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ADULT STUDENTS IN THE OPEN UNIVERSITY - SYSTEMATIC FEEDBACK AND CONTINUOUS DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The Open University is internationally significant adult educator. Open Universities have an important role as an enabler for continuous self-development for individual adult students. Also the Open University students' feedback is an important factor in continuous and systematic development. The Open University collects annually systematic feedback and reflections from academic adult students. The results of questionnaires are exploited in the continuous development and as part of the Open University Quality System.

Keywords: open university, student feedback, developing the teaching, quality

1 THE OPEN UNIVERSITY

The Kokkola University Consortium Chydenius is a university centre formed by three universities, one task of which is to produce the education of the Open University. Approximately 2000 adult students study in the Open University every year producing more than 12 000 study credits. The Open University provides everybody the opportunity for academic, scientific studies, there are no selection criteria or requirements for foundation studies. There are academic studies available versatively from many different disciplines. The studies are in accordance with the curricula of the university and they can be connected to a university degree. The students' motive for the studies varies, some look for the continuing education, some study for recreation and some aim for a university degree.

In open university the studies can be accumulated multiformly and flexibly so that it is possible for the adult students who work, possibly have families and live far from the location of the open university to proceed flexibly in their studies. The students can choose from different forms of study (for example, essays, e-learning courses, exams etc.) the one which is best suited for them. It is possible to complete the majority of the studies online. Almost all the basic studies and subject studies can be flexibly enrolled in at any stage of the semester.

Already for a long time an attempt has been made to systematically develop the science based teaching, the quality of the pedagogical planning and other practices of the open university. Developing the teaching of the open university is largely based on the student feedback information and on its reflection. This practical information comprises the teaching and teaching arrangements, student counselling, study administration and student services. In the open university a student feedback system has been developed through which the information based on the adult students' experiences is obtained to form the basis for developing the separate sectors of the education.

2 SYSTEMATIC FEEDBACK AS A TOOL FOR DEVELOPING THE ADULT EDUCATION

Feedback is collected every year from the students in the Open University of the university centre. The aim of the feedback is to clarify the students' experiences of teaching, counselling, student services and teaching arrangements. The feedback surveys are a fixed part of the quality system and the results are utilised in developing the operation.

The results of the feedback survey and the development proposals which have risen from them are processed every year during the development day of the staff of the Open University. The areas of development are mapped out and a plan of action based on them is made where the concrete measures and the person responsible for the matter are stated.

The 1-4 most central areas of development have been brought out from the results of feedback surveys. In an annual feedback day a subject or subjects for development have been chosen together and the measures have been planned. Based on the feedback, for example, student services have

been made more flexible and automated (among others, study letters automatically from Proma, the availability of Optima IDs, the available study time displayed in Proma, the receipt when receiving the examination registrations), the information has been intensified and clarified (the renewing of Optima and WWW -pages, customer letters, the texts in Meteori) and online supervision developed (the online recordings of study skills, the Academic study ability of an adult student -online course, real-time online supervision).

Attention is paid to reporting the results especially at a regional level. A summary, which is published on the web page, is made of the results. Based on the summary of results the publications which are sent both to students and the media are also written.

In some years, one development theme has been chosen beforehand for the survey and more feedback has been asked about it. For example, in 2010 the special theme was marketing and in 2011 it was the interaction of the studies and of working life. In 2015 the feedback is more widely requested about the online examination, the objective is to get information about the functionality of online examination and about its development needs.

3 METHODOLOGY

The article is based on the online student feedback survey done in 2014 which was sent to all the students of the open university who had completed the basic or subject studies programme. The survey was delivered to 321 students, of which 106 gave answers. The response was 33%.

In the survey the following points were examined: the selection criteria of the adult students' study place, the primary purpose of the studies, the future plans in regard to the university studies and the quality of the student services, teaching and supervision were clarified. The survey contained multiple choice questions and open questions. Mainly a five-step evaluation scale was used in the multiple choice questions (1=poor, 2=below average, 3=satisfactory, 4=good, 5=excellent) with which the quality of the operation and student satisfaction were surveyed. The results were examined with the distribution information (the frequencies, percentage values) and with the averages for the whole material and subject specifically. Factors which had promoted and complicated studying, the best contribution to the studies and strengths and development needs of the operation were examined with open questions. The open answers were classified according to the contents.

4 RESULTS

4.1 Opportunity for the distance learning increasingly important

The results show that the opportunity for distance learning is a matter of importance for the academic adult students. 75% of the interviewees mentioned the opportunity for distance learning as a matter which affected their choice of study place. On the whole, the online solutions which support the distance learning opportunity got positive evaluations from the students (avg. 4,35, scale 1-5).

On the basis of the survey, also the possibility to study with a degree as an aim is important from the adult students' point of view. 38% of the interviewees mentioned applying to study as a degree-student to a university or to the Master of Arts studies in the university centre, as a primary purpose for their studies. Developing vocational knowledge and skills was a purpose for the studies for 26% of the interviewees. The most popular plan in regard to the university studies was to apply for the Master of Arts studies in social work education and the second was the class teachers' adult education of the University Consortium of Kokkola. The popularity of the open university channel of study was also on the rise, 20% of the degree goal-oriented students planned to apply through this channel (in 2013, 12% of the interviewees aimed at applying through the open university channels).

4.2 Student services operating well

The interviewees evaluated the student services of the open university to be good (4) on the whole on a five-step scale (bad=1, below average=2, satisfactory=3, good=4, excellent=5). The students were the most satisfied in the service provided by the staff, 99% of the interviewees estimated it to be

excellent or good. Also the online operations, such as registration, the performance information and the getting the required user IDs were evaluated to be well functioning and quick.

4.3 Expert teachers and successful supervision

In teaching the adult students evaluated the teachers' expertise to be almost excellent (avg. 4,6). In the manner of the previous years the sufficient number of alternative ways of performance was considered as a strength (avg. 4,57). 98% of the interviewees evaluated the scheduling for teaching as good or excellent. As a whole the interviewees evaluated the open university education as good (avg. 4,29) and online services as supportive of the studies (avg. 4,35). The web-based teaching was evaluated as successful: online lecture recordings, online examination, web-based learning environment Optima and online group and individual supervision got good or excellent evaluations.

The counselling and supervision were regarded as good (4,17) on the whole in the studies. The adult students of the open university evaluated that in the supervision the attention was paid well or excellently to the interviewees' own situations in life. 87% of the interviewees experienced that they received advice well or excellently in the use of information and communication technology during the studies. Supervision in degree orientated studies was evaluated as good or excellent by 90% of the interviewees.

4.4 Learning the scientific contents most rewarding

All of the students taking part in the survey experienced that they had achieved all the objectives well in the studies (avg. 4,1). The students evaluated that they had learned the concepts and theories of the subject. Progress was experienced during the studies in the critical thinking skills and also in adapting the learned matters into practice.

Of the forms of study, the traditional learning task (avg. 4,64) was still evaluated as a rewarding form of study. Also the work practice (avg. 4,56), dissertation (avg. 4,57) and online courses (avg. 4,46) were still evaluated as good forms of study. Instead, the examination was experienced as least useful of the traditional forms of study of the open university from the point of view one's own learning (avg. 3,93).

As factors which promote learning, the flexibility in schedules of the studies, own motivation and the feedback given by the teacher were mentioned. The best outcomes of the studies were the interesting content, learning new things and the development of vocational and studying skills. At times the students, however, experienced challenges in their studies, such as lack of time, difficulties in combining work, family and studies, problems with the availability of the literature or limited interactivity. Academic adult students often regard time pressures as burdening between different areas of life but, on the other hand, work and family also bring resources for managing in the cross pressure of the competing roles.

4.5 The studies help in the working life

The students who had graduated evaluated that the studies of the open university had developed their vocational skills (avg. 4,53). The students evaluated that they had been able to utilise their work experience well in the studies (avg. 4,35). The students evaluated the contents of studies to meet the demands of the working life well (avg. 3,99).

4.6 E-learning and communality in the centre of development

The online studies, study counselling and student services are solutions which function excellently on the basis of the student feedback survey. Utilising e-learning is suitable and of good quality during the whole studying process even if indeed there are areas to be developed further. Also the encouragement and supervision by the staff received praise from the students. In web-based studies the significance of the supervision as an important form of support is emphasized. In the context of the

open university, distance learning is supported especially by face-to-face / online tutoring and the study materials which guide learning [1.]

5 CONCLUSIONS

It appears from the student feedback that the interviewees have been rather satisfied in their studies in the Open University of the University Consortium Chydenius of Kokkola. At the end of the feedback survey form it was possible for the students to give open feedback and development proposals. Among others, wider opportunities of web-based study, more interaction and communality were hoped for in the studies, however, without the flexibility suffering. The students brought out that the peer support amongst the students is significant during the studies. Formal and informal networks which promote communality and peer support were in an important role as enablers of interaction between the distance students [2.] On the basis of the analysis of the feedback survey, increasing the communal nature and interaction of the web-based academic adult studies was chosen as one subject of development. This is promoted by designing new study methods which connect the scientific contents, e-learning and the adult pedagogical starting points.

Repeating the feedback surveys year after year with the same content to the same target group, in other words, to the students who have completed the study programme, has produced similar results. On the other hand, the regular unchanged and repeated feedback survey makes the comparison of results with the earlier years and the follow-up of the development possible. The results are to some extent comparable with other similar agencies. An inquiry directed at a different target group could give information about new development needs. For example, the inquiry that is directed at the students who discontinue their study and/or proceed more slowly could bring more profound information about the challenges of the academic adult education and about the special supervision needs. The student feedback system needs indeed to be developed continuously to correspond with the special needs of the organization and, on the other hand, to be more versatile and more comprehensive evaluation tools of learning and teaching [3] also in academic adult education contexts.

The feedback surveys have been naturally connected to the cycle and development process of the semester of the open university. The shared processing of the annual feedback results in the beginning of each year maintains a planned quality process, in which case, the feedback information from different years is compared and an idea of the direction of the development and of the adult students' changing needs is obtained. At the same time, the quality of the previous development operations is followed. Handling the results systematically with staff of the whole unit gives direction for the development measures for the following school year and also for the longer time span. The staff of the whole open university is thus aware of the development needs of different levels, such as of the level of expertise in scientific contents of teaching, e-pedagogical solutions or office practices. However, the effectiveness of chosen development measures should be scientifically more competently evaluated in the future. The excellence of especially the web-based academic adult education and the adult students' special needs should be studied with scientific methods in more detail than at present.

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