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ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΟ ΑΝΟΙΚΤΟ ΠΑΝΕΠΙΣΤΗΜΙΟ

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## From Connectivity to Competence: The Crucial Role of Tutors in Promoting Communication Quality, Student Autonomy, and Learning Effectiveness in Open and Distance Education

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# **From Connectivity to Competence: The Crucial Role of Tutors in Promoting Communication Quality, Student Autonomy, and Learning Effectiveness in Open and Distance Education**

## **Από τη συνδεσιμότητα στην ικανότητα: Ο κρίσιμος ρόλος των καθηγητών στην προώθηση της ποιότητας της επικοινωνίας, της αυτονομίας των μαθητών και της αποτελεσματικότητας της μάθησης στην Ανοικτή και εξ Αποστάσεως Εκπαίδευση**

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### **Περίληψη**

Η παρούσα μελέτη αποσκοπεί στη διερεύνηση των παραγόντων που συμβάλλουν στην ποιότητα της επικοινωνίας μεταξύ διδασκόντων και εκπαιδευομένων στην ανοικτή και εξ αποστάσεως εκπαίδευση. Η μελέτη χρησιμοποίησε μια μικτή ερευνητική προσέγγιση με σύνθεση ποσοτικών και ποιοτικών μεθόδων. Το συνολικό δείγμα αποτελούνταν από 120 φοιτητές του Ελληνικού Ανοικτού Πανεπιστημίου (ΕΑΠ), οι οποίοι απάντησαν σε ηλεκτρονικό ερωτηματολόγιο και 73 από αυτούς συμμετείχαν σε συμπληρωματική δομημένη συνέντευξη. Τα ευρήματα έδειξαν ότι οι εκπαιδευόμενοι χρειάζονται τον καθηγητή να είναι ενθαρρυντικός και να συμμετέχει ενεργά στη διαδικασία της μάθησης και της ανάπτυξης της κριτικής τους σκέψης. Ωστόσο, η έρευνα υπογράμμισε επίσης την πεποίθηση των εκπαιδευομένων ότι μέσω μιας τηλεδιάσκεψης δεν υπάρχει υψηλή συχνότητα αλληλεπίδρασης. Τα ευρήματα συμβάλλουν στην αποτελεσματική επικοινωνία μεταξύ διδασκόντων και εκπαιδευομένων και στην περαιτέρω σωστή καθοδήγηση και υποστήριξη των σπουδαστών στην ανοικτή και εξ αποστάσεως εκπαίδευση.

**Λέξειςκλειδιά:** Ανοικτή εκπαίδευση, επικοινωνία, ποιότητα, διδάσκων, εκπαιδευόμενος.

## **Abstract**

The present study aims to investigate the factors that contribute to the quality of communication between tutors and learners in Open and Distance Education. The study used a mixed research approach with a synthesis of quantitative and qualitative methods. The total sample consisted of 120 students at Hellenic Open University (HOU) who answered an online questionnaire and 73 of them participated in a supplementary structured interview. Findings showed that learners need the tutor to be encouraging and actively involved in the process of learning and developing their critical thinking. However, the research also underlined the learners' belief that through a teleconference there is not a high frequency of interaction. The findings contribute to the effective communication between tutors and learners and to the further proper guidance and support of students in open and distance education.

**Keywords:** Open Education, Communication, Quality, Tutor, Learner.

## **1. Introduction**

Open and Distance Education (ODE) has become increasingly popular due to its flexibility and accessibility. Communication between learners and tutors plays a critical role in facilitating effective learning and promoting learner autonomy. In this context, the role of the tutor in communication is crucial in promoting learner engagement, motivation, and learning outcomes (Zafari& Kamal, 2020). Technology has a strong impact on this form of education as it mediates to create a two-way communication between tutors and students. The development of communication is very important in open and distance education, as it can minimize possible problems that arise. Through constructive and meaningful communication there is a development of creative relationships between the student and the tutor, while at the same time educational goals are more easily achieved (Berge, 2013). Ensuring a quality communication requires the tutors to have the appropriate skills, so that they can increase the participation of the students in the learning process. Every instructor should try to eliminate the negative feelings of the students, to limit the sense of loneliness they may feel which may lead to failure (Stavrakakis&Xanthopoulou, 2019). Effective communication is a process of exchanging ideas, thoughts, knowledge and information in such a way that the purpose or intention is fulfilled in the best possible way. In other words, it is nothing but the expression of the sender's views in a way that the receiver understands. Research has shown that the majority of students seek communication, psychological support

and encouragement from their tutor (Alawamleh, Al-Twait, & Al-Saht, 2020).

The aim of this study is to investigate the role of the tutor in quality communication, specifically in enhancing student autonomy and learning effectiveness. The paper will explore the factors that contribute to the quality of communication between tutors and learners, as well as the characteristics that a tutor should have to promote effective learning and motivation. The study will employ a mixed research approach, synthesizing both quantitative and qualitative methods. The sample consists of 120 postgraduate students at Hellenic Open University (HOU) at the Master of Education Sciences. The findings will shed light on learners' perceptions of effective communication in ODE and the role of the tutor in facilitating it. The contribution of this study lies in its focus on communication quality and the role of the tutor in enhancing learner autonomy and effectiveness in ODE. Findings can enhance the development of communication strategies and interventions, which will improve the quality of tutor-learner communication and promote effective learning outcomes.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Communication and Interaction**

Communication in open and distance education is a multidimensional concept and therefore very important and decisive for the success of a distance learning program. Distance education, as it develops and takes shape in recent years, can effectively respond to modern needs, while also giving the opportunity to many adults to become sharers of knowledge, while constant developments in the technological field create new data in the process of distance teaching and learning using digital tools, such as teleconferences (Lionarakis, Papadimitriou, Hartofylaka, Aggeli, & Tzilou, 2018). In addition, open and distance education offers the most opportunities for learning and exchange of good practices among higher education teachers, and problems of traditional universities, such as space and time, which sometimes act as a brake on conventional learning, can be effectively addressed in open and distance education (Armakolas, Panagiotakopoulos, & Frangoulis, 2019). Communication in open and distance education is not only about the learner's interaction with the educators, but also with the teaching material, the other learners and with

the technological environment (Armakolas, Panagiotakopoulos, &Magkaki, 2018; Stavrakakis&Xanthopoulou, 2019). A wider range of possible interactions is captured in the table below (Stavrakakis&Xanthopoulou, 2019). In the figure 1 below we notice that the interactions that develop in an electronic environment are multiple.

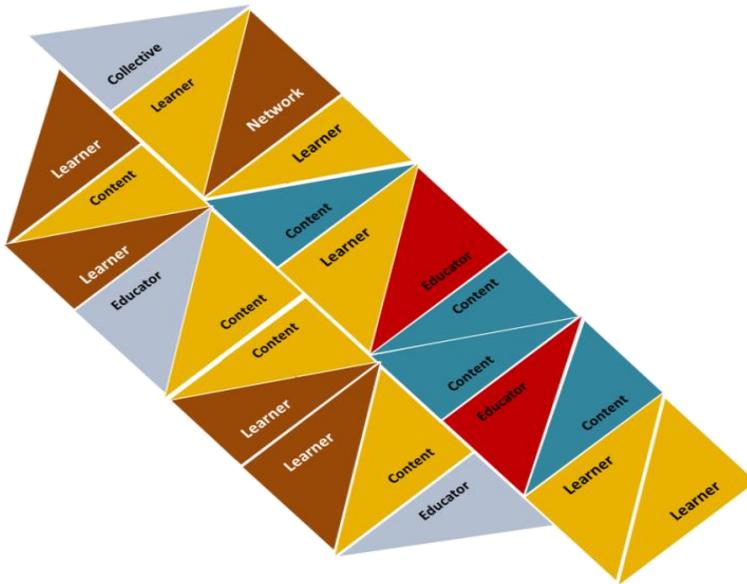


Figure 1: Matrix of interactions in an electronic environment

As it has been observed, in the context of their educational environment, students feel the need to interact with their advisor and their fellow students, because this increases their satisfaction. Especially in foreign exchange where not all students may have the characteristics that will allow them to respond to a perhaps more impersonal form of communication (Gavrilis, Mavroidis, &Giossos, 2020). That is why initially investigating the needs and expectations of all parties involved is a basic condition for effective quality service provision in a university institution (Xanthopoulou, 2020). A variety of modern and asynchronous media serve the communication needs of members of an open university. The most common ways of communication are through e-mail, telephone, fax, forums and social networks, printed and electronic materials, television and radio broadcasts,

commenting on written assignments working out activities or even face-to-face (Lionarakis, 1998). The above tools contribute to effective communication, especially when the transmitted messages are clear, and to the creation of personal relationships, since mutual esteem relationships gradually develop (Lionarakis, 1998).

## **2.2. The quality of communication in Open and Distance Education**

Communication plays an important role in the learning process as it allows the exchange of information, thoughts and ideas that contribute to learning (Xanthopoulou, 2020). For this reason, there are efforts to establish more effective ways of communication in open and distance education programs and reduce the lack of face-to-face interaction between the instructor and the student. Distance education requires an instructional design approach that can lead to educational transformation. This is characterized by advanced flexibility, learner autonomy and extensive use of digital technologies to improve learning outcomes. The main feature of this methodology is the physical distance between teaching staff, peers and educational institutions (Salas-Pilco, Yang, & Zhang, 2022).

The quality of communication in Open and Distance Education (ODE) is critical for promoting effective learning and student satisfaction. ODE is often characterized by a lack of face-to-face interaction between learners and tutors, which can hinder effective communication and lead to feelings of isolation and disengagement. As a result, tutors need to employ effective communication strategies to facilitate learner engagement, motivation, and learning outcomes (Alawamleh et al., 2020; Rahayu&Wirza, 2020; Correia, Liu & Xu, 2020). Effective communication in ODE involves a range of factors, such as clear and concise language, timely responses, and constructive feedback (Albrahim, 2020). It also involves creating a supportive and engaging learning environment where learners feel comfortable to express their opinions and ask questions. In addition, tutors need to be aware of the different learning styles, cultural backgrounds, and experiences of their learners and tailor their communication accordingly (Hassan, Mirza, & Hussain, 2020). There are various technological tools, which bridge this distance and improve communication and interaction (Vlachopoulos&Makri, 2019) like discussion forums, social media and Learning Management Systems (LMS). In the context of distance education, communication and understanding between participants is essential.

Communication between tutor and student is a vital element of successful distance education. It is very important to make continuous efforts to improve the way of communication between tutors and students, such as:

- Clearly define the course objectives, as well as the motivation for any online exercises or assignments.
- Provide explicit links between content, activities, and assignments and the course assessment and objectives. This will help students identify course activities and resources and understand when, where, and how to submit assignments.
- When writing assignments, syllabi, and publications, the instructors should use clear, succinct language.
- Create elements in the online classroom that will allow students to get to know one another and have the chance to develop trust, especially before assigning group work (Sarrafzadeh& Williamson, 2012; Wang, Song & Kang, 2006).
- Provide guidance on appropriate team procedures and appropriate division of labor. For most students, stress levels increase in distance education. Additional communication efforts, especially by the instructor, are therefore needed to reduce learners' concerns about information, assignment deadlines, or general course expectations (Stavarakakis&Xanthopoulou, 2019).

Ensuring the quality of communication and improving it, refers to a series of activities and actions (Williams, 2016). Quality assurance has to do with procedures and mechanisms in order to achieve the desired quality in communication between the involved members in teaching. The purpose is to improve communication, to ensure its measurability and facilitate its harmonization with some standards of educational institutions and academic programs. However, ensuring the quality of communication most often ends up referring to bureaucratic practices (Williams, 2016) as the term “quality assurance” is primarily associated with measurements and strict controls (Harvey &Gouvdis, 2007). Within a university, quality assurance in communication is associated with its improvement.

Recently, education has been oriented towards improving communication between tutors and students. In this direction, the points that need to be

improved, as well as actions and practices for improvement are scheduled for the future. In the past quality was mainly about measurements, judgments and accounts (Gibbs, 2013). Significant dimensions are currently considered, especially regarding the teaching context, the reflection or the innovation, which can be promoted (Gibbs, 2013). The continuous improvement of quality in learning and teaching, both in communication and in general, has to do with improving the educational experience of students and their empowerment in a process related to lifelong learning (Harvey & Newton, 2007). In conclusion, the quality of communication in ODE is critical for promoting effective learning and satisfaction. Tutors need to employ effective communication strategies that take into account the different learning styles, cultural backgrounds, and experiences of their learners. The use of technology can facilitate effective communication, but it is essential to ensure that the technology used is reliable and easy to use (Batsila, 2019; Ferdousi, Ahmed, & Momen, 2022; Patitsa, Sahinidis, Tsaknis, & Giannakouli, 2023).

### **2.2.1. Characteristics of quality communication and students' autonomy**

A quality system in a university must pursue the systematic and continuous development of the institution in all its functions (Ioakeimidou & Lionarakis, 2017), therefore identifying and understanding the involved parts of an organization is of vital importance for managers and educational policy makers (Xanthopoulou, 2020). As also pointed out by Ioakeimidou and Lionarakis (2017) there are factors (increase in the number of participants in higher education, development of new educational technologies, great social-geographical differentiation of learners, weight in the knowledge society, rising international competition of universities, internationalization, mobility, credits) that make it necessary to identify quality characteristics while building a culture of quality for the success of a six-year degree program.

Students in the open and distance education need personalized quality feedback, since it is an opportunity for communication and support are considered to be one of the main mechanisms of interaction with tutors (Sioulis & Gardikiotis, 2013). The process of quality communication in all its aspects is a collaborative and student-centered model. The teaching behavior in the open and distance education is determined by the shift of the center of gravity from the presentation to the provision of advice and supportive

assistance, so that the learners learn. It is important that the educational needs of students are met in many ways, so that they feel satisfied, as long as they are adults who participate critically in the educational process.

The case study by Papadimitriou, Lionarakis and Ioakeimidou (2019) showed that 100% of SEPs believe that their role in supporting, strengthening, encouraging, advising and enlivening students is of primary importance. In addition, basic principles of good practices were highlighted by the tutors, such as indicatively the active participation and utilization of students' experiences, respect for their needs, group dynamics, their encouragement/support, empathy, humor, flexibility, and .a. The characteristics and role of tutor (scientific training, supporting and encouraging role, effective organization of teleconferences) are decisive in the satisfaction factor of distance students and educational institutions must understand them in order to improve the quality of the studies provided (Gavrilis, Mavroidis, &Giossos, 2020).

### **2.3. The quality communication in teleconference**

In online class meetings, instructors through different ways can control and promote students' interaction and engagement (Shoepe et al., 2020). Today, there are several tools, outside the official environment of a university, which can be used to improve students' experience, offer them access to available services, challenge them about their goals, and to make suggestions to them on a practical level. "NavigateMe" for example is an online tool that can be adapted to the specificities of different universities and encourage students according to their lifestyle and needs to make the most suitable choices for them (Clark, 2015). Many studies (such as Doyumgaç, Tanhan, &Kiyamaz, 2021; Mayer, Lingle, &Usselman, 2017; Bates, 2020; Xanthopoulou&Lappa, 2022;Yoon, Lee, & Jo, 2021) also highlight the important role of audio and video channels, as participants, despite understanding barriers to their use, felt that audio and video would be beneficial for developing social interaction.

Tutors deciding whether or not to require students to use audio and video for teleconferences should weigh the potential for social interaction they offer, but also other factors, such as the technical requirements they must meet for their use (Mayer, Lingle&Usselman, 2017). With the help of modern technologies, the tutor can redesign the learning environment (adaptive

learning design) (Bower, 2016; Leppisaari&Vainio, 2015). There is a variety of non-verbal behaviors (expressions, head movements and posture, gaze and hand movements above the face) and many ways provided by modern learning technologies, which automatically recognize the emotional state of learners in real-time time using a state-of-the-art computer vision technique. These technologies can be integrated into online learning platforms to provide real-time feedback to tutors and learners about the learner's emotional state. For example, if the software detects that a learner is experiencing frustration or confusion, the platform can provide additional resources or support to help the learner overcome the challenge. This can help to improve learner's engagement, motivation, and overall learning outcomes (Guo, 2022).

### **3. Methodology**

The aim of the research is to investigate the students' perceptions regarding the quality of their communication with the tutor in open and distance education. In particular, the factors that determine the quality of communication will be studied, as well as the needs of the students that they consider to be covered by the quality of their communication with their tutor. The research took place from October 2020 to June 2022. The research questions that arise are the following:

1. Which factors determine the quality of communication between tutors and students in open and distance education?
2. Which educational needs of the students does quality communication with the tutor cover?
3. What ways of improving communication with their tutor would the students suggest?

For the data collection, the authors used a mixed approach of both qualitative and quantitative methods and tools. High data reliability rates are achieved (Matveev, 2002). The research sample consisted of 120-distance learning students at the Hellenic Open University and the questionnaires were distributed online through social media groups and students' academic emails, using the Google Form platform. The same process was followed for the qualitative research, as the questions of the structured interview were distributed online with the use of Google Form platform. Both the

questionnaire and the interview consist of sections related to the research questions.

Using both interviews and quantitative research methods can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the research topic (Perez, Howell Smith, Babchuk, & Lynch-O'Brien, 2023). Quantitative research involves collecting and analyzing numerical data, which can provide statistical information about the relationship between variables. This type of research is useful for identifying patterns, trends, and relationships between variables that can be generalized to a larger population (HR & Aithal, 2022). Qualitative research according to Muzari, Shava and Shonhiwa (2022), is used from social science and education researchers use for in-depth understanding of life and opinions. By using mixed research methods, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the research topic and triangulate their findings. Triangulation involves using multiple methods to investigate a research question, which can increase the validity and reliability of the findings. It can also help to overcome the limitations of each method, such as the lack of depth in quantitative research and the lack of generalizability in qualitative research (Dawadi, Shrestha, & Giri, 2021; Natow, 2020). The quantitative data were collected and analyzed through SPSS, while the qualitative data were analyzed through QNvivo tool.

The sections of the questionnaire are as follows:

- 1<sup>st</sup> section: Factors that determine quality in communication
- 2<sup>nd</sup> section: Needs covered by quality communication
- 3<sup>rd</sup> section: Ways to improve communication

From the Reliability Statistics table (Table 1) we have that the Cronbach's coefficient is very satisfactory (0.905) since it tends to unity. To qualify a questionnaire as reliable, the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  reliability index should be greater than 0.70. So these 23 questions satisfactorily compose a scale. In addition, the composition of the questionnaire was based on the research of Iliadou & Anastasiadis (2010) and Kefis and Xanthopoulou (2015) thus ensuring its validity.

**Table 1: Reliability Statistics**

| Cronbach's Alpha | N of Items |
|------------------|------------|
| ,905             | 23         |

Then, based on Braun & Clarke's (2006) six stages, the researchers used the thematic analysis in the qualitative research. The initial stage requires from the researcher to get familiar with the data. The data's coding was the subject of the second step. It was preferred to code using the QSR NVivo 12 application. In respect to the research questions, the data were meaningfully organized after an initial identification of meaning units linked to one another. The first thematic units from the QSR NVivo 12 coding are

1. Personal characteristics of tutors and students
2. Face-to-face meetings
3. Feeling of loneliness
4. Feeling as part of the community
5. Interaction in online classrooms
6. Communication skills
7. Learning benefits
8. Organization and planning of a teleconference
9. Limitations in online classrooms
10. Quality characteristics of the tutor
11. Invitations in online classrooms

Then, the authors with the use of NVivo created themes and sub-themes using the codes assigned to the interview data. Based on verbal relevance, the figure 2 below describes an initial correlation from QSR NVivo 12.

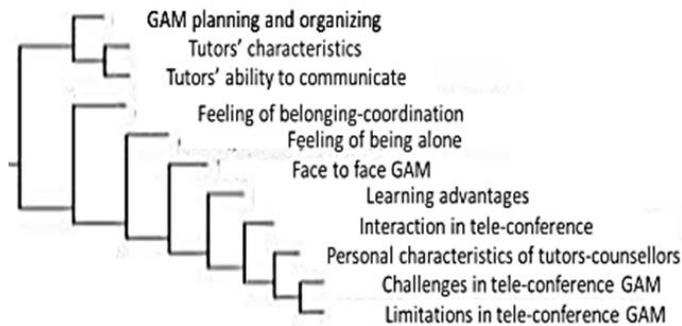


Figure 2: Items clustered by word similarity

(\*GAM- Group Advisory Meetings)

GAM- Group Advisory Meetings is a term used in the context of the Hellenic Open University (HOU) to describe a collaborative and supportive framework for academic interaction. These meetings provide an opportunity for students to come together in groups and engage in discussions with their tutors or advisors. The purpose of GAM is to foster communication, exchange ideas, and seek guidance on academic matters. During GAM sessions, students can receive support and guidance from their tutors regarding course content, assignments, and academic progress. It serves as a platform where students can ask questions, seek clarification, and engage in meaningful discussions related to their studies. The meetings are typically structured and scheduled, allowing students to actively participate and benefit from the collective knowledge and experiences of both the tutor and their peers

Additionally, based on the coding of the interviews there were tables of correlations between specific thematic areas. The personal qualities of tutors and their quality characteristics, as well as the characteristics of the students are directly related to the interaction in a teleconference as shown in the figure 2 below. It also appears that the organization and planning of the teleconferences are related to the quality characteristics of tutors and interaction (Figure 3). The text is in Greek as the interviews were carried out in Greek language, however they are explained below.



Figure 3: Correlation of personal characteristics of tutors and students with the interaction

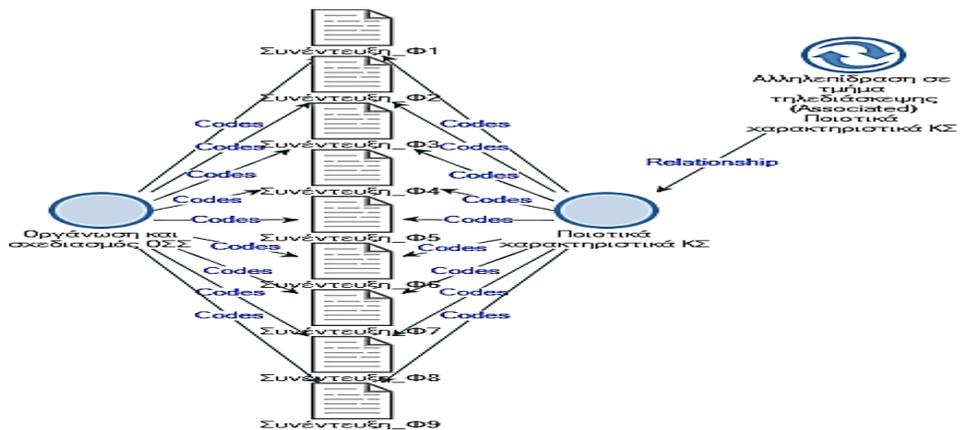


Figure 4: Correlation of OSS organization and design with the characteristics of tutors and interaction

The themes were re-examined in the fourth stage to ensure that there are no overlaps. The fifth stage included the redefinition of themes. The names of the final themes provide the reader a general understanding of what each theme entails. The smaller theme groups were then divided into three related thematic axes based on the study questions, as follows:

**1<sup>st</sup> thematic axis:** Characteristics of quality communication between tutor and students in the teleconferencing classrooms.

- 1.1. Appropriate educational methods
- 1.2. Personal characteristics of the tutor and students
- 1.3. A sense of belonging to a community

**2<sup>nd</sup> thematic axis:** Qualitative characteristics of tutors in a teleconference classrooms

- 2.1. Good practices in an electronic environment
- 2.2. Communication skills
- 2.3. Learning benefits
- 2.4. Organization and planning of teleconferences

**3<sup>rd</sup> thematic axis:** Differences between teleconferencing and face to face teaching regarding the quality of interactions

- 3.1. Challenges in an online classroom
- 3.2. Feeling isolated
- 3.3. Limitations on a video conference segment

The sixth step refers to the final analysis. Finding terms that would help organize the many subject divisions before compressing the substance of these conversations was the original objective. The analysis was based on the independent documents (interviews with postgraduate students in the Master of "Educational Sciences") that were under investigation.

## **4. Results**

### **4.1. Quantitative research findings**

Factors that determine the quality of communication between tutors and students in online and distance education as obtained from the questionnaires are presented in table 2 below.

**Table 2: Factors that determine the quality of communication between tutors and students**

| <b>Factors</b>   | <b>Average</b> |
|--|----------------|
| The friendly atmosphere between tutor and student  | 4,28           |
| The clarity and completeness of messages from the tutor  | 4,50           |
| Encouragement from tutor to his/her students   | 4,55           |
| The tutor's understanding of the student's feelings (stress, pressure, etc.)                               | 4,37           |
| The correct use of verbal and non-verbal communication by the tutor  | 4,46           |
| The tutor's interest in the family, work and personal situation of the students                            | 3,69           |
| The tutor's proficiency in available communication tools (operating system, technological equipment, etc.) | 4,23           |
| Regular communication (e.g. once a week) between the student and the tutor                                 | 4,20           |

As we present, the students mainly pointed the importance of clarity of messages from the tutor and the encouragement they need from him/her to develop a quality in communication.

Also, they mentioned that the tutor should show interest and empathy regarding their feelings of stress, pressure, sometimes loneliness, and understand their family and work obligations.

Table 3 presents the educational needs covered by quality communication between tutors and students.

**Table 3: The educational needs covered by quality communication**

| <b>Needs covered by quality communication</b>   | <b>Average</b> |
|---|----------------|
| Quality communication helps to develop a friendly and true relationship between them.   | 3,88           |
| Quality communication helps the tutor to meet the needs of students for advice and support.   | 4,18           |
| Quality communication helps the tutor to solve the students' questions immediately.   | 4,43           |
| Quality communication leads to appropriate guidance in the activities/assignments.  | 4,36           |
| Quality communication enhances the exchange of views between the student and the tutor on educational issues (e.g. teaching topics, educational materials, etc.). | 4,38           |
| Quality communication encourages students to continue their efforts.  | 4,51           |
| Quality communication reduces students' feelings of anxiety and insecurity.   | 4,26           |
| Quality communication helps students identify their weaknesses more easily.   | 4,13           |

According to table 3, students believe that is very important to receive advice and support, through e.g. frequent announcements from their tutor. This provides them appropriate guidance in the activities they have to carry out.

Exchanging views and opinions between the student and the tutor on educational issues (e.g. teaching topics, educational materials, etc.) encourages students to keep trying, it reduces their feelings of anxiety and insecurity, and helps them identify their weaknesses more easily.

Table 4 presents the ways to improve communication with the tutor, suggested by the students.

**Table 4: Student-Suggested Strategies to Enhance Communication with Tutors**

| <b>Ways to improve communication</b>   | <b>Average</b> |
|--|----------------|
| The tutor must take into account the special characteristics and interests of the students (e.g. learning difficulties, etc.)                    | 4,50           |
| The tutor should explain from the beginning of the semester the advantages of regular communication.   | 4,21           |
| The tutor should monitor the frequency of communication with the students.   | 4,03           |
| If students are identified who are slow to respond to communication, the tutor should contact them to determine if they need help                | 3,93           |
| The tutor should encourage the students to express their opinion in the forum and teleconferences in order to reduce their feeling of insecurity | 4,30           |
| A constructive and effective feedback improves quality in communication  | 4,53           |
| The tutor should clearly explain to the students the appropriate methodology for each assignment/activity.                                       | 4,63           |

#### **4.2. Qualitative research findings**

The qualitative research revealed that through teleconferencing, the interaction created between tutors and students can be as effective as that of a face-to-face classroom under certain conditions. The personal characteristics of the tutors, but also of the students, may hinder the quality of the interactions created in an online section or, conversely, contribute to the building of a constructive communication relationship. Having students feel like part of a community is an essential feature of a quality online classroom, but this feeling is not easy to achieve. Then, the communication skill of a tutor is a key element of a good interactive relationship, which can be cultivated, even by tutors who do not feel confident in an online section. The proper organization and design of a teleconference by tutors it is very important, although more demanding than a face-to face meeting. For the participants, organizing a teleconference is solely the responsibility of tutors. In open and distance education there are additional challenges that all involved must meet. Apart from the technical issues, which did not appear to be particularly serious, there are additional challenges, especially for

tutors related to a set of factors. Since the process of digital communication is different, the training of tutors it should also be corresponding to the different requirements. Tutors should be able to manage from small technical problems to more complex ones, such as the distance created by closed cameras, the lack of personal contact, their familiarity with the medium and procedures. In an online meeting, there are several restrictions on interaction. These include the lack of eye contact, the technical problems (especially at the beginning of the meeting), the functions of the video conferencing platform used by the university, any difficulties of students who delay the whole process, the security of personal data and, the regionally limited capabilities of the network.

### **4.3. Results for the specific research questions**

*1) Which factors determine the quality of communication between tutors and students in distance education?*

The factors that determine the quality of communication between tutors and students in distance education are the friendly atmosphere between tutor and student, the clarity of messages from the tutor and the encouragement from the tutor. Then, the understanding of the student's emotions (stress, pressure, etc.), the correct use of verbal and non-verbal communication by the tutor, the adequacy of the available communication tools (operating system, technological equipment, etc.) and the regular communication (e.g. once a week) between the student and the tutor helps to develop quality communication.

*2) Which educational needs of the students does quality communication with the tutor cover?*

Quality communication between tutors and students helps the tutor to meet the needs of students for advice and support, through e.g. frequent announcements. Then, it ensures the provision of an appropriate guidance in the activities that the students have to complete. It also strengthens the exchange of opinions between the student and the tutor on educational issues (e.g. teaching topics, educational materials, etc.), it encourages students to keep trying by reducing their feelings of anxiety and insecurity, and helps them identify and improve their weaknesses more easily.

*3) What ways of improving communication with the tutor would the students suggest?*

There are many ways to improve communication with the tutor, suggested by the students. First, the tutor should take into account the special characteristics and interests of the students (e.g. learning difficulties, etc.). It is also very important to explain from the beginning semester the benefits of the regular communication and to monitor the frequency of communication with his/her class. In case of identifying students who take a long time to respond to the communication, the tutor must contact them to determine if they need help. The tutor should further encourage the students to express their point of view in the forum and teleconferences, in order to reduce their feeling of insecurity. A constructive and timely feedback on the students' work through analytic and effective comments, as well as the clear explanation of the needs of each activity or assignment, can also improve the quality of communication.

## **5. Conclusions and Suggestions for future research**

Quality in communication in open and distance education is determined by several factors. Tutors should take these factors into account to achieve a successful educational and learning process. They should promote a friendly environment to students and make sure their messages and feedback are clear and understandable. They should also encourage students to contact them when they are in need. They should seek regular communication and be close to them, understanding their feelings and anxiety that may hinder them to complete their studies. Finally, the necessary tools and the necessary technological equipment should be ensured during teaching. Students have a variety of needs and the development of quality communication can play a catalytic role in meeting these needs. Students need support and guidance. They also need a tutor to support and advise them, helping them to overcome problems during the course and emotional and psychological difficulties that they may experience in open and distance education.

The quality of the communication between the tutor and the learner in ODE must be a priority for both sides. Tutors should put the students and their needs (educational and emotional) at the center of their teaching and adapt the course to them. Feedback plays a dominant role in ODE. Tutors should provide students with appropriate and constructive feedback that will

facilitate them in carrying out tasks and help them to overcome difficulties and obstacles in understanding the course.

The present research investigated the opinions students at the Hellenic Open University, and more specifically the views of postgraduate students at the Master of Education Sciences regarding the communication between tutors and students. At this point, we would like to refer to some research limitations. The research took place from 2020 to 2022. Due to the difficult conditions created by the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the imposition of restrictive measures, it was not possible to distribute the questionnaires and complete them by the participants in physical presence. Thus, possible questions when filling in the questionnaires from the participants could not be solved by the researcher, which probably affected the answers and consequently the results of the research.

In addition, the use of the questionnaire as a research tool limits the participants to analyze their thoughts and delve deeper into the topic under investigation. There is also the possibility that the answers are not objective, as the participants in their answers do not always express their opinions objectively. As mentioned above, the qualitative research was also carried out with Google Forms, which leads to the same limitations regarding the objectivity of the answers but also participants' intention to write analytical answers that will help in the later analysis. Some responses were excluded because their length did not assist the thematic analysis.

The research sample consisted of 120 postgraduate students. This number can be considered relatively small compared to the volume that characterizes this population group. For this reason, the authors suggest a similar research in which a larger sample so that the results can be generalized. It would also be of particular interest to record the views of the other side, specifically of the tutors. For example, the research could include interviews with tutors where they will give their opinions on the specific topic being studied. In this way, a more completed picture of the existing situation will be ensured and more objective results will be able to be obtained. Finally, a similar research could be conducted for other higher education institutions, such as the Open University of Cyprus. Through the comparison of the results there could be an improvement in the way the open universities are organized and operated.

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