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The University With a Soul. University of Vlora and the Reforms that Revolutionized Standards of Student Enrollment, Training, and Advancement in Albanian Higher Education

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"The companies that survive longest are the ones that work out what they uniquely can give to the world, not just growth or money but their excellence, their respect for others, or their ability to make people happy. Some call those things a soul."

Charles Handy

Abstract

With the world moving rapidly into digital media and information, the role of higher education is becoming increasingly important. Starting in January 2008, the University of Vlora is applying a modernization agenda through setting higher standards of scholarship, accompanied by curricular and governance reforms, causing changes to happen that are shaping themselves into an era of progress and rapid development, and planting a pioneer flag in the historical timeline of Albanian higher education. Differently from all other higher education institutions in Albania, and for the first time in decades of fictitious recognition of competency, the University of Vlora is striving to detach itself from the traditional oldsystem teaching mentality and methodology, managing through many struggles to be the first public university that is uninfluenced by the pressure of corruption and nepotism, and headed towards internationalization based on western standards. In its July 2010 edition, the Ranking Web of World Universities ranks University of Vlora number one among all public and private universities in Albania, a title that is well deserved and earned through genuine, untiring and unbiased efforts to reach out and aspire to be what the rankings call the best university in Albania. University of Vlora students are now studying in a university that offers updated curricula, flexible learning paths, and a fully functional automated online academic transcript system, a very productive application that combines online and batch processing to generate student transcripts, as well as to facilitate student-faculty and administration-faculty communication via a university email system. This paper explores the achievements as well as the challenges that students and professors are facing in this completely new way of learning and teaching at an institution of higher education in a post-Communist country. Data was collected using interviews, as well as open-ended and yes/no questions in a questionnaire. 100 students and 40 staff (faculty and administration) members of the University of Vlora participated in the survey.

Keywords:

higher education, quality, university ranking, curriculum, university administration, educational leadership

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1. Introduction

What has been happening in the last three years in Albanian higher education has proven that it is possible for an educational institution who had totally lost its identity to not only improve, but from *universitas incognita* be transformed into a true *universitas magistrorum et scholarium*. University of Vlora's commitment to quality is unquestionably revolutionizing Albanian education starting from its very core: the standard of scholarship. The value of effective knowledge management and the fostering of communication and exchange of information amongst administration, faculty, and students has also proven to be a vital key to the university functioning, development, and success.

Compared to only six semesters ago, when every piece of information, official or not, was transmitted by word of mouth and very few people knew how to use a computer, the University of Vlora now has a completely different face. The interesting thing is that the same people that not too long ago seemed to be unable to contain and let alone bring to life such a revolution, are now the ones who are keeping the whole system alive and working. As beautifully stated by Ray Tolley, president of the Educational Institute of Design Craft and Technology and an ardent promoter of educational technology in UK, at his Presidential Address (Tolley, 1987): "*Technology is not things – but people*".

2. A milestone in Albanian higher education

University of Vlora is a public university founded in 1994 in war torn, post-Communist Albania but growing to be an internationally recognized institution of higher education in South East Europe. Starting in January 2008, the University of Vlora is applying a modernization agenda through curricular and governance reforms, causing changes that are shaping themselves into an era of progress and rapid development and planting a pioneer flag in the revolution of the Albanian higher education.

2.1. Complete implementation of the Bologna process

University of Vlora started the true implementation of the Bologna Process in 2003 by applying the three cycle system: bachelor, master and doctorate, and effectuated a fully-fledged credit system compatible with the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), giving to the student the possibility to accumulate credits towards a degree and facilitating thus student mobility. The credit-hour value of each course is specified in semester hours. One semester hour is equivalent to a total of 50 minutes of scheduled instruction each week plus the estimated time required in outside preparation. Most University of Vlora courses are 8 credits.

2.2. A reassessment of institutional effectiveness

For the past two years, University of Vlora has undertaken a systematic and wide-ranging reassessment of institutional effectiveness and reengineering of its educational and administrative practices. The recent implementation and development of SIUV, the University of Vlora Information System, has allowed the institution to design and develop Intranet applications to provide a framework for knowledge management within the institution. The university's key achievements with the introduction of SIUV include the following:

1. improvement of access to university information;
2. improvement of institutional decisionmaking;
3. improvement of communication among administration and faculty for collaboration and crossfertilization of ideas.

This paper explores the achievements as well as challenges that students and professors are facing in this completely new way of learning and teaching at an institution of higher education.

2.3 Getting rid of corruption and nepotism

University of Vlora is determined to earn international recognition by fiercely combatting educational corruption, by steadily raising the bar of competence based learning, by setting international standards for faculty performance and professional development, and by developing reliable quality assurance. Differently from all other higher education public institutions in Albania, the University of Vlora is striving to detach itself from the traditional old-system teaching mentality and methodology, managing through many struggles to be the first public university that is uninfluenced by the pressure of corruption and nepotism, and headed towards internationalization based on western standards.

3. An analogy to postcommunist

Czech higher education Bill Weldon, the author of *Considerations for Higher Education Systems in PostCommunist Societies: A Current Look at Czech Higher Education* (Weldon 2003), talking about the current state of the post-communist Czech higher education, wrote:

Czech higher education needs a champion. Within it there exists an apparent ambiguity of leadership. Leadership by committee, like a Rectors Conference, or leadership by influence, like some individual educators, is muddled in a confusion based on a lack of clearly defined leadership principles.

3.1. Radical changes

The same concept that Weldon mentions applies to the post-communist Albania. Without a clearly defined set of leadership principles that distances itself radically from corruptive practices, it is impossible to make progress, because for every single step forward there will be an equal number of steps backward. Post-communist countries in particular need this champion type of determined and well-defined leadership that Weldon mentions in order to really be able to move ahead and make progress. Public opinion generally places the blame for slow progress on the character and ability of the university community of faculty and students, but what has been happening at the University of Vlora in the last two years can completely prove that opinion wrong.

With the change in leadership at the January 2008 elections for the new university rector, a series of radical reforms began to revolutionize the entire education system at the University of Vlora. The election of Prof. Dr. Tanush Shaska, an academic and well-known scholar with a vast career and training in western universities, as University of Vlora Rector introduced the university to a new era of authenticity in scholarship and education.

3.2. Excellency in planning and designing of reforms

The reforms were extremely well planned and designed to be effective in a short amount of time, aiming to improve the system in three aspects:

- by raising educational standards
- by improving efficiency in administration
- by encouraging research and scholarship

The reforms up to date have been much more successful than what the students, the media the wide community would ever predict or expect, by showing thus that the professors at the University of Vlora, including what is considered the older generation, are capable of change, able to keep up with the fast pace and high energy-consuming and time-demanding activities, if given the right kind of leadership.

4. The right kind of leadership

A right kind of leadership in such a context involves dealing with people's natural resistance to change. It means that the university leadership has to use strong methods that are very similar to those used at the York University pruned by the urgency of digitalization, when the faculty members were required to put their teaching materials on digital media and post their course information on the internet or lose their job.

The same thing happened in many universities across the world, starting with University of California at Los Angeles in 1997, where the use of computer technology in the delivery of higher education was not only required, but mandated (Noble, 1998).

4.1. Introducing academic advising

Academic advising has proved to be a crucial position at the University of Vlora, especially considering the abrupt change in curricula and education policies during 2009. The university administration appointed one academic advisor for each department who would act as a liaison between students and the curriculum, students and administration, and even between faculty and the university policies. The 2009 university and degree requirements, the enrollment limitations, as well as the program admission requirements are totally new to both students and professors.

Being the academic advisor for the Department of Foreign Languages, I had the opportunity to observe the students' capacity as far as the ICT skills are concerned. Very few students that came to seek my assistance possessed the knowledge necessary to access their student profiles and register for courses in September-October 2009.

4.2. A total renewal of IT service

The internet services were introduced at the University of Vlora in 2001, but IT staff was not included in the budget so the very small number of computers at the university was often virus stricken or non-functional. In February 2008 a special focus of the educational reforms taken by the president of the University was a total renewal of the University access to the internet and the creation of an IT office. During 2009 more installations have been taking place. A complete local area network (LAN) installation was accomplished linking more than 100 computers and a proportional number of peripherals like all-in-one printers, photocopiers and scanners. LAN access was provided to all college buildings for almost every department office. More computers and peripherals were installed. The internet service which was initially introduced to the University in 2001 had one dial up line which was used to connect the lab computers and some of the offices to the internet. The speed of the dial up line was not more than 50 Kbps and because of the huge amount of traffic and poor computer management and protection, problems occurred very frequently.

In 2008 the University administration agreed to financially support a bigger bandwidth, and 256 Kbps internet line was installed. Almost at the same time with the installation of the bigger bandwidth, wireless connectivity within

the University buildings was introduced to the existing network, providing a versatile connectivity solution for those who use a laptop computer.

5. Implementation of the UV Information System: SIUV

SIUV (Sistemi i Informacionit të Universitetit të Vlorës) meaning The Information System of the University of Vlora is the online portal of the University of Vlora. A literature view brings up many definitions of a portal Yanosky identifies four basic components in its definition of a portal: Connection, Content, Commerce, and Community (Yanosky, 2000).

Merriam-Webster's online dictionary defines the term *portal* as a communicating part or area of an organism, and more specifically a sight serving as a guide or point of entry to the World Wide Web and including a search engine or a collection of links to other sights arranged especially by topic. The image of a communicating part of an organism is the most appropriate definition of SIUV, because it is the point of liaison, a bridge of communication between a University and its internal and external interlocutors.

The SIUV portal contains three kinds of data:

1. Information
2. Content Management
3. Services

5.1. Information

SIUV Information includes course schedules, exams schedules, faculty workload, personal information for each faculty member, course enrollments, academic calendars, general information about the University that is posted on the University website like: history of the university, list of faculty members, hierarchy of administration, list of the departments and faculties, contact info, as well as links to other sub portals of the university.

Such links direct the user to the web pages of the departments and other offices of the university such as the student's office web page, the library's web page, the web page of the office of the scientific research, the rector's office, the provost's office. Included in the general information are also links to the websites of other universities, institutions, associations that are in partnership with the University of Vlora. The web page also provides links to the university e-publishing service.

5.2. Content Management

5.2.1. Document management

Content Management includes document management and website management. Document management consists in structured organization, versatile presentation, and effective use of information in order to reflect the stability of the academic programs and the function of the mechanisms of administration in order to keep the university worthy of accreditation. The university statute, regulation, academic programs with their respective course description, and the description of the procedures, and operational processes are stored in order to be retrieved easily from the website. To such end SIUV depends on its designers and maintainers to appropriately manage the university documents.

5.2.2. Website management

Website management consists of designing and maintaining the main university's web page, the web page of each department, and the faculty members' personal web page. Decentralization of faculty web content development and posting is a key objective for University of Vlora. Each faculty member is supposed to maintain his/her own web page. This includes updating the material, posting, updated CVs and course syllabi, information to help students with their midterms and exams, lecture notes and suggested readings.

5.3 Services

Services include: communications, student services, final grade reporting and student administration.

5.3.1. Communications

Communications include an e-mail system powered by Google with the domain name univlora.edu.al for students, faculty, and staff. All students have a Gmail account created for them when they first enter the university. The same thing is true for members of the faculty and staff. This is considered their official university of Vlora e-mail address and is used by university administration to disseminate information. All faculty and staff have their official e-mail address listed in their respective departments. The e-mail accounts can be accessed from anywhere. The administration also makes use of mailing lists in order to communicate with a collective body or the entire university.

The University Gmail also includes online tools hosted by Google, which allow university students or faculty to work on files from any

internetconnected computer. Members of university are able to work together in real-time on the same document. Online timetables and calendars are also being used extensively meeting many needs to communicate organizational information.

5.3.2 Student services

Student services are organized in a specific web space called the ***student's profile***. The student's profile is different from the student's e-mail address although the student accesses it using the same username as the e-mail address. The student's profile contains all the personal data that identifies a person as a student of University of Vlora: the student's personal code, the number of credits tried, and the number of credits earned, the courses taken or in progress, the grade transcripts, as well as an application as allows them to add or drop courses.

Student services also include an online survey with specific questions to be filled in by the students aiming to rate the professors' performance in class. Students have the option of communicating their problems to the university administration or ICT office by means of an online form at their student s' profile.

5.3.3 Midterm and final grade reporting

Professors at the University of Vlora, besides their personal web pages and emails, also have their faculty profile where they can print out the list of the names of the students enrolled in their courses, enter information about course assignments and enter the final grade for each student at the end of the semester.

5.3.4 Student administration

SIUV also includes an administration profile through each members of administration including head of departments, academic advisors, department secretaries, and ICT staff can access with a personal username and password the students data collection.

5.3.5 EPublishing service

The SIUV portal offers to the faculty two electronic venues for publishing scientific research: Buletini Shkencor (The Scientific Bulletin) and Mendimi Akademik (The Academic Thought).

6. Survey Results

6.1. Research method

Data was collected using a combined-question survey as well as personal interviews. One hundred students, as well as 40 staff members from five different departments were asked to fill in the questionnaire presented in Table 2.

6.2. Findings

The University of Vlora has 8000 active students and 210 faculty members. The findings showed that 60% of the students own a computer, but only 44% have internet connection in their home. Out of one hundred students surveyed, 64% know how to use a computer. 22% of the students do not own a computer, so they mostly go to the internet cafés and use public computers. 74% students reported to have given their password to another person at least once in order to get help for the registration to courses.

1	Please state your position at the University of Vlora: faculty/student/administration
2	What are the advantages of the electronic system?
3	What are some difficulties you have found while using it?
4	How have you managed to overcome such difficulties?
5	Have you ever given your password to anyone in order to get help in accessing your university profile?
6	Who types your assignments?
7	Can you use a computer? yes/no
8	Do you own a computer? yes/no
9	Do you have internet connection at home? yes/no
10	Please list all the foreign languages that you speak (if any).

Table 2. Survey on use of SIUV at the University of Vlora

A reported challenge was also the lack of skills in using software. 58% of the Word, but 27% of them had a friend type their assignments for them and 15% paid to have their assignments typed. When interviewed, they explained that they use to handwrite their assignments and papers and then have other people type the assignments for them.

The situation has drastically changed in comparison to three years ago when the number of students who had internet at home was only 17%, the percentage of students who owned a computer was 22%, and of those who typed their assignments themselves was only 13%.

From the survey, it was interesting to notice that the population of Internet users is limited to the group of those who knew a foreign language, especially English. Thinking in a national scale, this is one of the main reasons why the use of Internet services almost excludes ages from 45 to 73 thus concentrating the population of Albanian Internet users to young people and teenagers.

6. Concluding remarks

The advantages mentioned by all the participants in this research can be summarized in the following quote:

We are better informed now than ever before. Information is given to us officially through our personal emails. We can register for courses directly from our personal computers on our personal webpage. We do not need to lose time and energy in going to offices to ask for documents or to hand out documents. All information can be easily accessed online. We are proud of our university and its professors; we are proud of the way it is proving faithful to its mission and its vision.

It is essential for institutions of higher education in Albania to follow the example of the University of Vlora, and start implementing standards of excellence in scholarship in their educational and administrative practices, and most important of all, in faculty research efforts.

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