
HOW TO BUILD UP A EUROPEAN ODL NETWORK?

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Introduction

The Europe of Knowledge has been reached creating equality of chance by the continuous renewal of knowledge and the availability of education due to the policy of the European Union, and the efforts of the national economies and the individuals. The significant scene of the development of the intellectual resources and lifelong learning is the ODL which uses flexible institutional frames, modern educational methods and infrastructure.

Several different distance education network models are present and functioning nowadays in Europe. The organisational structure, management, efficiency and financing of these differ greatly.

The EU SOCRATES/MINERVA programme „How to Build Up European ODL Networks" ended in 2001 investigated different aspects of European distance education networking. The main objective of the one-year programme has been to prepare a study based on the comparative analysis of the different network models operating in Europe with the method of open and distance learning which contributes to the wider dissemination of open and distance learning, to the improvement of the quality of the up-to-date educational forms in the existing network by summarizing the experiences.

1. Research methods

The collaborating partner institutions (Dennis Gábor College – Hungary; Jutland Open University – Denmark; EDEN – Great Britain; Kaunas Technical University – Lithuania and Universitat Oberta de Catalunya) performed the practice and analysis of the ODL by their own experiences and by screening of other institutes and institutional networks operating mainly as the members of the international networks EDEN and EADL. As an essential element of the methodology of research we issued an on-line questionnaire, which examined the legal and financial surroundings, the constitutional structure, the sectors of operation, the practice of network and the expectations of the participants. The valuability of the answers was provided by a 90 % delimited multiple-choice test (<http://www.gdf.hu>). Answering the test was voluntary and at some certain questions more parallel answers were allowed depending on the content.

2. Representative sample

The questionnaire was completed by 67 participants from 24 European countries and 2 from non-European countries so the dimension of the sampling has reached the critical mass that tuned to be suitable for analysis and to draw some conclusions from it.

The answers equally represent the circle of countries from inside the European Union, that of those who are very close to joining and also the countries that are still outside from the EU.

This is an important point of view if we accept the proposition that the ODL is a very effective method of the cooperation of societies inside and over nations, the coordination of resources, and creation of professional communities.

2.1. The national legal environment of ODL

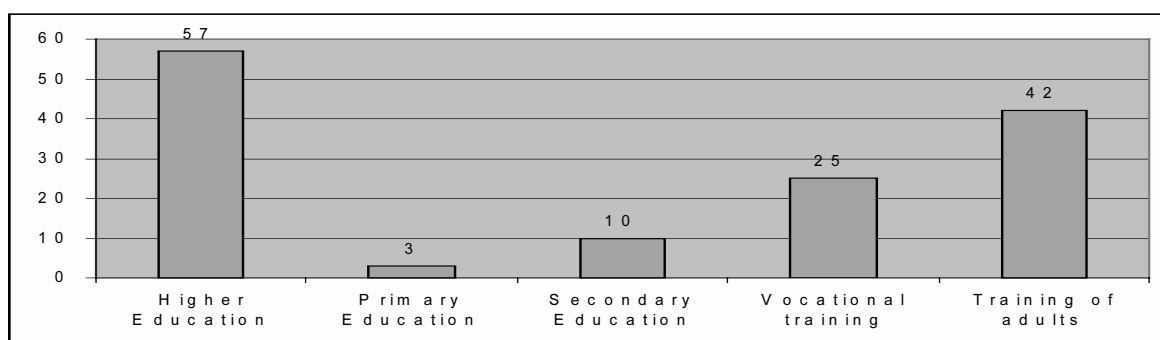
According to the 44,8% of the answerers there is no ruling law for ODL in his country.

The significant scale of the data leads us to conclude that there is a correlation between the lack of regulation and the „laissez-faire passer" dominance registered in model typology presented later. Its main characteristic is the small governmental role in the organisation, financing of ODL. Three answering institutions operate in elementary education, too.

The data expressible per thousand is still worth being taken into consideration and being discussed as a pedagogical test accepting the face-to-face need of preparatory education based on traditional methods and the primarily knowledge-renewal, knowledge synthesizing mission of ODL.

2.2. The operational sectors of the ODL

The theories concerning the fields of the application of the ODL were proved by the answers. The fundamental formal educational sectors of the ODL are the higher and secondary education and the vocational training. The ODL also appears in a significant measure - 61% of the answers - in adult-training outside of the educational system. This fact supports the practical realisation of the idea of lifelong learning : the training in the educational system ending at higher degree can be considered as initial. Its main objective is to establish knowledge and to prepare the students for a career which can be realized by harmonizing working and further education. The ODL is a rational tool and frame of the idea of lifelong learning, which - in contrast with the traditional training - can satisfy the increasing demands on the development of the intellectual resources.

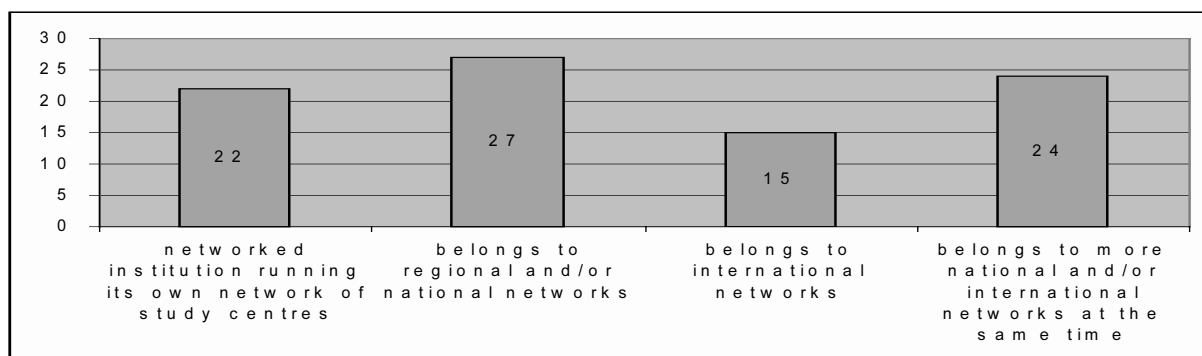


2.3. The national organisational forms of ODL

We defined the national facultative ODL organisational categories following Zeller's (1995) model typology. On the basis of the division and redundancy of the answers it can be laid down as a fact that there is no pure national model formation in the circle of the interviewees. Nevertheless the low collaboration willingness of governments in the organisation and financing of ODL can be considered significant.

2.4. The network typology of the individual institutions

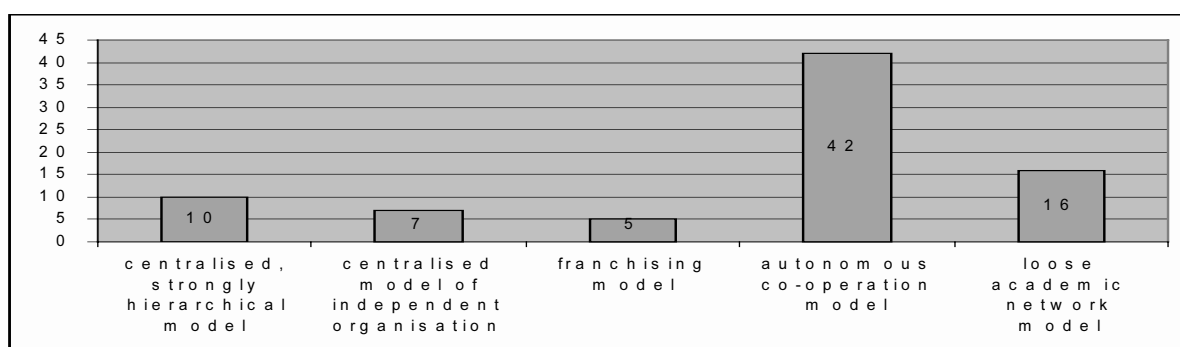
The variance of the answers measurable in absolute numbers is the most equable by this question of the given typologies. However, the 32 % of the answerers is not connected to any national networks, respectively do not operate an own network consisting of study centres, 13% is connected to national/regional/international networks at the same time. It is characteristic for the diversification that the interviewees considered important to give a more accurate answer mostly here.



2.5. Effectiveness – preference investigation of the models

The interviewees could choose among five desirable models considering the way of the division of labour and the legal status of the network members. The “Autonomous co-operation model” mixing the legal, professional, cultural and financing competencies in the most democratic way, has been considered desirable by 47 % of the answerers. Inclusive of the 18 % voted on the “Loose academic network model”, which prefers the exchange of professional and scientific experiences among the members, 65 % dominance of the desirable network model can be demonstrated.

Altogether 0,06 % chose the “franchising model” on the other side of the pole, which strongly restricts the organisational, professional and financing autonomy. 17 % of the answerers considered one of the centralised models emphasizing profile purity, maintenance and improvement of competitiveness through financing as the most efficient ODL network form.



2.6. The value of the connection to the network

We studied the value of the connection to the network in 3 main groups with many aspects on a 5 grade scale. The participants considered the following to be especially significant:

- The possibility of changing scientific and professional information (from the point of view of information and cooperation).
- The achievement of financial assistance (from the point of view of commerce).
- The individual development, the improvement of the quality of knowledge and service (from the point of view of the development of the institute).

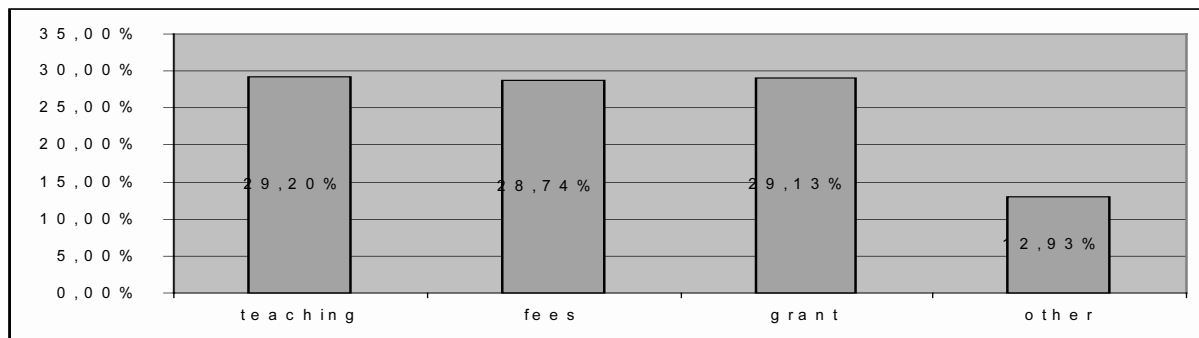
The advantages of connection to the network can only appear in the professional and qualitative improvement of the institutes if the network organization - having organisational and professional influence and providing high quality performance - is able to operate for a longer time.

That is why - besides the material advantages - the answers express precisely the advantages of the fulfilment of the professional image and potential by the network.

2.7. The financial resources of the institutions

Institution financing is supported by three main resources in the circle of the interviewees: incomes from education, tuition fees and external support of similar size (about 28-29 %).

90 % of the income coming from external support is governmental. National and international research, development projects, local governmental support were pointed out as additional resources of incomes.



2.8. Examples for good network practice

The survey is difficult to be evaluated because of the answers given to the open questions; but its pragmatic chapter still 39 % of the answerers relate their good experiences gained in the field of the operation and organisation, of ODL. There are reports on transnational collaboration primarily at large, comprehensive European free universities, distance educational associations and through student-teacher mobility.

References

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