

The Traits That Facilitate Successful Student Performance in Distance Education: The Case of the Distance Education Unit at European University Cyprus

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Abstract—Although it is not intended to identify distance education students as a homogeneous group, recent research has demonstrated that there are some demographic and personality common traits among most of them that provide the basis for the description of a typical distance learning student. The purpose of this paper is to describe these common traits and to facilitate their learning journey within a distance education program. The described research is an initiative of the Distance Education Unit at the European University Cyprus (Laureate International Universities) in the context of its action for the improvement of the students' performance.

Keywords—Distance education students, successful student performance, European University Cyprus, common traits.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE world around academia has changed dramatically in the last years and classrooms are starting to change also. During the last two decades, more and more distance education programs are offered by Open Universities, while the majority of face-to-face universities have also enriched their offer with blended, hybrid or fully online programs [1]. Apart from formal education programs (undergraduate and postgraduate), it is important to mention that Higher Education Institutions (Open and Conventional) also invest in lifelong learning programs by offering access to education and knowledge to a lot of people [2]. The European University Cyprus is one of the above-mentioned universities, which has prioritized distance education among its strategic objectives and has invested in offering distance learning programs through the Distance Education Unit (DEU), which is the responsible academic and administrative unit for the design, delivery and evaluation of these programs. Recent research has focused on how students and faculty members experience or perceive distance education environments as meeting their expectations [3]. This is very important, since successful students in conventional education may not have the same success in distance education context [4]. According to [5] the reasons for this difference in terms of students' successful

performance have to do with the motivations of the students, self-discipline factors and other learning traits. In this context, the assessment and evaluation of the students' differences and how these can influence their academic performance can help us understand how to achieve successful students' results.

The aim of this paper is to discover how the above-mentioned traits of the students are related with their successful performance in the context of distance education.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

As mentioned before, as the demand for distance education grows, more and more courses are being delivered online. Distance Education courses are quite different –design and delivery wise- from face-to-face programs and often require that students possess certain skills and characteristics needed to achieve the necessary learning objectives/outcomes [6]. According to [7] determining the online learner's characteristics can significantly help administrators, instructors, and instructional designers to understand who is likely to participate in distance learning, which factors contribute to a successful learning experience, and which potential barriers could deter some students from participating or successfully completing a distance education program. This study will identify student characteristics for distance education courses to use as a basis for the success of these programs.

According to the literature, since the first important steps of distance education-two decades ago-, distance learning students chose to study online basically due to the possibility it offers to self-manage the place and the pace of the studies [8]. Almost all of them were adults who had already had a degree or didn't have the opportunity to study when they were younger and they face distance education as a second chance to access knowledge and education [9]. In this context, self-regulated learning should be examined to better understand the traits of distance learning students. Self-efficacy theory refers to one's convictions about her or his ability to perform a specific task at a designated level [10]. This theory has particular importance to distance education. For example, according to [11] the situational factors that might affect an online student's decision to withdraw may not directly affect the outcome (withdrawal); rather, the student's self-efficacy beliefs are impacted by the personal factors, and the resulting

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efficacy beliefs affect the decision to persist in the course. This is significant and promising for student success administrators. Although the personal factors may not be practicably variable, the efficacy beliefs may be. Whereas self-efficacy measures are task and domain specific, self-regulated learning refers to the motivational orientations and learning strategies that students employ to attain desired goals [12], [13]. According to [14], [15] self-regulated learning should include three traits of students' behavior related with the cognitive strategies: Students should control actively their behavior, they should adapt the use of a cognitive strategy in order to achieve their goals and they should change their behavior as a reaction to their instructor action.

In addition, [16] mentions that "the success of an online course or program is impacted by the readiness of the students to embrace this method of delivery". This is easy to understand, since their participation and completion of course material is entirely up to them as dealing with any technical delays and difficulties that may occur. Experience in using Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) is another important element for the successful performance of distance education students [17], [18]. In this context, it is easy to understand that the above-mentioned self-efficacy of the students in learning some concrete contents, as well as in using efficiently the ICT can influence their performance. In this context, distance education students should feel comfortable with the use of the technological tools and applications they will need during their studies to be able to finish their studies successfully.

Moreover, the age of the students can be an important characteristic for their successful performance as well. Most distance education students are between 30-45 years old. It is easy to understand that the more they understand the philosophy of distance education, they easier it is to succeed in their studies. Of course, we should always have in mind that older people may face some usability problems with the use of ICT [19].

Furthermore, the gender issue has been examined widely in distance education and there is a lot of research that underlines how distance education has helped women (more than men) to access education and training and to combine personal and professional life with distance learning studies [20], [21]. Achieving gender equality in education implies equality of opportunities for males in relation to females, equality in the learning process, equality of outcomes as well as equality of external results after leaving education [22].

Another important factor for student successful performance in distance education programs is the educational background of the students [23]. As mentioned before, the majority of distance learning students has previous education experiences and has experienced academic success¹. Moore and [24] moved this issue forward and found out that apart from the previous educational experiences (educational background) it is also important the time between the distance learning program and the previous educational experience, saying that more time there is since the last education

experience less probable is for the students to finish successfully the distance education program.

Also, a success factor for distance education studies is the learning styles of the students. Despite the fact that learning style is traditionally assumed to be a predictor of learning performance, yet few studies have identified the mediating and moderating effects between the two [25]. So we understand that a tool that can identify students' learning styles can determine the combination between the learners and the teaching method, as well as measuring possible success of the students in the distance learning program [26], [27].

III. THE CASE STUDY: THE PROPOSAL FROM THE DISTANCE EDUCATION UNIT OF THE EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY CYPRUS

The Distance Education Unit (DEU) of the European University Cyprus offers programs leading to Bachelor and Master Degrees and other specialization courses for the development of professional competences of its students. The main objective of the Unit is to offer access to education opportunities to a wide number of people who until now, due to geographical, professional, family or other constraints, were not allowed to attend a face-to-face program. In this way, the DEU responds to the current and growing needs of society for learning, through alternative education programs and it promotes equal opportunity in education.

To assure the students' successful performance the DEU studies in detail the personal and learning profile of its students in order to give response to their educational needs. More analytically, extending [28] all distance education students at the EUC are obliged to fill in a survey, where they have to give detailed information about their personal and academic background as well as to write a cover letter on the reasons they have chosen to study. The data received from this survey are collected by the officer responsible for the students' admission and are analyzed in such way in order to create a clear image of the students' background, previous learning experiences and preferences. In addition, this information is shared with the academic advisor of each student to better guide his/her academic path. The academic advisor is a person responsible to guide each student from day one if his/her enrollment until he/she graduates from the program. The academic advisor's main duties are a) to facilitate the student choose the subjects to attend every semester, b) to help the student manage his/her study-time, c) to solve technical problems the students may face and d) to give advice on career opportunities and professional development of the students. In this context, it is obvious that the data collected from the survey are fundamental for the academic advisor's tasks. In addition, it is important to mention that the overall results of the survey are shared with the academic staff (instructors) and the instructional designers, so they can take into consideration the students' personal, social and education traits during the course design and the preparation of the learning materials for each subject. It is necessary to assure the active participation of all the people implicated in the teaching and learning process, academic and administrative staff, since each one of these people can contribute to the main objective of the

Distance Education Unit, to facilitate the teaching and learning process and help the students develop the corresponding competences.

The main axes of this survey can be found in the following table:

TABLE I
 STUDENTS' TRAITS FOR SUCCESSFUL PERFORMANCE

Axes	Examples
Personal Information	Age, gender, individual (special) needs, profession, foreign languages, personal status, education background, experience in distance education
Motivation for studying online	How is this program related with their personal goals? How is this program related with their professional goals? What kind of competences they believe they will develop? Which are the main opportunities and challenges for them? Is there a concrete reason for studying? What is their opinion about the program and its contents?
Learning Profile & Previous experience	Which are the main learning preferences? Which are the main strong and weak points? What kind of relation they have with the use of ICT? What are the expectations for learning according to their previous experience?
Self-regulation/self-efficacy	Are they considered disciplined enough to study on their own? Where/in what pace are they going to study? Which are the main challenges they feel they have to face? What kind of personal/professional factors may affect their learning journey? How much time they have for studying? Do they have access to the necessary infrastructure?

A detailed and concrete image of the students' personal information (age, previous learning experiences, background and self-motivation) can give us the necessary indicators for identifying their learning needs and expectations for the online program they attend.

IV. DISTANCE LEARNING DEMOGRAPHICS

While different characteristics of the adult Distance Education learner are addressed in the educational literature, it is possible to identify commonalities. According to the corresponding literature [29], [30] there are some characteristics that seem to be common for the majority of Distance Education learners. In this context, the first common characteristic is maturity, since all Distance Education learners are adults by definition. In addition, they are all engaged in a continuing process of growth, since they give value to learning. Moreover, they all bring a package of experience and values (mainly from previous education and professional experiences). They are also self-motivated and bring mature expectations about education itself. At the same time they often have competing interests, since they combine employment, family and social life with their studies. Generally speaking [31]-[33] there is a belief that adult Distance Education learners are achievement oriented, highly motivated and relatively independent with special needs from flexible schedules and instruction appropriate for their developmental level. Of course, the demographics of distance learners may be changing over time. Data from different Open Universities demonstrate that distance education receives younger students, who prefer to study online due to the flexibility in managing the time, place and pace of their study.

As far as barriers to participation in distance educational activities are concerned, the most frequently cited in the literature are the lack of time and cost [34]-[37] In addition, it demonstrates that Distance Education students often differ from traditional students in terms of demographic data, professional experience and self-motivation. To explore a potential "converging" effect [38]-[40] current profiles of Distance Education students that distinguish them from the on-campus students must be examined.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The above-mentioned information can be valuable for the "personalized" design and delivery of the distance learning courses and maximize the possibilities for students' successful performance. If all universities from different countries collect such kind of data, then we could create the learning profile roadmap for distance education students and identify common and different traits that can be used to maximize their motivation and improve their performance and the development of their competences. Of course it is very difficult to apply a "one size fits all" approach taking into consideration their traits, but for sure it can help the university staff understand what their students need for having a successful performance. The identification of the students' traits and needs can be more efficient when similar data from different Open Universities or conventional universities that offer distance learning course are collected and analyzed in order to create an "average profile" for the students who choose to study a distance learning program. In building a demographic, experiential, motivational and inhibitory profile of the Distance Education student, the findings of recent research continue to provide a rationale for the Distance Education format as well as a prognosis for the future of this format.

In this context, this research opens a new window for international exchange and collaboration in order to find the ways to facilitate distance learning students' learning journey.

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