

OPEN HIGHER EDUCATION IN ESTONIA

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Open Higher Education

Openness of higher education has often been connected to distance learning and access to higher education and/or technology enhanced learning for adults and other non-traditional groups. One can of course argue whether internet-based learning is more or less open than text-book based older forms of distance education but it is not the task of the current paper. In Estonia all (public) universities have since 10-12 years established open universities as defined functions of each university as the symbols of flexible university-level lifelong learning opportunities. Open universities, nowadays also central structural units, are responsible for offering continuing professional development (CPD) courses to companies and open courses or lectures to wider audiences. They also promote and support e-learning, take care of regional development activities, etc

In general, open higher education can be divided into three bigger action lines: degree education for adults, continuing education, i.e. non-degree education, and e-learning. In addition, accreditation of prior and experiential learning (APEL)¹ as an important element of open higher education is given a short overview.

University Continuing Education (UCE)

The common characteristic of these courses is that their goal is to widen learners' educational profiles within the same educational level; they are so called non-degree courses. People who pass the courses do not acquire a university degree, but the courses can be taken as part of a degree. The length of these courses can vary from a few hours to one year. Depending on its aim, UCE can be divided into (1) professional education, which involves both complementary courses (in one's current field of studies) and re-qualification courses (to acquire a new specialisation on the same educational level), and (2) courses in

one's field of interest (also referred to as 'liberal adult education')

The scope and content of UCE depends of course on the size and the specific orientation of a university. Since education and medicine have the longest traditions of professional development, these fields are supported by State regulations and budgets. A wide range of UCE opportunities is offered by Tallinn University (mainly oriented towards teachers education) and the University of Tartu (the only classical university and the only institution in Estonia providing medical higher education). The University of Tartu delivers CE courses for both teachers and doctors; Tallinn University focuses on teachers' professional development. At most universities, the number of CE students and courses are clearly smaller compared to the number of students in traditional degree education except in the two above-mentioned institutions. In addition to teachers and doctors, local and national government officials are active participants in CE courses; courses in economics and business are also quite popular; and, to a smaller extent, representatives of other professions also engage in updating their skills and knowledge. Courses of wider interest are also provided within Summer Schools and as public lectures

University continuing education courses include requalification programmes, which have become popular due to recent profound political and economic changes in the Estonian society. Due to these changes, several professions (mainly in agriculture, but also in Russian language teaching, for example) became less useful and different skills were required. Requalification programmes are meant for people who already have one university degree and who wish to get an additional qualification for job-related reasons. Current courses are mainly aimed at practising teachers. Programmes last for 1-2 years and lead to a new teaching qualification.

Reichert and Tauch (2003) showed in the Trends III report that in 2003 ca 2/3 of European universities were active in providing UCE for companies and only 49% said that they cooperate on their own initiative. Estonian was then (and most probably is also now) together with the Nordic countries, the UK and France among the the most active in Europe.

One of the problems in most countries is that short courses (up to 15 days) do not give credit points

¹ „The Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) refers to the process whereby the individual's competencies (knowledge, skills, attitudes and abilities) gained in non-formal (work-based) and informal (life experience) learning environments are accredited (assessed and recognised) – or not. APEL involves the comparison of the outcomes of the previous 'experiential' learning against the requirements of existing qualifications for the purposes of credit access and credit exemption.” (Adam, 2006: 37)

(BeFlex, 2007) and ca 1/3 of the respondents to the BeFlex questionnaire (mainly officials responsible for UCE) did not consider it important. However, this is one of the signs of quality offered by the university and it also facilitates recognition of this learning later. Estonia is also in this regard rather a forerunner – the majority of the UCE courses carry also credit points.

Degree education for adults

Almost all (97%) European universities find it important to widen access to higher education (Crosier, Purser, Smidt, 2007). A similar result was found in the Eurobarometer (2007) study where 87% of more than 5, 000 respondents - academic personnel from 31 European countries (EU+Croatia, Iceland, Norway, Turkey) . said that universities should be more open and accept more adult learners.

However, the majority of universities found that they had done enough for widening access and only 17% expected more students from underprivileged groups in the universities in the future (Crosier, Purser, Smidt, 2007). Estonia was together with the SE-European countries, the UK and Ireland more optimistic.

There are good reasons for this optimism. Quite a lot has happened already. Ca 1/3 of the total student body (altogether ca 6, 8000 students) can be defined as adult students as they study in either evening or distance education mode (part-time). The share of adult students is highest in the fields of education (working teachers without necessary education), social sciences (professionals who continue their studies in law or business) and humanities (among others also people studying for the self-interest) but also in private universities. For motives for selecting a special adults' oriented programme see Figure 1.

During the 1990-ies the number of students in Estonian Universities has increased very rapidly, almost tripling in the last 15 years. While in 1993 there were ca 25,000 students in HE, in 2008 the number of students in HE reached over 68, 000. This rapid increase has been achieved largely due to the increasing number of adult students. Currently every year universities enrol more students than there are secondary school graduates. The same tendency of rather rapid increase can also be followed in the case of UCE and retraining programmes.

There are several reasons for this that can be classified into two groups. First, a great need for new skills associated with enormous changes in the job market and society - many people do not manage with 'an old education' obtained in 1960-1980 in 'a new society'. This group is also related to the gradual formalisation

of the job market, where more and more professions have set up their qualification requirements. There are also needs for language retraining (from Russian to English), for IT skills, entrepreneurial skills etc. The second group of reasons why more adult students have come to the universities is most probably related to the opportunities - increasing openness of the HE system and curricula. In addition to six public universities, there have been established the same number of private universities, and a number of applied HE institutions. Public universities have adopted the third mission of providing serviced to the society, they have considerably diversified their forms of tuition, opened numerous new (mainly master-level) curricula oriented to adult students, make major efforts for regional development with opening colleges in regions far away from two bigger cities Tallinn and Tartu.

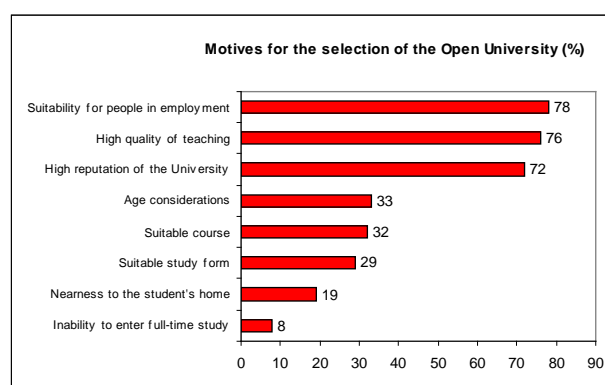


Figure 1. Motives for selecting the Open University

One of the important features that make higher education open for adults is the recognition of prior and experiential learning. Estonian universities started the development of a system for recognition of prior and experiential learning in 2002, together with the introduction of a Bologna reform. Currently APEL can be used at all levels for fulfilling the curriculum (partly). Neither APL² nor APEL¹ can be used for discretionary access to university studies as a substitute for qualifications required for admission.

E-learning

E-learning is becoming more and more a normal part of studies. 10 years ago few progressive teachers took any individual initiatives in developing e-courses. The wider application of e-learning started in 2003, when the Estonian eUniversity was established. (<http://e-uni.ee/index.php?main=120>). Nowadays the

² „The Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) refers to the recognition (or not) of certificated learning (learning formally assessed by another body) for the purposes of access (credit entry) to a programme, or exemption (credit exemption) from part of a programme of study within the national and/or international context.” (Adam, 2006: 37)

eUniversity is part of the consortium „eLearning Development Centre” engaging the majority of Estonian tertiary education institution. The eUniversity does not offer its own courses or programmes, it organises and supports university teacher training in e-learning competences, holds technological platforms and solutions for all its member institutions, promotes e-learning and initiates research and discussion in the area. One of the initiatives of eUniversity is creating a pool of learning objects and course materials in Estonian. The initiative is still in the starting phase – during the last years several options have been tested (using Estonian Libraries’ database, international Ariadne Knowledge Pool

<http://ariadne.cs.kuleuven.be/silo2006/NewFederatedQuery.do>) but the projects have been lacking an interest from the teacher’s side. There are very few university teachers who are eager to publish their materials in the database with an open access.

A study (Toots, Plakk, Idnurm, 2008) made in 2007 showed that when less than 10% of teachers have prepared e-courses to be fully accessible on the Internet then ca 40% have used e-learning in combination with traditional teaching. Among students, the numbers are doubled – 25% have participated in e-learning without any face to face contact and 80% in e-learning as part of blended courses.

Problems of adult participation in universities

According to the sociological research (*Elukestva õppe vajaduste analüüs* 2002), the major obstacles to adult participation in training are either attitudinal (they are too old or do not need any training) or situational (they view lack of finance and time as overwhelming problems). Respondents did not mention the distance to training institution as a problem. They were also satisfied with the opportunities to choose between courses.

One of the major problems for adults in obtaining education is lack of money. Currently only half of all the students studying in Estonian universities and other higher education institutions are state financed. Other students pay their own tuition fee or it is paid for them by their employers. As a rule, the State finances only full-time studies and these are not usually taught at times that are suitable for adult students. Until now the only exception has been for teachers who are working in schools but who do not yet have a university qualification or who are qualified in the wrong speciality.

Data from research among Estonian adults (*Elukestva õppe vajaduste analüüs*, 2002) and another research about Tartu University graduates (made among

graduates and their employers) (Tartu Ülikooli lõpetanute uuring, 2003) show, however, that employers generally have a positive attitude towards employee training. 90% support their employees university studies e.g. giving free time for regular participation in study sessions, and consider investments to the education of their employees useful. More than 80% of employers also find that education obtained besides working (part-time university studies) is more practical and better related to company activities than full-time studies. In case of CE people can usually select for themselves the courses they wish to take and they continue to be paid while they study.

One of the problems that adults can face when they enter a university is the orientation of some lecturers towards traditional students and their inability to take account of adult needs. As a rule, university teachers have no training in teaching and learning (and particularly none in teaching adults). Only during the last ten years, the Estonian Institute of Humanities, the University of Tartu and the Tallinn University have started to organise teaching development courses for university teachers.

Another of the obstacles for adult participation referred to above (*Elukestva õppe vajaduste analüüs*, 2002) is the attitude found in some learners; in addition to thinking that they do not need training or that they are too old for learning, they also lack learning skills (Dsis 2000). On average, Open University students have not engaged in any systematic study for eight years. This means that they may have difficulties both in starting their studies and in obtaining the skills and habits required for independent learning.

One of the specific problems concerning adult participation in university education in Estonia is the language of the study materials. The small number of Estonian speaking people (approximately 1 million of the 1.4 million inhabitants of Estonia) does not warrant the publication of up-to-date university textbooks in Estonian. This forces students to use other languages for learning. Nowadays it is mainly English, and in some specialities German For younger students this does not cause a problem, since they have learnt these languages at school. However, older people speak Russian as their first, and often only, foreign language. Since most of the current subjects on offer are based on textbooks and research articles in English, many adult students encounter problems as a result.

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