

IDEAL

Impact of Distance Education on Adult Learning



Distance education in European higher education -THE POTENTIAL-

Greece case study

Distance education in European higher education – the potential Greece case study

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

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Introduction

Tertiary education in Greece is divided into the University and the Technological sectors.² The University sector (ISCED levels 5A and 6) includes the Universities, the Technical Universities, the School of Fine Arts and the Hellenic Open University. The Technological sector (ISCED 5B) includes the Technological Education Institutions (TEIs) and the School of Pedagogical and Technological Education (ASPETE). All these institutions are publicly owned: legislation (Art. 16) dictates that ‘...tertiary education is exclusively delivered by self-administered institutions that constitute legal bodies of public interest ...’.

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

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

At this point it is important to mention that these numbers refer exclusively to students of public tertiary education institutions attending full-time courses. Unfortunately there are

² https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Greece:Overview#Higher_Education

no data available for the so-called 'private universities' or for part-time education at the aforementioned levels.

Adult learners in Greece

Every five years Eurostat runs the Adult Education Survey (AES)³ which studies the participation of 25-64-year-olds in education and training activities (formal, non-formal and informal). The most recent survey is the AES 2011 which was carried out in 2011 and 2012. This survey reveals that 11.7% of adults in Greece participated in education and training activities in those years, less than one third of the EU28 average of 40.3%. Unfortunately, this percentage represents an almost 20% decrease from the corresponding percentage of 14.5% in AES 2007. Micro-data indicate that the participation rate decreases significantly – almost exponentially – as the age of the adult learners increases. People aged 55-64 now account for 3.1% of the Greek population (EU28: 26.6%).

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

In contrast to the aforementioned negative findings, data indicate that adults in Greece aged 25-64 who participate in education and training activities spent nearly 177 hours on

³ http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/microdata/adult_education_survey

such activities in 2011 (EU28: 113 hours). Of these, 25-34-year-olds spent 297 hours (EU28: 188 hours) and 55-64-year-olds spent 68 hours (EU28: 70 hours). Hours spent on formal education and training activities are massively increased for ISCED 5-6 degree holders (Greece: 546 hours; EU28: 368 hours) and for ISCED 3-4 degree holders (Greece: 535 hours; EU28: 395 hours). Again contrary to previous findings, unemployed adults invested more hours in education and training than employed adults in 2011 (employed: 112 hours; unemployed: 255 hours). In 2012 unemployed adults also appeared to invest significant hours in training, although not as many as employed adults, possibly due to the severe financial crisis that forced people start thinking about re-skilling and up-skilling.

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

The regulatory framework in Greece

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

Based on Article 16 of the Greek Constitution⁴ (key points):

- Teaching and research are free and their development is an obligation of the State.
- Education at university level shall be provided exclusively by institutions which are fully self-governed by public attorneys. These institutions shall operate under the supervision of the State and are entitled to financial assistance from it; they shall operate on the basis of the statutorily enacted by-laws.
- Professors of university level institutions shall be public functionaries. The remaining teaching personnel likewise perform a public function, under the conditions specified by law.
- Professional and any other form of special education shall be provided by the State, through schools of a higher level and for a time period not exceeding three years, as specifically provided by law which also defines the professional rights of the graduates of such schools.
- The conditions and terms for granting a license for the establishment and operation of schools not owned by the State, the supervision of such and the professional status of teaching personnel therein shall be specified by law. The establishment of university level institutions by private persons is prohibited.

Students who wish to obtain a ‘distance’ degree from a university outside Greece (e.g. the UK) should contact the Hellenic National Academic Recognition and Information Center (NARIC)⁵, which is responsible for the recognition of university or technological

⁴ <http://www.hellenicparliament.gr/UserFiles/f3c70a23-7696-49db-9148-f24dce6a27c8/001-156%20aggliko.pdf>

⁵ <http://www.doatap.gr/en/index.php>

degrees awarded by foreign Higher Education Institutions. The regulatory framework stipulates particular requirements for the recognition of these degrees.⁶

- (a) The educational programme shall be delivered solely by the university and not by any other collaborating institution.
- (b) Evaluation, promotion and graduation shall take place via transparent and fair procedures, as is the case in conventional brick-and-mortar educational institutions in Greece. Procedures should be the same as those applied in the Hellenic Open University.
- (c) The academic department that offers the distance education course (e.g. bachelor in mathematics) should offer the same course face-to-face and with the same quality standards. This course should be also offered by the Hellenic Open University. Regarding the issue of equivalency of degrees obtained through a foreign 'distance' university, the regulatory framework necessitates that the course has to be delivered completely by the university and not through other collaborating institutions.

Recently a number of private institutions have begun to operate in this market. These institutions are officially recognized at ISCED level 4 and prepare students to obtain their ISCED 5A degree from universities in other countries. The certifications provided by these institutions cannot be equivalent to (national) tertiary education degrees; they are also not permitted to use the term 'university' in their self-definition or advertisements as the term is only applicable to public universities.⁷ The operation of these institutions is typically monitored by the foreign universities with which they collaborate, especially as regards examinations, projects and grading. Recognition of the degrees thus acquired is mostly focused on professional qualifications and rights to practice, which are administered by a particular body of the Greek Ministry of Education. For example, a teacher who qualifies at a private university in Greece has the right to teach in every school in the EU. Nevertheless, recognition of degrees must still go through the Hellenic NARIC.

⁶ Law 3328/2005

⁷ Law 3848/2010

National policies concerning distance education

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

The programme was centred on Strategic Goals and thematic Priority Axes. Priority Axes 7, 8 and 9, entitled 'Enhancing lifelong education for adults', focused on the development of distance learning by designing and implementing a series of distance education programmes. This is associated with the special objectives of enhancing the system, improving lifelong education services and promoting equal access, as well as increasing participation by establishing special incentives. According to the Operational Programme, the involvement of adults in lifelong learning through the provision of incentives was a key strategy choice. Given the geographical particularities of Greece, whose many islands and mountains can make access to important locations challenging, the potential of technologies for synchronous and asynchronous distance education was an important priority. The estimated number of beneficiaries (adults) from distance learning programmes is 57,750. However, no clear objective on distance education was set out in higher education institutions.

The Framework Programme for the New Programming Period 2014-2020 (EU Structural Funds)⁸ includes (a) the specific – horizontal – Operational Programme 'Human Resource Development, Education and Life Long Learning' and (b) a series of Regional

⁸ <http://www.espa.gr/el/Pages/staticNewProgrammingPeriod.aspx>

Operational Programmes where the same objectives will be pursued according to particular local needs. The main objectives of the horizontal OP are the following:

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

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

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

Universities providing distance education in Greece

Distance tertiary education in Greece is undertaken mainly through the Hellenic Open University⁹ (HOU) which offers undergraduate and postgraduate courses equivalent to those offered by 'traditional' universities, as well as vocational training and continuing education programmes. Greece is among the handful of countries in Europe that have a dedicated Higher Education Institution for distance learning, alongside the UK, Germany, Italy and Spain.

The key characteristics of HOU are:¹⁰

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

⁹ <http://www.eap.gr/> established by Law 2552/1997.

¹⁰ <http://www.eap.gr/view.php?artid=1179>

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

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

Various other universities offer professional competence development courses through their vocational education centers, either in traditional classroom-based mode or in a blended format including an online dimension. They always provide some kind of accreditation to the attendee featuring the university's seal, making these courses a popular 'trend'. Interestingly, apart from the Hellenic Open University, distance education initiatives are limited, and are confined to postgraduate studies. These programmes are typically supported by an online platform and do not require frequent attendance in person. Most of them are conducted by peripheral universities and typically cost less than 3,000€ for the whole programme; some are even free of charge. This state of affairs is also presented in the Eurydice Report on the Modernization of Higher Education in Europe 2014¹¹ (p. 51).

The strategy of Higher Education institutions in Greece as regards distance education therefore seems to focus clearly on the exploitation of existing infrastructures and human resources (academics) so as to provide mainly distance professional development courses rather than graduate courses (with the exception of a few postgraduate courses).

¹¹ European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2014. Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe: Access, Retention and Employability 2014. Eurydice Report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

The reason for this is probably to be found in the nature of the Universities in Greece, which are state-owned, so as not to compete with the Hellenic Open University.

Table 1: Overview of institutions offering distance education within Greece

Institution	Number of courses	Key data	Tuition fees
Hellenic Open University	31	Undergraduate and postgraduate	Undergraduate: € 6,600 Postgraduate: € 2,800
Ger Vocational Training Centre ¹² of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens many	350	Successful completion of each course leads to a certificate. Since 2001 more than 20,000 adults have participated in its courses. The Centre is accredited by the National Accreditation Centre for Continuing Vocational Training (E.KE.PIS).	€ 950-1,600 (depending on duration of study; € 150-250 per month)
University of Piraeus ¹³	70	Has trained more than 4,500 adults and been selected by more than 100 companies to train their staff. Operates both purely distance education and classroom-based or online (synchronous and asynchronous) education for professional development. The programme has been certified by TUV Austria Hellas based on EN ISO 9001:2008.	€ 350-700 (depending on duration of study; € 116 per month)
University of Aegean ¹⁴	43	Professional development courses based mostly on the asynchronous online approach, partly supported by synchronous online learning. Provides training certification and an accompanying certificate confirming the ECVET (Credits).	€ 200-1,600 (for professional development courses)
Athens University of Economics and Business ¹⁵	6	Online classes, synchronous e-learning, blended learning approach	€ 230-700

As mentioned earlier, there are a series of colleges in Greece that offer distance education courses in collaboration with foreign universities, providing undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. A quick search in <http://www.distancelearningportal.com> reveals

¹² <http://elearn.elke.uoa.gr>

¹³ <http://elearning.xrh.unipi.gr>

¹⁴ <https://e-epimorfosi.aegean.gr/>

¹⁵ http://elearning.kek.aueb.gr/?gclid=CK-PjfG7ucECFWYTwwod_F4ApQ

21 such courses, but in fact there are many more. The reason they are not discussed in this case study is that these establishments are not officially considered Higher Education Institutions (ISCED 5 and 6) in Greece. Although students may follow a course and gain a recognized degree at the end, this degree does not render them eligible to continue their education at a recognized tertiary education institution.

Students in distance education

The survey surface data^{16,17} mostly relates to the students of the Hellenic Open University, which is the dominating Distance Higher Education institution in Greece. The HOU typically receives at least 8 applications per place available. A typical HOU student has common characteristics with a student of any other university in Greece. In both cases the prevailing aim is to obtain a degree, but HOU students tend to be more focused on improving their career opportunities.

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

In a separate study concerning evaluation of the HOU¹⁸ by former students, alumni appeared to be satisfied with the curricula on offer. Nevertheless, they suggested that the HOU's facilities needed updating in a number of respects: in particular, the institution was said to be in need of a contemporary library and complete and up-to-date educational material. The lack of such material and of the necessary infrastructure was felt to be particularly problematic. Women reported difficulties in using electronic resources. Many students did not see any improvement in their career opportunities immediately after obtaining their degree. This may be due to employers' negative perception of the distance education degree, as well as the fact that most students were already working and chose distance education simply in order to obtain a tertiary education degree. Over the long term, however, students' career opportunities did improve.

The study also revealed a number of barriers that students face when enrolling in distance education courses. First and foremost, family and professional obligations significantly increase drop-out rates, especially for women. This situation also creates a

¹⁶ http://meae.eap.gr/filesupload/training/yliko_ae/ch_2.pdf

¹⁷ http://meae.eap.gr/filesupload/training/yliko_ae/ch_1.pdf

¹⁸ <http://repository.edulll.gr/edulll/retrieve/417/116.pdf>

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

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

Universities and adult learners

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

Table 2: Age group statistics for adult learners in Greece

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

In general, the success rates for distance education are lower than those for traditional classroom-based education. It is not always straightforward to determine when a student has dropped out: for example, should a student who has registered on a distance education course but never submitted an assignment be counted as a dropout? Typically, students are counted as dropouts if they meet certain minimums, e.g. if they have submitted only 1-2 assignments.¹⁹ The typical reasons for dropping out have to do with family obligations (difficulties in combining studying with caring for children), underestimation of study workload, and working life requirements (e.g. changes in working conditions). Interestingly, gender appears not to affect dropout rates, even among the most vulnerable group of 30-39-year-olds, who are most likely to be overtaxed by the daily challenges of family and work. There is also no statistical difference between employed and unemployed students. Dropouts do, however, tend to be much more common on undergraduate than postgraduate courses, possibly due to undergraduate students' lack of tertiary education experience.²⁰

¹⁹ http://www.eap.gr/news/EXAGGELIA_SYNEDRIOU/synedrio/html/sect4/58.htm

²⁰ Pierrakeas, C., Xenos, M., Panagiotakopoulos, C. and Vergidis, D. (2004). A comparative study of dropout rates and causes for two different distance education courses. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, Vol. 5, No. 2.

Another study²¹ indicates an overall dropout rate of nearly 28%, including students who registered but never started their studies and re-registered the following year, and students who started their studies and successfully completed some assignments/modules but decided to drop out afterwards for personal reasons.²² Results also indicate that students between 29 and 35 years old are more likely to decide not to start their studies, mostly due to an unmanageable workload and frequent changes of work. Moreover, it seems that older students are more likely to drop out than younger ones. Students who have delivered their first assignments are more likely to continue their studies than students who have not. Another important finding of this study concerns gender differences. Women are more likely to register and then not start their studies, but when they do start, they are more persistent and do not drop out as often as males. Marital status does not appear to correlate with dropout rates in any significant way.

²¹ Xenos, M., Pierrakeas, C. and Pintelas, P. (2002). A survey on student dropout rates and dropout causes concerning the students in the Course of Informatics of the Hellenic Open University. *Computers & Education*, Vol. 39, pp. 361-377.

²² This data is quite old but was the only publicly available data we could find. Personal – unofficial – communications proved that things have not changed a lot since then.

Adult entering higher education

Adults have particular motivations to enter or re-enter Higher Education. Most prominent among these are work-related educational needs, career improvement and recognition of practical knowledge. In order to enter Higher Education, adults must either have graduated from secondary school and possess the appropriate certificate, or follow a procedure ('2nd chance schools') to obtain the lower secondary certificate. In order to re-enter, e.g. for postgraduate courses, they must follow a separate procedure for each course. These procedures are often demanding and bureaucratic, making the option of distance education a popular alternative. Student selection in the Hellenic Open University is carried out through a random public electronic draw for undergraduate and postgraduate courses. Other universities follow their own selection procedures. In the private institutions described earlier, selection carried out based on the guidance of the foreign universities they collaborate with. The most popular distance education courses are business administration and informatics for undergraduates, and education studies, banking and MBAs for postgraduates.

Recognition of prior formal, non-formal and informal learning is not mentioned in current Greek legislation.²³ However, there are plans to include it in the near future.²⁴ The only relevant legislation in place at present is a mechanism for linking accredited VET programmes to formal higher education programmes through the recognition and transfer of credit points.²⁵ Naturally, this situation hinders adult access to higher education. The problem is actually even greater than this, as HE institutions in Greece do not offer part-time undergraduate courses, although some offer part-time postgraduate programmes. Tuition fees do not apply for undergraduate courses in Greece, but are charged for many part-time postgraduate courses. As mentioned earlier, tuition fees are charged at the Hellenic Open University (for learning, information and evaluation materials), but students

²³ Eurydice (2011). *Adults in Formal Education: Policies and Practice in Europe*. Brussels.

²⁴ European Commission (2013). *Developing the Adult Learning Sector Final Report*. LOT 3: Opening Higher Education to Adults. Contract EAC 2012-0074. Available at http://commit.eucen.eu/sites/commit.eucen.eu/files/HEAD_FinalReport.pdf

²⁵ http://www.minedu.gov.gr/publications/docs/pd_38_100802.pdf

receive support in the form of payment in installments, reduced fees and increased scholarships due to the financial crisis.