



DISTANCE EDUCATION IN EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS – ANALYSING MECHANISMS FOR INCREASING PARTICIPATION OF ADULT LEARNERS

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to present the research objective, the preliminary results and the potential impact of distance education within the framework of the IDEAL project¹ (“Impact of Distance Education on Adult Learning”²) a project carried out jointly by the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE), the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) and StudyPortals (SP). The project examines the interrelations of adult learning, higher education and distance education. It has been designed to explore if and how higher education institutions can contribute to adult learning by means of distance education. It seeks to offer insights on the needs of adult learners to both policy makers and distance education providers and to increase the participation of adult learners in higher education through distance education.

Distance education is considered as a generic concept covering different organisational forms of education like online education ($\geq 80\%$ of the content delivered online) or blended education (30-79% of the content offered online). In recent years the boundaries between distance education and campus-based education have become increasingly blurred, resulting in a mixed form of education often referred to as flexible education. The research project therefore draws upon this concept and seeks to analyse the degree of flexibility (in time, place, tempo and way of studying) of the distance education offered by different higher education institutions. In the study only formal education has been considered.

In the context of this research project, three studies have been carried out: Study 1 examined the distance education offer of European higher education institutions – what is offered and for whom is it designed? Study 2 consisted of a survey among enrolled distance education students in Europe and outside Europe to analyse their social profile, their motivations, the barriers they encountered, etc. Study 3 focused on potential distance education students – who are they, what do they look for, what are the barriers?

¹ <http://www.idealproject.eu>

² IDEAL Project number: 539668-LLP-1-2013-1-NO-ERASMUS-ESIN (20133864)

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Whereas current data on the participation of adults in education is usually obtained through grand-scale household surveys such as the Labour Force Survey or the Adult Education Survey³, this study analyses the actual content of the distance education offer, the experiences of students enrolled in distance education as well as the potential of distance education for adult learning. The results and conclusions published in the final report will be of relevance to researchers in the field of policy studies in adult education, policy-makers and higher education institutions alike.

Introduction

The IDEAL project (“Impact of Distance Education on Adult Learning”) is a joint project of the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE), the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), and StudyPortals (SP). It runs from October 2013 to September 2015 with financial support from the EU Lifelong Learning Programme (sub-programme Erasmus Multilateral Projects).

Purpose of the project and research questions

The IDEAL project has been designed to get a better understanding of distance education offered by higher education institutions and to examine how higher education institutions can contribute to adult learning by way of distance education; specifically: **“How can the distance education offer of European higher education institutions be better matched to the needs of adult learners?”**

The project aims to:

- offer insights on the needs of adult learners to both policy makers and distance education providers;
- strengthen the social dimension of higher education by better meeting the needs of adult learners;
- increase the participation of adult learners in higher education through distance education.

This research question has emerged essentially from the continuing emphasis of lifelong learning as a policy objective both at European Union level (foremost the Europe 2020 Strategy⁴) and in the context of the Bologna Process. For the latter, lifelong learning has been recognised as an essential element of the European Higher Education Area since the Prague Communiqué of 2001. It signalled that “in a Europe built on a knowledge-based society and economy, lifelong learning strategies are necessary to face the challenges of competitiveness and the use of new technologies, and to improve social cohesion, equal opportunities and quality of life”. Since then, there has been growing awareness of the need to embed lifelong learning within higher education. The 2009 Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué strongly emphasised this need and the 2012 Bucharest Communiqué reaffirmed “the role of lifelong

³ <http://www.ilo.org/dyn/lfsurvey/lfsurvey.home>

⁴ European Union, Europe 2020: http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/index_en.htm

learning as one of the important factors in meeting the needs of a changing labour market”. It has been stressed since that access to higher education for adult learners needs to be ensured.

In 2011, the Council resolution on a renewed European agenda for adult learning underlined the need to encourage higher education institutions to embrace adult learners. It is against this backdrop that the IDEAL project has set out to examine how the participation and attainment rates of adults can be increased, not only from the perspective of the providers (higher education institutions), but also from a student perspective. The focus on the distance learning offer as provided by higher education institutions has been chosen deliberately as many studies, among the HEAD study⁵, identified flexible learning arrangements as decisive factor facilitating adult participation in higher education. This approach was made possible through the successful implementation of a European database on distance learning courses provided by higher education institutions, the DistanceLearningPortal collecting data since 2012.

Outline of this paper

This paper will first define the key concepts, namely adult learners, distance education, higher education institutions, as used in the IDEAL project. By way of doing so, the scope of the project will be clearly delineated (2. Core concepts used). Secondly, the project research methodology will be outlined (3. Background and research methodology), including a short introduction of the main surveys carried out at European level and presenting insights for increasing participation in higher education (4. Preliminary results of study 1-3) and some 5. Preliminary conclusions and recommendations.

Core concepts used

The UNESCO Institute for Statistics defines adult education as “Education specifically targeted at individuals who are regarded as adults by their society to improve their technical or professional qualifications, further develop their abilities, enrich their knowledge with the purpose to complete a level of formal education, or to acquire, refresh or update their knowledge, skills and competencies in a particular field. This also includes what may be referred to as ‘continuing education’, ‘recurrent education’ or ‘second chance education.’” (UNESCO, 2012).

In the case of adult learners, this definition makes it difficult, though, to distinguish between those still in the process of completing initial education and those returning to education at a later stage. As the IDEAL project focuses on the latter, it will use the definition provided by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop, 2008) in its “Terminology of European education and training policy”, which restricts *adult learning* to **learning undertaken by adults after they have left their initial education and training**. That means that the adult learners targeted by the IDEAL project are adults returning to education

⁵ HEAD Study - Developing the Adult Learning Sector. Final Report: ec.europa.eu/education/library/study/.../adult-learning-g_en.pdf

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after a period of work, unemployment, parental leave, etc. While EU studies (e.g. the Adult Education Survey) targets (e.g. the 15% benchmark on adult participation in lifelong learning by 2020) often concentrate on those aged 25-64, the IDEAL project takes a more holistic approach and includes all learners who have completed their initial education and training and are returning to education (or at least considering it), no matter what age they have. The UNESCO Institute of Statistics defines initial education as: “formal education of individuals before their first entrance to the labour market, i.e. when they will normally be in full-time education. It thus targets individuals who are regarded as children, youth and young adults by their society. It typically takes place in educational institutions in a system designed as a continuous educational pathway.” (UNESCO, 2012)

Distance education has a long tradition and has classically been separated from campus-based education. According to UNESCO (2002), “the terms open learning and distance education represent approaches that focus on opening access to education and training provision, freeing learners from the constraints of time and place, and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups of learners.” (UNESCO, 2002). Such a degree of openness and flexibility will not be offered by many higher education institutions – and most likely only by universities that focus exclusively on distance education (single mode institutions like Fernuniversitaet in Germany and the Open University in UK). The IDEAL project, however, seeks to include also so-called dual mode institutions, offering both campus-based and distance education, that are likely to provide a more limited degree of openness and flexibility, applying a large variety of different interpretations of open and distance education. Distance education within the IDEAL Project is considered as a generic term for different organisational forms of education in which students and teachers are separated in time and space. It includes online education ($\geq 80\%$ of the content delivered online) and blended education (30-79% of the content delivered online) as well as modes of education using printed material delivered by post and/or other tools for bridging the distance and facilitating the learning.

The IDEAL project includes distance education of any length (ranging from individual course units to full degree programmes) that can be enjoyed by any free moving student. There might be entry requirements (e.g. work experience or language skills) but once they are met, any student should be free to follow the courses or programmes (i.e. they are not connected to specific exchange programmes).

Background and research methodology

At EU policy level, the need to embed the principles of lifelong learning in education and broader development policies has also taken on a more urgent tone than ever. The Europe 2020 Strategy has set benchmarks of specific age cohorts who should have completed tertiary or equivalent education (target: 40%, with figures ranging from 18% to 49.6% in 2012). EU Member States have further agreed to raise the benchmark for adult participation in lifelong learning to 15% by 2020. In 2011, the Council resolution on a renewed European agenda for

adult learning underlined the need to encourage higher education institutions to embrace adult learners also by means of distance education.

The goal of **Study 1** was to examine the distance education offer of European higher education institutions and to identify the intended target group(s). For this purpose, an **online survey** was conducted among higher education institutions. With the support of the International Association of Universities (IAU) and its World Higher Education Database (WHED) as well as through the joint networks of the project partners (the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE), the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) and StudyPortals) some 4,000 higher education institutions based in the European Higher Education Area have been asked to participate in an online survey in May 2014. The persons addressed were usually the heads of the institutions, i.e. placed at a strategic policy level. All together 167 valid respondents, of which 134 offer distance education. In parallel to the data analysis of this institutional survey, the distance education offer listed on www.DistanceLearningPortal.eu⁶ was analysed. By May 2014, the DistanceLearningPortal covered 3,140 distance education courses and degree programmes (offered online or in a blended way), 1,512 of which in the UK. The large majority of the programmes were master programmes but they also included bachelor and PhD programmes as well as short courses (defined as anything less than three months), such as modules or summer schools.

The goal of **Study 2** was to examine the profile and the needs of actual adult learners enrolled in distance education. To collect the data, higher education institutions that have participated in survey 1 and/or are listed on DistanceLearningPortal were contacted and asked to circulate the invitation to participate in an **online survey** among their enrolled distance education students. 1,773 valid responses were received of which 60% were from the UK, mostly the Open University. The topics to be covered were:

- Personal profile (age, gender, household situation, work and study situation, work experience and previous education, including non-formal education);
- Information on the programme/course selected (field of study, funding situation);
- Motivation to study (in general and for distance education in particular);
- Experiences as a distance education student (work load, barriers encountered and support received, overall assessment).

The goal of **Study 3** was foremost to examine potential students. This study is the most innovative in that it seeks to reach out to potential students. It is also a **multi-component study**, consisting of an **online tracking tool (study choice analytics)** combined with a student **online questionnaire** and **five country case studies**. The online questionnaire yielded 427 valid responses, of which six countries make up almost 50% of the respondents and the study choice analytics retrieved 9 million page views, however biased by the offer available on StudyPortals. To mitigate the technical and other biases on the use of DistanceLearningPortal and to complement the analysis of the data gathered in the three studies, five external experts

⁶ The online report presenting the first results is available here: <http://idealproject.eu/>

have been asked to take a closer look at five countries, analysing existing research on potential distance education students, their profiles, needs etc.

Preliminary results of study 1-3

Preliminary results of Study 1 – Distance education offer of European higher education institutions

- **What is offered:** 50% of the analysed institutions offer mainly face-to-face education but in addition some distance education; 21% distance and face to face education; 9% distance education only and 20% no distance learning.
- **In Europe,** there were to the time of the study 3006 distance education studies available in the portal. 1788 of them were located in the UK.
- **Offer by subject:** 28% of the distance education offer is in Business & Economics; 14% in Engineering and Technology; 14% in Life Sciences & Health; 12% in Social Sciences; 12% in Applied Sciences & Arts; 7% in Law; 6% in Environmental Sciences; 4% in Humanities & Art and 4% in Natural Sciences.
- **Level of education:** 56% of the programmes offered are at a level of a Master, 12% at Bachelor, 6% at PhD and 26% are courses which do not lead to a degree.
- **The intended target groups** for the institutions offering distance education regarding adult learners are adult learners with certain work experience (67%); adult learners with a degree (65%) and adult learners with no previous degree 46%.

Preliminary results of Study 2 – Social profile of adults enrolled in distance education

- **Regarding the current student body in distance education** it can be stated that the majority of distance education students are women. About the age, students of all ages study in distance education, generally older ones than in “traditional” higher education with work experience.
- **About the employment status:** 50% work full time; 19% work part time and 31% are not working.
- **Level of previous education:** 28% hold a high school certificate (or equivalent), 31% a Bachelor’s degree (or equivalent), and 11% a Master’s (or equivalent). 4% hold a PhD degree. The remaining 26% hold ‘other’ levels of degrees.
- **The level of degree to be obtained** reveals that a clear majority of students are studying for a Bachelor’s or equivalent level degree (84 %). 12% and 2% respectively are pursuing Master’s and PhD degrees (and another 2% ‘other’ degrees).
- **The kind of support do adult learners (expect to) get during their studies** are related to the learning material developed/ adapted specifically for distance education (1620); Administrative / organisational support (1627); Moral support; psychological support; counselling (1589) and Opportunities to interact with teachers and other students (1630).

- **The motivations** of students to consider distance education vary widely: they are mostly related to self-fulfilment, employability and status.
- **The main barriers to access** distance education are related to the need for recognition (validation and accreditation) of prior learning; cost of education; time restrictions; language of tuition; technology used.
- It is worth to mention that many of these barriers are the same for distance learning as for conventional learning.

Preliminary results of Study 3 – Potential Students

Student profile

A majority of distance education students are women. Students of all ages study in distance education, but unlike in on-campus education, very young students are in the minority. The majority of distance education students are returning to or entering higher education after a period of work or leave. Very often this includes duties related to family life such as parental leave. A typical distance education student is a person in the midst of life, with family, children and/or work responsibilities. A large majority of distance education students work alongside their studies. Another distinct group of distance education students are retired people, who study for self-fulfilment or in order to stay active. For some students, distance education means a second chance after missing the opportunity to enter higher education earlier in life. Distance education also offers educational opportunities for disabled students or students with other health issues (for example, the Open University UK is the largest provider of higher education for people with disabilities in the UK). Finally, as the term distance education implies, people living in remote areas far away from higher education institutions also constitute an important group of students. **The average potential student** for distance education is between 25-34 years old and in employment. In our dataset the majority of them have completed a bachelor's degree (57%).

Motivation for distance education

Students' motivations to study are highly diverse. Some are motivated by the possibility of career advancement or updating their knowledge; others by the sheer joy of learning. Whilst many students opt for distance education due to time and other constraints in their personal life, it can also be the delivery mode of choice. For example, many distance education students are so-called independent or self-directed students (some of them very young), who prefer distance education because it allows them to study at their own pace thus with little contact with other students. The main reason why students are looking for further education is to improve their career prospects. They intend to go for distance education in order to more easily combine studies with other duties.

Perceived barriers by distance education students

The most common barriers for distance education students are time constraints resulting from work and family responsibilities. As with on-campus education, funding is an important

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issue for the majority of students. The use of technology can also constitute a barrier. However our dataset shows:

- **Costs** (46%); Time (26%); Recognition of qualifications/ alternative access routes (19%); Distance education technology (15%); Language of the programme/course (11%)
- (FINLAND report) Shortages in counselling, lack of communication and face-to-face meetings, shortages in the design of the course, problems with the timetable, technical problems, need of self-discipline, and costs of the study
- (GERMANY report) Lack of adult-adjusted programmes, lack of specific support structures for adult students and especially formal regulations
- (GREECE report) Absence of a system of recognition of prior learning and work experience and “More negative image” of distance education degrees
- (HUNGARY report) Costs, lack of the courses people really need in their localities; previous bad learning experience; university distance learning programmes are all fee-paying, and participation in such training is not subsidised
- (UK report) Time pressures to juggle study around other commitments, whether work, family or both.

Study choice analysis

- The analysis showed that most of the potential students are interested in Business & Economics. (36.5%).
- 48.6% of the potential students are interested in courses hosted in the UK (48.6%). Most of the potential students also come from this country (11.5%).
- Regarding what level of education potential distance education students are looking for, the vast majority seems to look for a master degree (69.2%).

Preliminary conclusions and recommendations

The meta-analysis of Study 1 to 3 providing recommendations on increasing participation will be available in the upcoming final report to be issued in May this year. Hence, the full range of policy recommendations of relevance to researchers in the field of policy studies in adult education, policy-makers and higher education institutions will be made available at the EDEN annual conference in June 2015. However, at this stage the analysis shows that higher education institutions offering distance education need to take into consideration that:

- Increasing attainment levels, improving career prospects but also learning for self-fulfilment within the **vision of lifelong learning** are considered the major motivation for adult learners to engage in distance education;
- Provision of online education as the main mode of distance education responds to most adult learners’ request for more flexible learning opportunities;
- Transparency in information on **recognition of prior learning** and possible alternative access modes need to be increased as less than 10% of the universities in the survey provided this information;

- Funding opportunities need to be diversified and eligibility criteria need to be more visible;
- Good study guides are crucial including counselling in the selection process of courses and programmes and varied forms of support during the studies;
- Adult learners request more information on credits and transferability of acquired qualification;
- **Student-to-student interaction** opportunities need to be increased.

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