

# **The distance education offer of European higher education institutions - a contribution to adult learning?**

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**Proposal for a paper to be presented at the**

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The aim of the paper is to present the first results of a European research project on the interrelations of adult learning, higher education and distance education. The 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. 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 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 context of this research project, three studies will be carried out: Study 1 will examine the European distance education offer – what is offered and who is it designed for? Study 2 consists of a survey among enrolled distance education students to analyse their social profile, their motivations, the barriers they encountered etc. Study 3 will focus on prospective distance education students – who are they, what do they look for, what are the barriers? For this purpose, the browsing and search behaviour on [www.DistanceLearningPortal.eu](http://www.DistanceLearningPortal.eu) will be analysed and five experts will conduct a meta-analysis of existing research for five country cases.

The paper to be presented at the ESREA conference in Aalborg will focus on study 1 and analyse the distance education offer of European higher education institutions and the intended target group(s). For this purpose, the programmes listed on [www.DistanceLearningPortal.eu](http://www.DistanceLearningPortal.eu) will be analysed and a survey will be carried out among higher education institutions, covering (among others) the following aspects:

- Institutional profile (e.g. single mode / dual mode)
- Details on the distance education programmes (e.g. types of programmes, types of degrees / certificates, disciplines, language(s) of instruction)
- Access (entry requirements, recognition of prior learning, possible starting dates etc.)
- Organisational aspects (mode of delivery, work load, ECTS, time flexibility etc.)
- Support offered to students
- Quality assurance
- Motivation of the institution to offer distance education
- Main target group(s)
- Plans for the future.

The research is unique in its focus on the interrelations of adult participation, higher education and distance education. It also will provide new data through access to the DistanceLearningPortal and the large networks of the three project partners. Whereas current data is usually obtained through grand-scale surveys such as the Labour Force Survey or the Adult Education Survey, this study zooms in on the offer of higher education institutions and seeks to investigate the actual content of the distance education offer. The results and conclusions will be of relevance to researchers in the field of policy studies in adult education, policy-makers and higher education institutions alike.

THE PROJECT IS SUPPORTED BY:

