

Supporting Students as a Means of Preventing Dropout in Open and Distance Education

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A case study on the “Education Sciences” postgraduate program at the Hellenic Open University

Abstract: The purpose of the current research is to explore how to reduce the dropout rates in Distance Education through supporting students. More precisely, it focuses on measures that can be taken to help and encourage students facing difficulties and dealing with obstacles during their studies at the Hellenic Open University, thus fighting against dropout. The analysis of the results showed that both the academic staff and the students of the postgraduate program “Education Sciences” believe that the assistance provided to the students is not sufficient and that further measures should be taken to support students more effectively. Tutors, as well as students, claim that not only the role of a tutor is what ensures confidence during guidance and creating a climate of encouragement and support, but also he/she is the key person who can help, both academically and psychologically, students to continue their studies and finish them successfully. Tutors who participated in this research pointed out that, by supporting students, they can become more independent, while students claimed that they need more guidance, encouragement, and assistance from their tutors, even when they do not face difficulties while studying. Students feel that “Tutor –Student” communication is not as essential or effective as it should be and they further believe that a common line should be adopted so that all educators treat all students equally in all seriousness, especially those who encounter difficulties that affect their studies. Students also highlighted the importance of communication, cooperation, and collaboration between students and suggest that both the educational institution and its academic staff should employ these methods. Finally, the Hellenic Open University should adopt new methods and keep up with the current trends in the field of distance education, in order to integrate all students, even those who are at risk of dropping out.

Keywords: Open and Distance Education Dropout, Student Support, Hellenic Open University, Study Obstacles

Introduction

In recent years, at a global level, Open and Distance Education (ODE) is gaining more and more ground and is filling a gap that traditional education systems are unable to fill. So it seems to be one of the basic ways of educating and training adults. However, despite the advantages that Open and Distance Education (ODE) offers and that have been documented in many surveys, there is a great contradiction that makes it incapable of meeting the needs of trainees. As more higher education institutions expand their programs to include forms of distance learning, additional information is needed to support distance students and to prevent them from dropping out.

Student dropout occurs at all levels of education. A rich literature concerning primary and secondary education dropout and educational underachievement reveals an area of great interest for researchers spanning many years. Research focusing specifically on the reasons of student dropout at universities can be found in Tinto,

(1975) Bajtelsmit, (1988), and Giles (1999). The roots of this phenomenon especially at the Hellenic Open University is of particular importance, especially taking into consideration that distance learning is aimed to reduce educational inequality. Taking into account that these students have all enrolled in the module of their choice and they also have paid a part of their fee, it is assumed that these adult learners have selected and programmed their course of studies in accordance with their personal interests, capabilities, responsibilities and obligations. So, the study of the causes of the dropout at the Hellenic Open University can substantially contribute to the evaluation of the institution as a whole, especially for the University’s postgraduate program: “Education Studies”

Student dropout rates from higher distance education are definitely higher than those in traditional higher institutions so it is necessary to find ways to tackle the dropout (Grapsas & Mavroidis, 2017). Early abandonment is mainly due to occupational, academic,



family, health and personal reasons and varies depending on the educational system adopted by the educational system and the chosen course of study (Street, 2010). According to relevant research, the factors that lead ODE students to drop out of their studies appear to be in order of importance: financial reasons, lack of time, inadequate educational material, lack of support from the educational institution and tutors. Addressing the issue of dropout in higher education in the Hellenic Open University (HOU) seems to be a matter of great concern in recent years, considering it necessary and necessary to provide students with the educational support needed to successfully integrate them using the methods and tools offered by modern technology (Lionarakis, et.al, 2017).

According to Vergidis and Panagiotakopoulos (2002) the main mission of Open Universities globally is to “*address the educational and re-educational needs of workforce labor needs by providing quality, high level studies*” (Evans and Lockwood, 1994; Evans and Nation, 1996). Thus, the core philosophy of those universities is different from the conventional educational systems and seeks to promote the lifelong education and to provide adults with “*a second educational chance*” (Keegan, 1993). This method of educating is known as “distance learning studies” and aims to provide educational benefits within the geographical dominion of a country or even outside its borders, thereby bypassing geographic, social, economic and time obstacles (Vergidis and Panagiotakopoulos, 2002). In other words, access to open learning offers sensitive population groups (e.g., unemployed, handicapped, mothers, emigrants, immigrants, etc.) the opportunity to further develop themselves through attaining a quality education.

The selected sample of the current research comes from the Hellenic Open University (HOU), the origins of which can be traced back to 1992. In 1995, an administrative committee was established to help determine and manage the orientation of this nascent institution. In 1997, its founding law was passed. Looking at the records of the administrative committee of for 1995-1997, a period of time in which the overall characteristics of the institution were defined and formed; it was evident that the British model significantly influenced the subsequent formation and operation of the Hellenic Open University. Furthermore, after an interdisciplinary agreement was ratified allowing the Hellenic Open University to use such learning materials, many materials developed for distance learning in English universities (i.e., Manchester and the Open University), were translated into Greek. For 4,537 places, the Hellenic Open University received 23,941 applications (13,500 for

undergraduate studies and 10,441 for post graduate studies). To admit students, a draw is usually held. Also it must be underlined that although tertiary studies in Greece are offered to students free of cost, at the Hellenic Open University charges students tuition to cover its operating costs (Vergidis and Panagiotakopoulos, 2002).

The purpose of this paper is to find out how student support could help facing the problem of dropout in ODE programs, especially within the HOU. The research is expected to illuminate the unseen aspects of students' perceptions of their requirements and the difficulties they face in making such a decision. The results will provide the impetus to reflect on and redefine the role and function of higher open and distance education to make it more useful to students and therefore to society. The specific purpose is to answer the following research questions:

- What are the specifics of ODE studies and what is the educational background of the trainees
- What are the difficulties and obstacles that discourage students and push them to stop studying?
- What kind of support they would like in order to continue and finish their studies
- How does student support help tackle the dropout in ODE

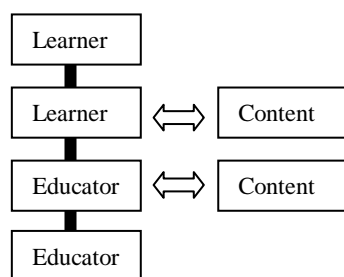
This research project concerns students of the HOU and more specifically those who attend the postgraduate program "Education Sciences". The sample of the research is composed of fourteen (14) students and four (4) tutors related to the above program. The aim is to identify the difficulties and obstacles that lead to dropout through the comparative presentation of the views of students and tutors. This will investigate whether the factors affecting dropout can be addressed through educational support and how the proposed ways of support can be preventive in addressing the phenomenon.

II. The Concept of Communication and Interaction

Communication is defined as the exchange of information and is considered essential for the learning process. Zeitoun (1998) defined communication as a process of interaction between two or more parties for the transmission of a particular message, concept, idea, opinion, etc. It is the skill that transmits a message from the sender to the receiver through a selected channel. This interaction with verbal or nonverbal media through appropriate channels includes computer networks and their software. ICTs allow two or more parties to transfer their experiences (cognitive, psychomotor, and emotional) from one place to another electronically. The global contact details are the sender and receiver, a transport channel and the feedback. The

established relationship between learning and communication implies that the key to learning is interaction. The interaction is now available online through video conferencing, chat rooms and other media. Garrison and Anderson (2003) reported that all forms of learning occur as interactions between educators, learners, and content. The two angles of the triangle are the human element and the non-human, just as necessary for e-learning. Bates (2005) emphasized two different types of interactivity: the first, isolated and individual, such as the learner's interaction with the content, and the second, social and reciprocal, between two or more learners. He emphasized that the two types of interactions were important in the learning process.

Figure 1. Typical Interaction

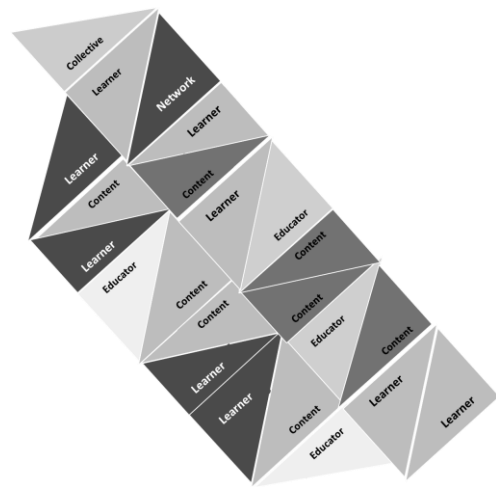


Moore (1989) suggested that there are three main types of interaction within educational contexts: (1) between learner and educator, (2) between learners, (3) between learners and content (Figure 1). This research focuses on the importance of the second type of interaction, i.e. the interaction that occurs between learners and educators. A number of subsequent typologies have emerged, which seek to either extend the basic principles of Moore's interaction or to define additional forms of interaction within the educational context. The Interaction Matrix brings together the dynamic interactions that can occur in modern online learning environments into a single model that can be used to design, develop and facilitate online learning initiatives.

Considering the full range of possible interactions possible, the Interaction Matrix shown in Figure 2 illustrates the key elements of a socially structured learning environment, as various collaborative interactions are involved. Sims and Stork (2007) suggest that designers should be aware of the unique cultural and social contexts of trainees, which influence their ability to participate in online learning environments. Emerging plans allow students to integrate their individuality, experience and culture into teaching and learning. Such plans will increase the completeness of the interactions. Designers need to be aware of each of these possible interactions and

incorporate as many of them as possible in an effort to provide the learners with the maximum level of control in their learning experience.

Figure 2. Interaction Matrix



II. Research Scope and Question

There are a great number of researches concerning the dropout phenomenon in traditional education programs, and in particular most research is concerned with formal education and school dropout, which is a very sensitive and current issue. However, there has been limited research on the factors leading to discontinuation and dropout of studies at open and distance education. The most relevant studies in comparison with the present study focus on either the factors that influence the dropout phenomenon in ODE or the educational background of adult learners who do not complete their studies. This remains an unexplored landscape of what ODE students themselves believe about how support could help tackle the dropout. The purpose of this research is to explore the difficulties and obstacles faced by postgraduate students of the HOU, and in particular the "Education Sciences" program, which lead them to think about abandoning their studies and to find out how their support could help. The answers to the following questions are sought through this investigation:

- 1) What do students expect from their distance learning experience?
- 2) What do they believe concerning the main difficulties and obstacles they face in their studies and push them to drop out?
- 3) How does support prevent students from leaving the ODE programs?
- 4) What are the demands of the students to redefine the role of the ODE and keep it in orbit until the completion of their studies?

III. Research Methodology

For the purpose of the research process, the qualitative method was chosen, which helps to more deeply understand the personal views and perceptions of the respondents and can perform an in-depth analysis (Bell, 1997). Although the qualitative method may not yield generalized results for the problem under investigation, it can reveal interesting aspects through the views of the research participants (Creswell, 2011). The purpose of the qualitative method is to investigate not only the causes of dropout but also the need for support in dealing with obstacles to the open and distance educational process. Interviews can provide information and findings on the importance of support for students and tutors as direct stakeholders.

The research tool was the semi-structured interview with open-ended questions that were divided in four axes related to the respective research questions. Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions provide more flexibility and allow the interviewer to direct the discussion and seek clarification in order to avoid misunderstandings. Also, through personal

contact, an appropriate atmosphere is created so that the interviewee can express his or her views and positions comfortably on the subject under investigation. Interviews, averaging 20 to 30 minutes, were recorded with the consent of the interviewers.

The questions asked to the students were open-ended and grouped in the following axes:

1. The first axis includes questions about the status and educational background of students starting their studies at the HOU

2. The second axis includes questions about the, experiences, the obstacles and difficulties that students encounter in their studies at HOU

3. The third axis includes questions that express their views on the phenomenon of dropout at HOU.

4. The fourth axis of questions examines the role of support in tackling dropout at HOU.

The following Table (Table 1) shows the interview questions which are grouped in four axes. It must be pointed that the questions were the same both for tutors and students.

Table 1. Questionnaire

Interview axes (4)	Questions
AXIS 1: views and experiences before starting studies at the HOU	Q1. Why do you think there is such a high dropout rate in ODE? Is there a difference in postgraduate programs compared to undergraduate ones?
	Q2. Do you think that students at ODE know in advance what difficulties they are going to face?
	Q3. Do you think all students can attend distance studies? How could their educational profile be determined?
	Q4. What do you think are the particularities of the ODE studies that make it difficult for students? What do you think are the main difficulties they face?
AXIS 2: views and experiences on the obstacles that students at the HOU face	Q5. What do you think are the main obstacles facing students at ODE?
	Q6. How do students overcome the obstacles they face in ODE?
	Q7. What do you think are the main reasons that push ODE students to decide to drop out of their studies
AXIS 3: views on abandoning the studies at HOU	Q8. Is there a way to tackle the dropout phenomenon from the ODE programs? What would you recommend?
	Q9. What do you think that students who have problems with their studies at ODE are asking for, in order to be able to continue and complete their studies?
	Q10. What do you think should be the role of the tutors in dealing with the obstacles that the students face? How can the tutor intervene?
	Q11. How can an educational institution help students overcome the obstacles they face?
AXIS 4: views on the role of support at preventing the dropout phenomenon	Q12. Do you think that the support provided to the students from the HOU is sufficient?
	Q13. How can the support help the reduction of dropout at ODE?
	Q14. Do you think that individual support services should be provided in every student who has this need? What kind of support could that be?
	Q15. What other ways of support would you suggest in order to help students avoid leaving their studies?

IV. SAMPLE-SAMPLING PROCESS

The selection of the sample population studied is very important for the reliability of the research. In this research, the selection was made by purposeful and a convenient sampling because it is considered to fit the purpose and purpose of the research. During intentional sampling, the researcher deliberately selects individuals

to investigate the phenomenon they are studying (Creswell, 2011).

Crucial to the sample's selection was the fact that there were surveys focusing on the views of students who had dropped out, most with little experience in the HOU and often without even completing a course. As the

present study investigates the views and positions of students and tutors on a serious topic, it is advisable for students to have sufficient experience in ODE and for this reason, postgraduate students who are at the end of their studies, i.e. students who are currently students, or who those ones that have just completed their studies. Students who are at the end of their studies due to personal experience, contact and communication with their peers and tutors, are considered a more valuable source of information than new students whose views are important only in relation to the initial difficulties they face. Experienced students know more and have a comprehensive understanding of the particularities and requirements of distance learning as well as the difficulties that learners face in staying and completing their studies.

Dropping out of ODE courses applies to all students, although it appears that a smaller percentage of students are facing the problem. It is therefore necessary to ask active students who are more experienced in distance learning and convenience, thus the sample population was selected from the postgraduate program "Education Sciences" of the HOU. For this reason, people who are completing their studies are selected, that is, such as those ones who are in the preparation of their thesis or who have recently completed their studies. The sample consists of 14 undergraduate students who have completed or those who are in the final stage of their studies and 4 tutors, three from the course "EKP65 Open and Distance Learning" and one from EKP64 "Introduction to Adult Education" at the postgraduate program "Education Sciences", as we can see in the following figure (Figure 3)

Figure 3. The research sample



The sample of the present study was selected based on the needs and accessibility of specific groups of students in the postgraduate program "Education Sciences" of the HOU. This research is a comparative approach and analysis of the views of students and tutors on the phenomenon of dropout in higher education and contributing to support in the prevention and treatment of the phenomenon

Results

Interviews with students resulted in the following results:

Axis 1(A1): Views and experiences before starting studies at the HOU

All students believe that those who start a first-time distance program are certainly not prepared for the difficulties they are going to face. Most, at the beginning of their studies, think that the process will be easier, but along the way they realize the difficulties and it is likely that some will not be able to cope. "... He/She probably thinks it's easier to do it remotely. Then, of course, many do not, because of precisely these obligations and perhaps for that reason they give up ... "(Student-11- S11).

The particularities of the HOU students that they find difficult to deal with have more to do with lack of livelihood communication, difficulty in communicating, autonomy and planning, time management, lack of time, increased family and professional obligations, prior knowledge level, and familiarity with ICT. Most students emphasize the difficulty they face in adapting to the principles and particulars of ODE, comparing and projecting their experience with traditional education systems of their previous studies or their working environment as the majority work as teachers in conventional education. "... The face-to-face communication that you usually have with the educator can create an intimacy and an emotional state. Otherwise, it can sometimes be emotionally charged with this facial of communication that exists. "And he continues "... the lack of livelihood communication with fellow students and educators. This is the essential difference, which creates insecurity ... "(S-1).

These difficulties, as they believe, could be tackled by the HOU itself if it informed new entrants with seminars, presentations that would help them be more prepared for distance learning. Also for the difficulties in the educational material and the lack of pre-existing knowledge that is necessary, a solution would be preparatory courses or tutorials for students who would need it.

Regarding the educational background of the students who choose ODE, the views of the participants are divided, as some believe that not everyone is able to study remotely, and that the institution might need to identify it at the beginning of its studies and, while others believe that, with the right conditions, everyone can do it and complete a distance study program.

A2: Views and experiences on the obstacles that students at the HOU face.

Time management and keeping track of study programs are the difficulties that most students face. The ability of students to adapt easily to new situations and new data is often presented in student testimonials as the key to a successful course in ODE. HOU students need

to learn to work more methodically, rationalize their time, and adhere to their own curriculum so they can be consistent in their obligations and deadlines. This, of course, describes the ideal situation of students who are sufficiently responsive to the requirements of the ODE. Difficult students, on the other hand, need more guidance, academic support, and encouragement in their studies by the tutors, and may have wanted more flexibility than the Higher Education Program. Another difficulty mentioned by the research participants is students' familiarity with new technologies, which may be because HOU students are older people, not so familiar with ICT.

Students' answers to the question about the difficulties and obstacles faced by those studying at ODE are confusing and we could say overall that time pressure, stress, lack of communication and support, lack of autonomy, financial issues and family and professional obligations are mentioned more. *"... the introspection of some, but not all, of course. I will also reiterate that they have not learned to be very programmed and follow the program and because of the obligations of course. But their obligations are also an issue, because we are certainly talking about older people who have too many obligations running, so they may prioritize something else at some point. And another obstacle besides these two... I don't know maybe the frustration about some modules, the learning content of maybe some students..."*(S-10).

Students' interaction with each other and the effort to communicate with tutors are cited as ways that students find ways to overcome the obstacles they face. Some also cite external support for academic support when they are unable to meet the course requirements. Overcoming difficulties and obstacles to ODE are contributed by personal effort for improvement, effective communication and systematic guidance by the tutors as well as communication and contact with other fellow students. A typical example is the following testimony: *"... it plays a very important role, both cognitively but also for the empowerment of the student, the communication, the daily communication he has with his classmates, and the live or living communication with the teachers. So this is a major difficulty in distance education ..." and continues " ... distance learning is aimed at a world that is older and has other obligations."*(S-5).

A3. Views on abandoning the studies at HOU

The difficulties and obstacles that students face frustrate them and make them think about giving up. *"The stress of time, the stress that can arise from work, exams in class, low grades that are often negative for the psychology of the student trying to get used to this*

piece and maybe even a part of the course because of it changes in finances because of a financial problem to interrupt his education."(S-14).

Students, through the way the ODE is provided from HOU, must find ways to stay on track. This is not always easy and this is why students require closer guidance, and especially at the beginning of their studies, until they are able to regulate themselves. Most students believe that an important part of staying in a HOU program is the motivation of students to keep them on a learning track. The following answer is characteristic: *"... it has to do with the motivation you have to start these studies. If the motivation is strong it will keep you, if it is not it will not."*(S-9).

Students' autonomy is crucial to the successful outcome of their studies. Students who learn to self-regulate through their involvement in ODE are less likely to drop out of school and are more likely to perceive the benefits of the processes that help them develop new skills. Students through the way the ODE is provided must be able to stay "on track" and meet the requirements of the studies. The following statement is characteristic: *"... impersonal communication may make it difficult for those unfamiliar with new technologies and modern media. Also the difficulty in autonomy and observance of study program, as well as interaction with other students"*(S-3).

The support provided by the HOU to its students, according to research students' testimonies, is insufficient and is associated with high dropout rates. *"As a result, once there is a leak - abandonment, it seems that (support from the HOU) is not enough"* (S-10).

The HOU could help students in need and prevent disruptions or dropouts in various ways, such as *"... following their course more and giving them more feedback on the level of their studies for their endeavor. If he were closer and watching them more, he might not have been so impersonal..."*(S-1).

A4. Views on the role of support at preventing the dropout phenomenon

The need to support ODE students is crucial and imperative. A typical example is the testimony that follows: *"... you do not have a steady and consistent support, coupled with what I said at the outset, that most are adults with many responsibilities. All this pressure on the one hand and obligations on the other, at a time when many are not able to withstand it ..."* (S-9).

Students point out the need for academic support, that

is, they have more need to solve questions, to be able to prepare the exams and assignments. *"... it's not just a matter of psychological support, because it is distance education it has no rhythm. That is, the university must find a way to keep pace with the development of a work in time"*(S-2).

Psychological support is cited by a number of students as an important factor in addressing the difficulties and obstacles faced by them and should be provided primarily by the tutors, who are not always appropriate to provide it. In the event that a student cannot be supported by the tutors then some structure or person within the University could do so. Students who feel unsupported, discouraged and frustrated try to get support either from their family environment or, most of the time, from their peers.

Teamwork and collaboration among HOU students is one of the key issues. This can be achieved through the relationship and communication they develop with their peers and often help them support each other when faced with problems. *"... I think teamwork is very important, especially in our own program, because everyone is working on their own and could be more teamwork, giving teamwork, encouraging collaboration and making the student do not feel alone"*(S-8).

In general, all students emphasize the importance of support such as this should be provided by the HOU and tutors, thus placing emphasis on the effective communication of students with their peers and tutors in order to help and prevent abandonment phenomena. Students, however, seek a more systematic guidance and encouragement through communication with tutors to be better supported in order to stay focused on their goal and to respond to the demands of the HOU. *"... Not all tutors are suitable for this. They may be academically qualified but they do not know basic principles of either adult education or distance education, and do not actually support them. So, one thing is that teachers who take part in such programs themselves must specialize in distance education."*(S-9) and *"... Maybe teachers can do this, but it can, too, not I know this. But it may be more essential that they are not so intuitive, but that they play a little bit of the role of the psychologist, after all, what will give the student the power to help."* (S-10).

The support that students expect from the NAP is not only through their relationship with the tutors. It is also the way in which they communicate with the HOU itself. As the students' testimonies about the HOU platform show, they find it to be useless and the student cannot retrieve the information he or she wants because it is lost between many different pages. *"... The*

university does not provide the right communication and feedback. An example is, say, on the university platform, from anywhere you go to the e-mail, from anywhere you go to the gods, from anywhere you go to the library. I don't think it's student-oriented..."(S-7).

Discussion on Results

A1. Views and experiences before starting studies at the HOU

In the first research question, the results overall, both by students and tutors, show that students are not well prepared when starting their studies at the HOU, and cannot foresee the difficulties they are going to face. Those who may be more prepared are those who had a close relative who has attended a distance program at the HOU or those who are trying to be informed by the information available on the university's page. In any case, however, it is necessary for both groups of research participants to introduce seminar-type introductory updates for new entrants. Students' abilities and characteristics to be able to adequately meet the requirements of the ODE include the skills of adaptability, organization, autonomy and the motivation for their studies. The autonomy and skills developed by distance learners are also referred to in the literature as traits associated with students' successful performance (Street, 2010).

One important parameter in a students' successful course of study at the HOU is that they manage to adjust the time, place, and pace of their study. In this way it can be consistent with the requirements of the program, the assignments and the exams so that they are encouraged to be able to continue and pursue their studies. Many students find it difficult to set a schedule and set study time, so they lose a little bit of their time and then, when the time presses on them, they realize that they do not have enough time, and as a result they become frustrated and discouraged. Discouragement, combined with poor performance or some failures in the exams or exams, have a negative impact on the students' psychology and may lead them to drop out of their studies. Autonomous students, on the other hand, have learned to self-regulate and it is very easy to do this with their studies at HOU and it is they who are less at risk of quitting. The rest, perhaps the majority, need someone to guide them, keep pace with them, and keep track of their course so they don't get off track. The need to integrate students who find it difficult to adapt to the requirements of the ODE and to self-regulate has a key role to play in preventing the dropout. It is therefore imperative for the HOU to make institutional changes to the way support services are provided to its students, as it appears that support provided by the tutors is incomplete, either because he or she is unavailable or inadequately trained to provide

it. (Spanaka, 2011).

A2. Views and experiences on the obstacles that students at the HOU face.

Students' difficulty in self-regulation is a key reason for the discouragement and frustration they feel. Students who fail to self-regulate learning in the ODE are more likely to drop out of their studies. Autonomy does not only help students with the practical issues of organizing their studies, but the skills they develop through self-regulation also enable them to cope with stressful situations such as anxiety, fear of failure, frustration. (Nikolaki, Koutsoumba, & Lykesas, 2013).

The educational material is a key feature that differentiates ODE from traditional education systems. The educational material in the ODE is what teaches the trainee. Students, however, appear to be confronted with educational material such as that of traditional education. What makes it difficult for them to complete the material, as they typically say, is that they consider the educational material something they need to read and learn, while the role and function of the educational material is completely different. Here, too, may be the use by the HOU of textbooks that do not meet the requirements of the ODE, and that they are not frequently updated (Kokkos, 2005).

To overcome the obstacles students face, tutors report preparatory courses and the psychological support service, which already operates in the HOU, while students feel that the university can do more to support them, however, they are not exactly aware of the structures that exist, nor of the opportunities they themselves have to claim and solve the problems they face (Lionarakis et al, 2017).

A3. Views on abandoning the studies at HOU

The main reasons cited as causing students to drop out of school are time pressure, stress, lack of support, lack of self-regulation, and financial stress as well as some extraordinary reasons such as personal or family. (Choi et al, 2013).

On the part of the students it is clear that they want more communication with the tutors. Each tutor addresses the issue of communication, guidance, encouragement and support differently, so there should be a general guidance from the HOU on how tutors should provide support to their students. Communication with students is crucial to the successful learning process. Most of the time, students who have a problem are reluctant to contact and ask for help, or when they ask for help, the tutor is usually unavailable to provide it. This has resulted in the discouragement and frustration that students feel and

drives them to think about quitting their studies.

The findings from the research on communication and the relationship that students develop with their tutor are very interesting. It is crucial how tutors handle the relationship and communication with students to help them towards self-regulation. Students do not ask the tutor simply for guidance, academic support or help with assignments and exams. They also seek encouragement and psychological support (Konstantopoulou et al, 2013; Lionarakis, 1998).

Also, although counseling and psychological support services are available in the HOU, most students do not know it or even if they do, they find it somewhat impersonal to seek such a service. When there is such a relationship of trust, the tutor can act supportively to the student and prevent him / her from dropping out (Sheets, 1992).

Finally, in line with the answers of students, one way to cope with the obstacles and difficulties that lead them to drop out of their studies is the support they receive from their peers. Interacting with their peers, either face to face at the monthly meetings or online through the social media platforms has a positive impact on reducing incidence of abandonment (Grapsa & Mavroidis, 2017).

A4. Views on the role of support at preventing the dropout phenomenon

So what is sought is a support that can cover the "interactive" distance of ODE, as Moore (1993) points out, that distance, communication and psychological, that separates the trainer and the trainee. And it seems that this distance can only be filled through the relationship that the student can develop with their teacher and peers. Because according to Kokos (1998), the learning process is achieved only through interaction.

Student guidance and support is not only limited to studying, preparing for the assignments or exams, but also giving greater importance to the role of tutors, emphasizing psychological support and encouragement through effective communication and contact throughout their studies (Zygouris & Mavroidis, 2011). An effective tutor is one that, through effective communication and contact with students, fosters a climate of trust and respect (Matralis 1998). Tutors may not all be as supportive, resulting in students feeling insecure because they do not have the communication, guidance and encouragement skills they expected to have (Konstantopoulou et al, 2013).

The HOU does not seem to take into account the

educational background of the trainees, as a result of which they cannot provide students with different support services. At HOU, all students are treated in the same way without giving them the feeling that there is flexibility in dealing with different characteristics and problems. Proposals for support by the HOU itself would be the creation of an independent structure that would support individually or in students groups who need it, as well as the revision of the role of the tutors to have more skills in emotional and psychological support and less in this academic role (Vassala, & Andreadou, 2009).

Also, the communication platform could help support students. The HOU could collect data through the online communication platform so that feedback would be faster and faster to follow the rhythm of each student. Also important are the student communication forums, the chat groups that connect students, exchanging views and experiences. Student interaction through these communication groups has a supportive effect on student psychology (Cambruzzi et al, 2015).

Lastly, a very important parameter for improving the ODE's provision, which most students are unaware of, is the evaluation of tutors. That is, although most students report the inability or inadequacy of some tutors to provide meaningful support to their students, they themselves do not mention the opportunity given, through assessment, to report the problem to the HOU, and to address it. Students seem to be unaware of the importance of evaluation, and this is evident from the tutors' witnesses who say that the percentages of students who evaluate them are very low, although they know that the evaluation process is anonymous and a very crucial criterion for tutors retain or/and development within the HOU.

V. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Discussion of the results resulted in the following conclusions:

- › Students starting their studies at HOU are unprepared for the difficulties they are going to face and most due to previous experience in the traditional education system expect more guidance from the Educational Institution and the tutors.
- › The conclusion about whether all students can respond to distance learning is that they could but with the appropriate preparation. This preparation must be done by the educational institution prior to the commencement of studies with updates on the curriculum requirements.
- › The difficulties recorded and related to the particularities of distance learning have more to do with organization, time management,

planning and generally all those processes that lead to self-regulation and autonomy of students of the ODE.

- › Newcomers facing difficulties could be supported by following their course, more at the beginning of their studies, in order to provide them with appropriate guidance and encouragement to gradually adjust to the requirements of the ODE, to self-regulate so that in the end they manage to be autonomous.
- › The contribution of the student relationship to the tutor is crucial to the successful or unsuccessful at the HOU. In particular, tutors need to know and be able to provide support services to students not only cognitively but also psychologically.
- › Students cite problematic communication with tutor as a reason for discouragement. Students feel that they are not guided, unsupported, not encouraged and do not have the relationship they would like to feel familiar with and integrated into the ODE process.
- › The obstacles faced by its students are: financial reasons, lack of time due to obligations, stress and stress created by the rigorous timetable of study and delivery of work as well as the lack of effective communication with tutors.
- › The training of tutors so that they can provide their services to students as best as possible could help tackle the dropout rate in the ODE.
- › Monitoring the progress of students and providing support services by the HOU itself to students in need would help to reduce the dropout rate.
- › The relationship that HOU students develop with their peers is seen as crucial to the support they feel when they fail to be supported by the institution itself or by the tutors.
- › The academic and psychological support of HOU students can reduce the dropout through the relationship of trust and support created between students and tutors.
- › In many parts of the research it is understood that the students of the HOU and in particular the "Education Sciences" program are not aware of issues that directly concern them. And here comes the question of whether it is purely their own negligence or whether the educational institution itself has a share of responsibility.

In summary and summarizing all of the above we conclude that support is deemed necessary and necessary for attending ODE. It is imperative in cases where students face difficulties and obstacles with their studies and think about giving up. The involvement and contribution of the tutor in fostering an appropriate climate of confidence, encouragement and support with

students creates a positive tendency and acts as a deterrent to the dropout. Finally, the university itself, by following international developments and adopting good practices from other ODE institutions in other countries, can improve student support services so that students stay on track, integrate and do not reduce rates of studies.

VI. SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This research investigated the contribution of support to the phenomenon of dropout at ODE and in particular at the Faculty of Humanities of the Hellenic Open University. Through the qualitative research process and in line with the latest technology developments and the ever-increasing needs of the trainees, it has been determined how student support can help reduce the dropout phenomenon. Nevertheless, the issue remains open and inexhaustible. So it would be of particular interest:

- › To explore the contribution of support to other ODE programs or even undergraduate programs.
- › To investigate the relationship between student support and reduction in dropout rates by quantitative methods.
- › To explore the factor of fostering a positive climate of communication and collaboration with students in encouraging and preventing the feeling of frustration.
- › To investigate the relationship between student autonomy and dropout in ODE.
- › To explore the need to support students who are not seeking communication and interaction with tutors and their peers.
- › To investigate the need for psychological support from the tutors.
- › To investigate the need for psychological support from an external consultant or from the HOU.
- › To investigate the relationship between trainees' motivation and drop out at ODE.
- › To explore the possibility of taking preventive measures against the phenomenon of dropout at ODE.
- › To explore the need for tutors training in ODE to improve students support.
- › To investigate whether the counseling and psychological support service of the HOU helps to reduce drop-out rates.

Acknowledgment

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