The Cultural Dimensions Reflected in Education: An Assessment of Romanian and Slovakian E-learning Based Systems

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Part of the European Union strategic preoccupations, education, vocational training and lifelong learning are considered important drivers for the economical and social mechanisms. Despite the fact that European Union works in a cohesive manner in respect to the general policies and regulations the member countries have to obey and apply, there are still particularities in the way nations choose to align to those. Each individual member state has its own specific ways of transposing them into reality and this diversity in the European unity results from the various social, cultural and economical backgrounds the member nations have. Thus, there are differences between the various educational systems as these are a reflection of the social, economical and cultural traits of the population, they are specific to each country. Due to rapid access to information given by Internet, people from various economical and social backgrounds, belonging to various nations become increasingly interested in the opportunities given by the online education. As statistics show, more and more developed countries use e-learning as an alternative or a complement to the classical educational systems. The current paper aims to explore the cultural attributes specific to Slovakia and Romania, according to the acknowledged theories in this field: Power Distance, Individualism, Masculinity, Uncertainty Avoidance, Pragmatism and Indulgence. Starting from these dimensions, patterns of the most appropriate ways of designing online learning platforms are recommended for the two European countries, as cultural dimensions influence the process of education, and consequently the processes of e-learning.

Keywords: cultural dimensions, e-learning, Slovakia, Romania

Internet development, IT&C applications and digital technologies have highly influenced the development of society. Today, to be competitive in a global market, companies need human resources in continuous development, with skills and knowledge in line with market dynamics (Pamfilie et al., 2012). However, although we talk about global markets and global movement of know-how, there are differences in the economies of the nations and in the systems they use for education. As various cultures have various values and motivations (Hofstede, 2001) their perspective about education is still different (Bowman et al., 2014), although recently there are international efforts to
harmonize educational systems. This may be explained by the fact that education depends on the objectives and human values (Gardner, 2008).

Regardless of the national educational systems, both universities and companies show an increasing preoccupation for integrating the campus based education with the virtual environment learning, for the blended learning (Al-Huwail et al., 2008).

**Literature review**

Slovakia has one of the highest levels of secondary or tertiary education attainment related to the share of the population, as the Eurostat statistics show (Eurostat, 2013).

Romania, as well, has a high percentage of population attending secondary or tertiary education. However, the situation of lifelong learning in the two countries is different, as the Slovakian and Romanian people are, according to the same statistics, among the least involved in continuous education (see Figure 1).

![Figure 1. The evolution of people involved in lifelong learning](chart.png)

Source: data processed from Eurostat, 2013

However, IT&C based activities are not fully integrated in education yet. According to Druga (2008) the few courses that use information technology at schools are usually the result of the individual initiatives, while tertiary education benefits from eLearning in a higher extent. Despite the fact that IT&C based learning is not fully integrated in education, the Eurostat information showing a continuous development of broadband infrastructure, the growth of households access to internet, as well as the increase in the number of individuals skilled in
IT&C are solid premises for development of eLearning in Slovakia and Romania (Eurostat, 2013).

Most often, countries with highly developed economies create e-learning solutions suited to their own cultural particularities, and this also due to the fact that these nations record the highest percentage of e-learning users (Eurostat, 2013). These solutions are then imported by less economically developed countries and often implemented, as such, without adapting them to their social, cultural and economic particularities.

Referring to cultural differences, Hofstede and Minkov identified 6 dimensions: Power Distance, Individualism, Masculinity, Uncertainty Avoidance, Pragmatism, Indulgence. According to their research, Power Distance reflects the way a nation expects and accepts the inequitable distribution of the power within the society. Cultures characterized by a high Power Distance acceptance, consider high hierarchies natural, as they create clear rules and structures in society. As such, people with a high status, official authorities, certifications and stamps are proofs of recognition and trust within society.

Cultures characterized by a high Individualism are formed by people who are rather preoccupied with themselves and their close family only, while the opposite - the collectivist societies are formed by people who are concerned with belonging to groups that take care of them in exchange for loyalty. As such, people from individualistic society praise whatever may bring them, as individuals, benefits.

In respect to Masculinity dimension, highly masculine cultures tend to preserve the traditional roles of the genders in society, with emphasis on achieving the best results, while feminine cultures appreciate the quality of life and the roles of genders in the society are not so distinctive.

The Uncertainty Avoidance dimension measures the degree of future uncertainty that cultures are willing to deal with. The anxiety of the unknown is higher or lower in the various societies, as they try to control the future or take it as it is.

Long term orientation of a society, or its Pragmatism refers to the way societies are more or less opened to new changes. Normative societies – the opposite of pragmatic ones, prefer to stay with their long-established traditions and norms, being reluctant to society’ change. Pragmatic societies, have a more practical approach, as they adapt to environment changes easier in order to achieve the best results.

A 6th dimension, Indulgence, was introduced and it refers to the extent to which people from a culture are educated to control their desires, emotions and impulses. Restraint societies - the opposite of Indulgent societies, educate their members to control their desires and impulses, their actions being under the control of strong social norms (Hofstede & Minkov, 2010).
Research

The research, starting from Romanian and Slovakian quantified Hofstede cultural dimensions (see Figure 2), focused on analyzing the e-learning sites of two top-ranking companies from Slovakia (E-learn Media) and Romania (Siveco). As these companies prove to be among the most successful ones in their markets, their e-learning services presentation websites were analyzed in respect to the cultural dimensions. For the Slovakian website, as it lacked the English version, Google translate service was used. Hence, the various print screens of Slovakian e-learning site, contain both English and Slovakian messages.

Figure 2. Comparison between Romanian and Slovakian cultural dimensions

As it can be noticed, the two cultures are very similar in what concerns the dimension of Power Distance - where both Romania and Slovakia score high and the dimension of Indulgence, where it can be noticed the low score for the two countries. The high Power Distance is reflected in e-learning through reference to authorities (Plesea et al., 2010).
Thus, the need for official recognition and authority is expressed in the two e-learning websites through references to awards, to prestigious and trustworthy partners, as well as through a display of their testimonials (Figure 3 and Figure 4).

Source: http://www.e-learnmedia.sk

Source: http://www.siveco.ro
Also, the clear categories used for presenting the information in Romanian e-learning website (Figure 4) make reference to the high Uncertainty Avoidance traits. Further on it was analyzed the attribute of Masculinity – which is high in Slovakia and medium – low in Romania, according to information presented in Figure no.2.

As it can be noticed in the print screens of the two e-learning websites (Figure 5 and Figure 6), this dimension is reflected through images presenting people of both genders involved in various professions.

Figure 5. Masculinity reflected in the people with various professions in Slovakian e-learning website

![Source: http://www.e-learnmedia.sk](http://www.e-learnmedia.sk)

Above, in Figure no. 5, it can be remarked that men are used for depicting occupations like pilot, business professional, while women are used for teaching and health caring services. On the contrary, Romanian e-learning website, presents the image of a woman in the place of technical support, traditionally a man’s responsibility (Figure 6). Here, it can also be remarked the low Indulgence dimension, as the formal dressing code is seen in students, professors and business environment.
Related to Individualism and Pragmatism dimensions, the Slovakian people score higher than Romanian one, as it is also reflected in Figures 7, 8 and 9.

The messages in the Slovakian e-learning website make appeal to individual benefits, to a pragmatic approach, to clear objectives. Romanian e-learning website presents benefits for “millions of students, teachers and parents”, companies, as it also aims to position Romanian intelligence worldwide. It minimizes the individual benefits, addressing rather to a large collectivity, to the society.
Figure 8. Individualism dimension reflected in Romanian e-learning website

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mission</th>
<th>Evolution</th>
<th>Management</th>
<th>Team</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shareholders</td>
<td>Financial information</td>
<td>Major projects</td>
<td>Clients</td>
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<td>Case studies</td>
<td>Partners</td>
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<td>Certifications</td>
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<td>Press</td>
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<td>Events</td>
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About SIVECO Romania

We design progress for...

- millions of students, teachers and parents who build the "education of the future"
- hundreds of organisations with major impact in the Romanian business environment
- companies oriented towards success that invest in training thousands of employees
- tens of thousands of doctors and millions of beneficiaries of health services
- hundreds of thousands of farmers who got easy access to European funds
- hundreds of thousands of beneficiaries of projects financed from structural funds
- positioning the Romanian intelligence worldwide through continuous research and development
- recognizing Romania as part of the world’s elite of educational software: more than 200 national & international awards


Figure 9. Pragmatism dimension reflected in Romanian e-learning website

<table>
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<th>Solutions Business-to-Business</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EAS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AelL Enterprise</td>
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<td>SIVADOCC</td>
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</tbody>
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Source: [http://siveco.ro](http://siveco.ro)

Cu ocazia sărbătorilor de iarnă, SIVECO vă dorește

Source: [http://siveco.ro](http://siveco.ro)
The lower score of Romanian Pragmatism dimension – as compared to Slovakian score, is shown through Figure no.9. While both e-learning websites were analyzed during winter holidays, only the Romanian one made reference to the traditional winter greetings and symbols.

Conclusions

Despite the fact that the two nations chosen for comparison share a common historical background (former communist countries and, at present, members in the European Union, with quite similar IT&C development status), there are differences in their cultural attributes.

From the analysis of the two e-learning services providers from Romania and Slovakia it can be remarked that the cultural dimensions brought in discussion were reflected in the e-learning websites images, messages and structure. The two successful e-learning providers studied in the current paper display the cultural particularities of their nations in the online communication used online with their customers. The proper communication of a company with its clients and the adequate understanding of their cultural attributes is one of the key factors influencing its long term success.

Acknowledgement

This paper was co-financed from the European Social Fund, through the Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007-2013, project number POSDRU/159/1.5/S/138907 "Excellence in scientific interdisciplinary research, doctoral and postdoctoral, in the economic, social and medical fields -EXCELIS", coordinator The Bucharest University of Economic Studies

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