

ASSESSMENT OF THE WEBSITE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ELBASAN

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ABSTRACT

Today's society is more and more relying on the use of information as an important means of improving management and decision making. This is also accompanied by an increasing use of new information and technology systems. This new orientation has brought important changes of the economy and of the whole society.

The education system has also been subject of these rapid changes. Although universities have limited finances, they have to use the information technology and systems in order to be more transparent, to improve management, to be more competitive and to increase the quality of the academic and scientific processes.

This study aims to assess: the website of the university of Elbasan, potential improvements in order to offer quality services, the effectiveness of the information system and of the quality of the services offered online, seen from the perspective of end users of the information system who are the administration staff, the lecturers and the students.

The importance of this study is directly linked to the improvement of how university works toward the communication between people, the creation of different options in the teaching process, the administrative processes and the work of the administration personnel, and the individual work of the students and lecturers of the university.

This study will also assess the approach to the information system in the university and the difficulties faced by users, who might need additional training in order to massively use the information system.

The study also gives some proposals on potential improvements to the information system and the university portal, for a better use by end users. These improvements are related to their acceptance by the users: lecturers, University and Faculties leaders, administration personnel and students. In the end the study will provide the relative conclusions on the effects of the use of the Information System in the "Aleksander Xhuvani" University of Elbasan.

Key Words: Information, Information system, portal, information technology, e-learning, transparency, university campus, students.

INTRODUCTION

The information technology in the last years has been characterised by an extraordinary development and has affected in transforming many organisational and administrative aspects of organisations which rely on the use of information technology and information systems in the course of their business. On the other hand, the digital information has become an indispensable element in every aspect, giving a great help in improving many organisational and administrative processes. The whole society has been subject to these changes, including the higher education institutions which quickly made use of the information technology and information systems as elements that help in improving the administrative, teaching and academic processes. The continuous application of innovation is nowadays a reality in the higher education institutions, offering a more positive approach towards the online university services. Universities are spending less and less in purchasing computer technology, in building internal computer networks, websites etc.

The massive use of the Information and Communication Technology together with the use of Internet have been as factors in building a new strategy in the education sector, where the traditional format is giving ground to the new technology based education methods, making universities some of the first organisations to have websites to introduce themselves in the internet. Websites have now become important means through which universities present what they offer to their internal people (students, lecturers, administration personnel) and to external individuals, making possible for them to receive necessary services and information.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The domain ".edu" was created in 1985 and from that time almost all universities have accepted the universal principles of building a university website. According to Hite & Railsback, 90 % of analysed college and university websites were found to be compliant with design principles resulting in an aesthetically pleasing site.

Colleges and universities with websites that serve multiple user populations (all with multiple expectations of the site) need a comprehensive set of usability standards and guidelines to ensure that their websites are as functional as they are beautiful in order to increase, or even maintain, student enrolment and remain competitive. (8, 1)

Many authors have dealt with the building and assessments of universities websites and they have presented different approaches to their use and functionality from the users' point of view. Universities and colleges websites are used by five main groups or audiences: future students, present students, faculties, staff and alumni. But apart from these five main groups, the following act as additional audiences: high schools, parents, donors, local businesses and the community. (8, 12, 13)

Christopher G. Connolly has widely treated the problems of universities websites in his studies and at the same time he tells the difference between a website, intranet and portal.

According to Connolly, an internet web site is the most basic manifestation of web technology, providing information through HTML that allows cross-referencing with hyperlinks. Consumers worldwide can access the Internet; thus the information presented on an Internet Web site is intended for public consumption without restriction. (6)

An intranet web site is one that is contained within an organization. Its purpose is to provide more relevant, useful web-based solutions to an internal community. People have access to an intranet through an authentication process, usually involving usernames and passwords that they must remember.

A portal, on the other hand, is a gateway to the Web that allows the plethora of information available on Internet and Intranet Web sites to be organised and customised through a single entry point.

Peterson points out that: Academic Web site design continues to evolve as colleges and universities are under increasing pressure to create a Web site that is both hip and professional looking. Many colleges and universities are using templates to unify the look and feel of their Web sites. (11)

Peterson also mentions that Colleges and universities have a long history with the Web. In the early 1990s, university websites began as piecemeal projects with varying degrees of complexity - many started as informational sites for various technologically advanced departments on campus. Over the last decade, these Web sites have become a vital part of postsecondary institutions and one of their most visible faces. Academic Web sites communicate the brand and mission of an institution. They are used by prospective students to learn about an institution and then used later to apply. Current students use them to pay tuition bills, register for classes, access course materials, participate in class discussions, take tests, get grades, and more. Online learning and course-management software programs, such as Blackboard, continue to increase the use of websites. They are now an important learning tool for the entire campus community and the primary communication tool for current students, parents, alumni, the community, donors, and funding organisations.

Usability is an important concept in systems development because it is equated to financial gain or loss. Systems with poor usability due to poor website design result in negative financial impacts. If a website is not usable many users will simply access another site that can meet their needs. Customers most probably switch to the competitors' sites. (5, 22)

Usability is generally defined as a multidimensional property of a user interface described by five attributes - learnability, efficiency, memorability, errors, and satisfaction. A system with a higher learnability attribute is easier for the user to learn, navigate, and perform required operations. An efficient system is designed to support higher productivity levels, while a system with higher memorability attribute values is easier to remember. The error attribute property describes websites designed so that users make fewer mistakes while using the site. The satisfaction attribute measures the aesthetic features that make web use pleasant, which improves overall customer satisfaction (15, 19, 24, 31).

A regular and consistently available website is one of the factors of a successful website . If a website is not available, then it cannot be used. If it cannot be used, then customers cannot conduct a transaction. Failure to transact greatly affects the performance of a website. It can be noted that customers perceive the quality of a web by its availability. Thus, availability also influences the usability of a website. (17, 20, 22, 23)

Shackel has studied websites and the criteria of assessing them. Shackel has outlined four main principles of assessing the quality of a website:

- Effectiveness – The performance in accomplishment of tasks by some percentage of the users within the system.
- Learnability – the degree of learning to accomplish tasks. Learning also includes the time taken to learn and relearn the system.
- Flexibility – The adaptation to variation in tasks an environments which can be accommodated by the design.
- Attitude – The users satisfaction with the system whether to continue use the system or enhance their use of the system.

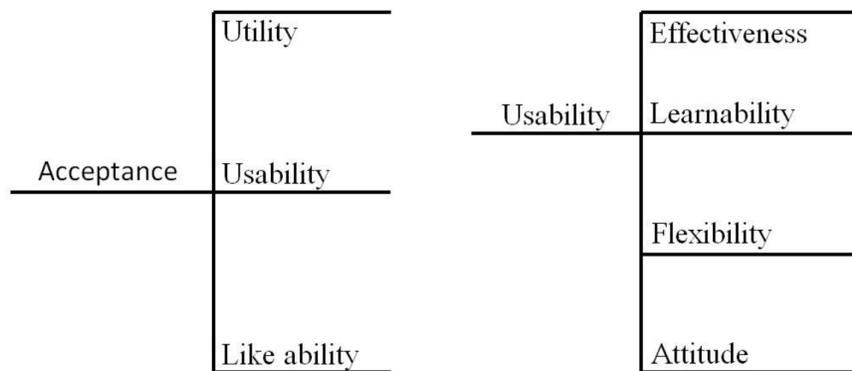


Figure 1: Shackel's definition of Usability (1991)

Another method to assess the quality of a website is by assessing the functions of a website. Assessment of universities websites in particular and those of education institutions in general can be related to the information offered to students. The ways to assess the quality of a university website are:

- Assessment of the functionality of the website
- Assessment of the suitability of the website
- Assessment of the communicative function of the website
- Assessment of the globalisation of the website

From the study of literature from different authors on the assessment of usability of education websites, (1, 17, 24, 25), the assessment can also be conducted by relying on the five following categories:

- Navigation
- Architecture/organisation
- Ease of use and communication
- Design
- Content

THE AIM OF BUILDING THE WEBSITE OF THE UNIVERISTY OF ELBASAN

The website of a university is seen as an important means of communication and as an important source of data and information related to the university. Given the fact that the website is used by a wide range of individuals (students, lecturers, administration, people from outside of the university etc.), the strategy of developing and using it is to satisfy as much as possible the requirements of its users related to age, cultural level, needs and aims.

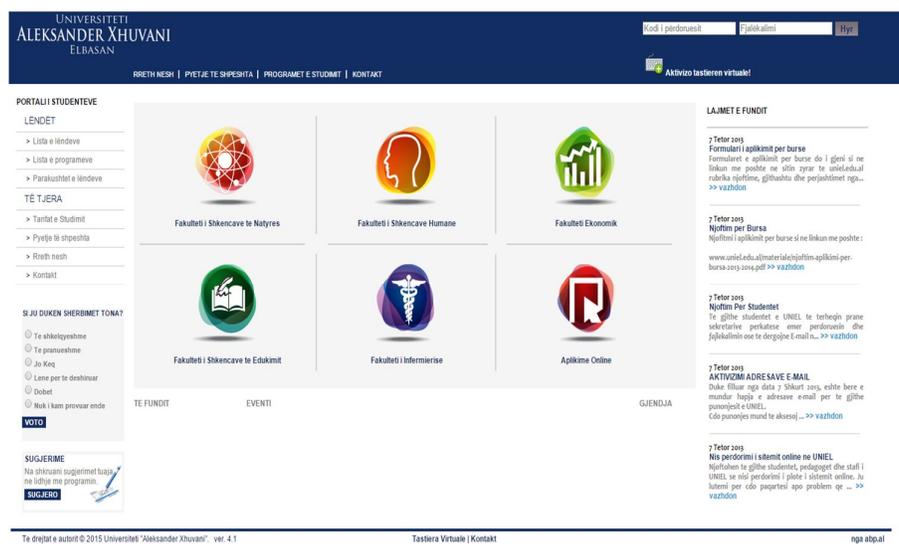


Fig 2. Website of the University of Elbasan

In fact the building of a university website is not that simple, and this is also because of the fact that groups of audiences (future students, present students, faculties, alumni, community etc.) have different orientations and formations. Each of these groups of audiences has its own aims, requirements and objectives towards the website.

The website of a university has to guarantee a high degree of access and updating. Different groups who use the website must see it as a single unit and not as separate units assembled together, which could cause them problems while navigating in it.

The following are some of the aims of having a university website:

- To make possible the promotion of the study programmes offered by the university
- To make possible the interaction between the university community and the external community
- To support students' recruitment
- To support students' progress
- To provide university personnel with information sources that can be useful in their work
- To make possible the publication of the content of the study programmes of faculties of the university
- To provide students with information which will serve them to accomplish their tasks
- To make possible strategic communication and the publication of events.
- To help in attracting students
- To support the activities of the university
- To provide the platform on which the administrative units will communicate their work
- To easily provide information on the university, processes, procedures, regulations and activities of the university

METHODOLOGY

The object of this study is to assess the information system implemented in the Elbasan University, and the university portal.

The questions asked for this purpose were divided into categories and they required:

- Demographic data
- Impression on the university website
- The ease of navigating in the website
- Difficulties in navigating the in the website
- The completeness of information on the website and what is missing
- Errors found on the website
- Suggestions on the improvements needed on the website and its different aspects

The questionnaires were handed out to 10 administration staff, 50 students and 20 lecturers. From the chosen population, 41 students, 13 lecturers and 7 administration staff completed the questionnaires. The questionnaires were distributed online,

and their standard use will be complemented by the interviews.

The questionnaires aim to assess as much as possible the perception and experiences of the users in using the website and the information system of the university. Age, academic experience, gender, residence etc. will also be considered as demographic factors.

The processing of the collected data has resulted in conclusions related to further improvement of the university website, so that a wider range of continuously updated information can be offered.

RESULTS

The data obtained through the questionnaires and the interviews result in the assessment of the university website from the perspective of the internal users: students, lectures and the administration personnel.

The answers to the first question only give information on the demographic data of the questioned people.

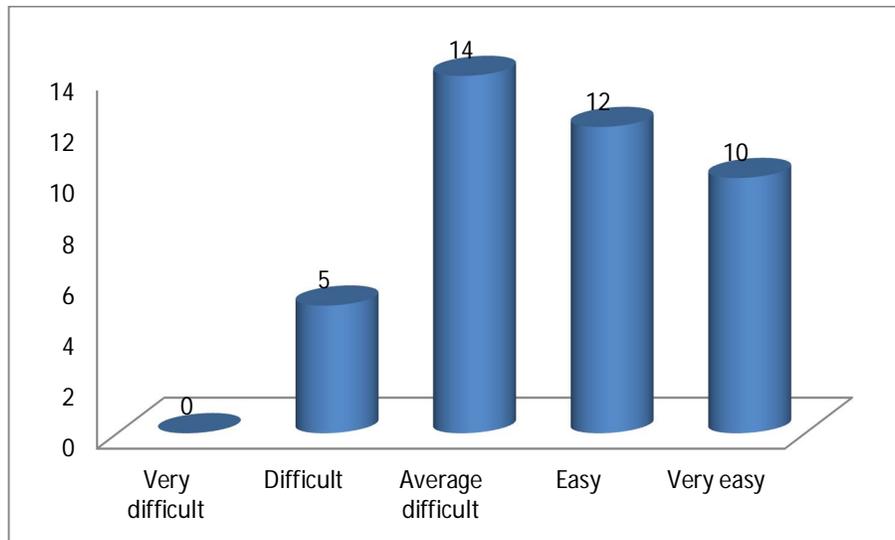
The answers to the second question give a general assessment of the university website, with almost all the participants considering the creation of the website an important tool which helps users obtain information they need and complete their tasks as per their categories. (students, lecturers and administration personnel).

Some of them asked for a simpler form and different colour of the website.

The replies to the third question, structured as per the Likert scale were:

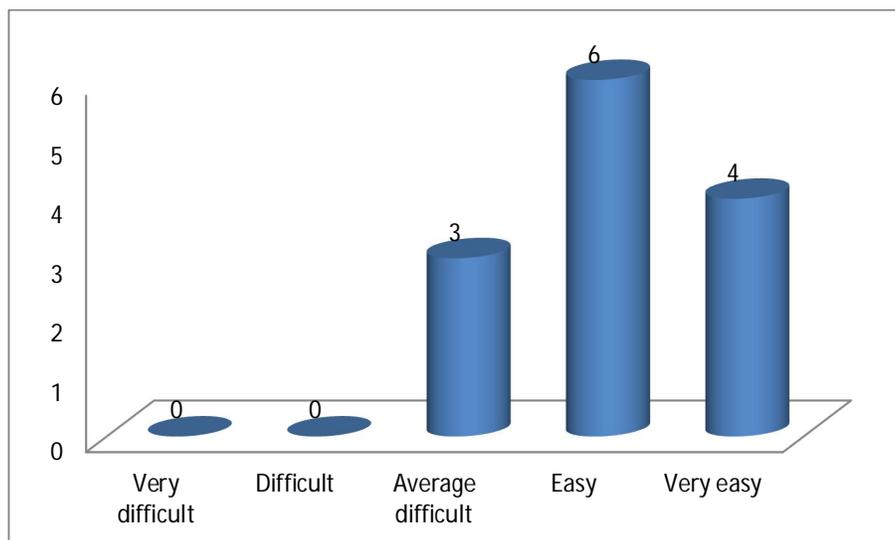
Students:

- 5 students said that the website is difficult to navigate
- 14 students said that there are average difficulties in navigating the website
- 12 students said that the website is easy to navigate
- 10 students said that the website is very easy to navigate



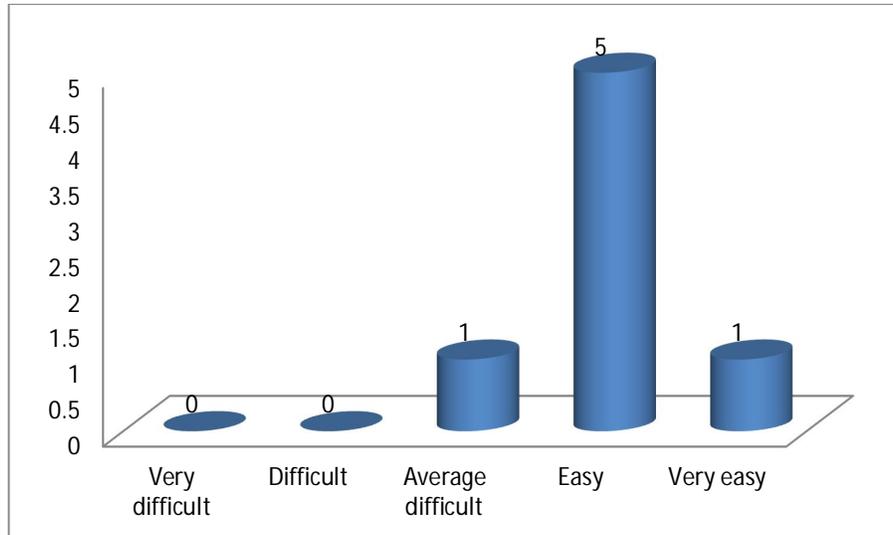
Lecturers:

- 3 lecturers said the website is averagely difficult to navigate
- 6 lecturers said the university website is easy to navigate, and
- 4 lecturers said it is very easy to navigate



Administration personnel:

- 1 person said the website is averagely difficult to navigate
- 5 persons said the university website is easy to navigate, and
- 1 person said it is very easy to navigate.



From a look at the data collected we can say that website is considered not difficult to use by the people questioned. But on the other hand, some answers mention the level of the difficulty in navigating, pointing out that in some cases some links are not active and users are faced with a lack of information that was supposed to be obtained via these links.

Some more problems are revealed by the answers to the fourth question, which is related to the third question. Out of the 61 people questioned, only 17 of them answered that the website provided all the necessary information, and the other 44 said that the website did not provide all the necessary information. One of the problems encountered was that some information outdated. There is also lack of information related to the study programmes, students' acceptance and assessment criteria, and to additional helpful materials for the students and lecturers in the academic process.

The answers to the fifth question revealed problems which were also encountered in the previous questions, such as:

- Inactive links
- Lack of updated information
- Content of the website not including other information which is important to students, lecturers and the administration personnel
- The form of the website is not very easy to use
- Colours are not relaxing to the eye, fonts are not the preferred ones and photos displayed are old.
- The speed of downloading materials from the website is not satisfactory.

CONCLUSIONS

The data collected from the answers of the questioned people help draw conclusions on the assessment of the university of Elbasan website. Based on these conclusions, the below interventions on the website are needed in order to make it more attractive and usable:

- First: Updates are needed as a lot of existing data belong to previous periods.
- Second: The content of the website needs improving according to the requirements of the users (in our case internal users: students, lecturers, administration personnel).
- Third: Design of the website needs to be modified, to make it more attractive and not boring to the users.
- Fourth: All links need to be active, to provide successful search for users.
- Fifth: The university website must be an integrated unit and not separate units assembled together.

The results of this study were made available to the administrators of the website, so that they can make the necessary interventions to render the website more acceptable and informative to the users.

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