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## ONLINE LEARNING AS A MEANS TOWARD ACHIEVING AN ADAPTABLE RIGHT TO EDUCATION IN ALBANIA

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**Abstract:** The development of technology and the increase of globalization in education require from states to find innovative ways of offering the right to education. On the other hand, global crises such as pandemic have not been in the international agenda, in order to think and discuss possible ways towards enjoying the same rights as in normal day life. Both approaches lead towards finding the alternatives in providing the right to education, where the lack of the teaching process in the classroom, brings to light online learning as a means to continue the implementation of the right to education. The article discusses the legal framework on the Albanian pre-university education regarding the online learning, as an acute need to provide education while schools are closed. It shares the methods of offering the remote teaching where the online learning is amongst these approaches. The article treats the challenges found during the online learning from the technological point of view, the curricula aspect, teacher training in order to deal with these alternative education opportunities, as well as the state obligations toward offering the right to education. The article sheds light toward the core elements of online learning, digging more towards the adaptability of the right to education in the form of e-learning, in order to respond to an increasingly challenging and unfamiliar reality. The article paves the way for further reflections and discussions regarding the improvement of online learning as an inseparable form of the education system.

**Keywords:** online learning, the right to education, adaptability, teacher training, Albania

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Online learning found the Albanian education system unprepared to cope with this change in the context of teaching, as well as from the legislative point of view, associated with the technical, financial and substantive aspects. Despite the fact that home education is recognized by the Albanian educational legislation from 2012 (On Pre-university Education System in the Republic of Albania Law of 2012), it has not been offered by educational institutions as a teaching method, which would pave the way to distance learning or online learning.

Yet Albanian education system is not alone. The use of digital content worldwide was relatively uncommon before the crises started. According to the World Bank, no country has a universal digital curriculum for teaching and learning. (European Data Portal, 2020, Transition to Digital Education).

Different terminologies have been used for online learning, a fact that makes it difficult to develop a generic definition. Terms that are commonly used include e-learning, Internet learning, distributed learning, networked learning, tele-learning, virtual learning, computer-assisted learning, Web-based learning, and distance learning. (Ally, 2004, p. 4). Online learning, otherwise e-learning is known as Internet-based hybrid learning or distance learning by being one of the most significant new learning technologies. (Blomerey, 2001, p. 3). According to the U.S. Department of Education, the term online learning can be used to refer to a wide range of programs that use the Internet to provide instructional materials and facilitate interactions between teachers and students and in some cases among students as well. (U.S. Department of Education, 2012, p. v) Various studies have defined online learning in different ways, however the essence of this form of teaching is providing distance education through technological means.

Anyway, the distance learning will not be possible to apply without digital competences in educational system. Digital competence is considered as one of the basic competencies of students in the pre-university education system (On Pre-university Education System in the Republic of Albania Law of 2012). Regarding the digital competence, Albania uses both the European definition and a national one. (Digital Education at School in Europe, 2019, p. 9) While regarding the inclusion of the digital competence in the educational level, it is not included in the national curriculum for primary education, being part only for secondary school students.

For more, the application of ICT education systems, starting from the pre-school, elementary, high school, university, professional education is supported by Cross-cutting “Digital Agenda Strategy 2015-2020” of Albania. Integration of ICT utilization in a contemporary level in teaching and learning, where all actors, such as, teachers, parents, students, policy makers and service providers play specified roles in the creation of e-education spaces, remains the main step for a gradual transition toward a knowledge-based society. (Digital Agenda Strategy 2015-2020, 2015, p. 32)

The digital competencies are necessary for both the student and the teacher. Studies show that the existing Albanian teacher competence frameworks do not acknowledge digital competences. (Digital Education at School in Europe, 2019, p. 47). Even though the use of digital technology has been included into the recent undergraduate curricula at faculties of education, further changes are needed to be implemented in pedagogy to integrate ICT and multimedia in teaching and learning (Teacher education and training in the Western Balkans Report on Albania, p 33-34). Despite the lack of capacity in digital education and a non-complete legal framework, Albania implemented the most possible measures in educational system related to distance learning due to Covid-19.

## 2. METHODS

The article follows the methodology of key documents analyses (legislation, strategies, regulations, international instruments, studies) which will cover an inclusive examination of the normative framework, the policies undertaken in the field and the obligations arising for Albania in offering the right to education through new channels of communication by the means of new technologies, online methods of learning, as well as educational platforms. It treats as well the forms of offering the process of learning, from the legislative, as well as pedagogical point of view. The article begins with the analyses of the legal framework in force providing for the distance learning, offering in this way a panorama of the policies and the legislation, highlighting the need for further improvements. To offer a concrete overview, the article continues with the methods of offering the remote teaching, emphasizing the challenges found not only in the legal framework but in the teacher training, the digital tools used for this purpose by schools, as well as the economic aspects in order to follow e-learning.

To facilitate the understanding of the changes that have occurred in organizing and offering the online learning process, the article continues with highlighting the European echo for digital school, as well as the so needed reforms in Albanian teacher training and curricula transformation toward adaptation to European standards.

The article closes with some finding and conclusions regarding the need for simultaneous approaches toward offering the right to education in an ever-changing environment, by making this right adaptable to the digital era.

Referring the sources used for the preparation of this article, the study goes through the analyses of the national legislation affecting the right to education, the forms of offering the learning process starting from 2012, the international obligations arising in this area, as well as several reports done for Albanian teaching profession and education system by international organizations dealing with this field.

## 3. RESULTS

### 3.1. The analyses of the legal framework in pre-university education

Education is included in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as one of the fundamental human rights. This means that education is considered something indispensable for all human beings, in all times and all societies, and it is the state that is responsible for the achievement of this right for all people. (Halvorsen, 1990, p. 341) The international instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) as well as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) have sanctioned and protected the right to education as a fundamental human right. These provisions are of greater importance to the establishment and maintenance of educational systems in different state applying to the whole world, since they cover a number of aspects of the right to education, accompanied by the respective obligations of states for their achievement. International acts have highlighted the fact that education should be accessible to all without dwelling on the forms of education provision, leaving this matter in the hands of the member states.

On the other hand, the core content of the right to education is characterized by the essential elements of the scheme created by Katarina Tomasevski, former special rapporteur of the UN for the right to education, which is known as the “4-As scheme”<sup>1</sup>, where the “*adaptability*” feature requires from education to be flexible and to adapt to the needs of changing societies. (CESCR General Comment No. 13, 1999).

The network of public educational institutions in Albania till 2012 has consisted of schools of various types, including full-time and part-time schools. (On pre-university education system Law of 1995) The distance learning is firstly introduced in the law directives of 2012, through which it is considered a way of education, where most of the learning process is carried out when the teacher and the student are not usually in the same place and at the same time and is realized mainly with the help of communication and information technology. (On Pre-university Education System in the Republic of Albania Law of 2012). Although the inclusion of distance learning is part of

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<sup>1</sup> 4-As scheme was first presented by Katarina Tomasevski to the Commission for Human Rights of the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations in Document E/CN.4/1999/49, Preliminary report of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, 13 January 1999. Known as 4-A because it contains: availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability

the forms of education delivery, only the students who have reached the age of twenty-one and have not completed high school are allowed to attend this form of learning.

Apart from including the distance learning in the pre-university education law, no further steps have been taken, till the amendment of pre-university education law in 2015 with the introduction of digital format of textbooks. The digital textbooks introduced only for a group of pilot schools in the first year of secondary education are projected to be in the form of tablets. The main purpose of them is to integrate the four basic functions of teaching, learning, central administration and online student-teacher-parent-school administration communication. (On the selection, provision of digital textbooks (interactive learning systems) in the educational institutions of the pre-university education system that have laboratories with tablets for the integration of the e-learning platform, for the X Grades for the school year 2015-2016, Instruction of the Ministry of Education and Sport, 2015).

However, these are sporadic initiatives which are not integrated in the Albanian pre-university education system. Despite the fact that one of the basic competencies for all students is the digital competence, the Albanian education system has not incorporated this competence in every part of education process. Furthermore, the Pre-University Education Strategy 2015-2020 has acknowledged that the form of distance education has not been implemented in the education system. (On the adoption of the Strategy for the Development of Pre-University Education, for the period 2014-2020, Decision of Council of Ministers of 2016)

Studies have shown that in primary education more than half of the European Education systems include digital competence as a cross-curricular theme. (Eurydice Report, Digital Education at School in Europe, 2019, p. 9) While according to the UNESCO review team's analysis, the current policy and institutional architecture concerning ICT in Albanian education is too fragmented to meet evolving national aspirations and global demands. (UNESCO's Report, 2017, p. 109).

Despite all this, given the need to continue providing education in conditions of a global pandemic, a variety of alternatives, mainly through online learning, are approved by the Albanian educational institutions. (Updated instruction for teaching at home, due to the situation created by the spread of COVID-19, Directive of the Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth, 2020) The time of school closure provided the opportunity for the teachers to offer classes through WhatsApp, email, online platform, Facebook, skype, YouTube video, while the psycho-social service provided support for students and parents to cope with periods of isolation and social distancing.

### **3.2. The methods of offering the remote teaching**

Teaching delivery methods of remote teaching during the pandemic were a combination of a variety of approaches such as YouTube videos, Zoom platform, Google meet, Hangout, the special channel on the Ministry of Education on YouTube, or videos of classes sent in WhatsApp or email-s of students (Council of Europe, 2020, Covid-19 Response). Another approach has been through the Albanian TV Education Channel (RTSH - Shkollë) which offered a variety of explanations from subject teachers from all education levels. These television programs were a means for helping pre-university pupils around the country, to have access in education especially in remote areas where Internet access was not possible, and pupils who do not have access to digital devices. (Council of Europe, 2020, Responses from our member states).

## **4. DISCUSSION**

### **4.1. The challenges found**

Firstly, during the television program transmitted in Albanian TV Education Channel (RTSH - Shkollë) teachers addressed a set of topics that students often found unrelated to their books, given the fact that students in the same school level work with different books due to Altext (On Pre-university Education System in the Republic of Albania Law of 2012).

Secondly, not every child or family in Albania can have a smartphone, tablet or computer and some families do not have internet due to the economic situation, as well as due to the remote areas in which they live. Given that the education sector was left out of focus in the context of the need for funding in the time of the pandemic (Normative Act of the Council of Ministers, On some amendments and additions to Law no.88 / 2019, "On the budget of 2020), the lack of these tools which offer online learning directly affected the realization of the right to education of these children, a right which cannot be recovered, or at best it may recover with difficulties over time.

Even the tablets, which a group of students are equipped with, in the framework of the pilot program for interactive learning systems (On the announcement of competition for digital textbooks for the school year 2015-2016, Instruction of the Ministry of Education and Sports, 2015) did not serve much throughout the remote teaching process, starting from the fact that these digital textbooks are detached from the entire education system, educational directives, curricula, without being worthy alternatives equivalent to the mainstream education offered in classroom. In reality, tablets as book substitutes have been presented more as a curiosity within the Albanian education system, without becoming an integrated tool with the rest of it.

One of the main challenges in providing online learning is its availability for all social strata towards inclusiveness in education. The content of education is diverse depending on the type of education, the level and the group of students who receive it. During the development of online learning, students of collective classes, vulnerable groups such as Roma children, isolated children because of blood feud, marginalized groups, children with disabilities, children in penitentiary institutions, refugees' children were left out of the focus of receiving online learning. Despite the special place they occupy in the Pre-University Education Strategy, this category of children requires greater care from the part of educational institutions, both in providing special programs, as well as and in providing financial facilities to cope with this new form of teaching. (On the adoption of the Strategy for the Development of Pre-University Education, for the period 2014-2020, Decision of Council of Ministers of 2016).

Another challenge is the teacher training integrated with the technology of information. According to UNESCO's report, teachers in Albania are not prepared for the use of technology in teaching. (UNESCO's Report, 2017, p. 101). The teachers engaged in online learning have to develop multiple knowledge in internet navigation; creating digital teaching materials; communicating through electronic mail; and knowledge of the basics for creating and editing web pages, in order not to lose the teacher-student relationship. While according to the online learning survey, 96.6% of the teachers have used WhatsApp as a tool to provide online learning to students, which apart from being a fast way to provide information it is not a proper electronic educational platform. (Sondazhi i mësimit online 2, 2020, p. 57)

On the other side, the vast majority of parents took the place of teachers in explaining a variety of subjects to their children despite the explanations given through digital formats or television programs. 95.2% of parents are engaged in online lessons with their child, as well as have supported the child with distance learning. (Sondazhi i mësimit online 2, 2020, p. 39) This high percentage of parental engagement highlights the need to improve online learning, using explanatory methods on digital platforms for an efficient learning process.

#### **4.2. Towards digital education**

The classroom environment is no longer within the school walls. This environment suddenly changed and as a result, major changes are required from all parties (state, school, teachers, students and parents) to adapt to the new digital classroom of students. (On the interruption of the teaching process in all public and non-public educational institutions, Order of the Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth, 2020). The subject of ICT is included in the pre-university education curriculum starting from the level of lower secondary education.

However, based on the development and interplay of technology in many aspects of life, this is not enough. Curriculum development must also take account of wider societal and technological changes, including the growing significance of the internet and mobile technologies to children and young people's lives both inside and outside of school. (European ideas for better learning: the governance of school education systems, 2018, p. 21). ICT subjects and knowledge should be an interactive part of a number of other subjects and different teaching processes in pre-university education system, in order for a practical application of the knowledge from the part of the students and the educational staff.

Moreover, the Digital Agenda of Albania 2015-2020 has highlighted as a priority the extend of the knowledge of ICT starting from preschool education. (Digital Agenda Strategy 2015-2020, 2015, p. 36). Gradually ICT will become an integral part of the learning process, through which online learning will no longer be a novelty.

### **5. CONCLUSIONS**

Not only the development of technology but also unforeseen situations like the case of the global pandemic, makes us think of new ways towards providing the right to education. Despite the ongoing debate about whether it is the use of a particular delivery technology or the design of the instruction that improves learning (Clark, 2001; Kozma, 2001 as cited in Ally, 2004), changes at the global level highlight the need for continuity of the learning process regardless of the conditions.

Consequently, the e-learning form needs to become an integrated part of the right to education and the education system. For this purpose, clear work policies and strategies should be built, the necessary legal frameworks should be drafted, accompanied by the appropriate curricula translated into digital educational platforms to which all students should have free access. Otherwise the cost of the right to education will be immeasurable for Albanian families.

Regarding the curriculum in pre-university education system, it is required the building of a digital library for different school levels, as well as platforms that will enable the full development of online learning, associated with the necessary assistance.

Furthermore, for online learning to be part of the education system, a multidimensional preparation is needed, starting with the preparation and training of teachers for new teaching methods and platforms, with the provision of appropriate digital tools to the students, with the construction of online classes according to the age of the student, as

well as finding the right ways to objectively measure the learning process. Changes in ICT in education are seen as necessary even from international organizations operating in the field of education, recommending the country to implement long-term incremental changes in the education systems requiring an adequate policy framework as well as adequate human and financial resources. (UNESCO's Report 2017, p 88)

It is important to bear in mind that the right to education is an absolute must in each one's life, consequently finding ways of offering the education will be the aim of new technologies toward improving the realization of this right for everyone.

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