Adult distance teaching and learning: comparing two Open University contexts

Maria Gravani, Open University of Cyprus, Cyprus

Paper presented at the 40th Annual SCUTREA Conference, 6-8 July 2010, University of Warwick, Coventry

There is renewed governmental focus on Higher Education (HE) and, in particular, on the role and contribution of the Open University of Cyprus to national development, so that the country can become a national and international centre of education. At the same time, there is a growing realization that we are deprived of research in the area of HE, especially since the first university in the island operated in 1992. Particularly, little empirical research has focused on investigating the processes by which undergraduate and postgraduate courses are organized and delivered in the HE sector, while no research has been done on how learners and tutors experience and perceive their learning, its context and its occasions, and the conditions that support and promote their professional growth in a university that adopts an educational philosophy fundamentally different from that held by a conventional university. Additionally, there is a scant understanding of the sorts of evaluative lens learners and tutors bring to bear on their experiences of the Open University.

In the light of the above, the proposed research seeks to unveil the ‘fine-grained’ processes that are at work during the organization and delivery of the courses at the Open University, and the factors that influence the development of the learner identity and learning competences. The project complements and builds on previous research conducted by Gravani (2003, 2008) exploring secondary teachers’ and university tutors’ adult professional learning in a course of an in-service training programme in a university in Greece. One aspect of this proposal entails further exploring adult professional learning processes in HE in a new setting. This will broaden our understanding of the learning processes, the extent to which these are influenced by the different contexts, the ways in which the different forms of knowledge interact and how this translates into effective teaching and learning in HE. The proposed research builds also on the experience and the expertise of the research team, both as researchers in the areas of adult teaching and learning, distance education and HE (Dr. Gravani, Dr. Zarifis, Prof. Hatzinikita, Dr. Gough, Prof. Yütte) and as educators at distance and open learning environments (Dr. Michaelides, Prof. Eufthismiadis, Dr. Petrides, Dr. Zarifis, Prof. Hatzinikita, Dr. Gough, Dr. Gravani).

The above informs the objectives of this project. These are:

1. To explore and compare adult educators’ and learners’ accounts of distance learning courses in the Open University of Cyprus and the Hellenic Open University;
2. To unveil and illuminate adult professional learning processes at work in the course of these courses;
3. To develop a structure which proposes strategies for continuous lifelong
learning in distance learning courses in HE in Cyprus and Greece

4. To use the research data to enhance adult professional teaching and learning at the Open University.

In the light of the above, the research questions to be addressed in the study are:

1. In what ways do adult educators and learners see their educational background, past experience in teaching and learning, needs, motives and expectations as relating to how they experience the distance learning courses at the Open University;

2. What are their experiences and perceptions of the social context of the programme and in what ways do they impact on adult professional learning;

3. To what extent do participants’ experiences of distance learning courses at the Open University in relation to the evoked emotions influence adult professional learning?

4. To what extent do they perceive the educational context (Programmes policies, curriculum, course content) is relevant to how they experience the course?

Such questions indicate that the study is an exploratory one, the purpose being to examine educators’ and learners’ perceptions, experiences and understandings of the courses. It starts from the assumption that adult and professional growth is a continuous process therefore an understanding of this process is useful in designing programmes. Such an exploration, which focuses mainly on how individuals understand, perceive and interpret a phenomenon and seeks a deeper interpretation and conceptualization of that (Van Manen, 1984), calls for a phenomenological approach and for qualitative research techniques to be adopted. Of the available research models the ‘case study’ with an interpretative framework would seem an ideal type for answering the research questions outlined earlier. Case studies can be carried out at various levels of complexity, from a single, brief, trivial episode to a lengthy major life event with multiple strands (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982). Two broad case studies were used for the purpose of this study. These were the Open University of Cyprus (OUC), and the Hellenic Open University (HOU). In these two settings the undergraduate programme in Greek Civilization and the postgraduate programme in Education Studies will be explored respectively. Particularly, eight tutors and sixteen learners (four tutors and eight learners, respectively, from each of the two case study universities explored) are proposed to be the key unit of analysis. Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews and analyses of both ‘learning journals’ and each university’s documentation of the two programmes. The analysis will combine a hermeneutic and grounded theory approach for the data from the interviews, the learning journals and documents.

To end with, the proposed study is the first of its kind in Cyprus and will result in informing the organisation, design, implementation and further development of distance-learning courses in Higher Education, and contribute towards their future reorganisation.

References

This document was added to the Education-line collection on 29 June 2010