

# IDEAL

Impact of Distance Education on Adult Learning



## Distance education in European higher education -THE POTENTIAL-

Report 3 (of 3) - Extended

# Distance education in European higher education – the potential

Report 3 (of 3) of the IDEAL (Impact of Distance Education on Adult Learning) project.

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## About us

### 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 actors, 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 from 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 promotes and develops lifelong learning policy and practice with a focus on adult learning and education, especially literacy and non-formal education and alternative learning opportunities for marginalized and disadvantaged groups. UIL's mission is to see to it that all forms of education and learning – formal, non-formal and informal – are recognized, valued and made available to meet the demands of individuals and communities throughout the world.

## 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 by offering information on study options which is accessible, comprehensible and comparable. The ultimate ambition of StudyPortals is to make study choice transparent, globally. StudyPortals covers a whole set of student-focused online study choice platforms, such as 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 stimulated 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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# Introduction

The present report is the third in a series published within the framework of the project 'Impact of distance education on adult learning' (IDEAL).<sup>1</sup> IDEAL is a joint project of the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE), the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), and StudyPortals (SP).<sup>2</sup> It runs from October 2013 to September 2015 with financial support from the EU Lifelong Learning Programme (sub-programme Erasmus Multilateral Projects: Project number: 539668-LLP-1-2013-1-NO-ERASMUS-ESIN).

As each report presents the empirical results of a preceding study, this report focuses on the analysis of Study 3: 'Distance education in European higher education - the potential', which examines the profile of potential students within our target group of adult learners. The aim is to find out their profiles, their reasons for entering distance education, and the barriers they face in doing so.

## Purpose of the IDEAL project and research questions

The IDEAL project has been designed to get a better understanding of the distance education offered by higher education institutions in European countries, and to examine how higher education institutions can contribute to adult learning by way of distance education.

The project specifically aims to:

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

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<sup>1</sup> See: [www.idealproject.eu](http://www.idealproject.eu)

<sup>2</sup> See: [www.distancelearningportal.com](http://www.distancelearningportal.com)

The central research question of the project is: How can the distance education on offer at European higher education institutions be better matched to the needs of adult learners?

To address this central research question, a number of sub-questions have been formulated:

1. What distance education is offered?
2. What are students looking for?
3. What are the intended target groups?
4. What is the current student body?
5. Who is showing interest in distance education?
6. What are the motivations of students 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?

## Policy background

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 learning in lifelong learning, ensuring equity and inclusion, alleviating poverty, and building equitable, tolerant, sustainable, and knowledge-based societies.<sup>3</sup> This key role was reiterated at the 6<sup>th</sup> UNESCO 'International Conference on Adult Education' in 2009 (CONFINTEA VI<sup>4</sup>).

Since the 1970s, UNESCO has played an important role in framing and promoting the discourse on lifelong learning. The Faure Report of 1972, entitled 'Learning to Be'<sup>5</sup> (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'<sup>6</sup> (Delors et al., 1996) described

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<sup>3</sup> European Commission, 2013, p. 16

<sup>4</sup> See: <http://www.unesco.org/en/confinteavi/>

<sup>5</sup> See: [unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002232/223222e.pdf](http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002232/223222e.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> See: [unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0010/001095/109590eo.pdf](http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0010/001095/109590eo.pdf)



learning throughout life as the 'heartbeat' of a society. It also viewed lifelong learning as a principle which 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 her or his 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 schools, to further and higher education, and adult learning and education.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.

The need for continuing reforms at the institutional level was reinforced by the Europe 2010 strategy, the Bologna Declaration and the Leuven Communiqué, as well as by Council directives, resolutions and conclusions on the Modernization of Higher Education Systems<sup>9</sup>. 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. At various occasions, UNESCO Member States have reiterated the need to increase the participation of adult learners, as well as the role of higher education institutions in the European context.<sup>10</sup> A number of means to increase the participation of adult learners have developed thanks to emerging technologies. Distance education may not replace on-campus education, but through its flexibility in teaching and learning it can be seen as an alternative for learners who are not able or do not wish to take on-campus education. This alternative constitutes an important element of lifelong learning. At the European Union level, lifelong learning has been emphasized as a key policy objective in the Europe 2020 strategy<sup>11</sup> (the European Union's strategy

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<sup>7</sup> UNESCO, 2014a

<sup>8</sup> UNESCO, 2014b, p. 26

<sup>9</sup> Council of the European Union, 2011

<sup>10</sup> UNESCO, 2008, p. 15

<sup>11</sup> See: European Union, Europe 2020: [http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/index_en.htm)

for growth) and the Bologna Process, starting with the Prague Communiqué of 2001. This policy objective was re-affirmed in the 2012 Bucharest Communiqué.<sup>12</sup>

UNESCO has put forward ‘Ensure equitable and inclusive quality education and lifelong learning for all by 2030’ as the overarching goal of the post-2015 education agenda.<sup>13</sup> The UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, a partner of the IDEAL project, promotes adult learning and education. Working together with UNESCO (with formal consultative status), the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE), also a partner in the IDEAL project, has supported global policy development on distance education for more than 75 years, and works towards increasing the openness in education systems.

The continuing emphasis on lifelong learning as a policy objective sets the background to the present research. The IDEAL project aims to examine the potential of distance education as an alternative means of education delivery for adult learners who have completed their initial education and training and are returning to further education.

## Distance education

Distance education has a long tradition and has classically been separated from campus-based education. ‘The terms ‘open learning’ and ‘distance education’ represent approaches that focus on opening access to education and training provision, freeing learners from the constraints of time and place, and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups of learners (UNESCO, 2002, p. 22). Such a degree of openness and flexibility will not be offered by many higher education institutions – and most likely only by Open Universities that focus exclusively on distance education (single mode institutions). The IDEAL project, however, seeks also to include so-called dual mode institutions which offer both campus-based and distance education. These are likely to provide a more limited degree of openness and flexibility, applying a large variety of different interpretations of open and distance education.

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<sup>12</sup> See: Bologna Process, Ministerial Conferences (documents) <http://www.ehea.info/article-details.aspx?ArticleId=4318>

<sup>13</sup> UNESCO, 2014c, p. 3

The IDEAL project defines distance education as a generic term for different organizational forms of education in which students and teachers are separated in time and space. It includes online education ( $\geq 80\%$  of the content delivered online) and blended education (30-79% of the content delivered online), as well as modes of education using printed material delivered by post and/or other tools for bridging the distance. In recent years the boundaries between distance education and campus-based education have become increasingly blurred, resulting in a mixed form of education often referred to as 'flexible' or 'blended' education. These terms are often used interchangeably. 'Blended education' describes a course unit or programme that blends online and face-to-face delivery. For the IDEAL project, a course or programme is considered as 'blended education' if a substantial proportion (30-79%) of the content is delivered online. The use of the term 'flexible education' follows the concept developed by the Swedish Agency for Distance Education (DISTUM<sup>14</sup>): 'Flexible education makes it possible for students to select their place, time, tempo and way of studying. The education providers plan, organize and realise teaching with the purpose of supporting students' communication and learning.'

The IDEAL project draws upon this concept to analyse the perceived advantage of the flexibility and accessibility of distance education to students attending programmes offered by different higher education institutions. The project includes distance education of any length (ranging from individual course units to full degree programmes) that can be enjoyed by any free moving student. There might be entry requirements (e.g. work experience or language skills), but once they are met, any student should be free to follow the courses or programmes (i.e. they are not connected to specific exchange programmes).

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<sup>14</sup> DISTUM 2000

## The present report in its context

This report is the third of three independent yet complementary research components of the IDEAL projects. **Study 1** examines the European distance education on offer – what is offered and for whom is it designed? For this study, the programmes and course units listed on the website [www.DistanceLearningPortal.com](http://www.DistanceLearningPortal.com) were analysed and a survey was carried out among distance education providers. **Study 2** consists of a survey among adult learners enrolled in distance education to analyse their social profile, their motivations, the barriers they encountered, etc. Both Study 1 and Study 2 have already been published on the IDEAL website. The present **Study 3** focuses on potential distance education students – who are they, what do they look for, what are the barriers? *Study 3 constitutes the present report.* The three studies, which are published as single online reports, are meta-analysed and brought together in a final publication to be available in June 2015, which will address the question of how the distance education on offer at European higher education institutions might be better matched to the needs of adult learners. The term ‘better’ is used in this central research question to indicate that the project will look at *both* the demand and the offer side of distance education.

Following this Introduction (1), the report will outline the Research Methodology and Data Set (2). The chapter on empirical results (3) is divided into 3 sections delivering an overview of the empirical results of the analysis of three different methodological approaches. The last chapter provides a synthesis of the findings and general conclusions (4).

# Research Methodology and Data Sets

This third study changes the point of view in relation to the two previous studies, since it seeks to reach out to potential distance education students. Moreover, it features a triangulation of research tools: an online questionnaire (part a), a study choice analytics tool (part b) and five country case studies (part c). Together these three approaches will shed light on the expectations and demands of potential adult learners looking for distance education courses. Embedded in the overarching research question ‘How can the distance education offered by European higher education institutions be better matched to adult learners’ needs?’, the present report sets out to answer the following sub-questions concerning potential students:

1. Who is showing interest in distance education (social profile)?
2. What are the motivations of potential students to consider distance education?
3. What are the main barriers to accessing distance education?

## Reaching potential distance education students

International research on distance education and adult learning has always encountered one major issue: it is hard to identify and reach the potential students. The difficulty with adult learners is that they are not a clearly delineated group and not known unless they enrol at an educational institution. Reaching the ‘potential adult learner’ and systematically collecting data on this group was therefore almost impossible. However, many potential adult learners have one thing in common: if they want to study on a distance education programme at a higher education institution, they are likely to start with an internet search, e.g. through Google, which is likely to take them to StudyPortals/DistanceLearningPortal.

The IDEAL project is one of the first projects that is able to identify and reach out to a large number of potential adult learners. It can therefore provide insights into the tendencies of adult learners in European distance higher education, in view of the direct offers available on the StudyPortals websites. Two parts of this research make use of

this opportunity: a) the online questionnaire which is addressed to visitors of DistanceLearningPortal.com (DLP), and b) the 'study choice analytics' – more about this below.

### Online questionnaire

Visitors to DistanceLearningPortal (DLP) were invited to take part in an online questionnaire, since these visitors clearly show an interest in studying at a distance. They were invited to take part in research through a banner that was visible on the DLP website. Clicking on this banner allowed students to fill in questionnaire consisting of 9 questions. The questionnaire was also sent to students who had indicated an interest in distance studies when they registered as users of StudyPortals. The questionnaire is available in the Annex.

### Study choice analytics

In addition to the online questionnaire, the interest from potential adult learners was also studied in a different way: through a purpose-built study choice analytics tool on the StudyPortals websites. This tool measures the interest of potential students based on their browsing behaviour. The main idea is that the number of page views per specific programme can be interpreted as an indicator of interest in that programme. For example, if a person searches for an item on Amazon, s/he will browse the website and read the descriptions of the items s/he is considering buying. Study choice works in the same way: if a student is browsing on a website with information about online and distance education programmes, s/he is likely to have an interest in joining one of these programmes at some point. The study choice analytics tool therefore captures browsing behaviour on the StudyPortals websites and enables researchers to analyse this behaviour.

StudyPortals is Europe's biggest and most comprehensive study choice platform. It has more than 35,000 listed academic programmes in four different portals, drawing 3 million visits each month. Once a visitor finds his way to one of the portals, s/he normally visits several different programme pages which all contain detailed information about the programme concerned.

Any programme presented on DistanceLearningPortal and offered by a higher education institution in Europe is included in this analysis. The profile of potential distance learning students and their interests is studied by a) analysing the webpages that these students visit, and b) analysing information that is known about these visitors (such as their IP address).

### Page views as an indicator of interest

In DistanceLearningPortal students can search and filter study programmes by keywords, study discipline, duration, tuition fee, and so on. 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 tracks the number of visits to each programme page. After seeing one of the programme pages, visitors typically open a few other pages which are of interest to them. Each one of these views is counted as a page view and is considered to reflect students' interest in the specific study programmes concerned.

The study analytics tool does not count the first entry of the visitor on the website. This makes the data accuracy higher, since random visitors who accidentally end up on that page (via Google for instance) are not taken into account. If after the first entry visitors continue to browse the website and visit several other pages, they have already shown active and explicit interest.

Each programme page includes carefully categorized information about the study programme. The information includes level of study, tuition fee, location of the provider, and discipline of the programme, among others. A visitor can read this information and filter search results based on these criteria. It is therefore possible to measure how many visitors are interested in distance learning programmes, segmented by all these categories. One category is study discipline (such as Law or Social Sciences). As one study programme may have several disciplines, we have taken this into account by weighing the page views accordingly. If a page has 3 disciplines and it is viewed once, each discipline gets 1/3 of a page view attributed in the analysis.

## Location as indicator of origin

The research also takes into account the location (country) of the visitor by logging their IP address. The IP address is a numerical label which is assigned to each participating computer network. IP address location includes information such as country, region, city and postal code. Based on IP address the study choice analytics tool can determine the country of the visitor. As study choice is something which is normally browsed at home and not on a trip, we can assume that most visitors who enter one of the StudyPortals websites are actually residents of the country from which they are browsing. There will be a slight number of visitors for whom this is not the case, but this is considered too small to be significant.

## The resulting dataset

The outcome of the study choice analytics tool is a file with log data reporting all visits to the portals. The data file on visits is enormous. It contains of more than 720,000 rows of log information, describing visitor behaviour from August 2013 until July 2014. It enables researchers to analyse that data based on different characteristics of the study programmes. It gives unique insights on what students were looking for on the website and what they are interested in. The visits were collected over a year to tackle the challenge of different activity on the website at different times (such as seasonal influences).

The results of this study are, of course, influenced by the offer on the portals. You cannot look at a programme page if the programme is not included in the database, for instance. If a discipline doesn't get any page views, the reason might be that there is no offer, or that there are no students interested in it. Hence, the results of the study choice analytics tool should be interpreted in comparison to the offer on the portals, not individually. In this way it is actually possible to compare the offer (the programmes present in the portals) with the demand (implied by browsing behaviour on the portals).

All visitors to the portals are treated the same way, with the same search options and database content. This provides a homogenous test environment. Comparing the differences between the various user segments can lead to valuable insights. As the content of portals consists of many different study programmes, it is clear that most of



the visitors are there to search and compare study options. Naturally, some visitors may not be prospective students, but as the number of visitors is so large it can be assumed that most of them are students and that the trends monitored in the data imply the real situation.

### Use of the dataset

The data from the study choice analytics tool presented the project with a unique chance to use actual browsing behaviour data to map students' interests in addition to the segmentations discussed above (by study programme characteristics such as degree level and discipline, or by country of origin based on IP address). It was also possible to cross-tabulate these segments, for instance based on students' country and desired degree level. A significant number of visitors might actually end up studying on one of the study programmes they found via DistanceLearningPortal sometime in the future. The tool therefore affords a sneak peek into future demand for programmes.

### Country case studies

Five external experts were asked to take a closer look at five countries, analysing existing research on potential distance education students, their profiles, needs etc. Aiming for a regional balance, Finland and Greece represent a north–south and Hungary and Germany an east-west dimension. The United Kingdom was added as a fifth country. The experts were chosen by the International Council for Open and Distance Education in a two-step process. First, well established researchers with a high international reputation were contacted in a series of countries. They in turn suggested candidates for the task from their national context. The selected person needed to have an international orientation but also needed to be able to speak the language of the country concerned. The analysis of the five country cases will be presented in the following chapter.

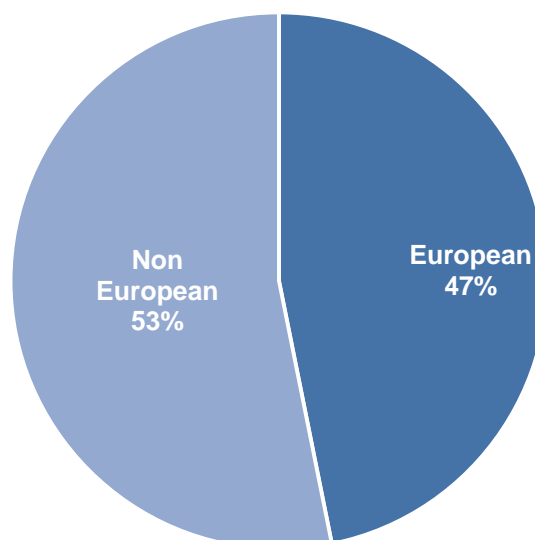
# Empirical Results

This chapter presents the information gathered through the threefold approach of the online questionnaire, the study choice analytics tool, and the five country cases.

## Online questionnaire

The online questionnaire was a survey consisting of nine questions which will be presented by a) social profile, b) motivation and interest in distance education and c) perceived barriers. There were a total of 427 respondents to the questionnaire of which the figure below will show the proportion of European and non-European respondents.

**Figure 1: Response rate divided by Europe and rest of world**



As illustrated in the figure above, over half of the responses (53.16%) were received from respondents outside Europe. The table below shows the distribution of the origin of all respondents, providing more details on the most frequently represented European countries. The best represented European countries were Greece (with 6.56% of all

respondents) and the UK (5.85%), followed by Italy (3.51%) and Germany (3.04%). The high number of respondents from these countries is due to already registered users of StudyPortals from these countries who responded to the questionnaire in addition to visitors to the website.

**Table 1: 12 most frequently represented countries**

(Answers in percent)

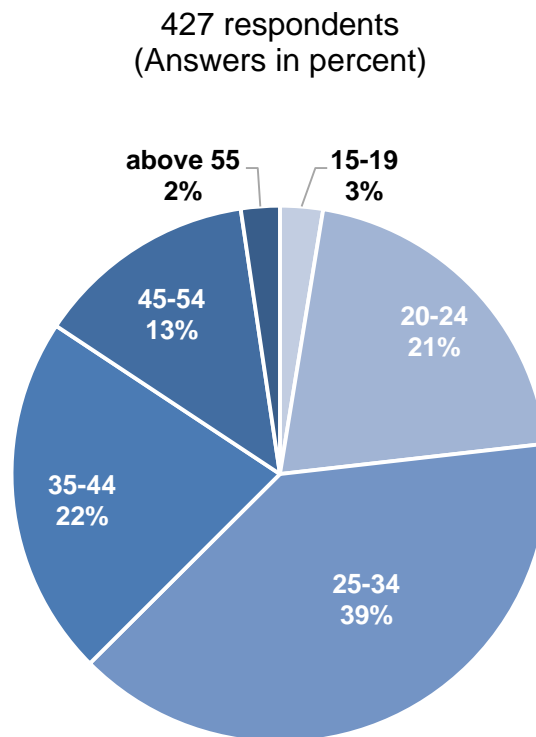
Country	%
Greece	6.56%
United Kingdom	5.85%
Italy	3.51%
Germany	3.04%
Netherland	2.34%
France	1.87%
Portugal	1.41%
Romania	1.41%
Croatia	1.17%
Russian Federation	1.17%
Spain	1.17%
Turkey	1.17%

The original idea was to consider only respondents from within Europe. This is reflected in the format of the questionnaire. However, the high number of valid respondents from countries outside Europe (using the questionnaire selection option ('other')) made us reconsider and use the whole sample including non-European countries. The selection option 'other', however, did not provide us with details on the country of origin of those who responded from outside Europe. A comparison of European and non-European responses did not show significant differences.

#### **a) Social profile of potential distance education students**

The first four questions of the online questionnaire related to the profile of the respondent (age, country, current occupation and highest level of education completed). The remaining five set out to assess the respondent's interest in further and distance education, as well as his/her biggest barriers and impression about the role of distance education in increasing equal access to education. The profile of potential students answering the questionnaire is portrayed in the following figures.

**Figure 2: Age of potential students responding**



The figure above shows that most respondents are between 25 and 34 years old. About 76.8% of the respondents are 25 or older. This observation is well in line with what has been observed in other studies as being the age bracket which is most interested in pursuing distance education. The following analysis of Question 3 portrayed in the table below reveals the current occupation of the potential distance education student.

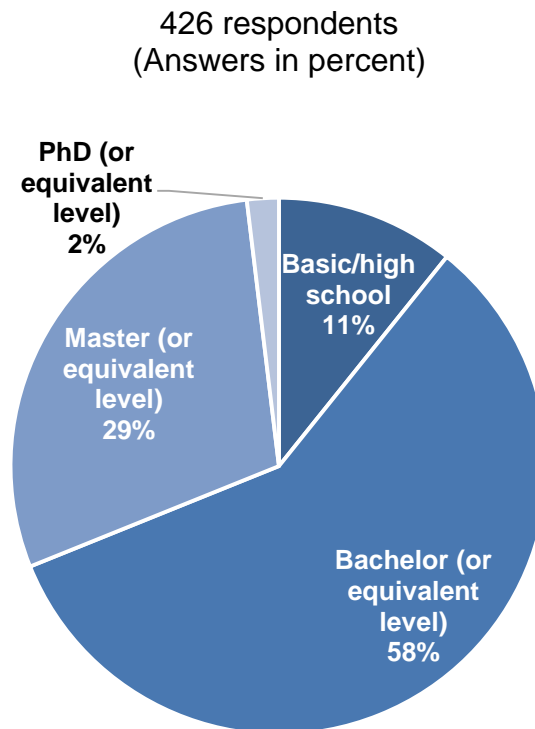
**Table 2: Current occupation of potential students**

426 respondents

Current Occupation	Number	%
In employment	213	50.00%
Student	128	30.05%
Self-employed	41	9.62%
Registered as unemployed	27	6.34%
On leave (parental leave, etc.)	6	1.41%
Studying and working	5	1.17%
Other	4	0.94%

According to the data presented above, most respondents may fall under the definition of adult learners as used within this survey (being either in employment, in retirement, on leave, registered as unemployed, or self-employed, n=288). 50% of the respondents are in employment.

**Figure 3: Highest level of education completed**



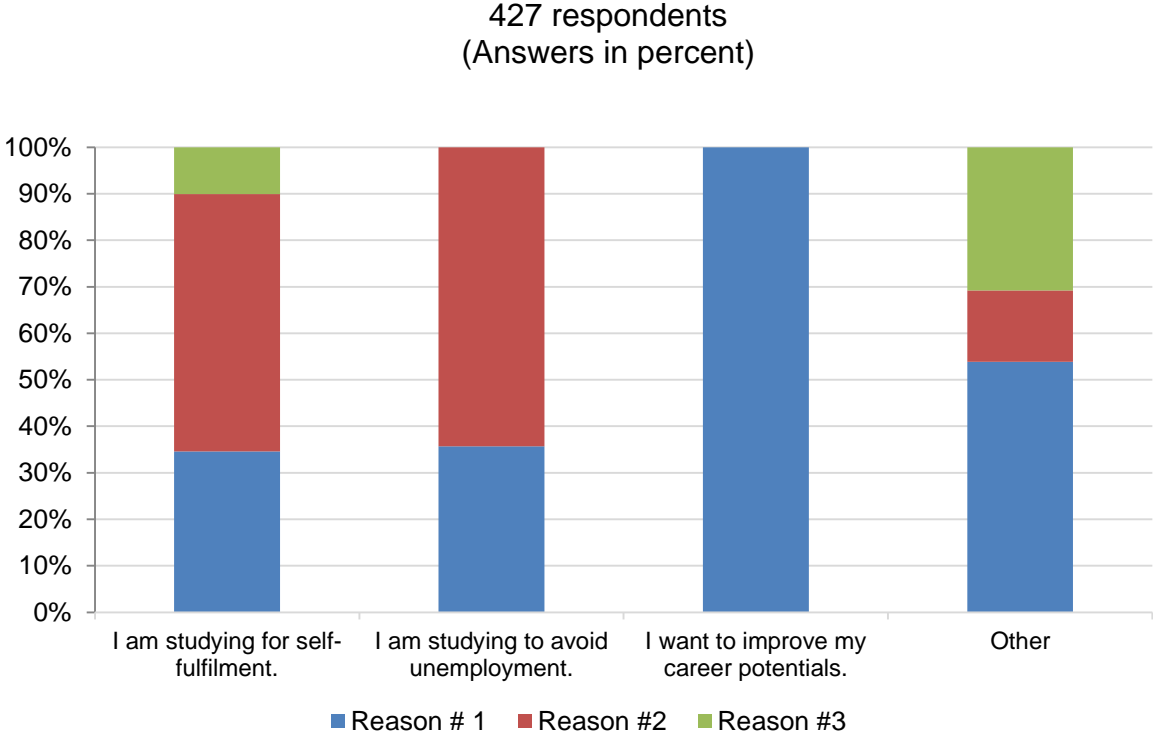
The pie chart above shows that the majority of the potential distance education students have a higher educational degree. 57.04% have a Bachelor's degree; only 10.56% have a basic/high school degree. Hence, according to our sample the average potential distance education student is 25-34 years old, most probably in employment and in most cases already holds a bachelor degree or equivalent qualification. This is in line with what is described in current literature.

### **b) Motivation and interest of potential distance education students**

As students' motivations to study can be highly diverse, it is worth analysing the predominant motivational factors. Some students are motivated by the possibility of

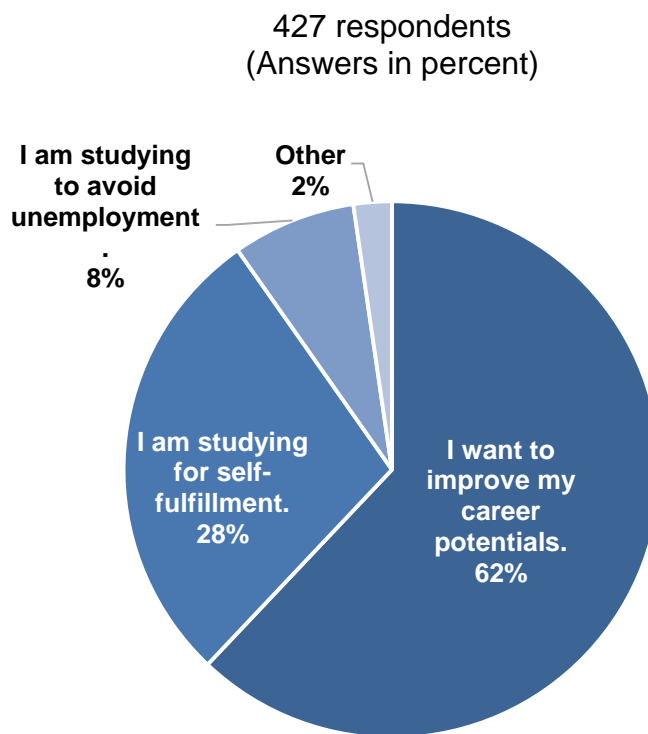
career advancement or updating their knowledge; others by the sheer joy of learning. Whilst many students opt for distance education due to time and other constraints in their personal life, it can also be the delivery mode of choice. For example, many distance education students are so-called independent or self-directed students (some of them very young), who prefer distance education because it allows them to study at their own pace, making little contact with other students. A closer look at the data set revealed preferences according to the respective questions in the questionnaire as shown in figures 4 and 5.

**Figure 4: Why are you interested in further education? (ranked by importance)<sup>15</sup>**



<sup>15</sup> More than one alternative could be selected.

**Figure 5: Why are you interested in further education? (by frequency of mentioning)<sup>16</sup>**



Figures 4 and 5<sup>17</sup> show the responses to the question ‘*Why are you interested in further education?*’ This question allowed for more than one possible answer. Analysis of the responses to this question may help to distil information on both respondents’ motivation and the degree of importance they allocate to different motivations, judging by frequency of mentioning. The most frequently selected reason for being interested in distance education was ‘improving career potentials’ followed by ‘self-fulfillment’. This tendency is visible throughout current research. Some responses highlighted that the pursuit of knowledge should be undertaken for its own sake, rather than as an obligation. Avoiding unemployment, the response most closely related to the economic relevance of distance education, was only mentioned by a few respondents.

<sup>16</sup> More than one alternative could be selected.

<sup>17</sup> Figure 5 does not take into consideration the order in which respondents selected each motivation item in the questionnaire. Instead, it merely shows the frequency with which each item was mentioned.

The analysis of the open text field provides more details on motivation/interest. Respondents used this open text field to specify their own reasons for considering further education, such as a love of study and research, a desire to teach or to share knowledge with their community, wanting to keep up with technological advances in their country, and wanting to serve their clients better.

The cross-tabulation of motivation for further education and respondents' age in Figure 6 confirms that economic factors are less important to the oldest cohort. Respondents below 54 years old have a strong professional motivation, which diminishes drastically for respondents above 55, where self-fulfilment becomes more important. Younger respondents, who may just be entering the labour market, are more likely to want to use further education for avoiding unemployment and improving their career options.

**Figure 6: Motivation for further education versus age**

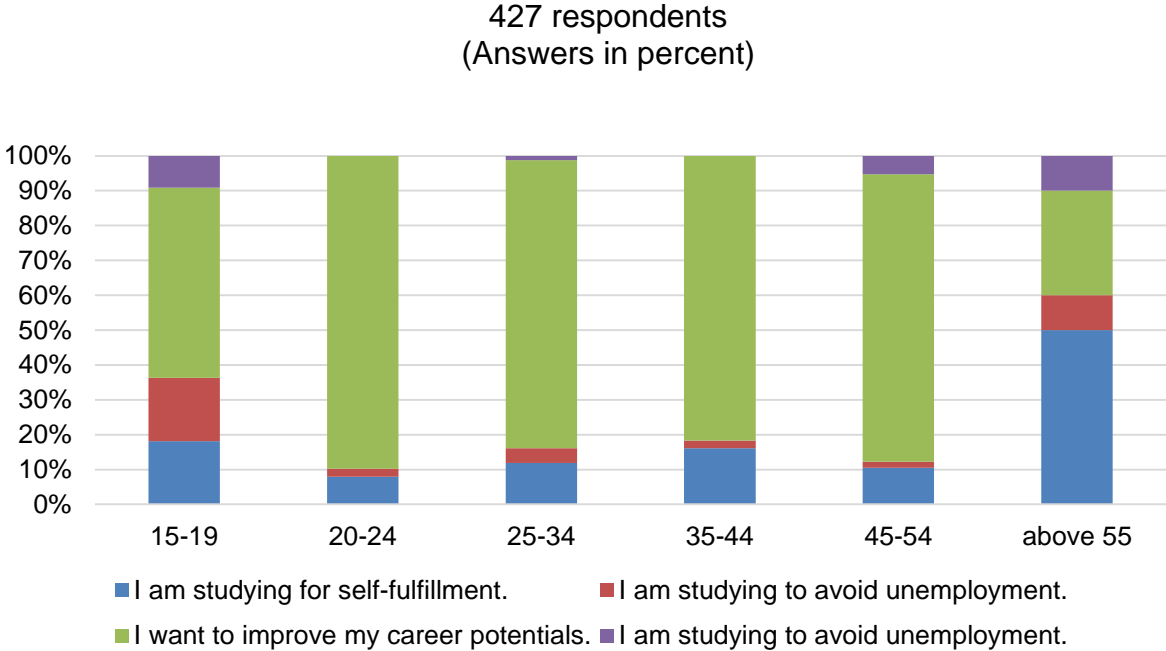




Figure 7: I am interested in distance education because distance education...<sup>18</sup>

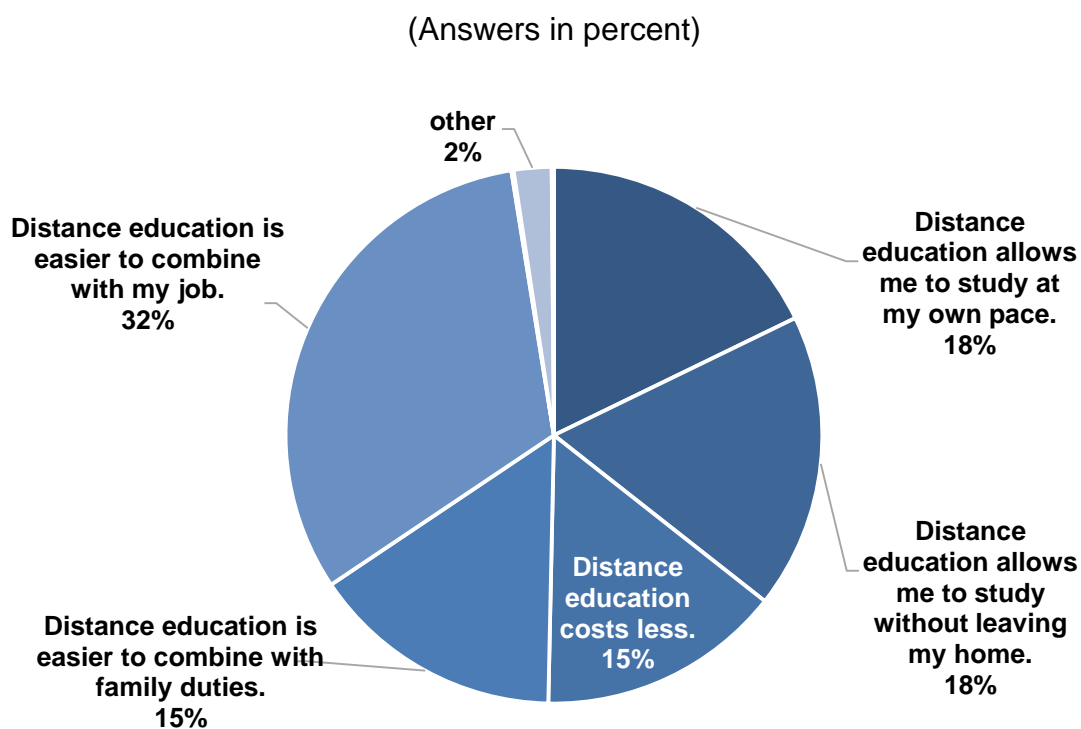


Figure 7 shows respondents' motivations for considering distance education. Among the many choices, 'distance education is easier to combine with my job' is the most often selected reason, chosen by 32% of the respondents. This result is also supported by other studies which show that job-related motivations are a strong determinant for distance education.<sup>19</sup> Next, 18% of the respondents indicated that they appreciated not having to leave home in order to study; another 18% also considered the possibility of studying at their own pace a good reason to choose distance education. 15% consider it easier to combine distance education with their family duties, and another 15% are drawn by the lower costs. 'Distance education is easier to combine with other study programmes at home' and 'distance education makes it possible to do additional courses that my university may not offer' were not popular responses.

As further reasons for being interested in distance education, potential students mentioned in the open text field the possibility of travelling and researching on their own terms (1 respondent), the ease of combining distance education with other study

<sup>18</sup> More than one alternative could be selected.

<sup>19</sup> European Commission, 2013

programmes at home (1 respondent) and the unavailability of suitable courses in their own country (1 respondent).

**Barriers to distance education as perceived by potential students**

What is perceived as a barrier to participate in distance education can differ widely from one individual to another, but a closer analysis reveals a number of common trends. Some perceived barriers do not necessarily cause potential students to refrain from engaging in distance education. Whilst unequal participation rates have multifaceted causes, ranging from those located at the level of the individual learner to those linked to institutional and cultural contexts, there are some communalities that can be observed. In the following section of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to select and rank which of the given barriers were the most important to them.

**Table 3: Perceived barriers**

427 respondents<sup>20</sup>

Perceived barriers	Number of mentions	Percentage of all barriers
Costs	218	29%
Distance education technology	107	14%
Language of the programme/course (if not taught in your native language)	83	11%
Other	58	8%
Recognition of my prior qualifications/alternative access routes	116	16%
Time	166	22%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>748</b>	<b>100%</b>

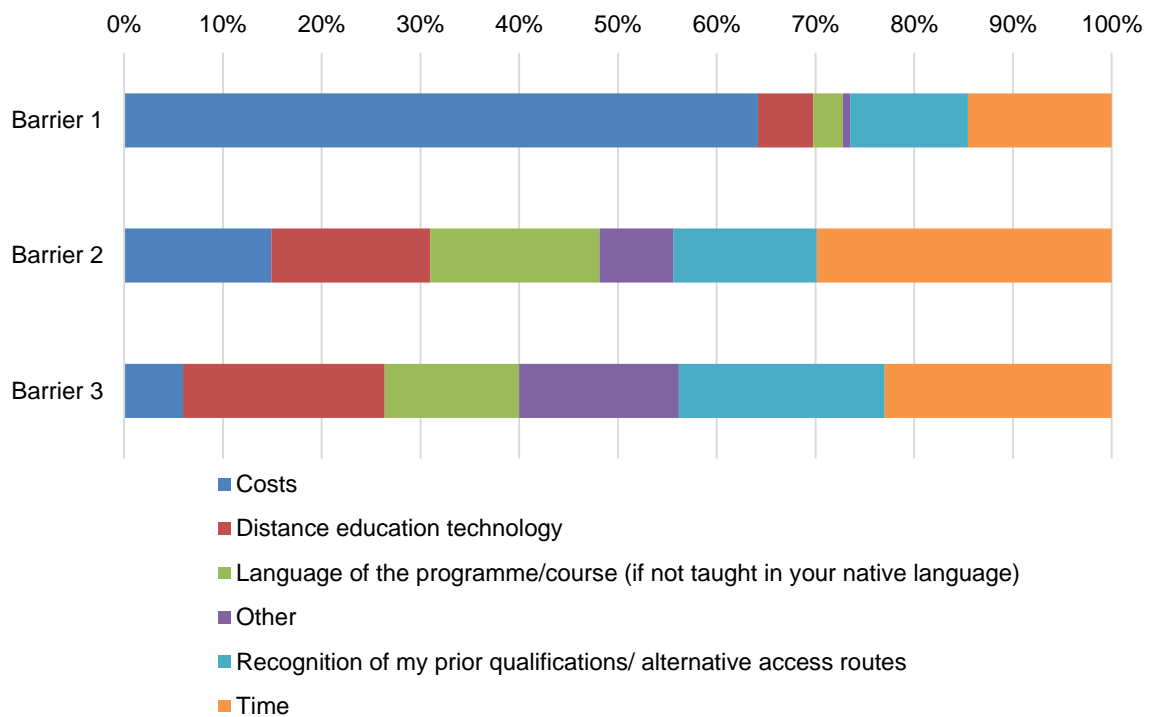
The options most often selected were ‘costs’ (mentioned by 29% of the respondents), followed by ‘time’ (22%) and ‘recognition of prior qualifications’ (16%). The following figure shows how respondents ranked the barriers according to their importance.

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<sup>20</sup> More than one alternative could be selected.

**Figure 8: Barriers in order of importance**

(Answers in percent)



The figure above shows that costs were not only the most often selected barrier, but also the biggest one, ranked as barrier 1 by 56.34% of the respondents. Not considering 'other' (because not all respondents specified), time was selected as both the second and third most important (barriers 2 and 3) by 17.61% and 22.90% of the European respondents respectively. With view to the section on 'other', some of the respondents gave further specifications mostly referring either to time again, or to the unavailability of the course or lack of interaction with fellow students and teachers.

Selected statements on perceived barriers in the open text field of the questionnaire could be categorized into the three following dimensions:

### Costs

- 'Unfortunately many courses are too expensive. I ended up doing my current course at diploma level as it was affordable but I would have preferred to do it at a higher level.'
- 'I wish I could take further education... Unfortunately I cannot afford it.'
- 'It is quite a good option for people who cannot afford to study abroad or to travel long distances. For me personally distance education is plan B (like I mentioned before) in case something goes wrong with my applications for conventional programmes.'
- 'I can't be left without an income while studying. So distance learning makes sense.'
- '(it should be)...affordable, so that anyone seeking an education can obtain it. Why place a plate of food in front of a person chained to a wall on the opposite side and say "enjoy, eat!"?'
- Flexible payment options

### Time/flexibility

- 'This is the only way for me to study. I work full time and I am a mother of 5 kids.'
- 'I take distance education to integrate working, caring for family and learning/researching.'
- 'I considered taking distance learning because I'm self-disciplined and understand better when I learn at my own pace.'

### Transferability, recognition and reputation of qualifications

- 'Distance education may be a valuable addition for persons already wedded to a career. By themselves, however, qualifications obtained by distance education are NOT very useful.'
- 'The prestige factor and recognition of the distant education institute.'
- 'The recognition of the course from the employer.'

- 'I'm considering taking distance education to have a recognized European education and a range of orientation that doesn't yet exist in France. I'm also considering taking distance education in order to be educated with more of a learner-centred approach than what France can offer me. Thirdly, I'm in a transition period, finishing my medical studies, beginning my practice and involvement in my department to build an academic career. It doesn't leave much time to attend courses during the day, so I have to consider education at night!'
- 'Accreditation of official bodies'
- 'accreditation of online colleges to my country board for universities'
- 'as I say I am not interested in full distant education since it is not accredited in my country'
- 'Concerns about respect for distance degrees by employers'
- 'diploma recognition in my country'
- 'Not knowing the quality of education/reputation of the school unless it is part of a well-respected full-time university'
- 'recognition of distance degree in my country, Jordan'
- 'recognition of the certificates'
- 'Relevance of distance learning centre certificates in my country'

### What other barriers do potential students see in distance education?

#### Lack of interaction

- 'lack of face-to-face interaction'
- 'Suboptimal quality of interaction'
- 'boredom, lack of live social interaction'

#### Limited offer in area of interest

- 'availability of the desired course'
- 'can't find appropriate programme'
- 'Difficult to find good courses in my country'
- 'Limited choice of subject area'

- 'programmes offered'
- 'there aren't enough of them'

### **Lack of information/awareness**

- 'I think it would be very convenient if educational fairs were held in different communities and countries, dedicated to distance learning options alone! I also believe it would be very helpful if they were held in several different languages with an option to receive info about what papers and courses you'll be needing as a resident student or pupil of the country that is hosting the fair...'

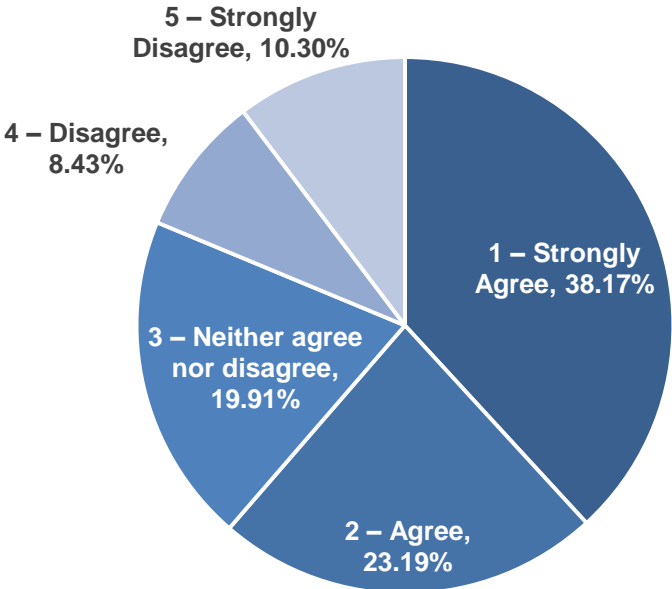
### **Requirement of physical presence**

- 'Class based activities'
- 'Need to travel for face-to-face'

The final question asked whether distance education was perceived to be an enabling factor to increase equal access to education. However, the questionnaire is addressed to potential students who have not yet engaged in distance education. It therefore represents an estimation rather than a reflection of personal experiences. Nonetheless, over 50% strongly agreed or agreed that 'Distance education helps to increase equal access to education'. Only 10.30% of respondents disagreed with this statement.

**Figure 9: 'Distance education helps to increase equal access to education'**

427 respondents  
(Answers in percent)



# Study choice analytics

The IDEAL project has access to the browsing behaviour of millions of visitors to the StudyPortals websites. This browsing behaviour is used to analyse the study choice behaviour of prospective adult learners. The tool that was used for this is called 'study choice analytics'. The technical and methodological aspects of using such information as an indicator for of student interest is discussed in the Methodology section. Analysis of the data set is carried out according to the following dimensions:

- I. origin (e.g. continent of origin, European region of origin, country of origin)<sup>21</sup>
- II. education delivery mode (e.g. online)
- III. education and programme offer (e.g. cost, duration)
- IV. study discipline, degree of qualification
- V. location of host institution

The data set contains a total of 720,000 logs from August 2013 until July 2014. This dataset is a summary of the entire traffic to the StudyPortals websites: 3 million visits per month. The table below shows the distribution of all the page views by country of origin. The following table gives an overview of the 9 most frequently represented countries, of which Germany, Greece and the UK will be further analysed in depth in the chapter on the country reports.

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<sup>21</sup> The Annex provides details and grouping of countries by continent and European region



**Table 4: Country of origin**

(Answers in percent)

Country	%
United Kingdom	11.50%
United States	8.90%
India	5.64%
Germany	4.48%
Greece	4.13%
Netherlands	2.36%
Pakistan	2.36%
Nigeria	2.14%
Canada	2.08%

More than 20% of the visits showed interest in any sort of blended or online structured delivery mode. Although almost 70% of the page views refer to ‘traditional face-to-face interaction’, distance education and blended forms of learning are on the rise and have become a decisive factor facilitating adult participation in higher education, as several studies have shown.

**Table 5: Interest in education delivery mode**

(Answers in percent)

Interest in... (Educational Modus)	%
Blended	6.78%
Blended/Online	0.71%
Face-to-face	69.63%
Face-to-face/Blended	0.75%
Face-to-face/Blended/Online	0.55%
Face-to-face/Online	1.35%
Online	11.45%
Blank	8.77%

With reference to the level of education that potential distance education students are looking for, the table below shows that a vast majority (almost 70%) are seeking a master’s degree. As already confirmed in our data set, the flexibility of distance education provides an attractive environment for pursuing specifically post-graduate studies.

**Table 6: Degree level of interest**

(Answers in percent)

Degree	%
Bachelor	10.23%
Master	69.24%
PhD	10.13%
Non-degree (Short Course)	10.40%

Figure 10 below presents the distribution of the country of interest. There is a vast preference for institutions in the UK (over 48.60%), followed by the Netherlands (17.97%) and the United States (8.18%).<sup>22</sup>

**Figure 10: Country of interest**

(Answers in percent)

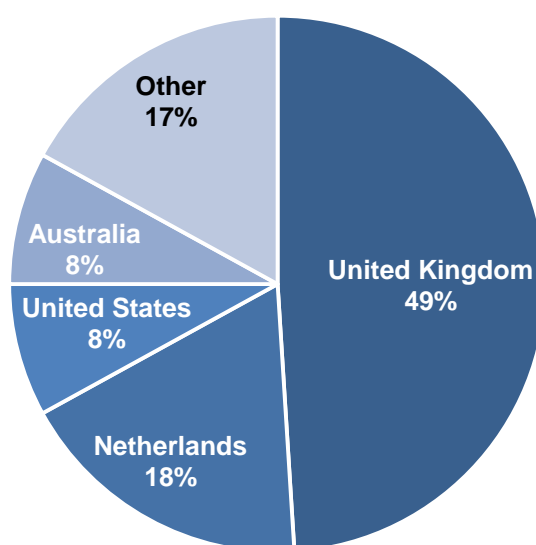


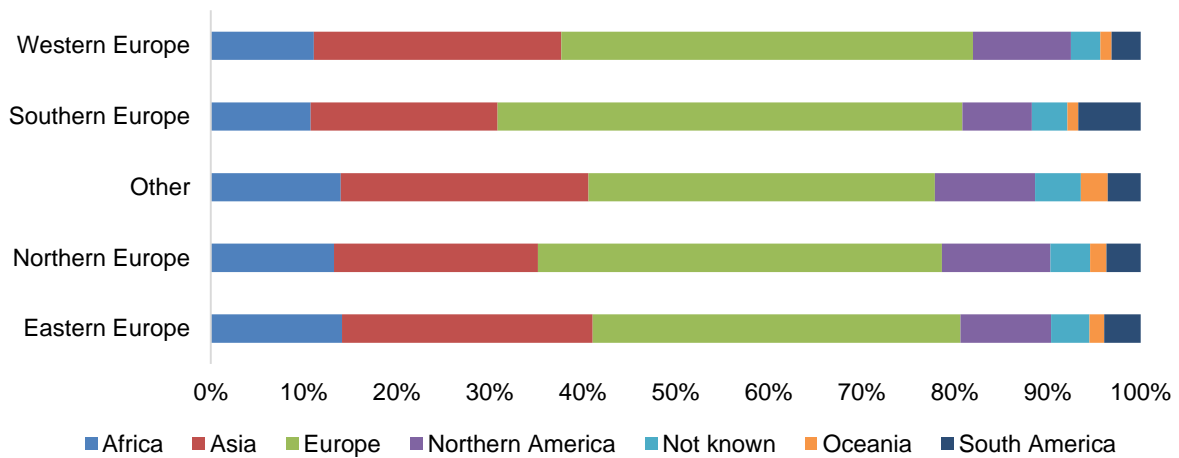
Figure 11 below confirms that the European potential students in our data set seem to prefer pursuing studies within Europe, mostly in Southern European countries (49.99%), followed by countries in the western sub-region (44.27%) and Northern Europe (43.43%). Europe as a first preference is followed by institutions based in Asia in second and Northern America in third position.

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<sup>22</sup> A categorization of the countries by the regions used in the table is available in the annex.

**Figure 11: European sub-region of interest by continent of origin**

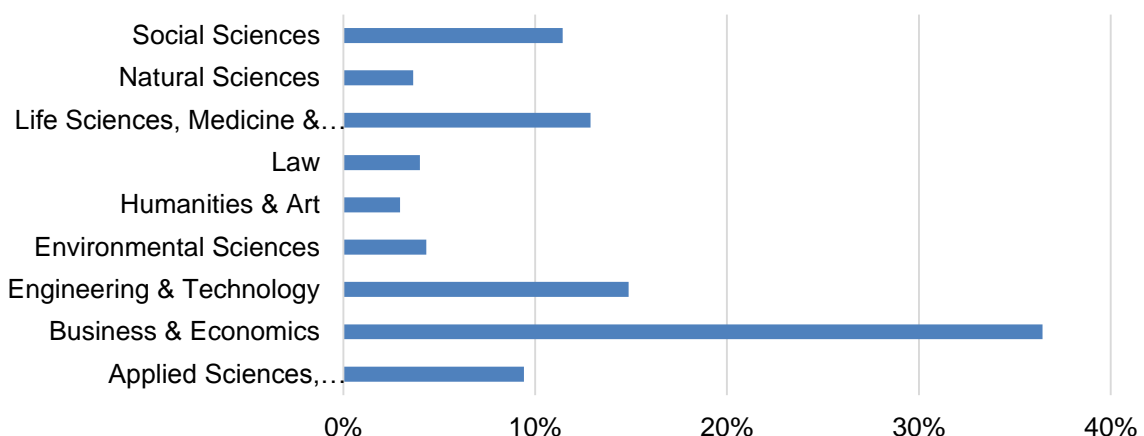
(Answers in percent)



In terms of preferred subject, the figure below shows that the potential distance education students in our dataset browsing on the StudyPortals website show a strong preference for business and economics (36.45%). The HEAD Study<sup>23</sup> confirms that increasing attainment levels and improving career prospects are the most significant motivations for adult learners to engage in distance education, which is in line with the present data set. The second most frequently viewed discipline is Engineering & Technology (14.87%).

**Figure 12: Disciplines of interest**

(Answers in percent)

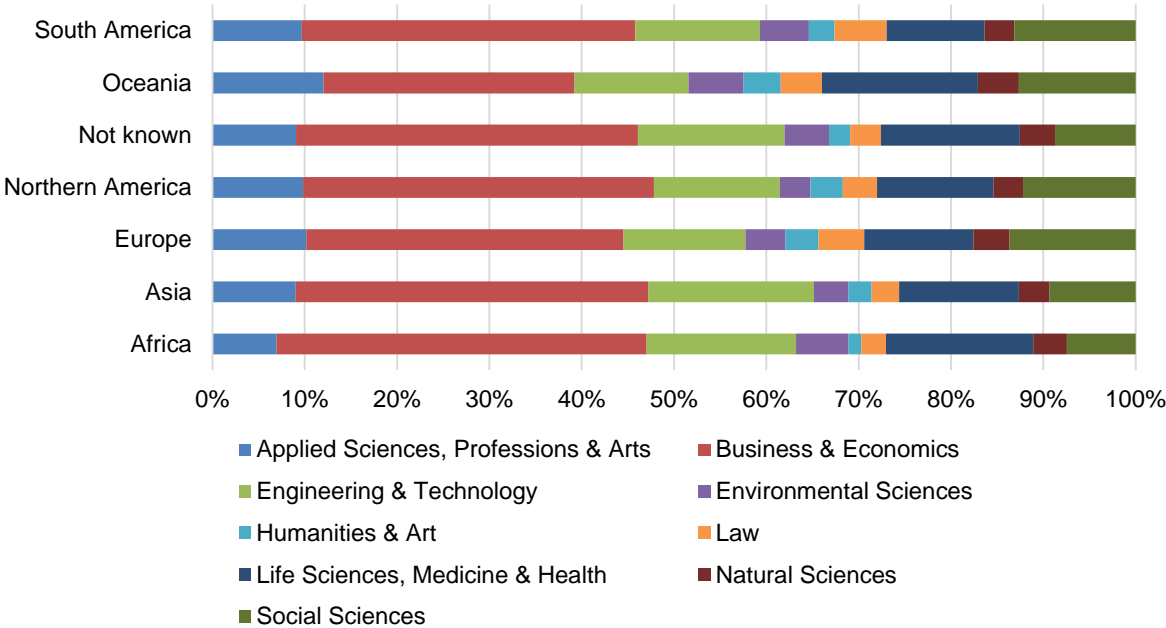


<sup>23</sup> European Commission, 2013.

The figures below show that all the tracked page views when grouped by continents portray a strong tendency towards considering studies in business and economics (36.45%). Another interesting trend is shown in the figure below, which portrays the origin of potential students worldwide and their choices regarding discipline. Business and economics remain the main choices.

**Figure 13: Continent of origin vs discipline**

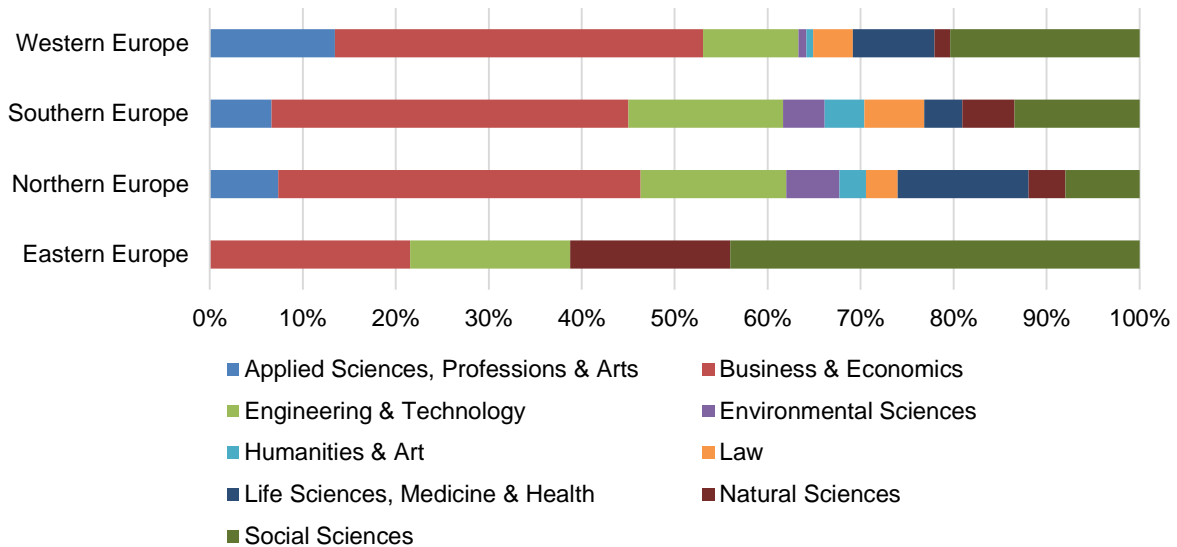
(Answers in percent)



Interest in disciplines in the European sub-region showed similar tendencies. 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. As our data has already shown, the flexibility of distance education provides an attractive environment for pursuing specifically post-graduate studies. The following figure provides an overview of the preference of European students cross-tabulated with choice of discipline.

**Figure 14: European sub-region of origin vs discipline**

(Answers in percent)



A summary of the data retrieved from the study choice analytics tool reveals the following overall trends. The discipline of greatest interest to potential students is Business & Economics (36.5%). 48.6% of potential students are interested in courses hosted in the UK. Most potential students also come from this country (11.5%). The vast majority of potential distance education students are looking for a master's degree (69.24%). Eastern Europe offer also does not include Applied Sciences, Humanities & Art, Life Sciences or Environmental Sciences, as students may prefer to search for these programmes within their own country, and study at an institute they are familiar with, or one comparable with previous institutes they have studied at.

# The country case studies

To complement the analysis of the quantitative data gathered in the whole IDEAL project, five experts have been asked to take a closer look at five countries, analysing existing research on distance education. Guidelines were developed which should assist the authors of the country case studies to develop mutually comparable national reports.

However, it should be noted that the national reports provide information on both potential *and* already enrolled students. Opportunely, these country reports can provide insights about national frameworks. Before looking into the key questions on profile, interest, motivation and barriers, the country reports allow for a closer analysis of the following dimensions:

- 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

**Table 7: Summary of case studies**

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
<b>Finland</b>	<p>No specific policy on distance education in higher education</p> <p>No separate open or distance teaching universities</p> <p>In 2000, 54% of the adult population (18–64-year-olds) had participated to adult education. In 2006 the proportion was 52% and in 2012 it had remained the same</p> <p>4% of the 18-64-year-old population participate in adult education in higher education institutions (2012)</p>	<p>Online-and blended education</p> <p>Web-based learning</p>	<p>No specific access or entry requirements</p> <p>Status of degree student can be obtained after pursuing courses in open university</p>
<b>Germany</b>	<p>No specific policy on distance education in higher education.</p> <p>13 out of 16 states mention distance education</p> <p>16 laws but none with specific section about distance programmes</p> <p>28% of adults participate in adult education</p> <p>According to data on adult learners in higher education, the report</p>	<p>Web-based learning</p> <p>Conventional campus-based learning with usage of new media</p> <p>Fernstudium</p>	<p>Highest degree from the school system (e.g. Abitur) or degree from vocational sector</p> <p>Recognition of degree from vocational training through special new policy <sup>24</sup></p>
<b>Greece</b>	<p>‘Education and Lifelong Learning’ policy</p> <p>11.7% of adults (25-64 years) participated in education and training activities in 2011</p> <p>34.9% of students participate in tertiary education (2013)</p>	<p>E-learning classrooms</p> <p>Stand-alone distance education</p> <p>(Pure) distance education courses</p>	<p>Graduation from secondary education</p> <p>No systematic procedure for recognition of prior learning or work experience</p>
<b>Hungary</b>	<p>No specific policy on distance education in higher education</p> <p>At master’s level, no distance education at all</p> <p>No laws mentioning e-learning</p> <p>3.9% participate in adult education</p> <p>According to data on adult learners in higher education, the report did not display any numbers.</p>	<p>Distance learning with electronic support system</p>	<p>School leaving examination certificate and enough entry points</p> <p>No alternative admission</p> <p>No systematic procedure for recognition of prior learning or work experience</p>
<b>UK</b>	<p>No specific policy on distance education in higher education but laws that indirectly influence it</p> <p>Common quality assurance (QA) framework for higher education</p> <p>ISCED5A 3.9% (theoretically based)</p> <p>ISCED5B 0.76% (practically based)</p>	<p>Distance education courses for international students</p> <p>Blended and online courses</p>	<p>‘Access Diplomas’ (programmes helping to access higher education)</p> <p>Recognition or credit transfer from equivalent level of study elsewhere</p> <p>Accreditation of (Prior) Experiential Learning (A(P)EL)</p>

<sup>24</sup> Deutsches Zentrum für Hochschul- und Wissenschaftsforschung, 2015.

## a) Existing or applied policy framework and overall participation of adult learners in higher education/adult education (EUROSTAT)

### Finland

In Finland there is currently no specific national distance education policy for higher education, despite the fact that distance education is widely used within the Finnish higher education institutions. On the more general level, ICT is seen as essential to education, working life and the general functioning of society. ICT is thought to offer the possibility of more flexible and individual studies. However, a recent document on the future of education from the Ministry of Education and Culture states that digitalization would change the functions of society. Within higher education, digitalization promises to support the development of science, raise skills levels, accelerate the usage of resources and enhance accessibility.

Since both undergraduate and continuing education in Finland are loosely regulated, the only limiting framework is perhaps the one focusing on access to undergraduate programmes at universities (HEAD<sup>25</sup>). There are no separate open or distance teaching universities in Finland, but as in most other Nordic countries, the HE institutions in Finland utilize different forms of distance education. In 2012, 4% of the 18–64-year-old population (125,000 people) had participated in adult education in higher education institutions. When looking at participation on higher education, the ‘Matthew effect’ is evident (understood as the cumulative advantage of a certain group or elite). Hence, adult entrants to degree programmes at universities were more educated and more often in white-collar positions than the population on average.

### Germany

In Germany each of the 16 states has authority over its educational system. Nevertheless, the similarities are much greater than the differences. At least 18 different laws influence the development of distance education in higher education: the German Higher Education Framework Law (Deutsches Hochschulrahmengesetz, HRG), the University Laws of the Federal States (Landeshochschulgesetze, LHG) and the Law of

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<sup>25</sup> European Commission 2013.



the Protection of Participants in Distance Learning (Gesetz zum Schutz der Teilnehmer am Fernunterricht - Fernunterrichtsschutzgesetz - FernUSG). Out of the 16 states, 13 explicitly mention distance education as a possible way to structure programmes. These statements, however, tend to be rather short and generally mention that the 'possibility of distance education should be used'. None of the laws has a specific section about programmes entirely offered at a distance at universities.

The laws of three states (Berlin, Lower Saxony and Hesse) do not even mention anything comparable. The proportion of tertiary-educated adults in Germany (28%) is lower than the OECD average (33%) and raising it to the European 2020 Strategy goal of 40% will be a difficult goal to reach if expansion remains at current levels (only +6% since 2000). Looking at younger (25-34 year-old) and older (55-64 year-old) adults with tertiary attainment, the numbers differ only slightly: 29% and 26% respectively. Some of these differences are due to the longer tertiary programmes and significant internal variations in attainment levels, due to the federal system. Others are linked to the vocational system: 'Due to the well-established and highly recognized upper secondary vocational programmes (dual system) with low unemployment rates, the incentives for tertiary attainment might be lower in Germany compared to other countries'. The report does not provide data on participation in distance learning.

## Greece

In Greece the Operational Programme 'Education and Lifelong Learning' (2007-2013), co-funded by the European Social Fund (ESF), was the main national policy regarding distance learning. It concerned all of the nation's 13 regions, so as to meet the 'Convergence' and 'Regional Competitiveness and Employment' goals. It was based on the goal of the National Strategy for education to increase the quantity, quality and effectiveness of 'investments in human capital', in order to upgrade the Greek educational and vocational training system.

The Programme was centred on strategic goals and thematic priority axes. Priority axes 7, 8 and 9, 'Enhancing lifelong education for adults' (the names and purposes of the three axes are not specified in the report) focused on the development of distance learning by designing and implementing a series of distance education programmes. This is

associated with special objectives on enhancing the system of lifelong education and promoting equal access, as well as increasing participation by establishing special incentives.

Tertiary education in Greece is divided into the University and Technological sectors. Based on Eurostat (2012), students participating in ISCED 5 and 6 in Greece comprised 30.5% of students in all levels of education (26.1% aged 25-64 and 12% aged 20-24 (almost double the respective numbers in the EU27)). The University sector (ISCED 5A & ISCED 6) includes the Universities, the Technical Universities, the School of Fine Arts and the Hellenic Open University. The Technological sector (ISCED 5B) includes mainly the Technological Education Institutions (TEIs) and the School of Pedagogical and Technological Education (ASPETE). All these institutions with statistical information available are public owned, as the relevant legislation (Art. 16) dictates that ‘...tertiary education is exclusively delivered by self-administered institutions that are considered legal bodies of public interest ...’.

## Hungary

The concept of e-learning is not mentioned in any law in Hungary, despite the fact that distance learning and both synchronic and asynchronous distance learning support have almost completely been shifted to electronic platforms. Electronic tools and devices are only mentioned in the context of educational administration. Although distance learning appears in documents on the national ICT strategy, no detailed principles are provided. Distance learning is available in a rather low proportion of educational programmes; at master’s level there is no distance education at all.

The low implementation of distance education in Hungary is due to legal regulations, which according to the author turned out not to be favourable to modern distance education using e-learning solutions. As a result, better-known correspondence programmes were favoured, despite low efficiency. While 73% of full-time and 27% of part-time students receive state subsistence, those participating in distance learning are not eligible. The total number of students in higher education is 338,467 / 3.43 % (2013/2014), out of a total population of 9,877,365 (2014). Of these, about 233,678 / 69.04% are full-time students whereas 104,789 / 30.96 % are non-full-time students. The

non-full-time students refer to the students who are in correspondence, evening or distance learning, or who study in another HEI.

## United Kingdom

There are no explicit national policies concerning distance education for any of the separate nations of the UK. However, a range of factors and policies have a bearing on distance education. For example, the recent tightening of visa approvals processes and immigration control has encouraged universities to pursue selling distance courses which international students can complete in their home nation. The British Accreditation Council has responsibility for quality assurance of the independent further and higher education sector. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) makes no distinction between on-campus and distance provision.

According to data from EUROSTAT on tertiary students (ISCED 5-6) by field of education and sex<sup>26</sup> the percentage of the population reaching ISCED 5A/B and beyond has remained relatively static over the last decade (2004 to 2012). Participation rates have increased amongst younger adults as a result of national policies to increase and widen participation in higher education. The report does not provide data on participation in distance learning.

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<sup>26</sup> See: [http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=educ\\_enr15&lang=en](http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=educ_enr15&lang=en)

## **b) Definition, terms and types of distance education available**

### **Finland**

Online- and blended education are established, normal ways to organize teaching for adults. Elements of distance teaching are widely used in different kinds of courses. During the last decade, web-based learning has become part of teaching in all areas of higher education.

### **Germany**

'Fernunterricht' refers to non-academic programmes which do not lead to an academic degree, whereas 'Fernstudium' denotes programmes at higher education institutions which are offered either in the private or public sector. The development of distance education and e-learning at German universities was influenced by a variety of factors. Some universities have been providing their courses at a distance from the beginning; other conventional, campus-based universities have recently begun to implement new media to enrich class lectures and reach more students with their own online programmes. While more than 90% of universities have digital learning material and up to 80% offer interactive courses, only 23 institutions (representing 16% of universities and universities of applied science) have specific distance education courses.

### **Greece**

In Greece distance tertiary education is undertaken mainly by the Hellenic Open University, which offers undergraduate, post-graduate and vocational courses exclusively through distance learning. Apart from the stand-alone distance education HOU, many other Greek universities offer (pure) distance education courses, most of which focus on professional development (vocational training). The courses they offer typically exploit modern technologies. Over the past few years, many universities in Greece have developed 'e-learning classrooms' furnished with the necessary infrastructure to enable students to support synchronous online learning and presentation activities. Moreover, many universities in Greece use online platforms so as to support traditional undergraduate and postgraduate courses, mostly with the aim of providing

educational content to the student. However, these platforms do not qualify as distance education material, as they are too basic.

## Hungary

In Hungary distance learning services provided by universities are generally combined with electronic learning support services, mainly as a consequence of the organization of part-time (correspondence and evening) courses. Every Hungarian higher educational institution operates some kind of electronic learning support system. Distance learning is defined as a form of training based on the interactional relationship of instructor and student and the student's self-study, using special information-technological and communicational educational devices, knowledge transfer/learning methods and digital course materials, in which the number of contact teaching hours amounts to less than 30% of the contact hours of full-time training.

## United Kingdom

The UK regulatory framework does not draw a distinction between different modes of higher education (e.g. between on-campus and distance provision). Nevertheless, the majority of distance learning is devoted to academic subjects and only a small proportion to vocational ones. Additionally, the terms 'distance learning' and 'online learning' are often used interchangeably; however, a distinction in meaning is not offered in the UK report. According to a study conducted by White et al., distance learning courses outnumber online learning courses by almost 50 per cent.

### **c) Access, entry requirements and recognition of prior learning**

## Finland

University admissions in Finland have been under discussion for several years and are currently being reformed. The aim of the reform is to promote the enrolment of 'young applicants' to the universities. Adults who need to upgrade their education level or deepen their knowledge are directed towards separate admission channels parallel to the main entrance track, or to professional further education courses not leading to a degree. Participation in open universities is not restricted according to previous

education, age, occupation, or any other characteristic of the potential student; it has the aim of equalizing access to higher education. The polytechnic sector features a similarly open system (which originally focused on adult learners). Institutions have separate bachelor programmes for young and adult students; adults are also allowed to attend programmes aimed at young students. These programmes for adults therefore offer more flexibility to the student. After pursuing a certain number of open university courses, a student is able to transfer to the status of degree student (this process is called open university gateway). The polytechnic sector is more open towards adult students than other universities as they offer more programmes for adults and have tailored teaching for meeting their needs.

## Germany

In 2009, the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder in the Federal Republic of Germany (Kultusministerkonferenz or KMK) released an enactment (ANKOM - Anrechnung beruflicher Kompetenzen auf Hochschulstudiengänge<sup>27</sup>) that opened universities to people with a degree from the vocational sector. Previously, a school-leaving certificate (Abitur) had been a requirement for entrance to higher education (Hochschulzugangsberechtigung). The report further states that this was changed by e.g. recognizing work experience/competences in order to access higher education. With regard to open access policy, the report uses a citation by Wolter (2013) who wrote that 'non-traditional access routes have played only a very marginal role up to now' (meaning open access), and that therefore the level of participation is very low.

## Greece

Recognition of prior learning is not mentioned by the legislation in Greece; however, there are plans to change this in the near future. The report mentions: 'The only relevant legislation in place at present is a mechanism for linking accredited VET [Vocational and Education Training] programmes to formal higher education programmes through the recognition and transfer of credit points'. In order to enter HE, adults must either have graduated from secondary education and possess a certificate, or follow a procedure

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<sup>27</sup> See: <http://ankom.his.de/>

(second chance schools) to obtain the lower secondary certification. Even if work experience is welcome or in some courses a prerequisite for attending a study programme, no systematic procedure for recognition of prior learning or work experience exists at the HOU<sup>28</sup>.

## Hungary

In Hungary access to HE is formally open to any adult with a school leaving examination certificate and enough entry points in the entrance examination for bachelor or master's programmes. No alternative admission is available. The only exception is the field of short non-degree courses: programmes for adults who want to upgrade their knowledge and skills in special continuing education for lifelong learners. New requirements from the education administration have made it more difficult for adults who left school long ago to access HE: they must now take advanced level school-leaving examinations for bachelor programmes or intermediate level language examinations for master's programmes. The Hungarian report mentions that those living with physical disabilities are strongly represented among distance education students, but would not provide concrete numbers. The country report concludes that higher education institutions in Hungary continue to provide quality education based on attendance, combined with e-learning methods. The report concludes by evaluating distance learning provision as an alternative to campus-based learning, and finds that the distance education on offer in Hungary has so far been unable to enhance the openness of higher education or involve new target groups in education. This is mainly due to the gaps in provision and national regulations already described.

## United Kingdom

The main mechanism for recognition of prior learning in the UK is recognition or credit transfer. Some existing programmes help to facilitate access to HE, such as 'Access Diplomas', Access to Higher Education Diploma courses (offered in England and Wales), or (in smaller numbers) the Scottish Wider Access Programme or the Access Certificate in Foundation Studies in Northern Ireland. There are also preparatory foundation courses

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<sup>28</sup> European Commission, 2013

(an extra year within the undergraduate degree) which feature Accreditation of (Prior) Experiential Learning (A(P)EL).<sup>29</sup>

### **Social profile, motivation and perceived barriers**

Analysis of the country reports should answer the three initial research questions from a country perspective. The following table therefore provides information on a) Social profile, b) Motivation and interest, and c) Perceived barriers.

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<sup>29</sup> European Commission, 2013



**Table 8: Social profile, motivations and perceived barriers by country**

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

## a) Social profile

### Finland

In Finland, the educational background of students has changed remarkably. Whereas in 2000 only a marginal number of students enrolled at open universities had a master's degree, in 2012, the proportion had increased to one third (the report does not provide specific numbers of enrolled students). Previously the open universities were more often used by young matriculated students who had not gained a study place at a 'proper' university, but nowadays students are more often adults in professional positions who want to enhance their qualifications, skills and competences. According to a survey conducted in 2006, many of the participants were in their thirties, with an average of 12 years' work experience. As these programmes are aimed at people with a bachelor's degree, the students were highly educated. Students on web-based courses were older than students on face-to-face and multi-form courses. Students on web-based courses also had more children than the rest of the students. They were highly concentrated in the southern parts of the country, especially near the capital and other cities, rather than rural areas. There were some hints that students in web-based courses were slightly better educated and were more likely to be employed in prestigious positions than the students in other forms of education. They also tended to have a higher income than others. Although students are a heterogeneous group with varied social backgrounds and work/life experiences, an average student would be a 36-year-old woman with at least secondary level education, working in a white-collar occupation and living in a city.

### Germany

The German report also reinforces the impression that distance education students (by the example of the FernUniversität Hagen are older than 'traditional' students, with an average age of 34.8 years. Only 29% of the participants in distance education were younger than 25 years. In general, students at the FernUniversität (where 88,168 students were enrolled last term) share a lower socio-economic background than 'traditional' students. It could therefore be argued that the FernUniversität is the university for 'non-traditional' and/or adult students.

## Greece

The largest distance education institution in Greece, the Hellenic Open University (HOU), was used as the major source to describe the country's practices. HOU students are older on average than students of other universities. The average student in distance education is between 30 and 37 years old and married. They often find it difficult to participate in face-to-face activities or to devote the required amount of time to their studies in campus-based learning. Distance learning offers the opportunity to combine family life and work with education.

## Hungary

The majority of adult learners in Hungary are between 30 and 40 years of age, with no significant difference according to gender. Adult students with previous higher qualifications tend to have heightened motivation for further learning. Two thirds of adult learners are married or live in a partnership and 58% have children. Most either have a job or are on parental leave. More than half of the students in adult education carry out some kind of intellectual work. They have a higher than average income as well as good computer knowledge and access.

## United Kingdom

The UK population has a greater proportion of students than the other countries surveyed. The age groups 25-29 and 30-34 are expanding most rapidly as a proportion of the total Open University population. Proportions of students declaring a disability have increased rapidly over the last 3 years; proportions of students with non-HE qualifications have also increased. 60% of students are female. 92% of part-time higher education entrants in the UK in 2012/13 were aged 21 or over. 75% of over 25s study part-time.

## **b) Motivation and interest**

### **Finland**

Finnish students enrolling in distance education are motivated by the chance to develop vocational skills, the possibility of self-fulfilment, and the flexibility to combine study with work and family.

### **Germany**

The German report shows that flexibility (i.e. the possibility of balancing study with career, family and other responsibilities) is a strong motivation for choosing distance education.

### **Greece**

Like in other countries, distance education students in Greece are older than other typical students. Their main motivation for taking distance education is improving professional skills and career opportunities. Through distance education they try to get their practical knowledge recognized. Like in Hungary, Greek students seem to have a negative image of distance education degrees. The report states: 'Many students did not see any improvement in their career opportunities immediately after obtaining their degree. This may be due to employers' negative perception of the distance education degree, as well as the fact that most students were already working and chose distance education simply in order to obtain a tertiary education degree. Over the long term, however, students' career opportunities did improve.

### **Hungary**

In Hungary like in other countries, the greatest motivation for distance education is improvement of career prospects. However, students in distance education tend to take longer to complete their training than those in traditional forms of teaching/learning. The 'freedom' of distance education demands a lot more independence and self-discipline, which according to the author makes it less suitable for students with lower qualifications.

## United Kingdom

In the UK adult learner motivation for embarking on HE study is often closely related to employability aspirations – whether to gain a job, change to a better job, make a ‘late’ career change or improve career prospects in a present job. For adults coping with a disability, returning to study can be about an aspiration to ‘give something back’ and help others as they have been helped. A little-studied employability motivation was also uncovered: for adult students living in rural isolation, often with extensive caring responsibilities, returning to study was about gaining confidence and the self-organization skills to become self-employed. For older learners (50+), personal interest/enjoyment becomes a more significant motivation.

### c) Perceived barriers

Our data within the overall IDEAL research shows that perceived barriers to distance education do not differ significantly from perceived barriers to higher education in general (see section (i) of online questionnaire).

## Finland

The Finnish country report draws attention to the lack of personal feedback and counselling in distance education. The fact that online education requires more independence and responsibility can also be seen as potential barrier.

Specific barriers mentioned include:

- the high costs of the network connections
- ‘too much freedom’ making it difficult to complete studies on time
- isolation and loneliness, the unfamiliarity of web-based discussion, and lack of communication and face-to-face meetings
- difficulties in network connections
- lack of personal feedback and counselling
- unexpected changes in students’ life situation (causing them to drop out)
- from the teacher’s point of view: students’ lack of time management skills and unrealistic impressions about studying on a web-based course

- problems in combining work and education; lack of time due to family responsibilities
- lack of support from employers

## Germany

In the German case study the perceived barriers are as follows:

- costs
- lack of feedback and teacher contact
- lack of student support and services
- alienation and isolation
- lack of experience/training
- lack of adult-adjusted programmes
- lack of specific support structures for adult students, especially in formal regulations

## Greece

The Hellenic Open University (HOU) supports students through instalments, reduced prices and increased scholarships. Particular attention is paid to 'mature students', i.e. those over 23 years of age, during the selection procedure. Accordingly, mature students are given preference at the public electronic draw. Family and professional obligations affect the drop-out rates in distance education, especially for women. The main barriers are:

- difficulty in using electronic media (particularly for women)
- negative image of distance education degrees
- past negative learning experiences and strong ties to 'traditional' learning
- absence of a system for recognition of prior learning and work experience<sup>30</sup>

## Hungary

Today, university distance learning programmes in Hungary are all fee-paying and participation in such training is not subsidized. Students in Hungary do not necessarily

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<sup>30</sup> European Commission, 2013

choose distance learning for 'traditional' reasons; rather, they look for the least possible face-to-face attendance, according to the author. The main barriers to distance education are:

- lack of home internet access and/or sufficient IT structure
- presumed lack of competence in ICT and foreign languages
- costs (correspondence training is subsidized by the state; modern distance education with e-learning is not)
- lack of the courses/content that people really need in their localities
- previous negative learning experiences
- 'too much freedom': students in distance education tend to take longer to complete their training than those in face-to-face education due to insufficient self-directed learning skills (e.g. time-management)
- lack of trust in the quality of distance education programmes as opposed to 'traditional' forms of teaching/learning (students tend not to trust the qualifications of an instructor they do not know personally)
- students find distance education 'faceless'

## United Kingdom

While costs were mentioned as a barrier in all the other country studies, in the UK the lower cost of distance education was seen as advantage when compared with the costs of 'traditional' higher education courses/programmes. However, given that tuition fees vary greatly, costs can still be considered a barrier in selected cases. Since 2013 part-time students are ineligible for maintenance loans or grants, which strongly affects distance education students. To qualify for student loans (as full-time students do), part-time study must be at a minimum of 25% intensity of its full-time equivalent, and learners must be 'enrolled on a named qualification'.

The UK case study reports the following barriers to participation in education in general:

- social class (the higher your socio-economic position, the more likely you are to take part in learning)
- employment (even a low ranking job gives you a better chance of learning than being out of the labour market entirely)
- age (younger people are more likely to participate)

- disability (a major barrier to participation)
- costs, specifically the fee increase from 2012<sup>31</sup> (a bigger problem for the lower social classes, single parent families, and minority ethnic groups, all of whom are more sensitive to fees rising than young full-time students).
- doubt about return on investment
- difficulties in using new technology
- family/caring responsibilities and work leaving little time for education
- few employers support staff development
- disability (a major barrier to participation)

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<sup>31</sup> Although not explained in the UK report, we suggest that this is mostly due to the 2010 change in government (from Labour to Cons/LibDem) which removed the cap on tuition fees and in turn enabled universities to charge students up to £9000 per year.



# Synthesis and Conclusions

The initial questions of the online questionnaire concerned a) profile, b) motivation and interests and c) perceived barriers. From the study choice analytics and the five country reports, the following conclusions were drawn:

## **a) Student profile**

A majority of distance education students are women. Somewhat older than regular higher education students, they often work alongside their studies and have family responsibilities. The average potential distance education student in our data set is between 25-34 years old and in employment. Distance education is sometimes the only possibility for them to continue their studies and to gain or upgrade their qualifications for a new job or position. Another distinct group of distance education students are retired people, who study for self-fulfilment or in order to stay active. Most of them have completed a bachelor's degree (57.04%). Provision of online education as the main mode of distance education responds to most adult learners' request for more flexible learning opportunities.

## **b) Motivation for distance education and students' interests**

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

distance education in order to combine their studies with other duties. The level of education potential distance education students were most commonly seeking was a master's degree.

All of these factors (increasing attainment levels, improving career prospects and learning for self-fulfilment) are elements within the vision of lifelong learning, which is considered the major motivation for adult learners to engage in distance education.

### **c) Perceived barriers**

The most common barriers for distance education students are costs and time constraints resulting from work and family responsibilities. As with on-campus education, funding is an important issue for the majority of students. The use of technology can also constitute a barrier. Information on recognition of prior learning and possible alternative access modes needs to be made more transparent: less than 10% of the universities in the survey provided this information.

## 1. Study choice analytics overview of country groupings

Region	Country of Interest
Eastern Europe	Bulgaria; Czech Republic; Hungary; Poland; Russia; Romania; Slovakia; Ukraine.
Northern Europe	Denmark; Estonia; Finland; Iceland; Ireland; Latvia; Lithuania; Norway; Sweden; United Kingdom.
Other	United States; China; Australia; Israel; United Arab Emirates; Brazil; Tunisia; Hong Kong (SAR); Canada; Mauritius; Costa Rica; Egypt; Singapore; Philippines; Macedonia (FYROM); New Zealand.
Southern Europe	Cyprus; Italy; Portugal; Serbia; Spain; Greece; Turkey; Slovenia; Malta; Croatia; Cyprus, northern part*; Albania; Armenia; Montenegro.
Western Europe	Netherlands; Austria; Belgium; France; Germany; Switzerland; Luxembourg; Monaco; Liechtenstein.
Continent	Country of Interest
Africa	Algeria; Angola; Benin; Botswana; Burkina Faso; Burundi; Cambodia; Cameroon; Cape Verde; Central African Republic; Chad; Comoros; Congo (Democratic Republic of the); Congo (Republic of the); Côte d'Ivoire; Djibouti; Egypt; Equatorial Guinea; Eritrea; Ethiopia; Gabon; Gambia; Ghana; Guinea; Guinea-Bissau; Kenya; Lesotho; Liberia; Libya; Madagascar; Malawi; Mali; Mauritania; Mauritius; Morocco; Mozambique; Namibia; Niger; Nigeria; Réunion; Rwanda; São Tomé and Príncipe; Saudi Arabia; Senegal; Seychelles; Sierra Leone; Somalia; South Africa; Swaziland; Tanzania; Togo; Tunisia; Uganda; Zambia; Zimbabwe.
Asia	Afghanistan; Armenia; Azerbaijan; Bahrain; Bangladesh; Bhutan; Brunei; China; Georgia; Hong Kong (SAR); India; Indonesia; Iran; Iraq; Israel; Japan; Jordan; Kazakhstan; Kuwait; Kyrgyzstan; Laos; Lebanon; Macao (SAR); Malaysia; Maldives; Mongolia; Myanmar; Nepal; North Korea; Oman; Pakistan; Palestinian Territory, Occupied; Philippines; Qatar; Singapore; South Korea; Sri Lanka; Sudan; Syria; Taiwan; Tajikistan; Thailand; Timor-Leste; Turkey; Turkmenistan; United Arab Emirates; Uzbekistan; Vietnam; Yemen.
Europe	Albania; Andorra; Austria; Belarus; Belgium; Bosnia and Herzegovina; Bulgaria; Croatia; Cyprus; Czech Republic; Denmark; Estonia; Faroe Islands; Finland; France; Germany; Greece; Greenland; Hungary; Iceland; Ireland; Isle of Man; Italy; Latvia; Liechtenstein; Lithuania; Luxembourg; Macedonia (FYROM); Malta; Moldova; Monaco; Montenegro; Netherlands; Norway; Poland; Portugal; Romania; Russia; San Marino; Serbia; Slovakia; Slovenia; Spain; Sweden; Switzerland; Ukraine; United Kingdom.
Northern America	Bermuda; Canada; Saint Pierre and Miquelon; United States
Southern America	Anguilla; Antigua and Barbuda; Argentina; Aruba; Bahamas; Barbados; Belize; Bolivia; Brazil; British Virgin Islands; Cayman Islands; Chile; Colombia; Costa Rica; Cuba; Dominica; Dominican Republic; Ecuador; El Salvador; French Guiana; Grenada; Guadeloupe; Guatemala; Guyana; Haiti; Honduras; Jamaica ; Martinique ; Mexico ; Montserrat ; Netherlands Antilles ; Nicaragua; Panama; Paraguay; Peru; Puerto Rico; Saint Kitts and Nevis; Saint Lucia; Saint Vincent and the Grenadines; Suriname; Trinidad and Tobago; Turks and Caicos Islands; United States Virgin Islands; Uruguay; Venezuela.
Oceania	American Samoa; Australia; Cook Islands; Fiji; French Polynesia; Guam; Kiribati; Marshall Islands; Micronesia, Federated States of; Nauru; New Caledonia; New Zealand; Northern Mariana Islands; Palau; Papua New Guinea; Samoa; Solomon; Islands; Tonga; Tuvalu; Vanuatu.

## 2. Online Questionnaire

Hi,

are you a potential distance education student?

Please spare 5 minutes to help universities adapt to your needs.

- ➔ Yes, I will take the survey! (*link to the survey*)
- ➔ No, thank you, I am not interested in the survey. (*closes the window*)
- ➔ No, thank you, I am not a potential distance education student. (*closes the window*)

Thank you for sharing information on your background and your motivation to take distance education!

### Your age:

Select:

- 15-19
- 20-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- above 55

### Where do you live:

Drop-down EHEA List

### Your current occupation:

Select

- Student
- In employment
- Self-employed
- Registered as unemployed
- On leave (parental leave, etc.)
- Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

### Your highest level of education completed:

Select

- Basic/high school
- Bachelor (or equivalent level)
- Master (or equivalent level)
- PhD (or equivalent level)
- Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

### Why are you interested in further education?

Select (multiple possible)

- I want to improve my career prospects.
- I am studying to avoid unemployment.
- I am studying for self-fulfillment.
- Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

### I am interested in distance education because:

Select (multiple possible)

- Distance education is easier to combine with my job.
- Distance education is easier to combine with family duties.
- Distance education allows me to study without leaving my home.
- Distance education allows me to study at my own pace.
- Distance education costs less.

- Other, please specify:\_\_\_\_\_

**The biggest barrier for me to take distance education is:**

Select 3 (in order)

- Costs
- Time
- Distance education technology
- Language of the programme/course (if not taught in your native language)
- Recognition of my prior qualifications/ alternative access routes
- Other, please specify:\_\_\_\_\_

**Do you agree/disagree with the following statement?**

Select line: Strongly agree ----- strongly disagree

Distance education helps to increase equal access to education

Any other thoughts on why you are or are not considering distance education?

Free text.

Thank you

### **3. Country reports**

**Finland**

**Germany**

**Greece**

**Hungary**

**UK**

# IDEAL Case study – Finland

**Author:**

Nina Haltia



## Contents

1. Introduction
2. History of distance teaching in Finnish HE
3. Adults in higher education – structures and policies
4. Adult learners and their needs

## 1. Introduction

The higher education system in Finland consists of universities and universities of applied sciences (i.e. polytechnic institutions). The universities provide scientific degrees at bachelor, masters and doctoral level. Although there are entry routes aimed specifically at adults, adult or mature degree students do not enjoy any special status. Universities also offer various forms of adult education courses which do not lead to a degree, including open university education and different kinds of vocational further education courses.

The universities of applied sciences offer more professionally oriented higher education. They provide degree education on bachelor and masters level. The bachelor's degree is the basic degree; special programmes exist for adults. Master's programmes are especially aimed at adults with work experience. The universities of applied sciences also provide open courses and further education which do not lead to a degree.

There are no separate open or distance teaching universities in Finland, but as in most universities in other Nordic countries (Scheller and Holmberg, 2014, p. 11-13), the HE institutions in Finland use different forms of distance education. Today, online and blended education are well-established, normal ways to organize teaching for adults, and elements of distance teaching are widely used in different kinds of courses (Hiidenmaa, 2014, p. 2). Recent initiatives in higher education policy in Finland have concentrated largely on the structures of higher education rather than the formats of teaching. This is also seen in the fact that, although different forms of distance or blended education are used, there are no national statistics on the numbers of distance education courses or the numbers of students on these courses, which makes it difficult to make clear judgments regarding the volume.

The present case report on Finland is divided into the following three parts. First, the report gives a short overview of the history of distance teaching in Finnish higher education institutions. Second, it describes the position of adults within Finnish higher education institutions and higher education policy. Third, the report summarizes the results of previous studies showing what we know about the motives, needs and difficulties of adult learners in higher education in Finland.

## 2. History of distance teaching in Finnish HE

The development of distance teaching in Finland is firmly connected to the history of open university education. Open university education was started at the beginning of the 1970s in some Finnish universities. The aim of the courses was to equalize entry to higher education by offering educational opportunities to those who did not fulfil formal entry requirements. Open university courses were specifically aimed at adults and a minimum age of 25 years was set, although it was only loosely applied. In addition to equality of educational background and age, regional equality was also seen as important. During the 1960s and 1970s a number of new universities were founded in different parts of the country. Open university education helped to increase access to higher education in rural areas (Haltia, 2012a; Halttunen, 2006.)

The UK Open University with its massive distance teaching 'industry' served as an example for the Finns, but as the resources and political situation in Finland were different, the resulting system took a different form. Open university courses were started in some Finnish universities as a locally organized, small-scale activity. At first, teaching on open university courses was mainly face-to-face and took place during evenings and weekends either at the university itself or at one of the local adult education institutions (Haltia, 2012a, p. 84-103; Halttunen, 2006.)

In the 1980s the distinctive Finnish version of distance teaching, so-called 'multi-form education', was introduced. In these courses, students study independently but also have regular face-to-face meetings with a local tutor. This mode of teaching and the government financed development projects which were launched in the universities in this period were of interest to many researchers. The atmosphere was very optimistic; it was hoped that the new distance teaching methods would make higher education more accessible, widening participation and enhancing learning (e.g. Koro, 1993). However, many research texts reported that, while open university courses did enrol more students, they were not necessarily from educationally disadvantaged groups. Moreover, the academic community doubted the efficacy of the innovative teaching methods and questioned the standards of distance education. (Haltia, 2012, p. 131-162.)

In the mid-1990s ICT was introduced in open university education. The possibilities offered by ICT were used in various ways: on some courses a few elements of ICT were adopted to supplement other forms of teaching, whereas on others the whole course was organized online. Eija Mannisenmäki and Jyri Manninen (2004) conducted a research project on online education in open universities at the beginning of the 2000s. They discovered that the borders between online, multi-form and face-to-face education were blurred, since the different modes of education were often combined within one course. According to Mannisenmäki and Manninen's classification, about 4% of open university students in 2000 were studying on online courses, 8% on courses that combined online and multi-form education, and 24% on multi-form courses. The majority of students (64%) still attended face-to-face courses. (Mannisenmäki and Manninen, 2004, p. 28-30).

At the beginning of the 2000s a number of other research reports were published on the subject of distance teaching courses and experiences with this form of education. Since open university education was a forerunner of distance education, it served as a kind of laboratory for the researchers testing the functionality of distance teaching and debating how web-based courses should be organized (see Korhonen, 2003; Nevgi and Tirri, 2001, 2003). For example, it was found that too much freedom in the course structure made it more difficult for students to finish the course. Clearly designed and scheduled courses, even if they allowed only limited individual flexibility, were found to be more efficient (Nevgi, 2001).

Optimism regarding ICT and the possibilities it offers was also reflected in initiatives to widen the use of the new distance teaching methods to degree education as well. The national policy adopted an objective to create a new kind of consortium on distance teaching, the virtual university, which was to increase web-based learning and enhance cooperation between universities. Several virtual university projects were financed by the ministry of education in 2001-2006. According to the project evaluations performed subsequently, these projects increased the use of ICT in teaching, enhanced know-how and strengthened the development culture within the universities. However, the projects were also criticized for short-sightedness, insufficient planning and lack of commitment in some areas (Nevgi and Heikkilä, 2005, p. 19-21; MoE, 2007, p. 48).

The virtual university consortium was ended in 2009, but some of the project's aims are still valid today. During the last decade, web-based learning has become part of teaching in all areas of higher education. A significant body of research has been carried out on learning processes in the context of degree education (e.g. Vuopala, 2013; Mäkelä, 2010) and on the quality of distance learning (e.g. Sariola and Evälä, 2005; Nevgi, Löfström and Evälä, 2005). Today there is no need to emphasize the technology and its forms per se because they have become so widespread. Rather, the question is about reforming and re-defining learning (Hiidenmaa, 2014, p. 2).

According to Hiidenmaa (2014), in many areas of higher education web-based learning is used as a natural way to organize teaching and much good practices can be observed. Nevertheless, distance teaching is still used in a rather haphazard way and online teaching formats are still in their early stages in some respects. There are significant differences between faculties and subject fields regarding the kinds of courses that are offered. For example, the open university, with its substantial and versatile distance learning opportunities, remains the forerunner. Students on degree courses do not have much choice regarding the mode of the teaching they receive; web-based learning is mostly used as an element of blended learning. According to Hiidenmaa, there are still issues to be settled here. Some of the technical solutions need further development as they are considered too clumsy. Moreover, temporary solutions and changes to the technical platforms often disturb longer-range planning. Both students and teachers need more education regarding distance learning. Perhaps most importantly, universities need to achieve consensus on views, targets and policies in creating these new kinds of learning opportunities within their institutions (Hiidenmaa, 2014, p. 6-7).

The latest theme in the discussion on distance teaching has been the Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) that have also been introduced to some extent in Finland. There have been MOOCs in computing science and mathematics in the University of Helsinki, aimed at both degree students and those outside the university. It has also been made possible to gain entrance to degree studies after completing the web-based course. The courses have been beneficial in four ways: (1) by forming part of degree students' study path; (2) by building the image and reputation of the subject field and encouraging people to enrol in it; (3) by replacing the entrance examination; and (4) by encouraging

people to make greater use of the distance education available (Hiidenmaa, 2013, p. 12-13).

Hiidenmaa (2013) points out that there are many questions to be considered when evaluating the development of MOOCs in Finnish universities: What are the aims of the courses? Are they designed to increase the reputation and visibility of the university or to develop its teaching? How does the question of equality relate to the MOOCs? What kind of cooperation is preferred? Naturally, there are also several practical questions which need to be answered. On the whole, Hiidenmaa argues, it is important to keep in mind that the different kinds of open and web-based courses available are only one element in increasing the openness of education. There are other forms of distance education besides MOOCs, all of which need to be considered when developing educational opportunities (Hiidenmaa, 2013, p. 23).

Although distance education is widely used in Finnish higher education institutions, there is currently no specific policy in Finland concerning higher education at a distance. On the more general level, ICT is considered an essential part of education, working life and the general functioning of society as a whole. The Finnish Ministry of Education believes that ICT offers the possibility for more flexible studies tailored to the needs of the individual (MoEC, 2011, p. 15). A recent document on the future of education states that digitalization changes the functions of society. Within higher education, 'digitalization supports the development of science, raises skills levels, accelerates the usage of resources and enhances the accessibility of education. In order to make the most of the possibilities offered by digitalization, it is necessary to create a learning-oriented culture and new kinds of teaching methods' (MoEC, 2014, p. 14 and 18).

The wider aims of recent political initiatives have been to lengthen individuals' working careers, to raise the educational level of the workforce, and to enhance the effectiveness of educational institutions. These goals are of course reflected in higher education as well. A major problem in higher education has been the slow transition of young matriculated students to the studies as well as the lengthening of study times. The fact that considerable proportions of new entrants to HE institutions have already taken a degree or already have a study place at another HE institution is also considered a

problematic issue. The university admissions system has been under discussion for several years and is currently undergoing a reform designed to promote the enrolment of traditional young applicants. Adults who need to upgrade their education level or deepen their knowledge are directed towards separate admission channels parallel to the main entrance track, or to professional further education courses not leading to a degree (MoEC, 2011).

### **3. Adults in higher education – structures and policies**

Higher education in Finland offers various study opportunities for adults and none of the areas excludes adults totally. However, there are differences in how adult students are positioned within the system. Open university education, as mentioned earlier, is traditionally aimed at adults. Open polytechnic education started in 1997 and was first aimed at degree students in polytechnic institutions, but has since been opened to non-degree students as well. Participation in both of these forms of education is open; it is not restricted according to previous education level, age, occupation, or any other criterion. The aim of open university and open polytechnic education is to equalize access to higher education and to create flexible and versatile study opportunities for lifelong learning (MoE, 2005, p. 9; Avoimen yliopiston foorumi, 2010).

There are fees for open courses, but they are regulated and subject to a maximum of ten euros per credit unit. Open university and open polytechnic education are fully equivalent to conventional degree courses. They function as modules of conventional degrees; if the student is or will become a degree student, the modules can be included in the degree. Studying in an open university or open polytechnic does not automatically lead to a degree, but it is possible to enter a degree course via the so-called 'open university gateway' or the 'pathway studies' of polytechnic institutions. However, the number of those entering degree programmes via the gateway remains low (see Haltia, Leskinen and Rahiala, 2014).

Both universities and polytechnic institutions offer various forms of professional further education. These courses do not lead to a degree. They can include modules of degrees or be specifically tailored to certain groups of workers. The aim is to create courses relevant to adults who need to update their know-how due to changes in their working

environment. Currently on the agenda are programmes combining work and education and various different kinds of professional specialization courses designed to build the competences of workers in new areas of working life (Haltia, 2012*b*; MoEC, 2013, p. 7).

Professional further education courses are aimed at academic or expert workers who already hold previous higher education degrees. These individuals need to develop their skills and knowledge in order to meet the demands of their working life; the courses should be designed to allow them to do this. Whilst adults need education to respond to the challenges of working life, further education courses for adults are often prohibitively expensive, charging far higher fees than open university or open polytechnic courses. Because of this issue, many adult students prefer to enter conventional degree programmes which do not impose fees, and which in any case are better known and respected by employers (MoEC, 2011, p. 37-38; Haltia, 2012*b*).

Adults' position on degree programmes differs according to sector. In the polytechnic sector, institutions have separate bachelor programmes for young and adult students. However, adult applicants may enter the programmes aimed at young students. The difference between the programmes is that the adult programmes offer more flexibility for the student. Access is possible through the main entrance route or via the so-called 'path studies' which lead from open polytechnic to degree studies.

The masters' programmes in polytechnic institutions are clearly aimed at adults who wish to enhance their skills and deepen their knowledge in a field in which they already have experience. Applicants to these programmes must have a bachelor's degree plus a minimum of three years' work experience in the field. Master's degrees in the polytechnic sector are a relatively new phenomenon in Finland and are not yet familiar to employers (Ojala and Isopahkala-Bouret, in review). The aim of the national policy is to make these degrees more established and respected in the job market. Adults who have taken these degrees feel that, although they are officially at the same level as university masters' degrees, they are nevertheless viewed as a second-rate option (Isopahkala-Bouret, 2014).



In the university sector there is no specific status for adult or part-time students. Instead, adults mix freely with other students on degree courses. According to official statistics, there are no adult or part-time students in Finnish universities. Adults may enter conventional degree courses either through the normal route or via separate selection channels. According to a study by Rinne et al. (2008) on adults' access to degree education, in 2003 about one fifth of university entrants were 25 years or older and about one in ten was 30 or over. The main entrance channel is the largest route and is mainly used by under 25-year-olds. Among the older applicant groups, the other selection routes are more popular (Rinne et al., 2008, p. 63-67).

The open university gateway is the entry route specifically aimed at adults. After pursuing a certain number of open university courses, a student is able to transfer to the status of degree student. The gateway is designed for mature students who have earned the required number of credits with sufficient marks. Successfully completed open university studies are to be taken as a proof of the student's ability and motivation to continue their studies and finish the degree. However, the number of people passing through this gateway has remained low (Haltia, 2012a).

On most university degree programmes, students gain entry to both bachelor's and master's degree courses simultaneously and may continue their studies right through both cycles. It is common for open university gateway entrants to transfer to degree studies after completing the courses included in the bachelor's degree. In practice, then, these students enter the degree course at the point when they are starting their master's degree studies.

There are many different masters' degree programmes available, including programmes taught in English and aimed at international students. Entry routes are available for adults with a bachelor level degree (for example, to allow kindergarten teachers to become primary or secondary school teachers). Recognition of prior learning is an important issue where these courses are concerned. The relevant policy documents present RPL as a means of enhancing flexibility and allowing for the life situation of adult students. On the other hand, it is also presented as an essential element in enhancing the effectiveness

of education. Adults should not attend formal education any more than is necessary and the education that they receive should be relevant to their needs (Haltia, 2012*b*).

The question of entrance to degree programmes in higher education institutions is very timely, since the admissions system is currently in the process of being reformed. The aim of the reform is to improve access for applicants with no prior experience of higher education. The main entrance route will in future be more specifically aimed at these applicants; applicants with previous study places or degrees will be steered towards other tracks. The aim is also to direct those who have already taken a degree towards their own further education programmes instead of degree education. The policy documents state that those with degrees should use further education courses and open university or open polytechnic courses to supplement their degrees and thus strengthen their knowledge and skills (MoEC, 2011; MoEC, 2010, p. 11; Haltia, 2012*b*).

On the whole, it seems that the polytechnic sector has been more open towards adult students than the universities. The polytechnic institutions offer programmes specifically aimed at adults and have tailored their teaching to meet the needs of adult students. Polytechnic institutions have also been more proactive in working to develop the gateway from open polytechnic to degree studies (Haltia, unpublished manuscript). Moreover, the practices concerning APL have been developed further in the polytechnic sector than in the university sector.

The universities are more conservative in their attitude towards adult students. Policies and practices concerning APL have been developed much more slowly than in the polytechnic sector. Moreover, the open university system has always been regarded as marginal in relation to the 'core' university system. In particular, the gateway to degree studies has been under negotiation. The universities have resisted efforts to widen this gateway despite governmental initiatives to make it more functional. The universities control the size of the gateway not only by determining the number of students taken, but also by setting the specific requirements for open university education (Haltia, 2012*a*).

Within the university sector, however, institutions and subject fields differ widely in their openness towards adults. In the study of adults' access to universities mentioned above,

degree programmes (or more specifically, selection units) were clustered into five different groups according to their friendliness towards adults. The first group comprised programmes where adults formed the majority of entrants. In these 'adult dominated' selection units, adults acquired study places both through the main selection route and through other routes, including the open university gateway. Only a small fraction of selection units belonged to this group, mainly from nursing sciences.

In the second group the units' main admission routes were popular among adults. In general, these units were not very easily accessible but adults were nevertheless accepted slightly more often than younger applicants. Selection units in the subject fields of theology, business studies, psychology, social sciences, music and education were overrepresented in this group.

In the third group, adults were directed to their own routes and separated from other applicants. Adults were seldom accepted through the main selection route. These kinds of selection units seemed to be linked to certain professions and were especially popular among men. Overrepresented subject fields in this group included business studies, engineering, social sciences, industrial arts, education, nursery school teacher education, and computer science.

The fourth group comprised selection units which were accessible to all age groups, yet which tended to be avoided by adults. The selection units from language studies and natural sciences quite often belonged to this group. The final group comprised selection units which were difficult to access for all age groups and which were closed to adults. At least in terms of student recruitment, these units could be described as elitist. Adults were less likely to be accepted than younger applicants.

The grouping formed a continuum where the most adult-friendly units were found in the first-mentioned groups. These groups comprised units which seemed to be genuinely open for adults, and which allowed adults access through various different routes. The least adult-friendly was the last mentioned group where it was difficult for adults to gain a student place through the main selection route, but where no other kinds of routes existed either. In the middle were the selection units where adults were directed to their own separate routes (Halttunen, 2007; Rinne et al., 2008).

#### 4. Adult learners and their needs

In Finland, participation in adult education is generally quite high. 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. Women participated more than men and those in employment more than those not in employment. Those living in southern parts of the country and the cities attended adult education more often than those living in more rural areas. The most significant factors influencing participation were socioeconomic status and level of previous education. Whereas a third of those with basic level education took part in adult education, the participation rate of those with higher education degrees was 70 % (Niemi, Ruuskanen and Seppänen, 2014, p. 20-21).

In 2012, 4% of 18-64-year-olds in Finland (125,000 people) had participated in adult education in higher education institutions (Niemi, Ruuskanen and Seppänen, 2014, p. 19). When looking at participation in higher education, the 'Matthew effect' is also evident. Compared to the population as a whole, adult entrants to university degree programmes tended to be more educated and more often in white-collar positions. They were not, however, in particularly well paid positions (Rinne et al., 2008, p. 124-130).

In the same study on entry to degree education in universities, the adult applicants were divided into five groups according to their educational background and age. The first group comprised the 'returners' (16% of entrants): those who had already taken a university masters' degree. This group is considered a problem in higher education policy, since they are heading towards multiple degrees. Second, the applicants who did not fulfil traditional entry qualifications were separated as a group of 'second chancers' (11% of entrants). This is the group which enters degree education via the non-traditional route. For the remaining applicants, age was used as the dividing criterion. The third group consisted of those who were 30 or older, termed 'mature entrants' (31% of entrants). This was the largest and most female-dominated group. Those under 30 were divided into two groups according to their education. Those who had not obtained any other degrees after the matriculation examination were termed 'young seekers' (22% of entrants). Those who had gained another degree were termed 'young continuers' (20% of entrants). The life situation of the entrants in these two groups was clearly different from that of the 'mature adults' and 'second chancers'. For example, they were less likely

to have dependants than the entrants in the older groups. Thus, the 'adulthood' of these groups is different (Rinne et al., 2008, p. 135-182).

In open universities and open polytechnics, the majority of the students are women of working age. Most of them are also employed. The students are nevertheless a heterogeneous group, and their social backgrounds and work and life experiences are varied. For example, some students on these courses have already pursued degrees at secondary and even at tertiary levels (Rinne et al., 2003; Haltia, Leskinen and Rahiala, 2014; Lohikoski, 2008).

The recent survey on open university and open polytechnic students shows that the age of these students has significantly risen over the last ten years. According to a study which looked at open university students in 2000, over a third of the students were under 25 years old. Today, the proportion of young students has dropped to about 15%; most students are in their thirties and forties. The educational background of the students has also changed remarkably. Whereas in 2000 only about 2% of open university students had a master's degree, in 2012 the proportion had risen to one third. The proportion of master's degree holders in open polytechnics was also high: 14% of open polytechnic students had obtained a master's degree either in a university or in a polytechnic institution. These changes indicate that the function of open university education has changed somewhat. In the past it was more often used by young matriculated students who had not gained a study place at a 'proper university. Nowadays students are more often adults in professional positions who want to enhance their qualifications and skills (Haltia, Leskinen and Rahiala, 2014).

As in other forms of higher education, the majority of the students on master's programmes in polytechnic institutions are women. According to a survey conducted in 2006, many of the participants were in their thirties, and the average amount of working experience was 12 years. As these programmes are aimed at people with a bachelor's degree, the students were highly educated. In addition to the required bachelor's degree, they had in most instances also attended many further and supplementary education courses (Ojala, 2008).

In the national adult education survey covering all forms of adult education, the most common motivation to take part in adult education was to enhance the skills needed in working life and improve career prospects. About 70% of those who had participated in some form of adult education reported this motivation. The second most important motive was to develop knowledge and skills in a subject area that was felt to be interesting (64%). The third was to develop knowledge and skills needed in everyday life (45%) (Niemi, Ruuskanen and Seppänen, 2014, p. 107-108).

When looking at adults' participation in higher education, the motives reported are quite similar. Recent studies on the motives of open university students have cited the development of vocational skills, general education, getting to know the subject field and studying towards a degree (Avointen yliopisto-opintojen kysyntä pääkaupunkiseudulla, 2012, p. 10-11). Students in open polytechnics also cited similar motives: the most important reasons for studying were development of vocational skills and self-fulfilment. Pursuing a bachelor's degree in a polytechnic institution was also an important aim for some of the students (Lohikoski, 2008, p. 12-15).

In a study which analysed students in both open universities and open polytechnics, the most significant motive for studying was to supplement the knowledge and skills needed in working life. The motive to develop oneself in relation to a hobby or in a more general sense was also significant for many students (Haltia, Leskinen and Rahiala, 2014). In this study, students were clustered in four groups according to their motives. The first and biggest group consisted of students who wanted to supplement their education either during or after finishing their degree. These students mainly wanted to acquire competences they needed in working life. The second group was composed of students who wanted to study mainly for non-instrumental reasons. They wanted to improve themselves in various areas of life. The third group comprised students who wanted to change career and planned to enter degree studies via the gateway specifically aimed at adults. In the fourth group were younger students whose main motives were to apply for degree studies via the main entrance track and prepare themselves for the entrance examination (Haltia, Leskinen and Rahiala, 2014).

In the above-mentioned study, most students were very happy with the study opportunities they had received through the open university or open polytechnic. About 90% stated that the studies had met their expectations. Particularly content were the adults who planned to enter degree studies via the separate entry channels. They claimed to have found their studies particularly meaningful and wanted to carry on studying.

Previous studies suggest that pursuing a degree can carry complex meanings for an adult. The dichotomy of changing vs. staying in the same field is seldom applicable in the case of adult students. There is some evidence that adults do not necessarily plan to get another job after graduation. Pursuing a degree can be mentally important, for example in a situation where studies have been started in an open university and obtaining a final seal for studies becomes an end in itself. Pursuing a university degree can also be more like updating previous education in a situation where a particular kind of job which used to require only bachelor or post-secondary education today requires a master's degree (Alho-Malmelin, 2010; Isopahkala-Bouret, in review; Moore, 2003, p. 152).

Open university and open polytechnic courses are arranged with different study formats. Even though we have no official statistics on the numbers of students in different study formats, we can be sure that a significant proportion of them are distance learners. Participation in web-based courses in particular has not been studied extensively during the last decade, but in a large-scale study on open university students in Finland, it was found that, when different study modes were compared, there were differences between the student body in web-based and non-web-based courses. The students on web-based courses were older than the students in face-to-face and multi-form courses. The students on web-based courses also had more children than the rest of the students. They were highly concentrated in the southern parts of the country and especially near the capital or other major cities. It could therefore be stated that web-based courses appeal more to people in the bigger cities in the south of Finland than to people in rural areas. There were some hints that students on web-based courses were slightly better educated than students in other forms of education. They also tended to have a higher income than others (Rinne et al., 2003, p. 102-104).

Mannisenmäki and Manninen (2004) conducted a survey of open universities and the students on their web-based courses. The average student pursuing this form of education was a 36-year-old woman with at least secondary-level education, working in a white-collar occupation and living in a city. Their results also confirmed the finding that, compared to other students, students on these courses were older, better educated, and more likely to be employed in prestigious positions. Many of them had children and lived in the big cities in southern Finland. It seems therefore that web-based courses are better able to accommodate study alongside work and family commitments (Mannisenmäki and Manninen, 2004, p. 36-37).

When students on web-based courses were asked about their study motives and experiences of the study format, they particularly emphasized the importance of flexibility in terms of time and place. The students appreciated the ability to combine work, family and study, since they were typically in life situations where they needed this kind of flexibility. In their life situation, the online course might therefore actually constitute the only opportunity to study. On the other hand, the finding indicates that this format of education selects students with better-than-average learning skills and resources (Mannisenmäki and Manninen, 2004).

When students were asked to name the advantages of online study, they stated flexibility of time and place, independent learning, the web as a study format, general flexibility, communication and counselling. Among the disadvantages were lack of counselling, lack of communication and face-to-face meetings, shortages in the design of the course, problems with the timetable, technical problems, the need for self-discipline, and cost. When asked to state the differences between online study and other teaching formats, students stated that online education was more independent, lonelier, more challenging and demanded more responsibility. They also stated that there were differences in time management and communication between web-based and non-web-based study (Mannisenmäki and Manninen, 2004).

In a study by Nevgi and Tirri (2001, 2003), adult students and their teachers evaluated web-based courses and the factors that enabled or hindered study in two different educational formats: open university and education aimed at unemployed people with



academic degrees. According to the students' view, the factor that most promoted successful study was students' own motivation and effort. The teachers, however, cited transfer of learning, feedback from the teacher and a constructive view of learning as the most enabling factors.

When evaluating barriers to learning, teachers were more likely than students to consider that significant barriers exist. According to the teachers' view, isolation and loneliness among students, the unfamiliarity of web-based discussion, and difficulties regarding network connections constituted the most significant barriers to learning. The barriers experienced by the students were not so powerful, but interestingly, open university students were more likely than students on courses aimed at degree holders to cite the high costs of network connections, lack of personal feedback and counselling and overly demanding course content as barriers (Nevgi and Tirri, 2001, 2003).

It is also worth noting that under half of open university students completed their course, whereas 62% of participants on the course aimed at degree holders finished the course on time. The reason for dropping out was most often an unexpected change in one's life situation. Teachers were more likely to consider dropping out a result of lack of time management skills and of students' unrealistic impressions about what studying on a web-based course would entail. The authors also point out that difficulties with technology can be related to difficulties in other areas of learning. Those who possess the necessary technical skills can more easily overcome the difficulties they encounter during studies (ibid.).

On a more general level, the barriers to participation in adult education most often cited are the difficulty of combining work and education, lack of time due to family responsibilities, and lack of educational opportunities within a suitable range. Lack of support from employers and high costs of education were also commonly cited barriers (Niemi, Ruuskanen and Seppänen, 2014, p. 106). The three most common barriers are ones that distance education and web-based courses can do much to overcome. But of course, the adults themselves must also be willing to participate. As participation is very much linked to previous education level, distance education itself as a study format has limited potential for attracting more students to higher education. Moreover, a certain

level of technical skill is necessary to take part in this form of education. In Finland, the adult population on average has excellent skills in technology as well as numeracy and literacy, but there are significant differences between people of different ages and education levels (MoEC, 2013, p. 19).

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# IDEAL Case study – Germany

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## 1. Introduction

This case study was conducted in the context of the project 'Impact of Distance Education on Adult Learning'<sup>33</sup> (IDEAL) and examines the situation of distance education and distance learning in Germany. It is based on a review of empirical data presented by European and national institutions and authorities, an analysis of national and regional policy documents, and a review of the literature on the characteristics, needs and expectations of students who are interested or enrolled in online study programmes. In order to structure this extensive topic, the case study follows one major question:

### **Has distance education increased the openness of higher education institutions in Germany and if so, how?**

The structure of this study is based on an analysis of the regulatory framework for distance education/learning in Germany because the German educational system is greatly determined by regional policies and is still in the process of adapting to the changes initiated by the Bologna-process<sup>34</sup>. Although the implementation of the bachelor and master system is largely complete<sup>35</sup>, the lack of social mobility in the German educational system (chapter 1.1.) remains a challenge:

'In Germany, only 24% of adults (non-students) have attained a higher level of education than their parents, the second smallest proportion among OECD countries (the average is 38%)' (OECD, Country-Note Germany, 2014, p. 7).

The case study does not provide a general overview of the German educational sector, as an extensive description is available in the country report section of the HEAD-study<sup>36</sup> in the third chapter of the Country Report Germany (Banscherus and Spexard, 2012, p. 138). However, the second chapter provides an overview of the regulatory framework for distance education in the 16 different federal states and on the federal level (2.1.). In order to focus on the higher education system in depth, two essential concepts of learning at a distance in Germany need to be distinguished. While 'Fernunterricht' is largely

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<sup>33</sup> <http://idealproject.eu/> [12.10.2014]

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.ehea.info/> [10.10.2014]

<sup>35</sup> 85% of programmes in 2012: <http://www.tagesschau.de/inland/bologna-prozess100.html> [17.10.2014]

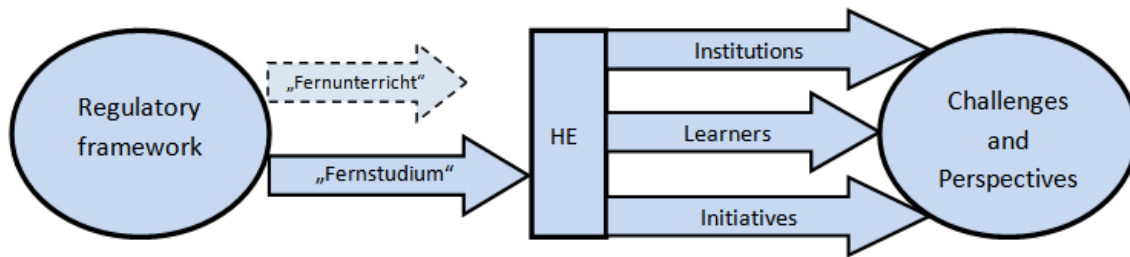
<sup>36</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/education/library/study/2012/adult-learning-g\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/library/study/2012/adult-learning-g_en.pdf) [18.10.2014]

focused on non-academic programmes and does not lead to an academic degree, the term 'Fernstudium' refers to a programme at a higher education institution, offered either in the private or public sector. The second part of the chapter (2.2.) summarizes the key differences between these two approaches. In this report, the focus is on programmes leading to an academic degree; 'Fernstudium' is therefore translated as distance education. A summary of important governmental initiatives regarding the opening of the higher education system over the past 15 years is presented at the end of this chapter (2.3.). The emphasis is on already implemented projects, which have in turn partly influenced the projects that are currently running.

Basic facts about higher education in Germany are presented in the third chapter, including the institutions offering distance education, learners' needs and characteristics, and a summary of the barriers in the higher education sector. Recent studies about learners' needs and expectations of distance learning are presented. In order to outline the recent developments in distance education in Germany, this chapter also highlights current initiatives for the opening of higher education. This chapter also provides major statistical findings and highlights research carried out over the past 15 years. It is worth mentioning that most studies in the last decade mainly emphasized aspects of the usage of new technology for learning processes (Allmann, 2004) rather than the learning format itself. Until the year 2010, there remained a serious lack of knowledge of the development of study formats suited to heterogeneous target groups, which still constitutes a challenge for these programmes (Klump and Rybnikowa, 2010). Through the various projects initiated by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung (BMBF)) since 2011, these topics are now being intensely addressed.

The perspectives and challenges in removing the barriers are the topic of the fourth and final chapter. The basic structure of the report is illustrated by the following figure.

**Figure 1: Structure of case study Germany, HE = higher education (illustration by the author)**



### 1.1. Social mobility in the German higher education system

Germany is often a quarter below the other Western countries when it comes to new or graduated students (Klump and Rybnikowa, 2010). Students from socially disadvantaged families in particular do not have the same opportunity to reach a tertiary degree as students whose parents already hold such a degree. The likelihood for enrolling at a higher education institution is twice as high for children of highly qualified parents than for children of low or medium qualified parents.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, a higher educational qualification decreases a person's chances of being unemployed and increases their earnings from work: in 2012, German workers with lower secondary education earned 84% of what their peers with an upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary education earned, still significantly above the OECD average of 76%<sup>38</sup> (OECD, 2014, p. 4). The social upward mobility of younger people in Germany is among the lowest of all OECD countries, with 24% of young adults up to 34 years having a lower qualification than their parents, compared to an OECD average of 16%. These findings can partly be explained by the established and well-recognized upper secondary vocational programmes (dual system) and the comparatively low unemployment rates (6.5% overall and 4.3% for people under 20 years<sup>39</sup>). The incentive for tertiary degree attainment might therefore be lower in Germany than in other countries. Nevertheless, these findings are of major concern in the public debate about how to open higher education institutions to new target groups and to develop a system for the recognition of prior learning, especially towards qualifications obtained in the vocational/dual system.

<sup>37</sup> Education at a Glance, OECD, 2014: <http://www.oecd.org/berlin/presse/bildung-2014-deutschland.htm> [13.10.2014]

<sup>38</sup> <http://www.oecd.org/edu/Germany-EAG2014-Country-Note.pdf> [13.10.2014]

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.destatis.de/DE/ZahlenFakten/Indikatoren/Konjunkturindikatoren/Arbeitsmarkt/arb210.html> [19.10.2014]

The development of dual study programmes is hence a political goal, even though only a small percentage of students (3.3%) is actually enrolled in these programmes, as the Wissenschaftsrat (regarded as the most important German scientific advisory board) pointed out in 2013.<sup>40</sup>

## 2. Regulatory framework for distance education

An excellent summary of the German educational system is provided in the Country Report Germany (Banscherus and Spexard, 2013, p. 138). This chapter will therefore concentrate on presenting the regulatory framework which exists for distance education in Germany. All 16 German states have authority over their respective educational systems, although their similarities are much greater than their differences. At least 18 different laws need to be taken into consideration, all of which influence the development of distance education in higher education: in particular, the German Higher Education Framework Law (Deutsches Hochschulrahmengesetz, HRG<sup>41</sup>), the University Laws of the Federal States (Landeshochschulgesetze, LHG<sup>42</sup>) and the Law of the Protection of Participants in Distance Learning (Gesetz zum Schutz der Teilnehmer am Fernunterricht - Fernunterrichtsschutzgesetz - FernUSG<sup>43</sup>). Although the latter generally focuses on aspects of Fernunterricht (see Chapter 1.2. for a detailed description of the law), in special cases it may also be applicable to courses at universities and similar institutions. It has not yet been finally decided whether this law has to be applied to these courses. In recent years, alongside the universities' growing activities in the field of further education, the introduction of the ISO 29990<sup>44</sup> as an international quality standard for learning services has also influenced the debate on quality standards in distance education.

### 2.1. National policies in the 16 German states

All states have different laws with respect to continuing and distance education. The University Laws of the Federal States (Landeshochschulgesetze) were therefore

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<sup>40</sup> <http://www.wissenschaftsrat.de/download/archiv/3479-13.pdf> [18.10.2014]

<sup>41</sup> [http://www.bmbf.de/pub/HRG\\_20050126.pdf](http://www.bmbf.de/pub/HRG_20050126.pdf) [19.10.2014]

<sup>42</sup> [http://www.gew.de/Landeshochschulgesetze\\_3.html](http://www.gew.de/Landeshochschulgesetze_3.html) [19.10.2014]

<sup>43</sup> <http://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/fernusg/> [19.10.2014]

<sup>44</sup> <http://www.beuth.de/cmd%3Bjsessionid=0B92CB9A7F9AB17AF64CEDF69C8F64D5.3?workflowname=infoInstantdownload&customerid=&docname=1728212&orgdocname=&contextid=beuthneu&servicerefname=beuth&LoginName=&ixos=toc> [12.10.2014]

analysed to describe the regulations defined therein. Whereas Germany is organized as a unitary state, its 16 states have 'independence in cultural and educational matters'. This entitles them to make their own decisions regarding educational matters within their respective political boundaries (Kappel, Lehmann and Loeper, 2002). The German educational system is therefore not centralized, but multi-centralized. Each federal state has its own Ministry of Education, Art and Culture, making them responsible for their own educational system; administrative regulations regarding fees and the organization of such matters as approaches to distance education may vary. The predominantly uniform school system in Germany results from the coordination between federal states which is negotiated through the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder in the Federal Republic of Germany (Kultusministerkonferenz or KMK).

The aim of the following analysis was to gather data on how the respective states outline the organization of distance education within their higher education systems. Additionally, the Framework Act for Higher Education (Hochschulrahmengesetz, HRG), which defines a framework for the organization of higher education throughout Germany, was consulted to compare these findings to the federal laws. The University Laws of the Federal States were screened to find out whether they incorporated key statements or at least references about distance education, such as statements about the organization of continuing education. Out of the 16 documents, 13 explicitly mention distance education as a possible way to structure programmes. These statements, however, are rather short and generally only mention that the 'opportunity of distance education should be taken'. None of the laws has a special section about programmes entirely offered at a distance at universities, etc. Three documents do not even mention anything of the kind (Berlin, Lower Saxony and Hesse). Hesse has a specific law regarding the organization of a network for distance education at universities of applied science with two other states ('Gesetz zum Staatsvertrag über Fernstudien an Fachhochschulen'<sup>45</sup>).

The Berlin law at least makes some references to distance education in the context of continuing education. The general starting point for all laws is the traditional campus-

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<sup>45</sup>[http://landesrecht.rlp.de/jportal/portal/page/bsrlpprod.psm1?pid=Dokumentanzeige&showdoccase=1&js\\_peid=Treffeliste&documentnumber=1&numberofresults=1&fromdoctodoc=yes&doc.id=jlr-FHSchulFStStVtrGRPpStaatsvertrag-Artikel8&doc.part=X&doc.price=0.0](http://landesrecht.rlp.de/jportal/portal/page/bsrlpprod.psm1?pid=Dokumentanzeige&showdoccase=1&js_peid=Treffeliste&documentnumber=1&numberofresults=1&fromdoctodoc=yes&doc.id=jlr-FHSchulFStStVtrGRPpStaatsvertrag-Artikel8&doc.part=X&doc.price=0.0) [14.10.2014]

based programme: distance education is therefore seen as an additional offer or variation which does not replace campus-based programmes. Most universities therefore use a blended learning design as a framework for their online offers. The Framework Act for Higher Education essentially includes the same statements, but also mentions that universities can recognize a distance education course for their traditional undergraduate and graduate degree offers (Section 13, paragraph 2). Obviously, most statements on distance education at universities and universities of applied science are closely linked to aspects of continuing education programmes. Only in some laws are they explicitly related to the general courses. These findings fit well with the general development of universities, which have only in recent years started to adjust their programmes to target groups other than the 'traditional' student.

Other relevant documents which may encourage the universities to increase their efforts as regards distance education programmes are the objective agreements (Zielvereinbarungen) between each university and their state and the indicator-based allocation of funds (leistungsorientierte Mittelvergabe). The latter defines the objectives a university has to meet in order to receive additional funding through their state. Both regulations are agreed between each university and the regional state in order to govern the development of the universities through the state. None of these regulations includes any form of direct motivation for the universities to enhance their efforts as regards distance education. Instead, they focus on the numbers of students enrolled and the acquisition of third-party funds (Drittmittel). They do mention efforts regarding continuing education programmes, but these are somewhat marginal (Kretschmer and Stöter, 2014).

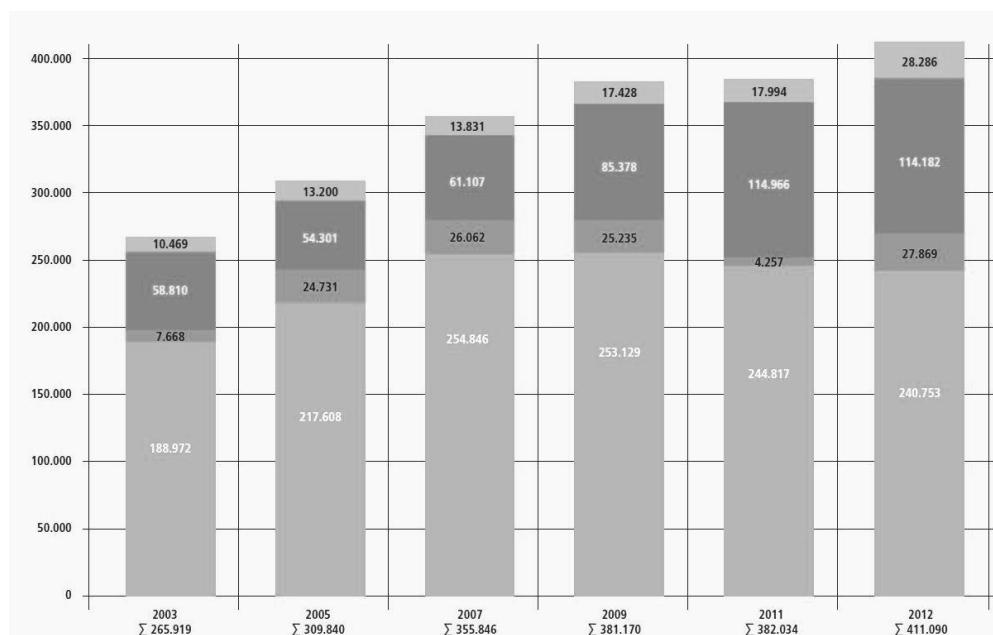
## **2.2. Basic distinction between 'Fernunterricht' and 'Fernstudium'**

Since 1977, all programmes provided at a distance and not leading to an academic degree have been regulated by the Law of the Protection of Participants in Distance Learning (Gesetz zum Schutz der Teilnehmer am Fernunterricht - Fernunterrichtsschutzgesetz – FernUSG), which defines special registration requirements that a programme has to meet. It is embedded in the laws for consumer protection and is therefore obligatory. 'Fernunterricht' is hence defined as 'the procurement of knowledge and skills with teacher and student mostly having non-direct

contact and with the teacher controlling the learning outcome' (FernUSG § 1 Abs. 1). This law is not applicable to higher education institutions providing an academic degree, except when there is an extra fee for a course. In fact, there is an ongoing debate on whether these restrictions have to be applied to universities and similar institutions.<sup>46</sup>

'Fernstudium' or distance education is traditionally provided by institutions of higher education and culminates in the award of an academic degree. These institutions can, however, also provide programmes of 'Fernunterricht'. The following table provides an overview of the distribution of participants in these two fields.<sup>47</sup> The bars are to be read from top to bottom for the following participant groups: Distance students at campus based universities; distance students at distance learning universities; business clients in 'Fernunterricht'; private participants in 'Fernunterricht'.

**Figure 2: Participants in Distance-Learning 2003-2012 (Forum Distance-Learning, Fernunterrichtsstatistik, 2012, p. 16)**



With 268,622 participants in 2012, most of the students are enrolled in the sector described as 'Fernunterricht'. Only a small proportion of students (28,286) are in the

<sup>46</sup> Critique and reply on the Law of the Protection of Participants in Distance Learning: <http://www.zfu.de/Mitteilungen/Kerres%20ZFU%20Kritik%20230701.pdf> [21.10.2014]

<sup>47</sup> [http://fdlmedia.istis.de/files/Fernunterrichtsstatistik/FDL\\_Fernunterrichtsstatistik\\_2012.pdf](http://fdlmedia.istis.de/files/Fernunterrichtsstatistik/FDL_Fernunterrichtsstatistik_2012.pdf) [10.10.2014]



sector distance education at traditional campus-based universities, although distance education universities have become more significant since 2003 and today educate 114,182 students. Of the 2,466,512 students enrolled in universities and universities of applied science in 2012<sup>48</sup>, an estimated 6% is enrolled in a distance education programme. It is worth mentioning that campus-based universities are not very successful in attracting participants for continuing education courses: this field accounts for only 3% of students and this number has not increased since 1991 (Holm, 2013, p. 108).

In fact, these total numbers have been growing since 2000, with the group of private participants consistently being the largest (Allmann, 2004). Since 2007 a trend is being observed according to which campus-based and distance learning universities attract more and more students while the proportion of private participants in 'Fernunterricht' is slowly declining. Various factors are responsible for these tendencies, especially the changed regulations regarding university entry. In 2009 these were expanded so that examinations other than the traditional 'Abitur' (the highest degree conferred by the German secondary school system) and a few others (Z-Prüfung, zweiter Bildungsweg) gave the right to study. University entrance is now also possible based on specific vocational degrees. Political developments and projects in this context are summarized as 'Studieren ohne Abitur'<sup>49</sup> and are described in detail in the following chapter. Due to the lack of adequate distance learning programmes at the campus-based universities, the distance learning universities have grown much faster. These universities provide programmes which are especially tailored for the new target group of working professionals.

### 3. Basic facts about higher education in Germany

The OECD Report 'Education at a Glance'<sup>50</sup> states that, in 2014, 53% of young people in Germany are expected to enter academically-oriented tertiary programmes (tertiary-type A) in their lifetime (OECD average: 58%), while in 2000 that proportion was only 30%. In the tertiary-type B programmes an additional 22% of young people (15% in 2000)

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<sup>48</sup> National education report, 2014, p. 128: [http://www.bildungsbericht.de/daten2014/bb\\_2014.pdf](http://www.bildungsbericht.de/daten2014/bb_2014.pdf) [21.10.2014]

<sup>49</sup> 'Studieren ohne Abitur': [http://www.studieren-ohne-abitur.de/web/information/ueberblick/#para\\_2](http://www.studieren-ohne-abitur.de/web/information/ueberblick/#para_2) [11.10.2014]

<sup>50</sup> Education at a Glance: Country -Note Germany: <http://www.oecd.org/edu/Germany-EAG2014-Country-Note.pdf> [19.10.2014]

are expected to enter shorter, more vocation-oriented tertiary programmes, while the OECD average was 18% in 2012 (16% in 2000) (OECD, 2014, p. 4). In general, the vocational sector is a widely accepted approach to learning. 48% of upper secondary students in Germany are enrolled in pre-vocational or vocational programmes (dual system) that combine school and work (OECD average: 46%). More than half (55%) of 25-64 year-olds have attained a vocational qualification at either upper secondary or post-secondary level (OECD average: 33%) and 86% of them have obtained at least an upper secondary qualification (OECD average: 75%). With an estimated 95% of today's young people graduating from upper secondary school during their lifetime and enrolling in further education programmes, only a small proportion of young people leave school without any degree<sup>51</sup>:

'Due to the high incidence of vocational qualifications, and the fact that a general degree (mostly Abitur) is dedicated to further education and not to direct entry in the labour market, only 3% of adults attain a general upper secondary or post-secondary qualification as their highest degree, one of the smallest proportions among OECD countries (OECD average: 12%)' (OECD, 2014, p. 1).

The proportion of tertiary-educated adults in Germany (28%) is lower than the OECD average (33%) and raising it to 40% until 2020 will be a difficult goal to reach if the current level of expansion does not change (only +6% since 2000). The difference between younger (25-34-year-old) and older (55-64-year-old) people with tertiary attainment is rather small: 29% and 26% respectively. Germany's longer-than-average tertiary programmes and the large internal variations in attainment levels due to the federal system may explain some of these differences as well as the specific vocational system:

'Due to the well-established and highly recognized upper secondary vocational programmes (dual system) with low unemployment rates, the incentives for tertiary attainment might be lower in Germany compared to other countries' (OECD, 2014, p. 5).

The post-secondary non-tertiary degrees (ISCED 4) in the vocational sector are of major relevance in the German educational system and account for fully 43% of degrees

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<sup>51</sup> <http://www.bpb.de/nachschlagen/zahlen-und-fakten/soziale-situation-in-deutschland/61656/bildungsstand>  
[20.10.2014]

obtained in Germany, meaning that the European 2020 Strategy goal of 40% was already met in 2012.<sup>52</sup>

### 3.1. Nationwide initiatives to open the universities

The following chapter summarizes some national initiatives from the last fifteen years which were launched to increase the universities' efforts in the field of distance and continuing education. The aim here is not to provide an in-depth description of these projects, but rather to highlight the main topics that were addressed in these years. In fact, many German universities did not develop a specific strategy for lifelong learning or specific distance education programmes. Universities' efforts are mostly driven by external motivations linked to special projects funded by the government or EU (Hanft and Maschwitz, 2012). Without such third-party funding they lack the resources for own development (Kerres, Hanft and Wilkesmann, 2012). Due to the indicator-based granting of funds described in chapter 2.1., universities depend on the acquisition of third-party funding. They are therefore very interested in projects that promise to deliver such funds, although their interest is mainly driven by the funds themselves rather than the actual theme of the projects. Hence it is not surprising that universities finance their continuing education programmes mainly through participation fees (Graeßner, 2007). This also holds true for the few distance education programmes at campus-based universities, while studying in general is free of charge and students only have to pay a small administrative fee (around € 50-400/semester).<sup>53</sup>

#### 3.1.1. Neue Medien in der Bildung (Volume: unknown / 2000-2004)

The aim of this project was the wide and permanent integration of new media as a tool for teaching, learning, working and communication, as well as an improvement of the programmes already on offer through media usage. Structural change and enhancement of teaching and learning through new media were also aspired to.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> National education report, 2014, p. 42: ([http://www.bildungsbericht.de/daten2014/bb\\_2014.pdf](http://www.bildungsbericht.de/daten2014/bb_2014.pdf)) [21.10.2014]

<sup>53</sup> Fee for studying: <http://www.bachelor-studium.net/studiengebuehren-kosten.php> [21.10.2014]

<sup>54</sup> For further information refer to: [http://www.dlr.de/pt\\_nmb/Foerderung/Bekanntmachungen/eLearning.pdf](http://www.dlr.de/pt_nmb/Foerderung/Bekanntmachungen/eLearning.pdf)  
Bundesleitprojekt Virtuelle Fachhochschule (Volume: 21 Mio. € / 1999-2004)

This project has led to the development of several bachelor and master programmes which are still offered by its successor oncampus GmbH<sup>55</sup>, which takes place at one of the involved universities of applied science. Several such universities are grouped together in an organization called Hochschulverbund Virtuelle Fachhochschule<sup>56</sup> and distribute their courses together through oncampus GmbH. The general aims of the project were integration of the possibilities of multimedia and the internet into higher education and concentration of active institutions in one project.<sup>57</sup>

### **3.1.2. Studieren ohne Abitur (Volume: n.a. / since 2009)**

In 2009, the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder in the Federal Republic of Germany (Kultusministerkonferenz or KMK) released an enactment that opened the universities to people with a degree from the vocational sector. Whereas until that year the highest degrees from the school system (such as the Abitur) were required to embark on a higher education entrance qualification (Hochschulzugangsberechtigung), this is now no longer the case.<sup>58</sup>

### **3.1.3. ANKOM - Anrechnung beruflicher Kompetenzen auf Hochschulstudiengänge (Volume: unknown 2005-2011) / Übergänge von der beruflichen in die hochschulische Bildung (Volume: unknown 2012-2014)**

These projects were developed in order to define regulations for the recognition of prior learning in the higher education system. Until then (and even today), each university used its own regulation about which competencies and degrees should be recognized. In 2002 and 2010, several enactments were released by the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder in the Federal Republic of Germany (Kultusministerkonferenz or KMK) stating that competencies acquired outside the higher education system could replace up to 50% of a study programme. The premise

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<sup>55</sup> <http://www.oncampus.de> [21.10.2014]

<sup>56</sup> <https://www.vfh.de/> [21.10.2014]

<sup>57</sup> For further information refer to: [http://www.bmbf.de/pub/Abschlussbericht\\_Bundesleitprojekt\\_VFH-Kurzfassung.pdf](http://www.bmbf.de/pub/Abschlussbericht_Bundesleitprojekt_VFH-Kurzfassung.pdf) and [http://fhge.opus.hbz-nrw.de/volltexte/2003/11/pdf/Die\\_Virtuelle\\_Fachhochschule\\_VFH.pdf](http://fhge.opus.hbz-nrw.de/volltexte/2003/11/pdf/Die_Virtuelle_Fachhochschule_VFH.pdf)

<sup>58</sup> For further information refer to: [http://ankom.his.de/pdf\\_archiv/2009\\_03\\_06-Hochschulzugang-erful-qualifizierte-Bewerber.pdf](http://ankom.his.de/pdf_archiv/2009_03_06-Hochschulzugang-erful-qualifizierte-Bewerber.pdf) and <http://www.studieren-ohne-abitur.de/web/service/ueber-das-projekt/>

for this recognition is that these competencies can somehow be defined as equal to courses at university.<sup>59</sup>

### **3.1.4. MOOC Production Fellowship: Lehren und Lernen im Web (Volume: 250.000 € / in 2013)**

The Association for the Promotion of Science and the Humanities in Germany (Stifterverband für die deutsche Wissenschaft<sup>60</sup>) and iversity<sup>61</sup> granted ten fellowships for the development of concepts for Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) in order to give the organizational development of higher education in a time of 'digital transformation' a significant boost.<sup>62</sup>

### **3.1.5. Aufstieg durch Bildung: offene Hochschulen (Volume: 250 Mio. € / 2011-2020)**

As one of the largest funded projects, the intention of this project is by definition to open the higher education sector to new and more numerous target groups. The 73 projects and several hundred institutions involved develop different courses especially targeted at adult learners wishing to return to university after a phase of working in a profession or to combine study and work. Most of these projects plan and develop courses in a blended learning design to meet the needs of this target group. The whole initiative is focused on these 'non-traditional students' and therefore incorporates the results of several further projects, like Ankom, Studium ohne Abitur, Neue Medien in der Bildung and others.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> For further information refer to: <http://ankom.his.de/> and <http://www.bibb.de/ankom>

<sup>60</sup> <http://www.stifterverband.info/> [13.10.2014]

<sup>61</sup> <https://iversity.org/> [13.10.2014]

<sup>62</sup> For further information refer to:

[http://www.stifterverband.info/bildungsinitiative/quartaere\\_bildung/mooc\\_fellowships/](http://www.stifterverband.info/bildungsinitiative/quartaere_bildung/mooc_fellowships/)

<sup>63</sup> For further information refer to: <http://www.offene-hochschulen.de/> <http://www.bmbf.de/de/23052.php>

[http://www.bmbf.de/pubRD/BMBF\\_UB\\_QID\\_2013.pdf](http://www.bmbf.de/pubRD/BMBF_UB_QID_2013.pdf) <http://www.wettbewerb-offene-hochschulen-bmbf.de/>

### 3.1.6. Digitale Medien in der Beruflichen Bildung (Volume: 60 Mio. € / Start 2015)

The objectives of one of the next projects from the Federal Ministry of Education and Research are to develop media-based training opportunities as part of a nationally recognized training occupation or of regulated training; to carry out research on the potential of digital media to support structural reforms in vocational education; and to stimulate the market for professional development and the use of Web 2.0 technologies and mobile applications, in order to increase the efficiency of these new media in the vocational and continuing education.<sup>64</sup>

### 3.2. Institutions offering distance education

The following chapter provides a brief overview of several institutions providing distance education courses and outlines which motivations, policies and organizational aspects influence their participation in distance education.

As a result of pressure towards greater access, the German HE system has seen a considerable expansion in recent years. Although the number of university students nearly doubled between 1980 and 2001, the budgets in HE only increased by 56% (Baker and Lenhardt, 2008). The universities still focus on their 'traditional' target groups; their programmes are designed with these groups in mind and are in general campus-based. Only a few institutions have developed special centres for their distance education programmes, which are chosen by only a very small number of students. The only real public distance education institution is the FernUniversität Hagen<sup>65</sup>, which also happens to be the largest German university. In the last term, 88,168 students were enrolled. Although the FernUniversität was launched to reach other target groups than the traditional, campus-based universities, it is not and never was an open university in terms of entrance requirements. Of the 81 providers of distance education university programmes, 59 are public universities or universities of applied sciences and 18 are private providers.

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<sup>64</sup> For further information refer to: [http://www.dlr.de/pt/desktopdefault.aspx/tabid-3162/4875\\_read-7021/](http://www.dlr.de/pt/desktopdefault.aspx/tabid-3162/4875_read-7021/) and [http://www.dlr.de/Portaldata/45/Resources/dokumente/BMBF-neue\\_medien\\_in\\_der\\_beruflichen\\_bildung.pdf](http://www.dlr.de/Portaldata/45/Resources/dokumente/BMBF-neue_medien_in_der_beruflichen_bildung.pdf)

<sup>65</sup> <http://www.FernUniversität-hagen.de/> [19.10.2014]

Nearly all of the latter offer their courses exclusively at a distance. Of 268,622 participants in 2012, 80% took their courses at distance education universities and only 20% at campus-based universities. 71% of students were enrolled at public universities and only 29% at private institutions. The significantly higher fees (between 11,000 and 13,000€<sup>66</sup>) for private courses could have potentially influenced this distribution as well. These results are further explained by the impact that the FernUniversität has on the German distance education sector: nearly 30% of all students enrolled in distance education courses in Germany are studying at the FernUniversität. Other providers connected to the public sector are the Virtuelle Hochschule Bayern (vhb)<sup>67</sup> and the Virtuelle Fachhochschule (VFH).<sup>68</sup> Whereas the latter provides its own programmes, the former functions more as a centre for the Bavarian universities and provides courses for the campus-based students at these universities.

Since 1990 the first steps were taken to enhance the development of distance education courses (mainly in a blended learning design) at campus-based universities (see chapter 3.1. for some initial projects) (Hanft and Knust, 2009). The development of distance education or e-learning in general at universities was influenced by a variety of factors: from distance education universities providing their courses at a distance from the beginning through to conventional, campus-based universities implementing new media to enrich class lectures and in order to reach more students with their own online programmes (Zawacki-Richter, 2001).<sup>69</sup> A study from 2007 (Keil, Kerres and Schulmeister) analysed the digital tools that universities provide in their institutions. While more than 90% of universities had digital learning material and up to 80% offered interactive courses, only 16% of universities and universities of applied science offered specific distance education courses. Another study analysed the reasons why universities use e-learning tools (Kleimann, 2008). The three major reasons were: improvement of student satisfaction (77%), enhancement of reputation (63%), and increase of study success (60%). The next important aspect was opening access for new

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<sup>66</sup> Fees for selected private universities <http://www.bafoeg-aktuell.de/studium/fernstudium/kosten.html> [23.10.2014]

<sup>67</sup> <http://www.vhb.org/> [16.10.2010]

<sup>68</sup> <http://www.vfh.de/> [16.10.2010]

<sup>69</sup>Olaf Zawacki (2001). Zum Verhältnis von Online Lehre und Fernstudium: <http://www.c3l.uni-oldenburg.de/publikationen/gmw01.pdf> [22.10.2014]

target groups (56%), which appeared significantly more important than support for the lecturers (37%).

An international comparative study by Hanft and Knust (2009, p. 133) revealed that the majority of continuing education programmes at campus-based universities were offered face-to-face (from 67.57% up to 97.49% depending on the duration of the programmes). Although some offers were designed in blended format (up to 25.68% if the programme was longer than one year), the proportion of exclusively online programmes was nearly non-existent (2.5%).

### **3.3. Focusing on the student – profiles and needs**

A great deal of research has been carried out in recent years to define the new target groups of 'non-traditional' students or adult learners, and to explore their needs and expectations with regard to university programmes. An international literature review by Zawacki-Richter, Bäcker and Vogt (2009) covering the many aspects of distance education revealed that 16% of the papers included in the review (N=695) examined learner characteristics.

#### **3.3.1. Learner characteristics, expectations and needs**

In the discussion about 'non-traditional students' a lot of literature is available on how this target group can be defined within the German context: see for example Banscherus and Spexard (2012) or Teichler and Wolter (2004). The share of this group in German HE is rather small (4% in 2008). Nevertheless, the following aspects are often mentioned when describing this target group: 'delayed enrolment in post-secondary education, attended part time, financially independent, worked full-time while enrolled, had dependants other than a spouse, was a single parent, did not obtain a standard high school diploma' (Horn and Carroll, 1996, p. 2). A fairly recent study at three German universities revealed the following socio-economic facts about students in Germany:



**Figure 3: Survey of undergraduate students at three conventional German universities (N=3,687) (Wilkesmann, Virgillito, Bröcker and Knopp, 2012, p. 64)**

	Total N=3,687	UDE N=1,300	TUD N=1,397	UOL N=990
age	22.9	22.8	22.7	23.4
proportion of women	47%	40%	45%	61%
migration background	27%	32%	31%	16%
parents without higher education degree	63%	63%	62%	66%
second chance education	10%	10%	8%	12%
without general qualification for university entrance	5%	6%	3%	8%
own children	3%	3%	3%	4%
caring for family members	7%	9%	6%	5%
apprenticeship + work experience	16%	12%	13%	26%
	40%	36%	33%	53%
employed	60%	62%	60%	58%
>15 hrs/week	12%	15%	10%	8%
de-facto part-time student (< 25 hrs/week)	24%	29%	22%	18%
wish for part-time study	19%	22%	18%	15%

Many of these students from campus-based universities share characteristics with students enrolled in distance education programmes. Conversely, the students enrolled at the FernUniversität differ significantly from students at campus-based universities, as the following figure shows:

**Figure 4: Socio-economic status of distance education students (FeU, 2011; N=1,681) compared with students at conventional universities (HIS, 2009; N=16,370) (Stöter, Bullen, Zawacki-Richter and v. Prümmer, 2014, p. 440)**



In general, students at the FernUniversität come from a lower socio-economic background than 'traditional' students. It could therefore be argued that the FernUniversität is the university for 'non-traditional' and/or adult students. The most important reasons reported by students for studying at a distance at the FernUniversität was the flexibility that the distance programme offered (cited by 80-90% of students). Most of the other reasons given were closely linked to this one because all of them had to do with the students' work or family commitments (Stöter, Bullen, Zawacki-Richter and v. Prümmer, 2014, p. 443).

Between 2004 and 2006 the drop-out rate from German universities had declined from 24% to 20% (Heublein et al, 2008). Until 2012 these rates then increased to 28%, ranging from 5%-51% across the various programmes.<sup>70</sup> A closer look at distance education institutions reveals that their drop-out rates are similar or even higher: 70% at the FernUniversität (2010) and between 20 and 35% at private universities in the same

<sup>70</sup> <http://www.spiegel.de/unispiegel/studium/studienabbruch-jeder-vierte-bachelorstudent-bricht-studium-ab-a-971349.html> [18.10.2014]

year.<sup>71</sup> The high drop-out rates at institutions providing distance education may be due to the higher average age of the students. The average age for students at the FernUniversität was 34.8 years in 2010/2011 (see Stöter, Bullen, Zawacki-Richter and v. Prümmer, 2014, p. 438), while in distance education programmes in general only 29% of the participants were younger than 25 years:<sup>72</sup>

‘Older adult students are drawn to distance education because of the need to balance career, family, and continuing education responsibilities conveniently, effectively, and efficiently. When contemporary technologies are integrated into the educational environment, the lack of familiarity with these tools creates barriers to learning. They need clear paths of communication available especially when social inclusion is limited by the online format. These ‘non-traditional’ adult students have competing priorities and struggle with balancing family responsibilities, job obligations, and commitment to the program.’ (Tanner, 2007, Abstract)<sup>73</sup>

Regarding the usage of new media, Zawacki-Richter (forthcoming) states that younger students prefer these tools for recreational use rather than for their lectures, whereas ‘non-traditional’ students use an array of specific tools specifically for study purposes. These findings are in line with some of the results of the reports by Schulmeister (2009), who found that these older students preferred a moderate implementation of tools, which are explicitly used to enhance their lectures.

Another aspect of learner characteristics analysed in various studies is motivation. In particular, students’ motivation and orientation patterns play an important role when it comes to the acceptance of digital learning tools. It is clear that students with a practical orientation and a focus on career opportunities value digital learning formats highly. However, it is also clear that being familiar with digital learning formats (and therefore having the skill to use them and to estimate their benefits) significantly and immediately increases the assessment of their importance (Mertens, Stöter and Zawacki-Richter, 2014).

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<sup>71</sup> Drop-out rates in distance education: <http://www.fernstudium-net.de/abbrecherquote-bei-fernstudien-weiterhin-hoch.html> [21.10.2014]

<sup>72</sup>Participants’ age in 2012, p. 21:  
[http://fdlmedia.istis.de/files/Fernunterrichtsstatistik/FDL\\_Fernunterrichtsstatistik\\_2012.pdf](http://fdlmedia.istis.de/files/Fernunterrichtsstatistik/FDL_Fernunterrichtsstatistik_2012.pdf) [19.10.2014]

<sup>73</sup> Tanner (2007):<http://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=1535473> [22.10.2014]

### 3.3.2. Formal barriers regarding access to higher education

The literature names various barriers a student will encounter when planning to enrol in a university programme. This is especially true for campus-based universities, but to some degree also for distance education institutions. **Institutional Access Barriers** can be: lack of equipment and support, scheduling, resource availability, programme costs, instructional concerns and/or technical assistance, while **Student Access Barriers** can be: costs and motivators, feedback and teacher contact, student support and services, alienation and isolation and/or lack of experience/training.<sup>74</sup>

In the German higher education system, the major barriers are a lack of adult-adjusted programmes and/or specific support structures for adult students, especially formal regulations. Until 2010 about 95% of all new entrants to the higher education sector were in possession of the general entrance qualification (Abitur), including those with a degree from one of the second educational route institutions (2.1%). In the Fachhochschulen sector about 55% had the Abitur and another 35% came from vocational schools (e.g. Fachoberschule). Only 0.6% of all new entrants to universities came via the third educational route, which was the only other way to get into HE before new regulations like Studieren ohne Abitur were in place (see chapter 3.1.) (Wolter, 2012).

## 4. Conclusion: Advancement through education: opening the higher education systems

In order to answer the question outlined at the beginning of this case study, a few aspects of current developments will be summarized in key words:

### Positive developments:

- Opening HE to new target groups through new regulations since 2009, so that examinations other than the Abitur can permit enrolment in a study programme (Studieren ohne Abitur)
- Recognition of prior learning has been addressed since 2002. Up to 50% of a study programme can be recognized, if competencies acquired outside the higher

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<sup>74</sup> Barriers in HE: <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/JITE/v40n1/zirkle.html> [21.10.2014]

education system are verifiable (ANKOM - Anrechnung beruflicher Kompetenzen auf Hochschulstudiengänge)

- Development of student support facilities especially for adult learners/'non-traditional' students interested in HE and seeking information and preparatory courses<sup>75</sup>
- Development of programmes for adult learners in blended learning designs (Aufstieg durch Bildung: offene Hochschulen) at campus-based universities and universities of applied science

### Further developments which need to take place:

- Further opening of HE to all people interested in studying<sup>76</sup> (Open University Germany?)
- Implementation of distance education programmes at campus-based universities
- Development of adult learner support centres at all HE institutions
- Increasing social mobility (Schulmeister, 2013, p. 20)
- Adjusting study programmes to (adult) learners' needs

The opening of the universities in Germany is mainly driven by national authorities, which support the HE institutions through various projects. Although the institutions value the opening itself, they lack the resources to develop specific programmes and can only do this within a funded project. These projects mainly address adult learners' needs. In the years to come a number of universities will have developed continuing education programmes (Aufstieg durch Bildung: offene Hochschulen) and adult students will have the opportunity to study in a format suited to their needs, although these courses will carry significant fees. The challenge will be to learn from the processes within these continuing education programmes so as to enrich traditional study as well. Nevertheless, other challenges still need to be addressed:

'Most of the political stakeholders agree at least mematically with the strategy for implementing lifelong learning structures in higher education. However, it seems that the

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<sup>75</sup> Service support centre lower saxony: <http://www.offene-hochschule-niedersachsen.de/> [23.20.2014]

<sup>76</sup> Kreplin, Seehagen-Marx & Engelhardt (2013, p. 5): <http://13t.tugraz.at/index.php/LehrbuchEbner10/article/view/95> [19.10.2014]

general political insight into the necessity of an open access policy has made more progress than the acceptance by and the implementation activities of most of the higher education institutions. This discrepancy has resulted in the still very low level of participation. It is fair to say that the structure of access in German higher education continues to be very Abitur-centered, and non-traditional access routes have played only a very marginal role up to now' (Wolter, 2013, p. 54).

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# IDEAL Case study – Greece

**How can the distance education offer of European Higher Education institutions be better matched to the needs of adult learners? Lessons from the Greek Case**

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## 1. Introduction

Tertiary education in Greece is divided into the University and the Technological sectors.<sup>78</sup> The University sector (ISCED levels 5A and 6) includes the Universities, the Technical Universities, the School of Fine Arts and the Hellenic Open University. The Technological sector (ISCED 5B) includes the Technological Education Institutions (TEIs) and the School of Pedagogical and Technological Education (ASPETE). All these institutions are publicly owned: legislation (Art. 16) dictates that ‘...tertiary education is exclusively delivered by self-administered institutions that constitute legal bodies of public interest ...’.

According to Eurostat 2012, 30.5% of students in Greece participated in ISCED 5 and 6, representing 26.1% of 25-64-year-olds and 12% of 20-24-year-olds (almost double the respective numbers in the EU27). These numbers reveal the attractiveness of tertiary education in Greece, which is also reflected in Greece’s surpassing of the Europe 2020 goal that ‘in 2020, at least 32% of 30-34-year-olds should have completed tertiary or equivalent education’. Tertiary educational attainment in Greece was already 34.9% in 2013.

There were 415,773 ISCED 5A students in Greece in 2012, of whom 47.41% were male, representing 2.48% of all students at this level in the EU27. There were 44,415 graduates at this level in the same year, 36.83% of whom were male, representing 1.14% of all graduates at this level in the EU27. The equivalent numbers for ISCED 5B were 224,478 (57.03% male), representing 8.56% of all ISCED 5B students in the EU27. In 2012 a total of 23,447 people participated in ISCED 6, of whom 53.52% were male, representing 3.28% of all students in the EU27.

At this point it is important to mention that these numbers refer exclusively to students of public tertiary education institutions attending full-time courses. Unfortunately there are no data available for the so-called ‘private universities’ or for part-time education at the aforementioned levels.

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<sup>78</sup> [https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Greece:Overview#Higher\\_Education](https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Greece:Overview#Higher_Education)

## 2. Adult learners in Greece

Every five years Eurostat runs the Adult Education Survey (AES)<sup>79</sup> which studies the participation of 25-64-year-olds in education and training activities (formal, non-formal and informal). The most recent survey is the AES 2011 which was carried out in 2011 and 2012. This survey reveals that 11.7% of adults in Greece participated in education and training activities in those years, less than one third of the EU28 average of 40.3%. Unfortunately, this percentage represents an almost 20% decrease from the corresponding percentage of 14.5% in AES 2007. Micro-data indicate that the participation rate decreases significantly – almost exponentially – as the age of the adult learners increases. People aged 55-64 now account for 3.1% of the Greek population (EU28: 26.6%).

In line with the rest of Europe, 14.5% of employed adults in Greece participate in formal and non-formal education and training activities (EU28: 48.6%), compared to only 10.0% of unemployed people (EU28: 26.9%). Closer inspection reveals that 25.3% of adult managers, professionals, technicians and associates, 15% of adult clerical support workers, service and sales workers, and 4.1% of adult skilled manual workers in Greece participate in education and training activities (the respective numbers for the EU28 are 64.1%, 45.8% and 32.7%). Interestingly, only 6.9% of adults in Greece (EU28: 30.9%) participate in job-related non-formal education and training. 4.6% of such activities are employer-sponsored, with efforts focusing mostly on 35-44-year-olds (6.6%) and ISCED 5-6 degree holders (16.9%), dropping down to 4.7% for ISCED 3-4 degree holders. As expected, the participation rate increases as the educational attainment increases. 25.5% of ISCED 5-6 degree holders, 9.8% of ISCED 3-4 degree holders and 3.2% of ISCED 0-2 degree holders participate in education and training activities (the respective numbers for the EU28 are 61.3%, 37.7% and 21.8%).

In contrast to the aforementioned negative findings, data indicate that adults in Greece aged 25-64 who participate in education and training activities spent nearly 177 hours on such activities in 2011 (EU28: 113 hours). Of these, 25-34-year-olds spent 297 hours (EU28: 188 hours) and 55-64-year-olds spent 68 hours (EU28: 70 hours). Hours spent

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<sup>79</sup> [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/microdata/adult\\_education\\_survey](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/microdata/adult_education_survey)

on formal education and training activities are massively increased for ISCED 5-6 degree holders (Greece: 546 hours; EU28: 368 hours) and for ISCED 3-4 degree holders (Greece: 535 hours; EU28: 395 hours). Again contrary to previous findings, unemployed adults invested more hours in education and training than employed adults in 2011 (employed: 112 hours; unemployed: 255 hours). In 2012 unemployed adults also appeared to invest significant hours in training, although not as many as employed adults, possibly due to the severe financial crisis that forced people start thinking about re-skilling and up-skilling.

Data indicate that the participation of adults in Greece in education and training activities lags behind the rest of Europe – less than 30% – and has been decreasing in recent years. Greeks tend to participate less in education and training as they get older, but more as their educational attainment levels increase. Moreover, more employed adults participate in education and training activities than unemployed ones, but the latter put in more hours.

### 3. The regulatory framework in Greece

The regulatory framework concerning education at tertiary level strongly discourages the involvement of non-State institutions, which have limited freedom in Greece.

Based on Article 16 of the Greek Constitution<sup>80</sup> (key points):

- Teaching and research are free and their development is an obligation of the State.
- Education at university level shall be provided exclusively by institutions which are fully self-governed by public attorneys. These institutions shall operate under the supervision of the State and are entitled to financial assistance from it; they shall operate on the basis of the statutorily enacted by-laws.
- Professors of university level institutions shall be public functionaries. The remaining teaching personnel likewise perform a public function, under the conditions specified by law.

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<sup>80</sup> <http://www.hellenicparliament.gr/UserFiles/f3c70a23-7696-49db-9148-f24dce6a27c8/001-156%20aggliko.pdf>

- Professional and any other form of special education shall be provided by the State, through schools of a higher level and for a time period not exceeding three years, as specifically provided by law which also defines the professional rights of the graduates of such schools.
- The conditions and terms for granting a license for the establishment and operation of schools not owned by the State, the supervision of such and the professional status of teaching personnel therein shall be specified by law. The establishment of university level institutions by private persons is prohibited.

Students who wish to obtain a 'distance' degree from a university outside Greece (e.g. the UK) should contact the Hellenic National Academic Recognition and Information Center (NARIC)<sup>81</sup>, which is responsible for the recognition of university or technological degrees awarded by foreign Higher Education Institutions. The regulatory framework stipulates particular requirements for the recognition of these degrees.<sup>82</sup>

(a) The educational programme shall be delivered solely by the university and not by any other collaborating institution.

(b) Evaluation, promotion and graduation shall take place via transparent and fair procedures, as is the case in conventional brick-and-mortar educational institutions in Greece. Procedures should be the same as those applied in the Hellenic Open University.

(c) The academic department that offers the distance education course (e.g. bachelor in mathematics) should offer the same course face-to-face and with the same quality standards. This course should be also offered by the Hellenic Open University. Regarding the issue of equivalency of degrees obtained through a foreign 'distance' university, the regulatory framework necessitates that the course has to be delivered completely by the university and not through other collaborating institutions.

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<sup>81</sup> <http://www.doatap.gr/en/index.php>

<sup>82</sup> Law 3328/2005



Recently a number of private institutions have begun to operate in this market. These institutions are officially recognized at ISCED level 4 and prepare students to obtain their ISCED 5A degree from universities in other countries. The certifications provided by these institutions cannot be equivalent to (national) tertiary education degrees; they are also not permitted to use the term 'university' in their self-definition or advertisements as the term is only applicable to public universities.<sup>83</sup> The operation of these institutions is typically monitored by the foreign universities with which they collaborate, especially as regards examinations, projects and grading. Recognition of the degrees thus acquired is mostly focused on professional qualifications and rights to practice, which are administered by a particular body of the Greek Ministry of Education. For example, a teacher who qualifies at a private university in Greece has the right to teach in every school in the EU. Nevertheless, recognition of degrees must still go through the Hellenic NARIC.

#### 4. National policies concerning distance education

The Operational Programme 'Education and Lifelong Learning' 2007-2013, co-funded by the European Social Fund (ESF), was the main national policy regarding distance learning. The programme covered all 13 of the nation's regions, so as to meet the goals for 'Convergence' and 'Regional Competitiveness and Employment'. It was based on the aim of the National Strategy for education to increase the quantity, quality and effectiveness of investments in human capital in order to upgrade the Greek educational and vocational training system.

The programme was centred on Strategic Goals and thematic Priority Axes. Priority Axes 7, 8 and 9, entitled 'Enhancing lifelong education for adults', focused on the development of distance learning by designing and implementing a series of distance education programmes. This is associated with the special objectives of enhancing the system, improving lifelong education services and promoting equal access, as well as increasing participation by establishing special incentives. According to the Operational Programme, the involvement of adults in lifelong learning through the provision of incentives was a key strategy choice. Given the geographical particularities of Greece, whose many

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<sup>83</sup> Law 3848/2010

islands and mountains can make access to important locations challenging, the potential of technologies for synchronous and asynchronous distance education was an important priority. The estimated number of beneficiaries (adults) from distance learning programmes is 57,750. However, no clear objective on distance education was set out in higher education institutions.

The Framework Programme for the New Programming Period 2014-2020 (EU Structural Funds)<sup>84</sup> includes (a) the specific – horizontal – Operational Programme ‘Human Resource Development, Education and Life Long Learning’ and (b) a series of Regional Operational Programmes where the same objectives will be pursued according to particular local needs. The main objectives of the horizontal OP are the following:

- 70% of the population aged 20-64 should be employed
- 450,000 fewer people should be at risk of poverty or exclusion
- Less than 10% of children should leave school early
- At least 32% of 30-34-year-olds should complete third level education

In general, the education system in Greece is characterized by decreased attractiveness of professional (technical) education and training, difficulties in moving from education to work and weak connections between the two, and low participation in lifelong learning (near 3% in 2012).

Especially as regards higher education, the objectives of the programmes include (a) timely completion of studies; (b) improved collaboration and connection with the world of work and business; and (c) more effective and higher quality tertiary education through the promotion of research and innovation and the uptake of R&D human resources. Interestingly, however, no clear priority is included for distance education, which might have been expected in a Strategic Plan/Operational Programme which exploits contemporary technologies.

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<sup>84</sup> <http://www.espa.gr/el/Pages/staticNewProgrammingPeriod.aspx>

## 5. Universities providing distance education in Greece

Distance tertiary education in Greece is undertaken mainly through the Hellenic Open University<sup>85</sup> (HOU) which offers undergraduate and postgraduate courses equivalent to those offered by 'traditional' universities, as well as vocational training and continuing education programmes. Greece is among the handful of countries in Europe that have a dedicated Higher Education Institution for distance learning, alongside the UK, Germany, Italy and Spain.

The key characteristics of HOU are:<sup>86</sup>

1. Study takes place exclusively through distance learning
2. Conventional courses are replaced by a flexible modular system which can easily be altered according to the prevailing social and educational needs.
3. Education is delivered according to a five-level system which covers all levels from postsecondary vocational training to doctorates of philosophy.
4. The institution features a University Educational Material and Methodology Research laboratory and University Evaluation Unit.
5. Administrative structures are simplified by suppressing the sectors council and enacting a Senate of fewer members which carries the same representational powers as a sectors council.
6. Course Modules are the basic functional unit of education. Each Course Module covers a specific subject at either undergraduate or postgraduate level and is equivalent to three semester courses in a conventional University.

Currently, HOU has over 15,000 active undergraduate students and over 13,000 active postgraduate students, as well as nearly 80 PhD students. It offers 31 Courses and 205 Course Modules, employs 1317 tutors and 48 academic research staff, and operates a ratio of 1 tutor per 20 students.

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<sup>85</sup> <http://www.eap.gr/> established by Law 2552/1997.

<sup>86</sup> <http://www.eap.gr/view.php?artid=1179>

Apart from the stand-alone distance education HOU, many other Greek universities offer (pure) distance education courses, mostly focused on professional development (vocational training). The courses they offer typically exploit modern learning technologies. In recent years, many universities in Greece have developed 'e-learning classrooms' furnished with the necessary infrastructure to enable them to support synchronous online learning and presentation activities. Moreover, many universities in Greece use online platforms to support traditional undergraduate and postgraduate courses, mostly with the aim of providing educational content to the student. However, these platforms are still too primitive to support distance education.

Various other universities offer professional competence development courses through their vocational education centers, either in traditional classroom-based mode or in a blended format including an online dimension. They always provide some kind of accreditation to the attendee featuring the university's seal, making these courses a popular 'trend'. Interestingly, apart from the Hellenic Open University, distance education initiatives are limited, and are confined to postgraduate studies. These programmes are typically supported by an online platform and do not require frequent attendance in person. Most of them are conducted by peripheral universities and typically cost less than 3,000€ for the whole programme; some are even free of charge. This state of affairs is also presented in the Eurydice Report on the Modernization of Higher Education in Europe 2014<sup>87</sup> (p. 51).

The strategy of Higher Education institutions in Greece as regards distance education therefore seems to focus clearly on the exploitation of existing infrastructures and human resources (academics) so as to provide mainly distance professional development courses rather than graduate courses (with the exception of a few postgraduate courses). The reason for this is probably to be found in the nature of the Universities in Greece, which are state-owned, so as not to compete with the Hellenic Open University.

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<sup>87</sup> European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2014. Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe: Access, Retention and Employability 2014. Eurydice Report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

**Table 1: Overview of institutions offering distance education within Greece**

Institution	Number of courses	Key data	Tuition fees
Hellenic Open University	31	Undergraduate and postgraduate	Undergraduate: € 6,600 Postgraduate: € 2,800
Ger Vocational Training Centre <sup>88</sup> of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens many	350	Successful completion of each course leads to a certificate. Since 2001 more than 20,000 adults have participated in its courses. The Centre is accredited by the National Accreditation Centre for Continuing Vocational Training (E.KE.PIS).	€ 950-1,600 (depending on duration of study; € 150-250 per month)
University of Piraeus <sup>89</sup>	70	Has trained more than 4,500 adults and been selected by more than 100 companies to train their staff. Operates both purely distance education and classroom-based or online (synchronous and asynchronous) education for professional development. The programme has been certified by TUV Austria Hellas based on EN ISO 9001:2008.	€ 350-700 (depending on duration of study; € 116 per month)
University of Aegean <sup>90</sup>	43	Professional development courses based mostly on the asynchronous online approach, partly supported by synchronous online learning. Provides training certification and an accompanying certificate confirming the ECVET (Credits).	€ 200-1,600 (for professional development courses)
Athens University of Economics and Business <sup>91</sup>	6	Online classes, synchronous e-learning, blended learning approach	€ 230-700

As mentioned earlier, there are a series of colleges in Greece that offer distance education courses in collaboration with foreign universities, providing undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. A quick search in <http://www.distancelearningportal.com> reveals 21 such courses, but in fact there are many more. The reason they are not discussed in this case study is that these establishments are not officially considered Higher Education Institutions (ISCED 5 and 6) in Greece. Although students may follow a course and gain

<sup>88</sup> <http://elearn.elke.uoa.gr>

<sup>89</sup> <http://elearning.xrh.unipi.gr>

<sup>90</sup> <https://e-epimorfosi.aegean.gr/>

<sup>91</sup> [http://elearning.kek.aueb.gr/?gclid=CK-PjfG7ucECFWYTwwod\\_F4ApQ](http://elearning.kek.aueb.gr/?gclid=CK-PjfG7ucECFWYTwwod_F4ApQ)

a recognized degree at the end, this degree does not render them eligible to continue their education at a recognized tertiary education institution.

## 6. Students in distance education

The survey surface data<sup>92 93</sup> mostly relates to the students of the Hellenic Open University, which is the dominating Distance Higher Education institution in Greece. The HOU typically receives at least 8 applications per place available. A typical HOU student has common characteristics with a student of any other university in Greece. In both cases the prevailing aim is to obtain a degree, but HOU students tend to be more focused on improving their career opportunities.

Students in distance education tend to be older than most students in other universities (the average age is 30-37 years and most students are married). Family and professional obligations therefore often make it difficult for them to participate in face-to-face activities or to devote the required amount of time to their studies.

In a separate study concerning evaluation of the HOU<sup>94</sup> by former students, alumni appeared to be satisfied with the curricula on offer. Nevertheless, they suggested that the HOU's facilities needed updating in a number of respects: in particular, the institution was said to be in need of a contemporary library and complete and up-to-date educational material. The lack of such material and of the necessary infrastructure was felt to be particularly problematic. Women reported difficulties in using electronic resources. Many students did not see any improvement in their career opportunities immediately after obtaining their degree. This may be due to employers' negative perception of the distance education degree, as well as the fact that most students were already working and chose distance education simply in order to obtain a tertiary education degree. Over the long term, however, students' career opportunities did improve.

The study also revealed a number of barriers that students face when enrolling in distance education courses. First and foremost, family and professional obligations

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<sup>92</sup> [http://meae.eap.gr/filesupload/training/yliko\\_ae/ch\\_2.pdf](http://meae.eap.gr/filesupload/training/yliko_ae/ch_2.pdf)

<sup>93</sup> [http://meae.eap.gr/filesupload/training/yliko\\_ae/ch\\_1.pdf](http://meae.eap.gr/filesupload/training/yliko_ae/ch_1.pdf)

<sup>94</sup> <http://repository.edulll.gr/edulll/retrieve/417/116.pdf>

significantly increase drop-out rates, especially for women. This situation also creates a need for particular competences on behalf of the tutor. Secondly, participation in distance education courses requires a high degree of self-control and self-esteem, as the lack of dedicated (i.e. obligatory) time for learning allows for more delays that may lead some students to drop out under certain circumstances. Moreover, students' past learning experiences and the learning methods with which they are already familiar may constitute an additional barrier.

Finally, the data indicates that distance education is used by people who wish to upgrade their professional skills so as to improve their career opportunities, mostly concentrating on a particular specialization. Distance education therefore seems well-placed to address practical, work-based training needs, rather than merely dispensing theoretical knowledge.

## 7. Universities and adult learners

As discussed above, the strategic aims of tertiary education institutions in Greece are more concerned with how to woo potential collaborators (i.e. in business and industry) and to ensure timely completion of studies than with how to engage particular target groups, such as adults. Based on Eurostat data, in 2012 there were an estimated 548,245 adults (aged 20+) in ISCED 5 and 6 institutions in Greece. The following table shows the corresponding statistics for all age groups:

**Table 2: Age group statistics for adult learners in Greece**

Age	20-24 years	25-29 years	30-34 years	35-39 years	40+ years
Students	219,987	273,546	36,652	7,667	10,393

In general, the success rates for distance education are lower than those for traditional classroom-based education. It is not always straightforward to determine when a student has dropped out: for example, should a student who has registered on a distance education course but never submitted an assignment be counted as a dropout? Typically, students are counted as dropouts if they meet certain minimums, e.g. if they have

submitted only 1-2 assignments.<sup>95</sup> The typical reasons for dropping out have to do with family obligations (difficulties in combining studying with caring for children), underestimation of study workload, and working life requirements (e.g. changes in working conditions). Interestingly, gender appears not to affect dropout rates, even among the most vulnerable group of 30-39-year-olds, who are most likely to be overtaxed by the daily challenges of family and work. There is also no statistical difference between employed and unemployed students. Dropouts do, however, tend to be much more common on undergraduate than postgraduate courses, possibly due to undergraduate students' lack of tertiary education experience.<sup>96</sup>

Another study<sup>97</sup> indicates an overall dropout rate of nearly 28%, including students who registered but never started their studies and re-registered the following year, and students who started their studies and successfully completed some assignments/modules but decided to drop out afterwards for personal reasons.<sup>98</sup> Results also indicate that students between 29 and 35 years old are more likely to decide not to start their studies, mostly due to an unmanageable workload and frequent changes of work. Moreover, it seems that older students are more likely to drop out than younger ones. Students who have delivered their first assignments are more likely to continue their studies than students who have not. Another important finding of this study concerns gender differences. Women are more likely to register and then not start their studies, but when they do start, they are more persistent and do not drop out as often as males. Marital status does not appear to correlate with dropout rates in any significant way.

## 8. Adults entering higher education

Adults have particular motivations to enter or re-enter Higher Education. Most prominent among these are work-related educational needs, career improvement and recognition of practical knowledge. In order to enter Higher Education, adults must either have

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<sup>95</sup> [http://www.eap.gr/news/EXAGGELIA\\_SYNEDRIOU/synedrio/html/sect4/58.htm](http://www.eap.gr/news/EXAGGELIA_SYNEDRIOU/synedrio/html/sect4/58.htm)

<sup>96</sup> Pierrakeas, C., Xenos, M., Panagiotakopoulos, C. and Vergidis, D. (2004). A comparative study of dropout rates and causes for two different distance education courses. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, Vol. 5, No. 2.

<sup>97</sup> Xenos, M., Pierrakeas, C. and Pintelas, P. (2002). A survey on student dropout rates and dropout causes concerning the students in the Course of Informatics of the Hellenic Open University. *Computers & Education*, Vol. 39, pp. 361-377.

<sup>98</sup> This data is quite old but was the only publicly available data we could find. Personal – unofficial – communications proved that things have not changed a lot since then.



graduated from secondary school and possess the appropriate certificate, or follow a procedure ('2<sup>nd</sup> chance schools') to obtain the lower secondary certificate. In order to re-enter, e.g. for postgraduate courses, they must follow a separate procedure for each course. These procedures are often demanding and bureaucratic, making the option of distance education a popular alternative. Student selection in the Hellenic Open University is carried out through a random public electronic draw for undergraduate and postgraduate courses. Other universities follow their own selection procedures. In the private institutions described earlier, selection carried out based on the guidance of the foreign universities they collaborate with. The most popular distance education courses are business administration and informatics for undergraduates, and education studies, banking and MBAs for postgraduates.

Recognition of prior formal, non-formal and informal learning is not mentioned in current Greek legislation.<sup>99</sup> However, there are plans to include it in the near future.<sup>100</sup> The only relevant legislation in place at present is a mechanism for linking accredited VET programmes to formal higher education programmes through the recognition and transfer of credit points.<sup>101</sup> Naturally, this situation hinders adult access to higher education. The problem is actually even greater than this, as HE institutions in Greece do not offer part-time undergraduate courses, although some offer part-time postgraduate programmes. Tuition fees do not apply for undergraduate courses in Greece, but are charged for many part-time postgraduate courses. As mentioned earlier, tuition fees are charged at the Hellenic Open University (for learning, information and evaluation materials), but students receive support in the form of payment in installments, reduced fees and increased scholarships due to the financial crisis.

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<sup>99</sup> Eurydice (2011). *Adults in Formal Education: Policies and Practice in Europe*. Brussels.

<sup>100</sup> European Commission (2013). *Developing the Adult Learning Sector Final Report*. LOT 3: Opening Higher Education to Adults. Contract EAC 2012-0074. Available at [http://commit.eucen.eu/sites/commit.eucen.eu/files/HEAD\\_FinalReport.pdf](http://commit.eucen.eu/sites/commit.eucen.eu/files/HEAD_FinalReport.pdf)

<sup>101</sup> [http://www.minedu.gov.gr/publications/docs/pd\\_38\\_100802.pdf](http://www.minedu.gov.gr/publications/docs/pd_38_100802.pdf)

# IDEAL Case study – Hungary

Distance education in European higher education: Survey about the impact of distance education on adult learning, 2014<sup>102</sup>

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## 1. E-learning courses offered by higher education institutions

Prepared by: Krisztina Fodorné Tóth

### Question 1: What is the percentage of the population reaching ISCED5 A/B1 and beyond in your country?

Number of graduates in higher education <sup>103</sup>

- total = 51,668;
- full-time = 37,089;
- non-full-time = 14,579

Number of graduates holding a degree <sup>104</sup>

- 1,439,616 = approx. 14%

### Question 2 : What is the percentage of adult learners (not only in HE)?

Number of adults studying in higher education: 338,467 (total, 2013/2014) <sup>105</sup>

Number of adults studying in secondary education:

- vocational school/specialized vocational school: 12,140
- secondary school: 70,588
- community employment: 48,000 (approx.)

Number of adults studying in elementary school: 2,587

Number of participants in community service programmes:

- development of basic competences: approx. 52,000
- other trainings: approx. 48,000

Total: 523,782 = 5.3%

(Population: 9,877,365 = 100% (2014); 9,937,628 (2011))

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<sup>103</sup> 2013: [http://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xstadat/xstadat\\_eves/i\\_wdsi002b.html](http://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xstadat/xstadat_eves/i_wdsi002b.html)

<sup>104</sup> 2011 census data: [http://www.ksh.hu/nepszamlalas/tablak\\_iskolazottsag](http://www.ksh.hu/nepszamlalas/tablak_iskolazottsag)

<sup>105</sup> Sources: [http://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xstadat/xstadat\\_eves/i\\_wdsi001a.html](http://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xstadat/xstadat_eves/i_wdsi001a.html) and <http://tkki.hu>

2014 <http://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xftp/idoszaki/oktat/oktatas1314.pdf> - Statisztikai Tükör, 2014/39

2014 <http://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xftp/stattukor/felnottoktatas13.pdf> - Felnőttoktatás, felnőttképzés ('Adult education, adult training'), KSH (Hungarian Central Statistical Office)

Total number of university students: (2013/2014) 338,467

- Full-time students: 233,678
- Non-full-time students (correspondence, evening, distance learning, study in another HEI): 104,789

A large proportion of the adults taking part in formal education pursue tertiary studies: in 2011, nearly two thirds took part in bachelor or master courses and 6% in PhD courses. About 50% of the adults concerned did not work alongside their studies. Four fifths of those who did work alongside took part in the courses mostly or exclusively outside their paid working hours. Only slightly over 10% were able to pursue their studies during paid working hours.

Following the 2005 peak, the numbers of adults participating in some form of tertiary education (correspondence, evening or distance learning courses) has been steadily decreasing. This is partly for financial reasons (adult education is typically self-financed), and partly due to the restructuring of the labour market. In recent years there has been a decrease not only in state financing of tertiary education, but also in private investors' willingness to finance courses, particularly since the world economic crisis in 2008. Due to the 2012 and 2012 amendments of the Labour Code, opportunities for employee training have been cut, not only financially but also in terms of time management and employment safety.<sup>106</sup> This may account for the decrease in the number of people participating in adult education, which is visible not only in tertiary education but on every level and in every form except elementary education. Where elementary education and the development of basic competences is concerned, the government's community service training module resulted in considerably improved rates of attendance, especially in 2014.<sup>107</sup>

As regards the numbers of people participating in non-formal education, a somewhat earlier figure is available from 2011; however, where these courses are concerned, data

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<sup>106</sup> [http://net.jogtar.hu/jr/gen/hjegy\\_doc.cgi?docid=A1200001.TV](http://net.jogtar.hu/jr/gen/hjegy_doc.cgi?docid=A1200001.TV)

<sup>107</sup> Statisztikai Tükör, vol. IV. No. 87., 5 August 2010 <http://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xftp/stattukor/felnottkepzes0507.pdf>; <http://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xftp/stattukor/felnottoktatás13.pdf> Felnőttoktatás, felnőttképzés ('Adult education, adult training'), KSH (Hungarian Central Statistical Office), March 2014.

covering several years is not always absolutely accurate. This is particularly true of courses that do not result in vocational qualifications acknowledged by the state (that is, content area, competence development or simply non-accredited courses).

In 2011, 27.2% of the adult population (25-64 years of age) took part in some kind of organized education or training. The proportion of women was somewhat higher than that of men (28.2% versus 26.2%). There was a relatively close correlation between economic activity and participation in learning programmes. On the whole, it can be concluded that the economically active – and among them, those who are employed – study significantly more than the economically inactive. More than one third of employed people (almost 40% of women and slightly under 33% of men) took part in some form of organized learning in 2011. The participation rate among unemployed men, however, exceeds that of unemployed women.

The most significant differences in rates of participation in adult learning reflect the level of qualification held: while little more than 10% of those with elementary qualifications took part in some form of formal learning, the rates for those with a school leaving certificate exceeded 30%. For those with a tertiary qualification, rates exceeded 50%. Within the above proportions, the rate of those participating in non-formal education varied in the following way. One quarter of the population between 25 and 64 years of age took part in some form of non-formal learning. The rate of participation is different for different groups. Willingness to participate decreases with age: while more than one third of those under 35 took part in non-formal education, less than 14% of those over 55 years of age did so (the distribution by age of adults in tertiary education shows a similar trend). Qualification level is a decisive factor in this case too: almost 47% of those with tertiary qualifications took part in some form of non-formal education, while under 10% of those with only elementary qualifications did so.

The most popular forms of non-formal learning were vocational courses without qualifications, conferences and seminars, workplace trainings, and trainings listed in the National Training Register. As regards the content of courses, the most frequent choices were social sciences, economics and law, followed by service-related topics, mostly

preferred by men. Healthcare and educational programmes were mostly attended by women, while men preferred programmes in the technical sciences and services.

The choice of acknowledged non-formal trainings which do not culminate in qualifications was mostly connected to participants' work. Adults completed almost three quarters of courses for this reason; the remaining quarter of courses were undertaken for personal reasons, for example, because they were related to participants' hobbies. Women were more willing than men to learn for reasons unrelated to their work. They attended about 30% of trainings for personal reasons; for men, this was true for only one fifth of trainings. Almost 30% of the adult population took part in at least one form of informal learning. Most of them were engaged in computer-aided learning, but many printed materials were also used. Computer-aided learning involves a combination of electronic study materials specifically developed for this purpose, digitally published literature developed for general purposes, and content retrieved from mixed electronic sources which is often of uncontrolled quality. For the time being, even in 2014, systematic online training remains the rarest form, despite the connectivist wave of 2011-12 and the great international breakthroughs in MOOCs since 2013. The most popular fields include the humanities, arts, services and social sciences. Since 2012 there has been a shift in preferred fields of study: at present, the most popular are language learning, development of ICT competences, healthcare/social care, business and economics, development of communication and individual competences. This means that there is an increasing demand among the Hungarian population to develop key competences.

Until recently, one of the most popular forms of adult education was postgraduate teacher training, the content of which extended from special subjects through methodological issues to key competences. Recently, however, the proportion of students in this sector been considerably reduced or rechannelled due to the restructuring of the control and financing of public education.<sup>108</sup>

A considerable proportion of non-formal programmes, particularly self-organizing study groups, do not start in the educational sector and are not even seen as training by either

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<sup>108</sup>[http://net.jogtar.hu/jr/gen/hjegy\\_doc.cgi?docid=A1100190.TV](http://net.jogtar.hu/jr/gen/hjegy_doc.cgi?docid=A1100190.TV)  
[http://klik.gov.hu/download/c/d0/70000/alapito\\_okirat.pdf](http://klik.gov.hu/download/c/d0/70000/alapito_okirat.pdf)

the participants or the organizers. Both the number of such programmes and their participation rates are difficult to measure. Many are attached to the civil sphere or run by individuals. These courses often focus on esoteric fields such as right hemispheric drawing, creative writing, etc.

Reasons for failing to carry out planned courses often have to do with the living conditions of the participants: shortage of money or time, employers' unwillingness to support training, etc. In the case of distance and electronic learning, resources such as home internet access or IT infrastructure are often insufficient for learning. Lack of relevant key competences is also a significant factor: some potential participants consider their own ICT knowledge insufficient to complete an online course or one with strong electronic support. Similarly, some lack the necessary language skills to complete an online course taught in a foreign language.

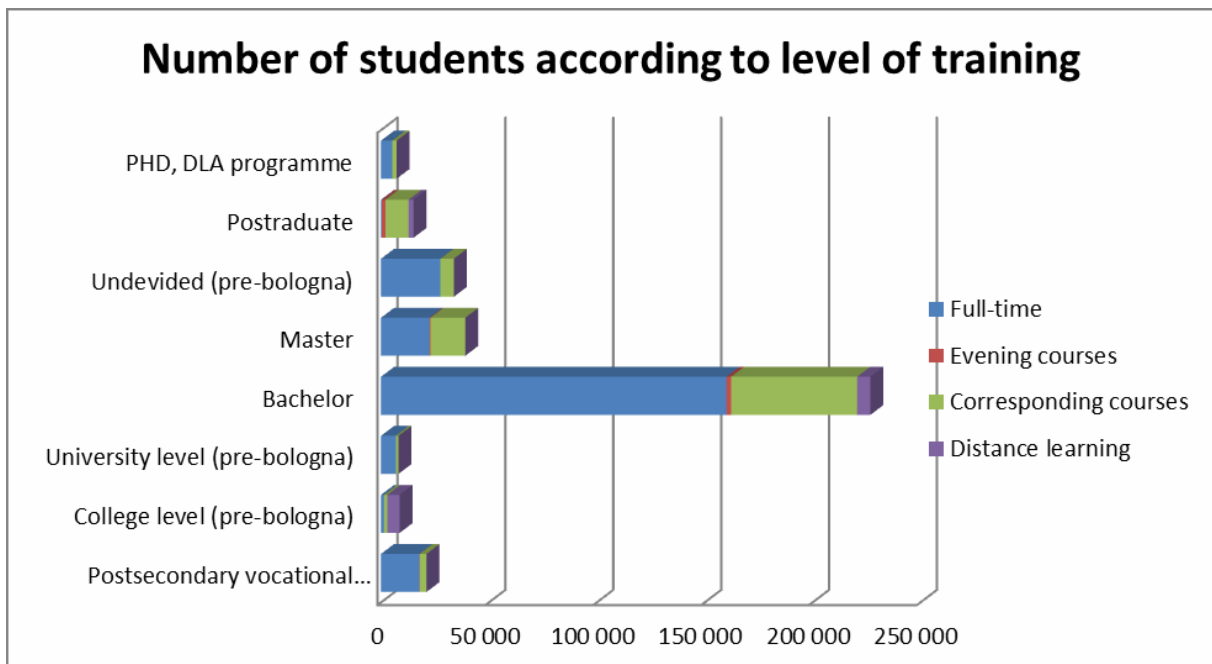


## 1.1. Statistics on students participating in distance/part-time training

Prepared by: Maria Kocsis Baán

The diagrams below present the data available on the following website:  
[http://www.oktatas.hu/felsooktatas/felsooktatasi\\_statistikak](http://www.oktatas.hu/felsooktatas/felsooktatasi_statistikak).

**Figure 1: Variations in rate of attendance in various levels of training with regard to status**



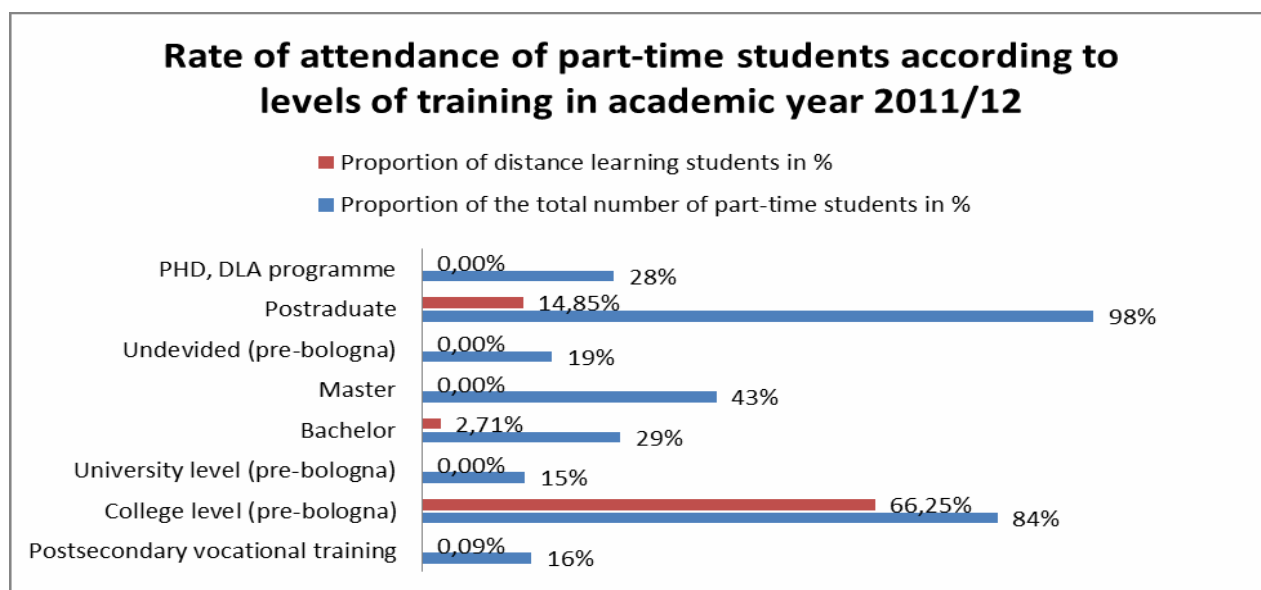
**Table 1: Education statistics – Hungary 2011/2012**

	Post-secondary vocational training	College level training	University level training	Bachelor program	Master program	Undivided training	Postgraduate vocational training	PhD, DLA	Total
<b>Full-time</b>	17,811	1,361	6,867	160,151	22,428	27,497	299	5,200	<b>241,614</b>
<b>Evening</b>	78	67	46	2,104	498	41	1,747	65	<b>4,646</b>
<b>Correspondence course</b>	3,208	1,485	1,194	58,428	16,113	6,228	10,786	1,989	<b>99,431</b>
<b>Distance learning</b>	18	5,719	0	6,158	0	0	2,238	0	<b>14,133</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>21,115</b>	<b>8,632</b>	<b>8,107</b>	<b>226,841</b>	<b>39,039</b>	<b>33,766</b>	<b>15,070</b>	<b>7,254</b>	<b>359,824</b>
<b>Proportion of part-time students in %</b>	16%	84%	15%	29%	43%	19%	98%	28%	<b>33%</b>
<b>Proportion of distance learning students in %</b>	0.09%	66.2 %	0.00%	2.71%	0.00%	0.00%	14.85%	0.00%	<b>3.93%</b>

Analysing in detail the main levels of Bologna-type training and the levels of training with the highest number of participants, the following diagrams command attention.

On the basis of these diagrams, it can be concluded that distance learning in Hungary represents a particularly low proportion of the educational programmes available, despite the fact that a significant number of students require the opportunities and advantages that part-time training forms can offer. Moreover, the figures are low despite the fact that Hungarian higher education is able to meet both the infrastructural and methodological challenges of organizing and implementing modern distance education programmes. It is particularly remarkable that, at masters level, there is no distance education on offer in Hungary at all.

**Figure 2: Rate of attendance for part time students by academic level**

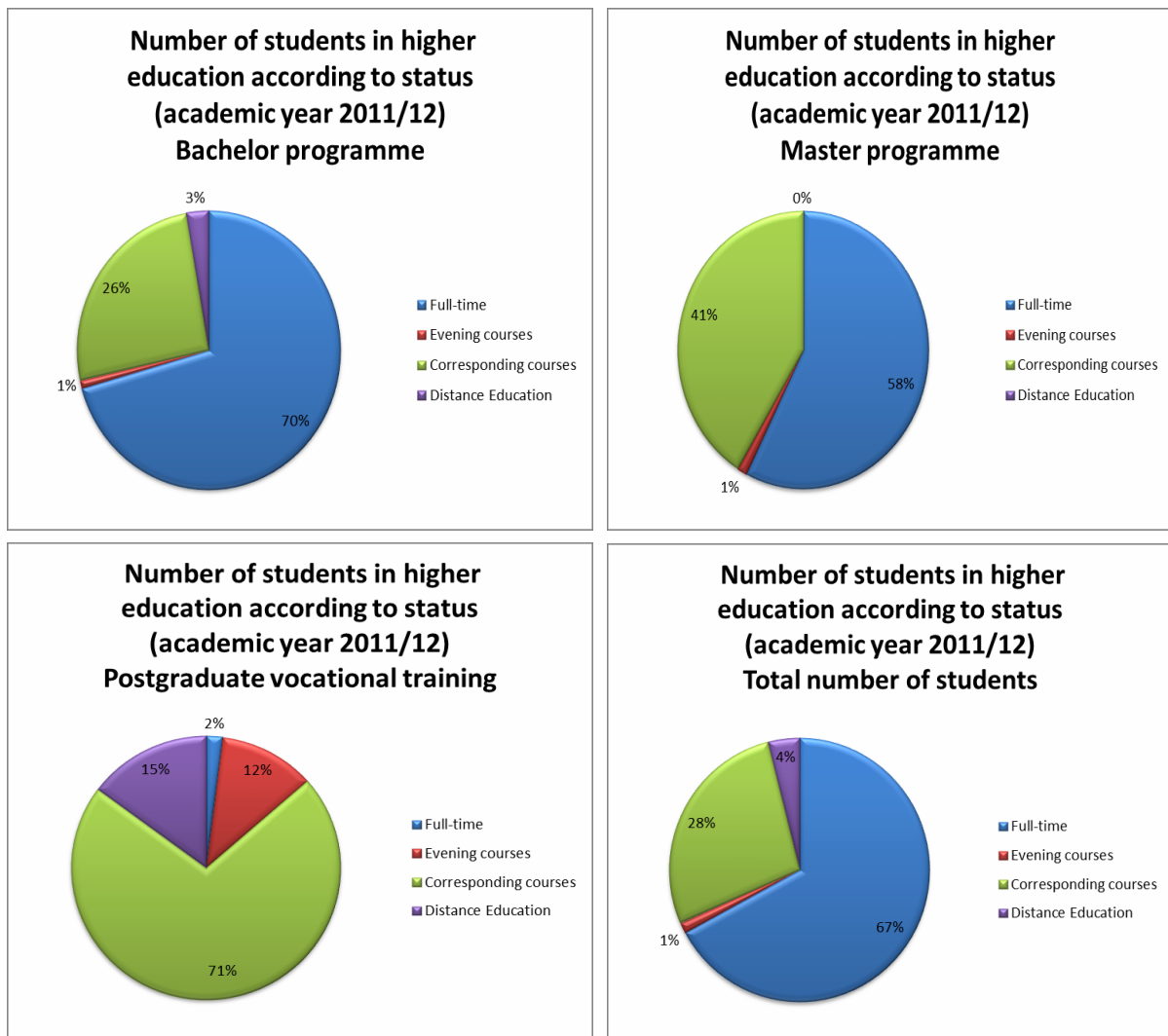


The reason for these shortcomings is all too clear: current legislation discriminates against modern e-learning in favour of the more familiar but less efficient correspondence programmes. While 73% of full-time and 27% of part-time conventional students receive state support, those participating in distance learning are not eligible to receive such support. This is why several higher education institutions advertise correspondence courses, which in optimal cases are carried out using blended learning methods.

**Table 2: Students receiving state subsistence in Hungary**

Academic Year 2011/12	Total	Receiving state subsistence (person)	State subsistence (%)
Full-time students	241,614	176,752	73%
Part-time students	118,210	32,084	27%
Total	359,824	208,836	58%

**Figure 3: Distribution of students by academic level - Hungary**



The significant number of students in college level training programmes is noteworthy. The table below shows the distribution according to status of students 'remaining' from pre-Bologna university-college programmes, with an institutional breakdown.

**Table 3: Student numbers at institutions in Hungary**

Institution	Total number of students	Students in their final year of studies)
Gábor Dénes College	195	195
Budapest Bussiness School	77	56
Károly Róbert College	5,327	794
Óbuda University	34	22
University of Pécs	3	3
Széchenyi István University	31	25
University of Szeged	10	10
College of Szolnok	42	42

According to this table, in four out of the eight institutions studied, the number of students reaching their final year of studies in the given academic year is very low. Károly Róbert College is the only institution with a high number of students in their final year. In the table shown below, it can be seen that the same institution is represented by only 246 students in full-time training at bachelor level in the same academic year.

**Table 4: Student statistics by age - Hungary**

Statistics according to age	Total number of students	Total number of students	Total number of students
18-24 years of age	166,112	19,719	633
25-29 years of age	29,677	9,076	3,009
30-34 years of age	13,245	3,270	2,858
35-39 years of age	9,139	2,449	2,870
at least 40 years of age	8,668	4,525	5,700
Total	226,841	39,039	15,070
'Adult' %	27%	49%	96%
over 30	14%	26%	76%

**Figure 4: Distribution of students within Hungary**

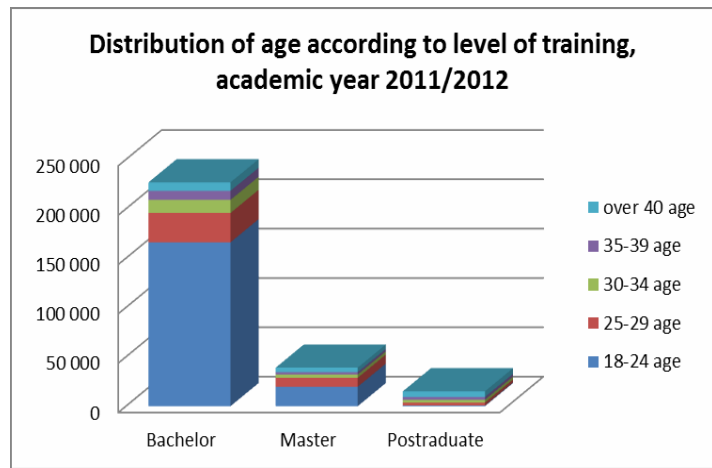
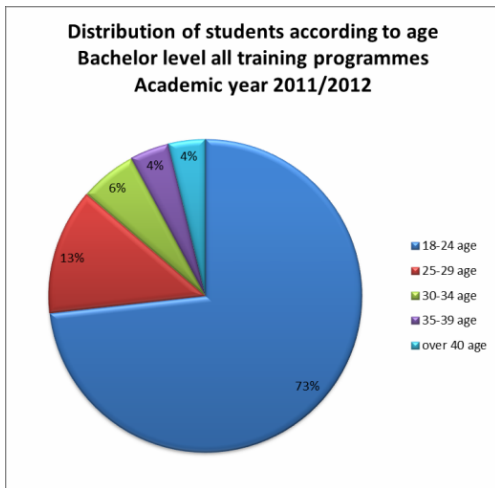
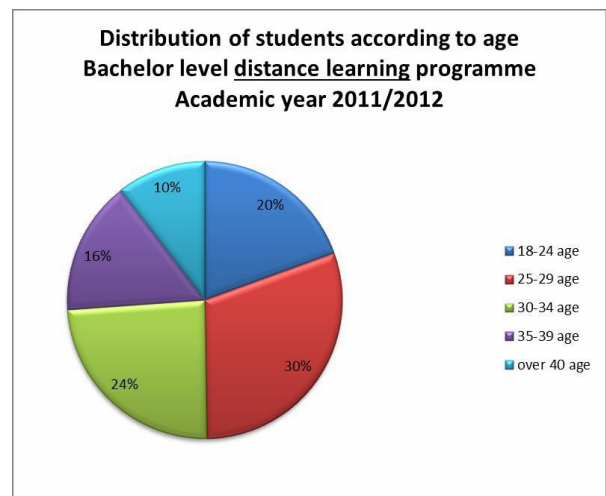
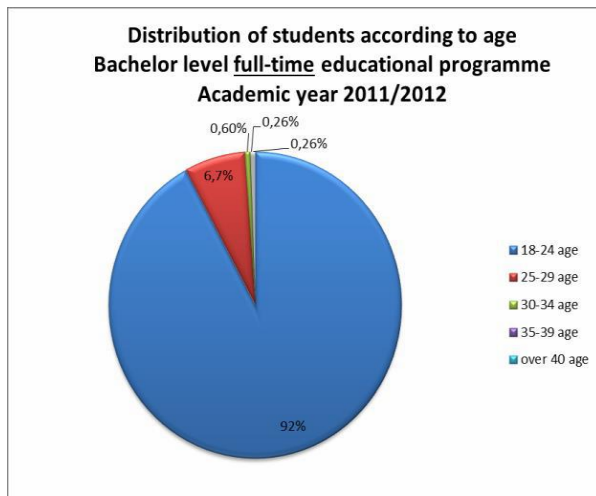
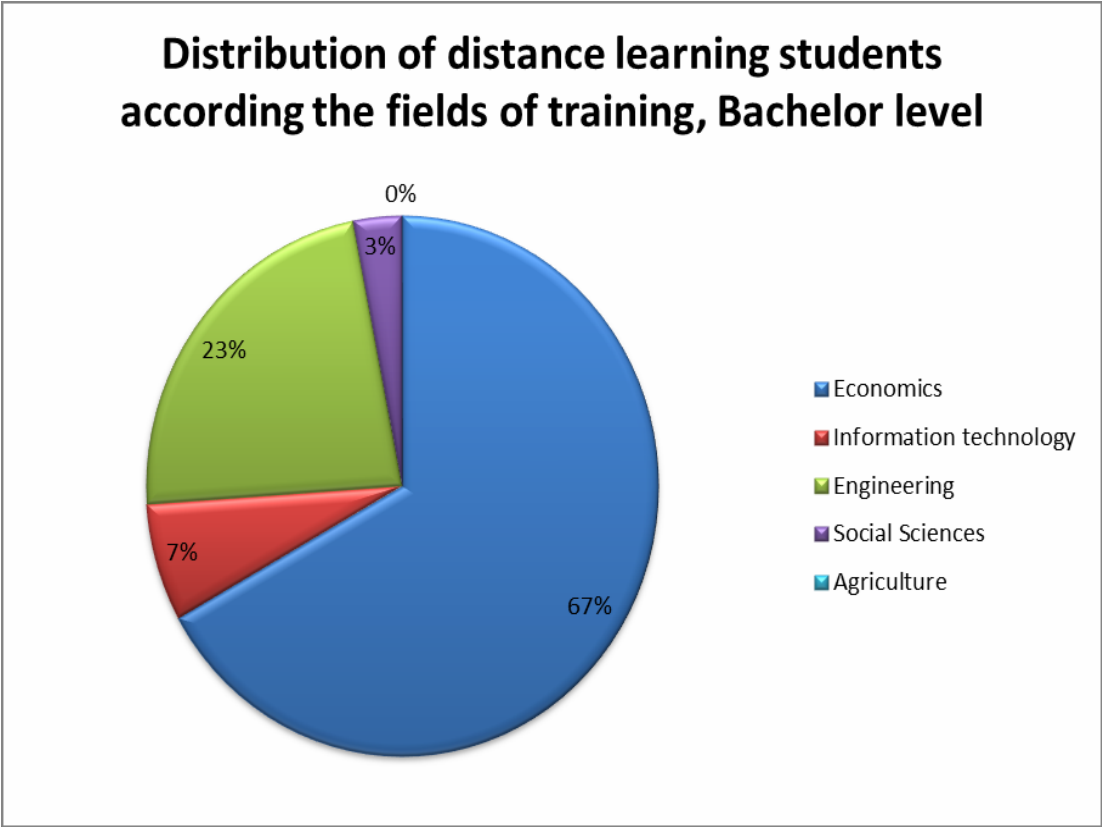


Figure 5: Distance learning students by field of training



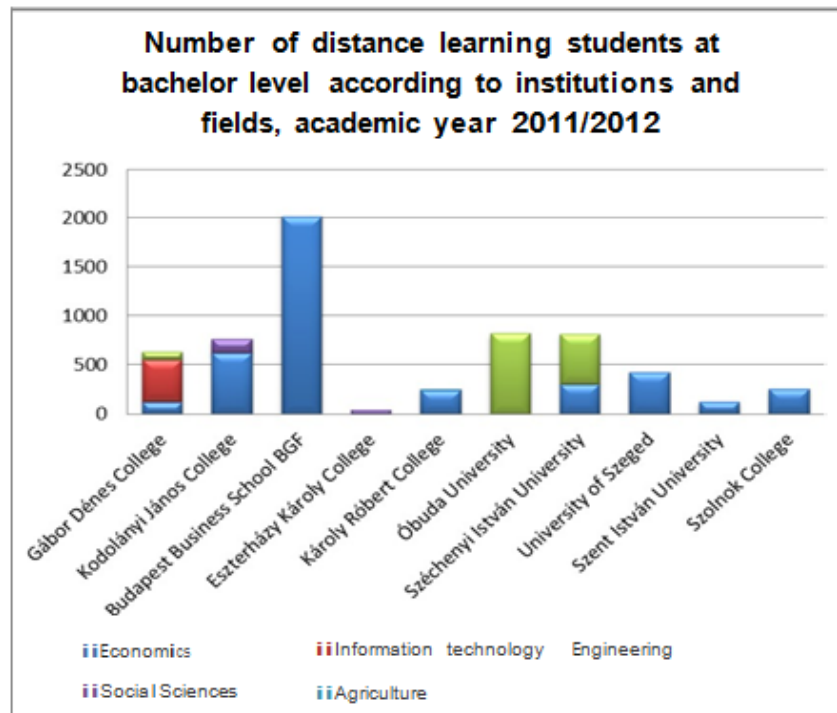
**Table 4: Distance education bachelor students by institution - Hungary**

Number of distance learning students at bachelor level according to institutions and fields, academic year 2011/2012	Gábor Dénes College	Kodolányi János College	Business School BGF	Eszterházy Károly College	Károly Róbert College
Economics	121	621	2,018		245
Information technology	433	0	0		
Technical sciences	81	0	0		
Social sciences	0	145	0	44	
Agriculture					1
<b>Total</b>	<b>635</b>	<b>766</b>	<b>2,018</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>246</b>

Óbuda University	Széchenyi István University	University of Szeged	Szent István University	Szolnok College	Total
	307	422	128	257	4,119
					433
823	512				1,416
					189
					1
823	819	422	128	257	6,158



Figure 6: Distance learning bachelor students by institution - Hungary



## 2. The social background, composition and characteristics of learners participating in distance learning

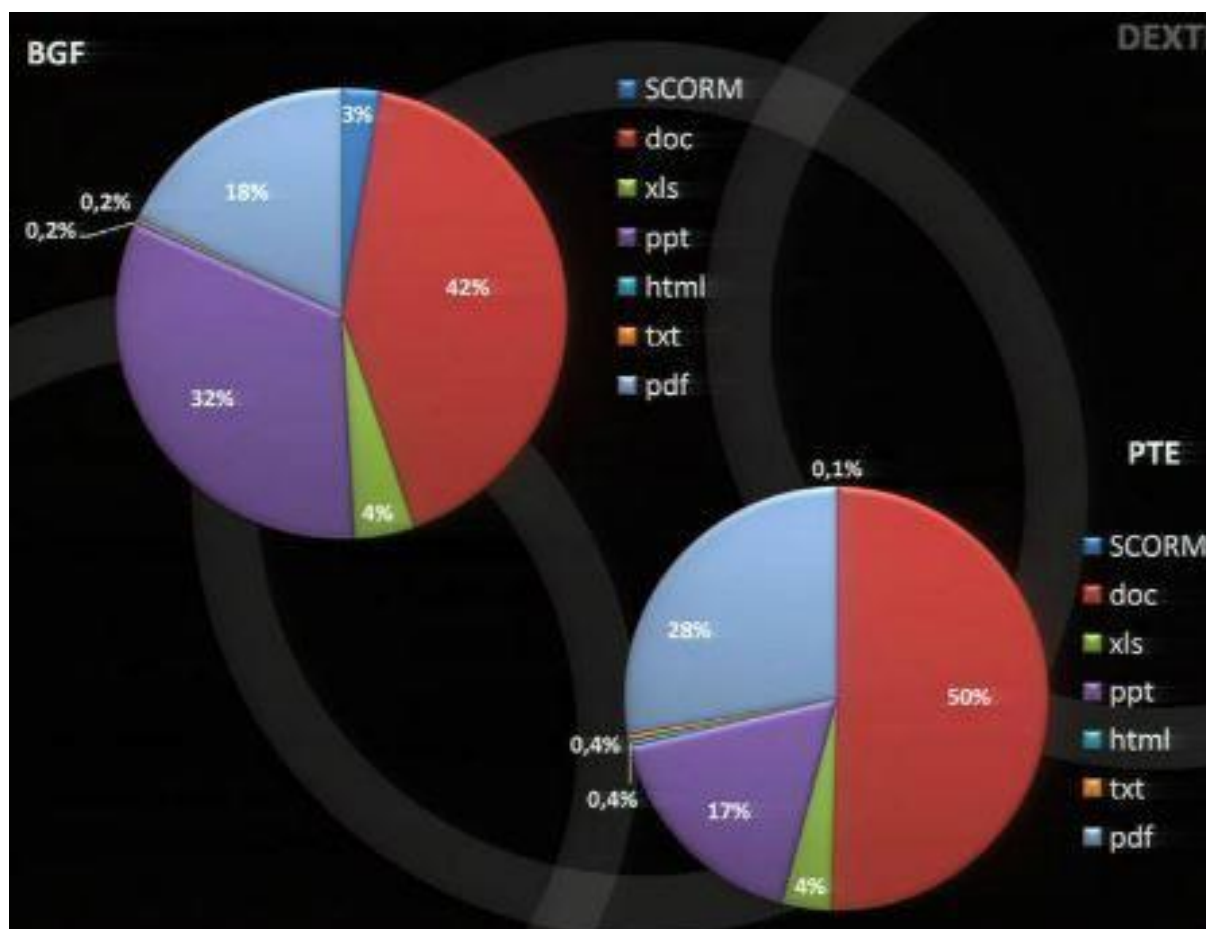
Prepared by: Krisztina Fodorné Tóth

### 2.1. Distance learning services provided by universities

Today, the distance learning services provided by universities are generally combined with electronic learning support services, mainly as a consequence of the organization of part-time (correspondence and evening) courses. Every Hungarian higher education institution operates some kind of electronic learning support system. At a minimum, this means the educational administrative system, which is represented by market framework systems (Neptun, ETR – Unified Study System). The framework systems support the sharing of educational documents, so some institutions use these primarily for storing and forwarding the minimally necessary amount of electronic training content. In general, it can be stated that document sharing (course descriptions, presentations, lecture notes, downloadable and referenced literature) represents the highest proportion of material in the electronic learning support systems of Hungarian higher education institutions, regardless of platform or system. This is illustrated through the example of user statistics from two universities using CooSpace, the Learning Management System (LMS) developed by Hungarian companies, which is the most popular in Hungarian higher education.

Higher education institutions use different platforms to varying extents for document sharing or the management of distance learning activities (submission of assignments, examinations, group-work, student–teacher or student–student communication). Besides the above-mentioned administrative system, the two most common forms of electronic system used for publishing content are a) files or webpages via the institutional server, and b) Learning Management Systems (LMS): practically every Hungarian higher education institution (HEI) uses these solutions to some extent. External open source document sharing systems (e.g. Google Drive, Dropbox) or mixed use platforms (e-portfolio, external websites and social platforms) are also used to a lesser extent.

Figure 7: Distribution of types of documents uploaded into Coospace LMS



Note: illustrated with the example of two Hungarian institutions 2004-2008<sup>109</sup>.

With regard to LMS, the range of platforms used and the activities performed may vary on the faculty, institutional, departmental or even individual level. This reflects a characteristic feature of Hungarian higher education institutions. In many Hungarian HEIs there is no well-planned, conceptually unified electronic learning support system for organizational and methodological matters. Instead, the form and source of such support depend on the subjects and teachers in question, thanks to strong fundamental respect for teachers' professional freedom. In institutions where the various forms of distance learning have a strong tradition and/or are markedly present, systematic electronic learning support is generally available but its sphere of influence does not necessarily extend to the whole institution. One reason for this is the significant organizational

<sup>109</sup> Pál Golobics: Új eszközök és alkalmazási területek a Coospace-ben ('New tools and fields of application in Coospace'), Dexter Kft. Networkshop konferencia 2009 <https://videotorium.hu/hu/recordings/details/1519>, Uj\_eszkozok\_es\_alkalmazasi\_teruletek\_a\_Coospace-ben.)

transformation which higher education has undergone in the past 15-20 years. As a result of integration measures, some formerly independent institutions with radically different educational methods have been merged, whilst still trying to preserve their integrity and autonomy.<sup>110</sup> However, this may in certain cases have created a situation where even the best practices of some institutions were not spread over the whole institution. In addition, in the early 2000s, several new institutions (units, faculties and independent institutions) were established as a result of higher education expansion.<sup>111</sup> Some of these new institutions have developed a modern electronic learning support system and applied this approach to distance learning, which then often departed from the classical university distance learning traditions.

Distance learning practice at Hungarian universities started with theoretical research in the early 1970s.<sup>112</sup> During this period, methods were developed for the modernization of correspondence programmes (especially in teacher training). These methods advanced and spread in the 1990s, when the network of Hungarian Regional Distance Learning Centres was established.<sup>113</sup> Although these centres were generally under the auspices of higher education institutions, the institutions in question did not always make use of the possibilities they offered. Moreover, the centres soon faced a significant lack of resources. As a result, university distance learning centres either became multifunctional units (e.g. for coordinating adult education or supporting the library or knowledge centre), or survived on external resources. Those that could do neither of these things simply ceased to exist. In the small percentage of institutions which have pledged to carry out distance learning education, this activity may not be affiliated with a distance learning centre (although this is primarily because the majority of institutions, especially the newly established HEIs, have never set one up). Distance learning activities related to universities or colleges are not connected to specific institutions, with the exception of a few cases. Instead, they function for the time being as a type of supplementary activity

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<sup>110</sup> Kálmán, A. (2002): A Lifelong Learning Központ empirikus távoktatási felmérése az Észak-Alföldi Régióban, valamint a távoktatás regionális helyzete. ('Empirical distance learning survey of the Lifelong Learning Centre in the northern region of the Great Hungarian Plain and the regional conditions of distance learning') Lifelong Learning Füzetek 2. szám, Debreceni Egyetem 'Lifelong Learning' Központ

<sup>111</sup>Kozma Tamás: A felsőoktatás expanziója. 'The expansion of higher education'  
[http://dragon.unideb.hu/~nevtud/Oktdolg/Kozma\\_Tamas/doc/expanzio.pdf](http://dragon.unideb.hu/~nevtud/Oktdolg/Kozma_Tamas/doc/expanzio.pdf)

<sup>112</sup> Kovács Ilma: Távoktatástól távoktatásig. 'From distance learning to distance learning.' Budapest, 2006  
<http://mek.oszk.hu/04500/04524/04524.pdf>

<sup>113</sup>Hungarian National Council for Distance Education - website: [http://www.fsz.bme.hu/lnokt/ntt/ntt\\_eng.htm](http://www.fsz.bme.hu/lnokt/ntt/ntt_eng.htm)

of universities, as far as the proportion of training programmes and the number of participants are concerned.

Distance learning represents only a very small segment of Hungarian university education. While there is still a wide range of programmes on offer, most of these are full-time correspondence programmes. In September 2014, altogether 31 distance learning training programmes were advertised in Hungary by the various institutions.<sup>114</sup> Thematically, this represents 11 different programmes provided by 9 institutions (for comparison, there are 46 higher education institutions in the country operating on a Hungarian licence and 30 on a foreign licence).

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<sup>114</sup> admission portal felvi.hu

**Table 5: Distance learning programmes advertised by Hungarian HEIs in September 2014<sup>115</sup>**

Intézmény	Képzéstípus	Munkarend	Finanszírozási forma	Szak	
BGF-KVIK	A	T	K	kereskedelem és marketing	szak leírása
BGF-KVIK	A	T	K	turizmus-vendéglátás	szak leírása
BGF-PSZK	A	T	K	gazdálkodási és menedzsment	szak leírása
BGF-PSZK	A	T	K	pénzügy és számvitel	szak leírása
EKF-TKTK	A	T	K	informatikus könyvtáros	szak leírása
GDF	A	T	K	gazdálkodási és menedzsment	szak leírása
GDF	A	T	K	gazdaságinformatikus	szak leírása
GDF	A	T	K	mérnökinformatikus	szak leírása
GDF	A	T	K	műszaki menedzser	szak leírása
GDF	F	T	K	gazdálkodási és menedzsment [kis- és középvállalkozási]	
GDF	F	T	K	gazdálkodási és menedzsment [projektmenedzsment]	
GDF	F	T	K	gazdaságinformatikus	
GDF	F	T	K	mérnökinformatikus [hálózati informatikus]	
GDF	F	T	K	mérnökinformatikus [rendszergazda]	
KJF	A	T	K	gazdálkodási és menedzsment (Budapest)	szak leírása
KJF	A	T	K	gazdálkodási és menedzsment (Székesfehérvár)	szak leírása
KJF	A	T	K	nemzetközi tanulmányok (Budapest)	szak leírása
KJF	A	T	K	szociális munka (Budapest)	szak leírása
KJF	A	T	K	turizmus-vendéglátás (Budapest)	szak leírása
KJF	A	T	K	turizmus-vendéglátás (Székesfehérvár)	szak leírása
KRF	A	T	K	kereskedelem és marketing	szak leírása
KRF	A	T	K	pénzügy és számvitel	szak leírása
OE-KGK	A	T	K	műszaki menedzser (Budapest)	szak leírása
OE-KVK	A	T	K	villamosmérnöki (Budapest)	szak leírása
SZE-GK	A	T	K	gazdálkodási és menedzsment	szak leírása
SZE-MTK	A	T	K	közlekedésmérnöki	szak leírása
SZE-MTK	A	T	K	műszaki menedzser	szak leírása
SZF	A	T	K	kereskedelem és marketing	szak leírása
SZF	A	T	K	pénzügy és számvitel	szak leírása
SZF	A	T	K	turizmus-vendéglátás	szak leírása
SZTE-GTK	A	T	K	gazdálkodási és menedzsment	szak leírása

Majors: commerce and marketing, tourism and catering, economics and management, finance and accounting, library information technology, economics and management, business IT, engineering IT, technical manager, economics and management (small and medium-size enterprises), economics and management, economics and management (project management), business IT, engineering IT (networks), engineering IT (system administration), economics and management (Budapest), economics and management (Székesfehérvár), international studies (Budapest), social work (Budapest), tourism-catering (Budapest), tourism-catering (Székesfehérvár), commerce and marketing,

<sup>115</sup> <http://felvi.hu> (Columns in table: Institution, Type of training, Status, Financing, Major)

finance and accounting, technical management (Budapest), electrical engineering (Budapest), economics and management, transportation engineering, technical management, commerce and marketing, finance and accounting, tourism and marketing, finance and accounting, tourism and catering, economics and management.

Establishing and running a distance learning programme in Hungary is subject to well-defined criteria, which indicate the resource-demanding character of distance learning<sup>116</sup>. Due to lack of resources (both financial and human), even the production of the electronic content of courses and programmes can be a difficult task, not to mention the introduction of distance learning itself, which requires a total overhaul of approaches and work processes. Most institutions have decided instead to gradually transform correspondence training programmes into a kind of blended learning, or have developed an institutional distance and e-learning strategy simultaneously (one example is the 2013 e-learning strategy of Pécs University).

This, then, is the current state of play with regard to distance learning in higher education. The forms of accredited, organized adult education programmes can be measured; however, there is little comprehensive data available for the whole country. Universities measure the state, outcome, participant base, and satisfaction level of their distance learning programmes themselves, using a variety of methods. One priority area for the spread of distance education could be postgraduate teacher training, since the recently reformed system has given special attention to distance learning<sup>117</sup>. The range of non-accredited or even non-organized training courses cannot easily be measured, because they are launched in various forms based on various financing and conditions, and have similarly diverse reporting and dissemination requirements and institutional backgrounds. In general, however, it can be stated that vocational postgraduate training programmes, particularly intra-institutional training courses, represent a high proportion of distance

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<sup>116</sup> Hungarian Accreditation Committee,  
[http://www.mab.hu/web/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=361&Itemid=522&lang=hu](http://www.mab.hu/web/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=361&Itemid=522&lang=hu),  
[http://www.mab.hu/web/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=443&Itemid=646&lang=en](http://www.mab.hu/web/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=443&Itemid=646&lang=en)

<sup>117</sup> Márta Hunya – Regina Nagy: Miért menjünk? Tartalmi és formai megújulás a pedagógus-továbbképzési kínálatban. 'Why go? Content and form renewal in the offer of postgraduate teacher training')  
[http://www.ofi.hu/sites/default/files/WEBRA/2014/01/HUnya\\_Marti\\_TAMOP315\\_miertmenjunk\\_educatio\\_KIK.pdf](http://www.ofi.hu/sites/default/files/WEBRA/2014/01/HUnya_Marti_TAMOP315_miertmenjunk_educatio_KIK.pdf)

learning. The forms, time management and methodological quality of such training courses are equally diverse.

In Hungary, besides the regional distance learning centres operating under the auspices of certain higher education institutions, individual institutions undertake to operate distance learning programmes in conjunction with their main activity (Examples for these:.....Open access online courses which can be expanded through the cooperation of several institutions into a systematic national or even higher level distance learning platform could represent a breakthrough. The Hungarian E-university Network<sup>118</sup> has already made preliminary preparations to this end. However, in recent years, several other initiatives have appeared aiming to introduce open access online courses, with the K-MOOC platform of Óbuda University being the most recent<sup>119</sup>. In 2013, Pécs University joined this trend with its open access online course provision; in 2014 it launched second cycle open courses whose credits are accepted by the relevant faculty<sup>120</sup>. The first initiative of this kind was the Virtual University launched by the teachers of ELTE University, which at present is operated via the social media platform Facebook<sup>121</sup>.

The motivations and attitudes of higher education institutions to distance learning programmes are also varied. In line with global trends, institutions are primarily interested in increasing the number of participants, including both Hungarians living abroad and foreign students. Since demographic changes and the transformation of the financing of Hungarian higher education have caused admissions of native Hungarian students to dwindle, institutions have been turning towards foreign target groups by introducing an increasing number of training programmes taught in foreign languages. At the same time, the distance learning programmes on offer are being expanded by transforming correspondence courses and introducing MOOCs. In an earlier phase of development, distance learning programmes were seen as attractive because they were presumed to have low costs and modest human resources requirements following their launch. By now, however, it has become clear that under network conditions and with the

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<sup>118</sup> <http://e-university.hu/>

<sup>119</sup> <https://elearning.uni-obuda.hu/kmooc/>

<sup>120</sup> <http://efeek.pte.hu>, Krisztina Fodorné Tóth: Nyílt online kurzusok tanulságai a szervezés és a motiváció tükrében; 'Open online courses in terms of organization and motivation'. Networkshop 2014; <http://nws.niif.hu/ncd2014/docs/ehu/052.pdf>

<sup>121</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/virtualisegyetem>



infrastructural, content and support expectations of the present target groups, the demand for human resources in distance learning programmes is equal, although different, to that of attendance-based teaching. This motivational factor therefore seems to be disappearing. In contrast, however, the target group seems to be changing as the Net Generation reaches the age of entering adult education and web applications become a way of life. As students' ICT competences improve and their attitude to online learning becomes more favourable, distance education seems a more and more relevant tool for increasing the range of people who can be involved in higher education. Moreover, a significant number of participants in distance learning find it to be the only form of training flexible enough to accommodate their way of life. (According to the internal survey of Pázmány Péter Catholic University in 2012-14, 72% of the respondents participating in distance programmes would choose the same form of training in their further studies for the above reasons.<sup>122</sup>

Adaptation of higher education programmes to distance learning environments partly follows the general trend of e-learning support and partly reflects a gradual departure from the organizational methods of correspondence courses. Thus, initiatives focus mainly on electronic content development and only subsequently on ways of elaborating possible online courses or training programmes. In the case of full distance learning programmes, the first step is to design the whole learning process (often starting from the organizational model of correspondence courses, already familiar to students). The framework is then filled with thematic groups and training course activities, followed by content development and editing, creation of the platform and preparation of trainers. According to the survey conducted by Pázmány Péter Catholic University, the Hungarian distance learning programmes examined featured group tutorials (not necessarily in postgraduate training) and tutor support, as well as a recommended learning schedule which learners can handle with a certain flexibility. Course materials (lecture notes, electronic material, etc.) were partly online and partly printed. Open online courses introduced in recent years signal a further departure of distance learning from correspondence courses, at least with regard to face-to-face contact. These courses are run fully on electronic platforms, and can be completed without contact teaching or

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<sup>122</sup> Éva Cseszka: Felsőoktatási intézményekben folyó távoktatásban résztvevők ('Participants in distance learning in higher education institutions'), Internal survey, Pázmány Péter Catholic University, 2014

tutorials using only online material and activities. Course materials include electronic lecture notes, online literature and video materials; activities include forums, video-conferencing, real-time or asynchronic communication via social media, collaboratively edited documents, assignments to be submitted, and assessment tests.

In a university environment, the costs for the participants/students of self-financed distance learning programmes are often equal to those of correspondence programmes. The order depends on the field and level of training (the cost of bachelor distance learning programmes is typically 150 000-180 000 HUF/semester; in addition, tertiary level vocational training courses are also available in distance learning mode, which are somewhat less expensive). The lower cost of open online courses reflects the lower rates of face-to-face consultations compared to the correspondence courses.

From the institutional perspective, the cost structure of electronic distance learning is different from that of traditional programmes: a significant proportion of the whole cost (approx. 57%) is spent on content development and system operation, while the cost of teaching is divided between teaching and tutoring fees. In addition, a significant proportion of the costs of distance learning (namely those related to content, course and system development) must be covered before the launch of the training, when the risk of recovery is high. However, these initial high costs are only incurred once and will not reach the same proportion again, unlike face-to-face training costs which remain the same for the duration of the programme. The provision of human resources is the responsibility of higher education institutions and must be covered by a very narrow budget until the income from the training allows the financing of extension. The whole cost demand of electronic distance learning during a cycle of seven semesters is some 70% of that of a correspondence course with the same number of participants, so even taking into account its significant need of human resources, it is clearly more cost-effective.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Kata Némethné Farkas: Az e-learning oktatás bevezetése a Széchenyi István Egyetemen. 'Introducing e-learning training at Széchenyi István University'. Student research, 2012

Today, university distance learning programmes are all fee-paying, and participation in such training is not subsidized. According to the legislative regulation of the act on higher education, one benefit is provided for all part-time training programmes according to duration: part-time training can be extended by a maximum of four semesters<sup>124</sup>. In the case of accredited adult trainings, training can be launched with a certain amount of state support depending on the content and target group, but not on the form of training, i.e. whether it is distance learning or face-to-face.

The participation rate in university and college level distance learning programmes is very low compared to the whole student population. At the same time, hardly any participation data are available for training courses offering no diploma. The main reason for the low participation rate may be the narrow offer of training programmes in this form. This seems to be verified by the wide interest shown in the recently launched MOOC programmes. For example, the open online courses launched by Pécs University in 2014 (3 courses altogether) have 309 registered participants (as of 8 October 2014). As shown in the figure below, the largest and most prestigious universities offer part time study programmes, but typically in the form of correspondence courses. No master level programmes are offered in distance delivery mode.

Information on higher education degree programmes together with their distance learning formats can be obtained from the annual Admission Information Booklet, which is available online at the central education and administration website<sup>125</sup> as well as from the institutions' own registry offices and websites. As with other university training programmes, these sources of information describe the disciplinary setting of the training, the level of diploma/certificates awarded, the tuition fees charged, and the course content of the programmes. The information provided by the institutions themselves gives much more detail, covering the organization and structure of the training courses, the required tools, platforms and software, and the list of contact persons together with their contact details. The institutions' own websites also provide information on higher education courses which do not award degrees or certificates. Those interested can obtain

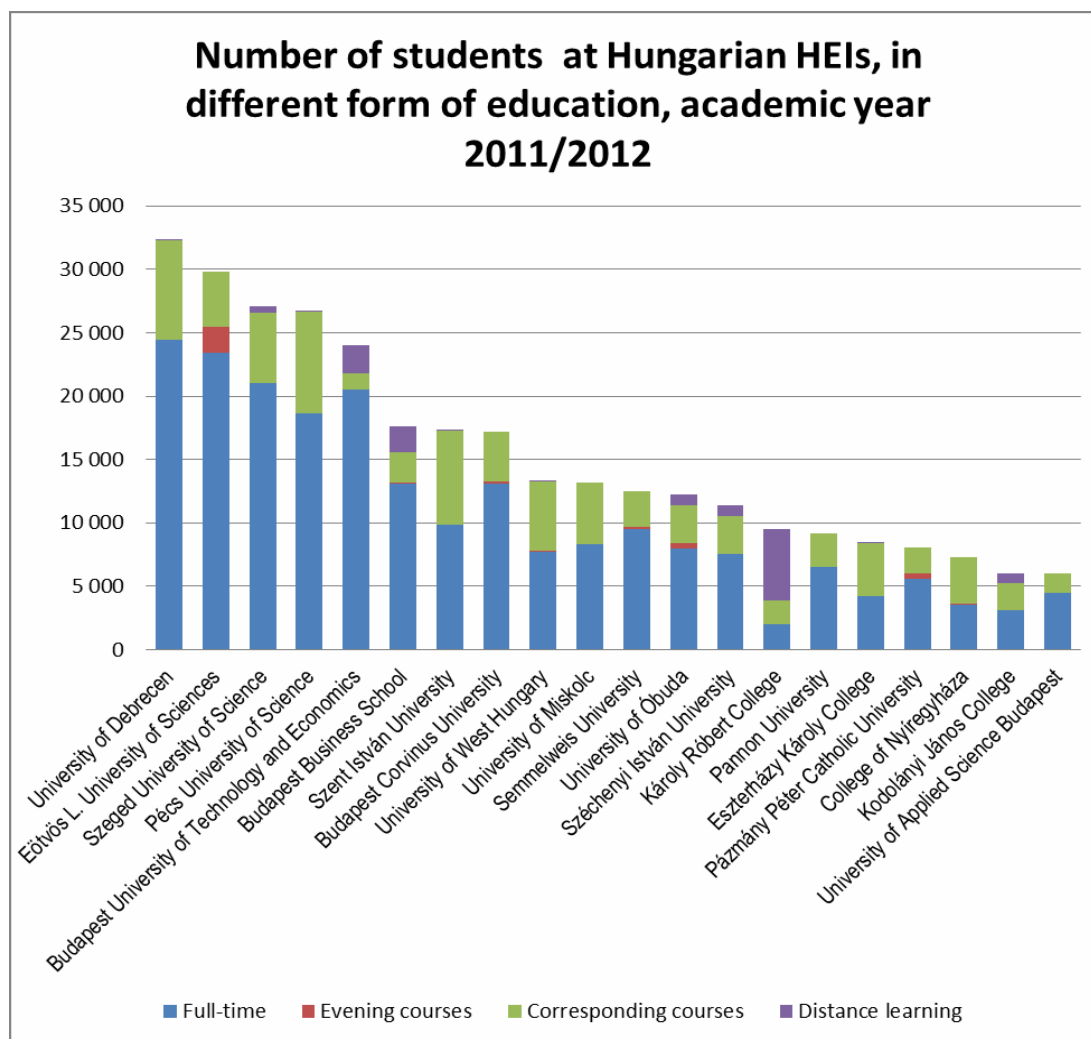
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<sup>124</sup>Article 55 (2) of Act No. CCIV of 2011 on Hungarian higher education,  
[http://net.jogtar.hu/jr/gen/hjegy\\_doc.cgi?docid=A1100204.TV](http://net.jogtar.hu/jr/gen/hjegy_doc.cgi?docid=A1100204.TV)

<sup>125</sup> <http://felvi.hu>

information on these and other adult training programmes at the website of the Public Employment Service.<sup>126</sup>

**Figure 8: Ranking order of Hungarian higher education institutions according to the total number of students and proportion of participants in different delivery forms (academic year 2011/12)**



The workload on distance learning programmes depends on their organizational characteristics. The above description of the cost structure of distance learning programmes applies here, too: the more automated the training, the lower the workload for instructors during the course. In the field of distance education, however, highly automated trainings are less effective due to the lack of participant interaction and the

<sup>126</sup> [http://www.afsz.hu/engine.aspx?page=allaskeresoknek\\_kepzes](http://www.afsz.hu/engine.aspx?page=allaskeresoknek_kepzes)  
[https://www.nive.hu/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=211&Itemid=167](https://www.nive.hu/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=211&Itemid=167)

demotivating effect of anonymity. In the case of degree awarding and accredited training programmes, the institution must provide a degree equivalent to that of the corresponding full-time attendance-based programme. Learning outcome requirements must be the same in both face-to-face and distance programmes. This means that the total workload for students of distance learning programmes is similar to that of full-time students. Naturally, the number of contact hours, if any, can only extend to what is permitted by law: in the case of distance learning, the number of contact teaching hours must be fewer than 30% of the contact hours in the equivalent full-time programme;<sup>127</sup> the rest of the workload is made up of independent work. This usually means a 20-80% or 30-70% division.

## 2.2. Statutory framework and legal regulation of distance learning

Distance learning is defined by Hungarian legislation within the field of higher education and adult education. In addition, it also appears in such non-regulatory legal documents as the 2010-2014 Action plan for digital renewal and the 2014-2020 Info-communication strategy. In these documents, distance learning is presented partly as a general and partly as a public education objective.<sup>128</sup>

Within higher education, distance education is regulated by Act CCIV of 2011 on Hungarian higher education<sup>129</sup>. This defines distance learning as ‘a form of training based on the interactional relationship of instructor and student and the student’s self-study, using special information-technological and communicational educational devices, knowledge transfer/learning methods and digital course materials, in which the number of contact teaching hours amounts to less than 30% of the contact hours of full-time training’. The act regulates the possibilities for launching distance education in various specialist subjects, and stipulates that the educational system shall make up for the lower

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<sup>127</sup> Article 55(2) of Act CCIV of 2011 on Hungarian higher education,  
[http://net.jogtar.hu/jr/gen/hjegy\\_doc.cgi?docid=A1100204.TV](http://net.jogtar.hu/jr/gen/hjegy_doc.cgi?docid=A1100204.TV)

<sup>128</sup> Info-communication strategy  
<http://www.google.hu/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CCEQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.nih.gov.hu%2Fdownload.php%3FdocID%3D24683&ei=aolmVJz2GsK5OJnjgAg&usg=AFQjCNHcm6I2tbA9myv0edBmfKzxdshqtQ&bvm=bv.76247554,d.ZWU>

Digital Renewal Action Plan:  
<http://20102014.kormany.hu/download/b/fd/21000/Nemzeti%20Infokommunik%C3%A1ci%C3%B3s%20Strat%C3%A9gia%202014-2020.pdf>

<sup>129</sup> [http://net.jogtar.hu/jr/gen/hjegy\\_doc.cgi?docid=A1100204.TV](http://net.jogtar.hu/jr/gen/hjegy_doc.cgi?docid=A1100204.TV)

number of contact teaching hours in correspondence courses by distance learning methods. In general, distance learning is handled by law with the same conditions as those provided for part-time training programmes. In the case of specialist subjects taught in full distance learning mode, distance learning activities are defined in detail by the accreditation process.<sup>130</sup>

In the case of non-formal training and training completed in another higher education institution, the act on public education and the act on vocational education should be regarded as governing law. In the act on vocational education<sup>131</sup>, distance learning is included as one of the modes of training without any special definition or condition. The act on adult education,<sup>132</sup> however, provides a definition of distance learning for use in adult education: ‘the form of education where the participants carry out learning activities on their own, independently, in a period longer than half of the duration of the training programme with the guidance included in the distance learning material, and participate in consultations requiring less than half of the time of the duration of the whole training course. The education package containing the course material, assessment material and guidelines for the learning process are provided by the institution. During the consultations, which can take any form (face-to-face meeting, internet, telephone), the participants clarify and deepen the knowledge they have acquired individually. Each phase of distance education can be supported by the use of info-communicational technology vehicles.’ In addition, the act stipulates that the training can be provided in distance learning mode, and that in this case, the documentation establishing the training must declare this and the necessary supplementary documents must be attached. In public education, Act CXC of 2010 on national public education<sup>133</sup> mentions distance education in one instance without any special focus, as one mode of public adult education. Although the method of adult training accreditation has changed significantly since 2013, the accreditation of distance learning programmes appears as a subfield of the traditional accreditation of adult training programmes without any particular further detail.

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<sup>130</sup> [http://www.mab.hu/web/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=361&Itemid=522&lang=hu](http://www.mab.hu/web/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=361&Itemid=522&lang=hu).

<sup>131</sup> Act CLXXXVII of 2011 on vocational education

[http://net.jogtar.hu/jr/gen/hjegy\\_doc.cgi?docid=a1100187.TV](http://net.jogtar.hu/jr/gen/hjegy_doc.cgi?docid=a1100187.TV)

<sup>132</sup> Act LXXVII of 2013 on adult education: [http://net.jogtar.hu/jr/gen/hjegy\\_doc.cgi?docid=A1300077.TV](http://net.jogtar.hu/jr/gen/hjegy_doc.cgi?docid=A1300077.TV)

<sup>133</sup> [http://net.jogtar.hu/jr/gen/hjegy\\_doc.cgi?docid=A1100190.TV](http://net.jogtar.hu/jr/gen/hjegy_doc.cgi?docid=A1100190.TV)

One interesting feature of Hungarian regulation is that the law does not mention the concept of e-learning in any form, despite the fact that distance learning and both synchronic and asynchronous distance learning support have almost completely shifted to electronic platforms. Electronic tools and devices are mentioned only in the context of the administration of either face-to-face or distance education. Although distance learning appears in the documents regarding the national ICT strategy, no detailed principles are provided.

### **2.3. Profile and social characteristics of participants in distance learning**

With regard to accredited university training programmes, the range of students participating in distance learning is the same as the target group of correspondence courses, particularly those who view their own ICT competence and learning habits with self-confidence. The participant population of non-formal programmes within higher education is varied, but the correlation discussed above between level of qualifications already held and willingness to engage in further study still applies. In other words, adult students with higher qualifications have heightened motivation for further learning. These adults are also characterized by a vivid interest in specific professional knowledge similar to that provided by corporate vocational training courses (particularly in the fields of economics, business and law). Understandably, those with physical disabilities are represented in this group to a greater extent.

One specific field of internal vocational distance learning at Pécs University of Arts and Sciences is the annual labour safety training of the employees, which provides the staff of the university with general theoretical knowledge. In this field, the target group is naturally the same as the staff of the university, which means a significant variation in ICT competences, learning habits and motivation. As a result, both the training and the online examination are as simple as possible both in content and technical implementation. In 2014 the third cycle of training was carried out. Although at first the employees showed some reluctance regarding the distance learning mode, by the end of the course they were significantly more open and receptive towards the new cycle.

One of the difficulties related to the training was clearly infrastructural: there were not enough computer workstations available for employees within the university. One solution for this was more efficient use of the available workstations (those with their own workstations provide access to their computers to those without workstations; in the relevant period, students' computer centres can also be used for this purpose). The other difficulty related to the participants' motivation. Previously, when the training was delivered face-to-face, employees were not reluctant to participate in a compulsory training course not closely related to their work, because it was carried out in working hours during which they were freed from work responsibilities. In the case of distance learning, however, it is the employees' own responsibility to manage their time and to make time for learning (which the line manager must naturally support). This means that employees must carry out self-directed learning, like participating voluntarily in a training course but without the inner motivational support.

According to a non-representative survey of participants in Hungarian university distance learning programmes (Cseszka, *ibid.*), the largest group of participants in distance learning are 31-40 years of age, 32% are 20-30 years of age, and 20% are 41-50 years of age. There were no younger or older respondents in the survey. The lack of younger participants may be due to the overrepresentation of that generation in full time programmes; the lack of older participants is probably due to the digital generation gap. An overwhelming majority of the respondents (70%) participated in basic/bachelor training programmes, 20% in tertiary level vocational training and the remaining 10% in postgraduate vocational training. At present, there are no master level distance learning programmes in Hungary. The majority of respondents (88%) are studying alongside work or on childcare leave. Most of them decided to take part in distance learning because the relatively few face-to-face consultations make it possible for them to participate in the training alongside work or family commitments (more than half have children), or because their employer did not allow them the time to take part in face-to-face training. In addition, however, it is surprising that about half of respondents identified closeness as a decisive factor when choosing a school, while 30% pointed out the greater distance from the training institution as an advantage.



It is clear from the answers to this survey that students in Hungary do not necessarily choose distance learning for traditional reasons. Those participating in distance learning may not necessarily prefer this form because of its advantages (sometimes they are not even aware of distance learning as a form of education). Instead, they are driven towards the choice of distance learning by lack of time, because it requires minimal face-to-face attendance. Ignorance of the opportunities offered by distance learning is also apparent when organizing open online courses: many of those interested clearly do not know the form of training, the working methods expected of them, or the support mechanisms available. According to the survey of Pázmány Péter Catholic University, several respondents had expected more support and human contact than is available in the distance mode. Among participants on the online courses at Pécs University of Arts and Sciences, by contrast, tutorial support came as a surprise because they had expected a fully automated course.

The possible obstacles to distance learning for students can be divided into two categories: lack of competence (or presumed lack of competence) and lack of information. Lack of foreign language skills (in the case of international or foreign language medium training courses), lack of ICT competences and insufficient self-directed learning skills belong in the first category. Many participants in the survey by Cseszka were shown to have difficulties with independent time management (when not under pressure, they are more likely to carry out periodical rather than regular learning activities), and with keeping deadlines for the submission of assignments. This last feature is noticeable among the participants on MOOCs as well. This may be related to the fact that those studying in distance learning mode take longer to complete their training than those who participate in face-to-face courses.

The second category, lack of information, is related to the nature of distance learning and its organizational and completion conditions. One particular obstacle is that students have less trust in the quality of distance learning programmes than in that of face-to-face training. The Hungarian teaching-learning tradition is based primarily on two factors: traditional classroom teaching and out-of-class study groups. Students who have formed their learning habits in this system may find distance learning programmes faceless. Moreover, they may have less trust in the professional expertise and/or dedication of an

instructor whom they do not know personally. A third hindering factor is that students, whether young or old, who are used to being constantly connected via the internet and social media tend to expect similar accelerated multidimensional communication on their learning platforms, too. They therefore find distance learning platforms which are unlike social media sites less interesting or exciting, or even unsatisfactory with regard to human support, even though they themselves show little communicative initiative on the online learning platforms because they are accustomed to the traditional teacher-led model (with few exceptions). Moreover, students used to free internet access are often unwilling to pay for network content. Technical restrictions (such as lack of internet access) are less characteristic of higher education programmes.

#### 2.4. The potential of distance learning at universities

Distance learning requires organizational and human as well as financial support. Financial support for students could be put in place (e.g. by lowering training costs and making certain aspects of training freely available. However, there are at present only a few examples of this concept in operation (MOOCs constitute one), and the national educational strategy does not seem to be pointing in this direction. Preliminary ICT training for students or preparation for independent distance learning constitutes a promising form of support for distance learning, especially when considering the majority of potential participants' lack of independent study skills and unfamiliarity with the educational platforms, software, and organizational characteristics of distance learning.<sup>134</sup> The third form of support recommended is to make distance learning less faceless and automated by organizing and running communication trainings. This would increase the motivation of students and make the distance learning experience more enjoyable and motivating.

At present, higher education institutions focus primarily on filling their participant quotas, which is becoming a more and more difficult task due to the transformation of higher education financing and the changes in the demographic structure of the target group. The main obstacle to increasing distance learning, however, is the lack of human

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<sup>134</sup> Molnár György: A közoktatási vezető képzés informatikai háttértámogatásának vizsgálata és fejlesztési lehetőségei. 'Examining and developing possibilities for information technology support in the training of public education managers', Budapesti Műszaki és Gazdaságtudományi Egyetem, Budapest, 2011

resources with the requisite expertise. In the majority of institutions, for instance, there is no e-learning unit responsible for setting up, developing and managing infrastructure or planning course content and conversion. In such cases, instructors personally devoted to e-learning try to develop and publish course content and to operate their education administration system. The tutoring of courses with a large number of participants also requires considerable work from the staff, who have to deal with this on top of the same or even an increased amount of contact teaching, due to the rationalization of teacher resources on several occasions. In addition, instructors have limited opportunities to acquire knowledge of specific e-learning, distance learning or andragogical teaching methods, including knowledge about the development of distance learning courses. Such matters are usually covered within the framework of specialist projects. Consequently, the majority of the teaching population is ill-prepared for providing electronic support for distance learning courses, especially with regard to the standard fast-paced form of distance learning involving a large number of participants. Despite all this, several higher education institutions are planning to extend their portfolio of distance learning, short-term and particularly international training programmes, often by transforming their correspondence courses into distance learning programmes. Distance education can evidently reach new target groups through open access courses/programmes and short cycle (including gamified) courses. Such courses, if constructed in a modular fashion and based on an elaborate validation system which acknowledges previous studies completed in Hungarian or even international higher education, could make the training structure of higher education more flexible, which could lead to a significant increase in the number of participants in it.

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### 3. Prospective students

Prepared by: Éva Cseszka

Higher education institutions make several programmes available for adults, primarily tertiary level vocational trainings, bachelor and master programmes, and doctoral programmes based on these. In addition, they regularly advertise postgraduate training courses to help former students comply with legal regulations obliging everyone employed in the given field to complete them. A very important group of training courses are the mandatory postgraduate trainings for certain professions: e.g. for healthcare workers or educators.<sup>135</sup> Good initiatives were also undertaken, for example, between 2009 and 2011, on the project entitled: 'Training the trainers among the instructors of Budapest University of Technology',<sup>136</sup> which addressed the lack of instructor competences necessary to meet the requirements of the Bologna process, the European Qualifications Framework and LLL strategy in an e-learning form. Training programmes were based on the needs and possibilities explored on the basis of previously surveyed institutional demands of Budapest University of Technology.<sup>137</sup>

The situation of adult learners in higher education in Hungary is fairly complex. Significant factors include the socio-economic and/or labour market status of the adult concerned, his/her former learning experiences and those of his immediate family, and the social environment, which may either encourage or constrain further engagement in education through flexible programmes. In many cases, flexible programmes require basic ICT knowledge and the status of a regular ICT user with certain minimal hardware and communication capacities. Unfortunately, many adults and young adults outside the big

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<sup>135</sup> Decree No. 64/2011. (XI.29) NEFMI of the Minister of National Resources – on the continuous postgraduate trainings of doctors, dentists, pharmacists and those possessing special tertiary qualifications in healthcare, government decree No. 346/2013. (IX. 30.) Korm. on the postgraduate training of educators, on the professional examination thereof, and on the amendment of government decree No. 277/1997. (XII. 22.) Korm. on the allowances and benefits for those participating in postgraduate trainings and on the amendment of government decree No. 202/2012. (VII. 27.) Korm. on Klebelsberg Institution Management Centre.

<sup>136</sup> (TÁMOP – 4.1.2-08/2/C/KMR-2009-0005), implemented at Budapest University of Technology and Economics (1 September 2009 to 28 February 2011)

<sup>137</sup> For details see: Dr. habil. Anikó Kálmán (2011): Innovációs célok a felsőoktatási tanárképzésben a Tudásháromszög megvalósításáért. Empirikus kutatások a szakképzésben és a szakmai tanárképzésben ('Innovation objectives in tertiary level teacher training for the implementation of the knowledge triangle. Empirical research in vocational training and vocational teacher training') – Trefort Ágoston Szakmai Tanárképzési Konferencia ('Trefort Ágoston Conference on Vocational Teacher Training'), 21 November 2011, Budapest (CD format)

regional municipalities are prevented from entering HE by low social status or poverty. For those who are in a good, stable social environment, participating in higher education is seen as a tool to achieve mobility.<sup>138</sup>

The act on Hungarian higher education<sup>139</sup> sets forth what kind of student representation should be present on an institution's senate. The organization responsible for coordinating representative bodies at the different universities, HÖÖK (National Union of Students), also provides representation for students. Unfortunately, however, student organizations are all made up of full-time students who enforce their own interests. A large number of higher education institutions do not take into account the needs and opinions of adult learners at all. Perhaps the only exceptions are the mandatory postgraduate trainings related to the different professions, which represent a safe market for higher education institutions. It can be concluded, therefore, that adults play no role in the formulation of strategic objectives and the mission statements of higher education.

The table shows the number of students enrolled in higher education/tertiary education since 1990.<sup>140</sup> 96,520 adult learners studied non-full-time formats in 2013/14, from tertiary vocational programmes to doctoral degree programmes. However, it is difficult to measure adults' learning at universities and colleges in forms other than tertiary level vocational training, bachelor and master degree majors, unified/undivided majors, postgraduate specializations and doctoral degree (PhD/DLA) studies. Several universities and colleges organize other forms of adult training for non-traditional groups, with the aim of upgrading labour market and lifelong learning-oriented key competencies.<sup>141</sup> Unfortunately, the number of adults participating in such courses are not documented.

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<sup>138</sup> Developing the Adult Learning Sector Country Report. DIE Country Report HUNGARY. Opening Higher Education to Adults (HEAD) Dr. Balázs NÉMETH.

<sup>139</sup> Act on Hungarian Higher Education - CCIV./2011.

<sup>140</sup> [http://www.ksh.hu/docs/eng/xstadat/xstadat\\_annual/i\\_zoi007a.html](http://www.ksh.hu/docs/eng/xstadat/xstadat_annual/i_zoi007a.html)

<sup>141</sup> Developing the Adult Learning Sector Country Report. DIE Country Report HUNGARY. Opening Higher Education to Adults (HEAD) Dr. Balázs NÉMETH

**Table 6: Yearly overview of higher education institutions and adults in tertiary education**

Academic Year	Number of higher education institutions	Total number of adults in tertiary education (learning in formats other than full-time programmes)
2006/07	71	177,674
2007/08	71	154,811
2008/09	70	138,105
2009/10	69	127,630
2010/11	69	120,620
2011/12	68	118,210
2012/13	66	104,789
2013/14	66	96,520

The Hungarian Universities Lifelong Learning Network (MELLearn) conducted a special survey on adult training activities provided by the 16 state-owned universities in 2006 (although two of them did not return the questionnaire). The survey listed special categories of adult training activities, such as part-time degree courses, evening degree courses, state-listed (OKJ) labour market trainings, postgraduate professional trainings, language courses, and other forms. A special 'Table of participation figures for adult university training courses' indicated the following figures for 2006.<sup>142</sup>

It is clear from these figures that the number of adults in conventional forms of higher education is steadily falling. Nevertheless, the number of adults studying on non-regular or non-degree courses at several universities is growing.<sup>143</sup>

<sup>142</sup> MELLearn Survey on adult training competences in higher education, 2006. Debrecen: MELLearn, p. 3. Developing the Adult Learning Sector Country Report. DIE Country Report HUNGARY. Opening Higher Education to Adults (HEAD) Dr. Balázs NÉMETH.

<sup>143</sup> Developing the Adult Learning Sector Country Report. DIE Country Report HUNGARY. Opening Higher Education to Adults (HEAD) Dr. Balázs NÉMETH

**Table 7: Adult learners in different education formats**

Format of education and training for adults in higher education (at 14 state owned universities)	Number of adult learners to enrol in such programmes (2006)
part-time degree courses	33,671
evening degree courses	1,141
state-listed certified trainings (OKJ trainings)	3,364
postgraduate professional trainings	2,479
language courses	3,347
other forms of training	4,442
Total	48,444

Dropout figures show significant differences according to the type of training and the learner's motivation for participating in it. In the case of postgraduate training courses, there are almost no drop-outs (for example, in the mandatory postgraduate trainings related to specific professions). Where a higher salary, promotion to a higher job category, or simply keeping one's job is at stake, the majority of adults enrolled complete the training. The dropout rate is higher in cases where employers prevent their employees from studying, for example by forcing them to work overtime, leaving no time for study. In such cases, the student's own motivation is not sufficient to prevent him/her from dropping out. He/she will prioritise keeping the job in order to support his/her family, even if that means giving up learning.

In the case of tertiary level vocational trainings or BA/MA programmes there is a considerable rate of dropping out: about one third of adult learners never complete their training.<sup>144</sup> The primary reason for dropping out is inability to spend enough time studying due to work commitments. One third of adult learners surveyed said that they dropped out because they were unable to cover the costs of their training. 15% gave up their studies for personal/family reasons. On average, those who drop out complete three years at bachelor level before they give up studying. It can be concluded that, in many

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<sup>144</sup> Dr. habil. Éva Cseszka: Felsőoktatási intézményekben folyó távoktatásban résztvevők (empirikus kutatás) 2012-2014. ('Participants in distance learning programmes offered by higher education institutions (empirical research) 2012-2014') Péter Pázmány Catholic University, Vitéz János Faculty - Grundtvig International Research Centre. On this topic, see also Ágnes Engler – Ágnes Réka Dusa – Anett Huszti – Katalin Kardos – Edina Kovács: Az intézményi tanulás eredményessége és minősége, különös tekintettel a nem hagyományos tanulói csoportokra. ('Efficiency and quality of formal learning with special regard to non-traditional learner groups') [http://ni.unideb.hu/learn/doc/22\\_Engler\\_et\\_al-Tanulo\\_regio.pdf](http://ni.unideb.hu/learn/doc/22_Engler_et_al-Tanulo_regio.pdf)



cases, even those who complete their studies successfully are delayed in earning their degrees/diplomas. Depending on the type of institution, full-time students earn their degrees in three, four or five years; many adult learners spend much longer studying. On non-mandatory and other tertiary level courses, dropout rates are very high, exceeding 50%.

Individuals' participation in organized forms of adult learning is motivated primarily by financial considerations, or perhaps financial pressures. Interviewees considered learning possibilities with what one might call 'economic rationality'. The most important element of their motivation to learn is in line with the basic principle of human resources development, which states that the primary objective of learning is to improve the individual's labour market status. This may be manifested in improved chances of finding a job, in promotion, or in a timely change of profession or workplace, and usually involves financial benefits such as a payrise.<sup>145</sup>

As this would suggest, adult learners tend to apply for courses that are relevant to their work. This primarily means mandatory profession-related postgraduate trainings and programmes leading to higher qualifications in the student's profession. Regrettably, the decision to choose a programme is rarely based on the students' interests. A considerable number of those taking part in adult learning are even 'forced' to do so. According to a survey by Semmelweis University, 98.4% of those taking part in the sport coach and trainer course would not have enrolled if their jobs had not been at stake<sup>146</sup>.

In general, admission to bachelor, master and postgraduate studies takes place through a formal entrance examination which enables the adult to become a student of the university or college and hold special rights attached to that status. One can directly enrol in full-time or part-time/distance courses either at ISCED 5a or 5b.<sup>147</sup> Access to adult

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<sup>145</sup> Dr. habil. Éva Cseszka (2010) A távoktatás helye és lehetőségei a felnőttek iskolarendszerű képzésében. ('Place and possibilities of distance learning in formal adult training') In: Katalin Tordainé Vida Katalin (ed. Innováció és felsőoktatás ('Innovation and higher education'). Esztergom: Pázmány Péter Katolikus Egyetem Vitéz János Kar, p. 1-19.

<sup>146</sup> National survey conducted at the Faculty of Physical Education and Sport Sciences of Semmelweis University (with 953 participants in 2012/13). Research leader: Dr Ágnes Kokovay.

<sup>147</sup> Developing the Adult Learning Sector Country Report. DIE Country Report HUNGARY. Opening Higher Education to Adults (HEAD) Dr. Balázs NÉMETH

education is formally open to any adult who holds a school leaving certificate and who collects enough points in the entrance examination to the bachelor or master programmes.<sup>148</sup> Vocational programmes are open to all adults holding a school leaving certificate. Doctoral programmes require a Diploma of Master studies and a successful entrance examination.

There is currently no alternative admission pathway to accredited programmes of higher education in Hungary. The only exception concerns short non-degree courses and lifelong learning programmes for adults who want to upgrade their knowledge and skills in special continuing education, for example at the university of the third age.<sup>149</sup> This underlines the importance of widening access to part-time and distance formats of bachelor and master programmes. Certain universities and colleges have already opened access to their continuing education programmes or non-degree/non-credit courses to non-traditional adult learners, and have begun to offer these courses in part-time, evening/weekend and distance education formats. Nevertheless, Hungary is still in need of a sophisticated RPL or VPL system for higher education, which is currently still in an experimental and early phase.<sup>150</sup> Significant obstacles to adult learning at universities and colleges include the costs of education and training programmes, a lack of appropriate courses in learners' local areas, and students' own bad experiences or those of others in their family or community.

Most recently, the education administration has made several decisions making it more difficult for adult learners to enter higher education. In most of the subject majors<sup>151</sup>, the adult applicant to a bachelor programme, who may have passed the school leaving examination decades ago, has to sit for an advanced level school-leaving examination. For admission to a master course, an intermediate level Hungarian language examination certificate is now required in addition to a relevant BA degree.<sup>152</sup> The foreign language

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<sup>148</sup> Developing the Adult Learning Sector Country Report. DIE Country Report HUNGARY. Opening Higher Education to Adults (HEAD) Dr. Balázs NÉMETH.

<sup>149</sup> The Programme of King Sigismund College is relevant in this context. A list of courses for elderly learners is accessible at: <http://www.zskf.hu/nyugdijasok>

<sup>150</sup> The latest project to focus on the development of the validation system in higher education is described as follows (only in Hungarian!): <http://tamop413.ofi.hu/validaciorol>, <http://www.ofi.hu/felsooktatasi-validacios-rendszer>

<sup>151</sup> <http://eduline.hu/cimke/k%C3%B6telez%C5%91+emelt+szint%C5%B1+%C3%A9retts%C3%A9gi>

<sup>152</sup> [http://www.felvi.hu/felveteli/jelentkezes/felveteli\\_tajekoztato/FFT\\_2014A](http://www.felvi.hu/felveteli/jelentkezes/felveteli_tajekoztato/FFT_2014A)

requirements are also high for many people. As a result of this new legislation, the number of both applicants and financed students has been greatly reduced.

Situational barriers can also hinder adults' access to higher education. Being a busy worker, one may not be permitted to join a course, or an employer may not let an employee learn for higher degrees, develop competences, etc. Family responsibilities may also prevent adult learners from actively participating in higher education.<sup>153</sup>

Factors which facilitate the participation of adults in higher education include the general assumption that higher education degrees and certificates are valuable, since they combine the acquisition of knowledge with the upgrading of key lifelong learning competences which are valuable in the labour market: for example, high-level foreign language skills, or skills in problem solving, decision making and group work. Top-ranked state universities and colleges and some private higher education institutions are still considered places of quality education, and enrolling in such scholarly communities is still appealing and challenging. Many adults are motivated to continue their learning by seeing examples of other people's careers being improved by their participation in higher education. The positive experience of others thus turns into a special external motivation. Curiosity and the desire to explore new worlds of knowledge and meet new and interesting people also constitute motivating factors.<sup>154</sup>

Adult learners in distance learning programmes cover a wide range of ages, from 20 to 50 years. In distance learning, the overwhelming majority of adult learners are aged between 30 and 40 years. Naturally, thanks to modern communications technology, distance learning attracts a younger generation than traditional forms of training. As regards the sexes, there are no considerable differences. Differences are more often linked to the nature and field of training. One third of distance learning participants are single, while two thirds are married or live in a partnership. 58% have children; the

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<sup>153</sup> Developing the Adult Learning Sector Country Report. DIE Country Report HUNGARY. Opening Higher Education to Adults (HEAD) Dr. Balázs NÉMETH.

<sup>154</sup> Developing the Adult Learning Sector Country Report. DIE Country Report HUNGARY. Opening Higher Education to Adults (HEAD) PhD. Balázs NÉMETH.

average number of children is 2.<sup>155</sup> Most adult learners have a job (or are at home on childcare leave). Some lead their own companies. Few of them are unemployed (which is understandable as the financial burden of fees would be too great for most unemployed people).

A considerable number of those participating in adult learning are also actively involved in lifelong learning and participate regularly in trainings and postgraduate trainings. Only 30% of training participants surveyed had not taken part in any formal training in the past 5-10 years, which is a lower rate than in traditional forms of training. It is important to underline that most adults involved in distance learning did not know of its existence prior to starting their course.

Adult learners usually have a vocational or secondary school graduation certificate. The number of postgraduate students are low, with the exception of profession-related mandatory postgraduate trainings where a degree is required to complete the course. One third of students live in the countryside, while another third live in large villages. The number of students from large cities and small towns is very low. White-collar workers in managerial or other high-level jobs make up more than half of the students, 58%, followed by middle managers. Adult learners have a higher than average income.

Most students used computers regularly before starting their studies. More than two thirds use a computer on a daily basis. Overall, these are very good indicators because they are well above the national average. 88% of adult education students have a computer, while about 90% of their workplaces contain one. Two thirds of the students have internet access at home. This is significantly more than the national average of around 15%. Many students have internet access at their workplace (61%). The average student has been using the internet for two years. The most common computer-based activities are emailing and browsing the internet. Two thirds of students already had an email address prior to starting their studies. They usually had no experience of distance

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<sup>155</sup> PhD. habil. Éva Cseszka: Felsőoktatási intézményekben folyó távoktatásban résztvevők (empirikus kutatás 2012-2014. ('Participants in distance learning programmes offered by higher education institutions (empirical research) 2012-2014') Péter Pázmány Catholic University, Vitéz János Faculty - Grundtvig International Research Centre.

learning (e-learning).<sup>156</sup> There are still no statistics available on the special groups or types of adult learners, other than those which classify them according to sex and form/mode of education within the HEI (e.g. full-time, part-time, evening or distance education). Most adult learners study in part-time form.<sup>157</sup>

The majority of trainings advertised in distance learning form belong to the fields of economics and technology. Without exception, these are offered by higher education institutions in the form of fee-paying tertiary level vocational trainings and bachelor programmes.<sup>158</sup> Postgraduate trainings are also advertised as fee-paying courses. The most important motivating factor for entering training courses is to improve career prospects. The second most important factor is internal motivation. In general, distance learning in Hungary is not necessarily chosen for traditional reasons. Surprisingly, in the case of tertiary level vocational training courses and bachelor programmes, a large proportion of the adults surveyed referred to the closeness of the institution. In fact, it seems that participants in distance learning do not generally prefer this form for its advantages (in general, they did not even know of it before starting their studies), but rather due to lack of time, as distance education requires the least personal attendance of all forms of education.<sup>159</sup>

The most important reason for choosing a postgraduate distance learning or e-learning course is to have a chance to harmonize work and learning. The second most important reason is to take part in well-organized education. Two thirds of the students surveyed would enter a distance learning programme again in future. The overall experience of distance learning programmes is usually positive: 36% of students judged distance learning courses better than traditional ones. One third of students chose their programme for its user-friendly service (flexible training location and scheduling, easy accessibility, etc.).

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<sup>156</sup> Survey of Eszterházy Károly College.

<sup>157</sup> Developing the Adult Learning Sector Country Report. DIE Country Report HUNGARY. Opening Higher Education to Adults (HEAD) Dr. Balázs NÉMETH.

<sup>158</sup> [http://www.felvi.hu/felveteli/szakok\\_kepzesek](http://www.felvi.hu/felveteli/szakok_kepzesek)

<sup>159</sup> PhD. habil. Éva Cseszka: Felsőoktatási intézményekben folyó távoktatásban résztvevők (empirikus kutatás) 2012-2014. ('Participants in distance learning programmes offered by higher education institutions (empirical research) 2012-2014') Péter Pázmány Catholic University, Vitéz János Faculty - Grundtvig International Research Centre.

In the opinion of most of the participants, distance learning is the only workable option for an adult with a job and a family, due to its flexibility and adjustability to students' individual schedules. On the other hand, the greater freedom also requires a higher degree of independence, which may make this kind of learning more difficult as well. The higher dropout rate in distance education compared to traditional education may partly be accounted for by the fact that some of the students applying to distance learning courses are incapable of the independent study required by this form of education. In order to achieve his/her final objective, the student must be highly motivated and persistent, and must not be afraid to ask his/her tutors, mentors or even peers for help in case of learning problems.

For most of those taking part in postgraduate trainings, however, independent learning generally causes no problem. Students on these courses generally claimed to have received proper training packages and adequate assistance via e-mail and telephone. The overwhelming majority of the students put their successful completion of the course down to the distance learning form, saying that they had been able to learn where and when they had the opportunity to do so. One of the advantages of distance learning is that it is the most feasible form of education if the student has a job: it only involves learning at the weekends, it is not compulsory to attend classes, the student may learn at his/her own pace, and the syllabus and scheduling of examinations are more flexible.

For one third of adults with only lower level qualifications (usually school leaving certificates), independent learning proved problematic, particularly in the case of tertiary level vocational trainings and bachelor programmes. Participants had little free time, and many of them (15%) had not taken part in organized education for many years.<sup>160</sup> These participants missed the traditional kind of help from teachers and the regular personal meetings. Interestingly, some of those participating in distance learning reported that they usually learn together with another person.

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<sup>160</sup> PhD. habil. Éva Cseszka: Felsőoktatási intézményekben folyó távoktatásban résztvevők (empirikus kutatás) 2012-2014. ('Participants in distance learning programmes offered by higher education institutions (empirical research) 2012-2014') Péter Pázmány Catholic University, Vitéz János Faculty - Grundtvig International Research Centre.

With the exception of postgraduate training courses, for those participating in distance learning, the requirement for high-level independence and the lack of the instructor's direct presence may present a problem. During the learning process, the student faces a number of difficulties which are harder to face if she/he has no experience in independent learning. Cultural habits acquired earlier may also affect efficiency. Due to the distance, the student does not attend classes but must usually learn the material alone at home, in limited time and potentially under troubled circumstances (family, work, etc.). There have also been complaints about the lack of opportunities to meet regularly with peers. The disadvantages of distance learning reported include insufficient tutorials, content which is difficult to learn alone, lack of pressure to study continuously and few opportunities for contact with peers.<sup>161</sup> The use and accessibility of the internet presented no problem, although in some locations insufficient bandwidth made it difficult to download pictures and videos belonging to the study material.

Unfortunately, distance learning has not become widespread in Hungary because higher education institutions and scholars continue to believe more strongly in the quality of attendance-based education. Correspondence courses therefore continue to take precedence over e-learning. As a consequence, distance learning is obliged to fit into the existing system and cannot develop a separate system of its own. Distance learning is therefore currently unable to enhance the openness of higher education or to broaden access to new target groups.

One of the major advantages of distance learning is that it can allow for differences in individuals' learning style by exploiting different forms of communication (correspondence, telephone, etc.) and teaching methods (suggesting courses of reasoning, making the student practise, displaying ideas, etc.) tailored to the needs of the individual. It is obvious for experts and researchers that lifelong learning needs to play a stronger role in adult education, and that the future trend is the planning of learning

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<sup>161</sup> PhD. habil. Éva Cseszka: Felsőoktatási intézményekben folyó távoktatásban résztvevők (empirikus kutatás) 2012-2014. ('Participants in distance learning programmes offered by higher education institutions (empirical research) 2012-2014') Péter Pázmány Catholic University, Vitéz János Faculty - Grundtvig International Research Centre.

paths tailored to the needs of the individual, creating an opportunity for everyone to learn in a way suited to his/her way of life.

A joint labour market and education policy could be a key driver to enhance the number of adult learners in higher education. However, joint actions are needed to raise the number of adult learners in universities and colleges. University lifelong learning can only be achieved if universities function as open learning spaces, both by inviting adults to participate in their flexible programmes and by moving out into the local region to cooperate with learners and learning organizations through the formation of learning cities, regions and communities.<sup>162</sup>

In any case, better promotion is required. Both the government and the academic sector, including the management of higher education institutions, need to recognize the potential of distance learning. The offer of distance learning programmes by higher education institutions could be enhanced in this way. A complete change in approach is needed for higher education institutions to realize that attendance-based education is not the only way to teach or learn efficiently, and that distance learning does not mean lower standards. It is important for higher education institutions to apply distance learning as a system, and to develop the appropriate IT facilities, human resources (e.g. tutors) and electronic and printed materials required for distance learning, as well as providing information for potential learners and learning methodology orientation within courses. In this way, people who would otherwise have no opportunity to make up for gaps in their education would be able to do so. The spread of distance learning in Hungary could afford more groups the chance to participate in lifelong learning and allow disadvantaged members of society to make a new start in education.

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<sup>162</sup> Developing the Adult Learning Sector Country Report. DIE Country Report HUNGARY. Opening Higher Education to Adults (HEAD) Dr. Balázs NÉMETH. Longworth, Norman (2006) *Learning Cities, Learning Regions, Learning Communities*. London, Routledge.



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# IDEAL Case Study – United Kingdom

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## 1. UK national overview

### 1.1. Tertiary education participation

According to data derived from EUROSTAT datasets 'Tertiary students (ISCED 5-6) by field of education and sex' (educ\_enr15) and 'Population on 1 January by age and sex' (demo\_pjan), the percentage of the population reaching ISCED 5A/B and beyond has remained relatively static over the last decade (2004 to 2012<sup>163</sup>). However, there are noticeable increases over the period in the proportion of the UK population on ISCED5A programmes (from 3.45% to 3.9%, if considering the proportion of UK residents of post-compulsory school age who are able to participate in tertiary programmes) and corresponding decreases in the proportion on ISCED5B programmes (from 1.08% to 0.76%, if considering the proportion of UK residents of post-compulsory school age who are able to participate in tertiary programmes ) (Table 1 and Figure 1).

The data from EUROSTAT appears to demonstrate broadly static engagement with tertiary HE across the life course. Data tables cross-tabulating tertiary participation with age are not available, so we are unable to say whether there have been increases in participation rates amongst younger adults or decreases in participation rates amongst older adults. We know from other sources that participation rates have increased amongst younger adults as a result of national policies to increase and widen participation in higher education.

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<sup>163</sup> The period 2004-2012 is the largest range of dates in the last decade for which full data is available from EUROSTAT.

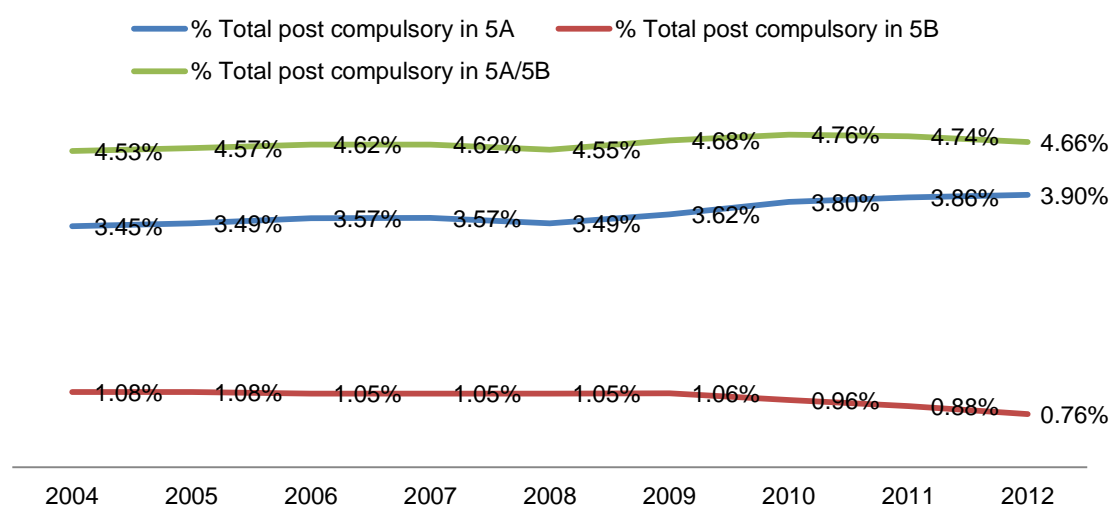
**Table 1: Tertiary participation rates for ISCED 5A and 5B for UK population, based on numbers of people of post-compulsory education age and UK population as a whole, 2004-2012**

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Level 5A	1,645,232	1,678,686	1,730,046	1,747,197	1,727,070	1,806,862	1,909,886	1,957,786	2,010,039
Level 5B	512,831	517,248	511,883	516,200	521,518	526,668	484,134	444,470	390,792
Total	2,158,063	2,195,934	2,241,929	2,263,397	2,248,588	2,333,530	2,394,020	2,402,256	2,400,831
Total post compulsory education age	47,659,096	48,073,754	48,526,299	48,982,579	49,465,640	49,892,775	50,286,472	50,704,999	
% Total post compulsory in 5A	3.45%	3.49%	3.57%	3.57%	3.49%	3.62%	3.80%	3.86%	3.90%
% Total post compulsory in 5B	1.08%	1.08%	1.05%	1.05%	1.05%	1.06%	0.96%	0.88%	0.76%
% Total post compulsory in 5A/5B	4.53%	4.57%	4.62%	4.62%	4.55%	4.68%	4.76%	4.74%	4.66%
Total UK	59,793,759	60,182,050	60,620,361	61,073,279	61,571,647	62,042,343	62,510,197	63,022,532	63,495,303
% Total UK compulsory in 5A	2.75%	2.79%	2.85%	2.86%	2.80%	2.91%	3.06%	3.11%	3.17%
% Total UK compulsory in 5B	0.86%	0.86%	0.84%	0.85%	0.85%	0.85%	0.77%	0.71%	0.62%
% Total UK compulsory in 5A/5B	3.61%	3.65%	3.70%	3.71%	3.65%	3.76%	3.83%	3.81%	3.78%

Notes:

- Level 5A denotes first stage of tertiary education: programmes that are theoretically based and designed either to prepare students for research or to give access to professions with high skills requirements. Level 5B denotes the first stage of tertiary education: programmes which are practically oriented and occupation-specific.
- The table above focuses on UK residents of post-compulsory education age, in order to align with the IDEAL project's aim to focus on 'all learners who have completed their initial education and training and are returning to education (or at least considering it), no matter what their age'.
- When considering the statistics represented above, it is important to bear in mind that the UK population is ageing: the proportion of the UK population aged 16 or over increased between 2003 and 2012 from 79.71% to 81.21%.

**Figure 1: Tertiary participation rates for ISCED 5A and 5B for UK population, based on numbers of people of post-compulsory education age, 2004-2012**



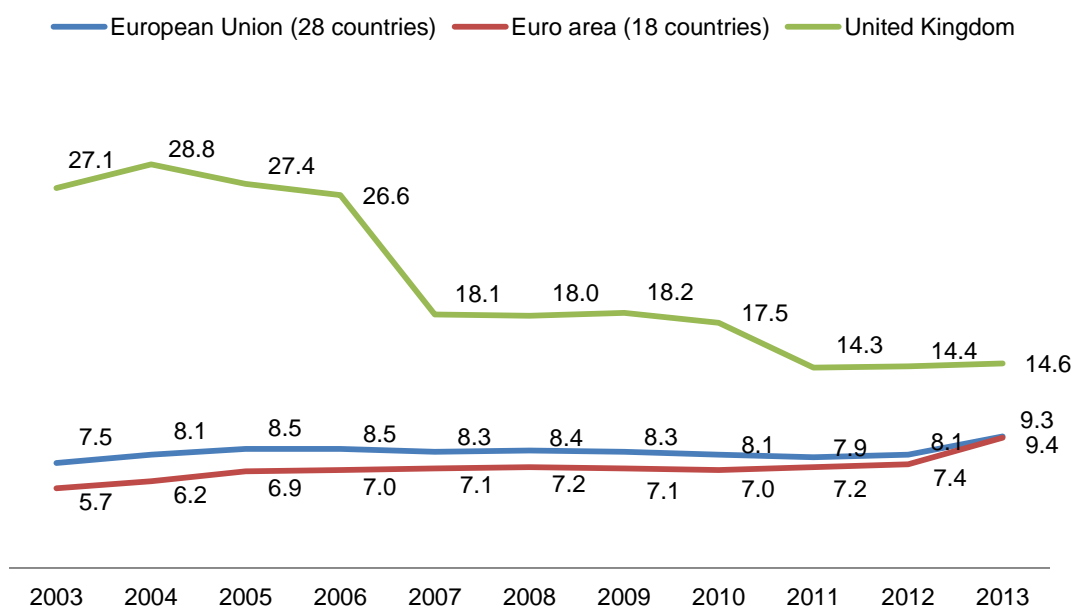
## 1.2. Adult education participation

EUROSTAT data on lifelong learning, defined as ‘all learning activities undertaken throughout life (after the end of initial education) with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences, within personal, civic, social, and employment-related perspectives’<sup>164</sup> and measured as ‘participation in education and training in the last 12 months versus in the last 4 weeks’, indicates a significant decline in lifelong learning participation in the UK over the period 2003-2013, in contrast with overall growth across the EU and Euro area (Figure 2). The decline in the UK has been more acute for females (Figure 3).

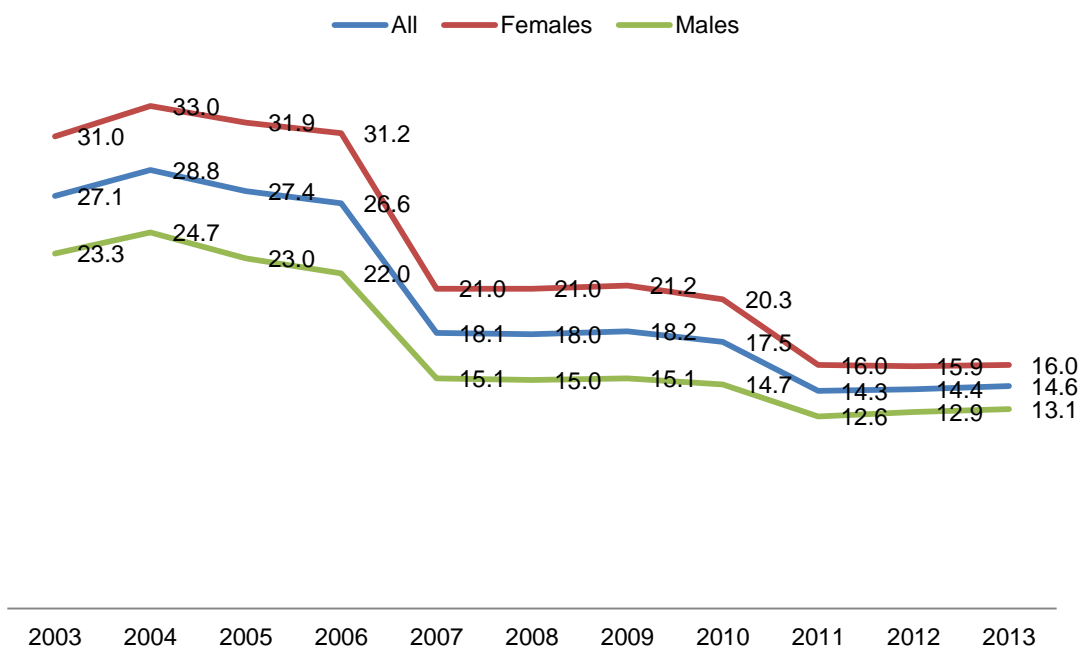
<sup>164</sup> [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY\\_SDDS/EN/trng\\_esms.htm#unit\\_measure1407416172749](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_SDDS/EN/trng_esms.htm#unit_measure1407416172749)



**Figure 2: Lifelong learning participation rates in the UK population compared with European Union (28 countries) and Euro area (18 countries), 2003-2013**



**Figure 3: Lifelong learning participation rates in the UK population, male and female, 2003-2013**



Source: Lifelong Learning data table (tsdsc440) derived from the Labour Force Survey.

## 2. UK universities and distance education

### 2.1. Regulatory frameworks

The four United Kingdom (UK) nations share a common quality assurance (QA) framework for higher education. Nevertheless, due to the three devolved national administrations of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, some aspects of the framework are nation-specific. The UK regulatory framework is 'integrated' (Kirkpatrick, 2012), in that it makes no distinction between modes of higher education. However, there are a range of other agencies which influence the regulatory framework for distance higher education in the UK, including the British Standards Institute, the British Accreditation Council, and the Open and Distance Learning Quality Council. Universities and colleges in the UK are independent of the state and autonomous in their activities. Most receive government funding through national funding councils. A range of requirements is associated with that funding, which differs considerably in each of the four UK nations.

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) oversees academic standards in institutions. An organization independent of government, it provides guidance on and conducts reviews of HE provision. QAA areas of focus include a regular cycle of audit and review, identifying good practice, making recommendations for improvement and publishing guidelines to help institutions develop effective systems to ensure that students have high quality experiences. The QAA makes no distinction between on-campus and distance provision.

The British Accreditation Council is responsible for quality assurance in the independent further and higher education sector. This includes private colleges providing access to higher education courses and validated HE courses in partnership with universities and awarding bodies. The British Accreditation Council works with the British Council which accredits English language centres and the Online and Distance Learning Quality Council (ODL QC), both of which predominantly focus on courses below higher education level.

### 2.1.1. England

Higher education provision in England is regulated through three main organizations: the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) and the Quality Assurance Agency. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) is the funding body for higher education in England and plays a central role in ensuring proper accountability for public funds. The Office for Fair Access (OFFA) promotes and safeguards fair access to higher education for lower income and other under-represented groups. It provides regulatory oversight by approving and monitoring 'access agreements', documents which set out how a higher education institution intends to support access to higher education for under-represented groups using the additional fee income that they choose to charge.

There has been some recent pressure for these three 'regulators', each with very different briefs, to be merged into a single higher education regulator for England (Future of Higher Education Commission, 2013) which would include within its remit monitoring of the financial health of higher education institutions.

### 2.1.2. Wales

The Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) currently holds regulatory oversight by applying terms and conditions to the annual round of funding provided to each Welsh Higher Education Institution charging annual student fees above £4,000. These terms and conditions relate to the financial stability of the HEI, its efforts to widen access to under-represented groups, and the quality of its provision.

### 2.1.3. Scotland

In Scotland regulatory oversight is the responsibility of the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) which distributes funding to HEIs and Further Education Colleges (FECs) in Scotland. Responsibilities are delegated from the UK-level QAA Board to QAA Scotland. One distinguishing aspect of the Scottish system is a central focus on the Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF), introduced in 2003, which places the improvement of the student experience at the forefront of quality assurance work.

Enhancement-led Institutional Reviews focus on institutional management of the standards of academic awards and the quality of learning opportunities provided to students.

#### **2.1.4. Northern Ireland**

In Northern Ireland the Quality Assurance Agency works closely with the Department for Employment and Learning and higher education institutions. Reviews of higher education are conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency, following the Institutional Review process used in England and Wales. Reviews of further education colleges which provide higher education awards are conducted through the Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review (IQER) process.

## **2.2. The size and shape of distance higher education in the UK**

There are no explicit national policies concerning distance education in any of the separate nations of the UK. However, a range of factors and policies have a bearing on distance education. For example, recent tightening of Visa approvals processes and immigration control, which threaten international student fee income, have encouraged universities to sell more distance courses to international students to be completed in their home nation. Some politicians in England, amidst a turbulent few years for higher education policy, have advocated distance education as a way through the difficulties (The Guardian, 2010). Distance education in the UK is included within the provision of a wide range of institutions. A small number of specific institutions cater to a very large proportion of all distance learning students, most notably the Open University UK (see Table 3 later in this report).

The generally held view is that many institutions pursue distance education for economic reasons, often exploiting the potential of academic globalization to reach international students (Rovai and Downey, 2010). Furthermore, in order to pursue such students in a competitive marketplace, many institutions draw in the services of private organizations to deliver their distance provision. In the UK, for example, the University of Liverpool works in partnership with Laureate to offer a range of online postgraduate courses in management, IT, health, law and psychology; the University of Essex works

in partnership with Kaplan, offering a limited range of online undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. Both target a broad market of working professionals, both UK-based and international.

The UK higher education sector includes an increasing number of private providers. Many of these make use of online provision, although not exclusively so. One major private provider, BPP University College, which has held degree awarding powers since 2007, describes all its students as online students, although it also offers face-to-face engagement on many of its programmes.

Advances in technology in recent years have meant that for many institutions, and for the UK sector in general, the terms 'distance learning' and 'online learning' are often used interchangeably. This means that it is difficult to find robust data on numbers of distance education and online education programmes separately. The major contribution to the literature is a study conducted by the University of Oxford in 2010 (White et al., 2010). The UK Higher Education Statistics Agency<sup>165</sup> also provides limited statistics on distance higher education provision.

The majority of UK distance learning offered by HEIs is at Level 7<sup>166</sup> (postgraduate level) and is offered as a form of professional development, often directed at business, law, medicine, science and education. Nevertheless, there is also significant provision at Level 4<sup>167</sup>, also in vocational areas (White et al., 2010) (Figure 4).

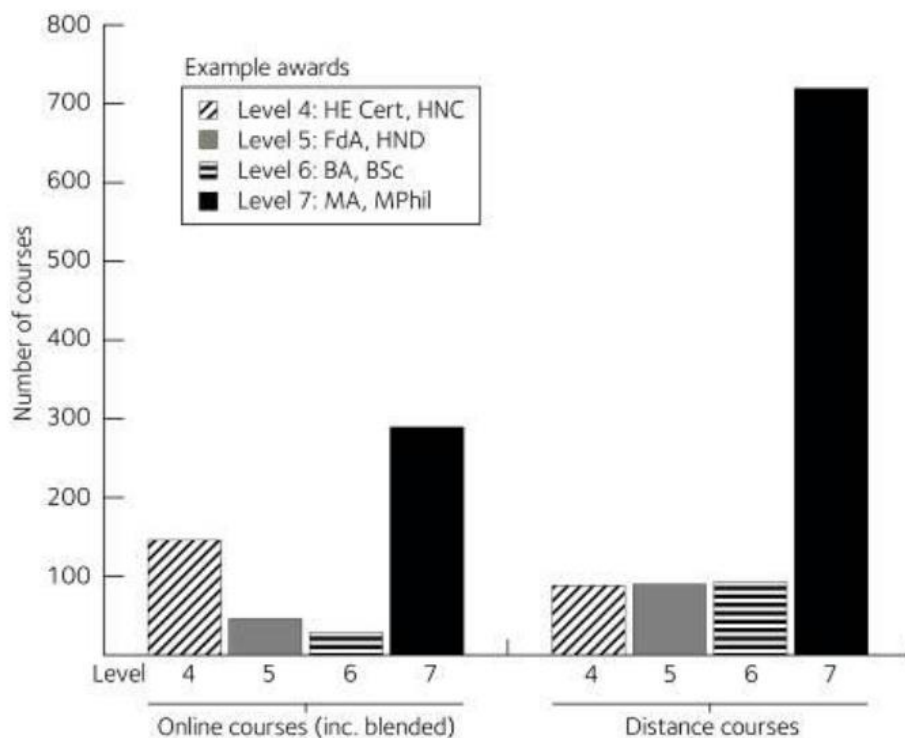
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<sup>165</sup> <http://www.hesa.ac.uk/>

<sup>166</sup> Level 7 qualifications include sub-doctoral degrees. UK Higher Education Levels are identified in the QAA Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Framework-Higher-Education-Qualifications-08.pdf>)

<sup>167</sup> Level 4 qualifications include Higher National Certificates and Certificates of Higher Education.

**Figure 4: Number of online and distance learning courses provided directly by UK HE and FE institutions, broken down by HE academic level**



Source: White et al., 2010, p.13

Research conducted in 2010 found that 113 (37%) of the UK's 308 Higher Education and Further Education institutions (excluding the Open University UK) offered distance education courses to international students (White et al., 2010). When combined with the large number of courses offered by the Open University, the study identified over 2,600 HE level distance courses:

- 1,528 courses offered by 113 HE and FE institutions, of which 510 were identified as being delivered online (including blended learning)
- 952 courses offered by the Open University, of which 600 were dependent on the web and a further 95 were delivered fully online
- 175 courses offered in partnership with commercial partners (ibid., p.12)

A search in 2014 of the UK UNISTATS website<sup>168</sup>, which provides course details for UK undergraduate courses, returned 194 courses across a range of qualification types, of which just under half were offered by the Open University (Table 2).

**Table 2: Undergraduate distance HE qualifications offered in the UK, UNISTATS**

Qualification type	Enhanced first degree Enhanced first degree programmes typically include the equivalent of at least four years' full-time study (five in Scotland), of which the equivalent of at least one year is at masters level.	First degree (e.g. BA, BSc) A first degree is the standard degree for undergraduate higher education. A typical undergraduate degree in England, Wales, or Northern Ireland involves the equivalent of three years' full time study (four in Scotland).	Foundation degree (e.g. FD, FDEd) (39) A foundation degree is a qualification which combines academic study with work based learning, focusing on a particular job or profession. A foundation degree involves the equivalent of two years' full time study and allows progress onto a full first degree.	HND (7) A Higher National Diploma (HND) is a work-related course. A full-time HND generally takes two years to complete, or three to four years part-time.	Other undergraduate (36) Other undergraduate e.g. CertHE, DipHE	Total
The Open University	1	47	13	0	30	91
The rest of the sector	0	64	26	7	6	103
Total	1	111	39	7	36	194

Commentators on UK distance higher education have observed that traditional campus-based universities have predominantly extended the prevailing model of university teaching as a 'craft', with most distance education provision in these universities a 'cottage industry...essentially grown up locally from within particular departments – the initiative of enterprising individuals' (Lentell, 2012, p.24). The contention is that: 'universities have largely not recognized that distance learning is a totally different pedagogy, and have not come to grips with the underpinning organizational requirements needed to implement and sustain quality distance learning' (*ibid.*)

<sup>168</sup> <https://unistats.direct.gov.uk/>

Although technology has enhanced much of what is possible in distance and online learning, UK institutions have articulated a range of other factors which are critical for its success. These include course and programme design, management, student and tutor support, and marketing (White et al., 2010, p. 44), all of which must be delivered in a very different manner compared with campus-based higher education (Kirkup, 2014).

### **2.3. Costs of distance higher education**

Undergraduate higher education fees are controlled differently in each of the four UK nations. In England, tuition fees are capped at £9,000 per year for a full-time course; there are no fees in Scotland for Scotland-domiciled students; and in Wales, although fees of up to £9,000 per year are chargeable, Welsh students are supported through government grants to reduce the fee cost to the student to £3,685 per year. The vast majority of full-time degree courses in England and Wales charge the maximum fee, but distance learning undergraduate tuition fees vary considerably, from less than £2,500 per year for the equivalent number of credits to a full time course, up to the maximum £9,000. Postgraduate course fees are not regulated, and some more prestigious qualifications, particularly MBAs, attract significantly higher fees.

### **2.4. What is known about students in distance education?**

Distance education students in the UK can be separated into those who are UK-based or UK-funded (which includes Crown servants in the Services studying overseas) and wholly overseas students (which includes students registered with or studying for an award at a UK higher education institution (HEI)).

In 2012/13 there were a total of 226,420 UK based/funded and 123,635 wholly overseas students studying by distance education through UK-based HEIs. Students of the Open University UK constitute a large proportion of all undergraduate and postgraduate distance learning students in the UK. Changes to fees and funding for higher education in England which came into effect in 2012/13 saw a dramatic reduction in the numbers of part-time students. This is reflected in the Open University numbers for 2012/13 (Table 3).



Wholly overseas provision grew between 2011/12 and 2012/13, with overall growth in undergraduate and postgraduate distance learning students represented by growth in non-EU students (6.1% for undergraduate and 10.1% for postgraduate), cancelling out a contraction in EU students (Table 4).

**Table 3: UK-based/funded distance learning students studying through UK-based HEIs**

Level, Institution	2011/12	2012/13
<b>Undergraduate</b>	<b>59,985</b>	<b>62,535</b>
EU	12,645	12,130
Non-EU	47,340	50,405
<b>Postgraduate</b>	<b>56,550</b>	<b>61,100</b>
EU	13,410	13,130
Non-EU	43,140	47,970
<b>Total</b>	<b>116,535</b>	<b>123,635</b>

Note: Based on HESA Student Record - see Definitions

**Table 4: Wholly overseas distance learning students studying through UK-based HEIs**

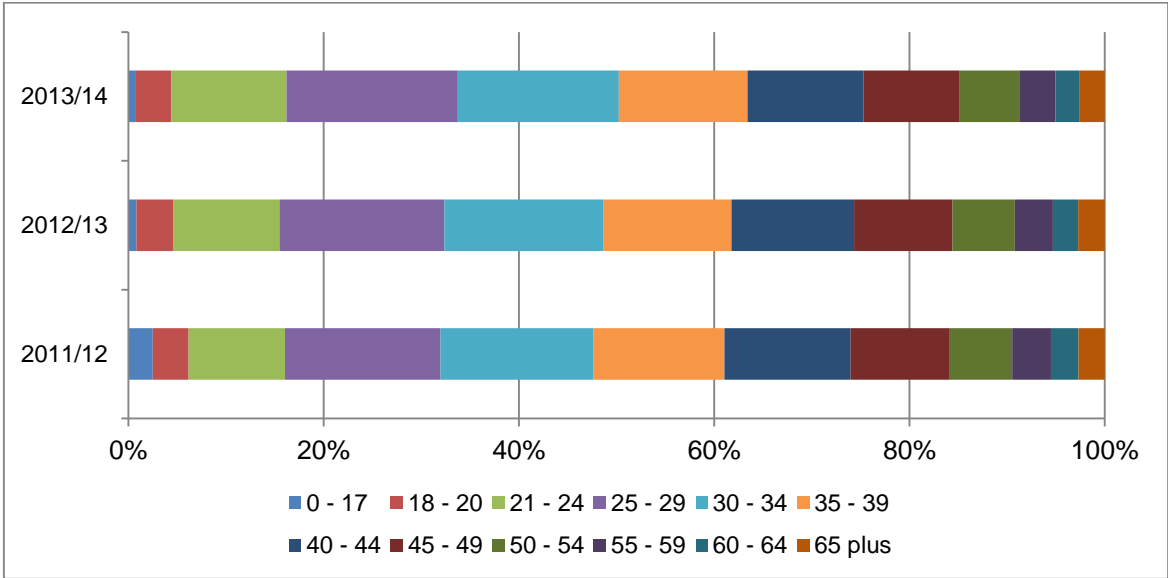
Level, Institution	2011/12	2012/13
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<b>Postgraduate</b>	<b>56,550</b>	<b>61,100</b>
EU	13,410	13,130
Non-EU	43,140	47,970
<b>Total</b>	<b>116,535</b>	<b>123,635</b>

Note: Based on aggregate offshore record (see definitions)

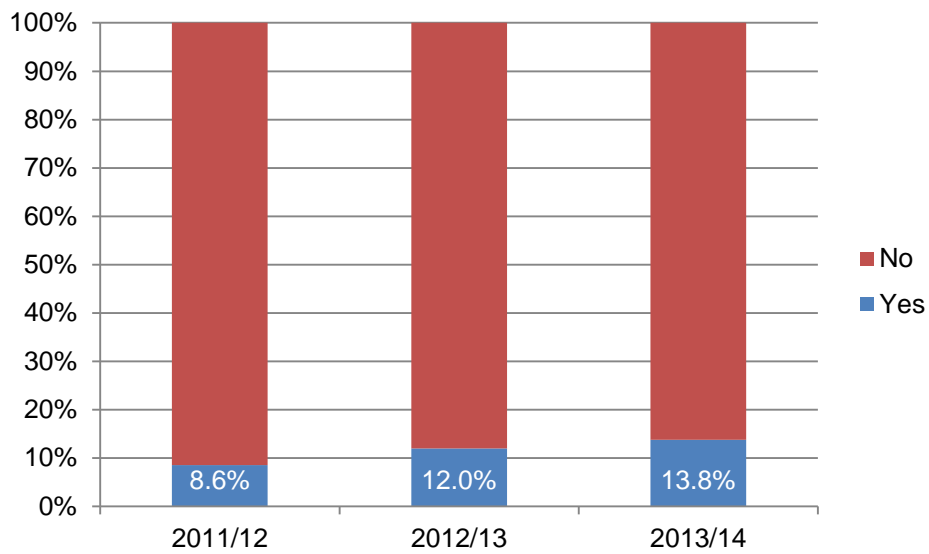
Detailed demographic data is available for the Open University UK. This is presented as an indication of the potential reach of distance education. It should be clearly noted, however, that the Open University UK has an open admissions policy for all of its undergraduate provision, unlike the wide range of other institutions offering distance education opportunities, which have a range of different admissions requirements.

The Open University’s student population is characterized by diversity, but shows a range of notable shifts in recent years. There is a greater proportion of younger students, with the age groups 25-29 and 30-34 expanding most rapidly as a proportion of the total OU population (Figure 5). The proportion of students declaring a disability has increased rapidly over the last 3 years (Figure 6), as has the proportion of students with non-HE qualifications (Figure 7). In terms of gender, 6 in 10 students are female, with very little change over recent years. Ethnicity also remains relatively static, with white students representing 88% of the student population. Other ethnicities represent much smaller proportions, which have also remained largely static over the least three years.

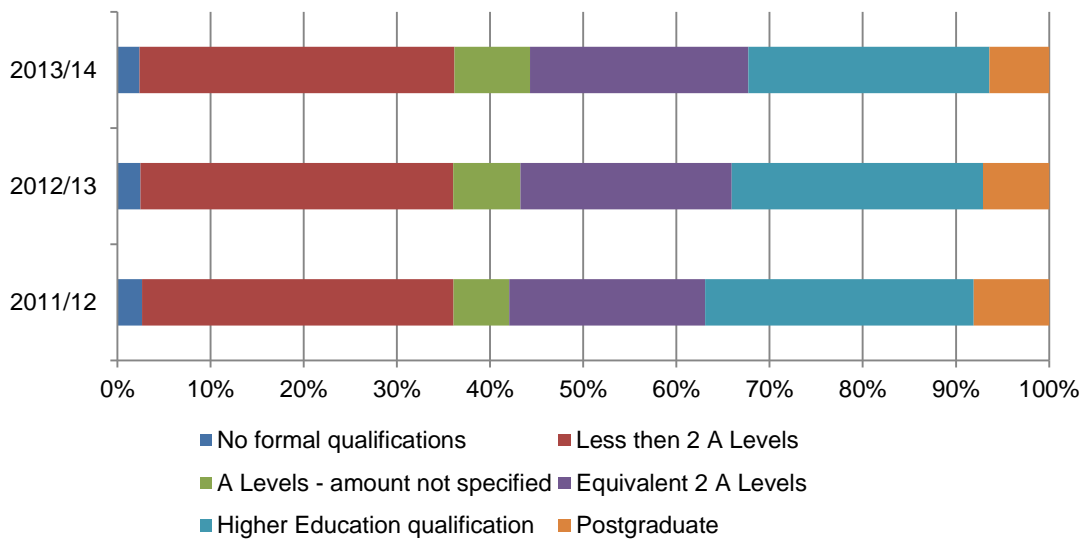
**Figure 5: Increasingly younger age profile of Open University students, UG and PG, 2011/12 to 2013/14**



**Figure 6: Increasing proportion of Open University students with a declared disability, UG and PG, 2011/12 to 2013/14**



**Figure 7: Increasing proportion of Open University students with A-level qualifications or lower, UG and PG, 2011/12 to 2013/14**



## 2. 5. Barriers and enablers

Advances in technology have increased the range of what is possible in distance learning, but some have suggested that this pace of technological change can be out of step with learners' skills (White et al., 2010). However, there are indications that students' familiarity with the main tools most often used by distance and online providers – virtual learning environments, blogs, wikis and forums – is increasing.

There appears to be general agreement that distance and online students have different expectations to 'traditional' campus-based students. It has been suggested that this relates to the fact that many distance learning students are working professionals and are as a rule older than campus-based students. White et al. identified that distance learning students 'generally expect to be engaged, challenged, consulted and supported in a professional manner' (2010, p. 43). Some institutions providing distance and online learning offer a range of supporting activities, including open days, online graduation services, and induction programmes. Advances in technology appear to support such developments, which aim to improve the social aspects of learning online.

## 3. Universities and adult learners

### 3.1. Adult learners and the strategic aims/mission of higher education

In the UK, a majority of school leavers now enter HE (almost always full-time). Strategic drivers and financial levers in HE prioritize the recruitment of bright 18-year-olds to full-time degrees, arguably to the disadvantage of adult learners seeking skills development and/or a second chance. Despite this, adult numbers in UK HE have, until the last few years, offered evidence of relatively healthy participation in relation to other European countries (Slowey and Kozina, 2012).

Historically many UK universities offered extra-mural evening study through a liberal mission to deliver part-time, non-accredited, non-vocational educational opportunities to adults. Increasingly beleaguered, this form of HE for adults has all but disappeared

due to funding regimes which exclude informal and non-credit-bearing adult education, amidst political derision for so-called 'hobby classes' (Bowl, 2010).

Provision for adult part-time HE is now largely concentrated in specialist institutions (topped by the Open University at 25% via distance education, followed by Birkbeck College, University of London via accredited evening classes), or in so-called 'recruiting universities' such as Glasgow Caledonian or Edgehill, which have a mission to serve the needs of local/regional students and employers, and of the 8% studying HE in Further Education (FE). The strategic place of adult learners in UK HE is thus paradoxical in a segmented sector, with the four nations operating their own complex internal markets and funding regimes (only the Open University operates across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and recruits on an open access model to fulfil its social justice mission). This fragmentation results in a range of barriers to sustaining or broadening adult engagement in HE.

In spite of persistent policy rhetoric about the need to enhance adult skills, the sector clamour around widening HE participation to a greater number of adults, and statements advocating the lifelong nature of learning and its crucial availability throughout life, including part-time provision (BIS, 2011), financial provision is more likely to inhibit institutions' efforts to stimulate adult participation (EU, 2013). Currently, the critical importance of adult learners in relation to HE is negated by the disproportionate impact of national policy on part-time (and hence as a proxy, adult) HE. Because UK universities are largely autonomous, most respond to levers aimed at young students. As financial support measures are directed at full-time students, there is little incentive to offer part-time modes.

As a result of all these factors, part-time adult learners in England have been the cohort most affected by funding changes. Tuition fees not only increased dramatically from 2012 as direct funding from centrally allocated institutional teaching grants disappeared, but public funding was completely withdrawn from students embarking on equivalent or lower qualifications (ELQs) and confused messages were sent regarding eligibility for financial support, uniquely impacting on part-time adult learners (Maguire, 2013). To qualify for student loans (as full-time students did), part-time study

had to be at a minimum of 25% intensity of the full-time equivalent, and learners had to be enrolled on a named qualification. Moreover, from 2013, part-time students were ineligible for maintenance loans or grants. Simultaneously, the economic downturn led to an increase in both un(der)employment and fear thereof. Employers were less inclined to fund part-time HE or provide time off for exams, and government-imposed austerity measures led to reduced public sector employment, the area most attractive to adult learners. Inadvertently, therefore, adult learners are playing a decreasing role in the mission of UK HE.

### 3.2. Numbers of adult learners

The dominant application route into HE in the UK is the Universities Central Admissions System (UCAS). Across the 162 HEIs in the UK, total numbers for **full-time** undergraduate (UG) degrees showed some decline following the effective tripling of HE tuition fees in England in 2012. However, numbers have remained relatively stable since then (378,000 entrants in England in 2013/14, 27,000 more than in the previous year). Some subjects reflect this recent increase (Sciences, including Engineering and Computing) while others (Languages, Architecture) have continued to decline. On the UCAS website, it is noted that around one third of all undergraduates are **mature** students (defined as adults aged 21 or over at the commencement of studies). This is broken down into:

- 40% aged 21-24
- 20% aged 25-29
- 40% aged 30+

Two thirds of these entrants have had no prior experience of HE. The proportion of full-time adult HE students from low participation neighbourhoods is dropping, suggesting that efforts to widen adult participation have stalled. If non-degree qualifications are included (certificates, diplomas, institutional credit), the proportion of adult learner enrolment rises to 52%.

Crucially, 92% of part-time HE entrants in the UK in 2012/13 were aged 21 or over. In order to understand the UK's somewhat ambivalent attitude to adult HE students, it is thus vital to take into account that the numbers of **part-time** UGs almost halved

between 2010 and 2014 (48% drop from 320,000 to under 200,000 (HEFCE, 2014), especially on courses that are not first degrees (numbers on foundation degrees, certificates and diplomas (38%) and institutional credit (35%) all dropped significantly). There may be significant social justice issues here, since a greater proportion of females (60%) study part-time.

In the same period, despite different funding regimes, part-time adult learner numbers decreased by 34% in Scotland and by 22% in Wales. Numbers have risen slightly in Northern Ireland, but essentially only because the original baseline was so low.

### **3.3. Success rates/drop out**

Across UK UG HE, adult learners studying full-time tend to drop out in slightly greater proportions than young students (10% vs. 6%), which is attributable to the additional responsibilities (life pressures) that adult learners carry while studying. Of the 2011/12 cohort of mature access students, 10% withdrew from their UG degree programmes – the same proportion as for adult students with traditional entry qualifications.

The more significant issue is withdrawal from part-time HE courses. This stands at 35%, a figure aligned with the experience of adults studying courses with the Open University. Supporting persistence for adult learners studying part-time is therefore of crucial importance, given that adult learners who see their degree through to the end perform at least as well as younger students and enjoy a significant ‘graduate premium’ in terms of subsequent career earnings, according to Open University evidence.

### **3.4. Adult learner motivations for returning to study**

UK adult learners in HE include those embarking on a ‘second chance’, those from groups traditionally under-represented in HE, those returning after a break, and late-life ‘leisure’ learners. Research in Wales with part-time adult students (Butcher and Rose-Adams, in press) confirms what policy statements and previous academic studies have claimed: that adult learner motivation for embarking on HE study is often closely related to employability aspirations – whether to gain a job, change to a better job, make a ‘late’ career change or improve career prospects in a present job. For

adults, however, all this is nuanced through personal values and life experiences – and therefore not aligned with HE policy on graduate outcomes for 21-year-olds.

For adults coping with a disability, returning to study can be about an aspiration to ‘give something back’ and help others as they have been helped. Another little-studied employability motivation was also uncovered by Butcher and Rose-Adams’ study: for those adult students living in rural isolation, often with extensive caring responsibilities, returning to study was about gaining confidence and the organizational skills to become self-employed, or to develop resilience and persistence as part of a drive for self-improvement and enhanced personal agency. For older learners (50+), personal interest and/or enjoyment became more significant learning motivations (UUK, 2010).

### 3.5. Courses and programmes of study

The most popular HE subject choices for adults are:

- Subjects allied to medicine
- Business
- Education

The contrast with young full-time students is striking: 28% of adult UGs study subjects closely linked to public sector employment (subjects allied to medicine and education) compared to only 12% of young students.

Higher Apprenticeships have been advocated as a contemporary solution for adult learners. However, for at least fifty years, reports have bemoaned the relative absence of higher level technical/vocational skills provision below degree level in HE in England (Association of Colleges, 2014), blaming the gravitational pull towards the academic in HE, as manifest in a system dominated by three-year residential degrees. This contributes to a decline in the recruitment of part-time adult students and a shortage of advanced technical skills. A key criticism is that HE qualifications are not fit for purpose: they are too generic, with insufficient skills elements and limited employer involvement. If Higher Apprenticeships are a solution, support will be needed in the HE in FE sector, which enrolls 130,000 HE students, about 10% of the total, of whom half study part-time and 60,000 study for professional certificates and diplomas.



### 3.6. Access routes

Of the adult students who embarked on full-time UG study commencing in 2012/13 (74,700), 20% progressed from Access to Higher Education Diploma courses (offered in England and Wales), or in smaller numbers from the Scottish Wider Access Programme or the Access Certificate in Foundation Studies in Northern Ireland. 49% of these students were over 25 years of age. Access to HE Diploma students were more likely than other students to live in areas with the lowest quintile of HE participation (fewer than one in six).

Access Diplomas are usually 60-credit Level 3 full-time courses in specific, often vocational subjects, intended to prepare learners for degree level study. Aimed at adult students who left school without the qualifications to enter HE (QAA, 2014), they are offered by almost 300 FE Colleges and a handful of other education providers (including HEIs and adult education centres). As such, they represent a major alternative route to admission to HE.

Health-related subjects allied to medicine and nursing were the most popular (9,795 accepted onto HE courses). In a handful of universities over 6% of the total UG intake progressed from Access. Part-time and distance learning modes were also available but attracted relatively few students. The gender split on Access Diplomas in England and Wales was 73% female: 27% male.

Some adult students without traditional entry requirements progress to HE from preparatory foundation courses (an extra year within their UG degree), especially in the Sciences. Others are able to gain direct access to the later years of degree programmes on the basis of prior sub-degree vocational qualifications. A notable difference between the UK nations is the significance of FE Colleges in Scotland, which provide a significant component of adult HE.

### 3.7. Recognition of prior learning

More usually known in the UK as the Accreditation of (Prior) Experiential Learning (A(P)EL), the tension between adult experience and learning on one hand and academic knowledge on the other has been played out in UK HE policy discourse for the past 35 years. A(P)EL remains a contested educational practice in the UK, 'over-theorised and under-practiced' (Scott, 2010, p. 29), on the margins of academic provision, perceived as 'difficult' for HEIs to implement and time-consuming for adult learners themselves (Peters, 2006).

This ongoing policy/practice conundrum is illustrated by the aspirations for proponents of A(PEL) since the 1980s, who hoped that policy espousal of Lifelong Learning would result in the removal of barriers for non-traditional learners in work settings, and that more accessible credit accumulation would result. Optimists saw A(P)EL as providing alternative, emancipatory routes to HE for adult learners, utilizing a developmental approach for individuals via reflection on 'authentic' prior learning to achieve social justice aims (Evans, 2006). More often, however, A(P)EL has morphed into credit exchange, with performance auditing and achievement mapping being used to credentialize experiential learning and thus to create a further hurdle for adult learners to overcome.

It is ironic that, despite policies advocating Lifelong Learning and Widening Participation coinciding with a shift to a more learner-centred pedagogy in UK HE, the extension of A(P)EL has not been achieved. Even a well-received policy aimed at widening participation, like the introduction of Foundation Degrees (FDs)<sup>169</sup> in 2000, has struggled to deliver major change (only 3.2% of all UK HE qualifications awarded in 2012/13 were FDs).

In the UK, assessment remains the dominant tool in the portfolio approach, driven by HE expectations regarding compliance with 'academic' writing. Prior learning thus has

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<sup>169</sup> A qualification aligned with the first two years of a three-year undergraduate degree which emphasised work-based learning and A(P)EL and theoretically offered adult students access to HE without formal qualifications and accelerated progression.

to be expressed in established, familiar forms, as learning outcomes designed by the university, including a mastery of theory. The power of formal expectations regarding the award of credit in UK HE remains strong, and there is little evidence of A(P)EL acting as a driver of social inclusion.

A(P)EL has gained a foothold in the development of portfolio assessment of competence in corporate Continuing Professional Development (CPD), but this has primarily addressed a narrow aspect of training for academic advancement. Lecturers appear to have limited knowledge of A(P)EL, misunderstanding its potentially developmental purpose in HE (Dismore et al., 2011, p. 329). Despite the challenge of work-based learning, many still perceive higher learning as essentially academic.

#### **4. Barriers faced by adult HE learners**

Part-time mature UGs are a poorly understood cohort in the UK, invisible in national policy but more heterogeneous than young full-time students (UUK, 2013). Despite making up well over a quarter of the UK UG population, policy treats them as an 'add-on' rather than as intrinsic to the HE mission. It is striking that the older an adult student is, the more likely they are to study part-time (75% of over 25s study part-time).

Of those studying part-time in England, 45% are parents with dependent children and two thirds have caring responsibilities. 53% of adult part-time learners study HE 'other than' first degrees. 82% of part-time mature students combine work with study and under a third receive financial support to study from their employer. Most therefore face daunting time pressures to juggle study around other commitments, whether work, family or both – more so than younger full-time students. Even if personally motivated, adults often need to address a lack of self-confidence as well as a lack of time. Fewer employers support staff development for the 80% of part-time students in employment, and adults find it increasingly difficult to take breaks for study. With the sharply increased cost, do higher fees offer a return on investment?

Fee increases from 2012 disproportionately affected adult learners, especially those from the most debt-averse of cohorts in HE: the lowest social classes, single parent

families, and black and minority ethnic groups, who were more sensitive to fees rising than young full-time students.

Although compared with most European countries the UK has high participation rates in education and training and fairly high levels of flexibility in formal education (Schuller and Watson, 2009), there are a number of systematic blocks to a longer term strategy for lifelong learning. The current system does not recognize increasingly diverse transitions into and from employment, and is itself complex and demotivating for many adult learners. In England at least, the system is over-centralized, and is characterized by the unacceptable accumulation of educational inequalities over the life course.

Barriers include social class, which is closely linked to participation in adult learning (the higher your socio-economic position, the more likely you are to take part in learning); employment (even a low ranking job gives you a better chance of learning than being out of the labour market entirely); age (the younger you are, the more likely you are to participate); and disability (a major barrier to participation). It can also be demotivating if older students' life experiences are not recognized within HE: studies of learners over 50 suggest attitudinal barriers (both by learners and providers) can be as significant as personal factors like health and income, or institutional discouragement (UUK, 2010).

## **5. Enabling factors for adult learners in HE**

In an Institute for Employment study (Pollard et al., 2008), 30% of the working adults surveyed would consider applying to university at some point in the future, but they want the flexibility to study vocational subjects in their local area, in the evenings, at weekends or part-time. There has been a plethora of recent literature (Barnett, 2014; McLinden, 2013; Maguire, 2013) concerning flexible approaches to HE in the UK (blurring the full-time/part-time divide through disruptions to pace, place and mode of learning). There is certainly a pressing need for greater flexibility regarding assessment deadlines and access to facilities for part-time adult learners.

However, while acknowledging the challenges faced by part-time learners in HE, this literature tends to underplay the relationship between what Barnett terms 'systematic flexibility' and 'pedagogical flexibility' and the specific needs of adult learners. As such, flexibilization has impacted more on traditional face-to-face HE in the UK, prompting the adoption of more blended approaches in the context of marketization, a clamour around students-as-consumers, and the potential of digital technologies. Contemporary thinking regarding flexibility in the adult sector is only at the stage of advocating investigation into ways to extend support for part-time learners (Barnett, 2014). There is little evidence of pedagogies which address the specific needs of part-time learners and apply theory to practice. Given that the provision of part-time HE has been in dramatic decline in the UK (especially England) for the last four years, it is difficult to see how the kind of flexibility envisaged here will bring back adult learners who cannot study full-time and are disproportionately affected by fee rises.

In contrast, organizations such as the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) have campaigned for the right to learn throughout life as a human right (Schuller and Watson, 2009), and for adults returning to organized learning to be treated positively as part of a national strategy. Their recommendations include basing adult learning policy on four key stages in the life course (up to 25, 25-50, 50-75, 75+) and the transitions between them, with resources rebalanced (a little) to the latter two stages. Funding should support people to combine study with other activities and should not discriminate against part-time provision.

Belatedly perhaps, the UK is starting to acknowledge a skills challenge. Employers are beginning to recognize that they need to make better use of current employees' skills. This will require universities and employers to work in partnership to develop more diverse vocational routes into HE.

## **6. Synthesis: potential for the future**

Although the absence of credit places them outside this report, could free Massive Open Online courses (MOOCs), Badged Open Courses (BOCs) and Open Educational Resources (OERs) address the needs of adults in HE through informal learning? This

would potentially bring together modes of learning familiar from distance education and an innovative re-engagement with adults seeking HE learning. The evidence is not yet clear, but poor retention and cohorts consisting of existing graduates suggest that MOOCs may not widen participation, and that OERs in their present forms may not start UK adults on a journey to formal HE learning.

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# Glossary

In the IDEAL project, the following terminology is used:

## 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 in 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, p. 25)

## Adult learners

Learners of any age returning to education after a period of work, unemployment, 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' (European Commission, 2006). What courses have in common with degree programmes is the award of credits.

### **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' (ibidem).

### **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 ( $\geq 80\%$  of the content delivered online) and blended education (30-79% of the content delivered online) as well as modes of education using printed material delivered by post and/or other tools for bridging the distance.

### **European higher education institutions**

For the purposes of this project, only higher education institutions that are on the list of the International Association of Universities (IAU)<sup>170</sup>, accredited by their competent national authorities and that are based within the European Higher Education Area<sup>171</sup> (EHEA) are considered.

### **ISCED (International Standard Classification of Education)**

ISCED is the reference classification for organizing education programmes and related qualifications by education levels and fields based on international agreement and adopted formally by the General Conference of UNESCO Member States.

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<sup>170</sup> See: <http://www.iau-aiu.net/content/list-heis>

<sup>171</sup> See: EHEA countries <http://www.ehea.info/members.aspx>

## Online education

Most or all of the content ( $\geq 80\%$ ) 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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