

Open Distance Learning in Cyprus: A Population-based Survey

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Abstracts

English

Background: Open distance learning represents a dynamic and flexible pathway of academic endeavour that serves different needs within a global economic environment. Cyprus, has invested in this alternative educational methodology by establishing the Open University of Cyprus as its second public university. The Interim University Governing Board was appointed in 2003 and the first students were admitted in September 2006.

Methods: A population-based survey was conducted in the Fall of 2005 across the island, in order to explore knowledge, attitudes and beliefs about open distance learning in Cyprus. A random sample of adults 18 years of age or older was selected using a multistage stratified sampling design and the data were collected through personal interviews.

Results: A total of 896 individuals, mean age 39.4 years of age (range 18 to 60) participated. Forty-nine percent were males, while 53%, 21% and 26% had completed lyceum, college and university, respectively. About 1 every 4 participants reported that they did not know anything about distance learning, whereas 55% had not heard about the Open University of Cyprus. Among unemployed participants, 29% did not know anything about distance learning while among those not having a computer at home or not knowing how to use a computer the percentage was 35% and 36%, respectively.

Conclusions: Knowledge on open distance learning was relatively high among the participants. However, disadvantaged individuals were those found to be less informed about the above alternative educational pathway in general and the Open University of Cyprus in particular.

Greek

Εισαγωγή: Η ανοικτή και εξ αποστάσεως εκπαίδευση αποτελεί μια δυναμική και ευέλικτη ακαδημαϊκή μέθοδο η οποία καλύπτει ποικιλόμορφες ανάγκες μέσα στο παγκόσμιο οικονομικό περιβάλλον. Η Κύπρος έχει επενδύσει σε αυτή τη μορφή εναλλακτικής εκπαίδευσης με την ίδρυση του Ανοικτού Πανεπιστημίου Κύπρου, ως το δεύτερο, από πλευράς έναρξης λειτουργίας, δημόσιο πανεπιστήμιο. Η μεταβατική διοικούσα επιτροπή του Πανεπιστημίου διορίστηκε το 2003 και το Πανεπιστήμιο δέχθηκε τους πρώτους φοιτητές το Σεπτέμβριο του 2006.

Μεθοδολογία: Το φθινόπωρο του 2005, πραγματοποιήθηκε μια έρευνα ανάμεσα στον πληθυσμό για να διαπιστωθούν οι γνώσεις, οι στάσεις και τα πιστεύω των Κυπρίων για την ανοικτή και εξ αποστάσεως εκπαίδευση. Το δείγμα επιλέχθηκε ανάμεσα στον ενήλικο πληθυσμό, 18 ετών και άνω, με βάση τη μέθοδο της τυχαιάς πολυεπίπεδης στρωματοποιημένης δειγματοληψίας και η συλλογή των στοιχείων υλοποιήθηκε μέσω προσωπικών συνεντεύξεων.

Αποτελέσματα: Συνολικά έλαβαν μέρος 896 ενήλικες, που είχαν μέση ηλικία 39.4 έτη (διακύμανση 18 έως 60). Σαράντα εννέα τοις εκατόν ήταν άνδρες και ποσοστό 53%, 21% και 26% ανέφεραν ότι συμπλήρωσαν σπουδές στο λύκειο, κολλέγιο και πανεπιστήμιο, αντίστοιχα. Περίπου ένας στους τέσσερις συμμετέχοντες δήλωσαν ότι δεν γνωρίζουν τίποτε για την εξ αποστάσεως εκπαίδευση και ταυτόχρονα, το 55% δεν είχε ακούσει για το Ανοικτό Πανεπιστήμιο Κύπρου. Ανάμεσα στους άνεργους συμμετέχοντες, το 29% δεν γνώριζε για την ανοικτή και εξ αποστάσεως εκπαίδευση ενώ παρόμοια άγνοια είχαν και όσοι δεν είχαν ηλεκτρονικό υπολογιστή (ΗΥ) στο σπίτι (35%) ή δεν ήξεραν να χρησιμοποιούν ΗΥ (36%).

Συμπεράσματα: Η γνώση για την ανοικτή και εξ αποστάσεως εκπαίδευση ήταν σχετικά υψηλή ανάμεσα στους συμμετέχοντες. Όμως, τα μη προνομιούχα άτομα ήταν τα λιγότερο πληροφορημένα άτομα γενικά για τη μέθοδο αυτή και ειδικά για το Ανοικτό Πανεπιστήμιο Κύπρου.

Keywords

Open University of Cyprus, Distance learning, Awareness, Methodology, Educational Behaviour.

Topics

- Abstracts
 - English
 - Greek
- Background
- Methods
 - Study population
 - Data collection
 - Data management

- Results
- Discussion

Background

Open and distance learning provides students the opportunity to learn on their own time, at their own pace, regardless of their age and without having to attend lectures, seminars or labs on the premises of a university, as compared to a conventional university. A variety of media is therefore utilized in order to facilitate the learning process and help students obtain a university-level degree, regardless of their location and distance from the premises of the institution (Vergides D. et al 1999).

Open distance learning has gained momentum around the world as a new, flexible, and dynamic way of acquisition of academic knowledge and professional experience in a complex albeit changing and challenging global environment (Feldmann B. 2001). The rapid advancement of technological and scientific knowledge that is being transformed into products and services by multinational corporations within a framework of a globalized and integrated economy creates several opportunities as well as new demands for continuous education of human capital that will be able to respond to the above needs (Needham G. 2005, Ayer S. 1998). Open distance learning represents a relatively new, adjustable and promising way to confront the above challenges especially for the developing countries (Gajaraj D. 2001, Fletcher M. 2001, Ramanujam PR. 2001).

The overall philosophy of open distance learning is to provide additional and student-oriented opportunities that will enable individuals, who might have missed earlier life opportunities for academic achievement, to select a personal pace of learning irrespective of place and time (Monk D. 2005). As Cyprus struggles to face the new challenges of its recent accession into the European Union, is important to invest on new and innovative pathways of higher education, that will serve as power engines to move the country forward in the competitive European economic and socio-cultural environment (EU Commission 1991).

The Open University of Cyprus was established as the second public Educational Institution of the Island. Its Interim Governing Board was appointed by the Council of Ministers with its decision No 57,374 on the 13th February, 2003 (Cyprus Official Gazette 2003). Within the last three years, the Interim Governing Board worked tirelessly in order to develop the academic and legal framework of the University, which enabled the first students of two master-level programs to be admitted in September of 2006. A population-based survey was conducted in the Fall of 2005 across the island, in order to explore knowledge, attitudes and beliefs of the adult population of Cyprus with regards to open distance learning.

The objective of our study was to analyze and evaluate information collected from the above survey on specific issues related to open distance learning and present a summary of important findings. We present demographic data on the sample of the survey participants, and information on the knowledge and attitudes about the open distance learning in general as well as the Open University of Cyprus (OUC) in particular.

Methods

Study population

The survey was conducted in the Fall of 2005. The population-based survey targeted the adult population of Cyprus residing in the areas controlled by the government of the Republic of Cyprus. A representative random sample was selected using a multistage stratified sampling design targeting adults 18 years of age or older.

Data collection

Information was collected by a team of twenty (20) trained interviewers through face-to-face personal interviews, using a structured questionnaire. The interviewers were hired and trained by a professional consulting company that implemented the survey. The questionnaire included demographic and other information (age, gender, educational attainment and socioeconomic status). Socioeconomic status levels were based on standardized tables taking into consideration information on education, occupation and income. Additional questions on the knowledge and experience of interviewees on computer use, internet and electronic mail were also obtained. Further inquiries focused on the knowledge about open distance learning, awareness about the Open University of Cyprus and on the need for continuing professional education (lifelong learning).

Data management

Data were entered into a computerized database. Verification of the accuracy of entered data was performed using standard techniques such as logic checks and repeated interviews via telephone covering about 30% of interviewees, who had agreed to participate and were conducted by each interviewer. Analyses were performed using standard statistical packages.

Results

A total of 896 individuals completed the personal interviews. Forty-nine percent were males. The mean age of participants was 39.4 years of age (range 18 to 60). Seventeen percent of participants were from the 18 – 24 age category (mean age 21), while 26%, 26%, 21% and 9% were from the 25 – 34 (mean age 29.5), 35 – 44 (mean age 39.5), 45 – 54 (mean age 49.5), and 55 – 60 (mean age 57.5) age categories, respectively. Among all survey participants, 53% had completed high school, 21% had gone to a college and 26% had completed a university degree. In addition, 70% reported having a computer at home, of whom about 48% used an electronic mail as opposed to 28% who did not have a computer and 2% who refused to respond to the particular question.

Among all responders, 24% reported that they had not heard about distance learning before, while among those who attended higher education, only 16% reported not being knowledgeable about distance learning. Furthermore, more than half of survey participants (55%), were not aware of the establishment of the Open University of Cyprus at a time (2005) when the university was gearing up to begin its academic programs within a year from the time of the survey. On the other hand, about a third of participants (36%) expressed an interest in obtaining a degree through open distance learning.

In Table 1 we present information on the association between knowledge about open distance learning and

several characteristics of the survey participants in general.

Table 1. Survey Participants' Knowledge about Open Distance Learning (N=896, 2005)

Participants' Characteristics	Knowledge about Open Distance Learning	
	Yes n (%)	No n (%)
Age		
18 - 24	113 (73)	42 (27)
25 - 34	181 (78)	51 (22)
35 - 44	185 (78)	51 (22)
45 - 54	142 (74)	49 (26)
55 - 60	62 (76)	20 (24)
Gender		
Men	331 (75)	108 (25)
Women	352 (77)	105 (23)
Education		
High School	312 (66)	159 (34)
College	155 (82)	34 (18)
University	216 (92)	20 (8)
Socioeconomic Status		
Class A - B (highest)	151 (90)	16 (10)
Class C 1	164 (82)	35 (18)
Class C 2	342 (70)	150 (30)
Class D - Z (lowest)	26 (68)	12 (32)
Regional district		
Nicosia (capital)	288 (87)	43 (13)
Limassol	246 (80)	63 (20)
Larnaca	81 (60)	54 (40)
Famagusta*	23 (59)	16 (41)
Paphos	45 (55)	37 (45)
Employed		
Yes	519 (78)	147 (22)
No	164 (71)	66 (29)
Have a computer at home [†]		
Yes	510 (82)	114 (18)
No	173 (64)	98 (36)
Total	683 (76)	213 (24)

* Refers to the part of Famagusta district controlled by the government of the Republic of Cyprus since some part of Famagusta district as well as the districts of Kyrenia, Morphou, and Karpasia continue to be under Turkish Occupation since 1974

[†] Information was missing for one participant

In Table 2 we explore the survey participants' awareness about the Open University of Cyprus. In most categories, awareness of the OUC was lower than 50%.

Table 2. Survey Participants' Awareness about the Open University of Cyprus (N=896, 2005)

Participants' Characteristics	Knowledge about the Open University of Cyprus	
	Yes n (%)	No n (%)
Age		
18 - 24	48 (31)	106 (68)
25 - 34	107 (46)	125 (54)
35 - 44	118 (50)	118 (50)
45 - 54	91 (48)	100 (52)

55 – 60	43 (52)	39 (48)
Gender		
Men	196 (45)	243 (55)
Women	211 (46)	245 (54)
Education		
High School	185 (39)	286 (61)
College	93 (49)	95 (50)
University	129 (55)	107 (45)
Socio-economic Status		
Class A – B (highest)	94 (56)	73 (44)
Class C 1	103 (52)	96 (48)
Class C 2	197 (40)	294 (60)
Class D – Z (lowest)	13 (34)	25 (66)
Regional district		
Nicosia (capital)	170 (51)	161 (49)
Limassol	177 (57)	131 (42)
Larnaca	32 (24)	103 (76)
Famagusta*	12 (31)	27 (69)
Paphos	16 (20)	66 (80)
Employed		
Yes	329 (49)	336 (50)
No	78 (34)	152 (66)
Have a computer at home [†]		
Yes	303 (49)	320 (51)
No	104 (38)	167 (62)
Total †	407 (45)	488 (54)

* Refers to the part of Famagusta district controlled by the government of the Republic of Cyprus since some part of Famagusta district as well as the districts of Kyrenia, Morphou, and Karpasia continue to be under Turkish Occupation since 1974

† Information was missing for one participant

Finally, in Table 3 we present information on the interest of participants in obtaining a degree through the open distance learning pathway. It is noteworthy that 50% of those being aware and 43% of those not being aware about the Open University of Cyprus expressed interest in pursuing a degree via open distance learning.

Table 3. Survey Participants' expressed interest in obtaining a degree via Open Distance Learning (N=896, 2005)

Participants' Characteristics	Interest in obtaining a degree (%)					Mean Score [‡]
	Not interested	Very little	Somewhat interested	Much interested	Very Much	
Age						
18 - 24	38	16	27	8	11	2,4
25 – 34	33	16	23	9	18	2,6
35 – 44	38	15	25	11	11	2,4
45 – 54	47	14	22	8	9	2,2
55 - 60	62	9	22	2	5	1,8
Gender						
Men	44	16	23	8	9	2,2
Women	38	13	25	9	14	2,5
Education						
High School	54	13	21	6	6	2,0
College	32	15	27	9	16	2,6

University	21	18	27	15	19	2,9
Socioeconomic Status						
Class A – B (highest)	23	16	24	13	24	3,0
Class C 1	31	17	27	11	15	2,6
Class C 2	49	14	23	7	7	2,1
Class D – Z (lowest)	58	11	21	5	5	1,9
Regional district						
Nicosia (capital)	35	17	27	10	11	2,4
Limassol	34	16	26	9	15	2,6
Larnaca	58	9	16	7	11	2,0
Famagusta*	64	8	21	-	8	1,8
Paphos	52	11	18	11	7	2,1
Employed						
Yes	41	15	23	8	13	2,4
No	41	14	27	10	9	2,3
Total	40	15	24	9	12	2,4

* Refers to the part of Famagusta district controlled by the government of the Republic of Cyprus since some part of Famagusta district as well as the districts of Kyrenia, Morphou, and Karpasia continue to be under Turkish Occupation since 1974

† Information was missing for one participant

‡ Scale score: Not interested = 1, Very little = 2, Somewhat interested = 3, Much interested = 4, Very much interested = 5.

Discussion

To our knowledge, this is the first study in Cyprus evaluating the knowledge, attitudes and beliefs of the population on the broad concept of open distance learning in general and on the awareness about the Open University of Cyprus in particular. We found that the majority of survey participants were knowledgeable about the pathway of open distance learning and the percentage was higher among those already having a university degree, those with higher socioeconomic status (SES), among the employed and in two geographical districts - Nicosia and Limassol – the capital of the island and the second largest city of the island, respectively. On the other hand, we found that specific awareness about the Open University of Cyprus was relatively low. In particular, very low levels of awareness were observed among the younger age group, those who only completed high school, those of the lowest SES category, the unemployed, those not having a computer at home and the participants from the district of Paphos, which is the farthest city away from the capital on the west part of the island. Finally, the average expressed interest of survey participants in obtaining a degree via open distance learning was below the mean score of 2,5 with the lowest interest reported from the high school graduates, those of the lowest SES, the unemployed, those residing in Larnaca and Paphos and the older participants.

The findings of our study suggest that population categories, which are regarded as disadvantaged and/or marginalized, that could most benefit from alternative academic pathways, such as the open distance learning, are those who were less informed in general about the particular educational opportunity and were least aware about the establishment of the Open University of Cyprus (Bird J. 2003). Therefore, it came as no surprise that those same population categories were less interested in obtaining a degree through open distance learning. Research supports that demographic characteristics and variations in students' perceptions of the academic environment play an important role in their study behaviour (Yu S. 2006, Richardson JT. 2006). Our findings provide additional evidence of the importance of the above factors with respect to attitudes and beliefs towards open distance learning and most significantly with regards to intention to pursue academic studies in particular.

Limitations of our study include the relatively small sample size that does not allow for advanced statistical analyses in order to further explore possible associations between participants' characteristics and other factors that may affect alternative educational opportunities. In addition, the survey was conducted at a time when the Open University of Cyprus did not have any ongoing academic programs and therefore, the low awareness observed, may reflect the above timing of the survey. A follow-up survey may be warranted in order to document any significant changes that may be attributed to the inauguration of the first two post-graduate programs at OUC in September of 2006.

In summary, we conclude that knowledge about open distance learning is relatively high in Cyprus, and the awareness about the Open University of Cyprus was found at a reasonable level given the timing of the survey. We believe that our study findings warrant the implementation of a follow-up survey some time in the near future in order to quantify the population awareness effect of the Open University having started its academic programs. Finally, we conclude that marketing activities to inform the public and generate interest about such alternative educational opportunities should more aggressively target those segments of the population, who are regarded as disadvantaged if they were to make a difference with respect to offering a second life opportunity for academic studies to those most in need.

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