

## E-learning Personalization in Midwifery and Maritime: A Machine Learning Approach for Intelligent Recommender Systems

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**Abstract**—The lockdown due to the pandemic of COVID-19 led to an unprecedented impact on education. Higher education institutions were forced to shift rapidly to distance and online learning. On the one hand, this fact revealed the weaknesses of adoption and utilization of e-learning strategies and technologies, but, on the other hand, it resulted in a digital revolution in education. However, the wide adoption of e-learning strategies and technologies and the complete transformation of the physical learning process to a virtual one pose the challenge of personalization of the learning process. This paper proposes a recommender system for supporting the professors in higher education of midwifery and maritime in understanding their students' needs so that he/she adapts the e-learning process accordingly. To do this, it utilizes learning profile theory and it implements k-means clustering and Bayesian Networks (BN) The proposed approach was applied to a maritime educational institution.

**Keywords**—learning profiles; learning styles; higher education; k-means clustering, Bayesian network; classification.

### I. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we propose a recommender system for supporting the professors in higher education of midwifery and maritime in understanding their students' needs so that he/she adapts the e-learning process accordingly. This research work extends our previous work [1] in the following directions: (i) We incorporated X-means clustering for dynamically creating the clusters corresponding to learning profiles; (ii) we enriched the model with the learning profiles; (iii) we applied our proposed approach in an additional higher education institution for further validation.

According to a European Commission's report on digital skills in education in 2013, an average of 65% of students in EU countries never used digital textbooks, exercise software, broadcasts/podcasts, simulations or learning games [2]. Since then, higher education institutions have shown a persistent concern with enhancing students' academic performance through the use of innovative technologies that offer new ways of delivering and producing university education [3]. From an economic point of view, the industry of e-learning has developed considerably in the last decade. The market of e-learning all over the world will be over 243 billion dollars in 2022 [4].

The pandemic of COVID-19 led most of the governments around the world to impose lockdown,

social/physical distancing, avoiding face-to-face teaching-learning, and restrictions on travelling and immigration [4]. It caused the closing of classrooms all over the world and forced 1.5 billion students and 63 million educators to suddenly modify their face-to-face academic practices [4]. This closure led to an unprecedented impact on education. Higher education institutions were forced to shift rapidly to distance and online learning. On the one hand, this fact revealed the weaknesses of adoption and utilization of e-learning strategies and technologies [5] [6]; but, on the other hand, it resulted in a digital revolution through online lectures, teleconferencing, digital open books, online examination, and interaction at virtual environments [7].

E-learning is the use of new multimedia technologies and the Internet to improve the quality of learning by facilitating access to resources and services, as well as remote exchange and collaboration [8] [9]. It has a great potential from the educational perspective and it has been one of the main research lines of educational technology in the last decades [4]. Particular attention has been given on understanding the adoption factors related to e-learning services satisfaction and acceptance by students and tutors [6] [8] [10].

However, the wide use of e-learning due to COVID-19 demonstrated inequalities as a result of previously underestimating the potential of e-learning and its exclusion from the digital education projects of educational institutions [4]. A considerable amount of literature has investigated inequalities between developed and developing countries [3] [11]. However, the wide adoption of e-learning strategies and technologies and the complete transformation of the physical learning process to a virtual one pose the challenge of personalization according to different learning profiles [12], a research area rather underexplored. E-learning provides people with a flexible way to learn allowing learning on demand and reducing the associated costs [8]. E-learning personalization is emerged as a major challenge [12] [13], especially in today's fast adoption of this alternative way of learning.

Despite the large amount of research works dealing with learning profiles in physical classrooms, these models should be further investigated and validated in the virtual classrooms, during the e-learning process. To this end, the contribution of e-learning to several learning factors according to the learning profiles has the potential to reveal the acceptance of e-learning by different learning profiles

and to result in e-learning process personalization in order to mitigate the respective inequalities.

The objective of the current paper is to develop an intelligent recommender system for supporting the professors in higher education in understanding their students' needs so that he/she adapts the e-learning process accordingly. In addition, the proposed recommender system is able to classify new records (i.e., students) to the appropriate learning profiles, e.g., in order to support the organization of the class groups. The proposed approach was applied to a maritime educational institution. The rest of the paper is organized as follows: Section II presents the related work on methods and approaches for evaluating students' acceptance of the e-learning process as well as learning profile models for learning personalization. Section III describes the research methodology and the proposed approach for the development of an intelligent recommender system for e-learning process personalization. Section IV presents the results from the adoption of the proposed methodology in the maritime and the midwifery education. Section V discusses the results and the implications of the proposed methodology. Section VI concludes the paper and outlines our plans for future work.

## II. RELATED WORK

In this section, we present the related work in order to present the current status in the literature and to identify the challenges and the research gaps on e-learning personalization. Section II.A reviews related research works on e-learning acceptance, and Section II.B reviews works related to learning personalization with a focus on learning profiles and their applicability to the e-learning process.

### A. E-learning Acceptance

Existing literature is quite rich on evaluating students' experience, satisfaction and acceptance of the e-learning process. In general, earlier studies focused more on content, customization and technology, while more recent studies focused on students' attitude and interaction, expectations, acceptance and satisfaction [10] [14]. To this end, there is an emerging trend towards the identification of the key factors for the adoption of e-learning strategies and technologies.

Several studies have used the original version of the classic model, the DeLone & McLean (D&M) IS Success Model [15] to measure and evaluate the success of e-learning systems [16]-[18]. Holsapple and Lee-Post [16] introduced the E-Learning Success Model, which posits that the overall success of an e-learning initiative depends on the attainment of success at each of the three stages of e-learning systems development: system design, system delivery, and system outcome. Lin and Lee [17] proposed a research model to examine the determinants for successful use of online communities based on structural equation modelling (SEM) approach. The analytical results showed, among others, that system quality, information quality and service quality had a significant effect on member loyalty through user satisfaction and behavioural intention to use the online community. Lin [18] examined the determinants for successful use of online learning systems. The results

showed that system quality, information quality, and service quality had significant effects on user satisfaction.

The use of virtual learning environments in addition to classroom study (blended learning), were surveyed by [19]. They concluded that the students' performance of the virtual learning environment support had better results than those having only face to face learning. The identified key satisfaction factors are information quality, system quality, instructor attitude toward e-learning, diversity in assessment, and learner perceived interaction with others. The authors in [8] identified clear governance structure and the need of organized distribution of planning responsibilities and implementation as the main adoption factors. In [20], the authors concluded that perceived usefulness, ease of use, perceived enjoyment, network externality factor, system factor, individual factors, and social factors are the main e-learning acceptance predictors. Student interface, learning community, content, and customization as well as ease of use of web courses have also been identified to have a significant impact on e-learning acceptance [21] [22].

In [23], the authors concluded that student e-learning adoption and attitudes in the university context are academic achievements mediated by digital readiness and academic engagement. In [24], the authors proposed an e-learning tools acceptance model in order to examine the level of acceptance and critical factors of virtual learning tools among university students in developing countries. Results confirm a strong relation between the perceived usefulness and the instructor preparation and autonomy in learning, as well as between the ease of use and the perceived self-efficacy perception. The research work of [25] developed a Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) for e-learning. The results indicated that system quality, computer self-efficacy, and computer playfulness have a significant impact on perceived ease of use of e-learning system. Furthermore, information quality, perceived enjoyment, and accessibility were found to have a positive influence on perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness of e-learning system.

The authors in [26] applied process mining methods in order to discover students' self-regulated learning processes during e-learning. They identified a high presence of actions related to forum-supported collaborative learning among the students who finally passed the exams and an absence of those in their failing classmates. The research work of [6] concluded that the main factors affecting the usage of e-learning are: technological factors, e-learning system quality factors, trust factors, self-efficacy factors and cultural aspects. Therefore, apart from the challenges related to the technological infrastructure, change management, course design, computer self-efficacy and financial support are also issues of utmost importance.

### B. Learning Personalization

Learning personalization is an important topic in educational sciences. Since different people learn in different ways, it is important to create and adapt the e-learning in order to maximize and speed up the learning process [12]. The need to adapt teaching strategies to the student's preferences is a reality in classrooms, be they physical or

virtual [27] [28]. However, this does not mean that a method should be created for each student in a classroom, but that the best form of interaction for each of them be identified, building groups of learners with common characteristics [29]. Learning styles are cognitive, affective and psychological traits that determine how a student interacts and reacts in a learning environment [30]. The idea is to identify the marked characteristics of a given learner so that these traits influence his learning process.

Several learning profile models have been developed in the literature, such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator – MBTI, Kolb’s Experiential Learning Model, the Hermann Brain Dominance Instrument (HBDI), the Dunn and Dunn Model, the Felder-Silverman Model, and the Honey and Mumford Model [27] [28]. With the wide adoption of e-learning strategies and technologies, there is the need for applying and validating learning profile models in the digital and online learning era. For example, in [12], the authors investigated the e-learning personalization aiming at keeping students motivated and engaged. To that end, they proposed the use of k-means algorithm to cluster students based on 12 engagement metrics divided into two categories: interaction-related and effort-related. The research work of [28] presented the architecture of a system that realizes an evaluation of learning profiles based on categories of student preferences. The profile models were built according to categories of student preferences based on the proposal of learning styles put forward by [30].

### III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this section, we present the adopted research methodology for e-learning personalization forming the basis for the development of an associated intelligent recommender system. The methodology consists of six steps that are described in the following sub-sections: (A) Data Collection; (b) Learning Profile Model Selection; (C) Classification for Structuring the Learning Profiles; (D) Validation of Learning Profiles Classification; (E) Modelling the Relationships between Learning Profiles and E-learning Preferences; and, (F) Predicting the Class Attribute of E-learning Impact.

#### A. Data Collection

The data was collected in the form of an online questionnaire of 80 questions addressed to students of higher educational institutions. Each question was in the form of Likert scale (1: Strongly Disagree – 5: Strongly Agree) and it was related to one out of the four learning styles as defined by the Honey and Mumford Model [31]: *activist*, *reflector*, *pragmatist*, and *theorist*. For example, in an ideal scenario that a student has answered 5: Strongly Agree to all the questions matching to the “activist” learning profile and 1: Strongly Disagree to all the others, he/she is classified as “activist”.

#### B. Learning Profile Model Selection

As it was mentioned, the selected learning profile model is the Honey and Mumford Model [31], which includes four

learning styles: *activist*, *reflector*, *pragmatist*, and *theorist*. However, this classification is usually not straightforward since most of the students belong to a mixture of learning styles, meaning that they incorporate characteristics from more than one profile [31]. The main characteristics of these four learning profiles are described below [32].

*Activist* refers to an individual’s preference for active involvement in the learning activity (through problem solving, discussion, creating their own models). Activists are enjoy new experiences and are not willing to participate in repeated tasks. They prefer brainstorming as a format of discussion. Therefore, the teaching and learning activities that are effective for this group need to provide new experiences, problem-based learning, games and group research. The teaching and learning activities that are not effective for this group are one-way lecture, passive learning, learning that involves many mixed and unarranged data, repeating the same activity.

*Reflector* prefers learning by watching and thinking. The reflector responds more positively to learning activities where there is time to observe, reflect and think and work in a detailed manner. Reflectors like to collect and analyse data and are careful at making decisions. They do not like to become leaders. The teaching and learning activities that are effective for this group need to be stimulating and to provide them with time to think before reacting and to provide conclusions without pressure. The teaching and learning activities that are not effective for this group are placing them in the role of leader or having them perform in front of people. They experience stress if required to perform immediately after a brief instruction

*Pragmatist* wants to know how to put what they are learning into practice in the real world. They experiment with theories, ideas, and techniques and take the time to think about how what they’ve done relates to reality. Pragmatists prefer to come up with new ideas, and solving problems especially for real life situations. The teaching and learning activities that are effective for this group are demonstrating practical techniques, providing them with the opportunity to express what they have learned and focusing on the practical issues. Learning methods that are not related to immediate need and performance with no clear practice or outline are not suitable for this group.

*Theorist* seeks to understand the theory behind the action. They follow models and reading up on facts to better engage in the learning process. Theorists are quite objective, and they do not enjoy things that are subjective. They prefer to make conclusions based on evidence, data analysis and logic. They have clear minds. The teaching and learning activities that are effective for this group are providing them with time to organise their feelings and to ask questions and process the methodology, assumption or logic in detail. The teaching and learning activities that are not effective for this group are learning that involves emotion, feelings, and activities that are unstructured.

#### C. Classification for Structuring the Learning Profiles

The classification of the student to the learning profiles is not straightforward since they may have characteristics of

more than one profile. Therefore, according to the given answers, the k-means clustering algorithm was applied in order to assign the respondents to 4 clusters ( $k=4$ ) matching to the aforementioned learning profiles.

k-means clustering is a method of vector quantization that aims to partition  $n$  observations into  $k$  clusters in which each observation belongs to the cluster with the nearest mean (cluster centers or cluster centroid) [33]. k-means clustering minimizes the within-cluster variances (squared Euclidean distances). Given a set of observations  $(x_1, x_2, \dots, x_n)$ , where each observation is a  $d$ -dimensional real vector, k-means clustering aims to partition the  $n$  observations into  $k$  ( $\leq n$ ) sets  $S=\{S_1, S_2, \dots, S_k\}$  so as to minimize the within-cluster sum of squares (WCSS) (i.e., variance). Formally, the objective is to find:

$$\arg \min_s \sum_{i=1}^k \sum_{x \in S_i} \|x - \mu_i\|^2 = \arg \min_s \sum_{i=1}^k |S_i| \text{Var } S_i \quad (1)$$

where  $\mu_i$  is the mean of points in  $S_i$ . This is equivalent to minimizing the pairwise squared deviations of points in the same cluster:

$$\arg \min_s \sum_{i=1}^k \frac{1}{2|S_i|} \sum_{x,y \in S_i} \|x - y\|^2 \quad (2)$$

The equivalence can be deduced from the identity:

$$\sum_{x \in S_i} \|x - \mu_i\|^2 = \sum_{x \neq y \in S_i} (x - \mu_i)(\mu_i - y). \quad (3)$$

Because the total variance is constant, this is equivalent to maximizing the sum of squared deviations between points in different clusters (Between-Cluster Sum of Squares, BCSS), which follows from the law of total variance.

#### D. Validation of the Learning Profiles Classification

As it has been already mentioned, students may belong to a mixture of learning styles, in the sense that they may incorporate characteristics from more than one profile. In order to validate the k-means clustering results of the previous step, i.e., the classification to the aforementioned 4 discrete learning profiles, we implement the X-means clustering algorithm.

In contrast to the k-means clustering algorithm which requires the number of clusters  $k$  to be supplied by the user and its search is prone to local minima, X-means searches the space of cluster locations and number of clusters to optimize the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) [34][35]. In this way, it can identify additional clusters representing mixtures of learning profiles. After comparing these results with the ones derived from the k-means clustering algorithm of the previous step, the domain expert is able to validate the applicability of Honey and Mumford Model according to the similarity of the two resulting sets of clusters. Moreover, they are able to select whether they will be based upon a pre-defined model of learning styles or they will create

dynamically learning styles in order to tackle with the mixtures of learning profiles that most often exist in reality.

The X-means clustering algorithm starts with  $k$  equal to the lower bound of the given range and adds centroids until the upper bound is reached. During this process, the centroid set that achieves the best score is recorded. The algorithm consists of two operations repeated until completion:

- **Improve Parameters:** which runs conventional k-means to converge.
- **Improve Structure:** which finds out if and where new centroids should appear by splitting centroids. In this operation, the advantages of two splitting approaches are combined: (i) One at a time: picking one centroid, producing a new centroid nearby, and running k-means to completion; (ii) Half the centroids: Gaussian mixture model identification and heuristics criteria for assessing the usefulness of splitting.

The selection of the  $k$  values is performed according to the BIC. Given the data  $D$  and a family of alternative models  $M_j$ , X-means adopts the posterior probability  $P(M_j|D)$  to score the models derived from k-means clustering. To approximate the posterior probabilities until normalization, the following formula is used [36][37]:

$$BIC(M_j) = \hat{l}_j(D) - \frac{p_j}{2} \log R \quad (4)$$

where  $\hat{l}_j(D)$  is the log-likelihood of the data according to the  $j$ -th model and taken at the maximum-likelihood point, and  $p_j$  is the number of parameters in  $M_j$ . This is also known as Schwarz criterion.

The maximum likelihood estimation for the variance, under the identical spherical Gaussian assumption is:

$$\hat{\sigma}^2 = \frac{1}{R - K} \sum_i (x_i - \mu_{(i)})^2 \quad (5)$$

The point probabilities are:

$$\hat{P}(x_i) = \frac{R_{(i)}}{R} \frac{1}{\sqrt{2\pi\hat{\sigma}^2}} e^{-\frac{1}{2\hat{\sigma}^2} \|x_i - \mu_{(i)}\|^2} \quad (6)$$

The log-likelihood of the data is:

$$l(D) = \log \prod_i P(x_i) = \sum_i \left( \log \frac{1}{\sqrt{2\pi\hat{\sigma}^2}} - \frac{1}{2\hat{\sigma}^2} \|x_i - \mu_{(i)}\|^2 + \log \frac{R_{(i)}}{R} \right) \quad (7)$$

Focusing on the set  $D_n$  which belong to centroid  $n$  and plugging in the maximum-likelihood estimates yield:

$$\begin{aligned} \hat{l}(D_n) = & -\frac{R_n}{2} \log 2\pi - \frac{R_n M}{2} \log(\hat{\sigma}^2) - \frac{R_n - K}{2} \\ & + R_n \log R_n - R_n \log R \end{aligned} \quad (8)$$

The BIC is used both globally, when X-means selects the best model, and locally, in all the centroid split tests. Finally,

the algorithm generates the number of the clusters  $X$ , corresponding to the unsupervised set of learning profiles, as well as the students assigned to each cluster. Comparing these results to the ones derived from the k-means clustering with the pre-defined 4 learning profiles, the consistency of the Honey and Mumford Model is evaluated in a data-driven way.

**E. Modelling the Relationships between Learning Profiles and E-learning Preferences**

Subsequently, the proposed approach models the relationships between the learning profiles and e-learning contribution to learning factors as derived from the questionnaire. The input to this step is typically the outcome of the step “C: Classification for structuring the learning profiles” provided that the step “D: Validation of the learning profiles classification” provides acceptable results. Alternatively, the user of the recommender system may prefer to use the outputs of the X-means clustering algorithm, instead of the ones of the k-means, in order to apply an unsupervised approach. The latter is especially useful when the X-means algorithm does not approach the results of the k-means.

To do this, a Bayesian Network (BN) is applied aiming at identifying these causal and uncertain relationships. A BN, also known as belief network, is defined as a pair  $B = (G, \Theta)$ .  $G = (V, E)$  is a Directed Acyclic Graph (DAG) where  $V = \{v_1, \dots, v_n\}$  is a collection of  $n$  nodes,  $E \subset V \times V$  a collection of edges and a set of parameters  $\Theta$  containing all the Conditional Probabilities (CP) of the network [38]. Each node  $v \in V$  of the graph represents a random variable  $X_v$  with a state space  $X_v$  which can be either discrete or continuous. An edge  $(v_i, v_j) \in E$  represents the conditional dependence between two nodes  $v_i, v_j \in V$  where  $v_i$  is the parent of child  $v_j$ . If two nodes are not connected by an edge, they are conditional independent. Because a node can have more than one parent, let  $\pi_v$  the set of parents for a node  $v \in V$ .

Therefore, each random variable is independent of all nodes  $V \setminus \pi_v$ . For each node, a Conditional Probability Table (CPT) contains the CP distribution with parameters  $\theta_{xi/\pi_i} := P(x_i/\pi_i) \in \Theta$  for each realization  $x_i$  of  $X_i$  conditioned on  $\pi_i$ . The joint probability distribution over  $V$  is visualized by the BN and can be defined as:

$$P(X_1, \dots, X_n) = \prod_{i=1}^n P(X_i | \pi_i) \tag{9}$$

With BN, inference for what-if analysis can be supported, either top-down (predictive support) or bottom-up (diagnostic support). If a random variable which is represented by a node is observed, the node is called an evidence node; otherwise, it is a hidden node [39]. Based on the learning profiles derived from the questionnaire, a BN with two layers was developed: at the top layer (i.e., learning profiles), there are 4 parent nodes matching to the respective clusters of students.

At the bottom layer (i.e., e-learning contribution to learning factors), there are 9 child nodes referring to 9 e-learning factors grouping the questions. In this way, the model identifies the preferences of each learning profile by assessing the impact of e-learning on the learning process of each profile. Therefore, according to the learning profile, the user is able to select the appropriate learning strategies aiming at personalizing the e-learning process.

The e-learning factors are constructed based on the grouping of the various questions of the questionnaire. Below, we describe their meaning:

**F1: Comprehension:** the level of comprehension of the course content with e-learning.

**F2: Content digestion:** the satisfaction by the content presented in comparison to the contents of the course.

**F3: Knowledge generalization:** the capability of understanding practical examples and how they support the overall concepts and theories.

**F4: Guidance and monitoring:** The level to which the interaction between the tutor and the students facilitates guidance and monitoring of students’ performance.

**F5: Tutor communication:** the level to which the communication between the tutor and the students is efficient.

**F6: Active participation:** The level to which e-learning enables the active participation of the students, e.g. by posing questions, participating to discussions, etc.

**F7 Effective learning:** The level to which the learning procedure is performed in an effective way.

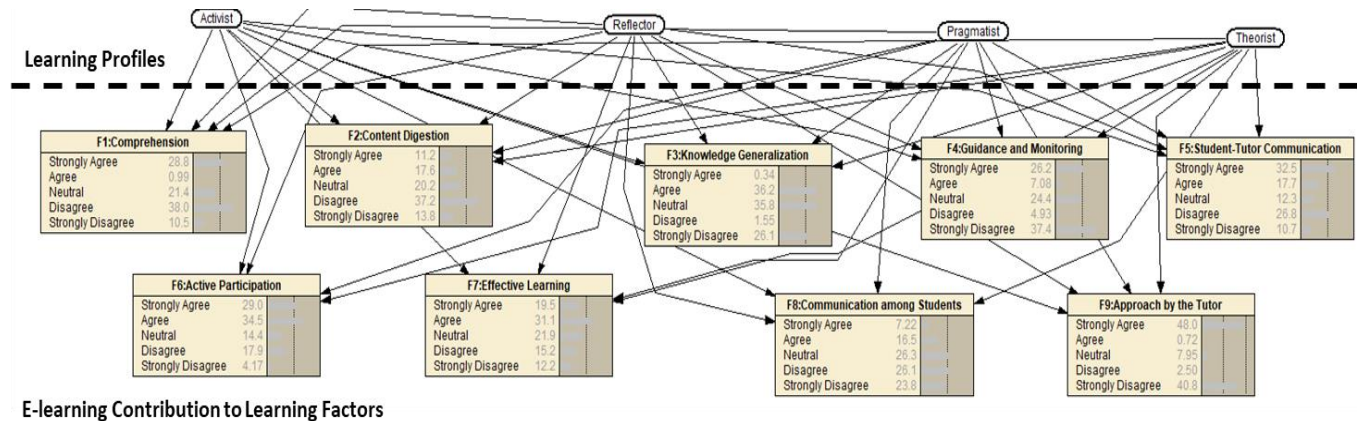


Figure 1. The Bayesian Network structure for modelling the relationships between learning profiles and e-learning contribution to learning factors for the maritime institution.

*F8 Communication among students:* The degree to which e-learning includes discussions among students and teamwork.

*F9 Approach by the tutor:* the extent to which the tutor applies pedagogical approaches that are personalized to the learning needs of the students.

**F. Predicting the Class Attribute of E-learning Impact**

At any time, the user of the recommender system is able to make queries in order to investigate particular relationships along with their associated CPTs. Moreover, the model incorporates a Naïve Bayes classifier for predicting the class attribute of a learning profile as soon as new records of students' responses are inserted into the database.

Naïve Bayes classifier is highly scalable, requiring a number of parameters linear in the number of variables in a learning problem. Maximum-likelihood training can be done by evaluating a closed-form expression, which takes linear time, rather than by expensive iterative approximation as used for many other types of classifiers [40]. Prediction of the class attribute can be performed even if the questionnaire is not completely answered.

**IV. RESULTS**

The proposed approach was applied on a dataset of 524 students: 268 from a maritime higher educational institution and 256 students of a midwifery department in a University in Greece. Following the research methodology described in Section III, the data was analyzed both as separate cases, one case in maritime students and one case in midwifery students, and as a whole. The implementation and execution of the experiments were performed using the sklearn.cluster library of Python [44] for the k-means clustering algorithm and the BN functionalities of the pgmpy (Probabilistic Graphical Models using Python) package [45].

Section IV.A presents the results from the dataset of maritime students. Section IV.B presents the results from the dataset of the midwifery students.

**A. Dataset from Maritime Institution**

The transformation of maritime from highly labour- to capital-intensive industry contributed to the presence of tertiary education in maritime studies [41]. However, the learning process in maritime education faces additional challenges due to the structure of their programs, the tendency of undergraduate students to combine studies and work, the internationalization, specialization, and standardization [42][43]. These make maritime education an interesting case study for the validation of e-learning process personalization.

TABLE I. CPCS OF THE E-LEARNING CONTRIBUTION TO LEARNING FACTORS GIVEN THE LEARNING PROFILES IN MARITIME

	E-learning contribution	Learning profile	CP
Highest CPs	F1={Neutral}, F2={Agree}, F3={Disagree}, F4={Agree}, F5={Strongly Disagree}, F6={Disagree}, F7={Neutral}, F8={Strongly Disagree}, F9={Agree}	Activist	0.386
	F1={Disagree}, F2={Disagree}, F3={Agree}, F4={Strongly Disagree}, F5={Disagree}, F6={Agree}, F7={Neutral}, F8={Neutral}, F9={Disagree}	Theorist	0.295
Lowest CPs	F1={Strongly Agree}, F2={Disagree}, F3={Strongly Agree}, F4={Neutral}, F5={Disagree}, F6={Strongly Disagree}, F7={Neutral}, F8={Strongly Disagree}, F9={Disagree}	Reflector	0.081
	F1={Agree}, F2={Strongly Disagree}, F3={Agree}, F4={Strongly Disagree}, F5={Strongly Agree}, F6={Neutral}, F7={Agree}, F8={Agree}, F9={Strongly Disagree}	Activist	0.056

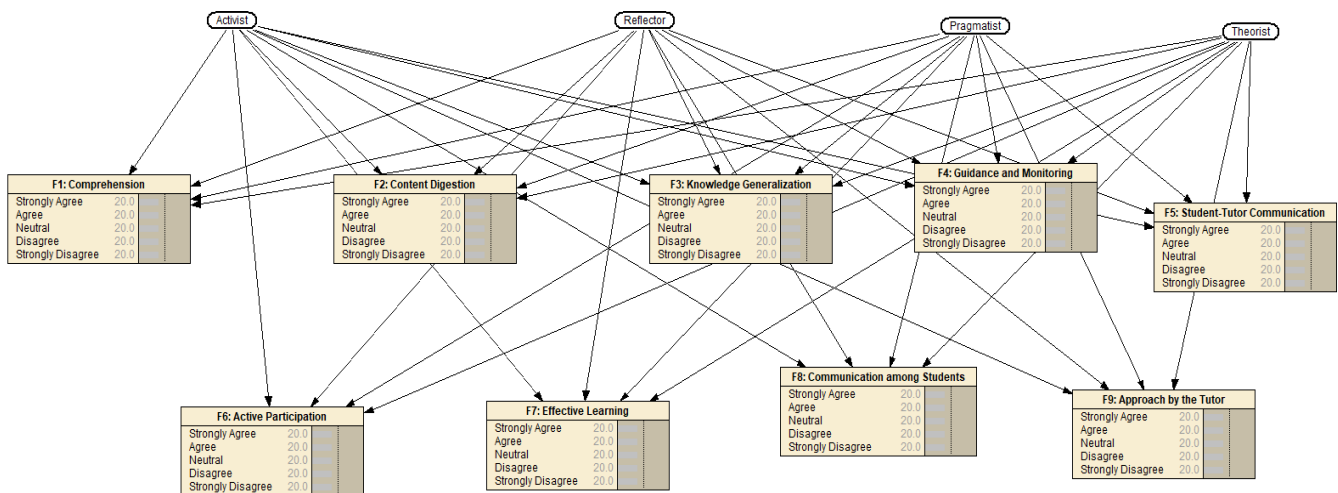


Figure 2. The Bayesian Network structure for modelling the relationships between learning profiles and e-learning contribution to learning factors for the midwifery institution.

After having structured the learning profiles of the respondents, the BN is created and the CPTs are calculated, as shown in Figure 1. Table I presents the highest and the lowest CPs of the e-learning contribution to learning factors given the learning profiles for the maritime institution. Therefore, the highest CP is the one of a student being activist given the answers of the second row that is 38.6%. The lowest CP is the one of a student being activist given the answers of the last row that is 5.6%. According to the queries posed by the user, various calculations can be done. As already mentioned, the model can also serve as a classifier for predicting the class attribute of learning factors as soon as new records of students are received and classified through the k-means clustering algorithm.

In order to evaluate its classification effectiveness, we inserted additional records, derived from more questionnaires addressed to students of the maritime educational institution, and we created the confusion matrix according to Table II in order to estimate the precision and the recall of the classifier using (5) and (6) [46].

The Precision results are quite satisfactory, while the Recall results can be further improved. We should also take into account that modelling human behavior, such as the learning process, has a high degree of uncertainty [47]. Moreover, the BN model sticks to the initially identified relationships, i.e., the ones that have been mined during the model training. Therefore, when new relationships, not previously identified, are added, they are not classified correctly. These records include values that are not frequent, so they are not critical for decision making

TABLE II. CONFUSION MATRIX

	Predicted Positive	Predicted Negative
Actual Positive	True Positive (TP) = 31	False Negative (FN) = 6
Actual Negative	False Positive (FP) = 4	True Negative (TN) = 22

$$Precision = \frac{TP}{TP + FP} = \frac{31}{31 + 4} = 88.57\% \quad (10)$$

$$Recall = \frac{TP}{TP + FN} = \frac{31}{31 + 6} = 83.78\% \quad (11)$$

### B. Dataset from Midwifery Institution

Evidence within higher education clearly identifies that the academic and personal development of students is enhanced by engagement with the academic and non-academic life of college [48][49]. It is necessary for the development of important capabilities including critical thinking, problem-solving, team work, and written and oral communication skills, all of which are essential midwifery graduate competencies for practice in modern, dynamic and complex healthcare services [50].

After having structured the learning profiles of the respondents, the BN is created and the CPTs are calculated, as shown in Figure 2. Table III presents the highest and the lowest CPs of the e-learning contribution to learning factors

given the learning profiles for the midwifery institution. Therefore, the highest CP is the one of a student being pragmatist given the answers of the second row that is 37.8%.

The lowest CP is the one of a student being activist given the answers of the last row that is 6.2%. According to the queries posed by the user, various calculations can be done. As already mentioned, the model can also serve as a classifier for predicting the class attribute of learning factors as soon as new records of students are received and classified through the k-means clustering algorithm. The confusion matrix is presented in Table IV.

TABLE III. CPs OF THE E-LEARNING CONTRIBUTION TO LEARNING FACTORS GIVEN THE LEARNING PROFILES IN MIDWIFERY

	E-learning contribution	Learning profile	CP
Highest CPs	F1={Disagree}, F2={Agree}, F3={Neutral}, F4={Agree}, F5={Strongly Agree}, F6={Neutral}, F7={Agree}, F8={Disagree}, F9={Neutral}	Pragmatist	0.378
	F1={Agree}, F2={Neutral}, F3={Disagree}, F4={Neutral}, F5={Agree}, F6={Strongly Agree}, F7={Disagree}, F8={Neutral}, F9={Agree}	Reflector	0.198
Lowest CPs	F1={Disagree}, F2={Strongly Agree}, F3={Neutral}, F4={Strongly Disagree}, F5={Agree}, F6={Strongly Agree}, F7={Strongly Disagree}, F8={Strongly Agree}, F9={Strongly Disagree}	Theorist	0.078
	F1={Strongly Disagree}, F2={Agree}, F3={Agree}, F4={Disagree}, F5={Neutral}, F6={Agree}, F7={Neutral}, F8={Disagree}, F9={Disagree}	Activist	0.062

TABLE IV. CONFUSION MATRIX

	Predicted Positive	Predicted Negative
Actual Positive	True Positive (TP) = 35	False Negative (FN) = 6
Actual Negative	False Positive (FP) = 7	True Negative (TN) = 24

$$Precision = \frac{TP}{TP + FP} = \frac{35}{35 + 7} = 83.33\% \quad (12)$$

$$Recall = \frac{TP}{TP + FN} = \frac{35}{35 + 6} = 85.37\% \quad (13)$$

## V. DISCUSSION

E-learning provides people with a flexible way to learn allowing learning on demand and reducing the associated costs. The wide adoption of e-learning strategies and technologies and the transformation of the physical learning process to a virtual one pose the challenge of personalization according to different learning. E-learning personalization is emerged as a major challenge, especially in today's fast adoption of this alternative way of learning. The proposed

approach was proved to be effective in classifying the students' learning profiles in order to adapt the learning process and to provide personalized recommendations for the learning style. It validated in two diverse educational institutions and the results show a stability in students' classification according to their answers to the questionnaire. The proposed approach can work either with a pre-defined learning profiles model or with a learned set of learning profiles.

In the first case (i.e., pre-defined learning profiles model), the proposed approach was based on the Honey and Mumford Model, which includes four learning styles: activist, reflector, pragmatist, and theorist. Therefore, the k-means clustering algorithm takes as input  $k=4$ . This case refers to a supervised learning approach. It should be noted that the learning profiles model can be a different one. Then, X-means clustering algorithm validates the assumption about the number of the clusters that was derived from the learning profiles model. The user may define a threshold of outliers that is acceptable for the model validation. If this threshold is not exceeded, the learning profiles and the learning factors along with their values feed into the BN. The latter is able to perform predictions and to provide useful information upon user's queries.

In the second case (i.e., learned set of learning profiles), the clusters corresponding to learning profiles can be created dynamically directly by the X-means clustering algorithm. This case refers to an unsupervised learning approach in which the learning profiles are not known in advance, and the resulting clusters should be interpreted by a domain expert. Then, the BN is structured accordingly with its nodes of the upper layer corresponding to the resulting number of clusters by the X-means algorithm.

In both cases, the proposed approach takes advantage of machine learning algorithms in order to form the basis for a recommender system capable of supporting personalized teaching and learning procedures according to the students' learning profile.

## VI. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

During the last years, e-learning has been gaining an increasing attention in higher education. Especially during the last months, higher education institutions were forced to shift rapidly to distance and online learning. On the one hand, this fact revealed the weaknesses of adoption and utilization of e-learning strategies and technologies, but, on the other hand, it resulted in a digital revolution in education. A major challenge was to apply e-learning strategies and technologies for supporting e-learning personalization. In this paper, we proposed an intelligent recommender system for e-learning process personalization.

The proposed approach is based on the Honey and Mumford Model of learning profiles and utilized k-means clustering, X-means clustering, and BNs in order to classify the students to learning profiles and to reveal relationships with the contribution of e-learning to several learning factors. The proposed approach was applied to maritime and midwifery education. We validated the model in terms of its

precision and recall in predicting the learning profile when new records are inserted into the database.

Regarding our future work, we plan to incorporate additional learning factors with respect to the e-learning impact. Moreover, we plan to apply more machine learning and data analytics methods, with an emphasis on fuzzy methods, in combination with different learning profile models. Finally, we will plan to expand our research to various universities in order to obtain more generalized results.

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