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Students' perceptions about distance education. A primary approach

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Abstract

Within only a few years, open and distance education emerged offering a flexible opportunity for skills upgrading by combining work and education. This paper describes a study that investigated students' perceptions about the distance education offered by the Hellenic Open University. The study used a combination of quantitative and qualitative research approaches. A questionnaire was used as a data collection instrument that consisted of quantitative Likert-type questions and qualitative open-ended questions. The quantitative data were analyzed with SPSS and the qualitative data were described qualitatively by identifying main themes resulting to significant insights relative to the effectiveness of distance education that may contribute to future improvements.

Keywords: distance education, student's perceptions, Hellenic Open University

Introduction

As we entered into the new millennium, the technoloization of the world affected at breathtaking speed the nature of work and the training needs of the workforce. In this globalization era where knowledge is redefining itself daily, education as a dynamic system assimilated the economical and technological changes, moved out of classrooms and entered into the workplaces in the form of distance education.

In Greece distance education developed substantially with the foundation of the Hellenic Open University (HOU) in 1992, and expanded progressively as other conventional universities developed distance programs. The HOU does not offer courses online but it combines distance studies and face-to-face meetings (Valasidou & Bousiou-Makridou, 2006).

Although the HOU provides distance education at an academic level, researchers brought in the limelight high dropout rates (Vergidis & Panagiotakopoulos, 2002; Xenos et al., 2002). The high percentage of students interrupting their studies after paying such high fees might hide students' disappointment and dissatisfaction that influence their decision to discontinue their studies. Therefore, this study was designed to investigate the satisfaction students of the HOU feel about the distance training programs they are undertaking.

The study

Method

The samples for this study comprised 153 distant learning students of the HOU randomly selected from study centres located in Athens. A questionnaire entitled Questionnaire for Distance Education was developed based on the Learner Questionnaire (LQ) that was used

by the Australian Council for Educational Research-ACER, in order to measure distance learning students perceptions towards the distance education provided by the HOU. The questionnaire was consisted of two sections. The first section consisted of closed quantitative Likert-type questions and qualitative open-ended questions. The second part of the questionnaire aimed to deal with demographic details about the students including age, gender and the course they were attending.

From the 153 respondents, 87 (56.9%) were female and 66 (43.1%) were male registered at the academic year 2009-2010 in postgraduate and undergraduate programs. The computer programme SPSS was used for analysing the data and specifically factor analysis. The findings are presented below.

Results

Five factors were extracted from factor analysis: 1) satisfaction with the trainers and the lessons, 2) anxiety, insecurity and boredom, 3) gain of skills and knowledge, 4) poor facilities and organization, and 5) generic disappointment (Figure 1).

	Factor 1: Satisfaction with the train- ers and the lessons	Factor 2: Anxiety, insecurity, boredom	Factor 3: Gain of skills and knowledge	Factor 4: Poor facili- ties and organisa- tion	Factor 5: Generic dis- appointment
Factor 1: Satisfaction with the trainers and the lessons	1	0.021	0.111	-0.302**	-0.421**
Factor 2: Anxiety, inse- curity, boredom	0.021	1	-0.044	-0.034	-0.062
Factor 3: Gain of skills and knowledge	0.111	-0.044	1	-0.120	-0.155
Factor 4: Poor facilities and organisation	-0.302**	-0.034	-0.120	1	0.250**
Factor 5: Generic dis- appointment	-0.421**	-0.062	-0.155	0.250**	1

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Figure 1. Pearson correlations between the five factors

The first factor is related to the degree the respondents were satisfied with the trainers and the lessons. The respondents who scored highly in this factor believe that the trainers made it clear right from the beginning what was expected from them (0.725), they explained things clearly (0.679), they respected their needs and background (0.515), they made the subject as interesting as possible (0.491) and they had an excellent knowledge of the subject (0.351).

The second factor is related to negative feelings such as stress (0.760) and insecurity (0.749). The results also indicate that respondents, who felt bored (0.389), claimed that the instructors did not make the lesson interesting (-0.304) and that they had to push themselves to understand things they found confusing (0.316).

The third factor is related to the gain of skills and knowledge. Respondents reported that they identified ways to built on their current skills and knowledge (0.727) and they developed the skills and knowledge they expected from their training (0.694).

The fourth factor expresses disappointment for the facilities and the organization of the HOU. According to the respondents the training did not use up-to-date equipment, facilities and material (-0.700), the materials did not keep up their interest (-0.628), no useful feedback

was given (0.539), training resources were not available (-0.475) and they did not understand what was expected from them (-0.397).

Finally, the fifth factor implies that there is a generic feeling of disappointment by those who would not recommend the HOU (-0.826) or their program to others (-0.741), those who were not satisfied with the training (-0.739) and those who felt that the training did not prepared them for work (-0.580).

In Figure 1 we can see that there is a correlation between factors one and five and between factors four and five. It seems that those who are satisfied with the trainers and the lessons are less likely to express a generic feeling of disappointment (-0.421) that is caused partially from the poor facilities and organization the HOU (0.250). It should be noted that there is no significant correlation between the third and the other factors.

The participants of the study had the opportunity to provide open-ended responses that were categorized into themes, and the results are presented in Tables 1 and 2 below.

Table 1. What are the best aspects of the distance training program?

Item	Percentage (%)	Count
Flexibility of time/space/studying	43.1	66
Combination of studies, work and family obligations	15.7	24
Lack of physical presence	7.8	12
Other	1.3	2
NA	38.6	59

According to Table 1, what students benefit more from distance education is the flexibility related to the time, place or studying (43%). For 15.7% of the respondents, equally important is that distance education can be combined with work and family obligations due to the lack of physical presence. It should be noted that several learners emphasized on the degree offered by the HOU that is being recognized by the Greek state as equivalent to that of the conventional universities.

Table 2. What aspects of distance education need of improvement?

Item	Percentage (%)	Count
Educational material	22.9	35
Communication	16.3	25
More face-to-face meetings	11.1	17
Use of ICT	9.8	15
Access to electronic resources	4.6	7
Better facilities	4.6	7
Lower fees	3.3	5
Better support	3.3	5
More practice	2.6	4
Other	4.6	7
NA	38.6	59

Apart from the strengths of distance education provided by the HOU the study identified several segments that need to be improved (see Table 2). Participants reported that they need more face-to-face meetings (11.1%), better educational material (22.9%), facilities (4.6%) and access to electronic resources (4.6%) and more practice (2.6%). Another problem the findings revealed is related to communication. Students reported a lack of communication (16.3%) and support (3.3%) from the teachers but from the fellow-students as well, as HOU does not promote opportunities for collaboration. Moreover, students suggested better use of ICT (9.8%) and proposed the use of teleconferences, videoconferences and e-learning platforms. Finally, tuition fees seem to be a further disadvantage of the HOU as students feel that the amount of money they pay at the HOU is disproportionate to public education. A student wrote that distance education is:

"An expensive sport for someone who demands for more knowledge".

Conclusions

According to the findings of the current study the most significant aspect of distance education is its flexibility that allows a combination of studies, work and family obligations. However, students demand for better communication and interaction with the teacher and the fellow-students, for more face-to-face meetings, for better facilities and for lower fees. Their demand is an education of quality that will use up-to-date material and the use of ICT will enable them to have a better access to electronic resources for their assignments.

The results of the current study converges with previous researches by Tsartsali (2006), Papavasiliou-Alexiou and Dimitropoulos (2009), Valasidou and Bousiou-Makridou (2006) and by Doo (2006). Although a small-scale survey was conducted due to the limited time, significant insights were exported from the data analysis and posed new questions for future research.

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