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

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present the research questions, preliminary results and potential impact of the IDEAL (Impact of Distance Education on Adult Learning) project, which is being carried out jointly by the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE), the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) and StudyPortals (SP).¹ This project examines the interrelations of adult learning, higher education and distance education, exploring if and how higher education institutions can contribute to adult learning by means of distance education. It seeks to offer policymakers and distance education providers insights into the needs of adult learners and to increase the participation of adult learners in higher education through distance education.

Distance education is understood here as a generic concept covering different organizational forms of education, such as online education (where at least 80% of the content is delivered online) or blended education (where 30–79% of the content is 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'. Drawing upon the concept of flexible education, the IDEAL research project analyses the degree of flexibility (with regard to time, place, tempo and way of studying) of the distance education offered by various higher education institutions. The study only considers formal education.

Three studies were conducted as part of this research project: Study 1 examined the distance education offered by European higher education institutions, investigating what courses are offered and for whom they are designed. Study 2 consisted of a survey of enrolled distance education students in Europe and outside Europe and analysed factors such as their social profile, their motivations and the barriers they

¹ See www.idealproject.eu; IDEAL project reference number: 539668-LLP-1-2013-1-NO-ERASMUS-ESIN (20133864).

encounter. Study 3 focused on potential distance education students, examining who they are, what they look for, and what barriers they face.

Whereas data on the participation of adults in education is usually obtained through large-scale household surveys such as the Labour Force Survey or the Adult Education Survey, this IDEAL project analyses the actual content of the distance education on offer, the experiences of students enrolled in distance education and the potential that distance education has 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, policymakers and higher education institutions.

1. Introduction

The IDEAL (Impact of Distance Education on Adult Learning) project 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's Erasmus Multilateral Projects sub-programme.

Purpose of the project and research question

The IDEAL project aims to develop a better understanding of the distance education offered by higher education institutions and to examine how higher education institutions can use distance education to contribute to adult learning. The key research question that the project seeks to answer is: How can the distance education offered by European higher education institutions be better matched to the needs of adult learners?

The project aims to:

- offer policymakers and distance education providers insights into the needs of adult learners;
- strengthen the social dimension of higher education by better meeting the needs of adult learners;
and
- increase the participation of adult learners in higher education through distance education.

The project's key research question emerged from the continuing emphasis on lifelong learning as a policy objective both at European Union level (especially in the Europe 2020 Strategy)² and in the context of the Bologna Process. With regard to the latter, lifelong learning has been recognized as an essential element of the European Higher Education Area since the Prague Communiqué of 2001. This 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'.³ 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 emphasized this need, while the 2012 Bucharest Communiqué reaffirmed 'the role of lifelong learning as one of the important factors in meeting the needs of a changing labour market'⁴. It has since been stressed 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 (i.e. higher education institutions), but also from a student perspective. The project focuses on the distance learning offered by higher education institutions because many studies, including the HEAD study, have identified flexible learning arrangements as a decisive factor in facilitating adult participation in higher education.⁵ This approach was made possible by the successful implementation of a European database on distance learning courses provided by higher education institutions, the DistanceLearningPortal, which has been collecting data since 2012.

Outline of this paper

This paper will first define the key concepts – namely adult learners, distance education and higher education institutions – as used in the IDEAL project in order to delineate the scope of the project. Secondly, the project research methodology will be outlined. This will include a short introduction of the main surveys carried out at European level. The paper will then summarize the preliminary results of the studies and present insights into

² European Union, Europe 2020: http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/index_en.htm

³ http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/documents/MDC/PRAGUE_COMMUNIQUE.pdf

⁴ [http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/\(1\)/Bucharest%20Communique%202012\(2\).pdf](http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/(1)/Bucharest%20Communique%202012(2).pdf)

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

increasing participation in higher education. The paper will conclude with some preliminary conclusions and recommendations.

2. 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”¹

In the case of adult learners, however, this definition makes it difficult 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 in its *Terminology of European Education and Training Policy: A Selection of Key Terms*, which restricts adult learning to learning undertaken by adults after they have left their initial education and training (Cedefop, 2008).

The adult learners targeted by the IDEAL project are thus adults returning to education after a period of work, unemployment, parental leave, etc. While EU studies (such as the Adult Education Survey) or targets (such as the 15% benchmark for adult participation in lifelong learning by 2020)⁶ often concentrate on those aged between 25 and 64, the IDEAL project takes a more holistic approach, including 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 are. 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 it has generally 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’

⁶ http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/lip/events/2013/documents/ldv_gr_ka4/al_agenda_ts__2013.pdf

(UNESCO 2002). Higher education institutions tend not to offer such a high degree of openness and flexibility, with the exception of open or 'single-mode' universities that focus exclusively on distance education, such as *Fernuniversitäten* ('distance universities') in Germany and the Open University in the UK. The IDEAL project, however, also includes 'dual-mode' institutions, which offer both campus-based and distance education and are therefore likely to provide a more limited degree of openness and flexibility.

The IDEAL project views 'distance learning' as a generic term for different organizational forms of education in which students and teachers are separated by time and space. It includes online education (where more than 80% of the content is delivered online) and blended education (where 30–79% of the content is delivered online) as well as modes of education that use printed material delivered by post and/or other tools for bridging distances and facilitating learning, such as massive open online courses (MOOCs).

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 may be entry requirements (e.g. work experience or language skills), but once these are met, any student should be free to follow the courses or programmes; in other words, students do not have to be participating in specific exchange programmes.

3. Background and research methodology

At EU policy level, the call to embed the principles of lifelong learning in education and broader development policies has taken on a more urgent tone than ever. The Europe 2020 Strategy has set benchmarks for specific age cohorts 30-34 years who should have completed tertiary or equivalent education.⁷ Furthermore, EU Member States have 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 by using distance education among other means.

The goal of Study 1 was to examine the distance education offered by 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)

⁷ http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Tertiary_education_statistics

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 were asked to participate in the online survey in May 2014. The persons addressed were usually the heads of the institutions; that is, they generally worked at a strategic policy level. In parallel to the data analysis of this institutional survey, the distance education offers listed on www.DistanceLearningPortal.eu were analysed.⁸ By May 2014, the DistanceLearningPortal listed 3,140 distance education courses and degree programmes that were offered online or in a blended way. Of these, 1,512 were in the UK. The large majority of the programmes were master's programmes, but the portal also included bachelor's 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 profiles and needs of adult learners enrolled in distance education. Higher education institutions that had participated in Study 1 and/or were listed on DistanceLearningPortal were asked to circulate among their enrolled distance education students an invitation to participate in an online survey. The topics covered in the survey 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 for studying (in general and for distance education in particular); and
- experiences as a distance education student (workload; barriers encountered and support received overall assessment).

Study 3 is the most innovative part of the project, in that it centres on examining potential students. This multi-component study consists of an online tracking tool (study choice analytics), student questionnaires and five country case studies. To complement the analysis of the data gathered in all three studies, five external experts have been asked to take a closer look at five countries by analysing existing research on the profiles and needs of potential distance education students in these countries.

⁸ The online report presenting the first results is available here: <http://idealproject.eu/>

4. Preliminary results of Studies 1–3

Preliminary results of Study 1 – Distance education offered by European higher education institutions

- 50% of the analysed institutions offer mainly face-to-face education but also some distance education; 21% offer distance and face-to-face education; 9% offer distance education only; 20% do not offer distance learning.
- At the time of the study, 3,006 distance/blended education studies in Europe were listed in the portal. 1,788 of these were located in the UK.
- 28% of the distance education courses on offer are in business and economics; 14% are in engineering and technology; 14% are in life sciences and health; 12% are in social sciences; 12% are in applied sciences; 7% are in law; 6% are in environmental sciences; 4% are in humanities and arts; and 4% are in natural sciences.
- 56% of the programmes offered are at master's level, 12% at bachelor's level, 6% at PhD level, and 26% are courses that do not lead to a degree.
- The target groups for the institutions offering distance education for adults are adult learners with 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 currently enrolled in distance education

- Women comprise the majority of current distance education students.
- Students of all ages participate in distance education, but they tend to be older than students in 'traditional' higher education and generally have some work experience.
- 50% of current distance education students work full-time, 19% work part-time and 31% are unemployed.
- 28% hold a high-school certificate (or equivalent), 31% have a bachelor's degree (or equivalent), 11% have a master's (or equivalent) and 4% have a PhD. The remaining 26% hold other types of degrees.
- A clear majority of students are studying for a bachelor's degree or equivalent (84%). 12% and 2% are pursuing master's and PhD degrees respectively, and another 2% are pursuing other degrees.
- During their distance studies, adult learners expect to receive support in terms of opportunities to interact with teachers and other students (1,630 students); administrative or organizational support

(1,627); learning material developed or adapted specifically for distance education (1,620); and moral and psychological support and counselling (1,589).

- Students' motivations for participating in distance learning vary widely, but they are mostly related to self-fulfilment, employability and status.
- The main barriers to distance education are related to the need for recognition (i.e. validation and accreditation) of prior learning; cost of education; time restrictions; language of tuition; and technology used. It is worth mentioning, however, that many of these barriers also apply to conventional learning.

Preliminary results of Study 3 – Potential Students

a) *Student profile:*

As indicated above, the 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 such as parental leave. A typical distance education student is a person with a 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 tend to 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; the Open University, for example, 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 also constitute an important group of students. The average potential student for distance education is between 25 and 34 years old and in employment. In our database, the majority of potential students have completed a bachelor's degree (57%).

b) *Motivations for distance education:*

Distance students' motivations are very diverse. Some are motivated by the sheer joy of learning and others wish to update their knowledge, but the majority want to improve their career prospects. Many students opt for distance education due to time and other constraints in their personal life, and because it gives them the flexibility to combine their studies with other responsibilities. However, many

distance education students are 'independent' or 'self-directed' students (some of whom are very young) who prefer distance education because it allows them to study at their own pace and does not necessitate much contact with other students.

c) *Perceived barriers for 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 issue for the majority of students. Technology can also constitute a barrier. Our database's list of perceived barriers to distance learning is outlined in more detail below:

- Cost factors (46% of students); time (26%); recognition of qualifications/alternative access routes (19%); distance education technology (15%); language of the programmes/courses (11%)
- Finland: lack of counselling, communication and face-to-face meetings; inadequacies in course design; timetabling problems; technical problems; lack of self-discipline; costs of the programmes
- Germany: lack of programmes tailored to adults; lack of support structures specifically for adults; lack of formal regulations
- Greece: absence of a system of recognition of prior learning and work experience; negative image of distance education degrees
- Hungary: costs (university distance learning programmes all entail fees) and lack of subsidies; lack of courses that people really need in their localities; previous negative learning experiences
- UK report: time pressure; challenge of juggling studying with other commitments, such as work and family

d) *Study choice analysis*

- The analysis showed that most potential students are interested in business and economics (36.5%).
- 48.6% of potential students are interested in courses hosted in the UK. Most of potential students also come from the UK (11.5%).
- The vast majority of potential students is interested in studying for a master's degree (69.2%).

5. Preliminary conclusions and recommendations

The meta-analysis of Studies 1 to 3 provides recommendations on increasing participation and will be available in the final report, which is to be published in May 2015. At this stage, however, the analysis shows that higher education institutions offering distance education need to take the following points into consideration:

- Increasing attainment levels, improving career prospects and self-fulfilment are the major motivations for adult learners who engage in distance education.
- Provision of online education as the main mode of distance education responds to most adult learners' requests for more flexible learning opportunities.
- Transparent information on recognition of prior learning and possible alternative access modes needs to be provided; less than 10% of the universities participating in the survey provided this information.
- Funding opportunities need to be diversified and eligibility criteria need to be more visible.
- Students need guidance on selecting courses and should receive various forms of support throughout their studies.
- Adult learners want more information on credits and the transferability of qualifications.
- Opportunities for student-to-student interaction need to be increased.

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