IDEAL

Impact of Distance Education on Adult Learning

Distance education in European higher education
-THE STUDENTS-

Distance education in European higher education – the students

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. It 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.

UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning

The UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) is 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 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.

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StudyPortals has the mission to empower the world to choose (for) education. We want to increase accessibility and stimulate people to develop and pursue an education (choose for education). Furthermore, we want to inform and help them to choose the institute, programme and environment that fit them best (choose education). Our ultimate ambition is to make study choice transparent, globally. We do this through operating student-focused online study choice platforms. We focus on quality from both a student and a university perspective. Since 2007 have we informed and stimulated students to choose the best (international) university course, and have helped universities to reach out to the right students, worldwide.

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Introduction

The present report is the second in a series of three published by the IDEAL project[1]. IDEAL, which stands for 'Impact of Distance Education on Adult Learning', is a joint project of the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE), the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), and StudyPortals (SP). It runs from October 2013 to September 2015 with financial support from the EU Lifelong Learning Programme (sub-programme Erasmus Multilateral Projects: Project number: 539668-LLP-1-2013-1-NO-ERASMUS-ESIN).

Purpose of the project and research questions

The aim of the IDEAL project is to gain a better understanding of the distance education offered by higher education institutions and to examine how higher education institutions can contribute to adult learning by means of distance education.

The project aims to:

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

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

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[1] See: www.idealproject.eu

In order to address this central question, a number of sub-questions have been formulated:

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

Policy background

Distance education may not have replaced on-campus education, but its flexibility makes it an attractive alternative for learners who are not able or do not want to participate in on-campus education. Distance learning is therefore an important element of lifelong learning, which has been emphasized as a policy objective at European Union level (in, for example, the Europe 2020 Strategy[2], the European Union's Strategy for growth, and the Bologna Process, starting with the Prague Communiqué of 2001 and re-affirmed in the 2012 Bucharest Communiqué[3]). 'Ensuring equitable and inclusive quality education and lifelong learning for all by 2030' is the overarching goal of UNESCO's post-2015 education agenda (see the Muscat Agreement of the Global Education for All (EFA) Meeting, 2014[4]). The UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, a partner of the IDEAL project, promotes adult learning and education. The International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE), which is also a partner in the IDEAL project, works together with UNESCO to support global policy development concerning distance education and to increase the openness of education systems. The continuing emphasis on lifelong learning as a policy objective sets the background to the present research. The IDEAL project aims

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[2] European Union, Europe 2020: http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/index_en.htm
[3] Bologna Process, Ministerial Conferences (documents): http://www.ehea.info/article-details.aspx?ArticleId=43
[4] UNESCO, Muscat Agreement: http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002281/228122e.pdf

to examine the potential of distance education as an alternative means of education delivery for adult learners *returning* to higher education.

The present report in its context

The present report is the second of three independent yet complementary research components of the IDEAL project. **Study 1** examines the distance education currently on offer in European higher education institutions: what is offered and for whom is it designed? For this study, the programmes and course units listed on www.DistanceLearningPortal.com were analysed and a survey of distance education providers was carried out.[5] **Study 2** consists of a survey of adult learners enrolled in distance education which analyses their social profile, their motivations, the barriers they encounter, etc. *Study 2 constitutes the present report.* **Study 3** focuses on prospective distance education students: who are they? What do they look for? What barriers do they encounter? For this study, the browsing and search behaviour on the DistanceLearningPortal was analysed and five experts were asked to conduct a meta-analysis of existing research for five country cases.[6] The central research question of the IDEAL project uses the term 'better' ('*How can the distance education offered by European higher education institutions be **better** matched to the needs of adult learners?*') in order to indicate that the project concerns *both* the demand and the supply side of distance education. The three studies, which are published as single online reports, are brought together in a final publication (to be made available in early 2015).

Outline of the present report

The aim of Study 2, i.e. the present report, is to examine the social profile and experiences of students in European distance education (higher education). The report is divided into five chapters.

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[5] The IDEAL Report 1 is available here:
https://idealprojectblog.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/ideal_report_final.pdf
[6] Study 3 will also be made available on the IDEAL website once ready.

Following the present introductory chapter, Chapter 2 outlines the research methodology and data set used. Chapter 3 discusses the data set in the context of existing knowledge about distance education students. In Chapter 4, the data itself is presented. Chapter 5 provides a summary of the findings and general conclusions. A glossary of key terms used is included at the end of the report.

Research methodology and data set

The overarching research question of the IDEAL project is: How can the distance education offered by European higher education be better matched to adult learners' needs? The present report looks at *students in distance education* in Europe and sets out to answer the following sub-questions:

1. What is the current student body in distance education? (Social profile of distance education students, e.g. employment situation, age, gender, previous and current education)

2. What are the motivations of students to consider distance education? (Why do they take up education? Why distance education in particular? How satisfied are they?)

3. What are the main barriers to access? (e.g. lack of time; lack of funding)

4. What kind of support do adult learners (expect to) get during their studies? (What do they consider relevant support and how important is it to them? What is their overall assessment of the support on offer?)

Student survey

In order to answer these sub-questions, an online survey of students enrolled in European distance higher education was carried out between 5 June and 25 July 2014. The data collected in this survey is presented in Chapter 4. The questionnaire, which was developed using the ZEF Evaluation Engine[7], contained standardized questions on the above topics, including a limited number of open comments options. The project team would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the kind support of the ZEF team.

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[7] The benefit of the ZEF tool is its high user-friendliness, leading to high completion rates. See: http://www.zef.fi/en/home

Target group

The survey addressed students enrolled in European higher education programmes/courses delivered either in blended form or fully at a distance (see glossary). The students were contacted indirectly, i.e. via their institutions. The latter were asked to forward the link to the survey to students enrolled in their distance education programmes. The institutions usually forwarded the survey invitation by e-mail, but also by banners on their website, announcements on online student forums, etc. As an incentive for students to participate in the survey, the project offered a prize draw (ten Amazon vouchers of €50).[8]

The following three types of institutional contacts were used:

1) The programme coordinators for each of the ca. 3,000 programmes/courses listed on www.DistanceLearningPortal.com (hereinafter referred to as DistanceLearningPortal or DLP)[9]. They were asked to forward the survey invitation to the enrolled students.

2) The respondents to the IDEAL institutional survey (see IDEAL Report 1[10]). 134 HEIs had reported to deliver some distance education. These institutions were asked to forward the survey invitation to their distance education students.

3) The ICDE list of distance teaching HEIs in Europe. These institutions were also invited to forward the survey invitation to their distance education students.

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[8] The winners were announced on the IDEAL project website in August 2014: www.idealproject.eu.
[9] About DistanceLearningPortal (DLP): launched in 2012, DistanceLearningPortal.com is the single largest database on distance and blended education in Europe. DLP is managed by the Dutch organization StudyPortals, one of the consortium members of this project. Higher education institutions themselves, e.g. the programme coordinators, enter the data in DLP via a standardized questionnaire. They can also request StudyPortals to insert their information against cost price on their behalf, in which case they need to identify the source of the information (typically their website or brochure). The IDEAL report 1 contains a detailed analysis of the programmes/courses listed on DLP. In June 2014, DLP contained information on almost 3,000 programmes and courses delivered at a distance in European higher education. This constitutes the set of contact persons that were asked to forward the student survey.
[10] The IDEAL Report 1 looks at the offer of distance education: it included a survey of higher education institutions in Europe.

Countries covered

The present study, the IDEAL Report 2, covers the countries of the European Higher Education Area[11] (EHEA). Even though this was stated in the invitation to the survey, a limited number of respondents indicated that they were studying with a provider outside the EHEA ('other' countries). They were excluded from the analysis. However, students based outside Europe were not excluded if they were enrolled in a European institution.

Response rate

The envisaged number of respondents had been set at 1,500. The total number of respondents was 1,809. Of these, 36 invalid sets had to be excluded (either because they were incomplete, or because the provider was in a country outside the EHEA). This left 1,773 valid responses for analysis. The number of respondents for each question is indicated in Chapter 4.

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[11] EHEA countries: http://www.ehea.info/members.aspx

Reflections on literature and data set

Before presenting the data collected, this chapter addresses two intermediary questions:

1) What is already known about the students in distance education?
2) How should the data presented in this report be read?

The number of students in European distance higher education is estimated at ca. 3 million (see IDEAL Report 1[12]). Of these, around two thirds are enrolled in single-mode distance teaching universities, e.g. the Open Universities. The others are studying with virtual universities or dual-mode institutions, ranging from higher education institutions with a very low focus on distance education (mainly delivering on-campus education) to providers that offer considerable distance education alongside their on-campus education.

Not surprisingly, a lot of the available literature on distance education students is provided by the Open Universities, e.g. the Open University UK[13], the German Fernuniversität Hagen[14], the Open University of Catalonia in Spain[15], etc. In countries that have not opted for the Open University model, where dual-mode universities represent the dominant model, information on distance education students can often be obtained at national level, for example by the Fédération Interuniversitaire de l'Enseignement à Distance (FIED) in France [16], the Swedish Higher Education Authority[17], etc. These organizations and other research bodies have mapped many of the facets of distance education, among them (of course) the students and their study situation. This report is not the right forum to describe and analyse that research. Instead, a very brief summary of some relevant aspects of the existing research is given here. This summary should assist the reader in contextualizing the data presented.

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[12] See: https://idealprojectblog.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/ideal_report_final.pdf
[13] OUUK, see http://www.open.ac.uk/about/main/strategy/facts-and-figures
[14] Fernuniversität Hagen, see http://www.fernuni-hagen.de/arbeiten/statistik/daten/index.shtml
[15] UOC, see http://www.uoc.edu/portal/en/universitat/coneix/fets-xifres/index.html
[16] FIED, see http://www.fied.fr/fr/a-propos-de-nous/les-realisations.html
[17] UKÄ, see http://english.uka.se/download/18.1c251de913ecebc40e780003403/1403093616295/annual-report-2013-ny.pdf

What is already known about the students in distance education?

Social profile: A majority of distance education students are women. Students of all ages study in distance education, but unlike in on-campus education, very young students are in the minority. The majority of distance education students are returning to or entering higher education after a period of work or leave. Very often this includes duties related to family life such as parental leave. A typical distance education student is a person in the midst of life, with family, children and/or work responsibilities. A large majority of distance education students work alongside their studies. Distance education is sometimes the only possibility for such people 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. For some students, distance education means a second chance after missing the opportunity to enter higher education earlier in life. Distance education also offers educational opportunities for disabled students or students with other health issues (for example, the Open University UK is the largest provider of higher education for people with disabilities in the UK). Finally, as the term *distance* education implies, people living in remote areas far away from higher education institutions also constitute an important group of students.

Barriers: The most common barriers for distance education students are time constraints resulting from work and family responsibilities. As with on-campus education, funding is an important issue for the majority of students. The use of technology can also constitute a barrier.

Motivations: 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.

Student satisfaction: Many distance education students report positively on their experience (for example, the Open University is ranked among the top universities in the UK for student satisfaction).[18]

Support structures: The personal background and life situation of distance education students are often considerably more complex than those of students in on-campus education, who are generally younger, fully committed to their studies and less tied up with other duties. Therefore, providers offer (and users expect) solutions for a greater variety of students, which requires backing up by various forms of support. Successful distance education providers apply research findings and experiences gathered during decades of practice within the field. Figure 1[19] describes three categories of support. The category which receives the greatest attention in the literature is *academic support*, i.e. the cognitive-oriented support that students get from teachers, tutors and sometimes study mates. Various factors related to the *organization* of their studies are also crucial to distance education students: e.g. how the provider structures the work via study guides and how it facilitates the formation of study groups. Less often discussed but equally important, especially for learners with less experience of higher education, are the social, psychological and/or emotional aspects of studying. This category includes ways of bringing positively powered dialogue into distance education, e.g. by patting someone on the back and providing positive feedback. Figure 1 summarises how different kinds of support can assist and enrich studies.

[18] OUUK: http://www.open.ac.uk/about/main/strategy/facts-and-figures
[19] The figure is adapted after Holmberg, C. (2012): Graph presented at the 4th Grundtvig European Conference on Professional Development and Mobility of Adult Education Staff, Florence, 6-8 June 2012.

Figure 1. Types of Support in Distance Learning
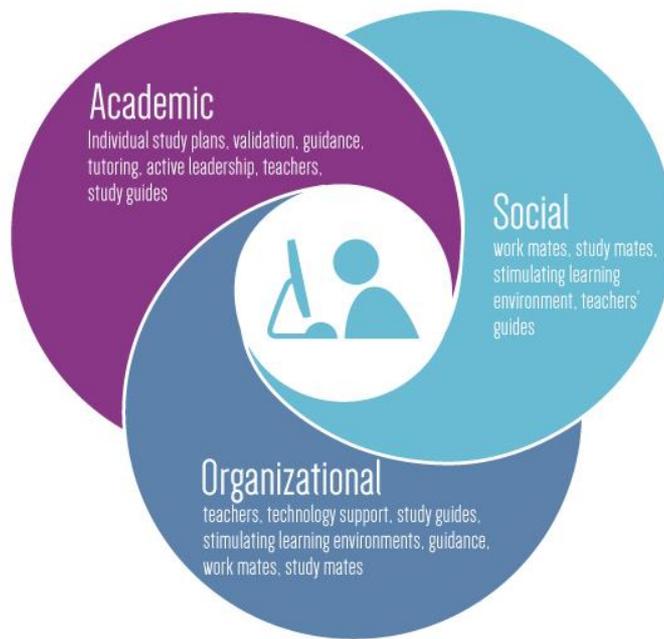
The information presented in this brief summary, in particular concerning the social profile of students in distance education, varies a lot across Europe depending on the policy framework and educational system in each country. Factors that vary from country to country include the age and share of tertiary education students and the system for financing higher education. The picture as regards barriers and motivation is also different in different countries, particularly between countries with a focus on single-mode distance teaching universities and those where dual-mode institutions are the norm. It should also be noted that the social background and motivation of students following single courses tends to differ from those on full degree programmes. The data presented in this report takes this into consideration. The situation in individual countries will not be discussed here. This information can be found in the country case studies that will be part of IDEAL Report 3.

How to read the data presented in this report

The main data source for this project is the DistanceLearningPortal (DLP). When reading the data, readers should be aware of the biases that this approach contains and how the report deals with them.

Degree programmes: The data listed in the DLP database mainly concerns full degree programmes (as opposed to single courses). The analysis in the IDEAL Report 1 showed that 74% of the DLP courses on offer are full degree programmes. The data is therefore expected to be biased towards students enrolled in such programmes. Moreover, the actual number of students taking single courses will be higher than our data indicates. This limitation can, however, also be seen as an opportunity. As the IDEAL project examines the potential of distance education for adult learning, the focus on degree programmes allows us to examine the potential for students to gain higher degrees.

Geographic spread: Report 1 shows that there is a strong UK bias in the DLP data. More than half of the 3,006 programmes/courses examined were based in the UK. How did we deal with this limitation? First of all, it is important to know that the Open University UK (OUUK) delivers a considerable share of the distance learning programmes available in the UK. We therefore began by assessing whether the data for the OUUK could be taken as indicative for other Open Universities in Europe. Comparing the research done by several other Open Universities on the profile of their students, we came to a positive conclusion. As mentioned previously, approximately two thirds of all distance education students are studying in Open Universities. The data for the OUUK, the first university of its kind in Europe and surely one of the most experienced, can therefore yield interesting insights for all Open Universities. Moreover, when we double-checked the data against the total data set for all questions, excluding the UK (i.e. the OU and other UK institutions), there were no significant deviations. Our data can therefore be read as indicative for all countries surveyed. The statistics for the UK will not be presented separately.

Non-respondents: It should be noted that there may be a non-response bias. In other words, the answers of those who did respond to the survey may differ from the potential answers of those who did not. Survey respondents tend to be students who are satisfied with their experience, or who hope that their feedback will have an impact. We therefore need to consider that there could be a number of students who did not respond to the survey because they are unsatisfied, are considering dropping out or have already done so, or do not see the point in providing feedback.

With the general knowledge about students in distance education and the biases discussed above in mind, the data presented in the next chapter should be read as a tool to help universities and policy makers interested in distance education to get to know their target groups' personal situations, motivations and challenges better, and thus to achieve more effective 'demand orientation'.

Empirical results

This chapter presents the data collected via the student survey. A summary and conclusions with regard to the potential of distance education for adult learners follow in the next chapter.

The data gives insight into the following topics:

1) Social profile of distance education students: age, gender, household situation, employment situation, work experience, country of residence

2) Previous and current education of distance education students: field and level of previous and current education; time allocated to studies

3) Funding of education: types of support and fees charged

4) Experience as a DE student: motivation to study DE, barriers encountered, support expected and received, overall assessment.

## (1) Social profile of distance education students

Age and gender

Figure 2 shows the distribution of age groups in our data set. There are two predominant groups: 25-34 and 35-44-year-olds (each representing 25% of the total). The share of 45-54-year-olds and those above 55 is also very high (24% and 20% respectively). The wide distribution of age groups and the high number of students in the midst of their lives shows the attractiveness of distance education for adult learners. The figure also shows that distance education reaches a few students aged 15-19 and some 20-24-year-olds as well, i.e. young students who are not necessarily second-chance learners. In general, the distribution among all age groups is in line with the available literature.

Figure 3 shows the gender distribution in our data set: in total, more women than men are enrolled in distance education (62% as opposed to 38%). This is in line with most other data available on distance education students (e.g. FIED[20]: >80%

female, UOC[21]: > 52% female). It should also be noted that the slightly higher share of female over male graduates is a general trend that can be observed in tertiary education across Europe (ca. 55% female)[22].

Figure 2: Age
1765 Respondents
(Answers in percent)
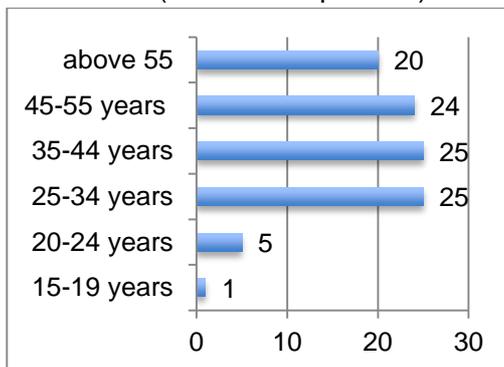
Figure 3: Gender
1757 Respondents
(Answers in percent)
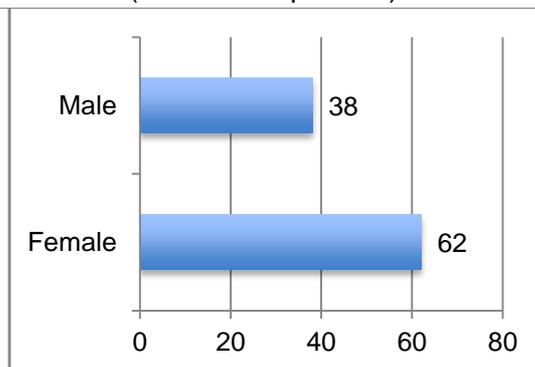
Household situation

Figure 4 shows that the majority of respondents live with their partner/family (63%). Of these, a large majority (almost 90%) have children in their household, the average number of children being 1.9. 22% of the distance education students in our data set live by themselves; the remaining 15% live with others (e.g. in a shared apartment). The available literature does not offer much insight into the household situation of distance education students. Considering the distribution of age groups, however, the high share of students living with their partner/family/children seems very plausible, as these are persons in the midst of their life, for whom distance education may represent the only feasible way to study.

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[20] FIED: http://www.fied.fr/fr/a-propos-de-nous/les-realisations.html
[21] UOC: http://www.uoc.edu/portal/en/universitat/coneix/fets-xifres/index.html
[22] Eurostat: Tertiary Education Statistics:
http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Tertiary_education_statistics

Figure 4: Household situation
1734 Respondents
(Answers in percent)
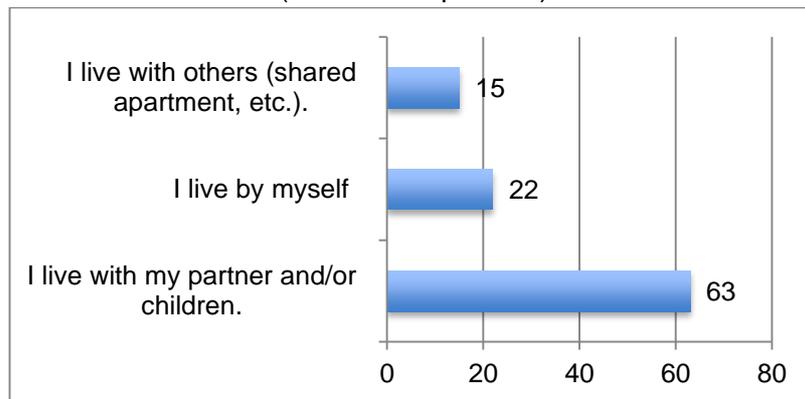
Employment situation

Figure 5 shows that 70% of the students are working (mainly full-time (51 %) but also part-time (19 %)). A similarly high share of working students is reported by the Open Universities (Fernuniversität Hagen[23]: 80% working). 30% of the respondents state that they do not work alongside their studies.

Figure 5: Do you work alongside your studies?
1733 Respondents
(Answers in percent)
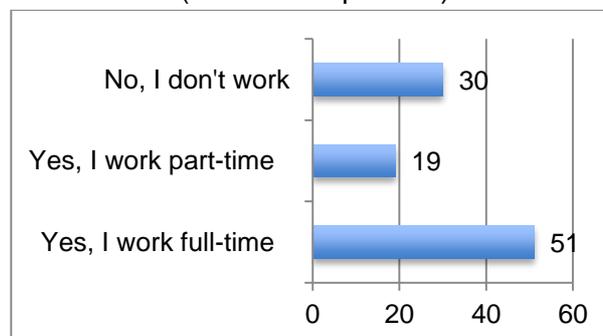
Of those working, one in seven is self-employed; a large majority are employed (60% of all respondents). Figure 6 gives an overview of the employment/unemployment situation of distance education students. One fifth of the respondents who do not work alongside their studies are registered as unemployed (6% of all respondents). The remaining 24% are not.

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[23] Fernuniversität Hagen: http://www.fernuni-hagen.de/arbeiten/statistik/daten/index.shtml

Question: What is your employment situation? (1233)
Question: Are you registered as unemployed? (520)
(Answers in percent)
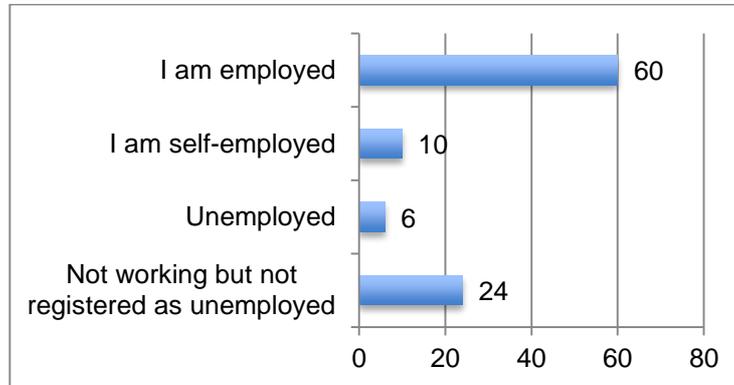
Those not working and not registered as unemployed were asked to explain their status in an open text field. The answers give interesting insights into the personal background of students. A majority claim to be retired (ca. half of this group). This is not surprising if compared to Figure 2, which shows a high share of students above 55 years of age. Approximately 15 percent state that they are registered as full-time students. Almost as many have health issues or disabilities. Around one tenth chose not to be registered as unemployed, citing diverse explanations, such as being a homemaker, being supported by their partner, being between jobs and not wanting to receive unemployment benefits (e.g.: "I'd rather starve than have the state control me"), etc. Slightly under one tenth are carers, i.e. taking full-time care of a disabled person, usually a family member. Almost as many are on parental leave. Very few state they were not eligible for unemployment benefits (e.g. because of visa restrictions, being previously self-employed, etc.).

Work experience

Figure 7 shows that only 3% of the respondents have no work experience at all. Almost half (46%) have 20 or more years of work experience. On the one hand, this reflects the age structure in our data set (see Figure 2). On the other hand, it also tells us about the employment history of the respondents: those seeking further education often have some prior work experience. Many of them are returning to or entering higher education after a period of work.

Figure 7: Work experience
Question: How many years of work experience do you have?
1722 Respondents
(Answers in percent)

Chart data:
- 20 years or more: 46
- 15-19 years: 12
- 10-14 years: 15
- 5-9 years: 15
- 1-4 years: 9
- None: 3
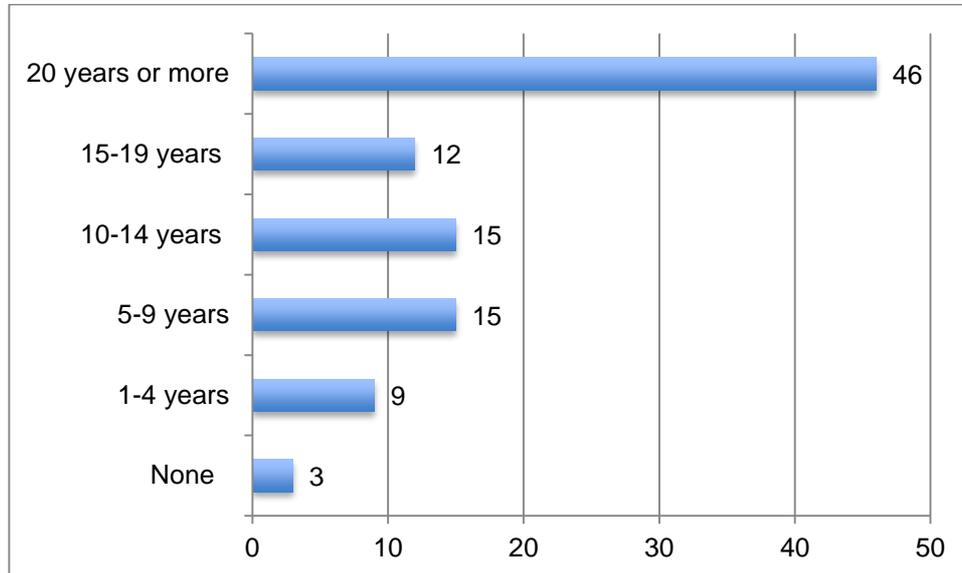
Geographic spread

Figure 8 tells us about the geographic spread of the respondents, as well as of their education providers. As mentioned in Chapter 3 (Reflections on literature and data set), the data has a strong UK bias, which reflects the focus of the Distance Learning Portal database.

60% of the respondents in our data set live in the UK, 10% in Greece, and 8% in Germany. 2% respectively are from Cyprus and Italy. The remaining 18% are resident in 'other' EHEA countries. Less than 1% lives outside the European Higher Education Area.[24] Even more students are studying with a UK institution than are resident in the UK (72%), which is also the case for Cyprus (4%). But fewer distance students study with a Greek (6%), German (4%) or Italian (1%) provider than actually live in these countries. The 'other' category covers EHEA countries.[25] The figure shows that distance education programmes serve students beyond national borders. The UK distance education offer appears particularly attractive to international students.

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[24] See Appendix B for a full overview of countries of residence.
[25] See also Appendix B for a full overview of countries of providers.

Figure 8: Country of residence and Country of provider
1772 respondents
(Answers in percent)
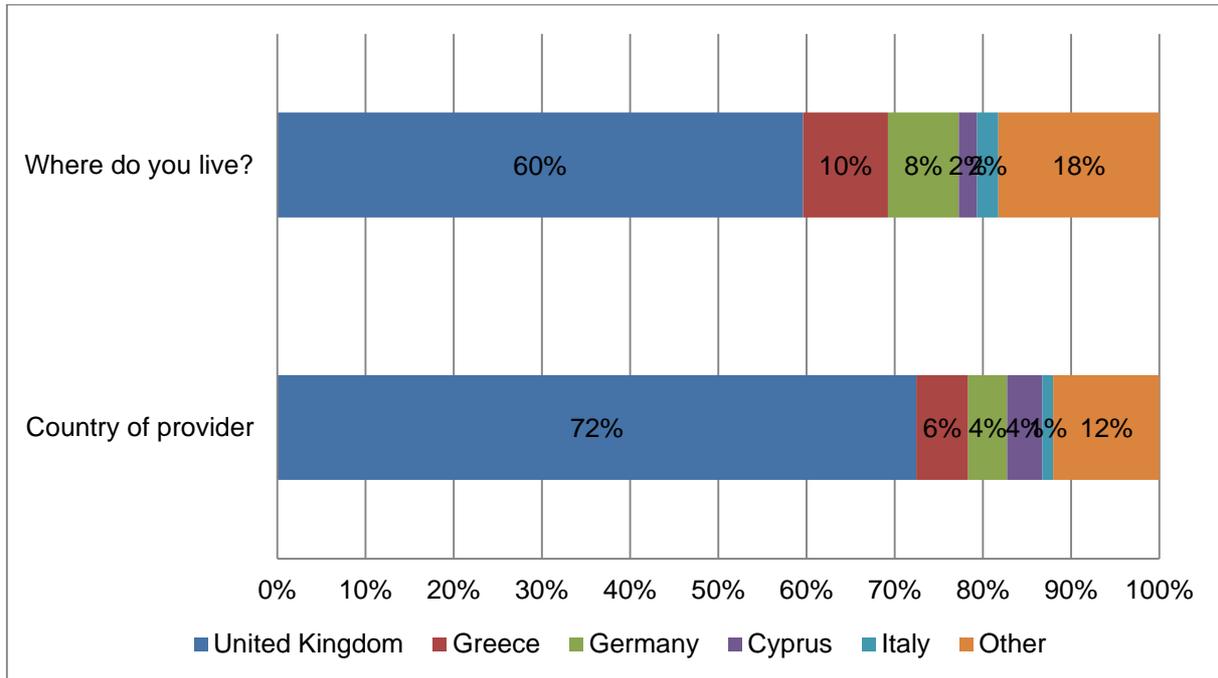
(2) Previous and current education

Field of study

Figure 9 compares the field of study of students' prior education to their current field of study. 'Humanities and Art' is the most common subject area named by students as their prior field (22%), followed by 'Business and Economics' and 'Engineering and Technology' (both 15 %). 14% of the respondents previously studied 'Social Sciences' and 11% 'other' subjects. The list of prior fields of study continues with 'Life Sciences, Medicine and Health', 'Applied sciences, Professions and Arts', 'Natural Sciences' and 'Law', with 'Environmental Sciences' the least mentioned subject area.

'Humanities and Art' also leads the list of current fields of study. It is interesting to note that even more students are enrolled in this field (29%) than hold a prior degree in it (22%). The figure also shows that the second most studied subject area is different from the subject of prior degrees held: 'Social Sciences' precedes 'Business and Economics', followed by 'Natural Sciences', 'Engineering and Technology', etc.

Figure 9: Field of study of prior and current education
Question: What was the field of study of your completed prior education? (826)
What is your current field of study?
1,659 Respondents
(Answers in percent)
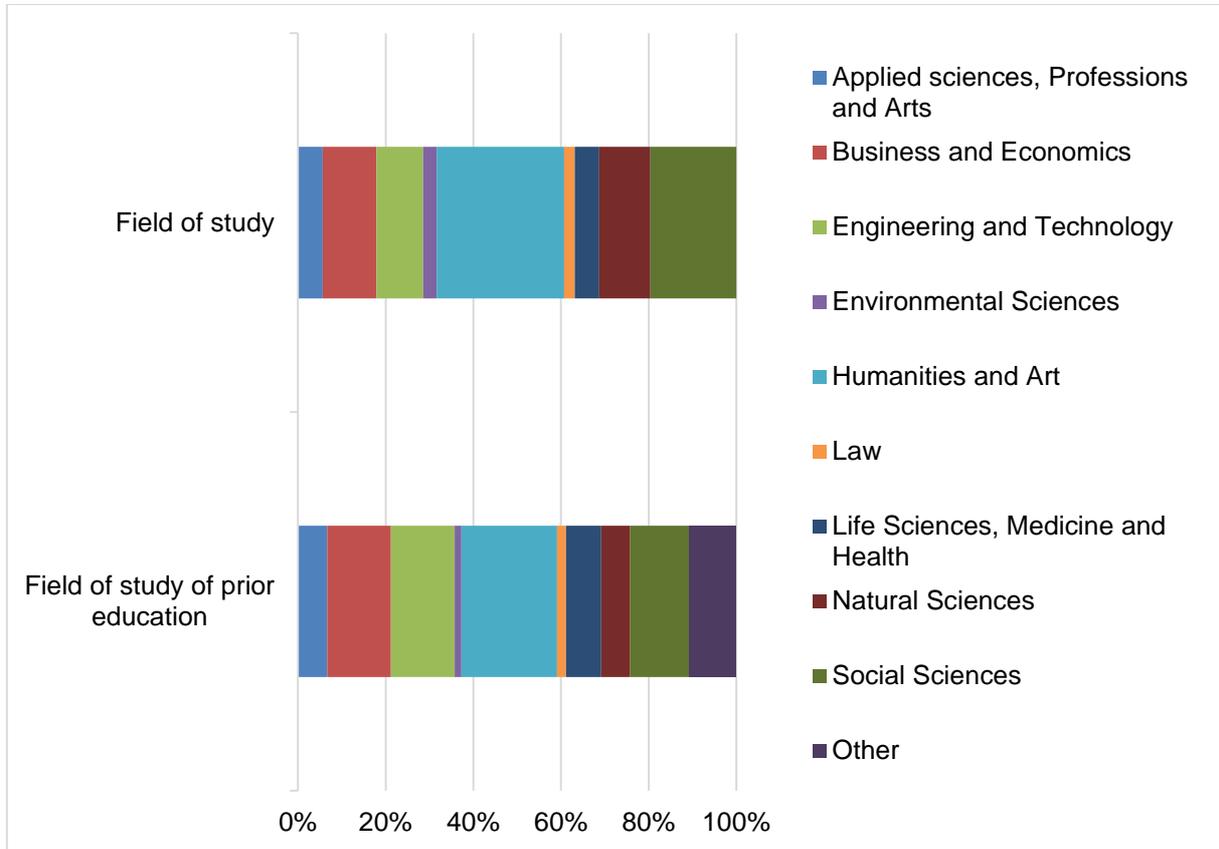
Full degree programmes or single (i.e., non-degree) courses

Figure 10 shows the answers to the question: Are you currently enrolled in a full degree programme or are you taking (a) single course(s)? It shows that our respondents mainly study in degree programmes (90%). However, two things need to be noted. First, the respondents were mainly recruited via DistanceLearningPortal, which mainly lists degree programmes (74%, see Report 1). Second, the number of students in one degree programme is higher than the number of students in one comparable single course, as the time frame is longer for degree programmes than for single courses. Hence, the number of students in degree programmes includes students in different years, whereas the number of students in single courses often only covers one year. We can therefore assume that the percentage of adult learners taking single courses rather than full degree programmes per year is higher than indicated here.

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Figure 10: Degree versus single course

Question: Are you currently enrolled in a full degree programme or are you taking (a) single course(s)?

1,676 respondents

(Answers in percent)
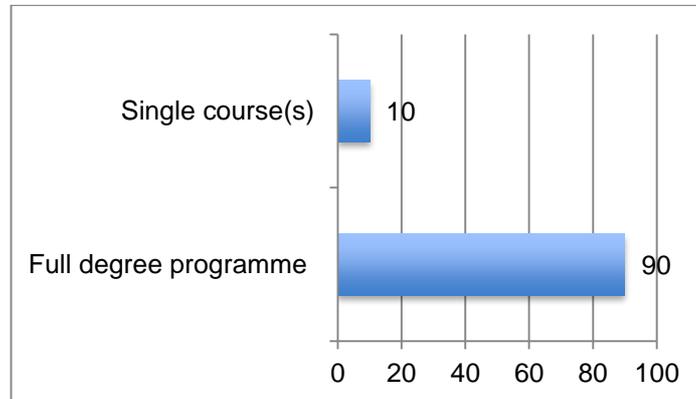
Attainment levels

The majority of the students in our data set are studying a full degree programme. Figure 11 shows their previous and current level of education. 28% hold a high school certificate (or equivalent), 31% a Bachelor's degree (or equivalent), and 11% a Master's (or equivalent). 4% hold a PhD degree. The remaining 26% hold 'other' levels of degrees. A look at the level of degree to be obtained reveals that a clear majority of students are studying for a Bachelor's or equivalent level degree (84 %). 12% and 2% respectively are pursuing Master's and PhD degrees (and another 2% 'other' degrees).

Figure 11: Level of previous and current education

Question: What is the highest level of education you have completed? (1,748)
Question: What level of degree will you obtain? (1,510)
(Answers in percent)

Level	Highest level of education completed	Level of degree will you obtain
High school certificate (or equivalent level)	28%	0%
Bachelor (or equivalent level)	31%	84%
Master (or equivalent level)	11%	12%
Other	26%	2%
PhD (or equivalent level)	4%	2%
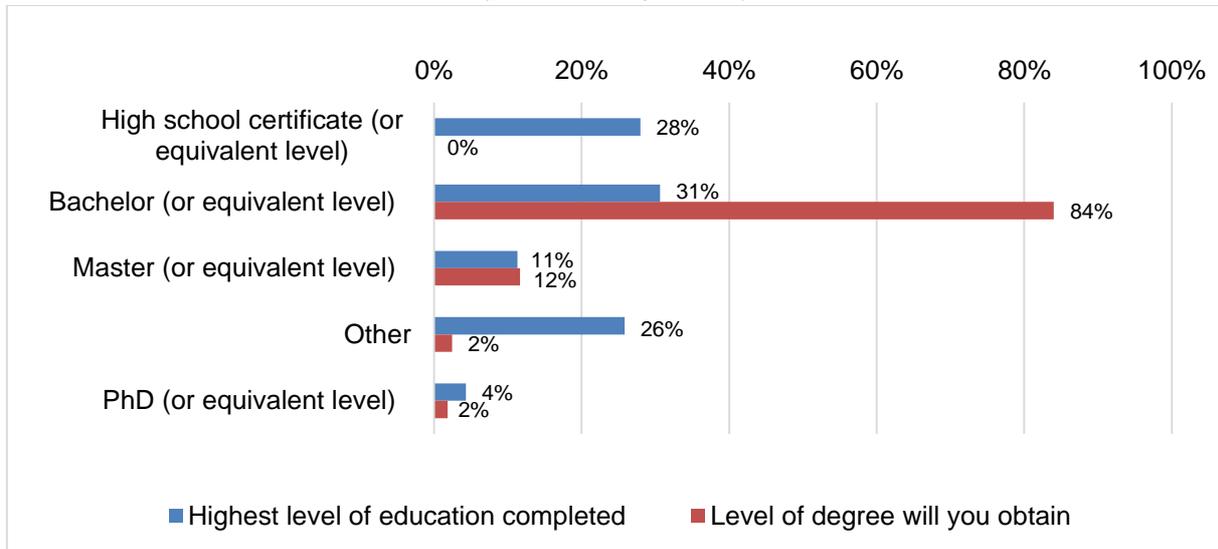
On the one hand, the figure shows that distance education offers the possibility to earn a higher degree than the one previously held. On the other hand, the figure also reveals that a significant number of distance education students are studying at the same level as their previous degree. This shows that distance education can be used to update knowledge and qualifications, but also to gain knowledge in a new field. Figure 9, which compares previous and current *fields* of study, also illustrates this.

In general, it should be noted that the high share of programmes at Bachelor's level is not uncommon (see for example Open University UK, where approximately two thirds of the modules on offer are at undergraduate level).[26]

Study time per week

Figure 12 shows the average time per week that students spend studying. Degree programmes are slightly more time-intensive than single courses. A majority (34%) of those studying for a full degree spend 10-14 hours per week studying. 27% of students taking single courses spend the same amount of time per week on their studies. Another 27% allocate 5-9 hours per week to their course. The figure also reveals that very few respondents are full-time students, spending more than 20 hours a week on their studies.

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

Figure 12: Time allocated to studies on average per week

Degree programmes (1492)   Courses (185)

(Answers in percent)

Degree programmes	Courses
More than 20… — 13	More than 20… — 10
15-20 hours per… — 29	15-20 hours per… — 23
10-14 hours per… — 34	10-14 hours per… — 27
5-9 hours per week — 19	5-9 hours per… — 27
1-4 hours per week — 5	1-4 hours per… — 13
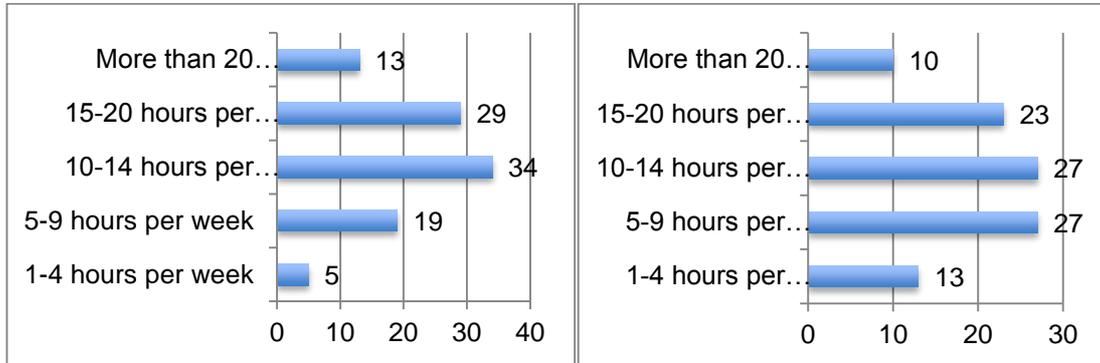
Duration of programmes

As Figure 13 shows, most degree programmes (78%) require more than three years of study. This needs to be read with Figure 10 in mind, which revealed that a majority of the respondents are seeking a Bachelor's degree (or a degree at an equivalent level). Most single courses (41%) take between 6 and 12 months. Some are considerably longer (31% take more than 2 years), but almost a quarter (23%) are no longer than 6 months.

The great variation in the duration of courses and the generally long time frame for the completion of degree programmes reflect the time students have available for their studies (Figure 12) as well as their employment and family situation (Figure 6). As discussed above, a majority of students work alongside their studies. Of those not working, many are taking care of children or disabled family members and are therefore unable to study full-time.

Figure 13: Duration of programme/course

Degree programme (1491)   Single course (184)

(Answers in percent)

Degree programme	
More than 3 years	77
Between 2 and 3…	14
Between 1 and 2…	3
Between 6 and…	5
Less than 6 months	1

Single course	
More than 2 years	31
Between 1 and 2…	5
Between 6 and 12…	41
Between 3 and 6…	15
Less than 3 months	8
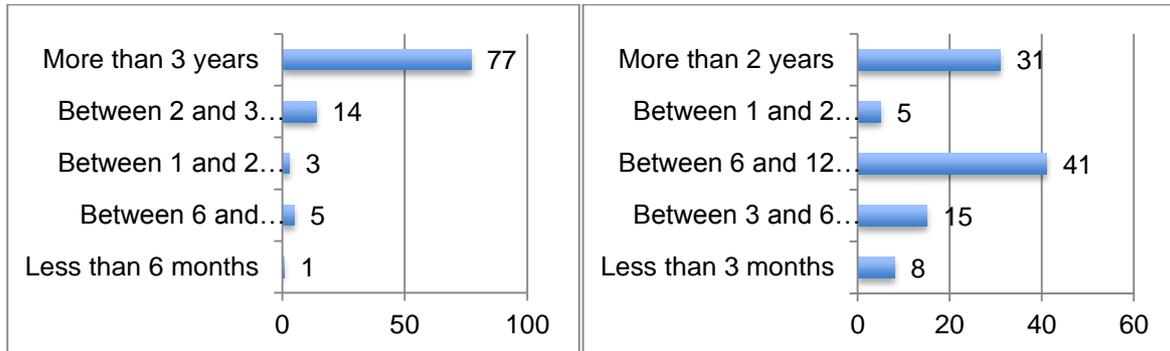
(3) Funding of studies

Sources of funding

A majority of distance education students fund their studies themselves. Figure 14 shows that this is the case for 68% of the respondents. This may reflect the students' employment situation, as many are studying alongside work. Of those claiming to receive support, 20% receive a full and 9% a partial scholarship, and approximately 15% are supported by their employer. A majority of students mention 'other' types of support. Those who selected this option were given the opportunity to comment in an open text field on the kind of support they receive. The 'other' types of support named were family (parents/partners/others), student loans and grants, and government support related to disabilities (carer's allowance/disability allowance/other).

Figure 14: Funding
Question: How are you funding your studies?
1670 respondents
(Answers in percent)
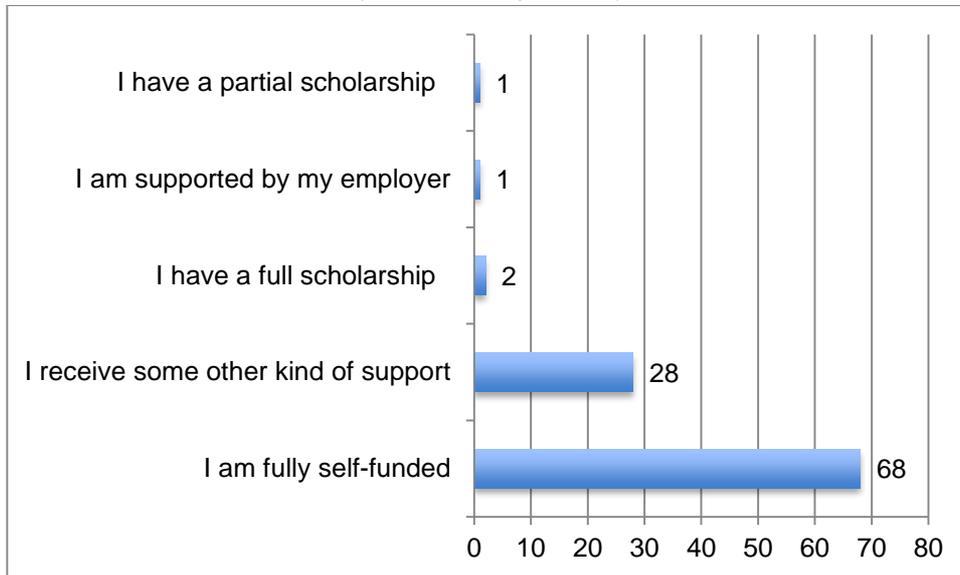
Tuition fees

Figure 15 shows that many respondents are studying on fee-paying programmes/courses (87%). Most of the fee-paying respondents are studying with providers in the UK, Greece, Germany and Cyprus; the distribution corresponds mostly to Figure 8 (Country of provider). While it is not surprising that the share of fee-paying students in this sample is high due to the high share of students enrolled in UK institutions, it should be noted that many respondents to this survey are studying in countries that traditionally do not charge any tuition fees, such as Norway. The Eurydice report "National Student Fee and Support Systems", which contains a comparative overview of student fee and support systems, shows the great differences in numbers of fee-paying students and levels of fees across Europe: "A significant number of countries – Cyprus, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Malta, Finland, Sweden, UK (Scotland), Norway and Turkey – do not charge any tuition fees. At the other end of the scale, all Bachelor's students pay fees in nine countries (Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovakia, United Kingdom (England, Wales and Northern Ireland), Iceland, Liechtenstein)." (Eurydice 2014, p.47ff [27])

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[27] The report covers 33 European countries (EU Member States, as well as Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, Montenegro and Turkey).

Figure 15: Tuition fees

Question: Does your programme/course charge any tuition fees or other fees?

1658 Respondents

(Answers in percent)
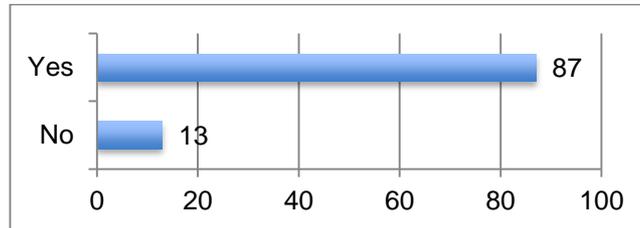
Of the fee-paying respondents, a majority of 42 percent responded that the level of fees is a "bit less than their living expenses" (see Figure 16). A quarter stated that the fees are very little, and one fifth claimed that the fees are higher than their living expenses.

Figure 16: Level of fees

Question: How much are the fees compared to your general living expenses (per year)?

1437 respondents

(Answers in percent)
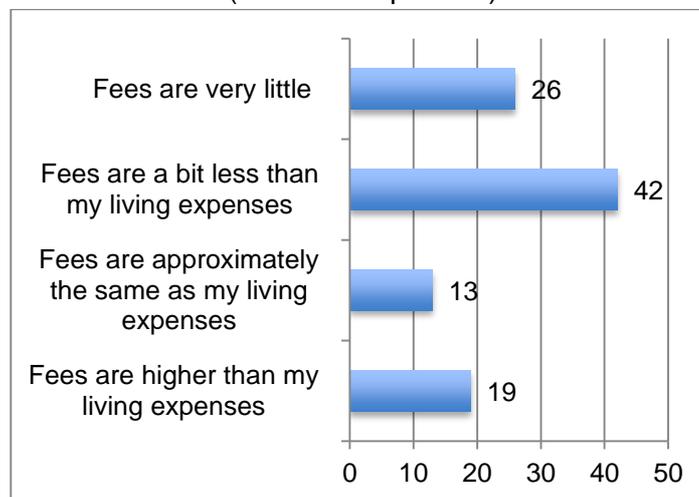
(4) Experience as a DE student

Motivation to study

The respondents were asked to indicate whether they agree or disagree with the following three statements regarding their motivation to study:

1. I want to improve my career prospects.

2. I am studying to avoid unemployment.

3. I am studying for self-fulfilment.

They could indicate on a graph the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement. Furthermore, they could provide comments on their motivation to study in an open text field.

Figure 17 should be read as follows: The numbered spots (1,2 and 3) are the balance points (centres of gravity) of the responses to each question. The shaded areas around the balance points show the main variations around the balance points. Single responses may well be placed outside these areas. The figure shows the following: Statement 3 ("I am studying for self-fulfilment") received the highest degree of agreement. Statement 1 ("I want to improve my career prospects") was also chosen as a relevant motivation to study. This was not the case, however, for statement 2 ("I am studying to avoid unemployment"). Most respondents disagreed with this statement.

Figure 17: Motivation to study
1. I want to improve my career prospects. (1685)
2. I am studying to avoid unemployment. (1676)
3. I am studying for self-fulfilment. (1683)
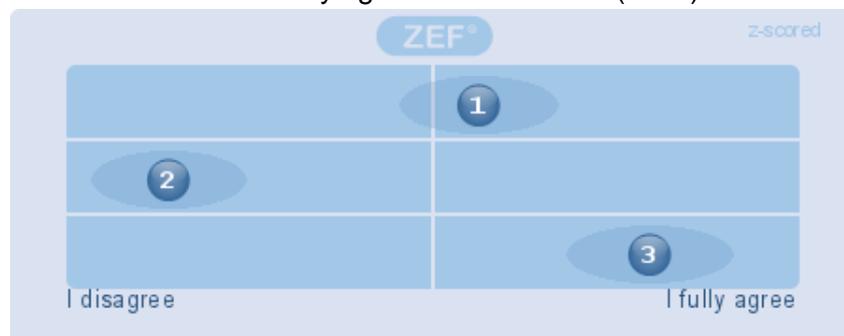
The open comments to Figure 17 give further insights into students' motivation to study. 719 comments were received, which corresponds to ca. 40% of the respondents to the original question. They are categorized below and illustrated by quotes.

General well-being/mental health/joy of learning

The majority of the comments (370) revolve around the idea of staying mentally active and healthy, enjoying learning and broadening one's horizons. Many retired people state that distance education helps them to keep mentally fit. Students with disabilities also underline this aspect of education. Irrespective of their age, students are motivated to educate themselves in order to improve their general well-being. They perceive distance education as a route to self-fulfilment, self-development and self-esteem. While some study for the sheer joy of learning, some also want to prove themselves to others. The following quotes illustrate these ideas.

- "Distance learning has, quite literally, saved my life and my sanity. Like many other disabled people, it has played an incredibly important part in giving me a focus and a purpose for living."
- "Having finished employment I was looking for a challenge that would keep me mentally active."
- "Natural curiosity about the world around us."
- "Studying is not a period in life but is (part of) life."
- "Study is both self-fulfilling and life-enhancing; if you don't use it you are likely to lose it later on."
- "To prove to myself and others that I am capable of fulfilling my potential."

Studying to increase career/job options

172 comments mention career options, job changes and promotions. Several respondents are returning to work after a period of parental leave and feel that they need to catch up. Some students express that they are bored with their current jobs and are therefore looking for new opportunities. All of them see (distance) education as the best way to achieve this, as these quotes illustrate:

- "I wish to change my career due to lack of prospects in my current field."
- "I wish to remain a competitive candidate within my organization by improving my skills and knowledge."

- "After caring for my children I have gained a huge amount of experience, but I know I need a qualification to return to the workplace."
- "My job is incredibly boring and meaningless. My studies let me use my brain and are going to enable me to do something meaningful."
- "I firmly believe that people of working age (that is to say, people aged 30 to 70) should be encouraged a whole lot more to study for career and/or work reasons. More should be done to encourage people of this generation to study more."

Another chance

81 respondents specifically say that they could not enter higher education earlier in life and see distance education as a second chance to do so:

- "I am doing now what I would have liked to do after I left school but circumstances didn't allow."
- "I was told by a male parent many years ago that education was wasted on women as they would just go on to become wives and mothers. Although I have become both, I also work and certainly do NOT consider that women should be excluded from education at any stage in their lives or from any opportunities that present themselves that enhance their lives both personally and professionally."

Investment

For 32 respondents who commented, (distance) education is an investment in their socioeconomic future:

- "To financially secure my own and my children's future."
- "A higher standard of education will provide me and my partner with increased prospects in terms of social mobility."

The remaining comments include less frequently mentioned motivations such as the wish to inspire others ("I want to encourage my children to study", mentioned by 19 respondents), as well as comments on other questions, such as student support, which are picked up in the relevant sections.

Why do students choose distance/blended education over face-to-face education? Figure 18 gives us an idea of the motivations for choosing a distance education programme.

The respondents were given the following three statements:

1. Distance education is easier to combine with job and/or family duties.
2. Distance education costs less.
3. The programme/course scores well in rankings.

For each, they could select their level of agreement/disagreement with the statement (x-axis) and how important each statement was for them personally (y-axis). Clicking on the selected point in the x-/y field delivers information on both. Furthermore, the respondents provided comments on their programme choice in an open text field.

Figure 18 should also be read as follows: The numbered spots (1,2 and 3) are the balance points (centres of gravity) of the responses to each question. The shaded area around each balance point shows the variation. Single responses may well be placed outside these areas. For a better understanding of the range of answers, the figure shows the percentage of answers to each statements placed in the four quadrants in the graph.

Figure 18: Choice of programme
1. Distance education is easier to combine with job and/or family duties (1669)
2. Distance education costs less (1663)
3. The programme/course scores well in rankings (1653)
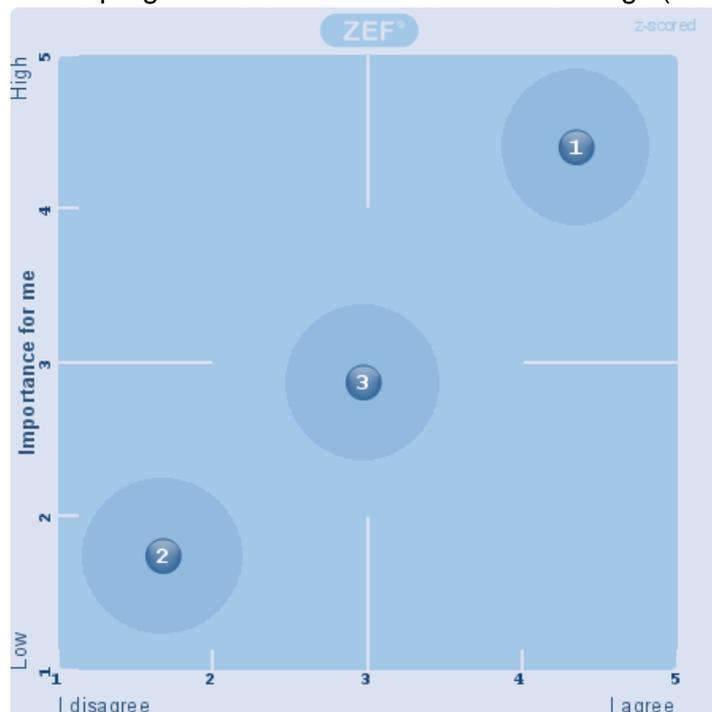
1. Distance education is easier to combine with job and/or family duties (1655) (N/A: 17)

2. Distance education costs less (1648) (N/A: 18)

3.The programme/course scores well in rankings (1613) (N/A: 43)

The figure gives a variety of insights. Statement 1 ("Distance education is easier to combine with job and/or family duties") receives the highest degree of agreement. It is a common response from distance education students, who are often motivated by the opportunity to study at their own pace and in their own time (Quote from one of the respondents: "I have two hours available between 10pm and midnight when my kids are asleep and the kitchen in order – it must happen then.") Statement 1 is followed by Statement 3 ("The programme/course scores well in rankings"), which receives a medium level of agreement. Statement 2 ("Distance education costs less"), however, very little agreement. The cost factor (i.e. the idea that face-to-face education is generally more expensive than distance education) can therefore be considered as not important.

The figure also shows how important each statement is within the personal context of the students. Responses here are almost in line with the level of general agreement with each statement. Job/family duties are clearly the main constraint (Statement 1), followed by the reputation of the programme/course (Statement 3). In both cases, however, it is interesting to note the high percentage of respondents that agree with the statement, but do not consider it as a constraint in their own context (See sub-figures: Statement 1: 18.61%; Statement 3: 20.95%). Interestingly, the (supposed) opportunity to save money (Statement 2) is an irrelevant factor for many students in our sample. The sub-figure, however, shows, that there are still a number

35

of students, for whom the cost of education is relevant and who do not consider distance education to be less expensive than face-to-face education (See sub-figure: Statement 2: 17.54%).

The open comments on the choice of distance education can be categorized into two main types:

- DE as an instrument for responding to specific restrictions ('external' factors)
- DE as a reinforcing/motivating element ('internal' factors)

There were 444 comments in total, which corresponds to approximately a quarter of respondents.

DE as an instrument for responding to specific restrictions ('external' factors)

272 respondents mention external factors which influenced their choice of distance education. The main external factors include time restrictions (and the flexibility offered by distance education), the physical distance to on-campus education, the (lack of) availability of the subject area in on-campus education, the language of tuition, health issues, and the costs of on-campus education. Alternative access is also mentioned (in cases where entry requirements to on-campus education were not met). The following quotes illustrate the various external factors influencing students' choice of distance education.

- "Distance learning was the only option which allowed me to continue to work full-time and care for my family, while also being the only affordable option."
- "I'm living in a rural area; most of my friends have gone to bigger cities where the chance to get a well paid job is much higher and life quality seems to be better. Depending on what life quality means for you. Education is also very rare in my area so I'm happy to have found my programme."
- "I only registered for it because there was no other provider for this subject at this level, so I had no choice."
- "I'm attending a programme based in the UK rather than in my country of residence (Italy) because there are no similar programmes offered by distance-learning universities here and I like studying in an English-speaking university."
- "Because of illness it would have been impossible to do a degree in my present circumstances without distance learning. I have needed the home-

learning aspect – not having to travel to class and the lower number of lesson hours has made it easier for me to keep up."

- "It is my only choice as I cannot afford to go to university full time."
- "An open policy in terms of previous qualifications required to enter the programme was the most important factor."

DE a reinforcing/motivating element ('internal' factors)

The 95 open comments, which reveal that distance education is chosen not so much due to specific restrictions, but rather deliberately, cite factors such as the reputation of the institution, an interest in a particular course/programme, and the way students like (or do not like) to learn.

- "I hear that employers appreciate Open University students and that the degree is accepted."
- "Relevance of programme/course to personal interests/current position is a key factor for the choice of programme/course."
- "Distance learning allows me to choose the hours and times I study. I have support available through my provider if needed but am able to get on with my studies as an independent learner, which suits me very well."
- "I suffer from anxiety and depression, so my motivation for distance learning was affected by that. I wouldn't have coped attending a brick university."

The conditions mentioned in this last comment (and other forms of social phobia) could also be understood as specific restrictions (previous section).

Among the 77 other reasons mentioned for choosing distance education over on-campus education were "the possibility to meet international students", an employer's support for a specific DE programme, and an enjoyment of using technology.

Services expected and received

The respondents were also asked about their experience and expectations of services and support from the education provider. They were presented with various types of support/services, for which they could indicate the level of importance to them *and* assess how well the provider delivered them (see Figure 19).

The four types of support/services proposed were:

1. Learning material developed and/or adapted specifically for distance education

2. Administrative/organizational support

3. Moral support/psychological support/counselling

4. Opportunities to interact with teachers and other students

The x-axis indicates the performance by the provider (weak-good), and the y-axis shows the personal importance of each statement. The range of answers to each statement is across the four fields in the main graph and are shown in sub-figures. Comments on services/support were also collected in an open text field.

Figure 19: Services

1. Learning material developed and/or adapted specifically for distance education (1639)
2. Administrative/organizational support (1635)
3. Moral support/psychological support/counselling (1625)
4. Opportunities to interact with teachers and other students (1630)
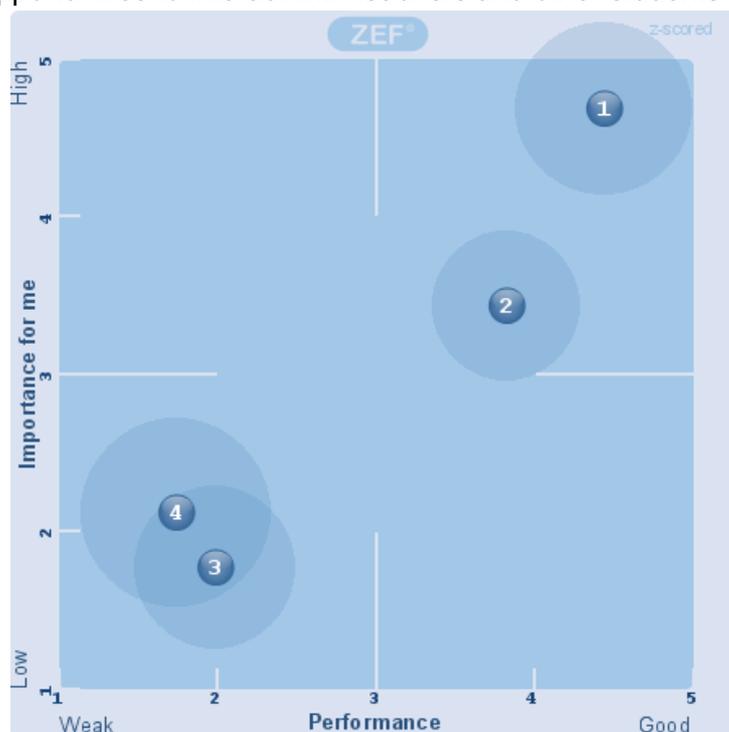
1. Learning material developed / adapted specifically for distance education (1620) (N/A: 22)

2. Administrative / organisational support (1627) (N/A: 11)

3. Moral support; psychological support; counselling (1589) (N/A: 39)

4. Opportunities to interact with teachers and other students (1613) (N/A: 20)
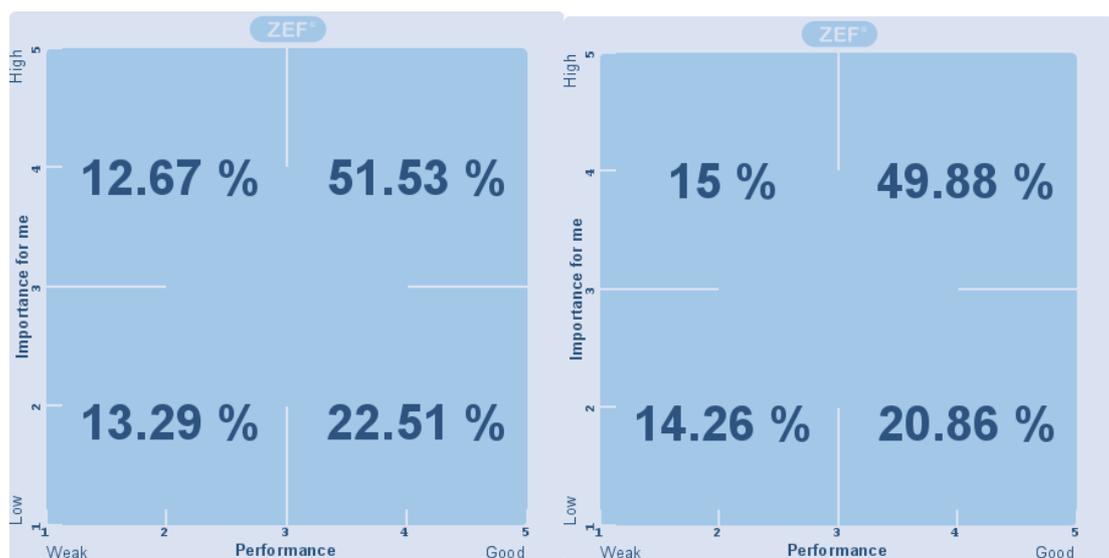
Figure 19 shows that the highest importance (y-axis) is attached to learning material that is developed and/or adapted specifically for distance education (Statement 1). Administrative/organizational support is named as the second most important service (Statement 2). Opportunities to interact with teachers and other students is seen as a rather irrelevant service (Statement 4). Only moral/psychological support and counselling is considered even less important (Statement 3).

The students rate the performance of their providers on each of these services similarly to the importance they attach to them. Statement 1 (learning material

developed and/or adapted specifically for distance education) ranks highest in terms of performance, followed by Statement 2 (administrative/organizational support). The statements related to the performance by the provider are considered as weak and are the same as the respondents that attach least importance. However, the providers are perceived to perform slightly better, or rather not as badly, on moral/psychological support and counselling (Statement 3) than on opportunities to interact with teachers and other students (Statement 4). The data suggests that there is need for improvement in particular for interaction opportunities.

The question also included an open comment option (used by 396 respondents, approximately a quarter of all respondents to this question). Interestingly, many (127) used this option just to express their satisfaction with their provider (some wrote 'excellent', 'very good', etc.). Overall, the positive comments (265) prevailed over the negative ones (201), as presented below. There is a certain overlap between the two categories, as some students made a positive comment but also raised a concern ('Overall good, but…'). It should be pointed out that many comments were from students of the Open University UK. As described in Chapter 3, the OU has previously been rated one of the top universities in terms of student satisfaction.

Satisfied with support

The majority of the 265 positive comments concern the good quality and availability of teachers/tutors, tutorials, learning material (especially for older people) and interaction forums. Several students say that the institution shows a real understanding of individual learners' challenges. In particular, support for disabled students is singled out as being good. Other forms of support commended by students are state-of-the-art services, the availability of a local office nearby, good use of IT, and a good library network. Students also mention that they are not feeling isolated. They appreciate that the support provided is not patronizing. The following quotes illustrate some of these positive aspects:

- "The educational provider I used provided exceptionally good materials and tutor support."
- "My tutor was very helpful and supportive."

- "What I truly like is that they constantly improve their services, especially the use of multimedia to improve tutor-student and student-student interactions."
- "It is hugely important that the educator is available for support and accessible. The OUs are generally very good at this."
- "I have received very good support for my needs due to my medical condition."
- "The interactive course helped with discussions that were open to all students and it was good to get feedback on where things were going right or not so well."

More support needed

Of the 201 comments that include criticism, more than one tenth address the issue of fees (too expensive; too little support for students in need). Some also observe that face-to-face tutorials have been replaced by online provision in some universities, and feel that the price of this is unjustified. The quality and availability of tutors is also an important issue. Many students feel that the human factor is missing. Some say they feel isolated; others complain that their teachers are not well trained (to deal with dyslexic students, for example), or that they should give better feedback. Almost a quarter of the negative comments revolve around a wish for greater interaction, both online and face-to-face. The times of online tutorials are inconvenient for some (especially for students studying abroad, or who work alongside their studies). Others would like more – and better quality – online tutorials, e.g. via Skype and YouTube. Overseas students bemoan the fact that face-to-face tutorials are not available outside the country of provision (and that this is not justified by the price charged). Home country students report that face-to-face tutorials are available, but are located too far away or scheduled at inconvenient times for working people. Online material is also criticised for being inconvenient to use (students point out that reading on screen is tiring and that they are not able to print everything at home, so they prefer books and face-to-face tuition). Other issues mentioned include the following: general support is too slow; teachers are not open to criticism; teachers are not trained to deal with students with health issues and/or disabilities; no services provided for international students; no career advice available; no way for students to assess

teacher quality; computer skills are a prerequisite (this is not always the case); material is out of date; lack of flexibility (e.g., as regards exams and time to completion); too much interaction; and a wish for better IT support (e.g., through mobile devices and more online features).

The following quotes illustrate the variety of comments in this field:

- "The cost of the tuition fees for students on state welfare benefits was only partially met (50%) by their university's fee remission scheme. More students would sign up for a course if benefits claimants and students on low incomes had their total tuition fees waived by the university."
- "Sometimes it is hard to know what is expected of you because all interaction is online and the human factor is missing. Tutors sometimes have too many students and not enough time to interact with them."
- "Face-to-face tutorials are often too far from where I live – the travel and costs often make it impossible to attend. I struggle with online tutorials."
- "Overall very good but more opportunities to interact with fellow students would be beneficial."
- "Not enough stuff available in printed form. Looking at a computer screen is tiring for me and I do not retain the information that way."

The potential challenges of distance education are presented in Figure 20. Respondents were given three types of challenges and were asked to indicate how difficult each of these was for them. The three types of challenges proposed were:

1. Using distance education technology
2. Language of the programme/course (if not taught in your native language)
3. Recognition/validation of prior qualifications

Statement 1, using distance education technology, is considered not a very difficult challenge. The language of the programme/course (Statement 2) is considered as slightly more difficult, but not as very difficult. It should be considered, however, that a high number of students studying in their native language seem to have answered this question (1,508 respondents). The language of tuition could therefore still pose a considerable challenge to students studying in a foreign language. Statement 3, the recognition/validation of prior qualifications, is ranked as very difficult. It is seen as a more relevant challenge than the previous two. Other literature (see IDEAL Report 1) also tells us that, especially for adult learners, recognition/validation of prior learning is highly important.

When reading Figure 20, which deals with challenges in distance education, the non-response bias of the present data needs to be kept in mind. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the answers of respondents may differ from the potential answers of those who did not answer. Those students who did answer the survey are more likely to feel generally positive about their studies and to hope (rightly) that their feedback has an impact. We therefore need to consider that there could be a number of potential respondents who face considerable challenges, to the extent that they do not see a point in providing feedback.

The respondents were finally asked about their overall assessment of their studies.
They were presented with three criteria and were asked to indicate what their expectations were before studying *and* how well the provider met them (see Figure 21).

The three criteria were:

1. Value for time invested
2. Value for money invested
3. Overall value of the programme/course

The x-axis indicates the performance by the provider (expectations met: not at all-fully). The y-axis shows students' expectations before studying regarding each criterion. Figure 21 shows students' overall assessment of their studies. The range of answers to each statement is spread across the four fields in the main graph and are shown in sub-figures.

Figure 21: Assessment

1. Value for time invested (1622) (N/A: 18)
2. Value for money invested (1613) (N/A: 33)
3. Overall value of the programme/course (1615) (N/A: 19)
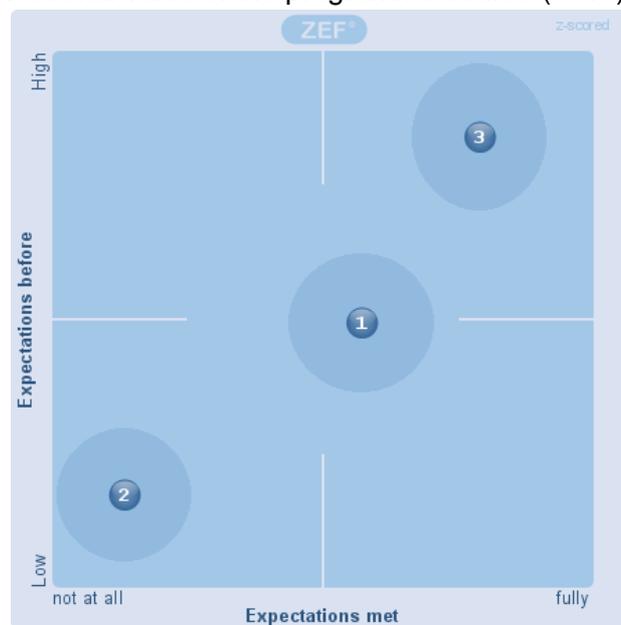
1. Value for time invested (1607) (N/A: 18)	2. Value for money invested (1583) (N/A: 33)	3. Overall value of the programme/course (1599) (N/A: 19)
7.97 % **69.57 %** **3.27 %** **19.2 %**	**9.68 %** **65.59 %** **5.61 %** **19.13 %**	**6.24 %** **71.25 %** **3.8 %** **18.71 %**
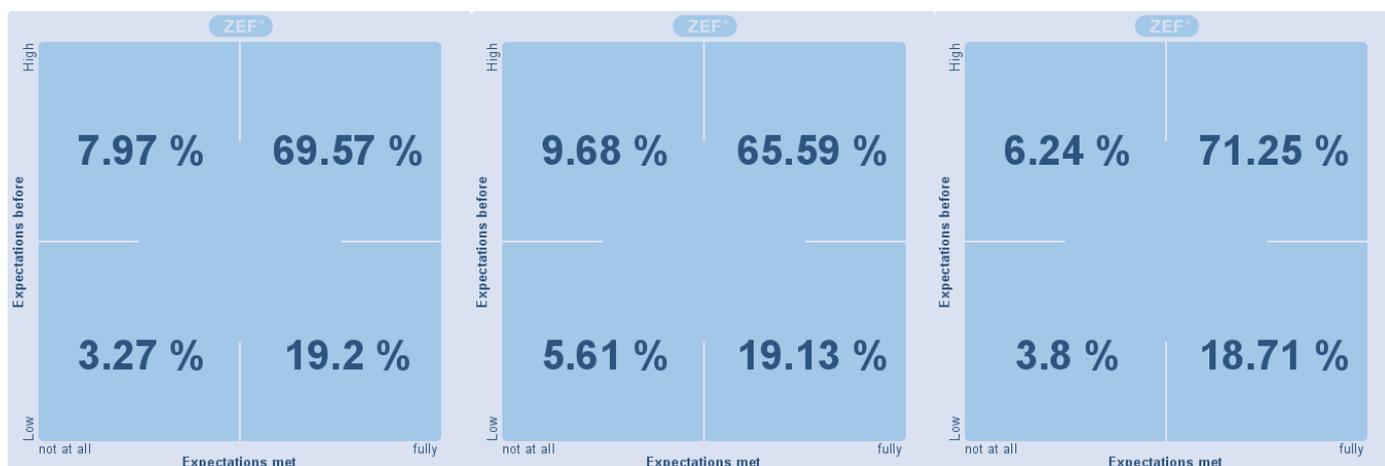
Figure 21 shows that students had high expectations for the overall value of the programme/course (Statement 3). Very little expectations were attached directly to the money invested in studying (Statement 2), but rather to the time invested in studying (Statement 1). In terms of performance by the provider, the overall expectations were best met for most respondents. The sub-figures to each statement show that the performance by the provider was considered as higher than the original expectations for a considerable number of students (Sub-figure, lower right corner: Statement 1: 19.2%; Statement 2: 19.13%; Statement 3: 18,71%).

This high degree of satisfaction is confirmed by data from the Open University UK, for example: "The Open University was the highest rated university for overall student satisfaction in the 2012 National Student Survey, and has been consistently in the top five UK universities for student satisfaction since the survey began in 2005."[28]

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

Conclusion

The empirical section of this report presented data on the following issues:

1. Social profile of distance education students;
2. Previous and current education of distance education students;
3. Funding of education;
4. Experience (motivations, challenges, support) as a distance education student.

This concluding chapter provides a summary of these issues, particularly as they relate to adult learning and education (ALE).

(1) Social profile of distance education students

Distance education students in Europe are a very heterogeneous group. However, some general characteristics can be identified and summarised as follows:

- A majority of distance education students are women;
- Students of all ages study in distance education, though they are generally older than those in 'traditional' higher education;
- The majority of distance education students are returning to/entering higher education after a period of work, leave, etc.;
- A majority are part-time students;
- A majority work next to their studies, many have family/children.
  Other distinct groups of distance education students include retired people, disabled students or students with other health issues, those caring for family members, those living in remote areas, those who could not enter higher education at an earlier age, and independent learners.

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<u>Social profile of distance education students relating to adult learning and education</u>

- The variety of age, life and work situations of the students demonstrate the potential of distance education to meet the needs of adult learners; e.g. for learners in remote areas, for second chance learners and for learners facing circumstantial restrictions. Distance education is a particularly liberating factor for parents, especially mothers, of young children. Distance education is, in principle, accessible to a wide range of potential learners.
- For institutions, the data show that they should capitalize on strengths: higher education institutions need to be aware of the different needs/life situations of students, adapt their offer and look for 'new' target groups.

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(2) Previous and current education of distance education students

- The most common subject areas offered via distance education are 'Humanities and Art', 'Social Sciences' and 'Business and Economics'.
- Many distance education students study in a similar field to their prior education.
- Most distance education students are in enrolled in Bachelor's level programmes.
- Many distance education students already have a Bachelor's degree (or equivalent).
- Distance education allows students both to get a higher degree and to study at the same level of degree; i.e., for updating existing in or gaining new knowledge.

> Previous and current education of distance education students related to adult learning and education
>
> - The high number of students in degree programmes shows the potential of distance education to help adult learners gain a new qualification. The availability of non-degree courses at various levels and in various fields can also help adult learners to update knowledge or gain knowledge and skills in a new field.
> - For higher education institutions, the data shows that it is important to understand learners' needs and to adapt the offer to the demand.
> - The high number of students with a previous higher education degree show that distance education has strong potential to increase access to HE to new target groups (i.e., non-degree holders). It is also important to promote the recognition of prior and informal learning.

(3) Funding of distance education

- Many distance education students are in fee-paying programmes/courses.
- A majority of fee-paying students claim that fees are slightly higher than their living expenses.
- Few distance education students receive non-private support; many invest their own resources.

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<u>Funding of distance education related to adult learning and education</u>

- Tuition fees and the funding of education may constitute a barrier for those interested in higher education, including adult learners.
- Distance education is not necessarily instrumental in reducing social disparities. Those unreached by 'traditional' educational means are unlikely to take advantage of distance education if they cannot invest their own resources.
- It is therefore essential that funding opportunities are in place and that information on funding opportunities, in particular eligibility criteria, are well communicated. Students should also be able to receive assistance in choosing and securing an appropriate funding source.

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(4) Experiences of DE student (motivations, barriers, support)

- The **motivations** to study vary widely. Students mentioned the following:
  - curiosity;
  - to improve general well-being;
  - to stay mentally fit;
  - to increase career options.
  - to take advantage of an opportunity they did not have earlier in life; and
  - an investment in their socio-cultural status.
- The motivating factors to take part in *distance education* can be divided into 'external' and 'internal' factors.
  - 'External' motivating factors: The main external factors are time restrictions (and the flexibility offered by distance education), the physical distance to on-campus education, the (lack of) availability of the subject area in on-campus education, the language of tuition, health issues, and the costs of on-campus education. Alternative access is also mentioned (entry requirements to on-campus education not met).
  - 'Internal' motivating factors: Distance education is chosen not so much due to specific restrictions, but deliberately. Factors range from the reputation of the institution, an interest in a particular course/programme, to the way students like (and do not like) to learn.

- The students in our data set report that the language of tuition, the technology used and the recognition of prior learning comprise considerable challenges. Considering the non-response bias in the data set, it must be assumed that for some social groups, DE is not easily accessible. Among the main **challenges** are:
    - the recognition (validation and accreditation) of prior learning as an important aspect of access;
    - the cost of education; and
    - time restrictions as the main limitations of distance education students.

- Students state their strong need for the following modalities of **support**:
    - Learning material developed/adapted specifically for distance education;
    - Administrative/organisational support;
    - Opportunities to interact with teachers and other students; and
    - Moral and psychological support and counselling.

- Many students are satisfied with their provider, but wish for improvement in the following fields:
    - Financial support;
    - A stronger human factor in distance education (e.g., availability of tutors, more/better tutorials at convenient times, face-to-face modules);
    - Teachers/tutors are trained to meet the needs of students (e.g., dealing with dyslexic students).

Experiences of distance education students related to adult learning and education

- Distance education students are motivated by a variety of factors; above all, distance education is seen as an opportunity for lifelong learning, and more than education.
- External motivating factors (e.g., time restrictions, need for flexibility) are still more important than internal ones (e.g., interest in a particular distance education programme). Distance education is often the only alternative, not the first choice. HEIs therefore need to understand why adult students are

choosing distance education and should adapt. Distance education needs to be accessible (e.g., through the recognition of prior learning) and attractive (e.g., through choice and continued support) to learners.

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

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

References

Eurydice (2014), National Student Fee and Support Systems 2014/15, Facts and Figures, Brussels: Eurydice.

Holmberg, C. 2012. Presentation at the 4th Grundtvig European Conference on Professional Development and Mobility of Adult Education Staff, Florence, 6-8 June 2012.

Web links

IDEAL project website:
www.idealproject.eu

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

Bologna Process, Ministerial Conferences (documents):
http://www.ehea.info/article-details.aspx?ArticleId=43

UNESCO, Muscat Agreement:
http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002281/228122e.pdf

IDEAL Report 1:
https://idealprojectblog.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/ideal_report_final.pdf

ZEF:
http://www.zef.fi/en/home

EHEA countries:
http://www.ehea.info/members.aspx

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

Fernuniversität Hagen:

http://www.fernuni-hagen.de/arbeiten/statistik/daten/index.shtml

UOC:

http://www.uoc.edu/portal/en/universitat/coneix/fets-xifres/index.html

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http://www.fied.fr/fr/a-propos-de-nous/les-realisations.html

UKÄ:

http://english.uka.se/download/18.1c251de913ecebc40e780003403/1403093616295/
annual-report-2013-ny.pdf

Eurostat: Tertiary Education Statistics:

http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Tertiary_education_st
atistics

Tuning Educational Structures in Europe – Glossary of terms:

http://www.unideusto.org/tuningeu/documents/glossary- of-terms.html

IAU, List of Universities in the World:

http://www.iau-aiu.net/content/list-heis

The following terminology is used in the IDEAL project:

Adult education

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

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

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

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

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

Adult learners

Learners of any age returning to education after a period of work, unemployment, 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."[29] Credits are awarded in non-degree and degree programmes alike.

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."[30]

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 (≥ 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 survey, only higher education institutions that are on IAU's List of Universities of the World[31], accredited by the relevant national authorities and based within the European Higher Education Area[32] (EHEA) are considered.

Online education

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

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[29] See: Tuning Educational Structures in Europe – Glossary of terms: http://www.unideusto.org/tuningeu/documents/glossary- of-terms.html
[30] Ibidem.
[31] IAU List of Universities in the World: http://www.iau-aiu.net/content/list-heis
[32] EHEA countries: http://www.ehea.info/members.aspx

Appendix B

Country of residence

Table

Country of residence	Percentage	Number of respondents
Albania	0.17%	3
Andorra	0.06%	1
Austria	0.69%	12
Belgium	1.38%	24
Croatia	0.06%	1
Cyprus	2.12%	37
Czech Republic	0.34%	6
Denmark	0.23%	4
Finland	0.06%	1
France	1.26%	22
Georgia	0.11%	2
Germany	8.14%	142
Greece	9.81%	171
Ireland	1.95%	34
Italy	2.47%	43
Latvia	0.06%	1
Lithuania	0.06%	1
Luxembourg	0.40%	7
Malta	0.11%	2
Norway	0.75%	13
Other	2.01%	35
Poland	0.17%	3
Portugal	1.03%	18
Romania	0.11%	2
Russia	0.40%	7
Serbia	0.23%	4
Slovakia	0.11%	2
Spain	1.61%	28
Sweden	0.23%	4
Switzerland	0.92%	16
The Netherlands	1.38%	24
Turkey	0.63%	11
Ukraine	0.34%	6
United Kingdom	60.44%	1054

Country of provider

Table

Country of provider	Percentage	Number of providers
Albania	0.1%	1
Andorra	0.1%	1
Armenia	0.1%	1
Austria	0.1%	2
Belgium	0.2%	3
Croatia	0.1%	1
Cyprus	4.3%	71
Denmark	0.1%	2
Finland	0.1%	1
France	0.4%	6
Germany	4.7%	78
Greece	6.3%	104
Ireland	0.1%	1
Italy	1.3%	22
Latvia	0.1%	1
Lithuania	0.1%	1
na	0.1%	1
Norway	0.8%	13
Poland	0.1%	1
Portugal	0.8%	13
Russia	0.4%	6
Slovakia	0.1%	1
Spain	0.5%	8
Sweden	0.1%	1
Switzerland	0.1%	1
The Netherlands	0.7%	12
Turkey	0.5%	9
Ukraine	0.1%	2
United Kingdom	77.9%	1280