Closing the Gap

Opportunities for distance education
to benefit adult learners in higher education

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IDEAL

Impact of Distance Education on Adult Learning
www.idealproject.eu

The IDEAL partners

International Council for Open and Distance Education

The International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) is the leading global membership organization for open, distance, flexible and online education, including e-learning, and draws its membership from institutions, educational authorities, commercial entities and individuals. ICDE has consultative partner status with UNESCO and shares UNESCO's key value – the universal right to education for all. ICDE further derives its position by using the unique knowledge and experience of its members throughout the world in the development and use of new methodologies and emerging technologies. Founded in 1938 in Canada as the International Council for Correspondence Education, the organization today has members from over 60 countries worldwide. ICDE's Permanent Secretariat is in Oslo, Norway and has been hosted by this country on a permanent basis since 1988. ICDE is supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research and by membership fees.

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The UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) is a non-profit, policy-driven, international research, training, information, documentation and publishing institute. One of seven educational institutes of UNESCO, UIL undertakes research, capacity-building, networking and publication on lifelong learning with a focus on adult and continuing education, literacy and non-formal basic education, and alternative learning opportunities for marginalized and disadvantaged groups. Within UNESCO's broad educational mandate, the mission of the Institute is to promote the recognition of and create the conditions for the exercise of the right to education and learning.

StudyPortals

StudyPortals is an online platform where students can find and compare higher education opportunities worldwide. StudyPortals aims to motivate people to pursue a university degree and helps them in their decision-making process by making information on study options accessible, understandable and comparable. StudyPortals' ultimate ambition is to make study choice transparent globally. They operate a set of student-focused online study choice platforms, including MastersPortal.com and DistanceLearningPortal.com. The focus is on quality from both a student as well as a university perspective. Since 2007, the StudyPortals, websites have informed and motivated millions of students to choose the best (international) university programme, and have helped universities to reach out to the right students worldwide.

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Foreword

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recognizes the value of adult learning and education as a catalyst for the achievement of its ambitious and transformational vision. While the Education for All goals have not been fully met, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) are guidelines for moving forward with a view to further sustainable and social development by ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting life-long learning opportunities for all.

Significant progress has been made in meeting many development challenges, and the spread of information and communications technology (ICT) has great potential to accelerate this progress even further. ICT plays a crucial role in enabling the realization of SDG Goal 4, which explicitly calls for education to be both equitable and inclusive. By simultaneously expressing the need to increase accessibility and enhance usage of ICT, especially in the least developed countries, the SDGs provide a clear way forward in making adult learning and education more accessible, effective and inclusive.

Inclusive education is not merely a way of integrating more learners into mainstream education, but rather an approach that can transform education systems in order to meet the needs and diversity of learners. Inclusive education is necessary to provide an appropriate response to all the needs a diverse group of learners might have in both formal and non-formal educational settings. Creating alternative pathways and facilitating the recognition of learning are vital means in widening access to education opportunities. UNESCO has been very clear in the past that it will only be possible to make the right to education a reality if inclusive education reaches out to all learners while respecting their diverse needs.

The increasing role of higher education institutions in lifelong learning processes is a trend in the global knowledge society. As emphasized in the canon of the World Conference on Higher Education in 1998, with globalization, higher education has become recognized as a significant catalyst for social and economic progress due to the creation, dissemination and application of all forms of knowledge. Widening access to higher education to enable inclusion is a precondition for societal progress and economic development in times of increased social mobility.

Understanding the important role that inclusive education plays in lifelong learning and consequently sustainability and development is also deeply rooted in the Belém Framework for Action (BFA), which was adopted at the Sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI, Belém, Brazil, 2009) by 144 UNESCO Member States. The BFA encompasses commitments to develop policies and programmes, foster good governance, increase funding, widen participation and improve quality in adult learning and education, and to monitor and report on progress. Thus, it presents a strategic guide for the global development of adult literacy and adult learning and education within the lifelong learning perspective.

Conceived as an integral part of lifelong learning, youth and adult learning and education are seen as an indispensable foundations for creating peace and sustaining personal, social and economic well-being. This outlook reiterates that the challenges of the 21st century can only be met effectively with an inclusive, informed, literate and active citizenry.

Given this, it has become apparent that it is more urgent than ever to facilitate access and inclusion for adult learners to learning and education by means of ICT. The possibilities created by ICT are immense and promising. Its ability to make education available to remote areas through ICT and Open and Distance Learning (ODL), for instance, continues to be a relevant topic in matters of inclusive education. Specifically, the BFA mentions explicitly that ICT and ODL can be used to respond to the specific need of excluded learners. UNESCO's new Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education (2015) similarly underlines the strong potential and supportive function of ICT in achieving the overall aims of adult learning and education. More specifically, the Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education (2015) highlights ICT as an enabler for learning anywhere, anytime, and for everybody, while also facilitating access to education for people with disabilities and other marginalized or disadvantaged groups. Much work is required, however, for an effective utilization of ICT in the field of education. Training teachers in ICT skills, bridging the digital divide and financing are just a few examples of the challenges policy makers, implementers and the learners themselves will face.

The research within IDEAL addresses these issues directly. It explores the possible impacts of ODL on adult learning and education and provides the foundation for cooperation and dialogue between the stakeholders involved across countries within the European Union. Readers concerned with social inequalities for adults to higher education will find it useful not only as a rich source of information, but also as a tool for advocacy.

Mirroring the assumed benefits of inclusive education, the IDEAL report puts the adult learner at the centre of attention by presenting unique insights into their needs, social profiles and barriers. Ultimately, IDEAL manages to make a clear link between adult learning and education and other lifelong learning approaches offered, namely ODL. In doing so, IDEAL analyses the overall potential of ODL in Europe as a means of increasing the participation of adult learners.

Arne Carlsen,
Director UIL

Executive Summary

The Impact of Distance Education on Adult Learning (IDEAL) has been studied in a joint project between the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE), the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) and StudyPortals (SP). The project period ran from October 2013 to November 2015.

The project examined the interrelations of adult learning, higher education and distance education while analysing if and how higher education institutions contributed to adult learning by means of distance education. The adults targeted by the IDEAL project were adults who have completed their initial education and training and plan to return to studies.

The project aimed 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;

- increase the participation of adult learners in higher education through distance education.

In separate research studies the following information was created and analysed:

- distance education **programmes offered** by European higher education institutions;

- the social profile of **enrolled distance education students** and their study experiences;

- the characteristics of **potential distance education students**, what they looked for and the barriers they faced.

To complement the collection of information, five external experts delivered country reports with overviews on distance education and existing research on potential distance education students in their respective countries.

From the analysis of information collected the following should be emphasized:

- National policies concerning higher education through distance education were not in place but should be developed and implemented. This could lead to reduced regulative barriers and the development of standard procedures for recognizing prior learning.

- Formal entry requirements constituted general access barriers. Eligibility criteria need to be more visible and more information on credits and the transferability of qualifications should be available.

- The general lack of communication regarding alternative access opportunities was a significant barrier for the openness of higher education to adult learners.

- Higher education institutions should inform adult learners in more detail about tuition fees. Ultimately, higher education institutions should improve funding models and provide options for financial support. Funding opportunities need to be diversified.

- Increasing attainment levels, improving career prospects and self-fulfilment were the major motivations for adult learners who engaged in distance education. Hence, higher education institutions should aim to achieve an adequate balance between providing full-scale programmes and offering short-term and long-term courses in these areas.

- The provision of online education as the main mode of distance education fulfilled most adult learners' requirements for more flexible learning opportunities.

- Higher education institutions should be advised to communicate more effectively and to use new media to provide further possibilities for access.

- Limited possibilities for direct interaction between all players involved hampered learning and may prevent adult learners from participating in distance education.

- It is strongly recommended that teaching methods and skills improve and that learning be embedded with good study guides, improved possibilities for interaction and support structures that meet the needs of adult learners.

Overview of the Report

This final report is the fourth publication of the IDEAL project. Three independent yet complementary research studies of the IDEAL project were published prior and are available on the website http://www.idealproject.eu.

This final report will present a meta-analysis of the three studies in an attempt to answer the central research question: 'How can the distance education programmes offered by European higher education institutions be better matched to the needs of adult learners?' In other words, how to close the gap?

To address varying target audiences, the report is divided into three main parts and one extended annex.

- **Part 1** provides an introduction to the project, describes how the study was designed and delineates the research methods used and the research process followed.

- **Part 2** in its two sections gives both a theoretical background to and an analysis of the findings linked to change processes in higher education systems. The aspects discussed relate to policies and regulatory frameworks, developments in technologies, pedagogical theories and the characteristics and needs of adult learners.

- **Part 3** includes recommendations from the project team.

- The annex comprises three chapters complementing the three parts.

Part One gives an overview of the empirical results from the three IDEAL studies. The second part gives a brief introduction to the field of distance education, and a third part provides an analysis of the concept of distance education. Finally, the annex includes :

- a summary and overview of the three IDEAL studies

- a brief overview of the developments within distance education

- an article on the concept of distance education

- a glossary of key terms

A reader wishing to learn more about the outcomes of each of the three research studies in detail can refer to the overview within that chapter. Readers who are new to the field can be introduced to the concept of distance education and developments in distance education within Europe and worldwide in the other chapters.

PART 1: The Study

INTRODUCTION

Background to the IDEAL project

Recent decades have seen unprecedented global progress in terms of economic growth, scientific and technological development and health and life expectancy (UIL, 2014). Additionally, expanded opportunities concerning various life circumstances are now available to more people than ever. As a result of all of these developments, the majority of the world's population now live in high or middle-income countries. This rapid development has also presented several challenges, notably, a new global labour divide, rapid changes in labour markets, demographic changes, an increase in ageing populations, urbanization, environmental degradation, conflict and natural disasters, migration, increasing inequality, persisting poverty and youth unemployment. The gap between the rich and the poor has widened, and the vulnerability of poor and marginalized populations has deepened. Education-related income gaps and high unemployment rates reflect a deep transformation in economic and social structures, driven by globalization and technological change. The partners in the IDEAL project share the conviction that lifelong learning represents a key strategy to respond to these changes and challenges.[1,2] They recognize that lifelong learning forms a crucial part of numerous European policy fields; it contributes to employment and competition, enhances personal development and helps build more inclusive European societies.

Several studies on lifelong learning and new challenges for education and training systems in European countries point out a need for substantial improvements, specifically regarding adult learning. In support of these studies, Gordon (2004) observes that there is still considerable progress to be made to broaden access, remove existing barriers, develop new paths and structures to achieve qualifications and respond to the needs of adult learners (p. 131). According to a study carried out by the OECD (Pont, 2004), there are many reasons for non-participation in adult education and training, including lack of information, time, motivation, incentives and funding. Of these, the study argues that a lack of motivation seems to be the most important and significant reason, though this is not widely agreed on. In addition, it is argued that it is the 'people who have the highest educational attainment levels who feel they would like to participate and who actually do participate more, revealing a close complementarity between initial education and adult learning' (Pont, 2004, p. 35). Hence, the more education you have, the more likely it is that you are motivated to participate in further education.

Despite these issues, higher education institutions seem to play an increasingly important role in lifelong learning processes. The UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education

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[1]   http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002164/216456E.pdf
[2]   http://www.icde.org/en/about/values/

(WCHE) in 1998 identified higher education as an important contributor to social and economic progress due to its ability to create, disseminate and apply knowledge (Eggins, 2003).

In recent years, higher education has also become an important sector for providers, creating new opportunities for lifelong learning. At the EU policy level, the need to embed the principles of lifelong learning into education and broader development policies has also taken on a more urgent tone. The EU's Europe 2020 Strategy has set benchmarks for 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 agreed to raise the benchmark even further, aiming for adult participation in lifelong learning to reach 15% by 2020. In 2011, the European Council's resolution on a renewed European agenda for adult learning emphasized the need to encourage higher education institutions to also embrace adult learners by means of distance education. The IDEAL project seeks to investigate the potential of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) to contribute to reaching the 15% benchmark, and therefore raises the question: to what extent do the European ODL programmes offered contribute to the wider goal of advancing adult education within lifelong learning?

IDEAL project aims, objectives and research questions

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

The research project examined the interrelations of adult learning, higher education and distance education. It was designed to explore if and how higher education institutions can contribute to adult learning by means of distance education. It sought to offer insights into the needs of adult learners for the benefit of both policy makers and distance education providers, and to increase the participation of adult learners in higher education through distance education.

The project aimed to:

- offer insights into the needs of adult learners for the benefit of 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.

The objectives of the project were:

- to provide an overview and in-depth analysis of European higher education programmes in the field of Open and Distance Learning (ODL);

- to assess the overall potential of ODL offered by European providers and to determine future problem areas and potential areas for growth;

- to outline the social profile of current and potential ODL students in European higher education;

- to identify motivations and major obstacles to ODL experienced by (potential) ODL students;

- to improve the quality and comparability of data on distance education for adult learning at a European level as a basis for future policy-making.

The project has thus been designed to gain a better understanding of distance education offered by higher education institutions. It addresses the question specifically: 'How can distance education offered by European higher education institutions be better matched to the needs of adult learners?'

This research question has emerged essentially from the continuing emphasis of lifelong learning as a policy objective, both at the European Union level (foremost the Europe 2020 Strategy) and in the context of the Bologna Process. For the latter, lifelong learning has been recognized 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 strategies and principles within higher education. Further support was added with both the 2009 Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué, which emphasized this need strongly, and the 2012 Bucharest Communiqué, which reaffirmed 'the role of lifelong learning as one of the important factors in meeting the needs of a changing labour market'. It has been stressed ever since that access to higher education for adult learners needs to be guaranteed.

In 2011, the European Council's resolution on a renewed European agenda for adult learning underlined the need to encourage higher education institutions to embrace adult learners. Against this backdrop, the IDEAL project 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 distance learning programmes offered by higher education institutions has been chosen deliberate-

ly, as many studies identified flexible learning arrangements as a decisive factor in facilitating adult participation in higher education. This approach was made possible following the successful implementation of a European database on distance learning courses provided by higher education institutions in 2012, the DistanceLearningPortal.

To address the central question, a number of sub-questions were formulated with regard to distance education:

1. What distance education programmes/courses are offered?

2. What are students looking for?

3. Who are the intended target groups?

4. What is the current student body?

5. Who is showing interest in distance education?

6. Why are students motivated to consider distance education?

7. What are the main barriers to access?

8. What kind of support do adult learners (expect to) receive during their studies?

Research design and methods

Three major research studies were designed to elicit qualitative and quantitative data from different viewpoints on issues relevant to the project aims. Readers will find definitions of the central concepts used in the three studies in a glossary in the annex. As far as the level of education is concerned, the IDEAL project covered higher education only, and more specifically, distance education offered by European higher education institutions. Only higher education institutions that were either included in the World Higher Education Database (WHED[3]) published by the International Association of Universities (IAU[4]) or those accredited by competent national authorities as offering ISCED level 5a/b or above were considered. Furthermore, only higher education institutions based within one of the forty-seven countries of the European Higher Education Area were included and encouraged to participate.[5]

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[3]   World Higher Education Database: http://www.whed-online.com
[4]   International Association of Universities: http://www.iau-aiu.net
[5]   List of countries participating in the European Higher Education Area: http://www.ehea.info/members.aspx

The following three studies were conducted:

Study	Source	Size	Notes/Challenges
Study 1: programmes offered by European HEIs	Survey to HEIs	167 valid responses, 134 from HEIs offering distance education	Interesting insights, not representative of entire European Higher Education
	Programme data in DLP	3,006 programmes and courses analysed	Mostly English-taught, focus on international students
Study 2: enrolled students	Survey via HEIs and IDEAL mailing list	1,773 valid responses	60% from UK, mostly Open University
Study 3: potential students	Survey to DLP visitors	427 valid responses	6 countries make up ~50% of the respondents
	Student browsing behaviour on StudyPortals	~9 million page views; more than 720,000 items	Big data set. Results biased by programmes offered on StudyPortals.
	Country reports by experts (DE, FI, GR, HU, UK)	5 country case studies (over 120 pages of information)	Research on diverse dimensions: potential and enrolled students and national contexts

Table 1: Overview of the three IDEAL studies
(UK or United Kingdom refers to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland)

STUDY 1: WHAT DO EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS OFFER?

In addressing the overarching research question 'How can distance education programmes offered by European higher education institutions be better matched to adult learners' needs?', the first study focussed on answering the following sub-questions: 'What is offered?' and 'What are the intended target groups?'. These questions were addressed by collecting empirical data sources gathered from higher education institutions (HEIs) in Europe on both an institutional level and a course/programme level.

Institutional level

A set of data was collected from European HEIs. It aimed at obtaining a clearer picture of the availability of distance education in European HEIs. Specific information was collected on the following aspects: 'Number, types and levels of courses and programmes offered', 'Drivers for distance education, target groups and student support', and 'Future expectations of the development of distance education'. To reach its goal, the project team developed a standardized web-based questionnaire. The Babson Survey Research Group[6] and the European University Association (EUA)[7] used some of the items in the questionnaire earlier; in both cases, an agreement was reached with these organizations with a view to make future comparisons with the different datasets possible.

The questionnaire[8] covered the following issues:

- Institutional profile (e.g. single / dual-mode)

- Number, type and level of programmes / course units offered

- Number of students enrolled

- Support offered to students

- Main motivations to offer distance education

- Main target group(s)

- Perceived barriers to the growth of online education

- Plans for the future

The questionnaire was distributed to 4,000 universities within the European Higher Education Area in May 2014. The International Association of Universities (IAU) provided their list of universities to assist with finding contact points. This approach was adopted with the goal to cover a variety of countries and institution types. The invitation to participate in the study was sent to the Vice Chancellor's/Rector's office.

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[6] http://www.babson.edu/Academics/faculty/provost/Pages/babson-survey-research-group.aspx
[7] http://www.eua.be/Home.aspx
[8] The questionnaire is available at www.idealproject.eu

Course and programme level

To complement the data from the questionnaire, the project used its unique access to the single largest database on distance and blended education – DistanceLearningPortal (DLP).[9] Within the DLP, European HEIs use a standardized questionnaire to provide information on courses and programmes. In June 2014, the database contained a collection of information on almost 3,000 distance learning programmes and courses. These data in the DLP formed the basis of the analysis in this part of the study.

The information available for analysis on the DistanceLearningPortal included the following:

- Basic information about the programme (type of degree, discipline);

- Access (formal entry requirements [prior degree, language proficiency, work experience] and information on alternative entry routes);

- Organization of the programme/course (delivery mode [blended or not], time flexibility [start and end date], physical attendance requirements);

- Workload (workload per week, maximum time to complete the course);

- Tuition fees (amount for the entire programme and whether scholarships were available);

- Support offered if any (e.g. learning material developed specifically for distance education, technical support, access to local learning centres/study centres, administrative/organizational support).

The aggregated data set also contained open texts fields where the HEIs could, for example, enter a general description of their programmes and courses. If the HEIs themselves did not provide enough information on the different variables in the questionnaire, the researchers inserted the necessary information after identifying the correct source of information.

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9   The portal is managed by StudyPortals (SP) and was launched in 2012.
     http://www.distancelearningportal.com/

STUDY 2: THE ENROLLED STUDENTS AND THEIR DEMANDS

The second study focused on the following sub-questions: 'What is the current student body in distance courses and programmes?', 'What are the motivations of students who consider distance education?', 'What are the barriers to access?', and 'What kind of support do adult learners (expect to) receive during their studies?'.

A web-based online questionnaire[10] was developed to collect data on the following variables.

- ◆ 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 (workload, barriers encountered and support received, overall assessment).

To collect data, the project team contacted institutions that participated in the survey in study 1 and/or were listed on DistanceLearningPortal, as well as institutions on the ICDE list of European distance teaching universities. The institutions were asked to circulate a letter to their enrolled distance education students with an invitation to participate in the survey and with a link to the survey. The investigation targeted only adult learners as defined within this project. The project team developed and standardized the questionnaire. The survey software used was an interesting new application, ZEF Evaluation Engine[11], allowing more complex analysis than other commonly used tools.[12] To get a good response rate (aim: 1,000) and reliable responses, the questionnaire was kept short and formulated in simple English, and a declaration of confidentiality was included. To increase the response rate, respondents were entered into a prize draw of gift certificates for books.

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[10] The questionnaire is available at www.idealproject.eu
[11] http://eduzef.net/en/solutions.php
[12] The following article explains how ZEF works: http://www.researchgate.net/profile/Arto_Selkaelae/
  publication/216365663_Features_of_the_Z-scoring_method_in_graphical_two-dimensional_web_sur-
  veys_the_case_of_ZEF/links/0dd1368cd2b4d468e9656b1b.pdf

STUDY 3: CHARACTERIZING POTENTIAL STUDENTS

The third study attempted to reach potential students. For this study we used a) an online questionnaire, b) a study choice analytics tool and c) five country case studies.

Online questionnaire

During the data collection phases in 2014 and 2015, the DistanceLearningPortal (DLP) of StudyPortals attracted 175,000 visitors per month, the majority of whom came from European countries. Visitors clearly showing an interest in studying at a distance by visiting the sub-portal DLP were invited to take part in an online survey. When visitors searched the DLP website, a banner advertising the questionnaire became visible; if the visitor clicked on it, the questionnaire appeared. Additionally, the questionnaire was sent to students who had indicated that they were interested in distance studies when they registered as Study-Portals' users. The questionnaire[13] had nine questions; four referred to the respondent's profile (age, country, current occupation and highest level of education completed). The remaining five questions assessed the respondents' interest in further and distance education, as well as their perceived barriers to study and their impression regarding the role that distance education played in increasing equal access to education.

Study choice analytics tool

In addition to the nine-item questionnaire, the purpose-built analytics tool to assess study programme choice on the StudyPortals websites measured the interest of potential students based on their browsing behaviour. The tool resulted in a file with log data reporting all visits to the portal and giving unique insights into what students were looking for on the website, and were thus interested in. The profiles of potential distance learning students and their interests were studied by: a) analysing the webpages visited by students, and b) analysing known information about these visitors, such as their location (country via IP address).

The main idea behind the tool is that the number of page views per specific programme can be interpreted as an indicator of interest in that programme. As an example, if a person searches for an item on Amazon, s/he will browse through the website and read the descriptions of the items s/he is considering buying. The same most likely happens with study choice; if a student is browsing on a website with information about online and distance education programmes, s/he is likely to show interest in joining one of the programmes at some point. This tool captured browsing patterns on the StudyPortals websites and enabled researchers to analyse this behaviour.

The StudyPortals website attracts 14 million visits per year. Once a visitor finds her/his way to one of the portals, s/he normally visits several different programme pages, all of which

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[13]   The questionnaire is available at www.idealproject.eu

contain detailed information about that programme. Any programme presented on DistanceLearningPortal and offered by a higher education institution in Europe is included in this analysis.

In the DistanceLearningPortal, visitors can search and filter study programmes by keywords, study discipline, duration, tuition fee and more. After performing the search, the portal will generate a list of the most relevant programmes. Each programme has its own webpage within the portal. The study choice analytics tool tracked the number of visits on each programme page. After seeing one of the programme pages, visitors typically open a few other pages that might be of interest to them. In our study, each one of these views was counted as a page view and reflected the student's interest in those specific study programmes.

The study analytics tool did not count the visitor's first point of entry onto the website. This makes data accuracy greater, as random visitors who accidentally end up on a webpage via Google, for instance, are not taken into account. If, after visitors land on the website, they continue to browse the website and visit several other pages, they have already shown active and explicit interest. As reported above, each programme page includes categorized information about the study programme. A visitor can not only read this information on the page but also filter the search results based on these criteria (i.e. level of study, tuition fee, provider location and programme discipline, among others). It was therefore possible to measure how many visitors were interested in distance education programmes, divided into the specific categories. One of those categories was the study discipline (e.g. law or social sciences). As one study programme may have several disciplines, we took this into account by weighing the page views accordingly. If a page had three disciplines and was viewed 50 times, each discipline got 50/3 page views attributed to it during the analysis.

The research also took into account the visitor's country by means of the IP address. The IP address is a numerical label assigned to each device participating in a computer network. The IP address location includes information such as country, region, city and postal code. Thus, based on the IP address, the study choice analytics tool could determine the visitor's country. As study programme choices are typically browsed at home and not elsewhere, we could assume that in most cases, visitors who entered one of the StudyPortals websites were actually residents of the country from which they were browsing. There could have been a small number of visitors for whom this was not the case, but this number of visitors was probably insignificant.

Country case studies

To complement information generated from the above-mentioned methods, five external experts were asked to take a closer look at five countries, analysing existing research on distance education and adult learners within their national contexts. The countries analysed further were Germany, Hungary, Greece, Finland and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UK). Aiming at a regional balance, Finland and Greece represented

a rather north–south dimension and Hungary and Germany a rather east-west one. As the data sources used in our various studies had an overrepresentation of information from the UK, it was added as a fifth country to make it possible for the following analysis to cope with that bias. The 'International Council for Open and Distance Education' chose the experts in a two-step process. First, well-established researchers with favourable international reputations were contacted in a series of countries. They in turn suggested candidates for this task, applying a national context. The resulting selection was based on researcher availability with an additional goal to have regional representation across Europe. The chosen researchers needed to have an international orientation and a solid spoken knowledge of their respective country's language. They were equipped with an extensive guide[14] describing the areas of interest to the IDEAL project and the expectations of their report.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE STUDIES

The three research studies were executed according to the design presented earlier. Most of the information was collected in 2014 and 2015 and no major changes were made to the design or the data collecting tools.

As foreseen, the survey in study 1 had low response rates from HEIs but met our goal of 100 responses satisfactorily. Out of the 4,000 invitations to answer the web-based questionnaires, we received 237 responses in total, of which 167 were valid responses. Of these, 134 came from institutions involved in distance education and they were the ones analysed. As most of the questions dealt with issues on a macro-managerial level, the survey was addressed to heads of institutions. The HEIs are large organizations and difficulties in reaching the correct informant most probably influenced the number of responses. The data could not claim to represent all countries covered by the project, of course. It shows the current provision of distance education as reported by HEIs and it demonstrates thereby the present and future developments in the field in Europe.

The second part of study 1 scrutinized programmes offered within the DistanceLearning-Portal (DLP) and was based on 3,006 programmes and courses. The information in the database is standardized and entered by the institutions themselves. Thus it shows the extent to which DLP providers use the portal to reach out to potential students. Another restriction of this dataset is that the absolute majority of the programmes and courses in the DLP are presented and given in English.

The survey given to enrolled students in study 2 received 1,809 answers. Of these, 36 had to be excluded either because they were incomplete or because the respondent came from a country outside Europe. The survey therefore generated 1,773 valid responses.

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14   The guide is available at www.idealproject.eu

As described above, the third study included three components. The online questionnaire to prospective students got 427 responses. Of these, 53% of them came from non-European countries and the three most represented European countries were Greece, UK and Italy.

The analysis of visits to the DLP was rather complex and time-consuming. The database attracted approximately 175,000 visitors per month during the study choice analysis period. The outcome of the DLP analytics tool was a file with log data reporting all visits to the portals. The data file on visits was enormous. It contained more than nine million pages of visits resulting in more than 720,000 rows of logged information that described visitor behaviour. It enabled us to analyse the data based on the different characteristics of the study programmes. It gave unique insights on what students were looking for on the website and what they were interested in. The information was collected during a time period of one year to address the issue of different activity levels on the website at different times (such as seasonal influences).

As planned, the reports from the case studies gave us deeper insights into potential students as well as information on related issues from five different countries.

PROVISION OF DISTANCE EDUCATION FOR ADULT LEARNERS IN EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

The programmes offered: Who is providing distance education at higher education institutions?

Distance education is provided by a variety of institutions, only very few of which are single-mode distance-teaching universities. There are indeed a considerable number of dual-mode or 'traditional' campus-based universities that offer some form of distance education. Particularly in the Nordic countries, the boundaries between distance education and on-campus programmes have become increasingly blurred as technology and methodology originally used only for distance education is now also used on campus. In these countries, almost all higher education institutions offer distance (or blended) education. Our data collected from higher education institutions showed that in most other countries, distance education programmes are just an add-on to the larger on-campus offerings. Technological developments have also spurred the rise of so-called 'cross-border education' networks, some of which are private for-profit organizations. Cross-border networks are responsible for a good portion of the distance education programmes offered to students in Europe.

In most cases, distance education is used to complement traditional forms of higher education. Half of the analysed institutions offer mainly face-to-face education but often have some distance education options; 21% offer a combination of distance and face-to-face education; 9% offer distance education exclusively and 20% report no distance learning at all (see Figure 1).
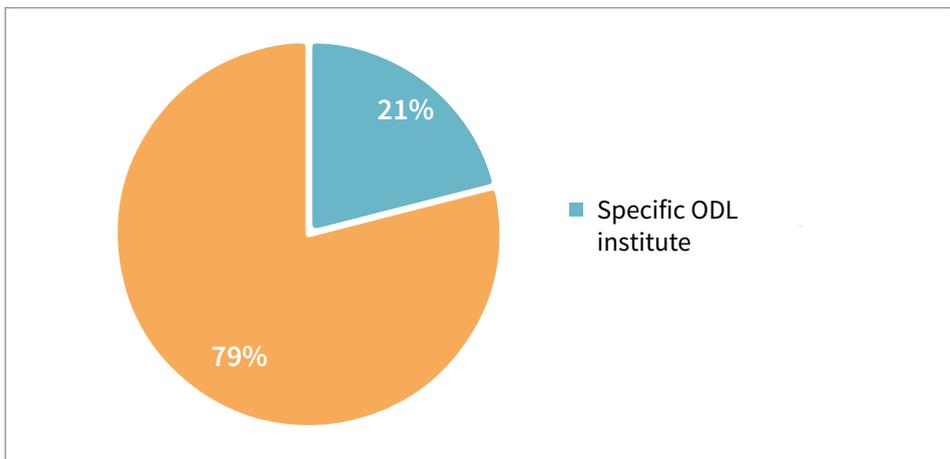
Figure 1: Distribution of DE in comparison to 'traditional' universities

Figure 2 shows that although distance education is widely spread across Europe and provided by many countries, the three main players – Germany, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and Spain – outnumber all other European countries by far

Figure 2: Estimation of distance education distribution across European countries (StudyPortal)

More traditional universities are rapidly transforming themselves from single-mode to dual-mode universities, recognizing the importance of distance education in providing students with the best and most up-to-date educational programmes and resources.[15] The increasing number of open or distance universities being established across Europe is highly indicative of this trend. However, programmes and resource content must respond to the needs of learners and thus match their social profile and interest, thereby enabling access while alleviating possible barriers.

A comparison based on our data of the interest in distance learning with the interest in on-campus learning shown in Figure 3 shows that there are many differences already. Figure 3 reveals that in four of the fifteen countries profiled, the interest in on-campus-learning is higher than the interest in distance education. The largest distance education provider in Europe, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, also has the population with the highest interest in distance education compared to on-campus learning. In Germany and Spain, in contrast, 'traditional learning' is still favoured.

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[15]   UNESCO 2002
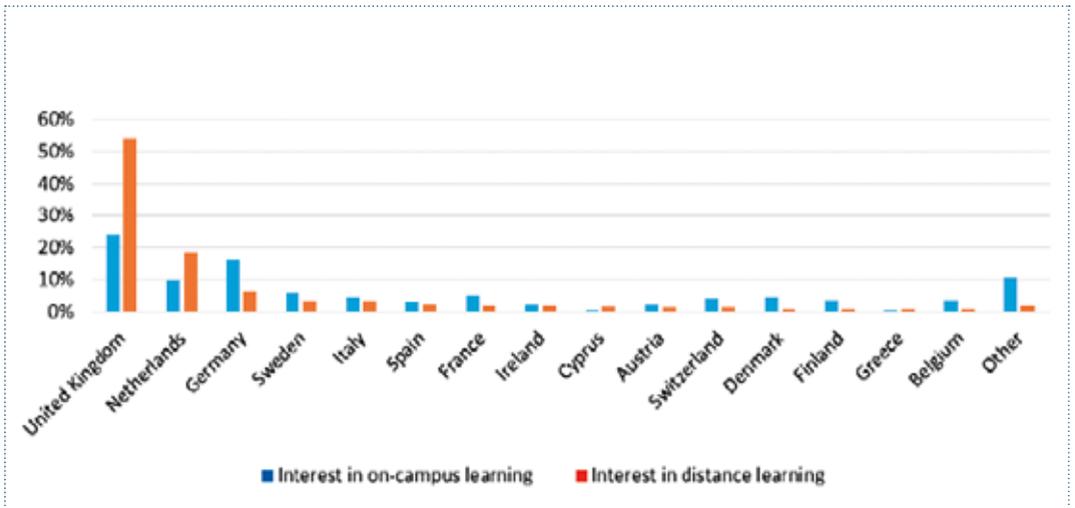
Figure 3: Demand of on-campus learning versus interest in DE in European Countries

In the institutional data set, the ratio for 'traditional' higher education institutions, i.e. those for which distance education is just an add-on, to face-to-face programmes is 1 to 10 for programmes delivered via distance education.

Apart from the single-mode distance-teaching universities, the majority of respondents to the institutional survey said that distance education is located within existing academic departments; in fewer cases, there is a specific distance education department dedicated to meeting the needs of learners at a distance. In a small number of cases, distance education delivery rests in the hands of the professors themselves rather than the departmental or institutional administration.

Provision: How is distance education delivered?

Data from responses to the institutional study showed that the most common *delivery mode* is online education. The programme data show that two-thirds of the programmes/ courses are delivered in full online mode. Almost one-third of these programmes/courses are delivered in blended mode.

While single-mode distance education institutions have substantial experience in the use of new technologies, the expertise within dual-mode institutions varies greatly, especially among those for which distance education constitutes a negligible part of the programmes offered. Furthermore, while some HEIs have not even identified distance education as a delivery method, MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) are entering the market.

What are the start dates?

The programme data collected further information on start or intake dates. These data show that even if they have rolling application deadlines, two-fifths of the programmes/courses have only one intake per year. Almost one-fifth have two intakes per year and only one-quarter of the programmes/courses are fully flexible, meaning learners can start any-time.

Are there any application deadlines?

The programme data reveal that around one-third of the programmes/courses have fully flexible application deadlines, i.e. no set application deadlines. Approximately one-fifth of the programmes/courses have only one deadline per year. Fewer than 10 per cent have several annual application deadlines. For more than one-third of programmes, no informa-tion on application deadlines was made available.

What is the preferred mode of study: part-time or full-time?

Half of the programmes/courses in the programme data are offered in part-time mode exclusively, one-fifth are optionally available in part-time or full-time mode, and one-fourth are full-time programmes. A very small number of programmes/courses did not provide any information on this issue. Of those answering that part-time is possible, almost all stated that no minimum number of contact hours per week is required. A negligible num-ber of these programmes/courses reported an average of 16 hours per week as a required minimum.

What are the attendance requirements?

Half of the programmes/courses in the programme data set do not require any physical attendance at all. Fewer than one-tenth reported that attendance is needed for regular mandatory meetings. Even fewer offer regular optional meetings.

What is the time frame for completion?

The majority of the programmes in the Distance Learning Programme data set report time frames similar to on-campus programmes at the respective level. However, according to the data, there is often considerable flexibility with regard to time available for completion at various levels. It is however not clear if time extensions are always free of charge.

What are the interaction opportunities for students?

The programme study showed that institutions provide very limited opportunities for student-to-student interaction. Very few offer possibilities for student group work, which means that students must turn to other forums to interact with their peers. On the other hand, a large number of programmes/courses reported offering continuous interaction with the teacher/tutor.

A central aspect of distance education is to give students the possibility to start studies whenever they want. Only few programmes currently offer this degree of flexibility. An increase would constitute a considerable opportunity for adult learning.

Online education as the main mode of distance education delivery constitutes an opportunity, on the one hand, as it is easily accessible and facilitates close communication between teachers/tutors and students. It also constitutes a barrier for learners who do not have access to equipment and Internet and are not experienced in their use. As the popularity of this type of distance education provision is on the rise, it is important to ensure access. Higher education institutions interested/active in distance education should exchange experiences and best practice among each other, thus creating a great opportunity for adult learners. HEIs should receive support to professionalize their offered programmes.

Target group: Who is participating in distance education in higher education?

Student numbers in distance education are difficult to estimate. We have suggested that there are around 3 million students taking part in some form of distance education in Europe. Single-mode distance-teaching universities alone cater for several hundreds of thousands of students. The institutional questionnaire also collected student numbers according to different types of distance education delivered. It showed that numbers are highest in online education, followed by blended education. Other forms of distance education had the lowest student numbers.

Study programmes and courses: What are subject areas, levels, degrees and credits offered?

Analysis of the programmes in the DistanceLearningPortal provided the following information on subject areas: 'Business & Economics' was the most frequently offered and/or best communicated/marketed subject area in this data set. This was followed by 'Social Sciences' and 'Applied Sciences, Professions & Arts'. The subject areas 'Life Sciences, Medicine & Health', 'Engineering & Technology' and 'Humanities & Arts' made up one-third of

the programmes offered in almost equal parts. The smallest number of distance education programmes was reported in 'Environmental Sciences', 'Law' and 'Natural Sciences'.

The high proportion of *degree programmes* shows that distance education has great potential to increase the attainment levels of adult learners, i.e. leading to formal (higher) degree qualifications. The award of credits for *single courses* offers a similar opportunity to increase attainment levels. Credits are a means of documenting academic achievements and can be acknowledged by other universities. A lack of information on credits can constitute a barrier: if better communicated, it could be an important tool for attracting adult learners to a course/programme.

What levels of distance education are offered?

Distance education is most commonly delivered at bachelor and master's level. In the institutional data set, the number of programmes delivered at each of these two levels was similar. In the programme data set, almost three-quarters of programmes offered were full degree programmes. The vast majority of the full degree programmes were provided at master's level. PhD and bachelor-level programmes constituted roughly one-fifth of the programmes offered, while single courses – irrespective of their level – made up one-quarter. An interpretation of this information could be that master's level programmes were particularly well marketed.

What degrees are acquired?

In the programme data set almost 75 per cent of programmes were degree programmes and the rest were single courses. However, the data set did not give us any information on whether enrolments in single courses of degree programmes were possible. The institutional survey indicated that it is possible to enrol in single courses belonging to half of the distance education programmes that lead to a degree. Additionally, fewer than one-third of the programmes in the DistanceLearningPortal database provided information on credits, e.g. whether they were available, what kind, how many. The majority of programmes/courses did not provide information on credits. We can thus assume that the information on credits is not communicated well by the providers. The availability of credits could constitute an important piece of information for adult learners, especially in the case of courses not leading to a degree.

Access: What are the entry requirements?

The DLP data showed that a minority (fewer than one-tenth) of programmes do not require a degree to enter and that more than two-thirds do. The institutional study also revealed that two-thirds of the respondents to our survey are very interested in reaching out to adult learners with a degree. In the majority of courses examined in the programme data, the level of degree required was lower than the programme/course for which it was required.

Is work experience required?

Approximately two-thirds of respondents in the institutional survey claimed that they targeting adult learners with some work experience. Half of all respondents even mentioned that they were interested in recruiting adult learners without a degree. In the DLP dataset, the information on required work experience reveals that distance education programmes, particularly at the PhD level but also several at the master's level, expect applicants to have acquired work experience prior to their application.

Considering the high number of programmes in our data set that require a prior degree at a lower level, we can conclude that distance education clearly has the potential to increase attainment levels, i.e. leading to higher degrees for students. Formal entry requirements, on the other hand, constitute general access barriers. These could be overcome and turned into opportunities if institutions consider offering individual alternative access routes. In fact, adults with work experience (and no degrees) are also reported to be a main target group: if options for the recognition of prior learning (RPL) or more generally for the recognition, validation and accreditation of formal and informal learning (RVA) are available accordingly, it could be a great opportunity for second-chance learners without the formal qualifications.

The general lack of information on alternative access opportunities is a significant barrier for the openness of higher education to adult learners. This barrier could be overcome quite simply by making such options more transparent. To increase participation of adult learners in higher education, institutions should work further towards establishing standardized procedures. They could also offer support in acquiring the required qualifications, e.g. language proficiency, credits.

Are there any language requirements?

As described in the programme study, the data set is biased towards UK and English-taught programmes in general. This explains the high number of programmes that require English-language testing -- a circumstance that is certainly not representative of programmes offered in all European countries. We can however say that English-language testing as a formal entry requirement could be a barrier to adult learners without sufficient language skills.

Is alternative access possible?

Although the institutional study showed that many HEIs have a clear interest in adult learners who qualify not only by a previous degree, but also through work experience, we have little information from the programme data on alternative access. Fewer than 10 per cent provided information on this issue. Programmes at master's level in particular offer opportunities for alternative access. We cannot assume that no alternative access routes are available for the vast majority of programmes. We can however say that if they do exist, they are not communicated very well.

Cost and Funding: How much does participation in distance education cost?

Approximately two-thirds of the respondents in the study on programmes offered by higher education institutions provided information on tuition fees. The data shows that fee levels for distance education increase by the level of educational qualification attained upon course completion, up to several thousand Euros/Pounds/etc. per year/module. It must be kept in mind that the data set contains a majority of UK programmes/courses and internationally-oriented ones in general: it does not allow us to draw general conclusions about fee levels in Europe. Furthermore, some countries do not charge any fees at all. Very few free programmes/courses were included in our data set. Overall, 87% of the respondents confirmed that they charged tuition fees.
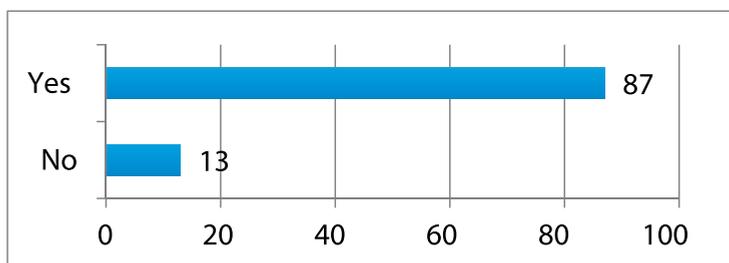
Figure 4: Tuition fees

Question: 'Does your programme/course charge any tuition fees or other fees?'1658 Respondents (Answers in per cent)

The absence of tuition fees in some countries may constitute an opportunity for adult learn-ers. When compared to the higher education institutions charging fees and the amounts charged, the absence of tuition fees in such countries could indeed be interpreted as a fee waiver for students choosing between institutions based in different countries. Such insti-tutions should be advised to communicate more clearly that they do not charge any fees if they are recruiting across borders.
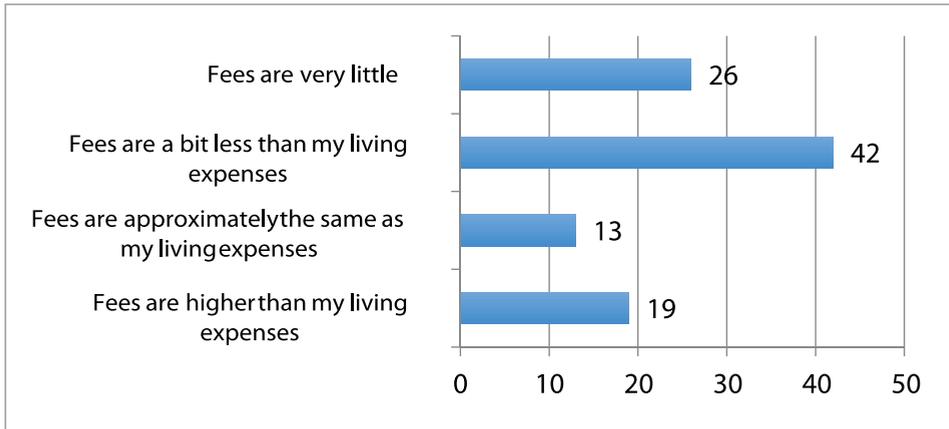
Figure 5: Level of fees

Question: 'How much are the fees compared to your general living expenses (per year)? 1437 Respondents (Answers in per cent)

Are there any funding opportunities?

At first glance, information on funding opportunities seems easily accessible. Almost half of the programmes/courses in the programme data set provide some kind of information on this issue. The complexity of the information and the predominant lack of eligibility criteria, however, might make it difficult for potential students to choose and secure an appropriate funding source without further assistance.

In the five commissioned country reports, only a minority of students (ranging from 1 per cent of the student population in Greece to around 40 per cent in Hungary) received aid. As previously mentioned, eligibility depends of the type of programme in many countries.[16]

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[16]   European Union, 2013, 73-74
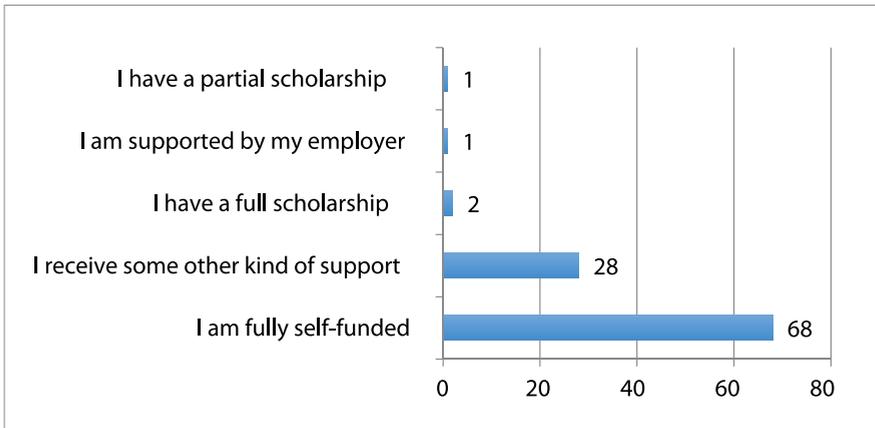
Figure 6: Funding opportunities for tuition fees

As seen in Figure 6 above, fees can constitute a financial burden owing to the need to support oneself, especially if there is no employer support or educational leave. The absence of core grant funding for part-time education is one of the biggest barriers to the participation and retention of adult learners in higher education in, for example, Ireland.

A broad and inclusive system of grants and loans is especially useful in reducing the restrictive effects of tuition fees. Hence, a number of countries have initiated funding regulations to enable flexible learning provisions. In Austria, for example, continuing education programmes or access courses are separated from the regular courses of study and accessible under special financial provisions.

Funding programmes at the European level are also very important. Though not always explicitly mentioned in our study sample, it can be assumed that EU funding has become a relevant component of cost-effective programme development and initial implementation of programmes in many higher education institutions and countries.

Tuition fees can constitute a barrier for anyone interested in higher education, not only for adult learners. It is therefore essential that information on funding opportunities, in particular eligibility criteria, be communicated clearly, along with the information on fees. Students should also be able to receive assistance in choosing and securing an appropriate funding source.

Services: Which support services are provided?

Responses to the institutional survey showed that support provided to students is mainly administrative. Moral support is offered by almost two-thirds of respondents. The programme study found that – further to continuous teacher support – it is difficult to access information on other support services. In particular, specific support to second-chance learners is not visibly accessible. The majority of programmes/courses in the programme data set did not provide any information on this type of support.

Student services and support include guidance and counselling services and more 'tangible' support services such as financial aid, child care facilities and/or local study centres and branch campuses to facilitate students' physical access to facilities. Such services play an important role in addressing various barriers (lack of information, lack of funding) that prevent adult learners from taking up higher education.
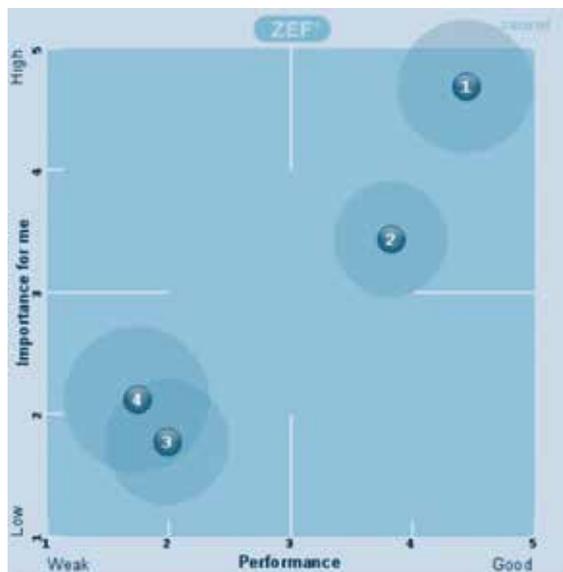
Figure 7: Services and support expected and perceived by students

1. Learning material developed and/or adapted specifically for distance education (1639)
2. Administrative/organizational support (1635)
3. Moral support/psychological support/counselling (1625)
4. Opportunities to interact with teachers and other students (1630)

Figure 7 shows the prominent need for learning materials to be developed that are adapted specifically for distance education, followed by the need for administrative and organizational support. Figure 7 also mentions moral and psychological support and counselling, as well as opportunities to interact with teachers and other students. Many students are satisfied with their provider but also wish for improvement. Flexibility is the most important quality of distance education.

Potential adult learners: How to reach prospective distance education students?

As we can observe in Figure 8 below, the age distribution of enrolled students follows the age distribution of prospective students. It is noticeable that the average age of students browsing on the DistanceLearningPortal is 27 years. Additionally, the number of potential students, 45 years of age or older in distance education is comparably lower to students of the same age already enrolled.
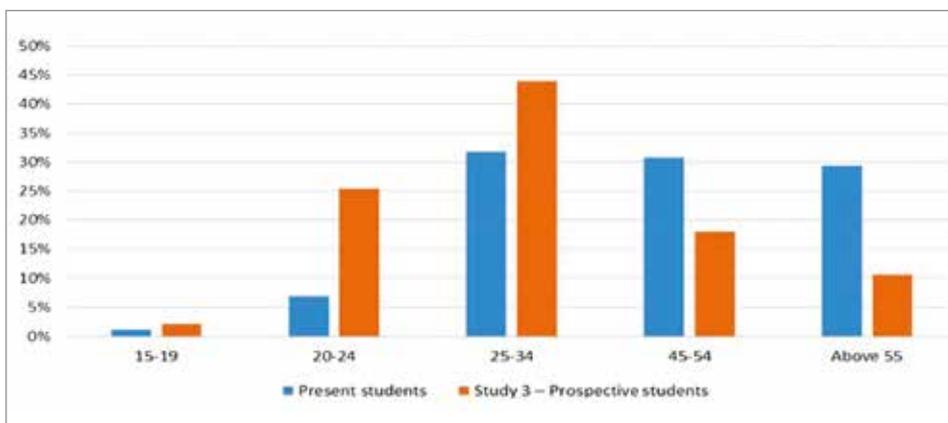
Figure 8: Age distribution of potential students

Most of the respondents to the questionnaire fall under the definition of adult learners used within our research. Over 60% of them were in employment and returning to studies. At the same time, one may raise the question of whether the respondents represent the contingent fully. Are the many new learners expected at the doorsteps of higher education institutions browsing the StudyPortals website and did they access our questionnaire? Only 11% of respondents had a secondary level of schooling as their highest gained qualification. It is a reasonable assumption that many of the adult learners entering distance education will belong to this group. Still, the characteristics of adult learners approached via the survey are consistent with earlier research. Factors such as lack of recognition of prior learning, high tuition fees and time constraints are hindering adults from enrolling.

The social situation of the respondents is also in line with what is described in current literature. According to the dataset, the average potential distance education student is 25-34 years old, has family obligations, is most probably employed and already holds a bachelor's degree or equivalent qualification in most cases.[17]

Previous and current education of the adult learner

The high number of students in degree programmes shows that distance education has great potential to help adult learners gain a new qualification. The availability of non-degree courses at various levels and in various fields can also help adult learners to update their knowledge or gain additional knowledge and skills in a new field. The data show that it is important for higher education institutions to understand learners' needs and to adapt the programmes offered to the demand.

The high number of students with a previous higher education degree shows that distance education has strong potential to increase access to HE for new target groups such as non-degree holders. It is also important to promote the recognition of prior and informal learning.

What are the challenges and barriers?

The main challenges for adult learners are time restraints, costs and the recognition of prior learning. An adequate framework and support need to be secured at policy level, especially at a time when new media provide further access possibilities. Achieving 'demand orientation' and equity of access is key.

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[17]   European Commission, 2013

Adult distance education students have a strong need for support and guidance. It is therefore important to develop good study guides that support students in their study planning. DE should also build further on learner orientation, giving learners more influence on the planning of their programmes.

Costs and time constraints resulting from work and family responsibilities were recognized additionally as significant barriers, most commonly followed by lack of recognition of prior qualifications. Studying at a distance as such was not perceived as a barrier. More than 60% of the respondents saw distance education as an enabling factor to increase equal access to education.

Notably, many comments in the open text fields dealt with the high costs of studying, e.g. *'I can't be left without an income while studying. So distance learning makes sense.'* The most frequent report on barriers raised issues around transferability and recognition of prior learning as relevant.

Future perspectives: What are the key factors for distance education providers?

The institutional survey showed that the core motivation for higher education institutions to offer distance education is the provision of more flexible learning opportunities: more than four-fifths of institutions prioritize this. Attracting adult learners is the third most important motivation, but only half as many respondents mention it. This might mean that distance education is understood as an opportunity for making pedagogic approaches more flexible in general.

The institutional survey also asked about the strategic importance for institutions to increase student access, progression, completion, etc. Slightly fewer than half of the respondents placed importance on enabling adult learners to enrol. It is not as strongly emphasized as student access, for example (mentioned by just over half of the respondents), but remains important in overarching institutional strategies.

The potential to enable inclusion was addressed in the question on access. In view of distance education's potential to prove access, potential distance education adult students share the opinion that distance education is indeed helping increase access to education. Some 61.36% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, 19.91% had a neutral position and only 18.73% had a rather negative viewpoint in this regard as shown in figure 9.
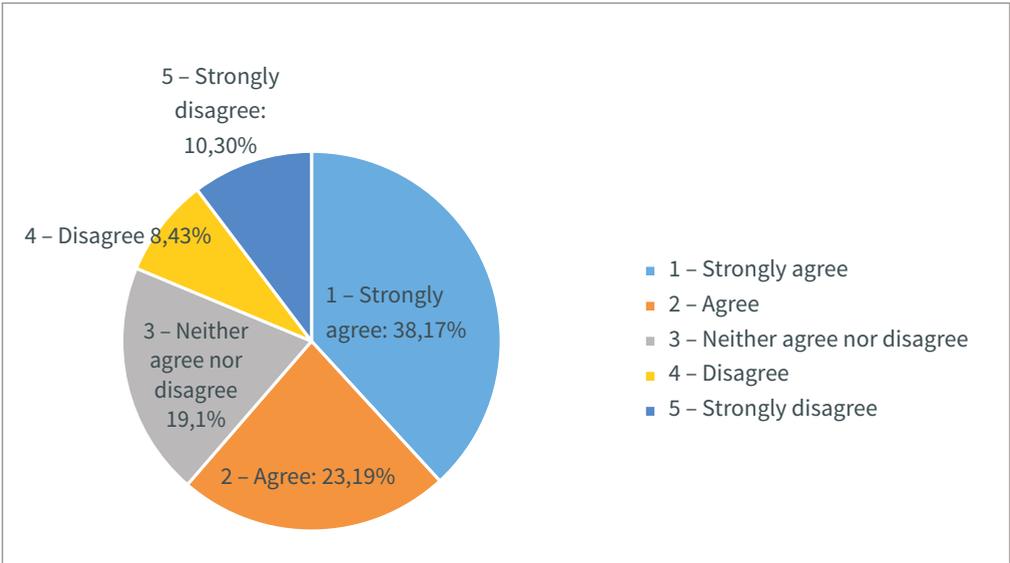
Figure 9: 'Distance education helps to increase equal access to education'

427 respondents (All respondents)
(Answers in per cent)

The expected growth for distance education, together with the institutional objective of enabling second-change learners to enrol, constitutes an opportunity for adult learning. Efforts needed to develop and deliver distance/online education and to resolve conflicting goals (e.g. to attract 'traditional' learners versus second-chance learners) poses a considerable challenge to many institutions. At the same time, institutions need to motivate faculty to enter into the world of distance education and to give them the organizational prerequisites and tools to realize it: only when they see it as a pedagogic opportunity for learners will they let it happen.

The respondents in the institutional data set attached the highest importance to additional efforts required to develop and deliver distance education as a barrier to its growth. In this light, a lack of acceptance by academic staff is reported as the second most important barrier to the growth of distance education. A majority of respondents state that there is plenty of student demand to facilitate growth in this field.

The variety of students' age, life and work situations demonstrates that distance education has great potential to meet the needs of adult learners; e.g. for learners in remote areas, second chance learners and learners facing circumstantial restrictions. Distance education is a particularly liberating factor for parents of young children. Distance education is, in principle, accessible to a wide range of potential learners.

The data showed that institutions should capitalize on strengths: higher education institutions need to be aware of the different needs /life situations of learner and to adapt their programmes offered and be prepared for new student groups.

In view of adult learners, our data show that more transparency on services might increase learner participation in distance education; specifically, information on support available to second-chance learners is not easily accessible.

CHALLENGES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

Factors influencing change towards increased flexibility in education systems

Lifelong learning is essential to strengthen a sustainable knowledge-based society in which rapidly changing needs within the labour market require continuous acquisition of basic, new and transversal skills and knowledge. In light of the economic crisis and the demographic changes Europe is facing, lifelong learning forms a crucial part of numerous European policy fields; it influences employment and competition, enhances personal development and contributes to a more inclusive European society.

The European Union has a long-standing interest in widening participation in higher education. EU strategies and activities have been largely in line with the worldwide consensus on the key role adult learning plays in ensuring equity and inclusion, alleviating poverty and building equitable, tolerant, sustainable and knowledge-based societies. The 1991 Memorandum on Higher Education[18] called upon HEIs to support an expanding knowledge-based economy, to help meet the demand for highly qualified personnel and to widen access to higher qualifications. The Lisbon Agenda[19] underlined the importance of achieving high skills for economic development and social inclusion through investment in education and training.[20]

The need for continuing reforms at the institutional level were reinforced by the Europe 2020 strategy, the Bologna Declaration, the Leuven Communiqué and related Council directives, resolutions and conclusions regarding the modernization of higher education systems.[21] Among other things, institutions should pay more attention to widening participation in higher education and also to addressing the challenge related to quality and diversity by means of flexible learning opportunities. Evidently, the challenges for higher education institutions were and still are considerable.

In 2002, the Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS) published an international comparative study of 174 campus-based universities in Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, UK, Australia and USA (Collis and van der Welde, 2002). The report primarily discussed changes related to the introduction of information and communication technologies (ICT), but it was still relevant to IDEAL issues. Questions illustrated by the research were: 'Did HEIs exploit the potential of ICT to rethink their paradigms, their structures associated with lifelong learning and their relation to ongoing globalization?' The authors concluded that changes were slow and not radical.

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[18] Memorandum on Higher Education in the European Community. Commission of the European Communities, Brussels (Belgium).
[19] HEAD Study p. 16
[20] HEAD Study p.19
[21] Council of the European Union (2011)

Bates (2001) noted that technologies did not replace previous practices but instead complemented them. 'It merely enhances what would be done in the classroom' (p. 17).

A study conducted by Middlehurst (2003) came to the same conclusion. She investigated whether online learning would quickly and fundamentally rupture the conventional campus-based model of higher education. The conclusion from her survey was that a fundamental move away from on-campus provision has not materialized. The research on this theme is not manifold and even if these studies are now more than ten years old, they point at assumptions about the HE system that still seem to have validity.

The ambition to change education systems by introducing and implementing policies and technology was not enough. The studies indicated that the main challenge for both institutions and governments was developing more strategic policies on potential ICT usage for different target groups, including traditional learners as well as the lifelong learners that higher education is expected to serve in the knowledge economy in the 21st century. Holmberg (2008) asserts that the scenario for change to education systems includes at least two additional factors: namely, the necessity to meet demands from learners and the need to match technology usage with the application of state-of-the-art pedagogical theories. The process must respond to drivers initiated in national and institutional policies, react to pushes from continuing technological developments, answer to the demands from learners expressing or demonstrating different needs and utilize research into teaching and learning to guide the use of technologies and the organization of educational settings.

The key factors studied in the IDEAL project which influence change towards increased flexibility in education systems:

- Developments in the use of technology in distance education

- Developments in pedagogical theories in relation to distance education

- Demands from adult learners in distance education

- Policies, regulations and strategies in relation to distance education

One element not depicted in the image but shown many times over as being highly relevant to practical development work is how beliefs and attitudes influence transformative processes in education systems. Barriers to change of that kind have been strong. Consequently, one may add this as a field of issues to be taken into consideration by agents promoting change. Beliefs and attitudes of this kind may be condensed as cultures of learning.

Interplay between legal frameworks and policies

In one of the studies referenced later in this Part 2 (James et al., 2011) the authors cite one of their informants, a vice-chancellor: 'While policy and regulations are important, they are often false indicators of impact … it's not so much law and policy, it's what people do with them, how they are implemented, that makes a real difference and determines impact.'

Higher education institutions are characterized by a high degree of autonomy. Institutional innovations and changes can relate to external policies as well as to ideas arising from groups or individuals within the institution often denoted as firing spirits. The relationship between a top down and a bottom up approach is reciprocal. In the interests of sustainability, innovators and their ideas need to be supported, backed and encouraged on a leadership level with institutional policies and strategies. In turn, policies and strategies developed by institutions need support from national plans and legislation.

Global and national policies are developed to address the increasing demands for higher education. The needed growth of the tertiary education systems should satisfy requirements for openness/access, strengthen in quality and find ways to increase equity at the same time. The institutions should play a more active role for adult learners: they should take part in lifelong and life-wide learning processes, which often call for flexibility in teaching and learning methodology. Many sources suggest distance education as an appropriate solution.

Policies are thus a driving force behind the rapid changes seen in education worldwide. But not only policies are drivers; to be efficient, international and national policies must be accepted and implemented in local institutional principles and strategies. They must also be developed hand in hand with changes in the regulatory frameworks, i.e. the rules governing HEIs. It is a plausible assumption that sustainable reorganization of teaching and learning modes should be embedded into legal structures supporting these transformations.

In a study by James et al. (2011), the researchers set out to investigate the regulatory frameworks for distance and online education within a designated group of Southwest Pacific/ South-East Asian nations. All 25 countries studied had national legislation and policy regulating education generally, yet legislation specific to open and distance learning was only reported in three of the countries.

The authors reported that there was very little scholarly literature against which to benchmark distance education regulatory frameworks. Even if research has not dealt with the issue, regulatory framework and policies need to go hand in hand. The authors concluded: 'Clearly, regulatory frameworks may significantly hinder or enhance the development and transformative contribution of open and distance learning.' (ibid., p. 8)

In the absence of better reporting, it remains unclear whether existing regulatory structures and legal frameworks are robust enough to deal with accelerating change in the education market, especially the diversification of education providers, the development of new educational approaches, the globalization of education and the maintenance of standards.

In its policy briefing[22] of March 2013, ICDE gave a few examples of how legal frameworks could hinder the development of flexibility in the organization of education. If national regulatory agencies prescribe minimum entry qualifications for students, an open university cannot be open in the true sense of the word, as access is restricted. The same goes for staff. Institutional policies for staff recruitment, professional development, awards and promotion are often modelled on and similar to those in face-to-face universities. Their emphasis on research, therefore, overlooks effective teaching and learner support as criteria for promotion or professional development. To develop efficient distance education programmes, institutions also need to be open to employing specialists in non-academic fields such as software development and graphic design.

In the same document, ICDE summarized that the rapid uptake of open and distance learning and the forecast of continued growth as a key form of higher education delivery highlights several aspects of the open and distance learning experience that will require attention. These include, for example, mobility and portability of qualifications; access; connectivity to technology; funding models; resources; support and advisory services; capacity and capability, to suggest but a few. This raises questions about whether existing regulatory structures and legal frameworks are robust enough to deal with accelerating change in the higher education market, especially the diversification of education providers, the development of new educational approaches, the globalization of education and the maintenance of standards, and whether current accreditation, quality assurance processes and other regulatory requirements are appropriate and likely to support good practice in open and distance learning provision, decision-making and accountability.

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[22]   Retrieved from http://icde.org/filestore/Regulatory_Framework/OpenandDistanceEducationPolicy BriefingMarch2013.pdf

Global and European policies in distance education

For many years, provision of *Education for All* (EFA) has been prioritized in the work of UNE-SCO's education sector.[23] During the 2009 UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education 'Dynamics of Higher Education' in Paris, open and distance education (the term used was 'Open and Distance Learning ODL') was stressed as a means to reach that goal. The final communiqué states:

◆ ODL approaches and ICTs present opportunities to widen access to quality education, particularly when higher education institutions in many countries share open educational resources readily (Article 13).

◆ The application of ICTs to teaching and learning has great potential to increase access, quality and success. To ensure that the introduction of ICTs adds value, institutions and governments should work together to pool experience, develop policies and strengthen infrastructure, especially bandwidth (Article 14).

◆ Our ability to realize the goals of Education for All is dependent upon our ability to address the worldwide shortage of teachers. Higher education must scale up teacher education, both pre-service and in-service, with curricula that equip teachers to provide individuals with the knowledge and skills they need in the 21st century. This will require new approaches including open and distance learning (ODL) and information and communications technologies (ICTs) (Article 11).

◆ The *Conference Call for Action* stresses: Member States in collaboration with all stakeholders should develop policies and strategies at system and institutional levels to:

◆ Support the fuller integration of ICTs and promote ODL as a means to meet increasing demands for higher education.

The European Union has a long-standing interest in widening participation in higher education. EU strategies and activities have been largely in line with the worldwide consensus on the key role of adult education in lifelong learning, ensuring equity and inclusion, alleviating poverty and building equitable, tolerant, sustainable and knowledge-based societies.[24] This key role was reiterated at the 6th International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI)[25] in 2009 and the outcome document entitled the *Belém Framework for Action (BFA)* as well as UNESCO's new Recommendation on Adult Learning (2015).

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[23] From 2016 onwards, UNESCO will focus on 'inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all', see http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/leading-the-international-agenda/education-for-all/education-2030/. For Education for All see http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/leading-the-international-agenda/education-for-all/

[24] European Commission, 2013, p. 16

[25] See: http://uil.unesco.org/home/programme-areas/adult-learning-and-education/confintea-portal/

In the European Union, open and distance learning began to appear in policy documents and funding programmes in 1988 (Tait, 1996). It is specially mentioned in the Maastricht Treaty from 199426. Policies on distance education are declared as instruments to enhance the socio-political role that education and training play in the drive for economic success and competitiveness. In December 1999, the European Commission launched a major programme entitled 'eEurope'27. The idea was to ensure that the EU benefited fully from the changes the Information Society was initiating. The key objective was to bring every citizen at home and at school, as well as every business and administrative unit, into the digital age and online. E-Learning was the concept used for the education sector, meaning a major cultural change in the education systems at large. Policy documents accompanied by research and development programmes propelled member countries and associated countries into action towards technology enhanced learning (TEL), increasing flexibility in education systems and advancements in distance education in the process. The investments were and still are considerable.

Lifelong learning has also been emphasized as a policy objective at European Union level (foremost as part of the Europe 2020 Strategy[28], the European Union's strategy for growth) and in the context of the Bologna Process, firstly in the Prague Communiqué of 2001 and again in the 2012 Bucharest Communiqué.[29]

The need for continuing reforms at the institutional level was reinforced in the Europe 2020 strategy, the Bologna Declaration and the Leuven Communiqué, as well as in Council directives, resolutions and conclusions from the Modernisation of Higher Education.[30] These resolutions determined that more attention should be paid to widening participation in higher education and to achieving high quality and diverse education by means of flexible learning opportunities.

Research does not give us an overview of the implementation of EU policies in different countries and how they affect tertiary education systems. A continued interest has been demonstrated in some national policies (e.g. in the UK, Finland, Denmark and Sweden) by establishing agencies under the ministries of education. These agencies strive to support the transition of higher education towards a greater level of openness to societal needs and more flexible modes of teaching and learning. Apart from the Norwegian agency Norway Opening Universities (NOU), many of the agencies established in association with the eEurope agenda are no longer active.

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[26]   Under the section Modernisation of Higher Education: http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1443732348068&uri=URISERV:ef0030
[27]   http://www.euractiv.com/education/elearning/article-117475
[28]   European Union, Europe 2020: http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/index_en.htm
[29]   Bologna Process, Ministerial Conferences (documents): http://www.ehea.info/article-details.aspx?ArticleId=43
[30]   Council of the European Union, 2011

The way in which global and national policies are accepted and integrated at an institutional level is not fully known. In a study of 25 countries in the South Pacific region, James et al. (2011) demonstrated that most institutions had limited public strategies or policy frameworks underpinning their distance education programmes. Similar data were found in two studies of Swedish HEIs (Holmberg, 2005).

DEVELOPMENTS IN THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

In the discourse on distance education during the last few decades, the term revolution has been used to describe ongoing changes related to technology. Special organizations focusing on the use of technology in education have been established and specific concepts have been coined that relate to technology and learning, e.g. web based learning and technology and enhanced learning. Developments in technologies have certainly propelled advancements and growth in distance education, but not on their own. Early investments in technology for the distribution of information only (such as TV universities) demonstrated that the equipment could support lecturing, but that it is just one side of education and learning that does not ultimately lead to an education revolution.

Effective learning requires access to content and possibilities in order to process and understand concepts. In early forms of distance education, dialogues between teachers and students in the form of letters catered to this requirement. Quality dialogues and a well-established relationship between tutors and learners were extremely important. Developments in ICTs have dramatically changed the situation. If technology is an essential device for educational transformation then ICTs are strategically decisive tools for the distance education of our time.

The advent and the wide spread of the Internet was a big leap forward for distance education. The vast majority of Europeans today have access to the Internet, amounting to 75% of the population in 2014. It varies, of course: in northern European countries, more than 95% of the populations were Internet users in 2014, but in any case, no European country revealed a percentage of Internet users below 50%.[31]

What remains important is how the Internet is implemented in education and how it is utilized for necessary learning, interaction and dialogue processes. Practitioners and researchers concern themselves with how interactivity in distance courses and programmes is provided, as this is considered an essential ingredient for a successful learning experience (McIsaac and Gunawardena, 1996). New technology tools could modify ways in which learners gather data and collaborate. These tools provide opportunities for instructor–student and student–student collaboration as well as real-time and/or time-delayed collaboration. Research also confirms the favourable relationship between the use of technology and the quality of an interaction (Dabbagh and Bannan-Ritland, 2005).

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[31]   Source: International Telecommunications Union.

More recently, social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram etc. integrate students' social lives with their studies in either synchronous (simultaneous interaction) or asynchronous (delayed interaction) ways.

Hardware developments have also created giant leaps forward for increased flexibility in education and learning. European students overwhelmingly have access to personal mobile devices. The use of laptops, tablets and Internet-connected smart phones etc. allow them to be truly mobile while studying.

Students in the 21st century expect learning opportunities allowing interaction with tutors and peers unbound by time or place. They require a wide range of devices supporting their learning, including e-mail communication, videoconferencing, shared presentation tools, whiteboards and chat rooms for improved interaction and collaboration. Blogs, wikis and podcasts, as well as the use of social media further add to improved connectivity between the members of a group addressing relevant tasks.

DEVELOPMENTS IN PEDAGOGICAL THEORIES IN RELATION TO DISTANCE EDUCATION

The interplay between theories in social and behavioural sciences and the tools and technologies used has played an important role in the progress of distance education. Teaching and learning processes in early distance education solutions were managed with books and letters. Through printed means, students gained access to the subject matter, and letters supported interaction between tutors and students: a time-consuming yet necessary dialogue for learning. Many distance education institutions were serving very large student populations even then, and early research was published with still high relevance. For example, Rekkedal (1983) demonstrated the importance of giving students feedback on assignments with as short a delay as possible to maintain their motivation and avoid dropouts. Additionally, Holmberg (1989) postulated a theory addressing personal communication between instructors and learners in distance education. His view was that a 'conversation-like interaction between the student . . . and the tutor/counsellor of the supporting organization administering the study' (p. 115) would create a feeling of empathy for the learner, which in turn could affect study quality and outcomes. The concept Holmberg used for this was guided didactic conversation. As demonstrated by the two examples above, researchers of the time put learners and their communication with instructors at the centre of the teaching and learning process in distance education.

From the 1970s onwards, a long series of new concepts grew describing a specific use of the new technologies related to pedagogical theories. These included Interactive Telecommunication Systems (ITS) and Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL). The terms *interactive* and *collaborative* demonstrate that a growing interest in sociological and

pedagogical theories had gained momentum. Theories regarding social constructivism[32], situated cognition[33] and deep learning[34] had entered the toolbox used by distance educators. The trends in the field of distance education shifted in pedagogical perspective, and theoretical frameworks with student interaction at the forefront became the beating heart of learner-centred strategies and environments.

Moore (1989) discussed three types of interaction, namely learner-content, learner-instructor and learner-learner. Later researchers added the interaction that occurs between the learner and the technologies used to deliver instruction or used for the interplay between people, the interface of technologies. Moore (1993) also developed a theory on *transactional distance.* According to this theory, perceived distance between the learner and the teaching organization is related to three variables: i) the dialogue that develops between the teacher/tutor and the learner, ii) the structure of the educational programme, and iii) the autonomy of the learner. Possible interpretations of his theory are that the more dialogue and interaction taking place in a distance education course, the less distance the learners experience. The more information given, the better and more complete the study guides are. Additionally, a more advanced learning programme structure demands increased autonomy from the learner. Even if these relationships seem obvious, they have great practical consequences for developing distance education programmes all the same. Moore's theory has led to extensive research (Garrison, 2000; Giossos, 2009 and many more), including discussions on students' feeling of presence in and sense of belonging to a particular study group. This sense of belonging would in turn enable students to interact comfortably with peers and instructors and establish an online learning community for collaboration (Ubon and Kimble 2004).

Campus-based universities moving into distance education have often extended the prevailing model of university teaching as a 'craft'. Initiatives run by enterprising individuals or single departments are the sources of the distance education courses and programmes. In addition to content specialists and technology experts, course and programme designers, graphic designers, management personnel, student and tutor support teams and marketing staff are also critical for the success of distance education. The demands differ markedly from those placed on staff at campus-based higher education institutes.

Distance education has changed enormously over the last 50 years. Technology has opened up opportunities to implement theories with high relevance for quality distance education. While some campus-based institutions may still advocate a transmission model, the major-

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[32] Theories around social constructivism have their roots in works of Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky. When it comes to cognitive development, Vygotsky postulates that the nature of much learning is collaborative. The context (culture) where learning takes place is even more important.

[33] Situated cognition is a theory that links learning to context. Learning is strengthened if it happens in the setting where it has its application area.

[34] Educational psychologist Ference Marton introduced the distinction between deep and surface approaches to learning, where deep learning processes aim at not just knowing about but understanding and integrating new knowledge deeply.

ity of single-mode distance education universities have adopted relevant research findings. This has also increased status and acceptance. The methods used in distance education and the focus on the student as a learner, on flexibility and on global reach stimulate interest across the entire field of education.

ADULTS AS LEARNERS IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

For obvious reasons, research emphasized children's learning for a long time. There is however an ever-growing focus on societal changes related to the knowledge society that adult education research established, and as a result, large research units worldwide are now exploring adult learning. The literature is therefore abundant; however, the ambition here is simply to demonstrate a few key findings. In general, it could be said already that although consistent conclusions are drawn from adult education research, they are difficult to implement in education systems.

Malcolm Knowles has influenced research in this field profoundly. He identified five characteristics that distinguish the education of a child from that of an adult (Knowles, 1984).

- Self-concept. As a person matures, his/her self-concept moves from being a dependent personality towards being a self-directed human being.

- Adult Learner Experience. As a person matures, s/he accumulates a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasing resource for learning.

- Readiness to Learn. As a person matures, his/her readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly towards the developmental tasks of his/her social roles.

- Orientation to Learning. As a person matures, his/her perspective of time changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application, and accordingly, his/her orientation towards learning shifts from one of subject-centeredness to one of problem-centeredness.

- Motivation to Learn. As a person matures, the motivation to learn becomes increasingly intrinsic.

Knowles' findings transferred into praxis thus mean that adults need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their learning. Their experiences in life should form a basis for the learning activities. An adult learner is most interested in the kind of learning that has immediate relevance and impact to their job or personal life. Adult learning could be seen as more problem-centred rather than content-oriented.

Mezirow (1991) describes how adults integrate knowledge from the outer world:
'In order to be free we must be able to "name" our reality, to know it divorced from what has

been taken for granted, to speak with our own voice. Thus it becomes crucial that the individual learn to negotiate meanings, purposes, and values critically, reflectively, and rationally, instead of passively accepting the social realties defined by others. Transformation theory provides a description of the dynamics of the way adults learn to do this.' (p. 121)

One of Mezirow's many contributions is that engaging in dialogue and using dialogue to test ideas and truths are fundamental to adult learning. Larsson (1996) also investigated the mere process of learning in his research. Supplementary to Knowles' principles and similar to Mezirow's statement, Larsson notes that creative learning should draw upon expressions and demonstrations of differences between learners in cooperation to challenge their ideas and beliefs. Here, interaction and dialogue is also known to be the key to success.

Consequently, when planning and organizing education for adults, institutions need to consider the maturity of the learner, which has made him/her autonomous, self-confident and capable of being self-directed.

Lifelong learning perspective

Modern expectations of a HE institution's role in relation to adult learners differ from those decades ago. Of primary focus was how to support the needs of local labour markets and a growing public sector through courses that refresh both knowledge and employee competence. Concepts used were renewal, brush-up courses or continuing education, among others, but the generic term used was recurrent education.

Ideas of lifelong learning in the 21st century differ from the thinking behind recurrent education. The historic roots relate to the 1960s and Paul Lengrand who introduced the concept 'Education Permanente' in a committee meeting for the advancement of adult education. At a recent seminar, the 21st century view on equity and lifelong learning was expressed as follows: 'It is not only having equal access that leads to equity; it is having equal access to success, regardless of learning difficulties, social backgrounds, and other barriers.'[35]

Lifelong learning put the needs and desires of the individual in central focus at the same time as societal needs, influenced by international knowledge development and globalization of economies. The European Commission's definition of 'lifelong learning'[36] declares it as 'all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective'. This includes all forms of learning: formal, non-formal and informal.

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[35] ICDE (2014) ICDE-UNESCO Policy Forum on open, online and flexible learning calls for action.
[36] European Commission, Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality, COM Brussels, Commission of European Communities, 2001, p. 9

The era of recurrent education prepared and started an adaption process for national HE systems. Since then, different categories of students with diverse educational background and varied aims for further studies can already access HE in many European countries. Additionally, students can return to HE to continue their studies and one notices a marked increase in interest in the renewal of education.

UNESCO has played an important role in framing and promoting the discourse on lifelong learning. The Faure Report of 1972, entitled 'Learning to Be'[37] (Faure et al., 1972), recognized that education is no longer the privilege of an elite or a matter for only one age group. Instead, it should be both universal and lifelong. The Delors Report of 1996, entitled 'Learning: The treasure within'[38] (Delors et al., 1996) described learning throughout life as the 'heartbeat' of a society. It also viewed lifelong learning as a principle that rests on four pillars – learning to be, learning to know, learning to do, and learning to live together – and envisaged a learning society in which everyone can learn according to his or her individual needs and interests, anywhere and anytime in an unrestricted, flexible and constructive way. Lifelong learning covers the full provision range of learning opportunities from early childhood through to schools, as well as further and higher education and adult learning and education.[39] There is an emerging recognition that 'Lifelong learning is the philosophy, conceptual framework and organizing principle for education in the 21st century', which puts the concept of learning for empowerment at the centre.[40] However, there is still considerable progress to be made to operationalize the concept of lifelong learning at the institutional level, specifically with a view to widening access, removing existing barriers, developing new paths and structures to qualifications, and responding to the needs of adult learners.[41]

Kjell Rubenson (2004) observed three views and inclinations to lifelong learning within policy over a period of time beginning in the 1970s, namely humanist, strong economistic and soft economistic views. In the 70s, humanist values dominated the discourse on lifelong learning. In the following decades, this vision for lifelong learning was replaced by an orientation with a strong economic focus. Lifelong learning became one of the different means to increase productivity; development of human capital, science and technology. The focus on equality and personal development as parts of humanistic ideas were replaced by concepts such as evaluation, control and cost efficiency. As within the concept of recurrent education, the desire for a qualified workforce with the necessary skills and competences became the motivation for lifelong learning. The third and present phase according to Rubenson is a soft variant of the economistic model. The responsibility for lifelong learning is divided between the market, the state, and civil society, and the individuals' responsibility for learning is the focus.

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[37] See: unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002232/223222e.pdf
[38] See: unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0010/001095/109590eo.pdf
[39] UNESCO, 2014a
[40] UNESCO, 2014b, p. 26
[41] Discussions related to this at CONFINTEA VI European Preparatory Conference and Outcome Document 'Pan-European statement on adult learning for equity and inclusion in the context of mobility and competition', see http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001829/182978e.pdf

In 2011, the European Commission's Directorate General for Education and Culture launched the study *Opening Higher Education to Adults* (HEAD). It indicated that since 2008, several European countries have made significant progress towards the implementation of national lifelong learning policies or strategies. They differ greatly, however, in the extent to which they embrace higher education as part of the lifelong learning continuum, and with regard to their implementation. In legislation, fields of action that are conducive to opening higher education to adults include the implementation of recognition of prior learning (RPL), credit transfer and regulations on flexible learning provision, including distance learning. The authors stress that one of the biggest challenges is to overcome conflicting goals between national and institutional strategies, which may lead higher education institutions to concentrate on traditional, young full-time students rather than opening up to more diverse student groups. According to the report's findings, the provision of programmes for adults seems to 'depend considerably on the type of institution, single or dual-mode, or on the initiative of individual staff and/or departments rather than on a coherent institutional strategy'. Furthermore, the HEAD study showed that the participation of adult learners is directly affected by the degree of flexibility the educational programmed offered. While there is no 'one-size-fits-all' solution for all countries, the authors demonstrated that distance and blended teaching methods, among others, are important elements of the flexibility of education.[42]

If lifelong learning policies are to be operational and implemented and HE open for lifelong learners, certain structural and content characteristics need to develop.

HAS HIGHER EDUCATION RESPONDED TO THE CHALLENGES?

POLICIES, REGULATIONS AND STRATEGIES IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

Adult learners rely on flexible learning provisions such as part-time and continuing education programmes to enable their participation in higher education, and are hence affected exceedingly by unfavourable legal frameworks.

The expectations for enrolments in distance education were high when questions were posed to institutional leaders in study 1. To the question 'How do you expect enrolments in distance education to change over the next five years?', 78% of the respondents answered that it would rise by at least 20%, and 21% of the respondents answered that it would double. The expectations for enrolment of adult learners in distance education were similar. Still, it seems that policies guiding the developments of higher education provisions are infrequent. In the country case studies, however, none of the participating countries had national policies on distance education in place.

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[42]   European Commission 2013, pp. 4-7

Finland	No specific policy on distance education in higher education. No separate open or distance teaching universities.
Germany	No specific policy on distance education in higher education.
Greece	No specific policy on distance education in higher education. Mentioned in the 'Education and Lifelong Learning' policy.
Hungary	No specific policy on distance education in higher education. On the master's level, no distance education at all. No laws mentioning e-learning.
UK	No specific policy on distance education in higher education, but laws exist that influence it indirectly e.g. Common quality assurance (QA) framework for higher education

Table 2: Existing or applied policy framework for DE

It is often argued that it is important to have policies on national levels, followed by related regulative frameworks and policies on institutional levels, followed in turn by related strategies, in order to reach sustainability in efforts to implement quality distance education.

In 1996, OECD[43] listed a series of factors necessary for lifelong learning policies to be operational and implemented. These factors need to address:

- access to higher education; possibilities for different categories of applicants to enrol

- availability of education; possibilities for lifelong learners to reach and participate in education

- validation of earlier education and already-achieved competences

Among the European Union's activities and strategies related to opening up higher education to adults, student services and support are widely acknowledged as an important factor for motivating adult learners to participate in and progress through higher education (Jung and Hong, 2014). Student services and support encompass a wide range of activities and services covering the entire period of students' access to higher education, from their progress through their chosen course of study to the period in which they develop further career pathways after graduating. Student support is critical to the success, status and quality of distance education and plays an important role in addressing the various

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[43] OECD (1996) Lifelong Learning for All, Paris, OECD.

barriers (lack of information, lack of funding) that prevent adult learners from taking up higher education.

Potential distance education adult students who participated in study 3 held the view that distance education could indeed increase access to education. Options for accessing courses and programmes are crucial.

The situation in the five participating countries from the case study is illustrated in the table below.

Finland	No specific access or entry requirements. Status of degree student can be obtained after pursuing courses in open university (In this case 'open university' refers to non-credit summer courses normally run by universities at Finnish folk high schools). APL introduced but slow uptake.
Germany	Highest degree from the school system (e.g. Abitur) or degree from the vocational sector. Recognition of a degree from vocational training through a special new policy. (Deutsches Zentrum für Hochschul- und Wissenschaftsforschung, 2015)
Greece	Graduation from secondary education. No systematic procedure for recognition of prior learning or work experience.
Hungary	School leaving examination certificate and enough entry points. No alternative admission. No systematic procedure for recognition of prior learning or work experience.
UK	'Access Diploma' programmes help to access higher education. Recognition or credit transfer from equivalent level of study elsewhere. Accreditation of (Prior) Experiential Learning (A(P)EL)

Table 3: Access, entry requirements and recognition of prior learning in five European countries

Only Finland and the UK have alternative access routes for adult learners without formal schooling. These two countries also have systems in place to accredit prior learning and of course, these two aspects often need to go hand in hand. The possibility to validate experiences, competences and earlier documented learning is shown to be of the highest importance to adult learners. With demonstrated knowledge as a basis for further studies, they can take shortcuts through education programmes or, for example, study on more advanced levels than they could without recognition of prior learning. Among other benefits, this simplifies time management, which is reported as one of the main challenges for adult learners.

The openness of higher education (the term open is used as in Open Universities and open learning) is primarily a political issue. Openness in its true meaning is not convincing without national policies paving the way for the acceptance of adult learners into higher education without traditional university entrance qualifications but with qualifications and preparations received in other ways throughout life (see comments on the concept *open learning* in chapter The Distance Education Concept in the Annex).

In one of the surveys, institutions were asked to report on their institutional strategy and how they ranked the importance of

- increasing student access

- increasing opportunities for continuing and/or professional education

- improving student progression and completion

- the provision of pedagogic improvements

- enabling adult learners to enrol.

For the vast majority of responding institutions, these objectives were all of high importance. Of these, increasing student access was named as the single most important issue, while the objective of enabling adult learners to enrol was not as strongly emphasized. However, the difference in importance between these various objectives was not striking.

Policy interventions mainly target institutional and situational barriers but tend to devote much less attention to dispositional barriers. Encouraging students and keeping up their motivation is an important task for guidance and counselling and a key complement to learner-centred teaching strategies and methods, which are equally as important for the motivation and retention of students, including adult students.

USE OF TECHNOLOGY IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

Developments in technology have meant a push forward for distance education. Issues related to distribution and distance have found new solutions and information, and communication technologies have developed into information and relation technologies Such technologies include smartphones and other advancements in hardware and software, the worldwide web, the Internet, applications such as chat, blogs, wikis, and podcasts, as well as SMS, MMS and communication platforms etc. These technologies have opened up opportunities for excellent presentations of subject matter, for easy access to dictionaries and encyclopaedia, but not least, opportunities to implement pedagogical theories with high relevance for quality distance education. The technologies can create nearness through interaction and dialogue. They can support:

- ◆ contact between students and faculty

- ◆ exchange and cooperation among students

- ◆ feedback systems

- ◆ learning techniques

- ◆ individualization, different ways of learning.

All these opportunities only become possible when technology is available, affordable and handled by competent digital users. Internet connection reliability and speed vary across Europe. The average Internet penetration in 2014 was estimated to be 75% of the European population[44], but also above 90% in many countries.[45] Out of the twenty countries in the world with the top connection speed that year, thirteen of them were European countries[46], but heterogeneity is also demonstrated here. Many large European countries were rather low on the list.

The importance then is how the Internet is implemented in education, how it is utilized for the necessary learning, interaction and dialogue processes. How is international data on Europe related to the world of distance education? A close look into the country studies reveals related issues. In one country 'living in cities' was identified as a characteristic of students attending distance education, and 'good computer knowledge and access' was identified in another. In all countries, 'difficulties with technology' was among the perceived barriers to access higher education as an adult learner. One report also pointed specifically at 'difficulties with network connections'. The impression may be that problems of this kind were solved, but obviously they are not. Lack of connection to the Internet still seems to exclude adult leaners from distance online education.

Even if the Internet and related technologies are very present in a person's daily life, the setting for an adult distance learner is different. 'Difficulties with technology' in distance education may be the problem. We don't have detailed information on how institutions introduce and support students with the use of educational technologies, but the country reports signal that this is probably a theme needing attention from HEIs.

Another aspect of using technology in education is of course that it should be employed correctly and in an intelligent way. As demonstrated in one of the background chapters, teamwork is needed to develop quality distance education. It is seldom enough with just the content provider. People who are confident with the use of advanced software and web

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44 International Telecommunications Union
45 http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats4.htm
46 'State of the Internet Report'. Akamai Technologies.

applications are needed in the development process. The single-mode distance education institutions with very positive feedback from large groups of satisfied students all employ working methods where staff members with different competences form teams to develop the courses. Distance teaching dual-mode institutions face a necessary challenge in organizing similar ways of working.

Just as students encounter problems with technology, so too can researchers and teachers. In the process of developing good praxis and milieus for distance education at dual-mode institutions, it is necessary to put more effort into training teachers in the use of increasingly advanced technologies.

Study 1 showed that the perceived barriers to growth of online teaching and learning had to do with the complexity and effort of developing courses and programmes. Of equally high importance was the proper use of technologies. This can be illustrated by a comment received from one HEI: 'Network and computer-based learning has huge potential. For a university, the challenge is to get the majority of teachers to make use of the full potential of network and computer-based learning, and to find their new role in the digitalized world.'

Lack of acceptance of new technologies by academic staff was reported as the second most prevalent barrier to the growth of online education.

THE APPLICATION OF PEDAGOGICAL THEORIES IN RELATION TO DISTANCE EDUCATION

A rather drastic and now classic quote from one of the early frontiers/pioneers of distance education, William Rainey Harper (1880), goes 'Whatever a dead teacher may accomplish in the classroom, he can do nothing by correspondence'. The presence of the educator in distance education is crucial and decades of research have demonstrated this fact and highlighted the most critical parts of the educator's role. Apart from the selection and structuring of knowledge in courses and programmes, demands on educators also concern the organization of teaching and learning and studying conditions. As illustrated earlier in this report, these processes need to be anchored in a collaboration between specialists, and should result in modes of subject matter presentation that meet learners' needs. Additionally, educators organize settings for students learning, leaving plenty of room for interaction and dialogue in which both feedback on learning processes and cooperation with study mates are central. Embedding distance learning processes further into support structures is vital.

While analysing the information on the DistanceLearningPortal (DLP) in our first study, we could identify that out of 2,223 study programmes, the absolute majority catered for student interaction. 11% of the courses/programmes provided no interaction opportunities for students, but in 28% of the courses offered, students could interact with their peers during individual assignments. Additionally, in 60% of programmes offered online, group work was organized as an opportunity for student-to-student interaction. Students could

of course use other forums to interact with peers apart from this organized interaction. The student-teacher interaction was also analysed in the dataset. According to information given by institutions, almost all programmes gave teacher support during the study period. In 1% of cases, feedback was only given on assignments, or no student support was offered at all. These data do not allow for an analysis of the quality of teacher-student relationships, but what could be concluded from the courses and programme description from an institutional perspective (from DLP) was that issues related to interaction between student and teachers and between students was considered and included in course designs.

The students participating in study 2 indicated overall satisfaction with their service and support experiences in their respective distance courses and programmes. Figure 10 illustrates this fact.
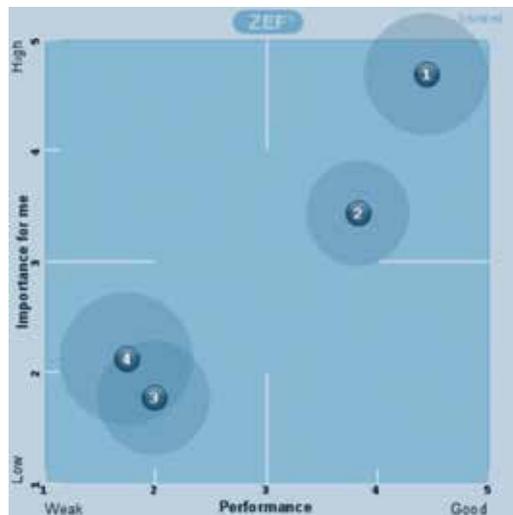
Figure 10: Services and support expected and perceived by students (Figure reproduced from p. 34)

Students were asked about their expectations and experiences of services and support from the education provider. They could thus indicate the level of importance of a variable and assess how well the provider delivered it. The variables were *Learning material developed and/or adapted specifically for distance education* (indicated by number 1 in Figure 10); *Administrative/organizational support* (indicated by number 2); Moral support/psychological support/counselling (indicated by number 3); *Opportunities to interact with teachers and other students* (indicated by number 4). The number of responses received varied slightly, sitting somewhere between 1625 to 1639. In the figure, the position of the digit represents the mean and the area around it illustrates the variation in answers. As illustrated by Figure 10, expectations on the whole were met and high expectations on a group level were generally met with a good performance. The expectations from students regarding learning material adapted for distance education were high and the provider delivered accordingly – on a

group level. Deepening the analysis, 200 (12%) of the respondents gave answers indicating they regarded the performance in this aspect as weak. Of special interest to our study were the responses to variables 3 and 4. On a group level, it looks as though the expectations were low and that the institution did not bother to focus on these aspects. In Figure 11, the variables are dichotomized and responses were spread over the four quadrants.

Figure 11: Left: answers to 'Moral support; psychological support; counselling'. Right: answers to 'Opportunities to interact with teachers and other students'.

Figure 11 above still illustrates that the performance of institutions was highly rated. Approximately 70% of students responded in this way for both variables, which leaves around 500 students who were not so happy with their institution's performance. In our dataset, we cannot identify the characteristics of the students whose high expectations were not met regarding how the educator supported them with positive backup, reinforcement, 'didactic conversation' or opportunities to interact with teachers and other students. The majority of students in our survey were already academically trained, studying full degree programmes. Which students had high expectations on support but did not experience an acceptable level of encouragement and assistance? An informed guess could be that they were adult learners with a shorter history in their educational background, perhaps new to both academic studies and to distance education. These adults are still an important target group for distance higher education.

Close to 400 students used the open comment option. Many of them used this option just to express their satisfaction with their provider. It was obvious that many of these comments came from students of open universities. Approximately 200 of the students left negative comments. Comments on high tuition fees aside, they all expressed concern about a perceived lack of quality dialogue and interaction or a low degree of flexibility in the course design. As often demonstrated in literature, issues such as faster and richer feedback and the need for more opportunities to interact and cooperate with fellow students were raised.

ADAPTING FOR ADULT LEARNERS

Higher education institutions with ambitions to reach lifelong learners will meet students with highly diverse needs and conditions for their study programmes. Institutions must adapt their strategies so that the

- selection and structuring of knowledge in courses and programmes meets the needs of adult learners

- variation in the range of courses and programmes meets the needs of students

- organization of teaching, learning and study conditions suits adult learners

Adult learners

Adults have more life experiences, are used to higher levels of responsibility and have different time priorities to those of younger students, as was illustrated in the information collected in our three studies.

An overview of the data showed that the majority of distance education students were women, and in relation to age, we found students in all age groups, but the distance education students were generally older than students in 'traditional' higher education programmes. We also observed that the majority of distance education students were part-time students, working in addition to studying, and that distance education seemed more attractive to people who already had considerable experience with education.

In numbers:

- of all the potential students who answered the questionnaire, 42% were between 25-34 years old.

- 52% of these potential students were working, either part-time, full-time or in self-employment. Among those students who were already enrolled, this percentage was higher: 70%.

- enrolled students had previous higher education qualifications: 31% had a bachelor's degree and 11% a master's degree. Among potential students, 52% of the respondents had a bachelor's degree and 32% a master's degree.

Although the data demonstrated variations, it could be observed that specific groups of people favoured distance education, i.e. disabled students or students with other health issues, as well as independent learners, people who could not enter higher education at an earlier age, persons caring for family members, people living in remote areas and retired people.

Motivation and interest in distance education

The reported motivations to study via distance education varied widely. Data pointed at two main reasons, namely the search for self-fulfilment and increasing career opportunities. Flexibility remained the most important quality of distance education. Notably, 82% of the potential students responded that their reason for considering distance education was improving their career prospects. When the motivation and interests of prospective students was examined in closer detail, not all their motivation was extrinsic. Inner motives were mentioned, but issues related to the organization of studies were very present. From literature, we can recognize the motivations/incentives mentioned: the ease of combining distance education with a job; the possibility to study at one's own pace; a preference for staying at home to study, the ease of combining distance education with family duties; the affirmation that distance education costs less.

The tendency to be outer-directed changes obviously with age. In our dataset, respondents below 54 years of age had a strong professional motivation that diminished drastically as the age of respondents increased to 55. Here, self-fulfilment played a more important role. Figure 12 below shows the cross-tabulation of motivation and age for potential students. The number of respondents was 427.
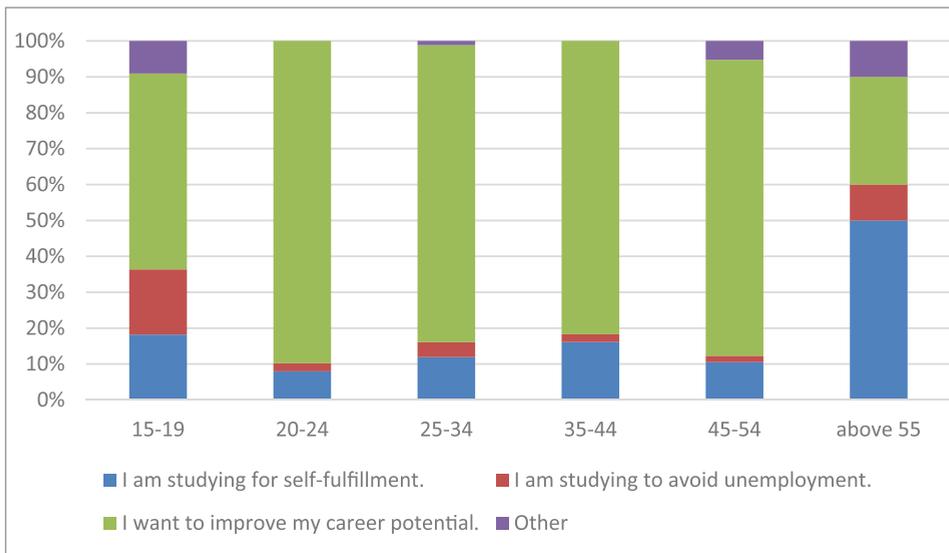
Figure 12: Motivation for further education versus age of potential students.

It seems logical that younger cohorts who are either in the labour market or about to enter it use further education to avoid unemployment and improve career prospects. The cohorts over 55 years of age begin to show more interest comparably in education for self-fulfilment.

Meeting the demand

Distance-teaching open universities are already established across Europe and more traditional universities are rapidly transforming themselves from single-mode to dual-mode universities, recognizing the importance of distance education in providing students with educational resources. Courses and programmes offered at any institution need to respond to the needs of the learners. They need to match their interests and social profile, enabling access while alleviating possible barriers.

The majority of European institutional leaders expect the number of distance education students to double. In IDEAL studies 1 and 2 we observed courses offered by European institutions and could compare them with what students were searching for. Data indicated that the prognosis from the leaders was right. The general demand for distance education was higher than what was offered.

Study interests

In the programmes available on the StudyPortals website, the most presented and best communicated/marketed subject area was 'Business & Economics'. It was followed by 'Social Sciences' and 'Applied Sciences, Professions & Arts'. The subject areas 'Life Sciences, Medicine & Health', 'Engineering & Technology' and 'Humanities & Arts' made up one-third of the programmes on offer in almost equal parts. The smallest number of distance education programmes was reported in 'Environmental Sciences', 'Law' and 'Natural Sciences' fields.

The information gathered via the study choice analytics tool made comparisons between interest shown in different subjects and programmes offered by higher education institutions. The data are illustrated in following figure.
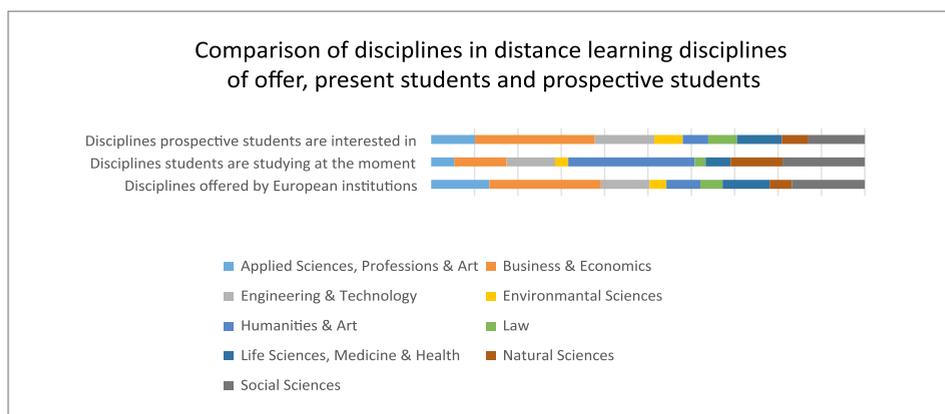
Figure 13: Comparison of interest/demand in disciplines in DE with the disciplines offered to enrolled and potential students

When comparing interest from enrolled and potential students in particular disciplines with what institutions offered, we note that the interest in business and economics, engineering and technology and life sciences is overarching the programmes offered. On the other hand, social sciences and applied sciences are overrepresented in terms of what is offered when compared to the interest level of potential students. The comparisons are not certain as the groups compared were selected in different ways. Notably, humanities and arts seemed to be studied more often than the programmes offered and the level of demand would indicate. Other information collected, e.g. from the country case studies, pointed in the same direction. A plausible explanation for this is that younger student groups and older student groups have different priorities when it comes to subject areas, and that one of the groups (the older students) were less well-represented when analysing study choices.

Barriers

In study 2, enrolled students were given three types of challenges and asked to indicate how difficult each of these was. The three challenges proposed used distance education technology, the programme/course's native language (if not taught in the student's native language) and recognition/validation of prior qualifications. The respondents found none of the challenges particularly difficult. In open text fields, however, they mentioned cost and time as their main barriers. In study 3, the potential students also nominated costs and time as the main barriers to accessing courses and programmes, but they also mentioned the recognition of prior learning and qualifications as a barrier.

Adult learners and student support

Support services were discussed earlier in this report, specifically, how essential they are for enhancing access and improving student retention and performance. Among the European Union's activities and strategies related to opening higher education to adults, student services and support are widely acknowledged as important factors for motivating adult learners to participate in and progress through higher education (Jung and Hong 2014). Student services and support encompass a wide range of activities and services covering the entire period of study from students' accessing higher education and progressing through their course of study through to the career development pathways they choose after graduation. Student support is critical to the success, status, and quality of distance education and plays an important role in addressing the various barriers (lack of information, lack of funding) that prevent adult learners from taking up higher education.

Student services and support must include various forms of services, such as guidance and counselling, as well as more 'tangible' support services such as financial aid, child care facilities or local study centres and branch campuses to facilitate students' physical access to study facilities. Such services play an important role in addressing the various barriers (lack of information, lack of funding) that prevent adult learners from taking up higher education.

We discussed three categories of support earlier. The category receiving the greatest attention in literature is *academic support*, i.e. the cognitive-oriented support that students get from teachers, tutors and sometimes study mates. Various factors related to the *organization* of their studies are also crucial to distance education students: e.g. how the provider structures the work via study guides and how it facilitates the formation of study groups. Less often discussed but equally important, especially for learners with less experience with higher education, is the social, psychological and/or emotional aspects of studying. This category includes ways of bringing positively-powered dialogue into distance education, e.g. by patting someone on the back metaphorically and providing positive feedback. Our studies demonstrated that adult learners needed all these aspects of support and that the institutions organising distance education need to cater for this accordingly.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As a way to open higher education to adult learners, online distance education provides an array of advantages. However, it may also constitute a barrier for those learners that do not have access to or experience with equipment and the Internet. As this type of distance education provision is on the rise, it is important to ensure access and adequate support mechanisms. Our studies guide us to make the following recommendations:

◆ Respond to the wide range of different needs of enrolled and potential students

◆ Increase flexibility within the distance education programme offered

◆ Remove regulative barriers and develop procedures for recognition of prior learning, validation

◆ Inform adult learners of access to alternatives

◆ Improve funding models and financial support for higher education for adults

◆ Facilitate learning for adult students in distance higher education.

Respond to the wide range of different needs

The most influential facilitating factor is to provide a great deal of flexibility for adult learners. The provision of online education as the main mode of distance education would therefore respond to most adult learners' request for more flexible learning opportunities.

Regarding the social profile, we have seen that a majority of distance education students are women, have family/children, are part-time students and are returning to/entering higher education after a period of work, leave, etc. Also, students of all ages study in distance education, though they are generally older than those in 'traditional' higher education. Such a variety of age, life and work situations among students demonstrates the potential for distance education to meet the needs of adult learners; e.g. learners in remote areas, second-chance learners and learners facing circumstantial restrictions. Distance education is a particularly liberating factor for parents of young children, especially mothers. In principle, distance education is accessible to a wide range of potential learners. The results of our data set suggest that distance education may have a strong potential to increase access to higher education for new target groups (i.e. non-degree holders). In this sense, the expected growth for distance education along with the institutional objective of enabling second-change learners to enrol constitutes an opportunity for adult learning.

Increase flexibility within the programmes offered

It is clear from the IDEAL study that a central aspect of openness in distance education gives students the possibility to start studies whenever they want. However, only a few programmes currently offer this degree of flexibility. The IDEAL study shows that many institutions still face a considerable challenge in the development and delivery of distance/online education, and in resolving conflicting goals such as attracting 'traditional' learners versus second-change learners. To provide a considerable opportunity to participate in higher education, national education policies need to increase the availability of part-time studies and options for adult learners with family or job obligations. It would be considered reasonable to develop and disseminate 'good practice' in the areas of flexible programme provision as well.

Remove regulative barriers and develop standard procedures for validation

Despite the possibility that distance education has potential for increasing attainment levels, formal entry requirements still constitute general access barriers. By offering individual alternative access routes, however, these barriers could be overcome and turned into opportunities. As largely discussed, there is a need to develop standard procedures for the recognition of prior learning (RPL), validation for adult learners. Adults with work experience (and no degrees) are seen as a main target group in our data. To increase adult learner participation in higher education across borders, institutions should work further towards standardized procedures. They also need to offer support in getting the required qualifications validated (e.g. language proficiency, credits). If options for the RPL or more generally for the recognition, validation and accreditation of formal and informal learning (RVA) are available accordingly, this would present a great opportunity for second-chance learners without formal qualifications. At policy level, an adequate framework and support need to be secured. In particular, higher education institutions should be encouraged to accumulate knowledge on how to manage procedures for the validation of non-formal and informal learning in line with national qualifications frameworks.

Inform adult learners of access to alternatives

The IDEAL study reports that higher education institutions may attract adult learners, but the limited access to information prevents potential students or adult learners from participating in distance higher education. The general lack of communication on alternative access opportunities is a significant barrier for the openness of higher education to adult learners. This barrier could be overcome quite simply by making such options more transparent. Since adult learners are not always aware of the absence of tuition fees in some countries, they could miss an opportunity to participate in higher education via online learning. Such institutions should be advised to better communicate that they do not

charge any fees if they are recruiting across borders. For this, new media provide further access possibilities. It is particularly important to achieve 'demand orientation' and equity of access.

Improve funding models

The IDEAL study shows that most adult learners in higher distance education have a strong need for financial support. Given that tuition fees can constitute a barrier for anyone interested in higher education, students need to be informed of funding opportunities, in particular eligibility criteria. Our data indicates that most distance education students are in fee-paying programmes/courses and few distance education students receive non-private support. If they cannot receive assistance in choosing and securing an appropriate source of funding, distance education is hardly chosen as an alternative route the 'traditional' educational means. It is therefore essential that higher education institutions be motivated to provide an array of information on where and how to seek financial support. Support from external stakeholders, such as private companies, foundations and NGOs, with a goal to ease the financial burden for adult learners could be explored.

Facilitate learning for adults

It is highly recommended to develop good study guides that improve student-to-student interaction. Our data shows that limitations in the possibilities for student-to student interaction constitute a barrier in distance education. Working together with study mates is of high importance for the success of studies. To overcome this limitation, the widespread availability of continuous teacher support should be provided to distance education students. In addition, teaching staff need to be ready to enter into an empathetic dialogue with distance education students. They should be trained to provide support that goes beyond cognitive aspects, organization of studies, and technological matters. For this, higher education institutions will need to motivate faculty to enter into the world of distance education and to give them the organizational prerequisites and tools. It is also relevant that other types of support services, in particular the specific support offered to second-chance learners, are not well-communicated. For adult learners, more transparency in such services might increase the participation of lifelong learners in distance education. It is essential to provide student services and support, teaching methods, and skills to meet the needs of adult learners and hence to develop useful study guides and resources, which help students to plan and facilitate their learning.

SUMMARY OF EMPIRICAL RESULTS FROM THE THREE INDEPENDENT STUDIES

Study 1: Distance education programmes offered

The overarching research question was 'How can distance education programmes offered by European higher education be better matched to adult learners' needs?' Study 1 set out to answer two embedded sub-questions: 'Which distance education programmes are offered?' and 'What are the intended target groups?'

Which distance education programmes are offered?

Who is providing distance education?

The institutional data set showed that distance education is provided by a variety of institutions, very few of which are single-mode distance-teaching universities. Today, there are a considerable number of dual-mode or 'traditional' campus-based universities that offer some form of distance education. Especially in the Nordic countries, the boundaries between distance education and on-campus programmes have become increasingly blurred as technology and methodology originally used only for distance education is now also used on campus. In these countries, almost all higher education institutions offer distance (or blended) education. Our institutional data showed that in most other countries, distance education programmes are just an add-on to the larger on-campus offer. Technological developments have also spurred the rise of so-called 'cross-border education' networks, some of which are private, for-profit organizations. The programme data gave additional insights into this development: cross-border networks are responsible for a substantial number of distance education programmes offered to students in Europe.

The geographic spread of both the institutional and the programme data sets are not representative. The programme data, however, provides us with an important piece of information: how European distance education programmes are advertised. It seems that English-taught programmes (mainly from the UK, but also from other countries where English is not the native language) make extensive use of the DistanceLearningPortal to reach out to their potential students.

How many distance education programmes are offered?

Single-mode distance education institutions provide many hundreds of programmes and more. In some countries, the lines between on-campus and distance education have become so blurred that almost all institutions provide some form of the latter. In our institutional data set, the ratio for 'traditional' higher education institutions, i.e. those for whom distance education is just an add-on, is 1 to 10 for programmes delivered via distance education versus face-to-face programmes.

The number of students in distance education is difficult to estimate. We have suggested that there are around 3 million students taking part in some form of distance education in Europe. Single-mode distance-teaching universities alone cater for hundreds of thousands of students. The institutional questionnaire collected numbers of students according to the different types of distance education delivered. It showed that numbers are highest in online education, followed by blended education. Other forms of distance education had the lowest number of students.

What subject areas are offered?

The analysis of the programmes in the DistanceLearningPortal provided the following information on subject areas: 'Business & Economics' is the most frequently offered subject area in this data set. Or rather: it is the best communicated/marketed subject area, followed by 'Social Sciences' and 'Applied Sciences, Professions & Arts'. The subject areas 'Life Sciences, Medicine & Health', 'Engineering & Technology' and 'Humanities & Arts' make up one-third of the programmes offered in almost equal parts. The smallest number of distance education programmes is reported in 'Environmental Sciences', 'Law' and 'Natural Sciences'.

What levels of distance education are offered?

Both the institutional and the programme study showed that distance education is most commonly delivered at bachelor and master's level. In the institutional data set, the amount of programmes delivered at these two levels is similar. In the programme data set, almost three-quarters of the programmes offered are full degree programmes. The vast majority of the full degree programmes are provided at master's level. PhD and bachelor-level programmes constitute roughly one-fifth of the programmes offered, while single courses – irrespective of their level – make up one fourth. From this information it could also be interpreted that master-level programmes are particularly well-marketed.

Degrees or no degrees?

As mentioned above, almost 75 per cent of programmes analysed in the programme data set are degree programmes, and the rest are single courses. However, our data set does not give us any information regarding whether enrolments in single courses belonging to a particular degree programmes are possible. The institutional survey indicated that in half of the distance education programmes that lead to a degree, it is possible to enrol in single courses.

Credits or no credits?

Not even one-third of the programmes in the DistanceLearningPortal database provide information on credits, i.e. whether they are available, what kind, how many. The majority of programmes/courses do not provide information on credits. What we can say is that information on credits is not well-communicated by providers. The availability of credits

could constitute an important piece of information for adult learners, especially in the case of courses not leading to a degree,.

How is distance education organized?

Apart from the single-mode distance-teaching universities, the majority of respondents to the institutional survey said that distance education is located within the departments; in fewer cases, there is a specific distance education department. In very few cases, distance education is in the hands of the professors themselves.

What are the delivery modes?

The most common *delivery mode* is online education, as reported by respondents to the institutional study. But the programme data also shows that two-thirds of the programmes/courses are delivered in full online mode. Almost one-third is delivered in blended mode.

What are the intended target groups?

What are the degree requirements?

The DLP data shows that a minority (fewer than one-tenth) of programmes do not require a degree, more than two-thirds do. The institutional study also revealed that two-thirds of the respondents to our survey are very interested in recruiting adult learners with a degree. In the majority of cases in the programme data, the level of degree required is lower than that of the programme/course for which it is required.

Is work experience required?

Approximately two-thirds of respondents in the institutional survey claimed that they were targeting adult learners with some work experience. Half of all respondents even mentioned that they were interested in recruiting adult learners without a degree. In the DLP dataset, the information on required work experience reveals that distance education programmes, particularly at the PhD level but also at master's level, expect applicants to have acquired work experience prior to their application.

Are there any language requirements?

As described in the programme study, the data set is biased towards UK and English-taught programmes in general. This explains the high number of programmes that require English-language testing – a circumstance that is certainly not representative of programmes offered in all European countries. For this data set, however, we can say that English-language testing as a formal entry requirement may be a barrier to adult learners without sufficient language skills.

Is alternative access possible?

While the institutional study showed that many HEIs have a clear interest in recruiting adult learners who qualify through work experience and not only by way of a previous degree, we have little information from the programme data on alternative access. Fewer than 10 per cent of HEIs provide information on this matter. Of those that do, programmes at master's level in particular offer opportunities for alternative access. We cannot assume that no alternative access routes are available for the vast majority of programmes. Rather, we can say that – if they exist – they are not marketed well.

What are the reported target groups?

As already mentioned, the institutional survey identified adult learners with specific work experience as the main target group, closely followed by adult learners with a degree (both were identified by approximately two-thirds of the respondents). The institutional survey also found that half of the responding HEIs are interested in reaching out to bachelor's degree holders as potential students. This could mean that they are recruiting mainly for master-level programmes. In the matter of national versus international students, there seems to be a slightly stronger focus on the former.

Tuition fees

Approximately two-thirds of the respondents in the programme data set provided information on tuition fees. The data show that fees for distance education programmes increase with the level of education offered, by up to several thousand Euros/Pounds/etc. per year/module. It must be kept in mind that the data set contains a mainly UK programmes/courses and internationally oriented ones; we therefore cannot draw general conclusions about fees in Europe. Furthermore, some countries do not charge any fees at all. Very few free programmes/courses were reported in our data set.

Are there any funding opportunities?

At first glance, information on funding opportunities seems easily accessible. Almost half of the programmes/courses examined in the programme data set provided some kind of information on this issue. The complexity of the information and the predominant lack of eligibility criteria, however, might make it difficult for potential students to choose and secure an appropriate funding source without further assistance.

Are there any application deadlines?

The programme data reveals that around one-third of the programmes/courses have fully flexible application deadlines, i.e. no set application deadlines. Approximately one-fifth has

only one deadline per year. Fewer than 10 per cent of programmes have multiple application deadlines per year. For more than one third of programmes, no information on application deadlines was made available.

What are the start dates?

The programme data also collected information on start dates, i.e. intakes: even if they have rolling application deadlines, two-fifths of the programmes/courses only have one intake per year. Almost one-fifth of programmes have two intakes per year. Just one- quarter of the programmes/courses are fully flexible, i.e. they can be started at any time.

Part-time versus full-time?

Half of the programmes/courses in the programme data are offered in part-time mode only, one-fifth are optionally available in part-time or full-time mode, and one-quarter are full-time programmes. Only very few have not provided any information on this issue. Of those programmes indicating that part-time study is possible, almost all state that there are no required minimum hours per week. A negligible number of these programmes/courses report an average of 16 hours per week as a required minimum.

What are the attendance requirements?

Half of the programmes/courses in the programme data set do not require any physical attendance at all. Just under one tenth report that attendance is needed for regular mandatory meetings. Even fewer offer regular optional meetings.

Time to completion

The majority of programmes in the DLP data set report time frames that are similar to those of on-campus programmes at the respective level. However, many of them also reveal a considerable amount of flexibility in the time available for course completion at various levels. It is however unclear if time extensions are always free of charge.

What interaction opportunities are available for students?

The programme study shows that student-to-student interaction opportunities provided by institutions are limited. Very few offer possibilities for student group work, which means that students must turn to other forums to interact with their peers. On the other hand, a high number of programmes/courses claim to offer continuous interaction with the teacher/tutor.

What support services are provided?

The responses to the institutional survey showed that the support provided to students is mainly administrative. Moral support is offered by almost two-thirds of respondents. The programme study found that – with the exception of continuous teacher support – information on other support services is difficult to access. In particular, information regarding specific support to second-chance learners is not communicated well. The majority of programmes/courses in the programme data set did not provide any information regarding this.

Why do HEIs provide DE?

The institutional survey showed that for four-fifths of respondents, the core motivation for higher education institutions to offer distance education is to provide more flexible learning opportunities. Attracting adult learners is the third most important motivation, but only half as many respondents mentioned it. This might indicate that distance education is understood as an opportunity for making pedagogic approaches more flexible in general.

The institutional survey also asked about the strategic importance for institutions to increase student access, progression, completion, etc. The data shows that slightly fewer than half of the respondents named enabling adult learners to enrol as strategically important. It is thus not emphasized as strongly as, for example, student access (which was mentioned by just over half of the respondents). It is however still important in the overarching institutional strategies.

Future expectations

Almost three-quarters of the respondents in the institutional data set expected enrolments in distance education to rise within the next 5 years. Only very few predict a decline in enrolments. The picture is similar for adults returning to higher education after a period of leave (work, unemployment, parental leave, etc.); most respondents expect a rise in adult learners' enrolments. There is only a slighter higher expectation for growth in the enrolment of national students in distance education than that of international students.

Barriers to growth

When responding to questions about potential barriers to the growth of distance education, respondents in the institutional data set attached the most significance to a perceived lack of effort required to develop and deliver distance education programmes. Lack of acceptance by academic staff was reported as the second 'very significant' barrier to the growth of distance education. Most respondents stated that there is sufficient student demand to facilitate the necessary improvements in this area.

Conclusions of Study 1 with respect to adult learners

Distance education providers

There is a considerable range of programmes offered in distance and blended education in Europe. The first-hand experience gathered from our surveys showed how difficult it is to get a full overview of this range. Access to information may be the single most decisive barrier for any potential students, and adult learners in particular. It also constitutes an opportunity if we can raise awareness of programmes and information offered to help adult learners make informed decisions.

Subjects, levels, degrees and credits

The large quantity of *degree* programmes in our distance education data set shows the potential that distance education offers adult learners to increase their attainment levels, i.e. through programmes leading to formal (higher) degree qualifications.

For single courses, awarding credits affords the opportunity to increase attainment levels. Credits document academic achievements and can be acknowledged by other universities. The lack of information on credits can constitute a barrier: if better communicated, it could be an important tool for attracting adult learners to take a course/programme.

In line with this, a recommendation to higher education institutions would be to state whether single courses forming part of a degree programme can also be taken separately for credits.

Organization and delivery mode

While single-mode distance education institutions have substantial experience in the use of new technologies, the expertise among dual-mode institutions varies greatly, especially among those in which distance education constitutes a negligible part of the programmes offered. Furthermore, while some HEIs have not even identified distance education as a delivery method, MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) are entering the market. An exchange of experience and best practice among higher education institutions interested in or active within distance education would create a great opportunity for adult learners. HEIs should receive support to professionalize their programmes.

On the one hand, online education as the main mode of distance education delivery constitutes an opportunity, as it is easily accessible and facilitates close communication between teachers/tutors and students. It also constitutes a barrier for those learners that do not have access to equipment and the Internet and are not experienced in their use. As this type of distance education provision is on the rise, it is important to ensure access.

Entry requirements and reported target groups

Considering the high number of programmes in our data set that require a prior degree at a lower level, we can conclude that distance education has clear potential for increasing attainment levels, i.e. leading to higher level degrees.

Formal entry requirements, on the other hand, constitute general access barriers. These could be overcome and turned into opportunities if institutions considered offering individual alternative access routes. In fact, adults with work experience (and no degrees) are also reported to be a main target group: if options for the recognition of prior learning (RPL) or more generally for the recognition, validation and accreditation of formal and informal learning (RVA) are made available accordingly, this could constitute a great opportunity for second-chance learners without formal qualifications to access distance education.

The general lack of communication regarding alternative access opportunities is a significant barrier for the openness of higher education to adult learners. This barrier could be overcome quite simply by making such options more transparent. To increase the participation of adult learners in higher education, institutions should work further towards standardizing procedures. Additionally, they could offer support in obtaining the required qualifications, e.g. language proficiency, credits.

Costs and funding opportunities for distance education

Tuition fees can constitute a barrier for anyone interested in higher education, not only for adult learners. It is therefore essential that information on funding opportunities, in particular eligibility criteria, be communicated more clearly, along with the information on fees. Students should also be able to receive assistance in choosing and securing an appropriate funding source.

The absence of tuition fees in some countries may constitute an opportunity for adult learners. When compared to the higher education institutions charging fees and the amounts charged, the absence of tuition fees in these countries could indeed be interpreted as a fee waiver for students choosing between institutions based in different countries. Such institutions should be advised to communicate clearly that they do not charge any fees if they are recruiting across borders.

Flexibility of the distance education programmes offered

A central aspect openness in distance education is the possibility to commence studying at any time. Only few programmes currently offer this degree of flexibility. An increase would constitute a considerable opportunity for adult learning.

The option for part-time study offers adult learners with family or job obligations a high degree of flexibility.

Limited attendance requirements and time frames for completion also constitute an opportunity for lifelong learners, as they offer a great degree of flexibility. On the other hand, extra fees for extended time frames may create barriers for lifelong learners. Therefore, students need greater transparency of costs. Providers should assist students further in securing an appropriate funding source for the successful completion of their studies.

Support to students

The limitations in possibilities for student-to student interaction constitute a barrier in distance education. Working together with study mates is highly important for academic success. It is therefore recommended to include such options for interaction in the information regarding distance education programmes.

The widespread availability of continuous teacher support for distance education students constitutes a great opportunity for lifelong learning. To ensure its effectiveness, teaching staff need to be ready to enter into an empathetic dialogue with distance education students – they should be trained to provide support that goes beyond cognitive aspects, organization of studies, and technological matters.

The availability of other support services, in particular specific support offered to second-chance learners, is not communicated well. For adult learners, more transparency of information on such services might increase participation of lifelong learners in distance education.

Drivers for distance education and future expectations

The expected growth in distance education, along with the institutional objective of enabling second-change learners to enrol, constitutes an opportunity for adult learning. A considerable challenge for many institutions will be making the effort required to develop and deliver distance/online education and to resolve conflicting goals (e.g. attracting 'traditional' learners versus second-change learners). At the same time, institutions will need to motivate faculty to enter into the world of distance education and to give them the organizational prerequisites and tools to realize it: only when they see it as a pedagogical opportunity for learners will they allow this to happen.

Study 2: Distance education students

The second study analysed profiles of students enrolled in DE, along with any previous issues they had related to education funding and their experiences as a DE students.

The social profile of DE students

Distance education students in Europe seem to be a very heterogeneous group. According to our dataset, some general characteristics could be identified:

- The majority of distance education students were women;

- Students of all ages studied in distance education, though they were generally older than those in 'traditional' higher education;

- The majority of DE students were returning to/entering into higher education after a period of work, leave, etc.;

- The majority were part-time students;

- The majority worked alongside their studies, and many also had a family/children.

Other distinct groups of distance education students included retired people, disabled students or students with other health concerns, those caring for family members, those living in remote areas, those who could not enter higher education at an earlier age and learners wanting independence.

The previous and current education of DE students

- The most common subjects studied via distance education were 'Humanities and Art', 'Social Sciences' and 'Business and Economics'.

- Many distance education students studied in a similar field to their prior education.

- Most distance education students were in enrolled in Bachelor's level programmes.

- Many distance education students already had a Bachelor's degree or equivalent.

- Distance education allowed students to attain a higher level degree and to study at the same degree level; i.e. updating their existing knowledge or gaining new knowledge.

Distance education funding

♦ Many distance education students were in fee-paying programmes/courses.

♦ The majority of fee-paying students claimed that fees were slightly higher than their living expenses.

♦ Few distance education students received non-private support; many invested their own resources.

DE student experiences (motivations, barriers, support)

The **motivations** to study varied widely. Students mentioned the following: curiosity; to improve general well-being; to stay fit mentally; to increase career prospects; to take advantage of an opportunity they did not have earlier in life; and an investment in their socio-cultural status.

♦ The motivating factors to take part in *distance education* could be divided into 'external' and 'internal' factors.

♦ 'External' motivating factors: The main external factors were time restrictions (and the flexibility offered by distance education), the physical distance to on-campus education, the subject area's lack of availability in on-campus education, the tuition language, health issues and the costs of on-campus education. Alternative access was also mentioned (e.g. students did not meet the entry requirements for on-campus education).

♦ 'Internal' motivating factors: Students chose distance education not because of specific restrictions, but deliberately. Factors ranged from the institution's reputation to an interest in a particular course/programme and learning preferences.

Students in our data set reported that the tuition language, the technology used and the recognition of prior learning presented considerable challenges. Considering the non-response bias in the data set, it could be assumed that for some student groups, probably students with a short educational history, DE is not easily accessible. Students observed the following among the main *challenges* and *limitations* for distance education students: recognition (validation and accreditation) of prior learning as an important aspect of access; the cost of education, and time restrictions. Students stated their strong need for the following modalities of **support***: Learning material developed/adapted specifically for distance education; administrative/organizational support; opportunities to interact with teachers and other students; and moral and psychological support and counselling.

Many students were satisfied with their provider but wished for improvement in the following fields: financial support; a stronger human factor in distance education (e.g. tutor availability, more/better tutorials at convenient times, face-to-face modules); teachers/tutors trained to meet the needs of students (e.g., dealing with dyslexia).

Conclusions of Study 2 with respect to adult learners

Social profile and the adult learner

The variety of age, life and work situations of students demonstrates the potential of distance education to meet the needs of adult learners; e.g. learners in remote areas, second chance learners and learners facing circumstantial restrictions. Distance education is a particularly liberating factor for parents of young children. Distance education is, in principle, accessible to a wide range of potential learners.

The data showed that institutions should capitalize on strengths; higher education institutions need to be aware of the different needs and life situations of learners, to adapt their programmes offered and to prepare for new student groups.

Previous and current education and the adult learner

- The high number of students in degree programmes shows the potential distance education has to help adult learners gain a new qualification. The availability of non-degree courses at various levels and in various fields can also help adult learners to update their knowledge or gain knowledge and skills in a new field.

- The data showed that it is important for higher education institutions to understand learners' needs and to adapt their programmes offered to meet the demand.

- he high number of students with a previous degree in higher education shows that distance education has strong potential to increase access to HE for new target groups (i.e. non-degree holders). It is also important to promote the recognition of prior and informal learning.

Distance education funding and the adult learner

- Tuition fees and funding may constitute a barrier for those interested in higher education, including adult learners.

- Distance education is not necessarily instrumental in reducing social disparities. Those potential students not reached by 'traditional' educational means are unlikely to take advantage of distance education if they cannot invest their own resources.

- It is therefore essential that funding opportunities are in place and that information on such opportunities, in particular eligibility criteria, are communicated well. Students should also have access to assistance in choosing and securing an appropriate funding source.

DE student experiences and the adult learner

- Distance education students are motivated by a variety of factors; above all, distance education is seen as an opportunity for lifelong learning and more than just education.

- External motivating factors (e.g., time restrictions, need for flexibility) are still more important than internal ones (e.g., interest in a particular DE programme). Distance education is often the only alternative and not the first choice. HEIs therefore need to understand why adult students choose distance education and adapt accordingly. Distance education needs to be accessible (e.g. via the recognition of prior learning) and attractive (e.g. through choice and continued support) to learners.

- The main challenges for adult learners are time restraints, costs and the recognition of prior learning. At policy level, an adequate framework and support need to be secured, especially at times when new media provide further access possibilities. Achieving 'demand orientation' and equity of access is paramount.

- Adult distance education students have a strong need for support and guidance. It is therefore important to develop good study guides that support students in their study planning. DE should also build on learner orientation further, giving learners more influence on the planning of their programmes!

Study 3 Potential distance education students

The third study focused on potential distance education students by asking who they are, what they are looking for and what their perceived barriers are. As reported in earlier chapters, the design consisted of three approaches: an online questionnaire filled out by potential students, a study choice analytics tool analysing potential students' browsing behaviour and five country case studies analysing existing national research on potential students. This last component also complemented all three studies by addressing examples of issues.

The online questionnaire

Who are the students?

More than half of the survey respondents came from outside Europe. Analysing differences in response patterns between answers from within and from outside Europe showed no differences. There were no surprises in the answers to the questionnaire given by potential students profiled. As evident in most data surrounding distance education students, these students were young, the largest group being between 25-34 years of age. 77% of the total group of respondents were 25 years of age or older. 60% were at work, employed or self-employed and they were well-educated as a group.Almost 90% of them had academic qualifications. 57% had a Bachelor's degree, and only 11% of the respondents had no more than a basic/high school qualification.

What are their motivation and interests?

Most of the respondents (62%) answered that their incentive to study was to improve their career prospects. Some 90% of the group nominated this together with the motivation 'to reach self-fulfilment'. In open text fields, respondents specified their reasons for considering further education, such as a love of study and research, a desire to teach or share knowledge with their community, a wish to keep up with technological advances in their country and the motivation to serve their clients better.

Respondents below 54 years of age had stronger professional motivations. This diminished drastically for respondents above 55, who considered self-fulfilment more important. Economic factors were thus less important to the oldest cohort.

For almost 1/3 of the respondents, the main motivation to consider flexible forms of education was because '*distance education is easier to combine with my job*'. The following four motivations were listed as answers in almost equal parts: not having to leave home; the possibility of studying at their own pace: the ease of combining distance education with family duties; and lower costs.

In the open text fields, respondents mentioned the following additional motivations: the possibility of travelling and researching on their own terms; the ease of combining distance education with other study programmes at home; and the unavailability of suitable courses in their own country.

What are the barriers?

Regarding barriers, costs and time constraints resulting from work and family commitments were most commonly listed, followed by the lack of recognition of prior qualifications. Studying at a distance as such was not perceived as a barrier. More than 60% of respondents saw distance education as an enabling factor to increase equal access to education.

Notably, many comments in the open text fields dealt not only with high costs for studying but also e.g. *'I can't be left without an income while studying. So distance learning makes sense.'* The most frequently reported barriers brought up issues around transferability and the recognition of prior learning.

Conclusions on data from the online questionnaire with respect to adult learners

Most of the respondents to the questionnaire could fall under the definition of adult learners used within our research. Over 60% of the respondents were in employment and returning to studies. At the same time, one may raise the question of whether the respondents adequately represent the potential and existing adult learners. Are the many new learners expected at the doorsteps of higher education institutions browsing the StudyPortals website and did they access our questionnaire? Only 11% of the respondents had a secondary level of schooling as their highest gained qualification. It is a reasonable assumption that many of the adult learners entering distance education will belong to this group. Still, the characteristics of adult learners approached via the survey are consistent with earlier research. Factors such as lack of recognition of prior learning, high tuition fees and time constraints are hindering adults from learning.

Additionally, the respondents' social situation aligns with what is described in current literature. According to the dataset, the average potential distance education student is 25-34 years old, has family obligations, is most probably in employment and in most cases already holds a bachelor degree or equivalent qualification. This issue will be further discussed in a following chapter. Issues related to additional employment were a strong determinant for distance education, and this is also supported by other studies.[47]

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[47]   European Commission, 2013

The study choice analytics tool

Analysis of the data set is carried out according to the following dimensions: country of origin; education delivery mode; education and programme offer; study discipline, qualification level; location of host institution.

Visitors to the website came from all over the world. The UK was most frequently listed as country of origin. Other European countries on the list were Germany, Greece and the Netherlands, representing close to 25% of browsers combined. More than 20% of visitors demonstrated an interest in any sort of blended or online structured delivery mode. Although almost 70% of page views referred to 'traditional face-to-face interaction', our data demonstrated that the popularity of distance education and blended forms of learning is on the rise and could become a decisive factor facilitating adult participation in higher education. A vast majority (almost 70%) of visitors were looking for a master's programme, and just one out of ten visitors showed an interest in non-degree, short courses.

Potential students in our data set seemed to prefer pursuing studies within Europe, with almost half the preferences aimed at UK-based institutions. In terms of preferred field of study, the students browsing the StudyPortals website showed a strong preference for business and economics (36.45%). The second most frequently viewed discipline was Engineering & Technology (14.87%).

Analysing the origin of potential students worldwide and their choices regarding discipline, business and economics remained the main choice. Similar tendencies were found regarding interest in disciplines in the European sub-region. An interest in business and economics is apparent in three out of four European regions. However, the Eastern European potential distance education students preferred Social Sciences.

Conclusions on data from the study choice analytics tool with respect to adult learners

The data retrieved from the study choice analytics tool showed that the discipline of greatest interest to more than one-third of potential students was 'Business & Economics'. The HEAD Study[48] confirmed that the two most significant motivations for adult learners to engage in distance education are increasing attainment levels and improving career prospects. This aligns with the present data set. Almost half of the site visitors were interested in courses hosted in the UK. The vast majority of potential distance education students were looking for a master's degree (69.24%).

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[48]   European Commission, 2013.

A plausible assumption is that some categories of adult learners were not browsing StudyPortals. This raises the question: Could age influence search behaviour? Would data gleaned from older groups of prospective learners give another insight into their interests?

With more data from browsers in older age-categories, would interest in single courses/ non-degree courses be higher? Are certain professions and competence areas underrepresented?

The country case studies

The five national reports[49] provided information on potential students and those already enrolled. They also reported on existing or applied policy framework and the overall participation of adult learners in higher education/adult education based on data from EUROSTAT. Additionally, they provided information on definitions used, terms and types of distance education available and accessible, entry requirements and recognition of prior learning. The information is condensed in Table 4.

Although all five countries engaged in DE, Greece was the only country that addressed aspects of distance education in its national policies, though it did not have an explicit DE policy. Overall participation in adult education varied from approximately 4% to slightly over 50%. Two of the countries gave open access to higher education for adults and three had implemented systems for the recognition of prior learning.

As an additional source of information pertaining to Study 3, the country reports answered three initial research questions from their respective national perspective. Table 5 provides information under the headings a) Social profile, b) Motivation and interest, and c) Perceived barriers.

Table 4: Summary of case studies ➡

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49   The Country Case Studies can be downloaded separately from www.idealproject.eu or read as
      appendices to the IDEAL report 3: Distance Education in European Higher Education – the potential

Country	a) Existing or applied policy framework and overall participation of adult learners in higher education/adult education (EUROSTAT)	b) Definition, terms and types of distance education available	c) Access, entry requirements and recognition of prior learning
Finland	No specific policy on distance education in higher education No separate open or distance teaching universities In 2000, 54% of the adult population (18–64 year-olds) had participated in adult education. In 2006 the proportion was 52% and in 2012 it remained the same 4% of the 18-64 year-old population participate in adult education in higher education institutions (2012)	Online-and blended education Web-based learning	No specific access or entry requirements Status of degree student can be obtained after pursuing courses in open university
Germany	No specific policy on distance education in higher education. 13 out of 16 states mention distance education 16 laws but none with a specific section on distance education programmes 28% of adults participate in adult education	Web-based learning Conventional campus-based learning with usage of new media Distance learning (Fernstudium)	Highest degree from the school system (e.g. Abitur) or degree from vocational sector Recognition of degree from vocational training through special new policy (Deutsches Zentrum für Hochschul- und Wissenschaftsforschung, 2015)
Greece	'Education and Lifelong Learning' policy 11.7% of adults (25-64 years) participated in education and training activities in 2011 34.9% of students participate in tertiary education (2013)	E-learning classrooms Stand-alone distance education (Pure) distance education courses	Graduation from secondary education No systematic procedure for recognition of prior learning or work experience
Hungary	No specific policy on distance education in higher education At the master's level, no distance education exists at all No laws mentioning e-learning 3.9% participate in adult education In the data report on adult learners in higher education, no numbers were displayed.	Distance learning with electronic support system	School leaving examination certificate and enough entry points No alternative admission No systematic procedure for recognition of prior learning or work experience
UK	No specific policy on distance education in higher education but laws that indirectly influence it Common quality assurance (QA) framework for higher education ISCED5A 3.9% (theoretically based) ISCED5B 0.76% (practically based)	Distance education courses for international students Blended and online courses	'Access Diplomas' (programmes helping to access higher education) Recognition or credit transfer from equivalent level of study elsewhere Accreditation of (Prior) Experiential Learning (A(P)EL)

Country	a) Social profile	b) Motivation and interest	c) Perceived barriers
Finland	Older than 'traditional' students (average 36 years of age) Slightly more educated with a higher income than 'traditional' students Employed Majority are women Have more children than 'traditional' students Live in cities	Self-fulfilment Flexibility Development of vocational skills	Costs Lack of feedback and support Lack of face-to-face meetings Isolation Insufficient self-directed learning skills Family and work responsibilities Difficulties with networking Change in life situation Difficulties with technology Lack of support from employer Lack of education
Germany	Older than 'traditional' students (average 34.8 years of age) Lower socio-economic background Only 29% are younger than 25	Flexibility	Costs Lack of feedback and support Lack of face-to-face meetings Isolation Lack of adapted programmes Lack of formal regulations
Greece	Older than 'traditional' students (30-37 years of age)	Development of vocational skills Career opportunities	Difficulties with technology Negative image of distance education programmes Negative learning experiences Absence of a system for recognition of prior learning and work experiences
Hungary	Between 30-40 years of age No considerable gender difference Two-thirds are married 58% have children Employed Higher income than 'traditional' students Good computer knowledge and access	Development of vocational skills Career opportunities Flexibility	Costs Difficulties with technology Lack of relevant course content Negative learning experiences Insufficient self-directed learning skills Negative image of distance education programmes
UK	Between 25-29 and 30-34 years of age 60% female	Career opportunity Self-fulfilment Personal interest/ enjoyment (50+)	Costs (compared to increased higher education fees – otherwise seen as a general advantage) Doubt about return on investment Difficulties with technologies Family and work responsibilities Lack of support from employer Disability

Table 5: Social profile, motivations and perceived barriers by country

As demonstrated in Table 5, student characteristics were similar to what earlier data revealed. Some traits should be highlighted. The Finnish case study showed that distance education students came from cities. In Germany, students had a lower socio-economic background and in Hungary, they had good computer knowledge and access to the Internet.

The country studies also revealed barriers that were not as apparent in the other studies. Even in 2014, students experienced problems using technologies necessary for online learning. All reports also brought up issues regarding the lack of quality support available to students learning. A couple of the reports, revealed negative attitudes towards distance education as a result.

Conclusions on data from the country case studies with respect to adult learners

From the case studies, we learn that openness to higher education for adult learners looks different in the five countries. Systems in which prospective learners get their prior learning and competences validated were not developed in any of them. Further regulations supplying education systems with alternative access routes were implemented in just two cases. For adult leaners, these aspects could be vital for their participation in lifelong learning.

Some of the case studies also demonstrated factors relevant to the planning and organization of distance education. Do we reach people living in the countryside? Do we meet their needs with the courses offered in Finland? Is the knowledge available on technology usage too poor to make distance education a realistic alternative in Hungary? Does the selection and communication of subject matter in German-based courses meet the needs of students with less academic training?

The issue of lacking student support and feedback was very present in the case studies. For a minority of students, particularly the self-directed learners, this is not a problem. For the majority of adult learners, support structures in the organization of the education could be crucial, even a question of success or failure.

AN OVERVIEW OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

History

At the end of the 19th century, well-established institutions, mainly private ones, were already coordinating distance education programmes under the name 'correspondence schools'. The name was a reference to the tool used by students and teachers to interact. The main target groups were adult learners returning to education after periods of work, to compensate for earlier gaps in their education or to update areas of knowledge that they needed for their working life. Does this sound familiar? Young students, e.g. those living far away from upper secondary school systems, also turned to distance education to fulfil their desire for education. This is also evident in recent decades, with many professors, bishops and engineers in western countries retiring after having used distance education on a secondary level as a platform for their careers. The demands on them as learners were however extreme. A high level of motivation, sufficient study skills and a capacity to organize their work, etc. were necessary components for mastering the study situation. To use a modern term, they were *self-directed learners.* For a long time, distance education institutions were clearly separate entities from campuses offering traditional face-to-face education.

In 1939, distance educators and institutions formed what is presently known as the International Council of Open and Distance Education (ICDE), a partner in the IDEAL project. The organization has since supported research initiatives as well as policy and praxis developments in the field. Not surprisingly, single-mode distance education universities and their research departments provide a lot of the available literature on distance education. The Athabasca University of Canada[50], the Open University UK[51] and the German Fernuniversität in Hagen[52] are good examples. In countries that have not opted for the single-mode distance education model and in which dual-mode universities represent the dominant model, information on distance education can often be obtained at a national level, for example from the Fédération Interuniversitaire de l'Enseignement à Distance (FIED) in France[53] and the Swedish Higher Education Authority[54]. These organizations and other research bodies have mapped many of the facets of distance education. This report simply summarizes some relevant aspects of existing research briefly.

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[50] http://www.athabascau.ca/
[51] OUUK, see http://www.open.ac.uk/about/main/strategy/facts-and-figures
[52] Fernuniversität Hagen, see http://www.fernuni-hagen.de/arbeiten/statistik/daten/index.shtml
[53] FIED, see http://www.fied.fr/fr/index.html
[54] UKÄ, see http://english.uka.se/download/18.1c251de913ecebc40e780003403/1403093616295/annual-report- 2013-ny.pdf

World scenario

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, distance education has a long history and is not a dwindling contemporary trend. In 2000, the number of students in higher education worldwide was close to one hundred million. At the time of this report in 2015, the student population has doubled. The expectation for the future is a continued increase in student numbers and estimates from organizations such as OECD and EU are that this number will double again in the next fifteen years. This will result in close to 400 million students in various tertiary education systems (OECD 2014). Most of this growth will be in the developing world, largely in China and India. In 1996, Sir John S. Daniel (Daniel, 1996) wrote that one new university per week is required to keep up with world population growth but that the resources necessary are not available (p.12). The number of students trying to find possibilities to study outside their home country will rise, but on the whole, traditional campus-based universities will not have complete control of the situation. Varied forms of distance education will play important roles in the process.

In 1946, the University of the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa, a traditional university in Pretoria, established correspondence education. Over the last few decades, it has grown to be Africa's leading open distance learning institution through developments in technology and pedagogy, and it is now regarded as the oldest distance education higher education institution in the world. Similar developments took place worldwide. Old institutions were transformed into distance education universities and new establishments were created. Over the years, the expansion of these institutions has been extensive, many of them with over 100,000 students enrolled in courses and programmes. The concept coined for these huge institutions is Mega-Universities; there are 60 of them worldwide[55] and many of them are distance education institutions. In 2015 at the time of printing, the largest is the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), founded 1985 in India and now accommodating 3.5 million students. Out of the five largest universities globally, four are single-mode distance education institutions. IGNOU is followed by the Open University of China with 2.8 million students, the Anadoulo University in Turkey with 2.0 million students and Allama Iqbal Open University in Pakistan, with 1.3 million students. The approval of six additional mega-universities (not included in the figures above) by the Nigerian government in 2013[56] is an exemplary example of the demand-driven boost in the provision of higher education.

The institutions founded with a goal to teach distant students exclusively are named *single-mode* distance education universities, whereas the establishments offering both on-campus education and distance education are called *dual-mode* or *mixed-mode* universities.

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[55]   https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_largest_universities_by_enrollment retrieved July 2015, List updated Jan 2015.

[56]   See: http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20130426173337745

There are no trustworthy international statistics on total student numbers in distance education courses and programmes. Official statistics in the USA communicate that 21,147,055 students in total were enrolled in the Autumn 2012 intake for distance education courses and programmes. Out of them, 12,5% were enrolled exclusively in distance education courses, whereas the majority combined their on-campus studies with distance education courses[57]. Student numbers at distance education mega-universities reached close to 15,000,000. Added to that are the distance courses and programmes delivered by campus-based universities. A reasonable estimate would then be that 25 – 30 million students are studying via distance education exclusively, approximately 12 – 15% of the entire student population. This is the same percentage as that in many of the countries with only dual-mode universities.

One of the consequences of the technological advances in recent years is that more and more courses offered at campus-based universities can be least partly studied at a distance. This is often referred to as *blended learning.* The clear cut distinction between distance education providers and face-to-face institutions from earlier times is now blurred; the organizational forms of teaching and learning have merged. This makes finding robust statistics on student numbers, such as those illustrated above, quite difficult .

Campus-based education

Distance education
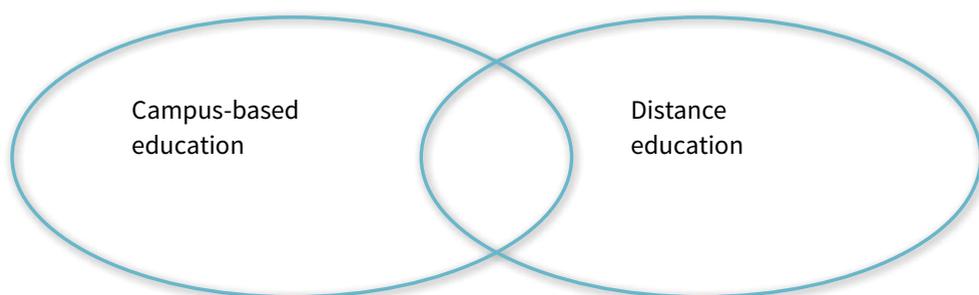
Figure 14: Merging of the two modes of education (Hansson and Holmberg, 2005)

The strong focus on interaction in the methodology used in distance education has influenced campus-based education. This has resulted in the increased possibility to access learning materials as well as the opportunity for communication in educational settings through the application of technologies (sometimes referred to as *technology-enhanced learning* (TEL)). Distance education has transformed, and often includes face-to-face sessions at campuses or learning centres, thus becoming a form of *blended learning* as defined above*.*

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[57] National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=80

Distance education in Europe

With the establishment of the UK Open University (OUUK) in Europe in 1971 came a watershed. Before then, there were many institutions, mainly private, as well as correspondence schools addressing adult learners on different education levels. As early as the 1920s, national initiatives profiting from new radio and television technology were addressing wide audiences in a format similar to distance education. Sometimes they simply delivered information, and other times, they also engaged in the learning processes. Technology was also a driver when OUUK started as the 'University of the Air'. Television and radio were important assets in their repertoire.

Right from the start, the 'University of the Air' adopted a radical open admissions policy and became an open university. The Open University's mission was to be open to people, places, methods and ideas. In this way, they set an example for institutions not just in Europe, but also worldwide. The modern use of the term 'open', however, does not always mean open access to education as it did at the OUUK.

When the OUUK accepted its first students in 1971, 25,000 people enrolled and 20,000 registered for a course – at a time when the total student population in the UK was only around 130,000.

Several European countries were inspired by the British Open University and in many cases, they used it as a model, even if the degree of openness varied between new applications. Early followers of the British Open University in Europe were Spain with its Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED) and the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC), Germany with its Fernuniversität, the Netherlands with the Open Universiteit Nederland and Portugal's Universidade Aberta. Based on membership in the European Association of Distance-Teaching Universities, there are eleven specialized distance-teaching universities in Europe in 2015.

Not all countries have opted for the model adopted by single-mode distance education universities. In Paulsen's 2003 review entitled *Online Education, Learning Management Systems,* we learn that the widespread provision of distance education in the Nordic countries is linked to their strategic decision not to opt for single-mode distance education universities such as those in the UK and Germany, but to opt for dual-mode types of universities instead, i.e. universities that use both face-to-face and distance teaching methods (Holmberg, 2003, p. 249). In Sweden and Norway, for example, distance education has been introduced systematically across almost all universities since the 1970s to take advantage of developments in educational technologies, and also as a way to reach out to non-traditional students.

Successively, many European countries have developed dual-mode universities and they now represent the dominant model. The number of EADTU members constituting *associa-*

tions or consortia of conventional universities is in fact higher than the number of *open and distance universities* (14). It seems there is a visible pattern in EU countries, and dual-mode universities are the rule of thumb today and not the exception. The European University Association reported that slightly more than half (53%) of all European HEIs provide some form of distance education (EUA 2010, p. 68) in its Trends VI report of 2010. One should, however, keep in mind that for single countries, e.g. Scandinavian ones, this percentage would be much higher, as almost all universities in the countries above provide some form of distance education.

Information from the IDEAL UK case study research (White et al., 2010) revealed that out of the UK's 308 higher education and further education institutions (excluding the Open University UK), 113 (37%) offered distance education courses to international students. When combined with the large number of courses offered by the Open University, the study identified more than 2,600 HE level distance courses in total.

In hindsight, the decision not to establish single-mode distance education institutions has had some advantages. Through engagement in distance education, campus-based universities were prepared for changes in tertiary education brought to universities by technologies and the use of the Internet later.

The number of students enrolled in distance education in the European Higher Education Area is difficult to assess. Enrolment numbers in European single-mode distance education universities alone exceed two million[58]. It should be noted that these enrolment numbers encompass not only students residing in the European Higher Education Area. Considering the large share of higher education institutions offering both campus-based and distance education programmes across Europe, we may assume that the overall number of students taking some form of distance education (included blended learning) must be considerably higher. Altogether, a conservative estimate would be three million students.

The diverse political and economic environments have also had an impact on distance education development and student numbers. For Central and Eastern Europe and the former USSR, 'the political and economic transformations have had important implications for education, and led to fundamental reforms and restructuring of national education systems. In most of the countries, distance education based on correspondence studies combined with face-to-face 'consultations' was developed and served large populations.' (UNESCO, 2002, p. 54) However, student numbers decreased significantly following the political transformation in 1989, partly due to lack of support from employers. The model was also required to overcome some reservations regarding both status and quality. Open and distance learning was still a priority for most of the governments in the area, but it was in need of fundamental reforms and upgrading.

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[58]   Information provided by EADTU.

While some higher education institutions might not even identify distance education as a delivery method for their educational programmes, so-called Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), a particular new course form, entered the market in 2008. What are they? The European University Association describes them in their January 2013 paper on MOOCs as follows: online courses; with no formal entry requirement; no participation limit; free of charge; and they do not award credits. MOOC providers are often 'either for- or non-profit private companies, partnering with universities or individual scholars, and providing services for them. The usual division of tasks is that the universities or the individual academics are responsible for the content (and the quality) of the courses, whereas the company is in charge of the production and its technical facilitation.' (Gäbel, 2013, p. 3). It should be noted that higher education institutions themselves also create and run MOOCs without external company assistance nowadays (Gäbel, 2014). As MOOCs usually do not have any formal entry requirements, it could be argued that they are effective tools for opening access to higher education. MOOCs are not categorically excluded in the IDEAL project studies. However, as they do not generally award credits or assess performance appropriately, and students do not need to officially enrol at the institution, they do not form a part of our studies.

THE DISTANCE EDUCATION CONCEPT

A broad group of concepts have developed to describe changes in education, some of which are anchored in policies whereas others relate to organizational forms of education or to the use of technologies. A third group of concepts are more related to pedagogical theory. They all turn up in the discourses surrounding distance education and are in one way or another related to that phenomenon. They will not be discussed here in detail, but they place one of IDEAL project's core concepts in context.

Table 6: Concepts describing developments in education[59]

eLearning Flexible education Just-in-time-learning Lifelong learning Life-wide learning Open and distance learning Open learning Recurrent education	Blended learning Borderless education Computer-supported learning Flexible learning Mobile learning Net-based learning Online learning Virtual learning Virtual university Web-based learning Technology-enhanced learning	Collaborative learning Edutainment Digital game-based learning - Games2Train - Games that teach - Policy games - Learning games - Serious games Individualized learning Interactive education Learning labs
Concepts primarily related to		
POLICY	ORGANIZATION TECHNOLOGY	PEDAGOGICAL THEORY

The concepts in the table above could of course be positioned in more than one of the columns in the table.

The IDEAL project began with the definition of distance education used by 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.'

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[59] Adapted from Holmberg, C. 2006. Flexibelt lärande – från korrespondensundervisning till öppna och fria studier i Borgström, L. and Gougoulakis, P. (eds) Vuxenantologin. En grundbok om vuxnas lärande. Stockholm, Atlas akademi.

The Canadian researcher Ross Paul defined Open Learning as:

- *the removal of restrictions, exclusions and privileges*

- *the accreditation of students' previous experience*

- *flexibility in managing the time variable*

- *substantial changes in the traditional relationships between professors and students*

<div align="right">(Paul, 1990)</div>

The occurrence of openness has a long tradition. In Finland, for example, universities have organized academic courses during the summer without any demands on entry qualifications since the beginning of the 1900s[60], courses which can be accredited later. Openness has been promoted in national policies to emphasize increased access to education, as also demonstrated by the Open University UK. In other cases, qualifications for entrance into higher education have been adapted to increase openness. Entrance criteria based on age and work experience are examples of that. Openness is however not standard, neither among higher education institutions nor those in distance education, not even in some institutions using the term Open University. What is widespread is openness in the sense of easier access to education through the use of technologies.

The UNESCO definition of distance education includes the following: 'freeing learners from the constraints of time and place'. This is in line with classic definitions of the concept of distance education. ICDE coined the following:

Distance education is a mode of education in which the student and the teacher are separated in time and/or space and where two-way communication takes place through non-traditional means for the most part.

This type of definition has been criticized by researchers in the field, among them Keegan (1990) and Holmberg (1989). These authors assert that for distance education to be realized, advanced educational planning is required. They also add that the complexity of the task needs teamwork between specialists, not just in the subject offered but also in issues related to the organization of learning scenarios and the use of educational technologies. Desmond Keegan phrased it this way:

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[60] Holmberg, C. 1998 Öppen universitetsundervisning i Finland. Unpublished paper to the Swedish Ministry of Education, Commission on Distance Education. (Swedish)

Distance education is a form of education characterized by

- *the quasi-permanent separation of teacher and learner throughout the length of the learning process (this distinguishes it from conventional face-to-face education)*

- *the influence of an educational organization both in the planning and preparation of learning materials and in the provision of student support services (this distinguishes it from private study and teach-yourself programmes)*

- *the use of technical media – print, audio, video or computer – to unite teacher and learner and carry the content of the course*

- *the provision of two-way communication so that the student may benefit from or even initiate dialogue (this distinguishes it from other uses of technology in education)*

- *the quasi-permanent absence of the learning group throughout the length of the learning process so that people are usually taught as individuals and not in groups, with the possibility of occasional meetings for both didactic and socialisation purposes.*

(Keegan, 1990)

The issue of flexibility is also partly problematic when looking at how courses and programmes in higher education are organized. Most often, there are certain degrees of flexibility but on the whole, the regime requires students to follow specific organizational patterns. The Swedish Agency for Distance Education[61] used the term 'flexible education'.

Distance education has transformed and frequently includes face-to-face sessions at campuses or learning centres, often addressed as *blended learning*. Old forms of distance education, those with a distinct separation between teachers and students, can still be found under the concept of *online learning*, but today, distance education profits from qualities that Internet and developments in media technologies have contributed. We have experienced a significant increase in flexibility offered by educational settings within the last few decades. The two paradigms are merging, but not just to blend organizational forms of education. Much like in the Keegan definition of distance education mentioned above, flexible education indicates changes in the working methods, planning of educational settings, preparation of learning material and provision of student services.

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[61] The Swedish Agency for Distance Education (DISTUM) operated under the Ministry of Education and Research between 1990 and 2001 to ease the transformation processes in higher education with a view to increase flexibility.

Adult learners in distance education

The lack of flexibility in teaching and learning within campus-based higher education (HE) often limits adults when combining studies with their other obligations in life. Distance education provision has, since the early days of private correspondence schools, been a way of reaching out to adult learners, and with developments in the field, it may now be easier to realize policy aims.

Research often demonstrates that people coming from lower socio-economic background are underrepresented in HE (Chowdry et al., 2013). Delaney (2015) studied adult learners graduating from distance education in Ireland. She found that the graduates of distance education programmes were primarily from lower socio-economic backgrounds, thus this group was largely underrepresented in campus-based full time education. This was also documented in Germany by Stöter et al. (2014). In Delaney's study, 30% of students came from a skilled manual background and a large proportion of the respondents had never accessed any form of higher education before. She also reported that in Ireland, the students recruited were in a position to pay fees but not to attend campus.

Funding is an important issue for the majority of students, as it is in on-campus education. The costs associated with travelling and living away from home are significant barriers to engagement in campus-based education, especially for students coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Cullinan et al., 2013). Financial implications seem to be among the principal reasons for choosing distance education. In the Irish study, 80% of respondents reported that they could not give up their job for financial reasons. That was the main reason for selecting this educational format, in addition to the amount of control distance education programmes gave them over their own time management. The students said that they could not have completed a degree any other way (Delaney, 2015).

Over the years we have learnt that students in distance HE are generally older than campus students and that they most often have family commitments and therefore financial responsibilities. Alongside their studies, they commonly have a full-time job (Stöter et al., 2014; Holmberg, 2005). Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to participate and, if they do, they are more likely to participate in lower level courses (Delaney, 2015).

Another interesting and highly relevant finding was the diversity among distance learners. In line with other research, they were a much more heterogeneous group than the on-campus students in terms of socio-economic background and prior educational experience. Providers must therefore face the consequence that distance education be more tailored to student requirements, for example with more awareness of the difficulties for students of different social backgrounds to adapt to university education by the institution. At the same time, providers must make suitable course formats available to those who enter with extensive HE experience.

Time management is identified as a critical element in the research into learner characteristics (Hart, 2012; Stöter et al., 2014) and turns out to be a common barrier to success for distance education students. Most of the focus on time management in the research emphasized the importance of students using their time wisely as well as suggesting that students engage in studies frequently and from early on in the semester. Students who exhibited good time management skills and had the ability to establish good relationships with other learners were more likely to be successful in their studies than those who did not. Holmberg and Emmoth (1999) gave an interesting example in a study where the successful students were child minders. Caring for a group of children each day was like a complicated puzzle that trained the students to plan and use time very efficiently.

Hart (ibid) also demonstrated that orchestrating time, a significant learner characteristic, was accomplished through self-management, the use of technology, on-the-go learning and participation in concurrent activities. Additionally, in research by Stöter et al. (2014), time management was an important characteristic for persisting in distance learning programmes.

As discussed by Mezirow and Larsson in the former chapter, interaction and dialogue is the key to all learning. Andrews et al. (2015) demonstrated this in a study identifying connectedness as a characteristic of successful learners. Connectedness was understood as distance learners' ability to interact and engage with people and other learning resources that framed their learning spaces.

Östlund (2005) studied the relationship between learners and their fellow students. Nearly all her informants emphasized the importance of peer learners giving a feeling of, social support, as well as support in interpreting assignments. This improved motivation significantly. Some students indicated that postings from classmates affected their self-confidence and the interaction amongst learners supported their learning process indirectly. Östlund's results also demonstrated that most learners found it difficult to combine work and domestic life with full-time studies. Lack of experience with distance learning resulted in problems structuring and organizing studies. Further, Hung and Zhang (2008) found that learners achieve better learning outcomes when they collaborate with peers in online learning environments.

Successful learners in distance education, irrespective of their background and previous experiences, need to know how to communicate and interact in varied online learning environments. Mastering the use of technology is a necessity and a lack of knowledge would constitute a barrier. This relates to the possibilities that exist for distance education to play a role in social inclusion. Dabbagh (2007) suggests that 'digital literacy' should be an increasingly important characteristic for online distance learners. Added to that, students' motivations to study are highly diverse. Some are motivated by the possibility of career advancement or updating their knowledge, and others by the sheer joy of learning. While many students opt for distance education due to time and other constraints in their per-

sonal life, it might also simply be the preferred delivery mode. For example, many distance education students are classified as independent or self-directed students (some of them very young) who prefer distance education because it allows them to study at their own pace. This group include students who prefer to study while avoiding contact with others.

The examples from research illustrate that the personal backgrounds and life circumstances of distance education students are often considerably more complex than those of students in on-campus education. Providers therefore need to offer solutions for a greater variety of students. This requires backing up by various forms of support. Successful distance education providers need to apply research findings and experiences gathered during decades of practice within the field.

While the research into learner characteristics identifies behaviours and practices that can result in successful online learning experiences, it is important to recognize that part-time online learners are not an homogenous group. A theme that emerged in their work was the focus on well-being: the need for students to feel happy and to enjoy their studies and other aspects of their lives. Angelaki et al. (2013) demonstrated how communication and social presence were related to students' well-being. To interact and to be seen was not just important for learning but also for establishing positive emotions.

In the 1960s, Holmberg introduced the concept of guided didactic conversation in distance education in his early works. He saw that it constituted a series of aspects, among them, that

- feelings of personal relations between teaching and learning parties promote study pleasure and motivation;

- intellectual pleasure and study motivation are favourable for the attainment of study goals and the use of proper study processes and methods;

- atmosphere, language and the conventions of friendly conversation are favourable for feelings of personal relations;

His concept is widely accepted but not always utilized. Distance education students who are often alone and not well-acquainted with HE and its applied methods need positive pushes and reinforcement, metaphorically speaking, someone patting them on the shoulder telling them that they will manage. Perhaps it is partly due to this positive reinforcement that the Open University UK is ranked among the top universities for student satisfaction.[62]

In many ways, distance education institutions must accommodate more heterogeneous student groups than on-campus institutions. The majority of distance education students are still in the midst of life with family, children and work responsibilities, most of them

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[62]   OUUK: http://www.open.ac.uk/about/main/strategy/facts-and-figures

women. Many distance education students work alongside their studies. As exemplified above, distance education the only possibility for them to continue their studies and to gain or upgrade their qualifications for a new job or position in many cases. Students of all ages study in distance education programmes, but young students are in the minority. 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. Another distinct group of distance education students are retired people who study for self-fulfilment or to stay active. Finally, as the term *distance* education implies, people living in remote areas far away from higher education institutions also constitute an important student group.
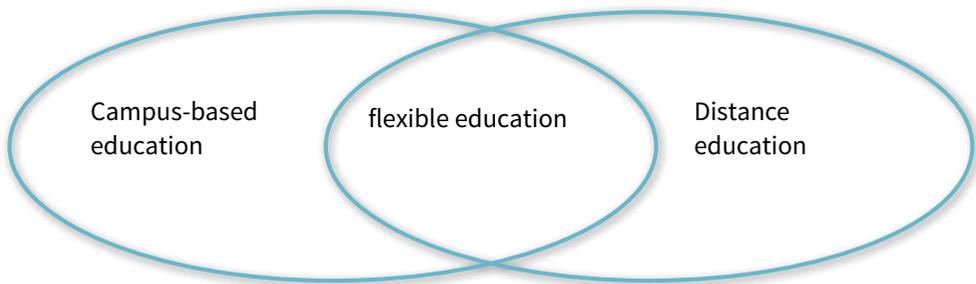
Figure 15: Mixed organizational forms of education – flexible education

The Swedish Agency for Distance Education (DISTUM) identified a series of variables in **flexible education** that define the concept as a whole. These aspects included learner and provider perspectives.

Flexible education makes it possible for students to select the place, time, tempo and way of studying. The education providers plan, organize and realize teaching with the purpose to support students' communication and learning. Thus from a student's perspective, flexible education could be characterized as a possibility to

- *study and follow teaching from home or from another place separated from the education provider*

- *begin studies and take part in teaching at self-selected time*

- *perform studies in a self-selected tempo*

- *study together with other students or as a single student*

- *The education provider should make these studies possible through*

- *developing and adapting teaching material*

- *developing and adapting material supportive to the students' work*

- *developing and adapting ways for assessment of students' knowledge*

- *using ICT[63] to bridge distance in time and space*

    - *being available during students' work to*

    - *guide studies*

    - *support students' work and communication*

    - *give an administrative framework for the studies.*

(DISTUM, 2000[64])

DISTUM's approach was very practical and focused on putting the concept into operation. It stressed flexibility for students and demanded flexibility from the provider. As the IDEAL project uses 'distance education' as a generic term for what was examined in the studies, this approach demonstrates a way through which distance education/flexible education can be observed.

Two major types of institutions offer courses and programmes found in one of the data sources of the IDEAL project, the DistanceLearningPortal, namely, those managing distance education solely (the single-mode institutions) and providers organizing both campus-based and distance education, the dual-mode institutions. While some distance education institutions may provide a high degree of flexibility in their provision, most higher education institutions probably have a limited degree of flexibility.

Using a strict definition of distance education could be problematic under these circumstances. As demonstrated above, it could be argued that distance education has become a generic term. The interpretations of the term vary from one provider to another to a large extent. One course or programme advertised as distance education may give students

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[63] CT an abbreviation of Information and Communication Technologies
[64] Presented in Holmberg, C. (2001) Towards a new scenario for Distance Education in Sweden. Contribution to the 20th World Conference on Open Learning and Distance Education in Düsseldorf, Germany 1st-5th April 2001

a high degree of flexibility whereas others have an approach that limits flexibility. When examining distance education programmes provided by higher education institutions, they could be characterized according to the variables presented above.

The following terminology is used in the IDEAL project:

Adult education

'General or vocational education provided for adults after initial education and training for professional and/or personal purposes, and which aims to:

- provide general education for adults on topics of particular interest to them (e.g. in open universities);

- provide compensatory learning in basic skills which individuals may not have acquired earlier in their initial education or training (such as literacy, numeracy) and thus to:

- give access to qualifications not gained, for various reasons, in the initial education and training system;

- acquire, improve or update knowledge, skills or competences in a specific field: this is continuing education and training' (Cedefop, 2008).

Adult learners

Learners of any age returning to education after a period of work, unemployment or parental leave, etc.

Blended education

A course unit or programme that blends online and face-to-face delivery; a substantial proportion (30-79%) of the content is delivered online.

Course unit

'A self-contained, formally structured learning experience. It should have a coherent and explicit set of learning outcomes, expressed in terms of competences to be obtained, and appropriate assessment criteria. Course units can have different numbers of credits.'[65] Credits are awarded in non-degree and degree programmes alike.

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[65] See: Tuning Educational Structures in Europe – Glossary of terms: http://www.unideusto.org/tuningeu/ documents/glossary- of-terms.html

Degree programme

'A set of coherent educational components, based on learning outcomes, that are recognized for the award of a specific qualification through the accumulation of a specified number of credits and the development of specified competences.'[66]

Distance education

A generic term for modes of education in which the student and the teacher are separated in time and space. It includes online education (with ≥ 80% of the content delivered online) and blended education (with 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.

European higher education institutions

For the purposes of this survey, only higher education institutions that are on IAU's List of Universities of the World[67], accredited by the relevant national authorities and based within the European Higher Education Area[68] (EHEA) are considered.

Online education

Most or all of the content (≥ 80%) is delivered via the Internet only. Online education is not synonymous with distance education, even though in many developed countries with extensive Internet access it may be the most widely spread form of distance education.

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[66]   Ibidem.
[67]   IAU List of Universities in the World: http://www.iau-aiu.net/content/list-heis
[68]   EHEA countries: http://www.ehea.info/members.aspx

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An important objective of European education policy is to explore possibilities of increasing the participation of adult learners in higher education by means of distance education. Against this background, the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), together with the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) and StudyPortals (SP), set out to examine the potential of the distance education programmes provided by higher education institutions on adult learning in Europe. Their research project entitled 'Impact of Distance Education on Adult Learning' (IDEAL) was funded by the European Commission's Lifelong Learning Programme. The task force for the project consisted of experts on adult and dis-tance education from the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU), European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA), European Distance and E-Learning Network (EDEN), European Foundation for Quality in E-Learning (EFQUEL) and European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA). This final report highlights the findings of the research which was carried out from October 2013 until November 2015.