
HELLENIC OPEN UNIVERSITY: THE NEW CHALLENGE IN 21ST CENTURY GREECE

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Introduction

The following paper is an attempt to approach the spirit of the Hellenic Open University (H.O.U.) and a comparative analysis of the “traditional” Higher Education Institutions (H.E.I.) of the country. Our intention is to trace those elements that render the Open University, not a new distance learning foundation, but rather a multifunctional, polymorphic and flexible academic foundation for continuing and life long learning.

The new paths of knowledge

Education is a gargantuan life respiration procedure for a society. It inhales the past and exhales the future. Everyone agrees that universities form the most vital core in this education “lung” (Tassiou T.P., 1993).

Education, research and knowledge are substantial elements of the new competitive environment. Not educated manpower is not esteemed, but it will continue to struggle for survival in a time of knowledge and information.

Societies with a knowledge shortage and a subsequent implementation deficiency will struggle to develop and progress in a global economic environment that is changing rapidly.

Humans have the ability and the need to learn, and that is why they have come so far.

Higher education gives a chance to acquire scientific knowledge. The restrictions posed by the traditional educational institutions in our country, as regards admission and attendance of the academic courses, do not allow a large part of the population to cover its needs for training and education.

In the era of globalization, technological innovation and economic reforms, society faces profound changes. Mattheou D (2000) characteristically mentions that “within the logic of globalization, the national ideal forms merely closed, societies and negative attitudes that vainly, ineffectively and mostly dangerously for themselves raise barriers to reform and progress”. Education nowadays should not stop with the conclusion of the basic studies. In the new era of the “information society”, education rapidly become obsolete, having as a result the forming of a need for continuing and life long learning, training and improvement of dexterities, as well as obtaining specialization. Mere know-how somehow is not enough, continuous flexible knowledge and development of abilities is a must, in order to be able to follow a world that is changing all the time. We live during a period in which knowledge is part of the productive circle of a society, at least as long as the capital, labor and the need for a quality and mass education emerges as the main need of our times.

The new peak industries that are forming at the dawn of the 21st century are not the chain production industries of the 20th century. They accumulate and reproduce knowledge.

Bearing this in mind, we will attempt to trace and analyze the most important similarities and differences between an Academic Institution of open and distance learning as the H.O.U. and the traditional Hellenic Higher Education Institutions (H.E.I.).

Academic Education Institutions

The Greek State, according to the country's Constitution, is obliged to provide for academic education to every Greek citizen that wishes to get such education. Law sets the prerequisites.

The objectives of the Higher Education Institutions H.E.I.¹ are:

- To produce and transfer knowledge, research, teaching and to cultivate arts.
- To contribute to the creation of responsible citizens with scientific, social, cultural and political awareness and to provide for the necessary knowledge that will secure their perfect training for their scientific and professional careers.
- To contribute to facing the social, cultural and development needs of the country.

The Hellenic Open University (H.O.U.) is an independent and totally self - governed Higher Education Institution that functions as a Public Legal Entity²

Its objectives are:

- Distance undergraduate and postgraduate education and training, with the development and utilization of the proper educational material and teaching methods.
- The promotion of scientific research in the field of transmitting knowledge from a distance.

Similarities and differences between the traditional H.E.I. and the H.O.U.

Although the main aim of the two types of Universities is to provide for academic education and therefore they have several similarities, their spirit and their way of function has several differences that will be thoroughly examined according to the following areas:

- Orientation and Philosophy
- Admission of those interested
- Structure, function and Degrees
- Teaching and Learning procedures
- Teaching personnel
- Learning Material
- Administration and Organization
- Communication of tutors and learners
- Funding and Financial Management
- Research
- Evaluation

¹ Law 1268/82 on A.E.I.

² Law 2083/92 and 2552/97 on H.O.U

Orientation and Philosophy

The traditional H.E.I. target a specific age group (18 –25) that attends a strict and rigid academic program. The method of lectures requires compulsory attendance on a regular basis, with a specific timetable and location of the lectures. Students live in the places the Institutions are located and their main occupation is attending their courses.

These requirements, however, exclude the following groups from obtaining academic education:

- Working people, either full or part time
- Citizens with increased family duties (e.g. mothers)
- Disabled citizens, or person living under special circumstances (e.g. imprisoned)
- Citizens that live in the province, far from urban centers with H.E.I.
- Financially weak that cannot keep up with the cost of living away from their permanent residence.
- Emigrants that live abroad or other people that temporarily reside abroad (e.g. diplomats)
- Citizens that belong to other age groups than that of 18-25 and that feel uncomfortable in a traditional H.E.I.

On the other hand the H.O.U. is aiming to the ideal of “open learning” (education is every mans right and they should be able to enjoy that during their entire lifetime) in combination with the method of “distance learning” (D. Vergidis, A. Lionarakis, A Lykouriotis, V. Makrakis, C. Matralis, 1998). The methodology of distance learning and the modular system that H.O.U. uses, gives the students a chance to chose, up to a point, the direction, the pace, the time, the location and the way of their study. With this method, students study with the help of a specially designed educational material and the frequent help from their tutor-counselor.

At first distance learning might give the impression that it collides with the traditional academic education, or that its aim is to replace it completely. However, its role is supplementary. Open universities are trying to deal with the restrictions, the injustice and to cover the gaps of the traditional system (Lionarakis A., 1995). The H.O.U.’s function is not competitive towards that of the traditional existing H.E.I., primarily when bearing in mind the targeted age groups.

Internationally today, more and more young people wish to continue their studies at the university, while at the same time the number of those that have completed their basic studies a long time ago and decide to get academic education is increasing as well. According to OECD’s last report, in many countries half of those that enter higher education are over 25 years old. In Greece the percentage of “adults” or “already working” students is just 6,5% and very few people over 35 decide to continue their studies on academic level.

Admission of those interested and the number of students

The admission of students in the traditional H.E.I. is based on a selective mechanism (exams for the admission of the “best»), immediately after Secondary School (Law 1566/85) or during Secondary School (Law 2525/97). Those examinations, despite the changes of their title (Pan-hellenic, Bundle, General etc) did not succeed in satisfying the needs of all those wishing to study. A large number of students (besides those admitted in prestigious departments) attend courses in departments they chose as their last resort. As a result, a large number of students drop out, delay or never complete their studies.

Admission in the H.O.U. is easier (Admission depends on choosing by lot) however high demand at the beginning made it necessary to exclude some candidates (*for example, in the case of "Business Administration" 6300 applications were received for just 510 places offered*)

At traditional H.E.I., the candidates are asked to prove beforehand that they are able to study the subject they are supposedly³ interested in. This competitive system of admission excludes persons that wish to study and they are also capable of doing so.

At conventional Universities the number of the students is de facto limited, depending on the number of buildings and available infrastructure (teaching rooms, laboratories, teaching staff, etc). There are no such limitations when it comes to the H.O.U.; Distance learning secure that the University remains open to all. A traditional University with 34 years of function, such as the University of Patras has some 15.000 students, while the H.O.U. in its second year of function has some 5000 students. However, this number is not adequate to cover the increasing demand for Bachelor degrees due to the absence of open and distant learning education in Greece. On the other hand conventional universities were delayed in establishing and operating postgraduate studies, forcing the great majority of students to universities abroad.

Structure, Function and Degrees

The H.O.U. is operating under the supervision of Greek Ministry of Education exactly as the traditional H.E.I.s. It comprises four schools⁴ that offer program studies leading to degrees equivalent to those of traditional H.E.I.s. In contrast to the traditional H.E.I. there is no provision for departments. In the case of the latter, departments are the basic academic unit and they are the own awarding degrees except from very few cases of interdisciplinary postgraduate degrees.

Each school offers a fixed number of Subject Units / modules from which the student can choose freely (modular system) and create his or her own educational profile.. That is to say that the basic academic unit at the H.O.U. is the Subject Unit / module instead of the "Semester Subject " of the traditional university. Each module aims to cover the knowledge field that it is about the same as three semester (six months) subjects of a traditional H.E.I., leading the student to gain in depth knowledge.

In the case of traditional H.E.I., students complete their studies after having attended a predetermined number of semester subjects that are taught at the Department in question, while students at the H.O.U. complete the studies after having successfully concluded a fixed number of modules.

Students are asked to complete 4-6 assignments during their study of each Study Unit / module. At the end they take an exam as in the case of traditional H.E.I..

The H.O.U. awards all degrees that H.E.I. award (Bachelors, Master's and Ph.D). In addition it certifies attendance of other levels of education, such as training diplomas, postgraduate diplomas or even attendance certificates.

Teaching and Learning procedure

In traditional H.E.I., one teacher usually teaches every semester subject. In the case of the H.O.U., this task is something the Team of Teaching Staff does (TTS). The TTS consists mainly of members of the Teaching and Research Staff / Academic full time Staff (TRS) as well as members of Collaborating Teaching Staff / Academic part time Tutors (CTS). A member of the TRS is responsible for every study program as Academic Supervisor and for every Subject Unit / Module a member of the TRS becomes a Coordinator.

³ In the case of the H.O.U., the ones that wish to study does not need to prove in advance that they can conclude their studies

⁴ Human Studies, Social Sciences, Sciences and Technology, Applied Arts.

In each Subject Unit / Module, a tutor supervises about 30 students. The student of the H.O.U. is more autonomous than the common student. He or she studies independently according to a specific schedule, using mainly the teaching material that is being sent at home. The students communicate regularly (by mail e-mail or telephone...) with their tutors; they are guided, having their questions answered. They complete papers or assignments and they are being graded. During tutorials, the students and their tutors create a personal relationship; they are being morally supported and keep their spirits high in order to continue their studies. The advisor sends analytical comments, justifies the grades awarded, proposes means and solutions to improve and develop the learning ability.

On the other hand, the traditional student is usually a passive receptor of ex cathedra knowledge that is taught to a large number of students. That student usually studies one book in order to be examined (excluding laboratory works or memos if there are any) at the end of the semester, so as to show if he or she has learnt the thing he was supposed to. Even the results will be announced with the faceless procedure of the Notice Board.

With the distance learning method the student is positioned in the center of attention. This way, interest to reach knowledge with one's personal effort is maintained (Hall R., 1993).

Teaching and Research Staff

Teaching and Research Staff / Academic full time Staff (TRS) is elected, promoted and working according to the same laws that apply for traditional H.E.I.

According to the law, initially there should be 2 members of TRS for each Subject Unit / Module and the rest of the teaching staff will be CTS / Academic part time Tutors. The CTS comes from other universities or new docents. This renders the H.O.U. very flexible when it comes to evaluation and choosing each year the best available tutor.

At the H.O.U., teachers work in close cooperation with each other under the direct supervision of the Subject Unit / Module's coordinator. This is a contributing factor to healthy competitive spirit that improves the quality of the offered education.

The role of the teacher in the H.O.U. is shaped differently, since it is not seen as a transmitter of knowledge, but rather like a close partner, mentor, evaluator and animating spirit of the student's effort. The teacher communicates substantially with the students and acts as a catalyst during learning procedure. The professor answers the questions the students might have during the whole period of the subject unit / Module. Through communication from a distance or tutorials, he or she helps the students face the difficulties they might encounter.

Teaching Material

At traditional H.E.I. the teaching material is exhausted to one book that is usually written by the professor that teaches the subject. The orientation, reference to current developments in the relevant field, structure and contents totally depend on the writer's good will (Koustourakis G., Panagiotopoulos Ch., 1999).

The H.O.U. is equipped with an Educational Material and Methodology Laboratory. It was established in the spirit of recognizing that the development of appropriate material and methods together with evaluation form the essential factors for the success and quality of the new institution.

The choice of the contents and the development of the teaching material in the H.O.U. is a result of teamwork. The logic of the Subject Unit / Module is promoting interdisciplinary approach of a knowledge field. The teaching material is the fruit of collaboration among leading scientists of the subject unit's spectrum, specialists in distance learning and adults teaching, the coordinator of the Subject Unit / Module and the critical readers. Great emphasis is placed to the style and the structure of the material. Professors of traditional universities that have participated in the creation of such material used their experience to improve the books used in H.E.I..

For each Subject Unit / Module, students receive a package of teaching material that includes printed material (books, readers, parallel texts, guidance for essay writing, aid material) audiovisual and multimedia material (cassettes, videocassettes and cd-rom...) that have been carefully designed to fit the needs of distance learning students. The student is able to form a complete picture of every field of knowledge. That is also a result of many writers contributing to the material, so that the presentation of a subject immediately gains a global character and a composite spectrum of facts and views. We should also mention that the curriculum guide that comes with the teaching material is leading the students in that way that they can organize their time and effort. That way, through continuous study, self-evaluation tests and assignments they can achieve their aspiration, which is learning. In addition, the H.O.U. is equipped, as the traditional H.E.I., with a library.

Administration

The administration body of the H.O.U. is the Senate, as in traditional Universities (Deans and Rectors, Chancellors and Vice Chancellors). During the transitional period, the H.O.U. is administered by the Administration Committee, the President and the Vice president of the Administration Committee. The Senate is the supreme administration body of the H.O.U. and its field of competence coincides with that prescribed for the H.E.I. by the law, as well as that of the Deanery.

In the case of the H.O.U. there is no dean council, its tasks are performed by a small senate⁵, a novelty that renders the administration of the institution very flexible.

H.O.U. has the same administration services as the traditional H.E.I.. However, it has a special organization that allows development, evaluation, production and management of the teaching material.

Financial Management-Funding

The same laws applying in the case of H.E.I. (Regular Budget Control, public investment, development program, property management, research programs, etc) determine the financial management of the H.O.U.. In addition, the H.O.U. is funded by the compulsory participation of the students to the cost of their studies, which is the main difference with the traditional H.E.I.

The cost for the student

Attendance in traditional H.E.I. is free of charge. However, the majority of students have devoted important sums for preparatory courses or private tutoring in order to achieve admission. The cost of transport, establishment and living in a city away from their permanent residence is particularly high.

Following the courses of the H.O.U. requires the student to participate in the cost.⁶ This sum is significantly lower than the sums that are required from other open universities (e.g. the Open University of the United Kingdom) that exclude the financially weak. The H.O.U. can subsidize up to 10% of the students, so that poor or financially weak are able to study for free.

The cost for the State

The cost for providing education is a declining function of the cost to the number of receptors. The cost includes expenses for the development of the university, the cost of buildings and other fixed expenditure, function expenses, the cost of development, production and distribution of the teaching material, the cost of libraries and other media required etc.

⁵ The Senate consists of the, the Rector, the Dean, the proctors and a member of the TRS of the H.O.U. from every School and the Head of the Educational Material and Methodology Laboratory.

⁶ Cost of 400 \$ per subject unit

Comparing the cost of studies per student between the H.E.I.s and the H.O.U. we observe that as the number of students increases, the cost of long distance education becomes significantly lower.

Research

Research and production of new knowledge is one of the principal aims of the H.E.I.. In the case of the H.O.U., besides from research in various sciences (mathematics, Physics, medicine, biology etc) as in the case of H.E.I., the research is focused in studying methods of improvement of the open and distance learning education and improving the offered special teaching material.

Evaluation

In contrast to what happens at conventional universities where evaluation is taking place occasionally; in the case of the H.O.U. there is a provision for continuous evaluation procedures. That is the purpose for establishing the “Internal Evaluation Unit”. All H.O.U. activities, i.e. teaching, materials, administration etc are evaluated by the students themselves, the personnel and the administration in order to achieve continuous improvement of the offered services and the promotion of corrective movements.

Conclusions

The change of socio-economic conditions is leading to a change of education methods at universities and to the development of new ones, such as open and distance learning education that is mainly offered by Open Universities. With the Institution of the Hellenic Open University, the state is making an effort to cover the need to secure access to quality education and to provide for education chances to as many as possible, regardless of their social, financial or cultural characteristics.

The similarities between the H.O.U. and the traditional H.E.I. are mainly traced in their legal form, the equivalency of the degrees, providing information on offered course, the fact that there are administration services, the function of a library, the organized examinations, the awarding of degrees, etc.

Their main differences are visible when it comes to their philosophy and the method they apply; the way the students are admitted, communication between students and tutors, development and production of teaching material of various forms, evaluation of the material and of all procedures in general, the levels and the way of certifying attendance, the students bearing the cost and the possibility of forming the training profile of their graduates.

The H.O.U. in contrast with the traditional H.E.I. is an educational institution that functions according to the needs of the times and it reflects the social, economic and political demands for a better and more effective education. Flexibility in forming the curriculum is aiming at covering the needs and the interests of the student as well as those of the market. The organized creation of multifunctional and polymorphic material through a comprehensive procedure eventually results in having the means necessary for modern learning. The production of modern teaching material by the H.O.U. will lead through healthy competition and upgraded quality to the improvement of the material used in traditional H.E.I.

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