

Communication between tutors – students in DL

A case study of the Hellenic Open University

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Abstract

English

Two – way communication between students and tutors is one of the two key factors contributing to the success of a Distance Learning programme, the other being the complete and well-designed educational package. Both elements are essential to guide students' learning.

By means of this communication the tutor can facilitate the interaction of students with the learning material, ensure their active involvement and motivate their interest in deeper understanding. Thus, communication is a significant contributor to students' learning. In addition, effective communication can act as support for the student through clear and adequate feedback, which informs the students of their progress and provides vital encouragement.

In this paper we present the survey which was administered to students and tutors of the course module EDU65 (Open and Distance Education) of the Hellenic Open University. The objective of the survey was to study their views on the frequency, subject and ways of communication between students and tutors as well as review their perceptions on the contribution of this communication to the successful course and completion of studies. Through their answers we try to determine the elements of effective communication between tutor and student and compose the profile of the successful tutor according to the students' stance.

Greek

Η αμφίδρομη επικοινωνία μεταξύ φοιτητή και διδάσκοντα και το καλά σχεδιασμένο εκπαιδευτικό υλικό αποτελούν τους σημαντικότερους παράγοντες για την επιτυχία ενός προγράμματος εξΑΕ που στοχεύει στο να οδηγήσει τον εκπαιδευόμενο σε μία ευρετική πορεία της γνώσης.

Μέσω της αμφίδρομης επικοινωνίας ο διδάσκων διευκολύνει την αλληλεπίδραση και ενεργητική εμπλοκή του φοιτητή με το εκπαιδευτικό υλικό, κινητοποιεί το ενδιαφέρον του για εμβάθυνση στη μελέτη και συμβάλλει σημαντικά στη προσπάθεια του φοιτητή να διερευνήσει και να οικοδομήσει τις γνώσεις του. Επίσης, η ποιοτική επικοινωνία μεταξύ συμβούλου και φοιτητή λειτουργεί υποστηρικτικά με τη σαφή και επαρκή ανατροφοδότηση που πληροφορεί τον φοιτητή για την πρόοδο του και υπηρετεί τον εμπνευστικό ρόλο του συμβούλου.

Σε αυτήν την εργασία παρουσιάζεται η έρευνα που διεξήχθη στους φοιτητές και Σ.Ε.Π. της Θεματικής ενότητας ΕΚΠ65 (Ανοικτή και εξ Αποστάσεως Εκπαίδευση) του Ε.Α.Π. Σκοπός της ήταν να διερευνηθούν οι απόψεις των συμμετεχόντων σχετικά με τη συχνότητα, το αντικείμενο και τους τρόπους επικοινωνίας με τον διδάσκοντα, καθώς και οι απόψεις τους για τη συνεισφορά της επικοινωνίας αυτής στην ολοκλήρωση των σπουδών τους. Μέσα από τις απαντήσεις τους, θα προσπαθήσουμε να ορίσουμε το πλαίσιο της αποτελεσματικής επικοινωνίας μεταξύ φοιτητή και Κ.Σ. και να συνθέσουμε το προφίλ του επιτυχημένου Κ.Σ. σύμφωνα με τη γνώμη των φοιτητών.

Keywords

Hellenic Open University, Distance Learning, tutor-counselor, effective communication, support, interaction

Introduction

It is an undeniable fact that DL programs and New Technologies can facilitate and support lifelong learning (Anastasiades, 2005), as their flexibility allows access to knowledge regardless of the student's location. In addition, the student is able to choose the time and pace of study (Lionarakis & Likourgiotis, 1999). DL programs are a widespread educational tool for numerous Universities, as they are addressed to bigger student population, they can follow current trends and developments and be cost-effective (Tucker, 2001).

Two features that differentiate DL from conventional face-to-face education are the specially designed learning material and the relationship between student and tutor. At the same time, these features influence and determine the effectiveness and success of DL programs. The quality of communication between student and tutor is crucial for the course of studies (Lionarakis, 2001), as the tutor needs to act as the mediator / facilitator between the learning material and the student and be his supporter and inspirer as well.

In this study we investigate the views of students and tutors on the way and quality of their communication in the context of a DL program by the Hellenic Open University. The structure of presentation is the following: firstly, we briefly review the role of tutor and the importance of communication in DL programs. In the second unit we present the role of tutor in H. O. U. Following, the methodology of the survey is given and in unit 4 the results are presented. The presentation is concluded with the discussion and conclusions of the survey.

1. The role of tutor in DL

The role of tutor in Distance Learning is different from that in traditional education. In DL programs there is not a conventional classroom, the student group is not homogeneous in age or educational background and there is no direct feedback as in face-to-face instruction. Instruction in DL is asynchronous, as it comprises a service offered at a time and place different from the ones it was created (Vassilou-Papageorgiou, 2001). It is implemented through the educational package and is based on individualization of learning. The main difference from the conventional education is the student's independence (Moore, 1973). The instructor (tutor in DL) is a facilitator, who guarantees the suitable conditions for active learning on the part of the student.

Students in DL programs consider the interaction with tutors to be very important. The fact that they study alone necessitates counseling services from the educational organization (Holmberg, 1995). Regardless of their autonomy, self-motivation and interaction with the learning material the students of DL programs are vulnerable regarding the application of the acquired knowledge. In this case, the contribution of tutors is valuable as it prevents the transformation of autonomy into isolation (Moore, 1989). The tutor has the theoretical knowledge, but at the same time he can be the students' "confidant", someone who understands their needs and choices (Notara, 2001). He is an intermediate, the person to whom students turn for support, either it is practical / organizational tips or educational / psychological advice.

Thus, the role of tutor in DL is two-dimensional: tuition and counseling, which are equally important for the individualization of the learning material and will help students understand it. Consequently, support should be provided for all students and not only for the ones who face problems (Tait, 1988). According to Tait (2003), support in DL serves three functions: it is cognitive and promotes learning; it is emotional and concerns the development of self-confidence and self-esteem; also, it is systematic and helps the student deal with the program requirements, so that they complete their studies. In many studies, interpersonal communication and feedback appears to influence the effectiveness of DL programs, as intimacy and individual feedback satisfy the students' needs (Thatch & Murphy, 1995). A survey by Dillon, Gunawardena & Parker (1992) indicates that students focus on interpersonal communication and guidance rather than the instructional method.

In DL programs, communication is achieved in two forms: it is one-way, between the student and the learning material and two-way, between the student and tutor (Keegan, 1986; Holmberg, 1995). The latter is hindered by the fact it is asynchronous. There are different theories concerning communication and interaction. Peters emphasizes the role of the institution producing the learning material and argues that DE will apply digital networks based on the standard of autonomous and self-guided learning, which will allow students decide on their own whether to use help or not (Thorpe, 2001).

Delling considers that the instructor is absent in DL and lays emphasis on the student's learning course, which is monitored and supported by the educational organization (Keegan, 1986). Moore highlights the different relationship by using the terms "learning and instruction" (and not "instruction and learning"). Here, the instructor responds to the students' needs and provides information and advice, which do not reduce their autonomy and self-responsibility (1973). However, in a later article (1994) Moore claims that distance learning is no longer a lonely activity thanks to telecommunications.

Holmberg promotes the theory of guided didactic conversation, as the main principle of DL is that what is important is the active engagement of the student in learning (1986). Two-way communication in DE serves specific purposes (1995): a) to support the motivation of the students through interaction with tutor b) to support and facilitate the student through practice c) to provide the opportunities for critical thinking and digestion and d) to evaluate the student's progress, so that evaluation is a tool for the student to understand their needs.

Contrary to the autonomy Holmberg promotes, Daniel argues for a balance between interaction and independence. Learning is achieved through independent activities (such as studying or assignments), but also through interactive activities (such as correction and comments of papers or group meetings). What is important is that the institution provides a balanced service and defines pacing. According to Daniel, independence can negatively affect the completion of studies (Keegan, 1986).

Sewart emphasizes the importance of the human factor in DL, as he argues that constant concern and care for the students is necessary (1993). The absence of immediate feedback and learning group, in combination with the problems stemming from the different learning styles are elements that necessitate the human factor, so that individualization of learning is achieved. Thus, Sewart considers that the services of counseling and support are necessary for the institutions offering DL programs.

In conclusion, communication in DL programs does not serve the transmission of knowledge as in traditional education, where the educator and the students can interact through verbal and non-verbal

communication. In DL, transmission of knowledge is conducted through the educational material and the participants in the instructional procedure (tutor and students) cannot enjoy the benefits of face-to-face instruction. However, interpersonal, two-way communication remains a significant factor in the learning procedure. Students need encouragement and guidance. The human factor is a major contributor to the student's success, as the tutor's course of action must consider the individual needs and expectations of the students, so that the provision of a mass-produced educational material can ensure individualisation in learning. In DL programs, feedback and support aim at the effective learning and place the student at the focal point of interest.

2. The tutor-mentor in H. O. U. and the communication with students

Many institutions offering DL programs have separated the dual role of instructors (Kokkos, 2001). Tutors are responsible for the pedagogical aspect and mentors provide support and encouragement. In the DL programs of the Hellenic Open University, the instructors are assigned with both duties. The tutor-mentor has a complex role and their duties are:

a) to monitor and evaluate students' progress

Although the educational material has been designed and produced according to the demands and particularities of DL, the tutor-mentor (t-m) will have to elaborate on some points, answer to students' questions and / or recommend sources for further study. By monitoring students' performance through the assignments and projects, the t-m will identify the difficulties and overcome them with the appropriate feedback. Instruction in this case is focused on the facilitation of learning and what is important is the students' activities (Beaudoin, 1990).

An important element that should be considered is the distinctive features of individual study. Students with no previous experience in DL need enlightenment and guidance, as the management of DL material requires skills different from those of conventional education. Only a few students dispose strong internal motivation and self-organization skills. The t-m should inform students about the demands of DL and help them develop a positive attitude towards it (Athanasoula-Reppa, 2003; 2006). In order to be able to understand and sympathize with students' problems the t-m should be fully aware of the features of DL (Sherry, 1996).

The written assignments are a very important activity, as through them students can apply the new knowledge and learn in an active way (Lionarakis, 2001). By means of the comments, the t-m can provide individual feedback, which is necessary to combat the stress and insecurity stemming from lonely study (Athanasoula-Reppa, 2003). Detailed comments is a constructive dialogue between instructor and student, as the t-m communicates with each student separately, identifies the weak and strong points, provides advice and guidance according to their individual needs and goals. Consequently, the communication will acquire a personal tone, which will make up for the loneliness and absence of daily contact (Notara, 2001). As Holmberg maintains (1995), the feeling of rapport can be promoted depending on the instructor's personality and positively influence the student's performance.

b) to coordinate group meetings

Although attendance of group meetings is optional, most students choose to participate, as these meetings is an opportunity to associate with co-students having similar difficulties and to contact with the instructor and discuss queries relevant to their study. For the instructors, group meetings are a unique opportunity to provide psychological support and boost the students' self-confidence (Notara, 2001). In addition, they can enhance understanding of the learning material through the appropriate activities.

During the group meeting the instructor can choose from numerous educational techniques, depending on their objectives. However, the techniques should engage students in active learning combining theory and practice and be suitable for adults, such as open questions, practice and group work. The activities in Adult learning should be productive, as adults need to act and explore solutions (Rogers, 1999).

There should be special reference to the first group meeting, because most students come to it feeling insecure whether they can cope with the demands and uncomfortable as they are not acquainted with the others and the instructor. Thus, the instructor should make an effort and create the friendly atmosphere which will facilitate collaboration. It is advisable there be a contact with the students prior to their first face-to-face meeting. A study by Rekkedal provides evidence that personal communication, when the instructor sends a greeting letter and keeps in touch with the students regularly, can positively affect the motivation of students and completion of studies (Holmberg, 1995).

c) to communicate with students between meetings

As time span between meetings is long, it is necessary there be some communication between t-m and students. The quality of their communication plays an important role in the educational process. In a survey with post-graduate students of the H. O. U., it was concluded that students need this communication to answer queries pertinent to the material or the assignments, seek help for the activities or support (Loizidou-Hatzitheodoulou, Vassala, Kakouris, Mavroidis & Tasios, 2001).

Support and encouragement are the most significant functions a DL instructor serves. Thus, they need to acquire certain skills, such as being genuinely interested in each student, being a good listener and showing empathy. For the student who experiences pressure from the family or working environment, the t-m is the person who really understands their need to study (Notara, 2001). A previous survey in H. O. U. concluded that the friendliness of the t-m can counterbalance the feeling of loneliness (Vassilou-Papageorgiou & Vassala, 2005).

The important thing is that the interpersonal relationship be developed through communication. By means of telephone conversations or e-mails, the instructor can individualize his relationship with each student. For this to happen, it is also necessary that the instructor be aware of the special features, needs and expectations of each student. His "class" comprises of adults who participate in the educational process with different motives, different background and experiences (Rogers, 1999). Moreover, adult students possess a wealth of experiences and knowledge, which they apply to assimilate the new information (Noyé & Piveteau, 1999). Moreover, they have already adopted their individual learning style (Rogers 1999). Therefore, it is essential that the instructor know whether the student is experienced in DL, their marital and professional status, their educational and cultural background. He should also know what the student's expectations are concerning the program and the instructor himself, as well as the possible difficulties there are. Having all this information, the instructor will be more effective in designing a strategy (Kokkos, 2001).

Summarizing, the role of tutor in H. O. U. is:

1. to facilitate and ensure the active involvement and interaction between the students and the learning material in connection with students; needs and expectations and applying the Adult Education principles
2. to inform the students about their progress via the assessment of their assignments
3. to encourage students developing an individualised and constructive dialogue through the comments of the assignments.

3. Methodology of the survey

- Objectives: the main objective of the survey was to investigate the students' and tutors' views on the quality and contribution of their communication between each other during their studies. In addition, by analyzing the data we can define the elements of effective communication and compose the profile of the successful t-m according to the student's and tutors' stance.

Our queries can be classified into three axes and are the following:

a) the way and content of communication:

Which way of communication do students and tutors prefer and for which reasons?

What is the content of their communication?

Do they consider communication effective and for which reasons?

b) the role of t-m:

How necessary and useful is the communication with the t-m?

Are students satisfied with the quality and frequency of this communication?

For which reasons was communication ineffective?

How do they assess the contribution of the t-m to their studies?

c) the features of t-m:

Which features should the t-m possess so as to be successful?

- Time of survey: It was conducted in the academic year 2006-2007.

- Survey method: It was an applied quantitative synchronized field survey.

- Survey tool: the specific survey was conducted through two different questionnaires, administered to the students and tutors in a group meeting or via e-mail. It was carried out after their third group meeting, so that they had had enough time to get acquainted with each other and have formed an opinion on the DL program and the communication with the t-m.

- Statistical analysis of the data: the software SPSS 14.0 was used. The process included descriptive analysis of the data (frequencies), Pearson's χ^2 and Fisher's exact test.

- Study group: the study group was comprised of students attending the postgraduate program of H. O. U.

in Education, and in particular, those attending the module "Open and Distance Education" (H. O. U. EKP65) during the academic year 2006 – 2007. Apart from convenience, an important reason for this choice was the fact that these students study the nature and features of DL and we expected their views to be more circumstantial.

4. The results of the survey

4.1 The results for the students

The questionnaire was filled out by 129 students (46.9% of the population attending the specific module in 2006-2007). From the participants, 40.3% were men and 59.7% were women. Almost half of them (51.9%) were 30-39 years old, 39.5% were 40-49, 2.3% were under 29 and 6.2% were over 50.

As for their marital status, 23.3% were single, 71.3% were married with no (38%), one (21.7%), two (34.9%) or more (4.7%) children. A small number were divorced (4.7%) and there was one widow (0.8%).

Professionally, most participants were teachers in primary or secondary education (75.2%). Others were employed in the private (8.5%) or public sector (7%), some were bank clerks (2.3%), unemployed (0.8%) or engaged in other professions (2.3%).

The majority of the participants spoke at least one foreign language (62%), a considerable number knew two (31%), and only a few spoke more (3.9%) or none (3.1%). Also, the majority had average (23.3%) or good (35.7%) PC skills, a considerable number had advanced to excellent PC skills (34.2%) and only a small number (7%) were basically computer literate. Finally, the reason for participating in the program was mostly professional or personal interest (the profile of the sample is presented in table 1).

Table 1. the profile of the students

<i>SEX</i>	<i>AGE</i>	<i>MARITAL STATUS</i>	<i>PROFESSION</i>	<i>DEGREES</i>	<i>PC SKILLS</i>	<i>FOREIGN LANGUAGE</i>	<i>DL EXPERIENCE</i>	<i>MOTIVATION</i>
woman (N=77)	30 – 49 (N=118)	married (N=92)	teacher (N=97)	one (N=94)	average - good (N=76)	one (N=80)	none (N=112)	professional / personal (N=109)
59,7%	91,4%	71,3%	75,2%	72,9%	59%	62%	86,8%	84,5%

Regarding their preferences in the ways of communication, students consider face-to-face contact to be the most effective (55.5%). Telephone communication and e-mails are equally popular (30.5% and 29.7% respectively). A small number of students think that the way of communication makes no difference and none of the students showed preference to post or fax. The reasons that justified their choices were the directness in communication (68.2%), the adaptability in conversation (33.3%). The personal tone in communication (32.1%) appears equally important as speed (31%) (figure 1).

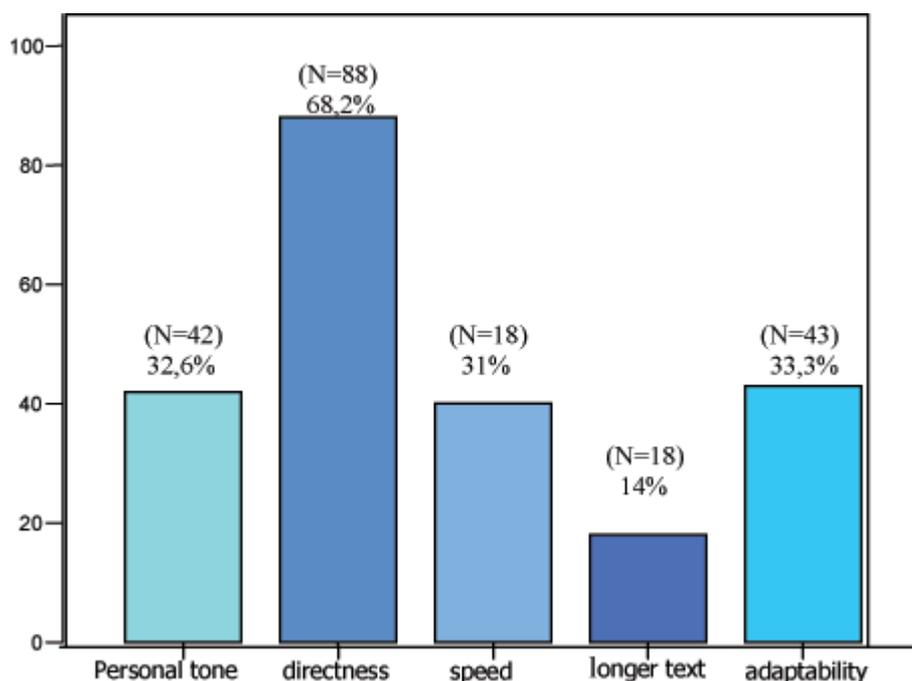


Figure 1. the preferences in communication

As regards the effectiveness and contribution of the communication with the t-m, most students think that it helped in different ways (table 2). Most of them found it useful in answering questions (71.4%). Also, it helped them digest the learning material (38%), organize their time schedule more effectively (9.4%), or understand the nature of individual study (4.7%). A considerable number of students were given psychological support (31.8%) and a small number thought it did not help at all (4.7%).

Table 2. the contribution of communication (according to students)

<i>In which way did the communication with the tutor-mentor help you?</i>	N	%
Answer questions / psychological support / organization of time schedule / understanding of individual study / digest of study	64	49,7
Answer questions	28	21,7
psychological support / organization of time schedule / understanding of individual study / digest of study	14	10,9
understanding of individual study / digest of study	7	5,4
No communication / did not help	6	4,7
psychological support and self-confidence	4	3,1
understanding of individual study	3	2,3
organization of time schedule and study	2	1,6
unanswered	1	0,8

A common topic in the communication between the t-m and the students is the comment soft he written assignments, so inevitably their views on the subject were investigated. The vast majority of the students (81.4%) mentioned that the instructor pinpointed the weak points but also acknowledged the good parts of their work. They also commented positively on the fact that the prompt response made the feedback effective (63.7%). Only a small number (9.5%) were not satisfied, either because there was considerable delay or the comments were very limited (table 3).

Table 3. the contribution of comments (according to students)

<i>What is your opinion of the comments of the written assignments?</i>	N	%
Pinpoint the weak points / praise / immediate response	70	54,3
Pinpoint the weak points / praise / delayed response	35	27,1
Ineffective (delayed response / limited comments / only weak points / no praise)	11	8,7
immediate response	11	8,7

Finally, we asked the students to rate the importance of certain features the t-m should possess, so that communication and his contribution are effective. Their answers showed (table 4) that, for the vast majority, scientific knowledge and clear and adequate feedback are the most significant (83.7% and 78.3% respectively). We should mention that all the features, i.e. availability, personal interest, friendliness, understanding, fair and accurate evaluation, are very or sufficiently important for most students, and only a small number regard them as a little or not important.

Table 4. the features of tutor / mentor (according to students)

	<i>Scientific knowledge</i>	<i>Availability</i>	<i>Personal interest in the student</i>	<i>Friendliness</i>	<i>Understanding</i>	<i>Fair and accurate evaluation</i>	<i>Clear and adequate feedback</i>

<i>Not important</i>		1.6 %		0.8 %		0.8 %	
<i>A little important</i>		0.8 %	1.6 %	2.3 %		0.8 %	
<i>Fairly important</i>	3.1 %	8.5 %	10.1 %	15.5 %	9.3 %	5.4 %	2.3 %
<i>Sufficiently important</i>	12.4 %	25.6 %	25.6 %	24.8 %	25.6 %	24 %	18.6 %
<i>Very important</i>	83.7 %	61.2 %	60.5 %	54.3 %	62.8 %	67.4 %	78.3 %
<i>Unanswered</i>	0.8 %	2.3 %	2.3 %	2.3 %	2.3 %	1.6 %	0.8 %

4.2 The results for the tutors

The questionnaire was filled out by 8 out of 9 tutors of the specific module in 2006-2007. From the participants, 5 were men and 3 were women. Half of them were 30-49 years old and the other half were over 50. Almost all of them were married.

The majority of the participants have collaborated with the H. O. U. for more than 6 years. Their DL experience included mostly their collaboration with the H. O. U. (the profile of the sample is presented in table 5).

Table 5. the profile of the tutors

SEX	AGE	MARITAL STATUS	COLLABORATION WITH H. O. U	DL EXPERIENCE
Man: 5	30 – 39: 1	Married: 7	4 – 6 years: 1	Foreign universities: 1
Woman: 3	40 – 49: 3	Divorced: 1	> 6 years: 7	Training seminars: 1
	> 50: 4			H. O. U.: 6

Regarding their preferences in the ways of communication, all tutors consider face-to-face contact to be the most effective. Telephone communication and e-mails are the second preferable way of communication. The reasons that justified their choices were the directness in communication (6 tutors), the adaptability in conversation and personal tone (4 tutors) (table 6).

Table 6. the preferences in communication

Face-to-face	By phone	By e-mail	By post / fax	They are all the same
8	2	2	0	0

As regards the comments of the written assignments, the tutors of the sample consider that pinpointing the weak points is of the utmost importance. In addition, most of them high prioritize the balance between criticisms and praise (5 tutors) and half of them highlight the significance of providing the right answer. Their views differ greatly on the importance of immediate response (table 7).

Table 7. the contribution of comments (according to tutors)

	Pinpoint the weak points	praise the positive points to balance criticism	Pinpoint the weak points and provide the right answer	immediate response
<i>Not important</i>				
<i>A little important</i>				1

<i>Fairly important</i>		1	1	4
<i>Sufficiently important</i>	1	2	3	1
<i>Very important</i>	7	5	4	2

We also asked the tutors to rate the importance of certain features the t-m should possess. Their answers showed (table 4) that, for all of them, clear and adequate feedback as well as availability is the most significant. The majority consider scientific knowledge and fair evaluation to be very important. On the other hand, their views differ on the importance of friendliness, understanding and personal interest, as shown in table 8.

Table 8. the features of tutor / mentor (according to tutors)

	<i>Scientific knowledge</i>	<i>Availability</i>	<i>Personal interest in the student</i>	<i>Friendliness</i>	<i>Understanding</i>	<i>Fair and accurate evaluation</i>	<i>Clear and adequate feedback</i>
<i>Not important</i>							
<i>A little important</i>			1		1		
<i>Fairly important</i>	1			1		2	
<i>Sufficiently important</i>	2	1	2	3	2		1
<i>Very important</i>	5	7	5	4	4	6	7
<i>Unanswered</i>					1		

For their role as counselors, our tutors think that to be able to support students emotionally, they need to study the profile of each student (5 tutors), show kindness (3 tutors), dispose more time (2 tutors) and have an educational background in Adult Education (2 tutors). Most of them do not consider it necessary to distinguish the two roles, of tutor and counselor (table 9).

Table 9. qualifications for the emotional support of students (according to tutors)

<i>What is needed to be able to support your students emotionally?</i>	<i>number</i>
The appropriate training (psychology, Adult Education)	2
Human kindness and personal interest	1
Study of the profile of each student	2
Kindness / study of the profile	1
Study of the profile / more time	1
Kindness / Study of the profile / more time	1

5. Discussion of the results

A) Students

- The sample profile and their views on DL

The students who choose to attend postgraduate programs of the H. O. U. are mostly women, between 30-49 years old, married with one or two children. The majority is engaged professionally in education and some possess more than one degree. They know at least one foreign language and are computer literate.

It is evident that the profile of the contemporary students has changed (Vergidis & Panagiotakopoulos, 2005). The student population today is older, married and employed people who cannot attend conventional classes (O' Malley & McCraw, 1999). Their acquired knowledge has become obsolete, the competitive job market depreciates their degree and the offer of alternative ways of studying, such as the DL programs, has led them to pursuing a postgraduate degree.

The students of the sample did not have any experience in DL and had chosen their modules according to their personal or / and professional interests. They were satisfied with their studies in general, as the special characteristics of DL, namely the flexibility in terms of time, place and pace are regarded as fairly or very important and helpful. Also, by means of DL programs they are given unlimited access to educational opportunities (Matralis, 1999).

- The students' views on communication

Most students of the sample realize the significance of group meetings and try to participate in them. They think that these meetings help them with questions relevant to the assignments or the learning material and they also have the chance to associate with the t-m and the other students, which is necessary to develop communication and also confirms a previous survey (Vassala, 2003). For the instructors, a group meeting is the best way to forge a relationship of trust with the students and provide them with psychological support and encouragement (Notara, 2001). 5) A similar survey by Vassala and Andreadou (2009) in H. O. U also concludes that, although they are not compulsory, group meetings are characterized by high rates of participation. In most times, students could not participate for reasons beyond their personal choice, such as sickness, long distance or unavailability of work leaves (Vassala & Andreadou, 2009; Agiomirianakis, Mihiotis, Psiridou & Konidaris, 2005).

In the first contact, which was through a letter or an e-mail, the t-m informed the students about the special demands of DL and friendliness was particularly commented by the students. A reason for this is that their unfamiliarity with DL and their long absence from classes are sources of insecurity and stress (Athanasoula-Reppa, 2003 & 2006).

During the studying year, the students were encouraged to communicate with the t-m, even off schedule. In most cases, the content of their communication was the written assignments or some query about the material. There were a small number of students who sought psychological support. However, it is notable that, despite the instructor's encouragement and initiative, a considerable percentage of students communicated with them the minimum. Some of them explained that they hesitated to disturb the t-m. Apart from their hesitation (Holmberg, 1995), we should mention that in the Greek educational system students are not familiar with the service of counseling.

For most students, communication with the t-m contributes significantly to their studies, as it helps them answer questions, digest the learning material, organize their time effectively or understand the nature of individual study, all of which are crucial factors given the unfamiliarity of students with the DL system. As the survey by Dillon et al concluded (1992), interaction with the tutor can act both as facilitator and hindrance. Moreover, a significant percentage was given psychological support and, in some cases, the instructor's attitude encouraged them to pursue their studies despite the difficulties. Only a small number maintained that communication did not help. A similar survey by Vassala and Andreadou (2009) in H. O. U also concludes that communication with the t-m contributed to answering questions and receiving encouragement.

As for the ways of communication, students consider that face-to-face contact is by far the most effective. Telephone conversations and e-mails are also popular, only a few students think there is no difference and none preferred post or fax. A previous survey in 2001 concluded in the same preferences (Louizidou et al). What the students need in communication is directness, which justifies their preferences. Also, they take into account the possibility to adapt the conversation and personal tone. The next important element is speed and the ability to send longer text, which both justify the preference of e-mails, as the tutor can provide extensive elaboration (Lipschultz, 1999).

One of the most common topics in communication is the written assignments. The survey shows that students appreciate it when the t-m pinpoints the weak points but, simultaneously, he praises the good parts. Another survey in H. O. U (Vassala, Hatziplis & Lionarakis, 2007) indicated that the students prefer the comments to be rewarding of their progress. Students are also satisfied when the response is prompt, as feedback to the written assignments is more effective when it is sent shortly after delivery (Holmberg, 1995). Only a minority of the students was not pleased, either because of the delay or the limited comments. Although students study individually and independently, they build a relationship with the instructor through the detailed evaluation and feedback, which both contribute to the establishment of trust (Beaudoin, 1990). By means of the comments, the t-m has the opportunity for individual contact with each student and guidance according to their specific goals and needs. Thus, the instructor can personalize their relationship and balance the absence of daily contact (Athanasoula-Reppa, 2003; Notara, 2001). As Holmberg maintains (1995), the feeling of rapport can be promoted by the personality and actions of the

t-m and positively affect the student's performance.

Students were also asked to rate the importance of specific features which the t-m should possess so that communication is effective. For the majority of them, the most significant features are scientific knowledge and clear / adequate feedback. However, all the suggested features (availability, personal interest, friendliness, understanding, fair and accurate evaluation) are considered very or sufficiently important for most students. In a previous survey in H. O. U (Vassilou et al, 2005), students prioritized social skills higher, with friendliness being the most important form of support. This fact attests the importance of the human factor in DL (Sewart, 1993 & 1998). Friendliness is a form of support that students need to balance the loneliness of individual study (Vassilou-Papageorgiou & Vassala, 2005).

B) Tutors

For all tutors, group meetings are an opportunity to answer questions and elaborate on the assignments. Also, it is the best way to foster a relationship of trust with the students and support them emotionally (Notara, 2001). Preparing these meetings, most tutors communicated with the students and asked for their suggestions. They also tried to encourage students to communicate with each other between meetings, as this can expand their experience and combat the feeling of isolation (Abrahamson, 1998).

As regards the comments on the written assignments, most tutors consider it is necessary not only to pinpoint the weak points but also praise the positive ones. Their views agree with those of the students but they differ on the importance of the immediate response, as most tutors do not prioritize it high. By means of the comments, tutors can build up trust (Beaudoin, 1990), add a personal tone and individualize communication (Athanasoula-Reppa, 2003; Notara, 2001). To achieve this, it is essential they study the special features and conditions of their students.

In order to meet the needs of their dual role, most tutors of the sample consider that no special training is needed but the study of the student's profile, kindness and more time. Interpersonal communication and intimacy, such as praise, a smile or using the student's first name, are significant factors to fostering a relationship of trust (Thatch & Murphy, 1995). They also think that it is not necessary to distinguish between the two roles. As Rekkedal's study has shown (1991), communication with the same tutor / counselor can help students complete their studies, in comparison with distinguished roles, as this case allows for deeper understanding and rapport (Holmberg, 1995).

The dual and demanding role of tutor-mentor in the H. O. U. means expanded skills. Almost all tutors consider availability and adequate feedback as the most important, as they are directly associated with the progress of study. Fair and accurate evaluation, scientific knowledge and personal interest in the students are also significant features the tutor should possess. Understanding and friendliness vary in the tutors' prioritization and appear in general less important in comparison with the students' views.

6. The tutor's profile

Composing the profile of the successful t-m based on the survey results, we can conclude the following:

The instructor must be scientifically knowledgeable, as then he can guide the student to active engagement and interaction with the material, answer questions and recommend further study. The understanding of DL and individual study are essential for the successful support of students (Sherry, 1996). Distance students may be more mature and autonomous but they need different treatment than those in traditional classes. As Buchanan claims (2000), activities promoting interaction and socialization among students (even in web-based environments) are of great significance since face-to-face contact is absent.

- The instructor must be clear and adequate in feedback, as through it the student is informed about their progress and can adjust his study accordingly. Also, the instructor has the opportunity to encourage and support the students in a personal tone (Notara, 2001).
- It is essential that evaluation be fair and accurate, as this can contribute to the development of a democratic relationship of trust.
- Students consider it is important the instructor be available. This balances the absence of everyday contact and allows the benefits of direct dialogue (Keegan, 2001). Prompt response to questions can contribute to observing the time schedule.
- The complex role of t-m requires communicative and social skills. Personal interest in each student and awareness of their profile help the instructor provide individualized feedback, associated with their personal goals, needs and experiences (Galusha, 1997; Kokkos, 2001). When students are not familiar with DL, insecurity and lack of confidence cause stress and hinder progress. Thus, explanation of the special features and demands of DL, as well as reassurance of support at the beginning of the program alleviate anxiety. In the survey by Fung and Carr (2000) concerning the tutorials of the Open University of Hong Kong it was found that the students had certain expectations and looked for guidance and support. In a similar survey, Stevenson and Sander (1998) concluded that knowledge of these expectations can play a key role to the tutor's competence, as they will be able to adjust their tutoring style and help students realize their real potential and needs.

- Friendliness and understanding are qualities which students seek in the instructor. The nature of individual study and their family / professional obligations are factors which affect negatively their studies. The understanding of their multiple roles on the part of the instructor will allow their encouragement and elimination of stress (Athanasoula-Reppa, 2006). Empathy will alleviate loneliness, especially when there are additional problems with the family, friendly or professional environment (Thatch & Murphy, 1995; Notara, 2001; Vassilou-Papageorgiou & Vassala, 2005; Vassala, 2006).

7. Conclusions

This survey investigated the views of students and tutors in H. O. U on the subject, quality and contribution of communication. It is concluded that, regarding the ways of communication, tutors and students consider face-to-face to be the most helpful and this justifies their massive participation in group meetings. Both parties agree that there they have the chance of interpersonal contact and development of trust, which allows the instructor to offer psychological support (Notara, 2001). Students also prefer telephone contact and e-mails, as they are direct and personalized. A key element in the communication is adaptability. In addition, they think it is important the communication be fast (Holmberg, 1995) and allow longer text (Lipschultz, 1999).

The most common topic in the communication between t-m and students is queries on the learning material and the assignments, while it is rare for the students to turn to the instructor for psychological support. This could be explained by the adulthood and autonomy of the students and their unfamiliarity with the role of mentor, attributed to their background in the conventional educational system. However, the instructors took the initiative to contact more frequently with those needing encouragement.

As for the feedback through the comments on the written assignments, students appreciate the prompt response as it can be more effective (Holmberg, 1995). Commenting the assignments was individualized communication with each student (Notara, 2001) and helped combat the insecurity of lonely study, as it provided elaboration on the student's performance (Athanasoula-Reppa, 2003). When feedback was delayed, limited or only critical, it contributed to the student's progress the minimum.

In the case of the H. O. U., the instructor has a dual role, as he acts as tutor and mentor. This means that special communicative and social skills are required. As tutors, they have to facilitate interaction with the learning material. Also, as mentors, they have to encourage and support the students contributing to their completion of studies (H. O. U., 2001). This justifies the high prioritization of their academic skills and the importance of social skills. The instructors in H. O. U think that what is necessary to accomplish their dual duties is more time and study of the students' individual profile. A fundamental principle of DL is the necessity of constant and continual communication between the Institute and the students. On the part of the tutor, the time-consuming and challenging task is to establish a friendly atmosphere and rapport in his communication with the students (Holmberg, 2002).

On the whole, students' evaluation of the contribution of the communication with the instructor confirms the multi-dimensional role of the instructor in H. O. U. As they claim, it helped them answer questions, digest the material with the recommended further study, understand the nature of individual study and organize their time schedule efficiently. Moreover, a number of students were offered psychological support, even if they did not take the initiative to ask for it.

Tutors, as well as the rest of DL staff, are called to function in a new, developing environment, which means that there are no easy and settled answers to guide their tutoring course (Hill, 1998). On the contrary, tutors should be resourceful and risk takers in order to develop new ideas and approaches. In addition, their diverse and challenging role calls for continuous updating and training (Clay, 1999).

It would be interesting to investigate the views of undergraduate students in DL programs, as certain features differentiate them from those of postgraduate DL programs, such as age, absence of family / professional obligations, or different goals.

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