A CASE STUDY ON STUDENT SATISFACTION FOR GRADUATES OF THE GERMAN LANGUAGE TEACHERS' BLENDED MA PROGRAM OF THE HELLENIC OPEN UNIVERSITY, CLASSES OF 2012 AND 2013

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the lack of research into satisfaction assessment of post-graduate students of the Blended Distance Learning Master's Course for Teachers of German as a Foreign Language offered by the Hellenic Open University. Through the compilation of previous questionnaires implemented for other DL programs and newly defined research problems in one online survey tool, this paper seeks to pin-point the correlation of initial expectance and final assessment of the blended course. Survey results on a case study population show that, even though the overall program seems to be appreciated, there are vast sections of the blended program that do not completely fulfill the expectations of the students. Furthermore, a need for further investigation and cross-referencing with respective studies is pointed out.

Keywords: Distance Learning, Hellenic Open University, satisfaction, German Post Degree Program.

INTRODUCTION

A number of different studies have been carried out internationally in order to establish and estimate both the reasons and extend of acceptance and satisfaction[i] of blended learning programs in higher education, which recently also included technologically advanced processes through M(obile)-learning, as described in a number of contemporary studies (Abu-Al-Aish & Love, 2013; Rekkedal & Dye, 2007; Γρηγοράκη, Πολίτη, & Τσολάκος, 2014). Such factors include community and social behavior, learning outcome expectations and learner – tutor interaction. Amongst others, Naaj et al. (2012) refer to these factors proposing a research instrument which measures student satisfaction against instructor, technology, class management, interaction and instruction, thus trying to aggregate the overall quality of the program. Wu et al. (n.d.), on the other side, concentrate on the instrumental issues of looking into the e-learning program quality, focusing on system functionality, content feature and social interaction to establish factors for student satisfaction.

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An additional stress-point defined is the *job satisfaction* (Johnson, Smith, & Tucker, 1982; Sinclaire, n.d.), evolving from the attendance of e-learning programs, which relates e-learning results with evidence of occupational usage of the knowledge acquired.

All above mentioned issues correlate different factors of personal estimates which lead distance students to form specific estimations concerning their distance learning experience. Tayebinik & Puteh (n.d.) point out that another such factor leading to a positive feeling for blended-learning is the *sense of community*, which is built up in such learning environments.

Furthermore, according to studies carried out in the past decade, there are an even greater number of aspects influencing the acceptance of blended learning approaches in the context of distance learning programs on a higher education level. As Tselios, Daskalakis & Papadopoulou (2011) state, the main aspects seem to be *usefulness and ease of use*, as people are looking for flexible learning to accommodate their *needs for improvements* (Dahalan, Hasmawati, & Hanafi, 2012, p. 464). *Flexibility*, moreover, in learning provides room for volitional control and an array of strategies and encourages persistence in the face of difficulties. *Autonomy in* and *control over* one's learning process can be seen as another condition for self-regulated learning, as pointed out in Bergamin, Werlen, Siegenthaler & Ziska (2012). Johnston, Killion & Oomen (2005) also refer to *flexibility* as one of the main factors influencing students' satisfaction for the distance learning program they attended. Another aspect has been offered by Giannousi, Vernadakis, Derri, Michalopoulos & Kioumourtzoglou (2009), who relate the overall satisfaction of blended-learning students with the *effectiveness* of the learning procedures offered. Finally, Adas & Shnais (2011) show in their research that students tend to state satisfaction for their blended learning experience in terms of process, ease of study and content of learning modules, while Valasidou & Bousiou-Makridou state that "*satisfaction depends mainly upon the level of effectiveness of [...]meetings (tutorials) with the instructor and, specifically, the issues that are discussed during the meetings.*" (2006, p. 8).

On the other hand, Shen (2009) demonstrates that there is only slight evidence of student achievement gains resulting from the e-learning components. His analysis of student perceptions indicate that students are mostly satisfied with many of the elements of e-learning, and find it useful for their study, but there also are areas of technology that the students rate more poorly, suggesting that instructors and universities need to be careful in the features of the system they are using, in the quality of the materials they provide to students, in training provided to students, and in collaboration of instructors with support services such as libraries.Similar restrictions of the overall acceptance of blended-learning courses offered, have been revealed by Valentine (2002), who includes quality of instruction, hidden costs, misuse of technology and the attitudes of the instructors, students and administration, in the factors that may influence the overall quality of the program offered, hence affecting students' general satisfaction for the program.

Surprisingly, the literature review also reveals a lack of studies concerning the acceptance of blended e-learning programs in conjunction with the improvement of ICT skills as well as the use of these skills in further occupational aspects, such as teaching assignments. Furthermore, it shows that the interest of most researchers focus on the relationship between tutor vs. learner(s) or learner vs. program, leaving behind the very reason for which each student got involved with distance learning programs in the first place, i.e. its usefulness in real life applications and further life-long education as well as expectations and anticipation of the students, which initially made them enroll DE.

This paper focuses on these issues by setting up specific queries addressing issues of reasoning, time, place and ICT involved in blended DL courses offered by the Hellenic Open University.

PROBLEM

In order to look into the aforementioned lack of evidence, this paper and its underlying Case Study seeks to establish answers that pin-point some of the missing components mentioned. For this, the overall design of the study was set to research the following problems:

> To what degree and why is the further education offered by the blended learning program of the Hellenic Open University Post-Degree program for Teachers of German as a Foreign Language accepted and put to practical use by post degree students and holders of the respective MA Degree?
> In reference to the overall estimation of the post degree education in its blended form, to what extend is it satisfying for the end-users? Is the degree pursued in order to solely secure monetary benefits for the degree-holders?
> Does the MA Degree represent a meta-value of post-degree education offering a wide range of supplementary specialized knowledge in the field of pedagogy and didactics of German as a foreign language leading to practical implementation of ICT-knowledge in the classroom or to further specialization and academic progress?
> As far as pedagogical aspects are concerned, what is the attitude of the students towards the overall PD program components regarding blended learning activities, ICT knowledge gained during the blended education for further use in actual educational environments and modern teaching approaches utilizing ICT components suggested in the PD progress?

METHOD, DESIGN AND LIMITATIONS

In order to collect the required data for the case study, a response format was needed, which had to be selected from a number of possible solutions, including in vivo interviews, mixed interview-paper questionnaire and both personal or anonymous questionnaires issued over the internet as mail attachments or online forms.

The final decision was in favor of an anonymous online semi-structured questionnaire featuring "genuine" five-point Likert-scale items (Boone & Boone, 2012; Zeppos, 2014) and Likert-type items (Clason & Dormody, 1994; Gadermann, Guhn, & Zumbo, 2012; Uebersax, 2006) supplemented by open-ended questions (Frary, 1996; Grosshans & Chelimsky, 1993; Marra & Bogue, 2006a). This was because of the principle that the physical restrictions of live surveys, namely time and place, would not hinder the publication and administration of an online survey tool, even though Evans & Mathur (2005), Marra & Bogue (2006b), Selm & Jankowski (2006) and Wright (2005), just to name a few, have shown that the number of responses to online surveys tend to be (very) limited due to various factors.

Since all members of the population and potential sample were physically located in various locations, it was obvious that a one-to-one submission would not be feasible. Furthermore, an anonymous distant questionnaire was expected to ascertain the submission of fairly straight forward responses to questions implying personal estimates.

An online questionnaire was also expected to offer the end-user the possibility to respond at his/her own pace and time (Wright, 2005), which would minimize the risk of rejecting participation due to these factors. Finally, all questionnaire items were set out to facilitate ease of response and effort was taken to eliminate guiding or restricting responses, thus allowing the participants to express both *pre*-set and *free*-set attitude scale measurements and descriptions.

As regards the actual content of the questions to be researched, a decision had to be made as of which aspects of blended distance learning methodology[ii] and satisfaction factors should be included in the survey. Since there are a number of studies already published dealing, amongst others, with aspects such as *cost and cost effectiveness*, e.g.

Rumble (1997), Bird & Morgan (2003) and Islam (2011), *entry and enrolment processes to Open Universities*, e.g. O'Mahony & Smyth (2007) and Bird & Morgan (2003), *study persistence and student concerns*, e.g. Valentine (2002) and Kovačić (2012) or *aspects and issues of student and tutor (e-)assessment*, e.g. Gibbs (2010), Valkanos, Papavassiliou-Alexiou, & Fragoulis (2009) and JISC (2007), it was decided that the focus of this paper should turn to aspects of offered assistance on *time, localization and ICT knowledge* factors through the DLM, as described by the Hellenic Open University[iii] statutory. Previous attempts to estimate student satisfaction under various aspects, e.g. Valassidou & Bousiou-Makridou (2006) and Pierrakeas, Xenos, Panagiotakopoulos, & Vergidis (2004) were considered as raw layout for the survey items to be used, although significant alternations had to be carried out to facilitate the scope of this study.

Population
The members of the target group of this case study were graduates of the Post Degree Program offered by the HOU[iv] for Teachers of German as a Foreign Language, who had successfully participated in the "blended distance courses"[v] and had been awarded the respective MA Degree, as described in the program's site.

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According to data released by the secretariat of the HOU, a total of 586 students had enrolled the program since its beginning in 2001 until December 2013. From 2005, the first year, in which distance studies of the first enrolled students were completed and their MA dissertations were submitted and posted online[vi], until 2013, which was the benchmark year for this study, the HOU awarded a total of $n_P=552$ MA degrees (94% of total enrolment) for this program.

For the purpose of this case study, the population of MA holders was narrowed down to those having graduated and their MA Dissertation published on the site of HOU between 2012 and 2013. According to the data released by January 2014, a total of 75 students fulfilled this prerequisite, representing 14% of the total dissertations published on site. Since the case study was to focus on the delimited period, the total number of 75 graduates ($n_T=75$) was set as population of the survey.

Sampling

In order to assure the participation of a representative number of individuals satisfying the main prerequisite of being holder of the MA Degree as aforementioned, sampling was carried out using a dual invitation system. In the first run, 52 degree holders, for whom the author of this article had been Tutor during their studies, were contacted via e-mail and invited to participate in the survey. The second approach was an open invitation through the site for German Teachers in Greece[vii], where every interested HOU graduate of this program was invited to request an access address to the online questionnaire.

All requests rendered through the second approach were automatically checked against a student database, reassuring that all participants were graduates of the Post Degree[viii] program of the HOU, thus minimizing the possibility of unauthorized respondents. Anonymity was secured through automated response messages which were generated by the online emailing system provided by the Greek School Network[ix] and Gmail[©]. No further back-tracking was carried out. Since the entire sampling process was based on anonymity, the final accumulation of respondents cannot be distinguished into "convenience" and "random" samples (Wilkinson, 1999), because a recognition of the origin of the responses was not an aim of the study, nor had there been any filing of participation requests. Therefore, all eligible responses were treated as being part of a random sample.The final sample accumulated through the proceedings described, reached 18 responses ($n_R=18$), forming 3% of the total population of HOU German Language Teacher PD program graduates.

As regards the total population for the time period specified, $n_R=8$ survey responses, totaling to a ratio of $r_S=11\%$ of the case study population n_T (graduation and dissertation posting between 2012 and 2013) were filtered out of the total questionnaire submissions. Therefore, the sample accumulated was regarded as being representative (Nulty, 2008) for the time period being analyzed, even though the total size of the sample of n_R cannot be regarded as sufficient for a generalized deduction of response outcomes (for $n_P=552$ MA holders)[x].

Measurement

The entire online questionnaire was designed and set up according to the specifications given by Grosshans & Chelimsky (1993), extended by remarks and web 2.0 tools as described in Frary (1996), Kim (2010), Rammstedt & Krebs (2007), and supplemented by M-learning issues as mentioned in Abu-Al-Aish & Love (2013) and Rekkedal & Dye (2007). Implementing the specifications proposed by the literary research, supplemented by remarks concerning Likert-scale items (Zeppos, 2014), the questionnaire included a total of 22 items, divided into four main categories, as described below.

Variables

Demographic data concerning age, gender, participation and completion of the PD studies was collected using constant variables. Data concerning the initial statements of attitude towards inaugurating distance learning was collected through three sets of genuine Likert-scale items investigating respective aspects of choice reasoning. These sets were categorized as *time, location, scientific learning* and *ICT knowledge*, which also make up the four main categories of this survey. Finally, data about the actual rate of satisfaction concerning the distance learning experience was collected using the same sets of categorized items, measuring actual satisfaction levels utilizing genuine Likert-scale attitude levels supplemented by open-ended questions.

The variables described[xi] and used in the questionnaire aimed at supplementing earlier surveys conducted[xii] and aimed at establishing student satisfaction on blended distance and e-learning experiences, connoted by expectations and study outcomes as questioned in the problem statement of this paper.

Each variable was assigned a five point attitude scale, describing the level of agreement of each respondent to the item in question. In order to avoid recursive responses, the four item categories were set up to provide different ranges. So, while in the first and second category the Likert-items were attributed the values 1 through 5, where value "1" depicted "*totally disagree*" and value "5" attributed "*totally agree*", the same items were used in the third category offering Likert attitude agreement anchors 1 through 5, where value "1" denoted "*absolutely positive*" and value "5" stood for "*absolutely negative*". The proposed values attributed to each item formed a system of validation, as described in Hitchcock & Porter (2004) and Brown (2011). Therefore, the attributed values did not form accumulative values but indicators of the respondents' agreement (Uebersax, 2006) on an interval attitude scale (Boone & Boone, 2012).

The supplementary open-ended questions offered in each category functioned as a means of deviation in case a respondent wanted to extend the offered choices with remarks of his/her own belief.

The submitted answers were evaluated using traditional text analyses methods (Rockwell, 2003) by assigning variable codes to each submitted supplement. The actual analysis was carried out using CDC EZ-Text (Version 4.04)[xiii].

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Instrument and Procedure

The survey was entirely carried out online. For this, the online survey tool *limesurvey 1.92+*[xiv] (Build 120919) was published on the web space of the author of this paper. A specific time span for conducting the survey was set, which lasted for 15 days after initial invitation to the first-run respondents. The tool was set up to allow only one response per IP-number, thus preventing double submissions from the same computer station.

The instrument had a continuous online presence of the survey during the entire survey period, since it was located on a 24/7 web-server. The questionnaire was presented in Greek and an automatic storing system was implemented to securely deposit completed questionnaires on the web. Each response was assigned a serial number in order to facilitate recognition of response items and series. Finally, the data submitted was then analyzed with spreadsheets in Windows Excel$^{©}$.

FINDINGS

Pre-attendance Expectations

In the following, analysis of the graduates' expectations as researched in the survey will be carried out, in order to establish the level of anticipation for the blended DLM of the HOU. An overall depiction of the responses gathered can be seen in
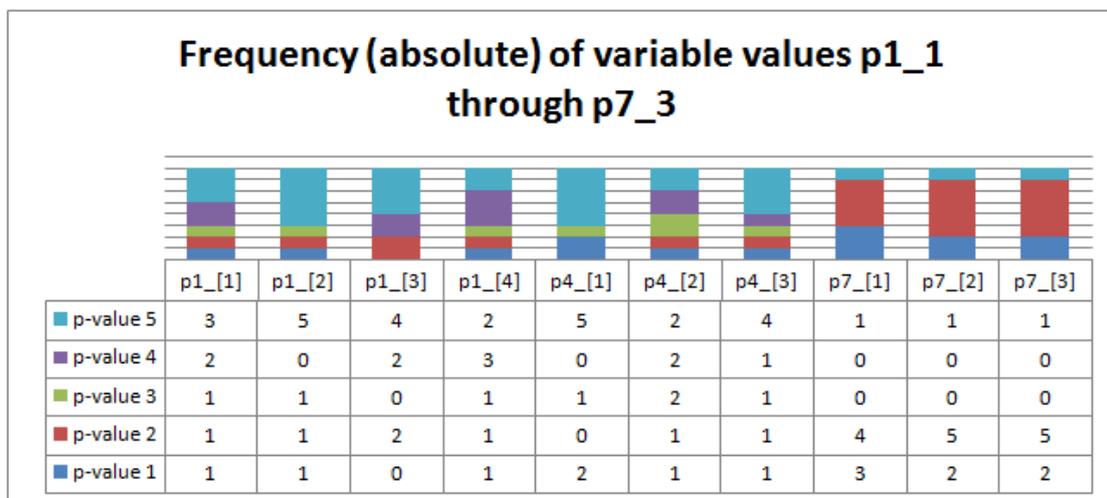Figure: *1*

Frequency (absolute) of variable values p1_1 through p7_3

	p1_[1]	p1_[2]	p1_[3]	p1_[4]	p4_[1]	p4_[2]	p4_[3]	p7_[1]	p7_[2]	p7_[3]
p-value 5	3	5	4	2	5	2	4	1	1	1
p-value 4	2	0	2	3	0	2	1	0	0	0
p-value 3	1	1	0	1	1	2	1	0	0	0
p-value 2	1	1	2	1	0	1	1	4	5	5
p-value 1	1	1	0	1	2	1	1	3	2	2

Figure: 1
Absolute frequency of variables p1_1 through p7_3

Taking in consideration the limitations of this case-study, the sample population for deducting results is set to be $n_R=8$. Average age of the sample n_R is 40.56, with lowest being 34 and highest 45.

A very low attendance of one (1) male respondent (12.5%) is observed, confirming respective findings and statements made by Anastasiades et al. (2011, p. 30) that there generally seems to be a significant lack of male attendance in such surveys. Six (75%, n_R=8) out of the seven female respondents graduated and posted their dissertation in 2013, while two, one male and one female (25%) did so in 2012.

Three respondents (37.5%) state that DL was the main reason which attracted their attendance (variable p1_1), while two respondents (25%) agree to this "a lot". One respondent respectively for each scale point (12.25% each) replies that they either simply, very little or not at all agree with this reasoning.

Main distribution around the midpoint suggests a tendency towards the positive attitude, since 62.5% tend to a positive response, while 25% tend toward negative, 12.5% being the actual mid-point.

Going into more detail of the Likert-attitude scale, five respondents (62.5%) mention part-time attendance (variable p1_2) as a reason for pursuing the DL course, while one participant (12.5%) states the mid-point and the remaining two (25%) do not agree with this justification. Main distribution around the mid-point shows a definite tendency towards the positive anchor.

Further down the item logic, four responses (50%) are set to "totally agree" for the freedom of time management, which the DLM would offer to prospective students (variable p1_3). Interestingly, two respondents (25%) place themselves next to the mid-point towards the positive anchor, while the remaining two (25%) towards the negative anchor. There is no response either for the mid-point or the negative anchor itself.

Finally, relief of time pressure (variable p1_4) is considered as a main reasoning for just two respondents (25%), while three responses (37.5%) place themselves on the "mostly agree" scale. For each of the remaining three points of reasoning there is one respective answer, offering 12.5% for each attitude point, totaling to 37.5%. Main distribution around the mid-point suggests that there is tendency towards the positive anchor, reaching 62.5%, while a smaller trend seems to exist towards the negative anchor summing up to 25%. Merely 12.5% appear on the actual mid-point.

A positive expectation for attending the blended DL course emerge through the provision of the nature of blended learning that commuting to the University or meeting points is drastically reduced (variable p4_1), since five (62.5%) out of eight responses totally agree with this feature. One respondent (12.5%) places herself on the mid-point, while the remaining two (25%) state that they do not agree at all with this as a reason for attending the blended DL courses.

Main distribution around the midpoint depicts a significant dominance of the positive expectance, since most of the replies are positioned towards the positive anchor. 55

A more detailed inquisition of the time factor reveals that two responses (25%) are offered as total agreement that supplementary ICT knowledge would assist in obtaining further studying techniques interwoven in DLM. Two answers (25%) state that they "agree a lot" with this reasoning. Interestingly, two responses (25%) are positioned on the very mid-point, suggesting general neutrality, while the remaining two responses (12.5% each, total 25%) are distributed between "agree very little" and the negative anchor. Main distribution suggests a tendency towards the positive anchor, while the neutral position claims a quarter of all responses.

Four respondents (50%) fully agree with the reasoning that the DLM would offer opportunities to scientifically research in libraries without being obliged to physical presence on site (variable p4_3). The remaining four responses are evenly distributed amongst the other four scale points (12.5% each, totaling to 50%). Main distribution suggests that a general positive expectance attitude seems to be towards the avoidance of physical presence in libraries, since five responses (67.5%) lie towards the positive anchor, while two (25%) responses are located towards the negative anchor, with one remaining answer (12.5%) being the actual mid-point.

Interestingly, seven responses (87.5%) state that there is no (37.5%, 3 responses) or very little (50%, 4 responses) expectation that the blended DLM would ascertain further acquaintance of ICT use (variable p7_1). Only one respondent (12.5%) states that she had expected to gain extra experience in ICT use for her field of expertise. Main distribution clearly suggests that there was no significant expectation for further ICT education through the DLM.

The same limited expectations as far as further knowledge concerning ICT software for use in the field (variable p7_2) are expressed, since seven out of eight answers (87.5%) state that they did not (25%, 2 responses) or very little (37.5%, 3 responses) expect any deepening in the knowledge of ICT software useful for educational purposes. Again, main distribution clearly suggests negative presumption on evolution of ICT-skills through the DLM of the HOU, since only one response (12.5%) is positioned on the positive anchor, with the majority prevailing at the negative side of the mid-point anchor.

Finally, the same low expectation can be found as regards the expansion of ICT software use which would be correlated with further theoretical knowledge (variable p7_3). In detail, two respondents (25%) state no expectation at all, while 62.5% (five respondents) had little expectations on this subject. One response only (12.5%) is listed as having had great expectation to gain further ICT knowledge in order to use respective educational software.

Post-attendance assessment
The same series of assessment and validation questions rendered in the first part of the questionnaire (p1_1 through p7_3) was issued in the second part (q1_1 through q1_10), investigating post-study assessment and viewpoint of the graduates after completion of their distance learning experience.

The attitude scale values mentioned in this section of the questionnaire were set up in reverse order, i.e. value 1 of the first section (questions p1_1 through p1_7 Likert-type) corresponded to value 5 of the second section (q1_1 through q1_10 Likert-type). An overview of the responses collected, in reverse order of rendered variable values, is **depicted in** Error! Reference source not found.
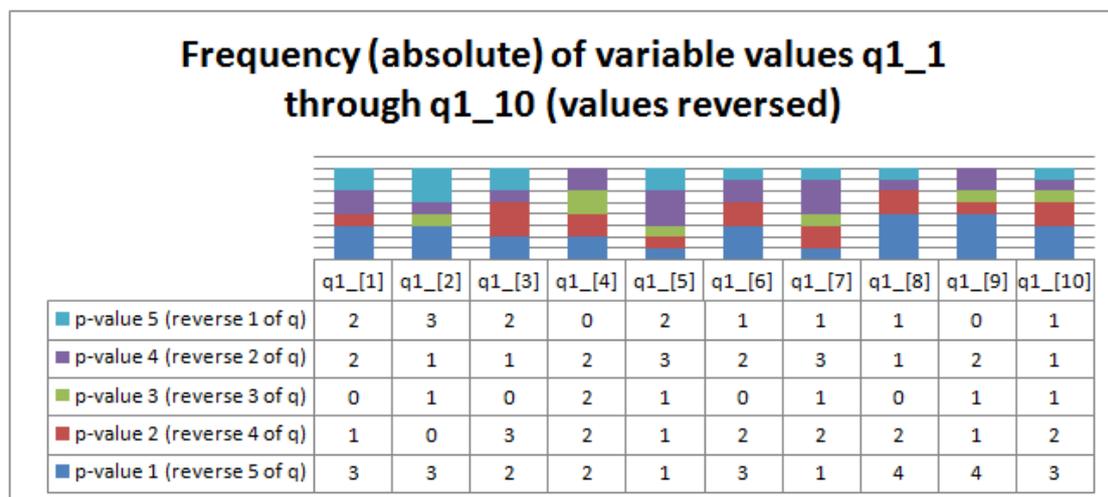

Frequency (absolute) of variable values q1_1 through q1_10 (values reversed)

	q1_[1]	q1_[2]	q1_[3]	q1_[4]	q1_[5]	q1_[6]	q1_[7]	q1_[8]	q1_[9]	q1_[10]
p-value 5 (reverse 1 of q)	2	3	2	0	2	1	1	1	0	1
p-value 4 (reverse 2 of q)	2	1	1	2	3	2	3	1	2	1
p-value 3 (reverse 3 of q)	0	1	0	2	1	0	1	0	1	1
p-value 2 (reverse 4 of q)	1	0	3	2	1	2	2	2	1	2
p-value 1 (reverse 5 of q)	3	3	2	2	1	3	1	4	4	3

Figure: 2
Absolute frequency of variables q1_1 through q1_10

The following description of the values collected in the questionnaire depicts the *initial value order*, while the discussion of the findings following will use the *reversed order* of the respective values.

Responding to the first recurring assessment item, 37.5% (three respondents) state that they did not feel attracted by the DLM offered through the PD program (variable q1_1). One respondent (12.5%) states that her expectations for the PD program due to its DLM were satisfied, while 4 respondents state either total or most agreement (25% each, 2 respondents respectively) to being attracted to the program for its DLM. Main distribution of the responses shows equal tendency towards the two outbound anchors, since there is no mid-point response.

A total of 37.5% (3 responses) totally agree to the ease of part-time attendance offered by the DLM (variable q1_2), while 12.5% (1 response) mentions that she mostly agrees. One participant states the mid-point value, agreeing to the reasoning while another 37.5% (3 responses) state that part-time attendance did not support their PD studies.

Further investigation into the reasoning for attendance of the program (variable q1_3) reveals that two respondents (25%) assess freedom of time management as positive, while one respondent (12.5%) states main agreement to this factor. 57

Three responses (37.5%) state that they were hardly satisfied by the freedom of time management, while another 25% (two responses) chose dissatisfaction concerning this feature of the program. Main distribution towards the negative anchor with 62.5% of the responses being next to the "not at all" anchor describes dissatisfaction of time management freedom offered by the DLM.

Finally, an equal distribution of assessment aspects is given for the relief of time pressure (variable q1_4), since two respondents for each value state their agreement. In detail, there are two respondents each for value "very good", "good", "almost good" and "dissatisfied". Interestingly, there is no response to the absolute satisfaction, thus forming a main distribution of 50% towards the negative anchor, while only 25% stand towards the positive anchor, without though offering total satisfaction. Two of the responses (25%) are positioned on the mid-point, stating relative neutrality.

Assessment concerning the need to commute to the University or student-meeting sites (variable q1_5) reveals a mixed status for the sample population. In detail, two respondents (25%) disclose total satisfaction on the fact that DLM allowed them to minimize their commuting, while three (37%) mention being very satisfied. One respondent (12.5%) places herself on the mid-point, stating average satisfaction while there is one (12.5%) response that satisfaction was not generally reached. Finally, one respondent (12.5%) states her dissatisfaction to the reasoning. Main distribution reveals a tendency toward positive appraisal (62.5%).

In more detail the time factor in conjunction with ICT features offered by the PD program (variable q1_6) does not seem to have general approval, as stated by the responses. In detail, only one response (12.5%) states total satisfaction of the supplementary ICT knowledge for obtaining further studying techniques, while two respondents (25%) list overall satisfaction. The majority of responses ranges on the negative half of the scale, since a total of 62.5% (five responses) either assess with "almost no satisfaction (25%, two responses) or no satisfaction at all (three responses, 37.5%). Main distribution clearly depicts a tendency towards the negative anchor.

A differentiation of tendency can be seen on the satisfaction towards the possibility to use distantly located libraries through the DLM for research (variable q1_7). One response (12.5%) states total satisfaction, while two respondents (25%) express their general positive appreciation.

One response (12.5%) is positioned on the mid-point, while two responses (25%) tend to see little satisfaction in this feature of the DLM. One respondent (12.5%), finally, declares no satisfaction for this DLM offer. Main distribution shows a slight tendency towards the positive anchor, since 50% (four respondents) place themselves on the positive wing, while three respondents (37.5%) gather towards the negative anchor.

Very little satisfaction is described around the question, whether the blended DLM of the PD program offered further ICT usage acquaintance.

So, only one respondent (12.5%) states full satisfaction for this feature, while another one respondent (12.5%) is mostly satisfied. On the other hand, two responses (25%) state almost no satisfaction, while the remaining 25% (two responses) declare dissatisfaction. Main distribution clearly depicts a negative tendency, since 7% of the responses range on the negative wing, while there is no mid-point value and the remaining 25% are distributed between total and significant satisfaction.

Tendency towards the negative anchor is also seen in variable q1_9, inquiring advance of ICT software knowledge for use in the classroom. In detail two responses (25%) state good satisfaction while one respondent (12.5%) positions herself on the mid-point. One response mentions almost no satisfaction regarding this feature of the DLM, while 50% (four responses) state dissatisfaction. Main distribution of 62.5% towards the negative anchor clearly depicts very low satisfaction for this DLM aspect.The last recurring item, referring to the benefit of ICT knowledge in order to acquire further theoretical knowledge (variable q1_10) clearly indentifies dissatisfaction on behalf of the PD graduates. In detail, only 25% - equally distributed between total and good satisfaction - and one response on the mid-point state the positive attitude of the graduates. The remaining five responses (62.5%) depict a tendency towards the negative anchor, since two respondents (25%) state almost no satisfaction and three responses (37.5%) show dissatisfaction on this feature of the DLM program.

DISCUSSION AND COMPARISONS

In order to discuss the attitude of graduates of the German Language PD program of the HOU, a cross tabulation of the rendered Likert-items described above was carried out. A graphical depiction of this cross tabulation can be seen in
Figure: *3*, while numerical outlines are shown in
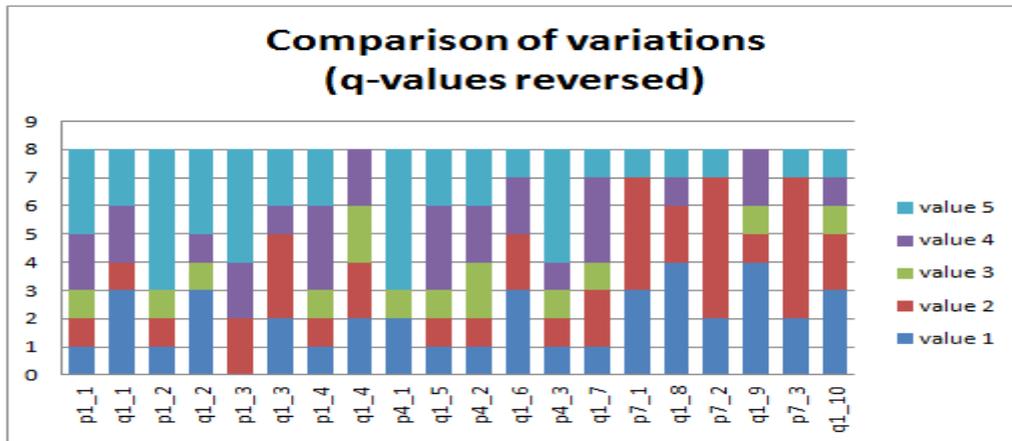Table: *1*, Table: 2 and

Table: 3.

Figure: 3
Cross-references of variables p1_1 through q1_10

As set out previously, the first section of the questionnaire (variables p1_1 through p7_3) used Likert-scale items valuing from "1" through "5", value "1" being the outmost negative and value "5" the outmost positive anchor. The second part (variables q1_1 through q1_10) reversed these values, so that the frequencies, value "1" being the former outmost positive and value "5" the former outmost negative anchor for the second recursive set, would now depict assessment in the same order of rank as initially set in the first set of the questions.

In the following, this cross tabulation will be described in brief, allowing for the deduction of conclusions regarding the attitude formed towards the blended DLM offered by the HOU for German as a Foreign Language. As shown in
Table: *1*, tendency variations occurred in almost all submitted values for the first set of variables concerning issues of time and distance learning organization regarding the PD studies at the HOU.

In detail, the relatively positive expectation expressed in variable p1_1 (62.5%) slightly shifted towards the negative anchor, since one respondent (12.5%) from the absolute positive anchor (value 5) and the one mid-point response (12.5%) finally assessed their experience negatively, rendering a total of 50% towards the negative anchor with no mid-point. Similar modifications can be monitored for variable p1_2, where the rather positive expectation of part-time attendance shifted towards the negative anchor, since two more responses (37.5% in total) assessed this feature as a negative experience, while one response (12.5%) drifted from "almost agree" to "almost disagree". Likewise, the expectation of variable p1_3 regarding time organization according to[60] personal needs was not met, since two (25%,) of the respondents changed their final assessment to absolute disagreement and one (12.5%, total 25%) respondent moved from "mostly agree" to "mostly disagree".

Table: 1
Cross tabulation of variable p1_1 through p1_4 to q1_1 through q1_4

	p1_1 to q1_1		p1_2 to q1_2		p1_3 to q1_3		p1_4 to q1_4	
	p1_1	q1_1	p1_2	q1_2	p1_3	q1_3	p1_4	q1_4
value 1	1	3	1	3	0	2	1	2
value 2	1	1	1	0	2	3	1	2
value 3	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	2
value 4	2	2	0	1	2	1	3	2
value 5	3	2	5	3	4	2	2	0

Finally, relief of time pressure, as expected by the respondents to be one of the main positive features of their blended learning experience, received a rather negative assessment, since no respondent claimed to be satisfied with this feature, while there was an increase of dissatisfied evaluation by one for each negative value except the mid-point, which proposed an increase of 12.5% for each value.

The overall assessment seems to be that the graduates of the blended DLM program evaluated their distance learning experience negatively, modifying their initial expectations towards the negative anchor, regarding time and organization issues as a feature of distance learning ease of use of the program.

As the fluctuation of responses show in Table: *2* shows, the aspired benefits in terms of need of commuting due to the DLM offered seem not to have been met, since the former 62.5% of positive expectations were distributed rather unevenly to the remaining assessment values.

In detail, three responses (37.5%) altered their positive expectation towards the more negative, increasing the initial zero answers to three (37.5%). Another interesting change can be monitored between the absolute negative anchor and the relative negative anchor, since one response (12.5%) moved towards the positive, leaving one response at the original assessment.

The second item investigated, which concerned the benefit of ICT knowledge and whether it would offer further studying techniques in conjunction with DLM showed an interesting tendency towards the negative, since the initial one negative answer (12.5%) turns out to have increased to three answers (37.5%) after completion of the studies, showing a distinct disappointment of this expectation. This tendency is even more strengthened by the fact that the former mid-point value of 2 responses (25%) moved towards the negative outmost anchor, also strengthened by one more of the 61 former positive responses. A total of five responses (62.5%) now ranged towards the negative anchor, while merely three responses (37.5%) remained on the positive axis. The mid-point was totally eliminated. The same happened to the expectations regarding distance researching and the use of open libraries through the DLM. Here, the positive anchor weakened, since three (37.5%, $n_R=8$) out of four former positive answers

migrated towards more neutral or negative assessment, strengthening the tendency towards the mid-point on the positive side, while another one response (12.5%) moved from the outmost negative anchor towards the mid-point by one.

Table: 2
Cross tablation of variable p4_1through p4_3 to q1_5 through q1_7

	p4_1 to q1_5		p4_2 to q1_6		p4_3 to q1_7	
	p4_1	q1_5	p4_2	q1_6	p4_3	q1_7
value 1	2	1	1	3	1	1
value 2	0	1	1	2	1	2
value 3	1	1	2	0	1	1
value 4	0	3	2	2	1	3
value 5	5	2	2	1	4	1

The overall tendency of the shift in this set of questions seems to be towards the negative anchor, depicting a slight disapproval of the ostensible benefits concerning accommodation of localization offered by the DLM, where the mid-point factor seems to be rather stable.

This indicates a general attitude ranging from indifferent toward negative, which obviously disapproves the actual results of the feature offered by the DLM.

Finally, the overall negative expectations of the respondents concerning further ICT knowledge obtained through the blended DLM seems to have had a slight decline after conclusion of the blended studies, as can be seen in

Table: 3.

In detail, although there is no change in frequency of the absolute positive attitude, where the response remains at 12.5%.

A slight change of 12.5% can be monitored in the second negative value, which[62] obviously has moved from the second positive value "mostly agree".

Another 12.5% (one response) moved to the outmost negative value, thus aggregating six responses (62.5%) towards the negative anchor, improving the initial negative

expectation value by one (12.5%), while the overall positive expectation rate of 12.5% next to the mid-point shows an increase by 12.5% towards the mid-point, totaling to 25%.

The same fluctuation can be seen as far as the widening of knowledge for the use of ICT software in the classroom is concerned.

Here, the initial 7 responses (87.5%) of the general negative position have been reduced to five responses, while there seems to be a shift towards the mid-point and the further positive anchor, although no absolute positive response can be marked.

On the contrary, a change between the two negative values is very obvious for the use of ICT knowledge for further theoretical use, even though the overall percentage of 37.5% remained for the negative side of the Likert-type-scale.

In detail, the initial absolute negative anchor increased by one response, while two moved from the second negative value, distributed evenly between the mid-point and the second positive value "mostly agree".

The outmost positive response remained unchanged. The overall impression is that the expectation of the distance students as regards the ICT knowledge for further studies had a slight improvement, although the overall impression remained rather negative.

Table: 3
Cross tabulation of variable p7_1 through p7_3 to q1_8 through q1_10

	p7_1 to q1_8		p7_2 to q1_9		p7_3 to q1_10	
	p7_1	q1_8	p7_2	q1_9	p7_3	q1_10
value 1	3	4	2	4	2	3
value 2	4	2	5	1	5	2
value 3	0	0	0	1	0	1
value 4	0	1	0	2	0	1
value 5	1	1	1	0	1	1

Verbal Descriptors Validating Similar Studies

The survey contained a section of verbal assessment (questions q4_1 through q4_4) supplementing the Likert and Likert-type data gathered as described above. These questions were added to investigate similar research work done in previous studies, which focused on the DLM programs offered by the HOU for English and French language teachers[xv]. The verbal assessments produced a variety of estimations regarding the

overall results of the DLM for German language teachers. Of the eight respondents fulfilling the initial prerequisites as described above, four (50%, n_R=8) rendered answers to the aforementioned items.

From these answers, the general experience in cooperation with the HOU staff, tutors and material seems to generally be valued as "mostly satisfying" since three out of four answers state a mostly satisfied cooperation, while only one respondent stated dissatisfied with cooperation issues. These finding confirm respective findings in a study by Shen (2009) referring to student-staff and student-material relations.

One mention concerning the teaching material was denoted, which describes the material as overcome and in need of revision, as has also been remarked in studies of the HOU PD programs for both German (Βηδενμάιερ, Τσόκογλου, & Χρύσου, 2011) and French language teachers (Χρυσανθοπούλου, 2011).

As regards the further use and knowledge of ICT offered by the blended DLM, one out of four responses is absolutely rejecting, mentioning that she had gained no benefit in this matter, while one respondent proposes a dedicated learning unit for ICT issues, supporting similar proposals offered by Βηδενμάιερ et al. (2011, p. 51) and Παπαευθυμίου-Λύτρα & Σηφάκις (2011, p. 24), while similar tendencies of restricted use and advancement of ICT knowledge offered were also described in Αναστασιάδη et al. (2011, p. 35). Two respondents state as not satisfied with the assistance offered to acquire ICT skills through the DLM, while only one respondent declares fully satisfied in this matter.

The third open-ended question collected aspects of further knowledge in the field of expertise offered by the DLM of the program.

Here one respondent out of four states dissatisfied, without giving further details, while the remaining three state mostly satisfied, again without going into further detail, contradicting respective findings in the study for English and French language teachers (Αναστασιάδη et al., 2011, p. 41; Παπαευθυμίου-Λύτρα & Σηφάκις, 2011, p. 23).

Finally, professional benefits deriving from the holding of the PD Degree are described either as "dubious" in one case out of four, or "none" in another, while the two remaining respondents state that they either are still "awaiting" results or that the reason for pursuing the MA Degree was for private advancement.

This finding contradicts to respective analysis conducted in other surveys carried out for the PD program for HOU English (Παπαευθυμίου-Λύτρα & Σηφάκις, 2011, pp. 20–21) and French (Αναστασιάδη et al., 2011, pp. 38–39) language teachers.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Examining the empirical findings of this case study, a series of serious assessment indicators emerged which could be used for further inquiry of the research problem of

this paper. They furthermore enforce findings stated by Valentine (2002) and Shen (2009) about the contradictions of students' expectations and levels of satisfaction after completing their blended DLM studies.

In this study it has been established that the PD program for Teachers of German as a Foreign Language offered by the HOU is generally accepted quite positively, since the overall assessment of the program, its staff and tutors, use of ICT and study techniques seems to be positive.

As the results have shown regarding the overall time and organizational assessment of the blended DLM program, a general negative estimate emerges. Further studies in this direction, as proposed by Tselios et al. (2011, p. 232) could provide more detailed insight into this matter and should therefore be carried out for the German language program of the HOU as well. Even though only a few studies have been carried out to:

> "[...] *identify and analyze the perceptions of postgraduate students of the Hellenic Open University* [...]" (Valkanos et al., 2009, p. 24) or estimate and indentify reasons for dropout rates in conjunction with tutor-students relationships, since "[...] *tutors should provide support and encouragement to all students irrespective of the course they teach, but sensitivity to a particular vulnerable student or student group should also be a priority for tutors* [...]" (Pierrakeas et al., 2004, p. 13),

actual studies on the acceptance of such blended learning techniques for students of the German Language Program of the HOU do not seem to have been carried out until today.

Therefore, the findings of this paper that estimation towards "*tutors [...] seems to generally be valued as 'mostly satisfying'* [...]", which has also been claimed by Valkanos et al (2009, pp. 25–27) for other blended DLM courses, need a more detailed study. Could it not be that differentiated aspects and estimates of the graduates could be revealed, since the small number of survey subjects, which cannot be considered to be representative for the overall PD graduates' population, show discrete negative tendencies in the overall assessment of the program's features, thus allowing for reservation towards the picture being implied in this sample?

As stated by some of the participating subjects, the actual Master's Degree is being used both for further educational needs and monetary benefit. The MA Degree seems to represent some meta-value of post-degree education offering a wide range of supplementary specialized knowledge in the field of pedagogy and didactics of German as a foreign language, leading to some practical implementation of ICT-knowledge in the classroom or to further specialization and academic progress. A positive[65] assessment can also be seen as regards the use and deepening of ICT knowledge correlating with further studies as well as in-the-field-use, since responses on this issue seem to have a positive tendency. A better implication, though, and use of ICT seems to be the missing point which would need further research, taking under consideration that:

"HOU policy demands that teachers must use ICT." (Koustourakis, Panagiotakopoulos, & Vergidis, 2008, p. 7), since, as mentioned in Sinclair's note *"student satisfaction with online learning is linked to interaction and communication, course design, the learning environment, and individual student factors of computer self-efficacy and the ability to control individual learning pace"*. (n.d., p. 7)

On the other hand, another negative issue is connected with the use and ease of library services through the DLM, as also stated by Valasidou et al. (2006, p. 9):

"[...] that the library and internet services need to be adequate in order to help them with their studies ...".

This obviously sets another benchmark for improvement for the PD program under investigation, which in turn should require a more intense effort to amplify usage of distance libraries and guidance to do so, influencing graduate satisfaction. Even though there are severe numeric limitations to this survey, as described above, the outcome of the study suggests that a full-scale (online) survey addressing all graduates of the German Language PD program of the HOU might produce a number of interesting responses, specifying the extent of acceptance and satisfaction for the blended learning courses offered. This could in turn serve as an evaluation benchmark for further development and updating of the content of the DLM program.

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List of input variables

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA		
variable number	wording	variable type
s1	gender	single choice standard
s2	date of birth	single choice standard
s3	Have you completed your studies at the HOU[xvi]?	YES/NO
s4	Year of completion	single choice standard
s5	Year of Degree award	single choice standard

CATEGORY: TIME					
variable number	wording			variable type	
p1_1	The fact that the HOU offered distance learning education for my PD studies caught my interest.			Likert-five-point-scale	
p1_2	DLM[xvii] would accommodate me because I could not attend a full-time presence course.			Likert-five-point-scale	
p1_3	DLM would accommodate me because I would be able to manage my study time according to my personal needs.			Likert-five-point-scale	
p1_4	DLM would give me the opportunity to embrace each learning module without time pressure.			Likert-five-point-scale	
anchor rating	1=totally disagre	2=agree very lit	3=agree	4=agree a	5=totally agree

CATEGORY: LOCALIZATION		
variable number	wording	variable type
p4_1	DLM would accommodate me locally because I would not often need to commute to the University or Meeting Sites.	Likert-five-point-scale
p4_2	DLM would offer me the chance to obtain supplemen knowledge of writing scientific texts using tools and practices rendered by DL	Likert-five-point-scale
p4_3	DLM would assist me in scientifically working and researching literature and supplementary material without my often physical presence in libraries locat far away.	Likert-five-point-scale

anchor rating	1=totally disagre	2=agree very lit	3=agree	4=agree a	5=totally agree

CATEGORY: ICT KNOWLEDGE		
variable number	wording	variable type

p7_1	DLM of the HOU would allow me to get acquainted with the use of ICT[xviii].	Likert-five-point-scale
p7_2	DLM would offer me extra experience in ICT and specialized knowledge for my field of expertise.	Likert-five-point-scale

p7_3	DLM would open new horizons as far as the use of educational and ICT software is concerned, in conjunction with deeper theoretical knowledge of my field of expertise.				Likert-five-point-scale
anchor rating	1=totally disag	2=agree very li	3=agree	4=agree a	5=totally agree

CATEGORY: SATISFACTION MEASUREMENT					
variable number	wording			variable type	
q1_1	variable p1_1 as attitude statement of accomplishme			Likert-five-point-scale	
q1_2	variable p1_2 as attitude statement of accomplishme			Likert-five-point-scale	
q1_3	variable p1_3 as attitude statement of accomplishme			Likert-five-point-scale	
q1_4	variable p1_4 as attitude statement of accomplishme			Likert-five-point-scale	
q1_5	variable p4_1 as attitude statement of accomplishme			Likert-five-point-scale	
q1_6	variable p4_2 as attitude statement of accomplishme			Likert-five-point-scale	
q1_7	variable p4_3 as attitude statement of accomplishme			Likert-five-point-scale	
q1_8	variable p7_1 as attitude statement of accomplishme			Likert-five-point-scale	
q1_9	variable p7_2 as attitude statement of accomplishme			Likert-five-point-scale	
q1_10	variable p7_3 as attitude statement of accomplishme			Likert-five-point-scale	
anchor rating	1=absolutely satisfied	2=very satisfi	3=satisfie	4=not th satisfie	5=dissatisfied

OPEN ENDED QUESTIONS	
variable number	Wording
p3	Shortly detail your personal reasons, referring to time issues, which urged you to tak part in distance learning courses of the HOU.
p6	Shortly detail your personal reasons, referring to localization issues, which urged you take part in distance learning courses of the HOU.
p9	Shortly detail your personal reasons, referring to ICT knowledge issues, which urged to take part in distance learning courses of the HOU.
q3	In short supplement your personal attitude referring to your satisfaction of your expectations towards the distance learning courses of the HOU.

OPEN ENDED QUESTIONS ON PERSONAL ASSESSMENT ON …	
variable number	Wording
q4_1	the overall cooperation experience with HOU staff, tutors and learning material.
q4_2	the supplementary knowledge of ICT techniques attained for use in your educational environment.
q4_3	the opportunity the course gave you to deepen your knowledge in your field of exper
q4_4	the benefits you have gained professionally due to the MA Degree awarded.

OPEN ENDED QUESTIONS SUPPLEMENTARY REMARKS AND SUGGESTIONS	
variable number	Wording
f2	Submit remarks on the survey, the research tool or the scope of the study.

[1] Given the fact that students' satisfaction in a blended learning environment is a matter under consideration for many scholars, the definition of student satisfaction, as given by Wu et al. (2010), as being "the sum of a student's behavioral beliefs and attitudes that result from aggregating all the benefits that a student receives from using the blended system" (p. 157) reflects the overall assumption of the definition of the term in this paper.

[1] Distance learning methodology, henceforth to be mentioned as DLM

[1] Hellenic Open University, henceforth to be mentioned as HOU (http://www.eap.gr/index_en.php)

[1] Visit the program's site at http://www.eap.gr/ger_en.php (last update December 2013).

[1] http://www.eap.gr/view_en.php?artid=1814 (last update December 2013)

[1] http://class.eap.gr/gerde (last update January 2014)

[1] www.deutsch.gr

[1] henceforth to be mentioned as PD

[1] www.sch.gr

[1] Comparable outcomes can also be seen in similar studies for graduates of the French Language Teachers' PD program offered by HOU (Αναστασιάδη et al., 2011; Καλούρη & Αντωνόπουλος, 2011; Χρυσανθοπούλου, 2011), which stresses the need to develop and maintain a culture of post-study quality assessment approaches in Greek Open University students, as practiced by the Distance Learning Program of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (http://elearn.elke.uoa.gr/elearn/ - last update January 2014 – At the time of update the site did not offer an English interface yet).

[1] For a list of these variables see Appendix 1.

[1] Such surveys include, amongst others, the work of Adas & Shmais (2011), Giannoussi, Vernadakis, Derri, Michalopoulos & Kioumourtzoglou (2009), Naaj, Nachouki & Ankit (2012) and Wu and Liu (2013). All of these studies address the student satisfaction for distance learning experiences in a variety of aspects and points of interest.

[1] Carey, James W.; Wenzel, Patrick H.; Gelaude, Deborah; Sheridan, John; Reilly, Cindy; & Burns, David (2008). CDC EZ-Text: Software for Collection, Management and Analysis of Semi-structured Qualitative Databases (Version 4.04). Atlanta: Developed by Manila Consulting Group, Inc. for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (http://www.cdc-eztext.com/ last update December 2013)

[1] http://www.limesurvey.org/

[1] These studies are included in the description of the findings of this article, using the original Greek names of their respective authors. At this point it has to be stressed once more that the sample of the study cannot claim representation of the total population of HOU MA Degree holders for German as a Foreign Language, but merely as an indication of possible attitudes existing in this population. Further detailed investigation of these findings is esteemed to be necessary for applicable results to be gathered.

[1] HOU =Hellenic Open University

[1] DLM =Distance Learning Methodology

[1] ICT =Information and Communication Technologies