INNOVATIONS AND INFLUENCES OF THE HELLENIC OPEN UNIVERSITY ON CONVENTIONAL TERTIARY EDUCATION. RESEARCH PROJECT'S RESULTS

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Abstract:

The distance education model has been a popular form of education in recent years due to rapid economic, political, sanitary and social changes worldwide. This paper presents the results of a research project entitled "Innovations, changes, influences of the Greek Open University in the Academic Environment" funded by the university. The purpose of this research project was to analyse and investigate the innovations, changes, and influences that the Hellenic Open University (H.O.U.) has had over the years, particularly regarding the methodologies of study programs in conventional educational institutions of various forms and within the fields that constitute the pedagogical foundation of distance education. As the elements that essentially represent characteristics and are recorded as prerequisites for the effective functioning of distance education are not always thoroughly and comprehensively applied in educational practice, this research explores how the Hellenic Open University has influenced conventional higher education in the provision of distance learning programs or training concerning its physiognomy. Initially, the innovations and changes introduced by the Hellenic Open University in the country's educational landscape are presented, followed by an examination of how fourteen conventional higher education institutions implement distance learning programs alongside traditional ones, based on information provided by these institutions in their promotional materials. Subsequently, interviews were conducted with faculty members experienced in distance education at the Hellenic Open University and in conventional settings. The findings demonstrate that the instructor plays a crucial role, and the experiences they bring to traditional universities are

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significant. In practice, conventional higher education only mechanically applies the principles of distance education.

Keywords: distance education, Hellenic Open University, educational innovation, universities, conventional education

1. Introduction

The Hellenic Open University (H.O.U.) was established due to experiences with existing alternative forms of education, the operation of open universities abroad, and primarily a deep-seated desire for change within the country's higher education system. (Lee *et al.*, 2014; Mbatha, 2014; Porter, 2022; Buselic, 2012; Castello, 2016; Godsk, 2014, 2013; Kinar & Torenli, 2010; Open and distance learning gained recognition in Greece and was introduced alongside the Open University as an innovative institution (Papadimitriou & Lionarakiw, 2019). Since its inception, the Greek educational system has largely mirrored models from abroad, particularly those of Germany and France. Over time, changes have been minimal, focusing on the pedagogical dimension, leading to many aspects of academic development, educational methodology, and teaching and learning processes remaining static without significant reflection or necessary alterations (Lionarakis, 2019).In nations with a long-standing educational tradition in designing processes for education, assessment, teaching, and learning, as well as creating academic teaching material and educational methodology, distance education served as a supplement and was easily integrated into the existing system (Rafiq *et al.*, 2014; Salmon, 2014; Sadera *et al.*, 2009). It did not raise new concerns regarding the creation of educational material, the criteria for students' academic assignments, or the monitoring and assessment of the educational process (Koper, 2015; Kyrma & Mavroidis, 2016; Nguyen, 2015; Singh, 2012; Tait, 2003).

However, within the Greek higher education system, it brought something different. It represented an alternative educational intervention addressing pedagogical and educational challenges. This paper arises from a research project funded by the Hellenic Open University, aimed at identifying the innovations introduced by the Greek Open University in the higher education sector and investigating its potential effects on the provision of distance education programs by conventional higher education institutions in the country, with particular emphasis on the pedagogical aspects of distance education and its application based on its characteristics and nature.

2. Research Methodology

The first phase of the research project involved collecting bibliographic material related to the research objectives. Specifically, the collection focused on the following areas: 1. Educational material 2. The role of the instructor 3. Internal evaluation 4. Teacher training

5. Assignments and activities 6. Evaluation and feedback 7. Group advisory meetings 8. Identity of the sciences.

In the subsequent stage, a bibliographic review was conducted following the examination of data derived from the literature study, which was pursued concurrently with the execution of the bibliographic review. The innovations and changes characterising the Hellenic Open University (H.O.U.) as a higher education institution were initially documented. Data collection and analysis followed, focusing on how other higher education institutions in the country develop and offer distance learning programs.

After completing the literature review and analysing its results, questions were formulated based on the emerging data. These questions were posed in interviews with teaching staff, comprising eleven faculty members experienced in distance education programs and conventional higher education institutions from fourteen offering distance education programs.

Data was collected through recorded interviews, emphasising the participants' opinions regarding distance education, the Hellenic Open University (H.O.U.), its impact on conventional education, and its distance education programs. An interview was also conducted with a faculty member who shared their thoughts in writing via email.

The methodology included:

1) **Sampling:** Academic instructors with experience in both educational models (Hellenic Open University and conventional universities) were selected.
2) **Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with questions relating to the research objectives. These were recorded either as audio or video.
3) **Data Analysis:** The interviews were transcribed, read, studied, and analysed to extract results and conclusions.

In the interviews, the principle of anonymity was maintained following an agreement with the involved parties.

3. Results

3.1. About Hellenic Open University
3.1.1 Innovations and Changes - Hellenic Open University (H.O.U.)

According to research, the most significant element is that H.O.U. has innovated and transformed many existing conditions within the educational landscape. This innovation can be summarised in the following key points:

- It established the Internal Evaluation Unit, which, for the first time, assessed all academic, administrative, and educational activities.
- It also created the Educational Material and Methodology Laboratory as a research and application facility for developing and enhancing methodologies for distance education.
- The institution's organisation was structured not to necessitate a large number of administrative staff.

- Students' contributions to their educational expenses facilitated independence and autonomy in the university's administration.
- From the outset, it trained 240 PhDs in topics related to distance education, establishing the first core for the university's staff.
- Approximately 1,500 creators of educational material were trained, enabling them to produce interactive and flexible teaching and learning packages for its programs. For the first time, academics and scientists participated in training programs focused on writing academic texts. These creators developed around 600 titles of books and manuals across all study programs, which were evaluated and assessed through a three-tier academic review system.
- It gradually provided training for all undergraduate and postgraduate study program instructors on the particularities of distance education. For the first time, academics attended seminars on teaching techniques.
- It allowed candidates to enroll in undergraduate and postgraduate study programs without exams. For the first time in modern Greek history, aspiring students had free access to university education without an examination process.
- It abolished the notion of "course" and replaced it with "Thematic Unit" as an interdisciplinary and intersubjective educational unit. Subsequently, semester-themed units were introduced.
- It redefined the concept of "lesson – lecture – teaching from the podium" and embraced Group Counselling Meetings as the primary method of teaching and learning. These alternative teaching methods shape the quality of educational practice.
- It enhanced the role of the instructor–professor, transforming him from the primary lecturer into a "professor-counsellor." The fundamental philosophy of the professor-counsellor is rooted in anti-authoritarian education, critical pedagogy, and contemporary teaching methods. On the one hand, the student operates autonomously and self-regulates their studies; on the other, the professor-counsellor supports the educational material being taught and opens pathways for exploratory learning.
- It introduced written assignments as mandatory and a prerequisite for final examinations, defining them as a key learning tool. Simultaneously, it established detailed feedback on these assignments, emphasising the teaching role of the professor-counsellor.
- It created educational materials that formed the system's core through its methodology. These educational materials must be continuously updated and improved to be an interactive mechanism for effective teaching and learning (Lionarakis, 2019).

It raises questions such as what constitutes educational material, how students learn, how professors teach, how the educational process is assessed, how to write academic teaching material, what students must do to learn, how the teaching process differs from the learning process, how it is supported, and how students make progress

in their learning journey. The practice of distance education has demonstrated that it effectively and directly engages with these themes, addressing them and providing comprehensive answers to most. However, in the Greek educational system, where the entirety of relevant answers has not been articulated by an organised body of modern educational thought, the concerns of distance education generate a new philosophical stance of axioms that undoubtedly form a system of qualitative engagement in higher education.

3.2 Conventional universities and distance education programs – Research Results

So far, fourteen higher education institutions in the country have been studied for how distance education programs are offered. These educational institutions offer training certificates or postgraduate degrees through the distance learning model (University of Crete, (n,d); University of Ioannina (n.d); University of Macedonia (n.d); University of Patras (n.d); University of the Peloponnese (n.d); University of Western Attica (n.d.); University of the Aegean (n.d); University of Thessaly n.d); Athens University of Economics & Business (n.d); Aristotle's University (n.d); Ionian University (n.d.); International Hellenic University (n.d.; National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (n.d); University of Piraeus (n.d.)

According to the informational materials from fourteen conventional higher education institutions in the country, these institutions offer training programs described as distance education, responding to contemporary demands for lifelong learning, the evolution of knowledge, and the updating of skills. They primarily adhere to the characteristics of distance education, though not all institutions do so to the same degree. These universities provide certification through supplementary distance education programs, with Lifelong Learning Centres and postgraduate programs serving as providers.

As is natural, all of this relies on delivering material via the Internet, which is used to share teaching resources in the thematic units, as they refer to them, offered in distance learning programs. Additionally, platforms are provided for studying the material in whatever format, along with forums for student communication. However, this last point is not always adhered to, as some programs offer the option of communication through forums within the university. In contrast, this is not the case in others of the same university (e.g., the University of Macedonia).

Learners and instructors communicate exclusively through the platform and via email. Students send their queries through the platform, and instructors respond. There is no other form of personal communication apart from two or three teleconferences, during which general assignment guidelines are presented.

The teaching material is not always the product of strictly academic staff, except for the University of the Aegean, which explicitly states that it comes from academic and scientific personnel from the country and abroad. The approach of the aforementioned universities initially appears superficial in how they offer their programs concerning the nature of distance education.

The University of Crete stands out to some extent, aligning more closely with the principles of distance education, as a bibliographic study reveals that it recognises the need for communication for every student throughout their learning journey. It provides academic advisors to assist students in better organising their studies. Departments assign one Academic Advisor for each enrolled student. The Academic Advisors are teaching staff from the Department who, through discussion, can assist students with academic issues, such as managing problems with the curriculum and clarifying any questions regarding procedures established by the Department. They also connect students to the institution's services, such as Student Welfare, the Internship Office, or the Student Counselling Centre, aiming for better organisation and successful completion of students' studies. During enrolment, the secretariats inform newly admitted students about their academic advisor's name and contact details. Additionally, the Student Counselling Centre (S.C.C.) is a service of the University of Crete that provides individual/group psychological support and counselling to all institution students for developmental issues, personal adjustment challenges, or occasional/chronic difficulties. It supports students with disabilities who face learning, physical, or psychological challenges. It develops initiatives and programs by implementing special educational provisions to ensure equal access to academic studies.

At the University of Thessaly, emphasis appears on familiarising students with new technologies within the distance education framework through a two-week preparation program. The teaching material is the focus at the University of the Peloponnese, while at the International University, support and communication between instructors and students are emphasised throughout the program.

Many elements of the measures adopted by the Ministry of Education derive from the applications and experiences of the Hellenic Open University (HOU), such as internal evaluation, the abolition of departments, the introduction of study programs, and the establishment of a small council instead of a rectorship (Lionarakis, 2010).

4. Discussion on Results

The country's higher education institutions offer training programs through distance learning, aligning with contemporary demands for lifelong learning, development, and updating knowledge and skills. These institutions generally exhibit the key characteristics of distance education, although not all adhere to them equally. Universities provide training certificates via supplemental distance education programs, with lifelong learning centres and postgraduate programs as the leading providers.

This foundation naturally relies on the availability of materials online, which are presented as thematic sections within distance education programs. Furthermore, students can access study materials in various formats and interact with one another in forums. However, this is not always the case, as some programs only facilitate communication through internal forums, while others do not (e.g., the University of Macedonia).

Interaction between students and instructors occurs exclusively through the platform and email. Students submit inquiries on the platform, and instructors address them. Personal communication is limited to two or three video meetings that cover general assignment guidelines.

Educational materials are not consistently produced by strictly academic personnel, apart from the University of the Aegean, which clearly states that its materials come from academic and scientific staff, both nationally and internationally. The aforementioned universities initially appear somewhat superficial in their approach to offering programs compared to the essence of distance education.

The University of Crete distinguishes itself to some extent by adhering to distance education principles, as evidenced by a literature review that highlights its recognition of the necessity for communication throughout each student's learning journey. Academic advisors are in place to aid students in better organising their studies. Each department designates an Academic Advisor for its enrolled students. These advisors, who are instructors in the department, assist students with academic issues through discussions, helping to address concerns related to the study programs and clarifying any queries regarding departmental processes.

They also serve as a link between students and various institutional services, including Student Welfare, the Internship Office, and the Student Counselling Centre, to better organise and support students' educational journeys. The secretariats inform newly admitted students about how to contact their Academic Advisor during their registration. Additionally, the Student Counselling Centre (S.C.C.) at the University of Crete provides individual and group psychological support and counselling to all students facing developmental and personal adjustment issues and occasional or chronic difficulties. It supports students with disabilities who encounter learning, physical, or psychological challenges and develops initiatives and programs to implement special educational provisions for equitable access to academic studies.

At the University of Thessaly, there is a notable emphasis on familiarising students with new technologies through a two-week preparatory program within the distance education framework. The University of Peloponnese prioritises the quality of educational materials, whereas the International University prioritises support and communication between instructors and students throughout the program.

Many elements of the measures adopted by the Ministry of Education stem from the applications and experiences of the Hellenic Open University (EAO), including internal evaluation, the abolition of departments, the introduction of study programs, and the replacement of a rectorship with a small senate (Lionarakis, 2010).

4.1 Results from Interviews

Here are the results from interviews with eleven Academic Faculty (A.F.) members who have experience in distance education, Hellenic Open University, and conventional universities. The questions focused on specific key areas, such as the teaching materials, Group Advisory Meetings, the role of the academics, the tasks and activities, evaluation

and feedback, the training of teaching staff, the existence of internal evaluations at higher education institutions, and the nature of the sciences.

4.2 Key area: Educational – Teaching Materials

The distance between students and instructors in distance education results in educational material designed not only to bridge this gap but also to fulfil various teaching functions found in traditional education. Consequently, it must: a) guide the student in their studies, b) include specific exercises and assignments, c) elucidate difficult points and concepts, d) assess and inform the student about their progress, e) motivate them to continue, and finally, f) enable them to freely select the time, place, and pace of their studies.

4.2.1 Results

Concerning the teaching material, A.F.1 stated that conventional universities do not adhere to the quality standards of distance education (E.A.) in any respect, both within their distance education programs and, even more so, in their traditional programs, where there is little impact. A.F.2 believes that the Hellenic Open University (H.O.U.) meets the criteria regarding teaching material, as it follows a series of processes for developing material. Additionally, he stated that the material in conventional universities is not reviewed, as each individual writes their own, which is not always optimal. A.F.3 supports the notion that individual instructors decide on the educational material in conventional programs, whether in traditional or distance education. In contrast, at H.O.U., there is a complete team of authors and reviewers, and a series of processes are followed. Moreover, it has eradicated the mindset that "writing complex material earns you accolades." H.O.U. has infiltrated traditional education by employing individuals from traditional backgrounds who have undergone extensive training. A.F.4 adds that whether instructors in conventional universities possess experience in distance education significantly affects their ability to manage teaching material effectively. The structure of teaching material, as found in distance programs of open universities, is not comparable to that in conventional universities. There is always a handbook and some articles, but it largely adheres to traditional teaching logic. A.F.5 argues that principles related to distance education material are occasionally followed in conventional universities, particularly in continuing education and training programs. However, such practices are often executed mechanically, without a proper understanding of what is being done. They segment the material into sections with some activities. A.F.6 observes that little emphasis is placed on distance education material, which is often limited to digitisation, with only a few exceptions. A.F.7 supports the view that teaching material at H.O.U. may be pivotal for learning; however, this is not the case in conventional universities. A.F.8 concurs, adding that instruction regarding educational material is restricted to traditional textbooks. A.F.9 asserts that the material is classic and stereotypical in conventional institutions, merely a book available on the market. Occasionally, in distance programs, the material varies from institution to institution,

depending on how each instructor handles it; there is no standardised approach. A.F.10 states that distance education material often presents challenges even at H.O.U. Meanwhile, conventional universities do not adhere to the principles of distance education in their distance programs, as there is often the assumption that students in conventional settings are no different from those at H.O.U. A.F.11 highlights that the distance education programs offered by conventional universities are governed by more rigid guidelines and materials, lacking flexibility.

4.3 Key Area: Pillar of Education

In the distance learning model, the teaching material is a key pillar of the educational process. It was important to clarify its role in the traditional educational environment as well.

4.3.1 Results

A.F.1 notes that educational materials in distance education programs offered by conventional universities do not form a core component of the learning process, as they cannot replace the educator or stimulate interaction. Typically, these materials consist of either transparencies or commercial texts, but they lack study guides that specify distance education materials. They repurpose content from traditional universities for distance education without sufficient adaptation. A.F.2 asserts that the materials are crucial, yet this is not the case in conventional institutions, where each instructor teaches their course with minimal oversight. A.F.3 argues that the primary pillar in conventional programs is the educator, while distance education programs experience little change due to a lack of motivation for reform. A.F.4 emphasises that the educational materials encountered in open university distance education programs are not akin to those in conventional universities, as they largely adhere to traditional teaching methods. A.F.5 suggests that most conventional educators refer to educational materials because this concept has become established in prominent universities. However, this is a misrepresentation, as it has been perpetuated that distance education merely involves "*converting materials into PDFs and distributing them.*" The application of ICT is viewed as distance education in conventional settings. A.F.6 indicates that due to its poorly designed nature, educational material does not fundamentally serve as a significant pillar of learning at the learning level. A.F.7 illustrates that educational materials are not a learning pillar in conventional higher education institutions and their distance programs, as insufficient emphasis is placed on them, particularly within the conventional framework. A.F.8 highlights that in conventional universities, the primary pillar is interaction to some degree among educators and learners, where lectures are centred around human communication. This aspect exists in H.O.U. and distance institutions but is not central, as educational materials form the foundation of distance education. A.F.9 states that conventional programs and their distance offerings receive little attention, reflecting a lack of consideration, time, expertise, or funding. Thus, such endeavours are regarded as luxuries. A.F.10 declares that educational materials are not a learning pillar in

conventional universities or their distance education offerings due to the rushed processes to attract students and secure funding, which fail to facilitate the creation of educational materials that support distance learning. A.F.11 asserts that in those programs, the foundation lies in the study approach and organisation of materials, which is diverse, whereas in conventional settings, it primarily revolves around educational textbooks.

4.4 Key Area: Philosophy of "Thematic Units"

The thematic units of H.O.U. encompass a comprehensive interdisciplinary knowledge domain corresponding to three-semester courses at conventional universities. Programs of study structured in this way offer more immediate access and facilitate opportunities for elective choices in practice, which no student in a conventional university in Greece has. Thematic units are characterised by interdisciplinarity and a wealth of educational material.

4.4.1 Results

Regarding the "Thematic Units," A.F.1 argues that themes in distance education follow the philosophy of the course but often lack quality criteria in distance education settings. A.F.2 believes the term refers to the abundant material available in the e-class of conventional universities, while A.F.3 contends that it is misapplied, indicating a collection of courses with related content. A.F.4 asserts that the correct use of the term occurs when experienced individuals in distance education are involved; otherwise, there is little rationale for thematic units with rich material. A.F.5 states that the term is merely a label. At the same time, A.F.6 believes that since the introduction of thematic units at H.O.U., there has been a reduction in the variety of knowledge subjects, reducing it to a simplistic term within H.O.U. A.F.7 argues that the term is copy-pasted for imitation, a common phenomenon in academia attempting to draw attention to an area of interest. A.F.8 asserts he lacks a clear understanding of the issue due to his differing structural experiences over the years, while A.F.9 claims the term is in use. At H.O.U., there is minimal discussion regarding interdisciplinarity. A.F.10 offers no opinion, while A.F.11 suggests that there may be departments within schools in conventional settings, allowing some internal differentiation.

4.5 Key area: Role of the Instructor

In H.O.U., distance education embraces a new role as a consulting professor for the instructor. This identity incorporates elements familiar to their traditional role while simultaneously enabling them to gain previously inaccessible experiences. The practice of distance education highlights this role and calls for its application.

4.5.1 Results

A.F.1 believes that an instructor with sensitisation and knowledge of distance education methodology must integrate it into traditional universities. Otherwise, they do not

engage with the process, as it relies on the instructor's willingness since course organisation and assessment depend heavily on their initiative. However, most instructors create PowerPoint presentations and are curious about the behaviours of those who attempt to adopt more active roles. A.F.2 states that instructors experienced in distance education should influence processes in conventional settings, given that many come from H.O.U. with diverse backgrounds. He concludes that the impact he observes relates to how professors communicate with and address students, which again depends on each individual's personality. A.F.3 asserts that instructors recognise the advantages provided by distance education methodologies. A.F.4 considers that the instructor's role in distance programs of conventional institutions differs from H.O.U.'s programs, where joint utilisation of the standard handbook prevails instead of the troublesome guiding instructor directing students on how to use their resources and assisting them with assignments. A.F.5 maintains that the instructor's role is neither that of the traditional conventional university nor that of distance education, which is advisory towards the student, primarily not being the mentoring professor of H.O.U. If a professor with substantial experience in H.O.U. moves to a conventional setting, their role changes, and the skills they have acquired in H.O.U. influence their approaches within the conventional framework. However, it is noted that H.O.U. is not uniform; teaching specific graduate programs at H.O.U. significantly differs from teaching undergraduate programs, leading to varying impacts. This does not guarantee that everyone who has experienced H.O.U. comprehends the essence of distance education or applies it effectively. A.F.6 indicates that the instructor's role varies greatly depending on the individual. Initially, H.O.U. operated primarily with professors from conventional universities. Some quickly adapted, immersing themselves in the distance education mindset, demonstrating genuine interest in student learning and fostering student interactions. Individual initiative played a significant part. A.F.7 asserts that the teacher's role significantly depends on personal approachability and availability in conventional settings. A.F.8 supports the notion that the instructor's role in distance education environments and conventional ones is critical in both contexts, but holds heightened importance in conventional settings. Not only do instructors matter, but the teaching team also plays a significant role in how students learn and socialise within the university environment. When numerous visionary individuals are part of the teaching group, it can make a difference, whereas in distance education, the teaching material guides the student. He does not observe any substantial effect of H.O.U.'s distance approach on instructors in conventional settings. A.F.9 insists that he transfers his experiences from H.O.U. and distance education to conventional universities based on his style and framework, asserting that he cannot achieve much more, especially considering how graduate programs are structured. A.F.10 emphasises that, based on his personal experience, the instructor's role in conventional settings can be influenced by the principles and philosophy of distance education, but only if they wish, leading them to embody more advisory, guiding roles with students eager to foster closer relationships. A.F.11 states that in conventional settings, roles are more defined, often characterised by

typical communication within the classroom or during office hours. In distance education, there exists greater flexibility in guiding, studying, and employing various interactive approaches.

4.6 Key area: Assignments – Activities

The dimension of distance learning heavily relies on the written assignments produced by students. Through these tasks, methodologies are introduced on how "to design, write, and present an academic paper," "how to evaluate a written assignment," and "what the instructor-advisor does through the written assignment," among others. These elements lack a cohesive strategy across the academic body, while activities are documented according to specific criteria.

4.6.1 Results

A.F.1 mentions that in certain courses, there are laboratory assignments or smaller activities where feedback is provided by the instructor based on the course outline submitted in the Educational Development Program. Some instructors integrate these activities within their teaching framework. However, there are also undergraduate or graduate courses in which students are graded solely on the final exam, whether written or a mini-project. The inclusion of assignments and activities in the distance education programs offered by conventional universities has not been realised significantly. The study remains more traditional and classical, failing to reflect H.O.U.'s philosophy. A.F.2 states that no unified policy exists; each instructor operates as they see fit, leaving no room for modification. The advantage of H.O.U. is its incorporation of institutionalisation around these elements. The material includes activities and assignments with timelines; such features are absent in conventional programs in the same format. Additionally, changes are underway with the advent of artificial intelligence (AI). A.F.3 notes that a team is developing activities around the didactic work. This is more valid as the team examines issues from various perspectives. The large student cohort in conventional education stifles a teacher's ability to implement activities effectively. A.F.4 argues that the role of assignments or any activities in the distance education programs of conventional universities is trivial and mechanistic. Concerns also emerge regarding H.O.U. activities due to the rise of AI, prompting discussions about replacing activities with alternative assessment forms that compromise the pedagogical aspect. A.F.5 supports the notion that while there are activities, they remain very superficial and rudimentary, relying solely on automated assessments, and the perceived role as a learning tool is lacking. A.F.6 agrees that activities exist in conventional distance education programs, but their application and usage depend entirely on the initiative of the instructors. A.F.7 asserts that regardless of the implementation of assignments and activities in conventional educational institutions, they should be abolished and replaced with other forms of assessment and learning tools, as they have become standardised, irrespective of the educational model. A.F.9 believes that assignments must be reexamined from the ground up because, until now, activities and assignments merely

require students to reproduce their studies merely. With the rise of AI, these elements have changed. A.F.10 states that in conventional universities, instructors have no obligation to justify the grades awarded, whereas in H.O.U., they must articulate their decisions, either verbally or in writing, rendering the entire process more valid and organised, even if it risks becoming mechanical within H.O.U.

4.7 Key area: Evaluation and Feedback

In distance education, the process of assessment and feedback is a key element of the educational process, as it is an important guide for the student who "learns on their own".

4.7.1 Results

A.F.1 indicates that the evaluation and feedback, as defined by H.O.U., do not exist in conventional universities and their distance education programs. Evaluation is not characterised by the specificity outlined in H.O.U., which employs criteria, assessment indicators, comments, and highlights weaknesses. Evaluation occurs sporadically at best. A.F.2 asserts that H.O.U. has the advantage of smaller class sizes compared to conventional universities, which additionally employ formats contrary to H.O.U. He emphasizes that conventional education tends to automate its evaluation processes, which is less evident in H.O.U. A.F.4 notes that evaluation and feedback correlate with the instructor's experience and willingness to discuss and address students' final outputs. In the conventional system, achieving this within any educational model is arduous, mainly due to the number of students, but also due to a lack of desire to engage in the subject. A.F.5 mentions that there are no specific standard norms for evaluation within conventional universities, and the entire mechanism surrounding the evaluation process is robotic. According to A.F.6, some form of evaluation and feedback does occur in conventional and distance education programs offered there, yet this hinges significantly on the instructor's interest in feedback processes in accordance with student requests. Even self-evaluations by students depend on the experience and disposition of the instructors. A.F.8 contends that the evaluation and feedback processes in conventional settings are highly restrictive. A.F.11 claims that feedback that is neither sought nor aimed for is often lacking or not encouraged.

4.8 Key area: Group Advisory Meetings (G.A.M.)

Communication interlinks with and significantly impacts learning, especially in Distance education environments, which present challenges due to the spatial, temporal, and psychological distance that separates learners from instructors, complicating their access to educational materials and consequently hindering effective learning. Group Advisory Meetings are crucial in the learning process, offering opportunities to foster interaction, trust, and collaboration between instructors and learners.

4.8.1 Results

A.F.1 asserts that no Group Advisory Meetings (G.A.M) occur within traditional distance education programs, while H.O.U.'s G.A.M. sessions, since their transition to digital formats, have detracted from their educational essence. A.F.2 claims that neither traditional educational institutions engage in such practices nor H.O.U. maintained the same efficiency, as the transition to digital G.A.M. has created a distance that was previously non-existent in face-to-face interactions. A.F.3 contends that digital G.A.M. introduces maladjustments that significantly undermine the educational framework concerning interaction, resulting in adverse implications for all parties involved. Traditional institutions do not use G.A.M. methodologies that emphasise distance education or alternative formats. A.F.4 observes that while G.A.M. does not exist in traditional settings, their success at H.O.U. relies heavily on the instructor's experience and efforts to engage students actively. A.F.5 states that G.A.M. is absent in conventional institutions as it contradicts their educational philosophy. Furthermore, he argues that a vital component of communication is lost within H.O.U., particularly the paralinguistic or physical aspects of interaction, which predominantly impair comprehension and understanding. The absence of such elements challenges emotional understanding and global cognitive comprehension. He regards the shift to digital G.A.M. as a poor interpretation of the function of G.A.M. A.F.6 believes G.A.M. do occur in conventional contexts, albeit not systematically, but as desired by the instructor, based on their experience in distance education. A.F.7 acknowledges the importance of G.A.M.; however, digital formats have stripped away the immediacy and interaction of face-to-face communication, and there is limited knowledge about G.A.M. in conventional settings. A.F.8 posits that H.O.U.'s G.A.M. is well-organised, whereas in conventional settings, it is deemed impossible due to the size of the student population. The effectiveness of in-person G.A.M. is diminished as they have been supplanted by digital formats that no longer fulfil the same purpose, obstructing substantial communication and interaction overall. A.F.9 emphasises that G.A.M. at H.O.U. should incorporate both face-to-face and digital formats. Solely digital arrangements have changed the quality of communication, understanding, and discussions made possible through in-person contact, lacking immediate communication and the interpretation of body language. A.F.10 asserts that no G.A.M. occur in conventional institutions, while the digital interactions in H.O.U. present challenges, including inhibited visual eye contact. A.F.11 states that meetings in conventional universities typically occur at students' initiative, primarily to exchange ideas related to their assignments.

4.9 Key Area: Staff Training

The training of instructors at H.O.U., specifically for the new members of the Collaborating Educational Staff (C.E.S.), enables them to acquire knowledge about distance education methodologies and the technological information and communications that support the educational process at H.O.U. Furthermore, they are informed of the best practices in distance education. C.E.S. members can draw from

examples of effective practices to develop applications tailored to the unique circumstances and demands of their specific Thematic Unit.

4.9.1 Results

A.F.1 believes that most teaching staff from conventional universities do not receive training for any educational model due to a lack of recognised necessity. Additionally, a false impression exists that subject knowledge inherently includes knowledge of methodology, coupled with a certain arrogance perpetuated among experienced instructors. A.F.2 critiques that no training occurs at all and emphasises that it is a matter of personal preference and initiative for each instructor. This applies even among those with experience at H.O.U.; the transfer of knowledge and methodologies across thematic units or courses is often ad hoc. A.F.3 remarks that in recent years, training initiatives have commenced through lifelong learning, but such training occurs on a non-standard basis, generally voluntarily. Instructors may attend seminars that effectively serve as preparatory courses to make them more effective. Most veterans refrain from engaging, believing they already possess the necessary knowledge. While some newer instructors have also participated in programs at H.O.U., providing a vast reservoir of experience and methodological knowledge, A.F.4 states that systematic and organised training does not occur. When it does take place, participation is often limited due to the pretentiousness of professors who presume that being proficient scientists automatically qualifies them as good teachers while adopting an authoritarian teaching method devoid of pedagogical dimensions. A.F.5 echoes that no training occurs in conventional universities, either for their distance education programs or traditional counterparts, driven instead by a mindset of authenticity, with no mechanisms in place for training even newly-appointed faculty members. A.F.6 does not observe instructor training in either conventional distance or traditional programs. The university has only recently begun to address the means of imparting education and learning in higher education—not just in Greece—when the rise of Lifelong Learning Centers highlighted the reality that students were not learning effectively, indicating that something must be amiss. A.F.7 notes that training occurs at H.O.U., but students should also be introduced to the principles of distance education at the outset of their studies. He has not noticed any instructor training happening in conventional settings. A.F.8 states he is unaware of any form of training at conventional institutions; he has no experience with any attempts to establish training units for instructors to learn what is practised at H.O.U. A.F.9 highlights that no training exists in conventional universities, as faculty consider themselves "intellectuals" and do not perceive a need for professional training. A.F.10 asserts that faculty members in conventional universities do not participate in any training programs or seminars, particularly concerning their distance education programs, often stemming from an attitude of superiority. A.F.11 concludes that no training occurs, although attempts are made to emulate the distance education model, specifically the H.O.U. methodology.

4.10 Key Area: Internal Evaluation

The primary aim of internal evaluation is to enhance the quality of the services provided at H.O.U. through activities conducted over the academic year. Its objectives concentrate on assessing the educational process at H.O.U., specifically concerning instructors, thematic units, educational materials, and administrative services. Additional endeavours include faculty training, collaboration with relevant bodies for external evaluation, and research into procedures and methods to maintain the quality of educational technologies.

4.10.1 Results

A.F.1 believes that no meaningful work is undertaken by Internal Evaluation Units (IEUs) in conventional universities, as they ought to initiate improvement actions that do not come to fruition. Frequently, instructors lack problem-solving and collaborative skills, and although issues arise from oversight, no corrective measures are implemented. Similarly, A.F.2 asserts that control over recent years has been administered uniformly across universities in Greece by the National Authority for Quality Assurance in Higher Education with specific standards. Prior to this, H.O.U. was the only institution that had such processes in place. He points out that evaluation tools are often problematic and outdated, with both education models primarily relying on leadership quality. A.F.3 notes that at H.O.U., an evaluative framework exists for assessing and ensuring quality in teaching materials, processes, and instructors; efforts are made to utilise results and implement improvements. By contrast, in conventional institutions, safeguards are inadequate to indicate that evaluation operates in a corrective manner, heavily dependent on individual initiative. A.F.4 mentions that bureaucracy plays a significant role and that external evaluations are generally effective; however, few programs in conventional colleges engage in distance education. A.F.5 indicates that evaluations are typically conducted through certification and funding measures, although he believes that genuine improvement actions do not follow. He notes that the Lifelong Learning Centers programs resemble business ventures; if they were subjected to a stringent evaluation system—where all criteria impact their existence—the competition in Lifelong Learning Centers would intensify. A.F.6 has not observed any improvements being implemented across any educational models. He states that universities have never participated in discussilifelong learning centersons regarding methods for teaching and learning at the tertiary level. For the past several years, however, there has been a growing interest in how "learning occurs" within higher education, leading to the establishment of teaching and learning centres across various universities. This has now begun to attract attention in both conventional and distance education fields. A.F.8 emphasises that no instructor training is evident within conventional universities, either for their programs or distance education initiatives. In contrast, systematic and consistent training takes place at H.O.U. with no equivalent found in conventional settings. A.F.9 asserts that assessments from all evaluations appear inconsequential, as no corrective actions ensue; the consequence may only involve intervention by a university ethics board should serious issues arise. A.F.10

states that IEUs predominantly consist of representatives from the natural sciences, which he perceives negatively, believing that immeasurable outcomes inherently characterise education. A.F.11 notes that at some universities, there is feedback and recommendations aimed at improving certain courses or class categories.

4.11 Key Area: Nature of Sciences

The humanities and social sciences do not necessarily require students to be physically present on university premises, unlike the natural sciences, technology, and health sciences, which mandate physical attendance. Consequently, the question arises as to whether the principles of distance education can similarly apply to these scientific fields.

4.11.1 Results

A.F.1 states that a humanities instructor and a natural sciences instructor within a distance education framework must consciously choose to apply distance education principles while recognising that certain rules must be observed. Student-centred teaching is essential, centring on addressing students' needs. This can only be realised if instructors hail from H.O.U. A.F.2 claims to lack familiarity with the programs of other faculties but believes there should not necessarily be a significant difference. A.F.3 asserts that the nature of distance education can apply equally across humanities and other sciences; however, instructors often conform to rigid teaching methodologies, particularly in the natural sciences, emphasising traditional teacher-centric models. A.F.4 indicates that the impact and application of distance education principles vary by scientific domain since natural sciences, health, and technology sciences necessitate laboratories. A.F.5 argues that the cultures within humanities differ from those in natural sciences regarding ontological and epistemological perceptions. This relates to educational needs and expands the educational requirements of each student group based on their respective branches of science. A.F.6 believes that implementing distance education is more straightforward in humanities and social sciences than in medical and natural sciences, which require physical presence for experiments and training. A.F.8 observes that the impact of the nature of distance education varies among different faculties, emphasising that subjects in humanities can operate through assignments and essays, allowing students to learn through study rather than practical application. A.F.9 reiterates that the principles of distance education could apply universally, except where laboratory work is essential and cannot be conducted otherwise. A.F.10 concludes that distance education operates differently based on scientific disciplines, while natural sciences emphasise specific characteristics. A.F.11 asserts significant differentiation, particularly in Humanities Studies, which does not fully exploit distance education tools.

5. Final Inquiry

Impact of H.O.U. and Distance Education on Conventional Universities A.F.1 states that there is limited influence, noting some impact when instructors come

from H.O.U., having adopted the distance education culture and attempted to transfer it into their conventional university work. H.O.U.'s role has restricted reach within conventional realms concerning communication, teaching methods, and addressing students' learning needs. Consequently, those designing distance education programs should be aware of H.O.U. methodologies. A.F.2 believes that conventional universities have changed due to H.O.U.'s presence and because most faculty responsible for teaching distance education courses come from H.O.U. A.F.3 asserts that over 2,000 instructors across various types of universities contribute to this annually. In many cases, a transfer of educational methodology expertise developed by H.O.U. has permeated conventional settings. Distance education was the primary factor influencing this, as devised by H.O.U., which has also led to an osmotic exchange with numerous foreign universities offering distance education programs, thus generating dynamic growth. In the initial two decades, the contribution of distance education as evolved from H.O.U. has been pivotal. A.F.4 contends that H.O.U. represented a significant milestone in higher education conducted unconventionally, even though distance education had previously existed in Europe before H.O.U. Since its inception, many universities have aspired to adopt distance education for reasons of influence and impact. One influence pertains to ethical levels, while another relates to adopting a different teaching and training style, ultimately enhancing the financial viability of higher education institutions. A.F.5 states that H.O.U. introduced the concept of distance education, providing a pathway for traditional faculty to undertake dual roles in education. Many faculty members engaged with H.O.U. subsequently modified their perceptions. As H.O.U. released more programs, and a substantial number of faculty members became involved. Any resentment toward H.O.U. diminished. This influence is regarded positively since it did not have an intense technocratic character; it initiated discussions on openness and pedagogical dimensions. A.F.6 notes that a significant impact is evident in educational materials, which adhere to significant distance education principles even within conventional frameworks. Moreover, the structuring of thematic units and assignments has evolved sporadically and non-systematically. The impact partially correlates with faculty members serving as consulting professors at H.O.U., significantly transferring their expertise. A.F.7 asserts that the operational model of H.O.U. and distance education has influenced conventional universities regarding instructors' roles, communication dynamics, and assessment methods, always in alignment with each instructor's experience and their relationship with H.O.U. A.F.8 believes any impact is conceivable since many faculty at conventional institutions are H.O.U. graduates. The influence is gradual, involving the expertise and the pedagogical perspective surrounding distance education. A.F.9 emphasises that the influences of distance education in conventional universities pertain strictly to the instructor's role, whereas H.O.U.'s presence has dramatically refined expectations. According to A.F.10, H.O.U.'s impact is economically driven, having become a significant hub—the benchmark for assessing the quality of a distance education program. H.O.U. has undeniably influenced the quality of distance education offered by conventional programs. A.F.11 indicates that H.O.U.'s impact on several universities largely hinges on

the teaching methods employed—specifically distance education. They have significantly gained insight from H.O.U.'s existence and the collaborative experiences instructors acquired as faculty advisors there. Moreover, there is a trend towards more accessible and feasible forms of learning aimed at reaching a broader audience. However, the implementation of fundamental principles of distance education methodologies requires extensive organisation and effort. Simultaneously, attempts are made at various universities to blend technology with pedagogical aspects in specific modern courses distinguished by interdisciplinary focuses.

6. Discussion of Results from Interviews

6.1. Educational Teaching Materials

In the management of teaching materials for distance education programs in conventional universities, instructors' good intentions to utilise materials grounded in distance education principles prevail. Instructors with backgrounds from H.O.U. are the only ones making substantial efforts to integrate distance education elements into their teaching materials. This raises concern as the onus for teaching materials in distance education and conventional university programs lies solely with individual instructors. Only if an instructor has garnered experience at H.O.U. can the materials comply with distance education principles. In conventional educational settings, there is no regulation governing the teaching materials provided. Furthermore, it is universally acknowledged that this is not the case at H.O.U., where materials adhere to distance education principles but require ongoing enhancement and refreshing. Moreover, whenever there are attempts to align educational materials with distance education principles in conventional institutions, they are largely restricted to merely digitising existing resources and employing technological means. Simultaneously, it is crucial to note that these initiatives tend to be primarily mechanical. The complete absence of a pedagogical dimension in this context is evident. Thus, it becomes clear that educational materials in conventional universities relevant to their distance education programs have not been significantly influenced by the principles of distance education; instead, such influence arises solely from the faculty's eclectic personal perceptions and experiences. Consequently, regardless of attempts to align educational content with distance education principles, they remain superficial and are dictated by students' immediate need for comprehension. There is no mention in conventional programs where the elucidation of educational materials is portrayed as aspirational. Rather, it falls short of evolving into an educational dimension and remains stubbornly anchored in its authors' authority.

6.2 Learning Pillar

In conventional universities and their distance education offerings, the learning pillar remains the educator rather than the educational materials. While the structure of the teaching materials may occasionally emulate the principles of distance education, there

appears to be little willingness to implement change; this necessitates time, effort, and collaborative input from many specialists. This effort faces barriers stemming from financial struggles and a narrow focus that hinders such "details." Furthermore, substantial reflection suggests that although most conventional programs reference educational materials and their associated principles, the practical application often diverges from this expectation; it merely serves as a façade cultivated in certain prestigious universities where academic reputation dominates without a potential realisation in pedagogical transitions. The prevailing notion tacitly asserts that distance education encompasses "*the act of condensing content, converting it to PDF, and distributing it.*" This perspective, supported by technological applications, emerges in conventional institutions. Nevertheless, significant influences regarding the framework of materials within conventional programs are often overlooked.

6.3 Philosophy of Thematic Units

The existence of Thematic Units, rather than distinct courses, in H.O.U. represents one of its innovations. H.O.U. is the first institution to institutionalise this framework. Characterised by rich educational material, interdisciplinary features, and relevance to themes in their model, it promotes student-centred learning rather than rigid methodologies. The term "Thematic Unit," used by conventional universities to describe their distance education programs, is primarily adopted through imitation without genuine adherence to its underlying essence. While conventional higher education attempts to convey potential student interest, it does so without any substantive connection to H.O.U.'s intent, where operations require diverse and comprehensive semester units distinct from annual models. Centralised methodologies signal a return to monotonous perspectives, as there seems to be little discussion regarding interdisciplinarity.

6.4 Role of the Instructor in Conventional and H.O.U.

In H.O.U., distance education as a consulting professor establishes a distinctive role for instructors. The educator draws upon various pedagogical insights aimed at nurturing student engagement through distinct practices tailored to real-world applications within learning environments. At the same time, efforts to transfer distance education principles to conventional institutions encounter resistance, revealing entrenched habitual teaching methods. They strive to integrate these elements into traditional settings only when instructors specifically emerge from H.O.U.'s methodologies. Unfortunately, the persistent lack of transformation from conventional teaching methods remains evident, primarily hindering educators' understanding of the crucial distinctions needed to successfully implement these pedagogical frameworks. Awareness of compliance relies on each instructor's willingness to incorporate progressive practices into learning paradigms or remain stagnant, thereby impeding potential growth and enriching student engagement.

6.5 Assignments – Activities

Assignments yield significant contributions to student engagement and interaction. Many learners acquire knowledge through action; therefore, assignments embody common elements across various educational contexts aimed at providing customised education. The coherence of intellectually designed activities is essential, yet a continuous reluctance emerges from conventional institutions to adopt these change-oriented practices, reminiscent of fostering pedagogical involvement. Conversely, within H.O.U., a strong framework exists for activities embedded in educational standards. In contrast, conventional educational environments often overlook such initiatives, frequently succumbing to rigid approaches. An alarming trend reflecting potential AI implications threatens the clarity of traditional constructs used for assignments and project work, posing challenges to learner autonomy and assessment methodologies. Without intervention or innovations championed by educational leaders, assignments will attract diminished effectiveness, inducing a shift in traditional paradigms towards alternative assessment criteria that promote lasting engagement.

Within conventional educational settings, evaluations fail to reflect the evaluative depth present in H.O.U., as standardised metrics and established frameworks are absent. Consequently, any semblance of evaluation demonstrates disorganisation that mirrors personal educator philosophies rather than systematic advancements from insightful feedback loops supporting student growth. The implications signify an emerging detachment between conventional instructors' reflective practices and noteworthy contributions from their engagements within H.O.U. frameworks, posing substantial threats to fostering robust evaluation contexts that facilitate learner success trajectories.

6.6 Group Advisory Meetings (G.A.M.)

The existence of G.A.M. serves as a multifaceted mechanism, providing vital educational avenues that encompass cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions to enhance student support. Despite their foundational role within traditional educational paradigms, the evolution towards virtual G.A.M. has displaced significant efficacy as the essence of direct professor-student interaction diminishes. Investment in holistic models that integrate in-person and digital modalities remains paramount to sustaining vitality within these initiatives.

6.7 Staff Training

H.O.U. has positioned itself as a trailblazer for professional development among faculty engaged as educators in distance education paradigms; however, the stagnation observed across conventional university frameworks illuminates an educational chasm. The absence of systematic development strategies indicates a reliance on personal experience, perpetuating challenges witnessed across conventional settings. Thus, the opportunity for staff training to clarify instructional methodologies remains unrealised, necessitating a greater alignment and intentional strategy development to anchor conventions in innovative pedagogical practices.

6.8 Internal Evaluation

Institutions must implement effective internal evaluations to ensure adherence to quality assurance standards, ideally fostering a culture of continuous improvement. However, the mismatch between assessment frameworks and strategic outcomes hinders progress, diminishing external accountability standards reinforced by ineffectual evaluations. H.O.U., conversely, has developed a nascent system of internal evaluations, yet systemic processes and expansive engagement would enhance its overall functional capabilities.

6.9 Nature of Sciences

H.O.U. has adapted gracefully across humanities and social science disciplines, whilst traditional settings resist such transformations reflective of pedagogical paradigms. As institutions deliberate on their role and potential contributions to educational innovation, they must reconcile educational practices with academic disciplines that may inherently demand physical presence and experiential participation. The capacity for meaningful engagement hinges upon instructor adaptability and appreciation for varied methodologies that promote multidisciplinary learning.

Impact of H.O.U. and Distance Education on Conventional Universities Preliminary insights from convergent faculty experiences illustrate H.O.U.'s limited, systematic influence on conventional educational structures. The apparent disconnection from established models speaks to lingering uncertainty surrounding optimal educational practices. Most importantly, the essence of transformation lies in the faculty's responsiveness to divergent pedagogical paradigms shaped by individual instructor experiences and institutional climates. Consequently, while conventional universities operate within entrenched familiarities, integrating H.O.U.'s frameworks remain contingent upon sustained leadership commitment toward innovation-oriented teaching practices, extending beyond habitual confines.

7. Limitations

Overall, this research faced significant challenges accessing conventional university structures, where any face-to-face engagement was met with suspicion regarding research intentions perceived as critically undermining academic integrity. Furthermore, while the sample of respondents is quite representative, it remains relatively small. Despite the general consensus among nearly all respondents, it would be beneficial to interview other educators in both distance education and conventional education simultaneously.

8. Recommendations

Future endeavours could incorporate insights from faculty exclusively at conventional universities that offer distance education programs, thereby providing a more nuanced perspective. Additionally, potential exploration of the effects of distance education on

conventional curricula may yield enlightening findings, concentrating on hypothetical changes while addressing shortcomings noted among existing structures. Thus, enriching dialogue concerning the implications of distance education and fostering collaboration between diverse educational models holds substantial potential for evolving educational frameworks.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Antonis Lionarakis is Emeritus Professor at the Hellenic Open University. He served as a member of the Governing Committee of the Hellenic Open University and as Dean of the School of Humanities (2016 – 2021). He has taught in postgraduate programs at the Department of Education of the University of Athens and the University of the Aegean, at the Marasleio Teaching School, and at the University of Piraeus. He has also taught for 8 years at the Open University of the United Kingdom. He was a member of the Board of Directors of the Institute of Lifelong Adult Education, founder and president of the Scientific Society "Hellenic Network of Open & Distance Education". He was a member of the Ministry of Education's committee for the establishment of the Hellenic Open University, later a member of the Project Implementation Team, and a proponent of the principles of open and distance education in Greece. He is also the founder and editor of the international journal "Open Education". He has participated in the publication of 24 books (author and editor) and in many research projects, and over 170 of his papers have been published in dozens of scientific journals. He has been invited to teach and present his work by many universities in Greece, Cyprus, the United Kingdom, France, Iceland, Bulgaria, Turkey, and Japan. With reference to all of the above, 25 years ago, he submitted to the then Minister of Education (G.A. Papandreou) the file for the establishment, creation, and development of the Hellenic Open University as the first alternative university in Greece, based on the ideal of open education and the flexible methodology of distance education.
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