Distance teacher education
- Experiences from Dalarna University, Sweden

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Abstract
In 2003 the first distance teacher education started at Dalarna University in a small scale compared with today when a large part of the teacher education is distributed as distance education. From this point of view it seems important to ask the question: *How can you become a successful distance student?*

This paper is based on a case study. Data were collected from earlier research reports, study registers and a group interview.

The most important parameters appeared to be motivation, situation in life, discipline and experiences from earlier studies and/or work experience and good relations to other students and the university teachers.

**Key words:** Distance teacher education.
INTRODUCTION
In 2004 thirty-four students started their distance teacher education at Dalarna University. Today the larger part of the teacher education is distributed as distance education. For example, in the spring term 2009 around 200 new distance teacher students were accepted at Dalarna University. However, more students demand more staff. The groups of students seem to be different from the first ones and a lot of them live nearby the university, which was not the case in the beginning.

I can agree that there has been a change. The students today are younger and it’s not so homogeneous any longer. There are more students today who are not motivated /.../. They have become younger and that might be coherent to their lack of experience. (University teacher)

This new situation will probably influence the quality of the education, the university teachers’ and the students’ working and study conditions. Taking this into consideration the aim of the study is to answer the question: How can you become a successful distance student, by asking the following questions:

- What significance has the age of the students concerning the study results?
- How does the students’ social situation influence?
- What importance has the student's motivation?
- Of what importance is their educational background and earlier work experience?

The result could, hopefully, be a starting point of a discussion about how to pedagogically develop the distance teacher education in order to improve it both regarding contents and methods.

METHOD
This paper is based on a case study (Cohen & Manion, 1994; Merriam, 1994) and accordingly the result could not be claimed to be valid in general. Data were collected from earlier research reports at Dalarna university, study registers and interviews, so called triangulation. “/.../, triangulation can be a useful technique where a researcher is engaged in case study, a particular example of ‘complex phenomena’” (Cohen & Manion, 1994:241).

Research reports
During the last few years some reports have been written at Dalarna University investigating distance education from different angels (Lundgren & Svärdhagen, 2003; Lundgren & Svärthagen, 2004; Oom Gartman, Lundgren & Svärthagen, 2005; Reneland, 2005; Andersson & Lundgren, 2008; Haneffors, 2008). The results and experiences from these reports are summarized and analysed in relation to the research questions in this paper.
**Study registers**

Additional information was collected from study registers. Students, with their main subjects in literature, Swedish, social sciences or culture and milieu, who started their distance teacher education in the spring term 2004, 2005 and 2008 were chosen (table 1). The results have been noticed after one semester, two years and in the end of the education. For the students who started 2008 the results were noticed after the first semester.

The sampled students intend to become education for recreation instructors or teachers for (the early years in) compulsory school, which requires 210/240 points (30 point = one semester full time study), and teacher education for (the later years) in compulsory school and upper secondary school, which requires 270/300/330 points. The points required to receive the university degree differs depending on aim and direction in the main subject and the specialization of the teacher education.

Table 1. Number of students admitted and sample.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of start</th>
<th>Students admitted</th>
<th>Numbers of sampled</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spring term 2004</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring term 2005</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring term 2006</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring term 2007</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring term 2008</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>352</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The students’ educational background was difficult to interpret through the information found in the registers. In some cases explanations could be found due to choice in upper secondary school, or accepted as a so called 25:4, that is someone more than 25 years of age and a work experience of more than four years, or admitted for special reasons validated of the admission office.

During this work we have found that the follow up systems at the University and have shortcomings that have to be developed, as well as the registers used. This is necessary to be able to check and follow up the students’ results, to be able to provide better help and develop the education pedagogically.

**Group-interview**

A group-interview was also made with five experienced university teachers at Dalarna University concerning the distance education with the questions in the aim as a guideline. The interview was tape-recorded.
THEORY

Distance education in this case is defined as a type of teacher education where university teachers and students are geographically separated (Machenzie & Christensen referred to in Willén 1982) using Information and Communication Technology (ICT) (Chaib & Carlsson 2001), with a great flexibility concerning room, but less flexibility concerning time.

Conditions that were supposed to influence the suitability of distance teacher education for the single student were identified from our earlier experiences as distance educators. It is most likely that distance students are influenced by how accustomed they are with computers. Younger generations in general are more familiar to use computers and ICT and may for this reason prefer distance education, although they live near a university. They probably to a higher degree prefer sitting in front of a computer than older individuals with little computer experiences. For example, Haverila et al (2008:8) found that:

"/…/ the more experienced students [Note our remark: in e-learning] perceived themselves to have more positive attitude towards e-learning, and also that their learning style is more suitable to e-learning /…/ and they perceived themselves to be more active learners and self-starters."

Earlier studies indicate that age, social background, motivation, educational background and former work experiences have an influence on a successful result as in all forms of studies (see, for example, Andersson & Lundgren, 2008). These aspects partly also have an influence on each other. For example, age and work experiences are normally linked to each other, the older the more working experience and “there is a connection between the situation in life and motivation” (University teacher).

Distance education has often been considered to make the student isolated (Östlund, 2008 referring to Peters, 2003). However, the rapid development of ICT has opened for both better communication possibilities and pedagogical development of the distance education. Many students appreciate distance education (Östlund, 2008 referring to Poole, 2000; Petrides, 2002; Northrup, 2002), something that also is demonstrated by the increasing number of students applying for distance education. Distance students in Sweden have tripled from 1997 to 2007, from 29 400 to 89 000 (Östlund, 2008). Reneland-Forsman (2009) found that e-learning creates a good opportunity for deepened communication and that the older students contribute to a developed thinking as a result of their earlier work experiences. She underlines that the distribution form should not be in focus; instead it is important to stress the learning process. Furthermore, there are research studies pointing out that distance students are as satisfied and achieving just as good results as campus students (Johansson et al, 2000; Allen et al, 2000; Zhao et al, 2005). There are also investigations revealing that distance students are not satisfied, for example concerning access to teachers and feed-back (Östlund, 2008 referring to Johansson et
al, 2000). Other research findings exhibit distance students as less successful than campus students. They tend to terminate before they obtain the final university degree (Östlund, 2008 referring to Rovai & Barnum, 2003; Westerberg & Mårald, 2006). A common reason is that the student has a lack of time. Another cause of failure is underestimation of what university studies demands (Östlund, 2008 referring to Tresman, 2002).

Sara Dulaney Gilbert’s (2001) book: *How to be a successful online student*, also gives some guidance to understand the distance student role. She says that the distance student has to ask himself/herself: Why do you want to study at distance and if the following are any of your reasons: It’s faster, cheaper, easier and you do not have to deal with other people. Then distance learning is not for you, because distance education is neither faster, cheaper, easier, nor less socially involved. But, if the student’s reasons are to:

- Fit learning into your schedule of family and job demands
- Keep education consistent despite a move or major change
- Get a good education when a campus is hours away
- Make a start on returning to school, when you’re filing timid about joining a class then distance education is a good move. (Dulaney Gilbert, 2001:70)

**RESULTS**

The result is presented in accordance with the questions raised in the aim of this paper.

**What significance has the age of the students concerning the study results?**

In the first group of students (start 2003): “A majority of the students /.../ (14/16) were women in the middle-ages and a rather homogeneous group” (Andersson & Lundgren, 2008:4). In a later study concerning students in general at Dalarna University 60 students answered a survey, in which 90 percent were women and 10 percent men (Hanefors, 2008). Most of the students were between 30 - 39 years old and almost half of the group was 40 - 49 years old. Only a few of the respondents were less than thirty years or older than fifty years. In most cases the students participating in distance education did not seem to be those who recently had left upper secondary school in these studies. It seems to be the middle aged women who at first hand are attracted of distance education, perhaps because they see a possibility to do things that before have not been possible to do.

Many have had dreams in their minds which never have been carried through. They have had an idea, this is what I want to do, but it has not come true. (University teacher)

Concerning the importance of the age in relation to the results of the students an interviewed experienced university teacher said:
I think age and motivation stick together to a high degree. I imagine that students, mainly women a little bit older 35, 40 with work experience have another motivation to get an education. When growing older your possibilities to choose also become more and more important of several reasons. (University teacher)

Although there in general are more of the younger students nowadays attending, it is still not the real young ones apply for the distance teacher education. However, the distance students are from the university teachers point of view supposed to be more successful than the campus students.

Even if we today say that there has been a change in group of distance students concerning the composition I still believe the distance students are a little older, have more experience and succeed in their studies better than the campus students. (University teacher)

It seems that the age might influence the study results, perhaps most of all connected to former work experiences and sometimes to former university studies.

Many of the older students have not only work experience but experience from earlier academic studies and that gives a totally different start in the new studies apart from what kind of earlier studies they have. They have an advantage. (University teacher)

The distance study form is an opportunity to change the future for the older students and this fact increases the motivation to succeed in the studies. These aspects are elaborated more in detail in the forthcoming sections.

What could be found in the study register?
The result from the study register is presented and commented more in detail on the groups who started in 2004 and 2005 and only briefly, in order to indicate trends in early drop-outs, on the group that started in 2008.

Group one (start 2004)
The seventeen students, eleven women and six men, started their teacher program in the spring 2004. They were registered to become a teacher for the later years in compulsory school or upper secondary school. The students’ main subject was Social science (SAMD). The 270 points students should finished their studies the spring term 2008. None of the students came directly from upper secondary school. Most of them had most likely some kind of work experience or previous university studies. The result is presented in figure 1.
Figure 1. The 2004 student group’s study rate in accordance to time and age.

After the first semester all but one of the students had succeeded. After two years seven students had failed and after four years only seven students had succeeded to reach the goal. There was no significant connection to be found between age, earlier work experience or education. It just seemed to be a coincidence.

**Group two (start 2005)**

Of the forty-two students who begun their studies in the spring term 2005 fourteen had as their main subject Swedish (SVED, SVEA) and twenty eight had their main subjects in Culture and milieu of life (KULD). In figure 2 SVED and SVEA are represented together as the attained points are what is accounted for. In the comments below they are separated.

Figure 2. The 2005 student group’s study rate in accordance to time table, age and main subject.

Three of these students (SVEA) were registered to become recreation instructors or teachers for the early years in compulsory school. All were women and accepted as 25:4. They all succeeded in accordance with the syllabus. Two have a university degree while the third seems to continue and broaden her studies in the subject
Swedish as a second language despite the fact that she could have had her university degree.

Three students had registered in the main subject Swedish. Two were men and one was a woman. The youngest woman succeeded the first semester then she seems to have left the University. The other two did not succeed even the first semester. Eight students were registered to become teachers for the later years in compulsory school or upper secondary school. Six were women and two were men. Four of the students came from a three year theoretical program in upper secondary school, while two were accepted as 25:4. After the first semester all but one student had passed. After two years (spring 2007) the remaining seven students had all succeeded and in 2009 all but one succeeded.

All the twenty-eight KULD-students had their main subjects in Culture and milieu of life and all were registered to become recreation instructors or teachers for the early years in compulsory school. Twenty five were women and three were men. Considering the age all of the students, but for one, seem to have had work experience or other education before starting the teacher education. After the first semester five students, all women, had failed. After two years eighteen students succeeded to reach the goal.

After three and a half years sixteen students has reached the goal 210 points. Thirteen students, one man and twelve women, have received their final university degree. Neither concerning this group any connection between age, work experience and results can be found.

**Group three (start 2008)**

Of the thirty-two sampled students in the spring semester 2008 had eighteen, sixteen women and two men, the main subject in Swedish (SVED), four, three women and one man, in social sciences (SAMD) and ten, all women, in Culture and milieu of life (KULD). As they have been at the University just a short time the results are only shortly commented. After the first semester had fourteen of the eighteen SVED-students succeeded and also produced during 2009. Among the ten KULD-students nine succeeded to reach the goal and are still producing.

A general conclusion is that a lot of students seem to fail but no significant differences between age and study results can be found.

**The distance student's life situation**

The female and also the few male students in two of the studies (Oom Gartman, Lundgren, & Svardhagen, 2005; Andersson & Lundgren, 2008) claim that their life situation was such that they could not have attended if campus education would have been the only alternative.
The majority point out that distance education gives them the opportunity to study from home /…/ several also points out that this is the only opportunity for them to pursue university-level studies at all /…/. Another factor /…/ was that to study form home is financially more attractive /…/ avoid long journeys /…/ the opportunity to spend more time with the family /…/. (Oom Gartman, Lundgren, & Svärdhagen, 2005:4)

In, for example, Hanefors (2008) study 88 percent of the students had children. Many of the students had raised a family with children and/or a work they could not leave for social reasons. Distance teacher education was the ultimate alternative to educate or to re-educate. One student said: “This is my only possibility as I have children and family. I have no other choice /…/” (Andersson & Lundgren, 2008). Another said: “Economically I have to work daytime due to the kids” (Östlund, 2008: Course II p 9). For those living far from the university the possibility to be a distance student opened new possibilities. This was also the case in study made by Östlund (2008).

No, I could not [go to campus]. My intention was to be a teacher in 1998, but I could not, as me and my husband lived in separate cities and we already had children and dogs. But, when I received this opportunity I took it and it was distance education (student quoted in Andersson & Lundgren, 2008:5)

It seems reasonable to say that distance students, living hours away from a university and their life situation influenced their choice of educational distribution form.

**The distance student’s motivation**

Andersson and Lundgren (2008) claim that the motivation of the students in the first distance teacher education was very high. They also stressed that in this form of education the students must have a strong motivation and a lot of discipline to be able to succeed. Some of the students with experience from campus education meant that it was easier to pass through in campus than in distance education. This was also the opinion of the university teachers. “They [the distance students] have made a more active choice, they are disciplined and motivated” (University teacher quoted in Andersson & Lundgren, 2008:7). “I also think that at least the first distance students I taught had more ambition than the Campus students. They were more focused. /…/” (University teacher quoted in Andersson & Lundgren, 2008:6). The motivated distance students seem more aware of the importance of being disciplined.

You can study more independent, when you have time, but at the same time it is necessary that you really do so. You must have a strategy and you must accomplish it. Those who lack discipline cannot study in distance. (Distance student quoted in Andersson & Lundgren, 2008:9)

On the other hand, the student’s motivation always seems to be important. Unmotivated students do not succeed well in any form of education.
I do wonder if it isn’t so after all that you have seen, a little more motivation from the distance students. They handle remaining tasks more seriously. I know that I have to demand for the remaining tasks more times in campus education than I have to do in distance education. (University teacher)

It is not possible to claim that distance students in general are motivated. But, middle aged women living far from the university were in this case study in most cases highly motivated.

The distance student’s educational background and earlier work experiences
In the study of Hanefors (2008) fifty-five percent of the students had experiences from earlier university studies. It seems reasonable to think that earlier university education in general is helpful as many of the earlier non academics had great problems in the beginning to understand what academic studies meant and what was required from them. “/…/ as I have studied at the university before I have learned how to handle my reading /.../ it takes time to learn that” (Östlund, 2008). However, students seem to find university studies more time consuming than expected. “/…/ as I'm not used to university studies I did not understand it was not possible to take your time as long as you wished” (Östlund, 2008: Course II p.12).

If the students had not used technical equipment (ICT) before they became a distance student, this took a lot of energy to handle in the beginning. This was obvious in the studies of Andersson and Lundgren (2008) as well as in the study of Östlund (2008). “It was a totally new business. I was retrained from care sector. It was very much that was new and in a high tempo” (Östlund, 2008).

/…/ I had some problems. It did not function. Where I live it was not [the IT-net] extended enough, but it became better when I got help from the IT-unit /…/. (Distance student quoted in Andersson, & Lundgren, 2008: 6)

However, one of the interviewed university teacher’s said about what a distance student need: “Time and motivation are considerably more important than technical knowledge and experiences” (University teacher).

In Andersson and Lundgren’s (2008) study sixty-three percent had previous experiences of the teacher role before they started their teacher education. Two of them had, for example, worked as recreation instructors for a long time and another as a pedagogical assistant, another as a supply teacher. “I had a substantial experience from schools before this education and I had the luck to have a good practice. Important prerequisites I think” (Student teacher quoted in Andersson & Lundgren, 2008:7). The students with former experiences from a job in pre-schools said this had helped them to better follow the teacher education as they could refer to practical situations and most of the students who had this experience were also older. “Many of these students have worked in schools or within child care as non educated and they
have a long work experience and now they want to learn more” (University teacher). The fact of having work experience gives you a more mature insight that your own work is important.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

The ambition with this paper was to find some answers of the question: *How does one become a successful distance student?* No significant connection between age and study results was found. The use of ICT seemed to be of minor problem. The most important parameters how to be a successful distance student appeared to be motivation, situation in life, discipline and experiences from earlier studies and/or work experience. Distance teacher education seems also to work well for mature individuals with high motivation and good relations to each other and the university teachers.

This case study points also to the fact that many distance students do not complete their teacher education, however, some of them continue their studies after some time. Out of the results, some presumptions can be made: Lack of time because of family reasons or work, misjudging of what is demanded in university studies and lack of discipline influence the possibilities to fulfil the studies. Some of the students may also have discovered that the teaching profession was not what they expected and therefore left the education.

Going back to Dulaney Gilbert (2001) it is also in this case possible to verify that most of the distant students in this case study had chosen distance studies due to their family situation. Campus was hours away and, not at least, it was a possibility to return to school. For the students who started in 2005 and 2008, we do not know for what reasons they attended. However, what we do know is that the first groups (Andersson & Lundgren, 2008) of distance students in the teacher education program did not chose distance learning as it was faster, cheaper, easier, nor less socially involved.

**What can be done to get better results in distance teacher education?** It seems important to emphasize the demand of self discipline in academic studies and to stress the communication part. It is also time to think more about how to develop the distance education pedagogically. One of the teacher educators concluded that the shortage ICT ought to be CIT as he saw the communication as the most important part, not the information technology. The university teachers also claimed that the courses given in distance education have implications for altering the campus courses and vice versa.”/.../ Why don’t we do like this even in the campus courses? /.../ The variety in teaching and examinations, the balance between lectures and seminars, the utilizing of resources in short” (University teacher). The university teachers interviewed said that distance and campus education more and more seems to be the same. This study, as well as others, shows that the demands to be a successful distance student very much are the same as in campus studies. It seems to be
important to study if and how these different study forms may have a stimulating effect on each other in the future.

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