

PROS AND CONS OF DISTANCE EDUCATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF HUMANITIES AND ECONOMICS IN LODZ AS PERCEIVED BY THE STUDENTS - A CASE STUDY

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***Abstract:** The article deals with advantages and disadvantages of distance study in higher education. The article presents the results of research focused on examining the advantages and disadvantages of distance study at the University of Humanities and Economics in Lodz as perceived by its adult students.*

The aim of the research was to determine the subjective satisfaction of students with their distance studies. To gather the data we decided to use qualitative research with semi-standardized interviews.

The research sample consisted of students of Master's degree program, who had previous experience with a combined form of studies. They had studied in a combined form of study in a Bachelor's degree program. All students are older than 30.

Keywords: AHE, distance study, e-learning, adult students

INTRODUCTION

Although employees are required to develop their competences, frequently employers are not willing to let their workers undergo education activities during working hours, even though they realize the importance of their employees further education. One of the possibilities to solve this problem is through e-learning education, which is steadily becoming more popular. Distance learning is also suitable for people with disabilities, mothers on maternity leave, and it is also suitable for people living in regions with insufficient transport infrastructure, etc. (Zormanová, 2016)

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Distance education is a new form of education which takes place when a teacher and students are physically separated and they use technology for making connection between them (Heinrich, Molenda, Rusell, Smaldino, 2002). Distance education is a formalised teaching and learning system which provides opportunity to study without the use of classroom or face-to face interaction with teachers.

Distance education has a lot of advantages, including its own pedagogical merit, leading to different ways of conceiving knowledge generation (UNESCO, 20002).

Distance education increase opportunities for learning and training, improves cost effectiveness of educational resources. There are also some other advantages of distance education as flexibility, balancing inequalities between age group, limitation of geographical aspects or physical disabilities. One of the most important advantages of distance learning is its convenience because students can easily study at home, which has a good influence on the combination of education with work and family life. Distance learning can also increase interactions with students, mainly in the case of introverted students (Franklin, Yoakam, Warren, 1996). In daily life, students more and more often prefer studying internet sources to traditional handbooks (Morze, Spiwak, Smyrnova-Trybulska, 2015). Interactive online courses have a positive influence on performance in terms of knowledge acquisition than using traditional education forms (Leszczyński, Gotlib, Kopański, Wejnarski, Świeżewski, Gałązkowski, 2015). It seems that it would be good to provide online courses which replace conventional lectures (Roszak, Kołodziejczak, Kowalewski, Ren-Kurce, 2016).

2. A CASE STUDY - AHE (THE UNIVERSITY OF HUMANITIES AND ECONOMICS IN ŁODZ)

There are distance education forms of bachelor and master study programs and courses of lifelong learning and complementary studies taught at AHE (The University of Humanities and Economics in Łodz) thanks to the Polish Virtual.

The following bachelor study programmes were offered at AHE in the academic year 2016/2017 in the distance learning form: Administration, Journalism, Economy, Philology, Finances and Accounting, Graphics, Informatics, Economy, Culturology, Pedagogy, Political Science, Psychology, Sociology, Nursing, International Relationships, Recreology, Logistics.

The following master study programmes were offered at AHE in the academic year 2016/2017 in the distance learning form: English Philology, German Philology, Polish Philology, Graphics, Material Engineering, Pedagogy, Political Science, Sociology.

As part of the complementary studies the following study programmes were offered at AHE in the academic year 2016/2017: Tax Consultancy; English Language

Didactics for Kindergarten and First Grades of Primary School; Physics for Primary and Grammar Schools; History for Primary and Grammar Schools; Informatics with E-Learning Elements; Teaching for Kindergarten and First Grades of Primary School; Mathematics for Primary and Grammar Schools, Ethics Teaching; Safety Education, International Trade, Financial Audit; Logistics; Pedagogy for People with Limited Legal Capacity; Neurologopaedics, Pedagogy, Resocialization, Work with Pupils with Specific Education Needs, Therapy and Education of Children and Youth with Autism and Asperger Syndrome; Psychology of Sport; Psychology in Business (Akademia Humanistyczno-Ekonomiczna w Łodzi, <http://www.ahe.lodz.pl/akademia/uczelnia>)

2.1 Organization of Distance Studies at AHE

Teaching is organized into 2–3 attended lectures at the university during the semester and the remaining study is done through an online environment. The attended lectures are planned face-to-face meetings between students and teachers. This usually consists of the introductory meeting before the start of the course, where students are informed what is to be expected from them and get acquainted with distance learning methodology. Further on, later in the semester, there is another meeting in order to reactivate and motivate students and help solve their study problems. Finally there is an evaluation meeting at the end of the course (Akademia Humanistyczno-Ekonomiczna w Łodzi, <http://www.ahe.lodz.pl/akademia/uczelnia>).

The e-learning environment under (in Polish: Platforma zdalnego nauczania PUW) is one of the largest in Poland and operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week (Akademia Humanistyczno-Ekonomiczna w Łodzi, <http://www.ahe.lodz.pl/akademia/uczelnia>).

The course of the distance study is overseen by the association called Polish Virtual University (PUW), which is comprised of methodologists, information scientists, graphic artists and editors. The association helps academia teachers in creating distance learning materials.

Distance learning is carried out online. The online environment features didactic materials used for studying: distance study aids in textual and audiovisual form, textbooks written specifically for distance studies, discussion boards and chat rooms. Students also keep receiving tasks from their teachers in this online environment; they complete the tasks inside the environment and also receive feedback there. Another feature of the online environment is the creation of tests and evaluation of students. The tests are immediately evaluated by a computer program, which also assigns a mark for the test. Teachers may keep testing the knowledge of students throughout the course with tests whose results may or may not be counted in the final evaluation of the class. There is also a messaging system inside the online environment, where students and teachers can message each other.

3. THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The aim of the research was to determine the subjective satisfaction of students with their distance studies. We focused on their motivation to study in the distance form, map the positives and negatives of this form of study as subjectively perceived by the respondents themselves.

The aim brought about the following research questions:

- What are the causes for students selecting the distance form of studies?
- What are respondents' motivational factors to study?
- What advantages and disadvantages do respondents see in distance studies?

3.1 Research Methodology

To gather the data – information answering the specified questions – we decided to use qualitative research with semi-standardized interviews.

Open coding technique was used to analyse the data. Analysed interviews were divided into units, which in this case mean words, sentences or paragraphs based on their meaning; the units are therefore semantic wholes. Units were assigned their codes.

Once a list of codes has been created, their categorization could begin.

Categorization created the following categories:

- Reason to choose distance form of education
- Motivation to study
- Support from family, friends and others
- The positives of distance form of study
- The negatives of distance form of study

The technique of laying cards was used to evaluate individual categories; the categories are organized into an image, which serves as the basis for text compilation in a way that retells the content of individual categories.

3.2 Characteristic of the Research Sample

The interviews were carried out with Pedagogy students of the first year of master study program studied in distance form. There were ten respondents. All respondents were middle-aged, between 35 to 48 years old. Nine respondents were employed full-time; one female respondent was on a maternity leave. Nine respondents have children. All respondents had previous experience with a combined form of study, therefore being able to compare both forms of studies

4. RESEARCH RESULTS

4.1 Reason for choosing the distance form of study

Respondents stated choosing this form of study due to time constraints, because combining study, family and work responsibilities is difficult and the distance form of study enables them to study at times when it is most suitable for them.

“This form of study seemed the least time consuming, which I appreciate as a full-time employee. I do not waste time by unnecessary travels.” (Respondent A)

One female respondent chose this form of study due to health issues.

“I choose this study also because of health reasons, since my health caused problems during regular studies.” (Respondent B)

4.2 Support from Family, Friends and Others

Respondents frequently mention that they are able to manage the difficulties of studies due to the help from their friends and family, who motivate them to study and provide support during hard times of study set-backs. The family also represents a significant help in harmonizing study, work and family duties, sometimes even providing financial help.

“I am also motivated by the responsibility to my whole family, who greatly participates and actually allows me to study (especially my husband and parents helping with babysitting, and my parents helping financially, because as I am currently on a maternity leave, my studies are demanding on my relatives...). My sister, who obtained a PhD degree, is also a big motivation for me as I would like to be at least a little like her, plus she encourages me, supports me and gives me energy, because I often don't believe in myself and am afraid that I will fail...” (Respondent D)

Frequently, the respondents state that family or friends supported them to begin studying. They boosted their self-confidence, and provided them with the sense that they could succeed when in doubt. Their scepticism about their study abilities was caused by previous study failures.

“I studied at university right after the grammar school, sadly unsuccessfully, which I never truly came to terms with. The idea of going to study again was ever-present, but I was afraid of another failure... But I wanted to prove it to myself. So when I discovered a field that was interesting for me, it was by chance that my always optimistic sister (unlike me) pushed me in the right direction at the right moment... And to be continuing at the master level I would have not thought possible a couple of years ago, since my original goal was ‘only’ the bachelor degree...” (Respondent E)

4.3 Positives of Distance Studies

Since the respondents of this research already had previous experience with other forms of studies (full-time and combined), they could compare the time demand of

all forms of studies. The respondents knew how time-consuming it is to study, therefore they perceived the saved time during distance studies in comparison to the combined or full-time studies. All respondents agree that the most prominent positive aspect of distance education is the saved time and costs connected with it, which is caused by not having to commute to school as often as during combined studies.

"The main positive aspect is the time saved by not having to commute to school. This reflects on saved costs as well." (Respondent G)

Since most of the respondents are employed full-time, with the exception of one female respondent, who is on a maternity leave, they found the distance form of study highly suitable. Respondents appreciate the possibility of studying whenever it is suitable for them, a specific advantage of distance studies. The significant time-saving is perceived to be caused by the fact that studying can be done at home, during suitable times, without having to spend more time during lectures

"Less time spent at school, more time for other matters. More time for self-studying..." (Respondent H)

Since most of the respondents also have children, they also have to harmonize their family, work and study responsibilities. They appreciate the fact that it is possible with the distance form of studies. All respondents agree they have better conditions to harmonize all three types of responsibilities owing to the distance form of study; due to being able to plan the time of studying according to their own schedule and by saving time that would otherwise be spent commuting to school. Respondents perceive this advantage of distance study more strongly, because they had the experience of harmonizing family, work and study responsibilities in a combined form of studies, which they all went through in their bachelor study programmes.

"The advantage for me is that I don't have to commute to school, which was very demanding to do when I worked and studied bachelor programme in the combined form. School was in the afternoons on weekdays, I had complications finishing early at work, had to make up for the missed hours by working on weekends, and I also had to find someone to pick my daughter up from kindergarten..." (Respondent D)

Respondents also stated that the positives of the distance form of study is quality and effective distance study materials and precisely defined requirements to successfully complete a subject.

"Well and clearly prepared study aids and materials. Clearly and precisely defined requirements. The chance of individual consultations with lecturers. That's concerning my current studies at AHE." Respondent I)

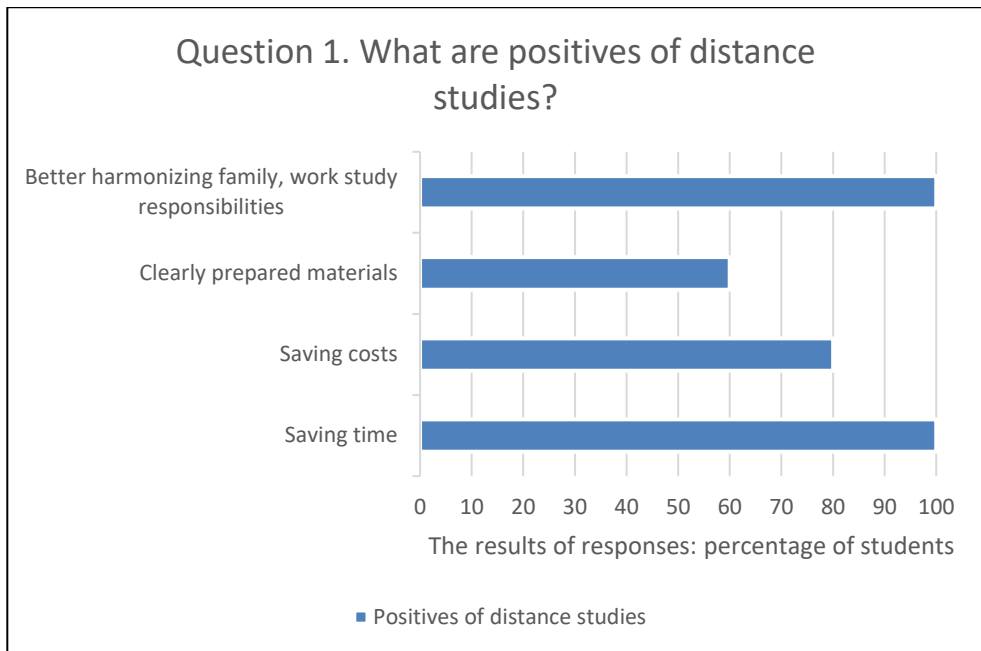


Figure 1. Positives of distance studies (in percentage)

Source: *Own Research*

4.4 Negatives of Distance Studies

The negative aspect mentioned by most respondents was the feeling of social isolation during studying. Most students see the absence of personal contact with classmates and teachers, and absence of direct conversation with teachers, as the negative aspect of distance form of studies.

“I see negatives in the fact that I’m in less contact with my classmates – a personal contact that is” (Respondent J)

“Though I don’t have to commute to school, I miss the personal contact with my classmates and teachers. I miss the personal touch and the fact we can’t discuss tasks, requirements of individual subjects, give and get help, support each other... Also limited contact with teachers is a disadvantage for me. I learn better when hearing about a topic, making notes and clarifying things with questions. I realize I can contact anyone via e-mail and ask for help, but I prefer personal contact, even with the price of having to visit school more often...” (Respondent D)

This absence of contact with other students and teachers is frequently connected with motivation to study – students can motivate each other during meetings, teachers motivate students during lectures and seminars; these are not as frequent in the distance form of studies as they are during combined or full-time studies.

“I perceive few negatives. Maybe the limited contact with the university environment, which can also motivate, and with other colleagues, as well as direct feedback.” (Respondent I)

Students frequently realize, and perceive this as a negative aspect, the hardships of self-organizing their studies. They face issues with determination to self-study, fight procrastination.

“More time to self-study obviously leads to procrastination.” (Respondent E)

Other respondents do not perceive any negatives of the distance form of study; they find it fully satisfying.

“None for me.” (Respondent A)

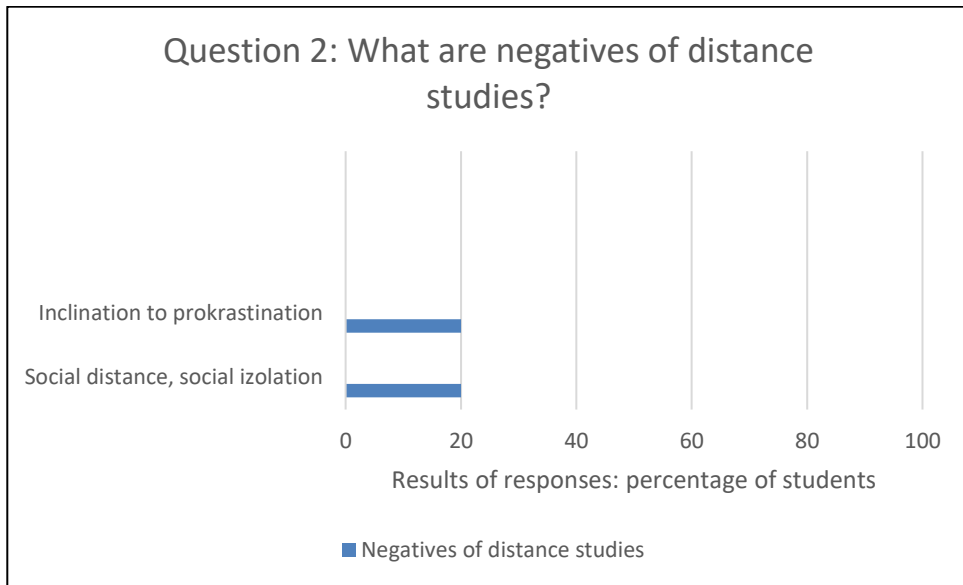


Figure 2. Negatives of distance studies (in percentage)

Source: *Own Research*

5. RESEARCH RESULT SUMMARY

Research results show that the motivation of all respondents to study, to begin and continue studying, was their current or possible future career or change of job. Although jobs and job positions were frequently mentioned, they were not the only driving force behind studying. Respondents also strived to increase their professional competences, cared for self-development. Respondents felt the need to educate themselves and gain new knowledge that they could utilise in practise.

Certain motivation for students is also the support of their family and closed-ones, who encourage them, and help them overcome obstacles and study problems, and also help them to harmonize family, work and study responsibilities.

Since the respondents had previous experience with the classic combined form of studies, they could compare that to the current distance form, and agree that the distance form of studies is less time consuming and can be better harmonized with family and work responsibilities. Students also valued the effectiveness of study materials and clarity of requirements to successfully finish individual subjects in their current distance studies.

Some respondents perceive the social isolation as a negative aspect that lessens their motivation. Social distance causing the feeling of social isolation implies students have to deal with limited feeling of solidarity, with loneliness, both of which negatively influences their success chances and may lead to quitting the distance studies. Another negative aspect mentioned by students was a higher inclination to procrastinate, since study activities were not organised.

CONCLUSIONS

The article described the subjective satisfaction of students with their distance studies. We dealt with students' motivation to study in the distance form and the causes for students selecting the distance form of studies, we mapped the positives and negatives of this form of study as subjectively perceived by the respondents themselves.

Research results showed that students' motivation to study was their current or possible future career or change of job and also we found that students selected the distance form of studies because of health reasons and also because this form of study seemed the least time consuming.

Research results showed that students valued the fact that the distance form of studies could be better harmonized with family and work responsibilities. Students also valued the effectiveness of study materials.

Research results showed that distance education has some disadvantages. Some respondents perceived the social distance and social isolation. Some students were more inclined to procrastinate when studying in this form.

Based on the research results we created some recommendations.

The following recommendations to improve distance studies can be provided based on the research results:

1. Students evaluate the distance form of study mostly positively. Adult students perceive this form of study as less demanding in terms of harmonizing family, work and study responsibilities in comparison to the combined form of study. We therefore recommend using the distance form for adult students more prominently. We recommend to provide the distance form of study over the combined one. Distance form of study, as demonstrated in the research, is a highly suitable form of studies for adult

students, who frequently have to harmonize family, work and study obligations. The distance form of study feels adequate for them because they are able to fulfil their study obligations at times that suit them. Furthermore, they save their time that would be otherwise spent commuting to school.

2. As a negative aspect, students mentioned little contact with the teacher and they regretted not being able to discuss individual tasks and study requirements personally with the teacher. We recommend eliminating this problem by organizing two meetings. The first, introductory one, to present students and teachers, study plans of individual subjects and requirements for their successful completion. The second, final one, to evaluate the course.

Besides meetings we recommend frequent e-mail contact between students and teachers, and allowing students to get in touch with teachers over the phone.

3. Since a number of respondents experienced social isolation and problems stemming from social distance, this problem needs to be eliminated. A number of respondents felt a low amount of communication with other students and with teachers as a negative aspect and connected it with decreased motivation to study. The problem can be remedied by frequent contacts between students and teachers and between students themselves; here we recommend using an online forum, on which once a week or biweekly, teachers can post a topic for discussion, ideally based on a topical article or event, together with questions that students can answer.
4. Inclination to procrastination can be eliminated by assigning study tasks or shorter seminar papers to students once per week or once per two weeks. The study tasks or seminar papers are always connected with one of the covered topics or individual topics. Students must complete these tasks and send their solutions to the teacher for evaluation and feedback. Students are evaluated based on these tasks. Similarly to study tasks, students send their assigned seminar papers to the teacher and get feedback on them.

Tasks or seminar papers assigned to students in this way provide feedback to the students on the partial results of their study work and motivate them to learning. Effectively refined feedback is the basic prerequisite to secure a transfer. It is important to not have a long pause between sending the task solution or seminar paper and receiving the feedback from the teacher as that would demotivate students.

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