Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education-TOJDE April 2015 ISSN 1302-6488 Volume: 16 Number: 2 Article 4

STUDENT SATISFACTION IN THE CONTEXT OF A POSTGRADUATE PROGRAMME OF THE HELLENIC OPEN UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to empirically examine the correlation between student satisfaction from their studies and three important distance learning factors in a blended distance education environment, namely the student-tutor interaction, the performance of the tutor and the course evaluation by the students. The study involved 81 postgraduate students from a modular course of the School of Humanities of the Hellenic Open University (HOU). A questionnaire of 35 closed type questions was used. The majority of the students were satisfied from their studies, from the tutor's performance and from the communication and interaction with their tutor, while they also provided a positive overall course evaluation. Regarding the course evaluation, they would like the course programme to be better formulated and more clearly communicated. The data analysis yielded a significant, positive correlation between the satisfaction of the students from their studies and all three examined factors. Finally, there was a statistically significant difference on student satisfaction levels among different age groups, a statistically significant difference regarding the number of course modules attended in relation to the evaluation of the tutor's performance and a statistically significant difference regarding the number of Counseling Group Sessions (CGS) attended in relation to student satisfaction.

Keywords: **Blended distance education, student satisfaction, tutor performance, communication, interaction, course evaluation.**

INTRODUCTION

Teacher is an important agent in blended distance education; he does not only teaches but he also becomes a «creator» of learning environment a supporter and an advisor (Jones, 2007; Rogers, 1996). The teacher's (or tutor's) performance, the interaction and the communication with the students - either in the classroom (in the case of blended

learning systems) or at a distance (e.g. via email, telephone or an educational platform) - contributes significantly to the guidance and support of the student during his distant studies.

Student satisfaction is very important in distance learning courses, since students work in isolation from their teachers, their fellow students and the educational organization and therefore they are more susceptible to disappointment and the possibility to drop-out from their studies. Student satisfaction encompasses the feeling of pleasure that the students get when their learning needs are covered by an educational institution or programme (Allen, Bourhis, Burrell, & Mabry, 2002; Shehab, 2007; Wang, 2003). Satisfaction in learning is the students' pleasure of what they have accomplished so far, emanating mainly of their self-esteem and self-confidence. Self-esteem depends on three parameters: a) the trust to ourselves, b) our own image for ourselves and c) the love towards us (André & Lelord, 1999; Hambly, 2010). Self-confidence is the trust to our abilities in order to achieve our goals and visions (Wilde, 1980). The tutors' role is to promote, via creative educational action, the feeling of satisfaction and pleasure of the students. In order to perform correctly, the tutors themselves also have to feel self-esteem and self-confidence. In other words, the tutors must believe in themselves and their knowledge and respect themselves and their students (Reindhardt, 1960; Saman, 2004).

Drop-out rates in distance education courses, and especially online courses, are higher than those observed in conventional education (Frankola, 2001; Oblender, 2002). Therefore, it is very important to investigate the factors that affect student satisfaction in distance education courses, in order to improve the quality of teaching and of the services offered by the course provider and, therefore, reduce the drop-out rates and increase the academic performance of students. According to the theoretical model of Ali, Ramay and Shahzad (2011), student satisfaction is based on three factors: a) the interaction between students-and tutors, b) the performance of the tutors, and c) and the evaluation of the course. In particular, according to Zimmerman (2012), interaction has an important role in the learning process and is important both in conventional and in distance education. Especially in distance education, the student, precisely due to the lack of face-to-face communication with the tutor, needs support and guidance more than in conventional studies. The good and effective communication between the teacher and the student contributes to the gradual self-confidence of the second and consequently in the achievement of his goals. Furthermore, the tutor through communication covers the needs of the students both in the learning level as well as in the sentimental one (Keegan, 1986; Holmberg, 1995). Interaction also encompasses the constructive discussion between students and tutors, which is achieved through technological means, including synchronous communication. Moore (1993) emphasises that the right dialogue between the student and the tutor contributes towards a positive interaction and helps developing a good and efficient collaboration.

Additionally, Mason (1991) and Paulsen (1995) refer that the skills of the tutor are divided into three categories: a) organizational, b) social and c) intellectual. The tutors' purpose is to provide support and guidance to the distant learners in order not to abandon their studies. Friendliness, sincerity, warm smile, calm voice tone, patience and exchange of opinions are the main characteristics of the tutors' role in open and distance education (Simpson, 2002).

The tutors' performance refers to their efficiency in teaching, i.e. to their scientific knowledge and social skills, as well as to the educational techniques with which they have to be familiar. Race (1993) stresses the importance of feedback, objectivity and of

making good use of model answers and assessment criteria, while he underscores the three-fold role of the distance learning tutor, i.e. teaching, assessing and counseling.

According to Gunawardena and MacIsaac (2004), the tutor is a trainer, animator, inducer, coordinator and facilitator. Consequently, the tutors' role is important and valuable (Jones, 2007). In this respect, the tutors' efficiency play a vital role in the satisfaction of the students and is associated with parameters such as:

- **their scientific knowledge,**
- **their love and devotion to their work,**
- **their efforts to investigate the students' needs,**
- **the students' goals and their expectations from the course/module,**
- **the correct course/module design, i.e. their preparation and use of the right teaching techniques, and**
- **the positive attitude and encouragement (Ali, Ramay & Shahzad, 2011).**

Finally, regarding educational evaluation, this refers to the systematic and organized procedure where processes, systems, people, means, or results of an educational mechanism are assessed according to predefined criteria and through predetermined means (Dimitropoulos, 1999).

According to Rowntree (1998), evaluation is the collection, analysis and interpretation of information for any aspect of an educational program in order to assess the effectiveness and efficiency of all parameters related to its application. In the present context, emphasis is put on how the students evaluate a distance education course they have enrolled into. Empirical research accessing the relationship between student satisfaction and specific parameters of distance education has mainly concentrated on on-line distance education courses (Ali, Ramay & Shahzad, 2011; Arbaugh, 2000; Kruger, 2000; Sher, 2009). The present study examines student satisfaction and its relationship with

- **student-tutor interaction,**
- **the performance of the tutor, and**
- **the course evaluation, in a blended distance learning environment of the Hellenic Open University (HOU).**

The HOU was officially established in 1997 and is the only University offering exclusively distance education courses in Greece.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on the above, the aim of this study is to determine the relationship between students' satisfaction and

- **the performance of the tutor,**
- **the student-tutor interaction and**
- **the students' evaluation of the educational course in which they enrolled.**

Furthermore, the paper investigates differences in

- **students' perceived satisfaction,**
- **student-tutor interaction,**
- **performance of the tutor, and**
- **evaluation of the course by the students based on demographic factors - such as gender, age and previous experience in distance learning.**

METHODOLOGY

The Educational Framework

The HOU currently offers six (6) undergraduate and twenty five (25) postgraduate courses, all addressed to adult learners. For each course module, HOU students should hand in 4-6 written assignments throughout the 10-month academic year and a sit a compulsory exam at the end of it. Furthermore, each course module includes five face-to-face Counseling Group Sessions (CGS) which take place in 9 cities all over the country for undergraduate courses and in 3 cities for postgraduate courses. Participation in CGS is not compulsory. Tutor-student communication and interaction between CGS is mainly held through e-mail and telephone. Students at HOU are provided with printed course material and a set of books, audio and video material, CD-ROMs/software, all especially prepared for distance learning. There is also a web-based instructional environment / portal (http://online.eap.gr), where each course has its own website. Course websites simplify organizational procedures and provide fora for asynchronous interaction (http://www.eap.gr). The use of the portal is gradually increasing (Mavroidis, Karatrantou, Koutsouba, Giossos & Papadakis, 2013).

Sample

The sample was taken from four groups of the course module "Open and Distance Education" from the postgraduate program "Studies in Education" of the School of Humanities of the HOU. The students of the sample were attending the module during the academic year 2012-13. Two groups were holding their CGS in Athens and two in Thessaloniki. The questionnaires were distributed during the opening of the third CGS, in February 2013. In total, 81 completed questionnaires were collected. Thirty eight questionnaires were collected from Athens and forty three from Thessaloniki.

Instrument

The questionnaire used was based on the work of Ali, Ramay and Shahzad (2011) and of Arbaugh (2000) and consisted of thirty five closed-type questions, divided into six categories:

- **demographic information,**
- **satisfaction from studies,**
- **tutor's performance,**
- **communication and interaction between the tutor and the students, and e) course evaluation by the students.**

More specifically, the satisfaction of the students from their studies was examined with six questions, the tutor's performance with nine questions, the communication and interaction between the tutor and the students with seven questions and, finally, the evaluation of the course with seven questions. A five point Likert scale was used, with 5 options ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Data Analysis

The data collected were analyzed by descriptive (median and range) and inductive statistics. More specifically, (a) a Spearman rank-order correlation coefficient to assess the relationship between different parameters, (b) a Mann-Whitney test to examine differences related to gender and previous experience in distance learning, and (c) a Kruskal-Wallis test to examine differences related to age and to the number of course modules and CGS already attended by the students. The statistical package SPSS 17 was used to perform the statistical analysis and the level of significance for the statistical tests was set at 0.05.

RESULTS

Validity and Reliability

According to Babbie (2011: 224) when we refer to the term validity we mean the grade to which an empirical measure mirrors sufficiently the true meaning of the concept under consideration while the reliability is related to whether a particular technique applied repeatedly to the same object brings each time the same results (Babbie, 2011: 219). According to Green and Salkind (2007), the reliability coefficients should be bigger than .7 in order to be able to assume sufficient reliability for a research tool. Cronbach's alpha for the overall questionnaire (including twenty nine items) was .91. Furthermore, Cronbach's alpha for the student satisfaction was .86, for the performance of the instructors was .90, for the student-tutor interaction .88, and finally for the evaluation of the program by the student .86.

Demographic Profile

The sample consisted of 66.7% women and 33.3% men. The 45.7% of the HOU's students were from 31 to 40 years old. The 82.7% were graduates of higher educational institutions and 9.9% had a postgraduate degree. A percentage of 82.7% had no previous experience in open and distant education, 35.8% had attended three thematic units, and finally 32.1% has attended from 5 to 8 CGS.

Descriptive Statistics

Table: 1
Student Satisfaction (six questions)

	Not at all f%	Little f%	Moderately f%	Enough f%	Much f%
I am satisfied by my decision to follow the distance learning postgraduate program of the H.O.U.	0	1.2	19.8	50.6	28.4
I believe that the distance learning postgraduate program covered my needs in a very satisfactory level.	0	2.5	32.1	50.6	14.8
If I had again the chance to follow a distance education program, I would do it with pleasure.	1.2	9.9	19.8	38.3	30.9
I think that the quality of the distance education program I followed was better than that of a conventional one with the same subject.	2.5	14.8	24.7	46.9	11.1
I consider that the distance education program made my studies easier than a conventional one.	3.7	6.2	17.3	45.7	27.2
I would suggest the distant studies in the HOU to my friends/colleagues	0	6.2	13.6	38.3	42.0

The 81 students of the sample reported a *Mdn* of 3.83 in a scale of 1 to 5 for their satisfaction from studies (IQR=1.0), 4.11 for the tutor's performance (IQR =.94), 3.78 for the communication and interaction with their tutor (IQR =.71) and finally a *Mdn* of 3.71 for the course evaluation (IQR =.86).

Table: 2
Tutor's performance (nine questions)

	Not at all f%	Little f%	Moderately f%	Enough f%	Much f%
How satisfactory was the performance/effectiveness of your instructors in the HOU in total?	0	1.2	24.7	56.8	17.3
Were your instructors available for communication (in the hours given, by phone, mail, etc)?	0	1.2	16.0	25.9	56.8
Did they activate/ help the students to learn?	1.2	3.7	22.2	51.9	21.0
Did they treat all students fairly?	0	1.2	18.5	48.1	32.1
Did they respect all students?	0	0	3.7	42.0	54.3
Did they accept and encourage questions and comments pleasantly?	0	1.2	17.3	43.2	38.3
Did they present the information in a clear manner?	1.2	0	32.1	51.9	14.8
Did they give emphasis in the important points and concepts?	1.2	2.5	21.0	54.3	21.0
Did they show that they knew their subject?	0	1.2	12.3	45.7	40.7

Table: 3
Communication / interaction between the tutor and the students (seven questions)

	Not at all f%	Little f%	Moderately f%	Enough f%	Much f%
Did the instructors encourage me to participate actively in the discussions during my studies?	0	6.2	17.3	51.9	24.7
Did the instructors give me constructive feedback on my written essays through their comments?	3.7	3.7	23.5	44.4	24.7
Did I have the possibility to interact with the instructors during discussions (and generally)?	0	3.7	21.0	54.3	21.0
Did the instructors deal with me and help me individually?	3.7	6.2	32.1	43.2	14.8
Did the instructors inform me regularly for my progress and encourage me to continue my efforts?	4.9	9.9	30.9	44.4	9.9
Did the instructors promote and encourage the communication and collaboration between the students?	2.5	8.6	32.1	40.7	16.0
Did the instructors respond adequately to questions and give clarifications whenever needed?	0	3.7	16.0	59.3	21.0

Table: 4
Evaluation of the educational course by the students (seven questions)

	Not at all f%	Little f%	Moderately f%	Enough f%	Much f%
Did I receive valuable learning experiences from my studies in the H.O.U. so far?	0	1.2	22.2	51.9	24.7
Were the written essays relevant to the subject of the studies and useful?	0	3.7	22.2	43.2	30.9
Was the educational material useful and suitable?	1.2	23.5	40.7	25.9	8.6
Were the program's requirements clarified in the material or orally?	0	9.9	42.0	38.3	9.9
Were the evaluation procedures and the final exams fair?	0	4.9	21.0	61.7	12.3
Was the workload suitable in comparison to the level of studies and the schedule/timetable?	2.5	11.1	28.4	42.0	16.0
Was the acquired knowledge from my studies in the specific program of H.O.U. useful (professionally and personally)?	0	3.7	13.6	51.9	30.9

Correlation Between Factors

A series of Spearman rank-order correlations were conducted in order to determine if there were any relationships between the satisfaction of the students from their studies, and a) the performance of the tutors, b) the student-tutor communication and interaction, and c) the course evaluation by the students. A two-tailed test of significance indicated that there was a significant, positive correlation between the satisfaction of the students from their studies and a) the performance of the tutors (rs(81)=.622, p=.000), b) the student-tutor communication and interaction (rs(81)=.502, p=.000) and c) the course evaluation by the students (rs(81)=.628, p=.000).

Differences

Male students' satisfaction levels (*Mdn*=3.83) did not differ significantly from those of female students' (*Mdn*=3.92), *U*=657.50, *z*=−.719, ns, *r*=−.08. Neither male students' evaluation of their tutor's performance (*Mdn*=4.22) differ significantly from those of female students' (*Mdn*=4.06), *U*=633.00, *z*=−.934, ns, *r*=−.10. Also, male students' evaluation of the communication and interaction with their tutor (*Mdn*=3.71) did not differ significantly from that of female students' (*Mdn*=3.79), *U*=690.00, *z*=−.392, ns, *r*=−.04, and male students' evaluation of their course (*Mdn*=3.86) did not differ significantly from that of female students' (*Mdn*=3.64), *U*=621.50, *z*=−1.081, ns, *r*=−.12.

Satisfaction levels of students with experience in distance education (*Mdn*=4.17) did not differ significantly from those of non-experienced ones (*Mdn*=3.83), *U*=321.50, *z*=−1.848, ns, *r*=−.21. Neither the evaluation of the tutor's performance differ significantly between students with experience in distance education (*Mdn*=4.00) and non-experienced ones (*Mdn*=4.11), *U*=435.00, *z*=−.426, ns, *r*=−.05. Also, students' evaluation of the communication and interaction with their tutor did not differ significantly between students with experience in distance education (*Mdn*=3.76) and non-experienced ones (*Mdn*=3.71), *U*=418.50, *z*=−.633, ns, *r*=−.07, and the evaluation of their course did not differ significantly between students with experience in distance education (*Mdn*=3.71) and non-experienced ones (*Mdn*=3.71), *U*=427.00, *z*=−.526, ns, *r*=−.06.

There was a statistically significant difference among different age group students' satisfaction levels ($H_{(3)=}$8.389, p=.034), with a mean rank of 29.17 for students younger than thirty old, 45.01 for students between thirty one to forty years old, 32.90 for students between forty one to fifty years old and 52.08 for students older than fifty one years old. In the contrary, there was not a statistically significant difference between

different age group regarding students' evaluation of their tutor's performance ($H_{(3)}$=3.600, n.s), with a mean rank of 24.25 for students younger than thirty old, 43.45 for students between thirty one to forty years old, 40.31 for students between forty one to fifty years old and 43.33 for students elder than fifty one years old. Neither there was a statistically significant difference between different students' age groups regarding the evaluation of communication and interaction with their tutor ($H_{(3)}$=1.533, n.s), with a mean rank of 29.67 for students younger than thirty old, 41.73 for students between thirty one to forty years old, 42.40 for students between forty one to fifty years old and 41.38 for students elder than fifty one years old. There is also no statistically significant difference between different students' age groups regarding the evaluation of the course by students ($H_{(3)}$=2.923, n.s), with a mean rank of 38.58 for students younger than thirty old, 40.85 for students between thirty one to forty years old, 37.17 for students between forty one to fifty years old and 50.96 for students elder than fifty one years old.

The results from the Kruskal-Wallis test showed that there was not a statistically significant difference between the number of course modules that the students have attended in relation to student satisfaction ($H_{(3)}$=3.071, p=.381), in relation to student-tutor interaction ($H_{(3)}$=3.346, p=.341) and in relation to the evaluation of the course by the students (H(3)=3.844, p=.279). On the other hand, the results showed a statistically significant difference regarding the number of course modules attended in relation to the evaluation of the tutor's performance ($H_{(3)}$=8.412, p=.038). The mean rank was equal to 54.97 for students that have attended one course module, 38.27 for those who have attended two course modules, 40.05 for those who have attended three course modules and 31.29 for students who have already attended four course modules.

The results from the Kruskal-Wallis test also showed that there was not a statistically significant difference between the number of CGS that the students have attended in relation to tutor's performance ($H_{(3)}$=5.045, p=.173), in relation to student-tutor interaction ($H_{(3)}$=2.347, p=.506) as well as in relation to the evaluation of the course by the students ($H_{(3)}$=3.741, p=.302). On the other hand, the results showed a statistically significant difference regarding the number of CGS attended in relation to student satisfaction ($H_{(3)}$=8.241, p=.043). The mean rank was equal to 50.16 for students that have attended one to four CGS, 33.38 for those who have attended five to eight CGS, 47.28 for those who have attended nine to 12 CGS and 34.66 for students who have attended more than twelve CGS.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The main purpose of this study was to examine the relation between the satisfaction of the students from a distance learning course in the School of Humanities of the HOU and

- **the performance of the tutor,**
- **the communication and interaction between the students and tutor, and**
- **the evaluation of the course by the students.**

The results showed a very good, statistically significant, positive correlation between student satisfaction and all three examined factors noted above. This comes to an agreement with the results of Ali, Ramay & Shahzad (2011) where the student - instructor interaction is positively and significantly correlated with students' satisfaction along with the instructor's performance and the course evaluation. According to Sher (2009), both student-student and student-instructor interactions are significant contributors to the level of student learning and satisfaction in a technology - mediated environment. Shehab (2007) conducted research in a blended learning environment and

her results suggested that the relationship between learners' satisfaction with most perception dimensions, namely course structure, quality of instructional methods and interface was significant and moderately positive. It should be noted however that, although many studies suggest that interaction is the key element for students' learning and satisfaction, Saman (2004) suggests that there is no significant correlation between the students' perception of tutors and the students' learning outcomes.

Students' Satisfaction from Their Studies

According to the descriptive statistics of the present research, the majority of the students were satisfied by their decision to follow the HOU's distant postgraduate program declaring that the postgraduate program covered enough their needs. As the results of other studies also suggest (Iliadou & Anastasiadis, 2010) HOU students – at least postgraduate ones - are in general satisfied by their educational experience. Also, the students responded that if there were given again the chance, they would follow with pleasure a distance education program. As far as the quality of the distant program is concerned, they declared that it was quite better in relation to a conventional program. What is more, the majority of students stated that following a distance education program made their studies easier than in a conventional program. Finally, a large percentage of the questioned participants would suggest the program to friends and colleagues. These responses highlight the positive feeling that alternative educational methods such as distance education create to participants, especially since they overcome the barriers posed by conventional educational programmes. Furthermore, this may be directly related to the nature of blended learning that depends on distance learning methods without the complete loss of face-to-face sessions (Colis & Moonen, 2001; Shehab, 2007). The role of the tutor and the interaction between students and tutors are very important in this respect (Keegan, 1986; Moore & Kearsley, 2005). Finally, the number of face-to-face meetings is limited in the blended learning environment of the HOU and this helps the employed learners, who are a majority in the case of the postgraduate course, to manage between work and studies, along with having other life responsibilities. This may be another reason for the satisfaction they expressed, inline with the results of Wagner Werner and Schramm (2002) and Shehab (2007).

Concerning the differences between male and female students, male students' satisfaction level did not differ significantly from female students'. This is in agreement with the study of Shehab (2007), where the gender was found to be an insignificant factor in the learners' overall perception. On the contrary, there was a statistically significant difference among different age group students' satisfaction levels. This is in agreement with the results of Huang (2002) who found that age is correlated significantly with the perception dimensions in a distance learning environment. On the other hand, the results of Shehab (2007) suggested that age was an insignificant factor in the learners' overall perception of their studies. It appears that the results may depend on the course setting and the specific parameters of the research (for example about 15% of respondents in the study of Shehab (2007) were below 20 years old, while all students in the present study are above 23 years old and 93% above 30 years old).

Tutor's Performance

As far as the tutor's performance is concerned, the majority of students consider that it was very effective; a large number of students declared that tutors were readily available for communication and stated that they were helping the students by phone or mail. This is in agreement with the studies of Iliadou and Anastasiadis (2010), indicating that tutors in the postgraduate courses of the School of Humanities of the HOU respond adequately to the special, demanding, role of a distance education tutor (Gunawardena & MacIsaac, 2004; Jones, 2007). Since similar results were found by Zigouris and Mavroidis (2011) in

a different, more informal, educational setting in Greece it appears that the distance education culture, initiated by HOU in 1998, is spreading in the different educational settings in Greece.

The respondents also stated that the instructors were facing students in a fair manner, noting that they showed respect to students. Thereafter, the majority of the questioned students declared that the instructors were happily accepting questions and comments and presented the information with clarity. A large percentage of students mentioned that tutors provided adequate emphasis to the important points and concepts and knew well the subject they taught. These results are in agreement with the study of Mahmood, Mahmood and Malik (2012) and are significant for the effectiveness of distance education, as the teacher's role is very important in a distance learning environment. Students seek from their teachers to respond in a timely manner and this action influences positively student's satisfaction.

Communication and Interaction between Students and Tutor

As far as the communication and interaction between the tutor and the students is concerned, the majority of the students answered that the tutors were encouraging them to actively participate in the discussions. They also considered that the instructors were providing adequate feedback to the essays. A large percentage of the respondents stated that there was enough interaction with the tutors, declaring that the teachers helped them individually in a quite satisfactory level. They mentioned that the teachers were informing them quite regularly for their progress and encouraging them for continuation of their effort. Also, in agreement with the study of Iliadou and Anastasiadis (2010), students confirmed that the tutors were promoting and encouraging communication and collaboration between students. Finally, a large percentage mentioned that they were solving students' queries and that they were providing to students clarifications where needed. As stressed by Zigouris and Mavroidis (2011), it appears that both students and tutors believe in the importance of communication, covering the needs of students with respect to both instructional and emotional support.

It should be noted that the most important form of communication developed was the interpersonal one during meetings, followed by communication through e-mail and telephone. Face-to-face communication is considered to be an important means of communication, highlighting the fact that students consider it essential in the framework of a distance learning course (Anastasiades & Iliadou, 2010; Angelaki and Mavroidis, 2013; Wilson and Whitelock, 1998). Conrad (2005) in her study on the development of learners' sense of community in a blended course also concludes that face-to-face interaction was considered as a benchmark of communication for the group of learners.

Course Evaluation

As far as the course evaluation is concerned, the majority of respondents declared that they have perceived adequately valuable learning experiences in their studies in the HOU so far. The students answered that the written essays were quite relevant to the subject of their studies and useful, and that the teaching material was quite useful and suitable. As far as the course requirements are concerned, they replied that these were clarified moderately in the material or/and orally. The majority declared that the evaluation process and the final exams were quite fair. In the question if the workload was suitable in relation to the level and the schedule/timetable of their studies, the majority answered "enough". It appears that students would like the course programme structure to be better formulated and more clearly communicated. This appears to be a common issue in distance education, as - for example - Shehab (2007) notes that course structure was still not up to the expectations of learners since their perception of this dimension was the

lowest compared to other perception dimensions. Finally, in the question if the knowledge they acquired in the specific program will be of use - both professionally and personally - a large percentage declared "enough".

Overall Discussion

The results of the present study, in agreement with other relevant studies in the literature, suggest that the role of the tutor is crucial for the students' satisfaction of their studies. The promotion of a good climate of cooperation on behalf of the teacher, either in relation to an educational platform or a face-to-face session in the classroom, contributes to the learning process and consequently to the achievement of the learning targets. Also, the timely response of the tutor in questions and requests for clarifications, for instance in relation to written essays as well as suggestions for suitable bibliography, contributes to the good communication and consequently to the students' satisfaction from their course (Mahmood, Mahmood & Malik, 2012; Sarakatsanou, 2007).

Student satisfaction is one of the five pillars of quality in combination with the satisfaction by the distance education institute, the effective learning, the access and the institutional relationship of cost and effectiveness (Moore, 2002; Vernadakis, Gianousi, Tsitskari, Antoniou & Kioumourtzoglou, 2012). According to Ntarantoumis, Simos, Carcanis and Lampsa (2008), the satisfaction of the learner is one of the most important axes and can be divided into specific indicators or sub-axes for its better and more detailed examination:

- **pleasure,**
- **recompense, and**
- **benefits acquired by the student from his/her studies.**

These indicators can provide a good overview of the general satisfaction of the student. In an effort to match the tutor's behavior and the student's satisfaction in a traditional class, Arbaugh (2000) correlated the direct behavior of the teachers with the students' satisfaction in an online environment.

Arbaugh (2000) concluded that the immediacy of the instructor along with the feedback, the use of humor or emotions, to address student by its name to the written communication, to discuss and share personal examples, are the best prognostic factors for the student satisfaction rather than his mastery in the technological means (Arbaugh, 2000; Jackson, Jones & Rodriguez, n.d.).

Even in online distance education, the biggest challenge is not technology, but the definition and the application of suitable strategies and techniques, offering effective learning opportunities (Jackson, Jones, & Rodriguez, n.d.).

Proposals for further research

It would be useful to conduct a comparative study between distance learning students and students attending conventional face-to-face courses, in order to cross-examine the parameters investigated here.

Also, it would be useful to examine a larger sample of students, from different disciplines, following both undergraduate and postgraduate courses.

Finally, further research could focus:

- **on examining the views of the tutors in relation to the perceived communication/interaction developed between tutors and students and the tutor's satisfaction from their work, and**
- **the relation between student satisfaction from the course and student-student interaction.**

On the latter, it should be noted that Jung et al. (2002) suggested that learners' satisfaction with online learning environments was strongly related to the amount of active interaction with other learners.

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