

Open University Mode of Study at the University of Tartu

Commissioned by the University of Tartu, Estonia and co-funded by the ESF Primus Program, Estonia

Kadri Vakmann

Laura Kirss

Hanna-Stella Haaristo

Mihkel Nestor



Euroopa Liit
Euroopa Sotsiaalfond



Eesti tuleviku heaks

2012

Executive Summary

This study focuses on open university mode of study at the University of Tartu. The analysis was based on various sources of data: in addition to relying on research results provided by previous studies, the registry data from the University of Tartu and the data obtained through a web based survey was used. A web-based survey was conducted among the open university students, teaching staff and study coordinators. Additionally, three case studies were carried out in three faculties having the largest number of open university students to help with understanding how this mode of study functions in reality. The following will summarize the main results of the study outlining the most important recommendations as well.

Views on the differences between regular and open university mode of study

According to the responses of the teaching staff, the main difference between regular and open university mode of study is the organisation of studies – 82% of the teaching staff replied that they organise lectures differently in regular and open university. At the same time, almost every tenth of teaching staff said that there are no differences in teaching regular and open university students. Taking into account the fact that open university is mostly focused on individual study putting less emphasis on contact hours, it is not surprising that the organisation of studies was pointed out as the main difference. Relying on students' independent work to a large extent would also presume applying different teaching methods and using different learning materials. The survey reveals that this does not seem to be the case: only every third teacher uses different teaching methods and 12% affirmed using different learning materials. 20% of the lecturers have established different requirements for open university students for passing the course.

The surveyed teaching staff believe that the students of open university are generally not academically less talented (51%) compared to students of regular study. More than half of the lecturers do not tend to have lower requirements for open university students for passing the course or the curriculum. Compared to regular students, the lecturers view open university students as more motivated (55%) and more demanding (53%). Open university students are rather often characterized as having greater interest towards acquiring new knowledge and they tend to be more active in classes. At the same time, the specificity of the open university mode of study creates more need for student supervision and counselling.

It is rather complicated for open university students to compare their studies with those of regular students. Many of them might not have a recent experience with regular studies, especially not with the same curriculum. However, 38% were convinced that open university provides education comparable to that of regular studies; 27% thought that open university education is somewhat of lesser quality and 6% replied that it was considerably worse. The most critical ones are the students of the law faculty. 44% of teaching staff view open university to have more or less similar quality while 26% regard it to be of somewhat lower quality.

Satisfaction and problems with open university

The students are generally very satisfied with their studies – 53% evaluated the studies with the highest grades; 44% gave the average rating and only 3% the lowest rating. The organisation of studies is generally suitable for students – only a small proportion of students complain about some aspect of the organisation of the studies. Most often the students tend to express dissatisfaction with

the time table and access to information regarding organisation of studies – about one fifth of the students are not satisfied with these aspects.

The students' replies suggest that according to their views the cost-benefit ratio of the studies is not always well balanced. Only about one third of students think that the relationship between the tuition fees and the quality of studies is very good or good; 50% consider it to be more or less good while 15% say that it is bad.

One aspect that creates dissatisfaction among the open university students is the narrow range of available subjects (e.g. electives). A third of students say that it is not possible to choose all the subjects listed in the curriculum, in the faculty of law the proportion of these students was even 41%.

Lack of sufficient feedback from the teaching staff is another source of problem for students: 19% said that feedback is often insufficient; 59% that it is at times insufficient. Additionally, 35% of students replied that feedback on independent work is not adequate. The other aspects of study that students are experiencing some problems with are availability of learning materials, contacting teaching staff, studies being too theoretical and demanding. For almost a third of the students sharing time between studies, family commitments and work is often a problem.

The answers of the teaching staff indicate high satisfaction with the organisation of the open university – 80% of lecturers are very or rather satisfied with it. The aspects receiving the highest satisfaction rates are those regarding the study coordinators' competence and helpfulness. The source of some dissatisfaction tends to be the time table which, taking into account the nature of the open university (sessions take place mostly at weekends), is rather expected.

For the study coordinators, the main problem regarding the quality of studies is finding supervisors for students. Their replies suggest that to some extent it is also problematic for students to collaborate with supervisors. Additionally, there are sometimes problems with lecturers' insufficient feedback to students, narrow range of offered subjects, insufficiency of information about subjects and lecturers' communication and teaching skills.

Recommendations

Even though this research identified no large-scale problems in the functioning of the open university mode of study at the University of Tartu, it is somewhat worrying that the skills and knowledge obtained from the open university are not evaluated to have equal value compared to those acquired from the regular mode of study. It is important to note that the diplomas are exactly the same regardless of the study mode. Subsequently, some recommendations and suggestions are made to contribute to greater efficiency and effectiveness of the open university:

- Improve information about the open university mode of study – specifically, what do these studies require from a learner who is working full-time and what are the actual study-related costs. Also, students would need more counselling regarding choosing the right workload, planning and organising their studies.
- In future, more attention should be paid to student selection. In order to increase the likelihood of graduation and guarantee the quality of studies, the motivation and capability to study should be more carefully tested at admission.

- The quality of studies would be enhanced through better management of work load of teaching staff, provision of appropriate learning materials as well as increasing feedback to students.
- Greater use of e-learning opportunities could be one solution to the problem of narrow range of subjects available at open university. Using video-lectures would also add to the range of courses available for open university students.
- Every faculty should critically review and analyse its capacity to provide high quality learning in the open university mode of study.

Poliitikauringute Keskus Praxis**Praxis Centre for Policy Studies**

Tornimäe 5

10145 Tallinn

phone +372 640 8000

www.praxis.eepraxis@praxis.ee