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Trends in student population and curriculum design for the Open University of the Netherlands

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Abstract

European countries intend to move towards a single European Area of Higher Education. This so-called Bologna Process aims at creating comparable, compatible, and coherent systems of higher education. In practice, this means the harmonization of course credits, program degrees, and program accreditation. In order to come in line with the Bologna Process, all these elements have had to be changed in the Netherlands. In the last decades, this has had a great impact on the number of institutes, the content of the programs, and the composition of the lifelong professional learning student population. The Executive Board of the Open University of the Netherlands (OUNL) felt that due to a combination of changes in the student population and declining student numbers, the policy of moving towards increased distance education needed to be changed. A new teaching model will have to be developed in order to ensure lower dropout rates, increased persistence, and higher graduation rates. This model must embrace relevance, actuality, commitment, challenge, and interaction as its leading design principles. With the implementation of this model, the bachelor's and master's programs will become more structured and more professionally relevant.

Introduction

Open universities were established to deliver degree programs for non-traditional students. These degree programs were highly academic and concentrated on domains of scientific knowledge. The adult learners were accepted and approached as novices who studied academic domains, regardless of their professional backgrounds or professional needs. Open universities have played an important role in providing access to higher education to those without a previous degree. Nowadays, in developed countries, this traditional target group of students is shrinking, sometimes dramatically, as was the case at the Open University of Hong Kong (Butcher, 2013). At the same time, the need for lifelong learning for professionals who have previously graduated is growing. These students enroll in bachelor's programs and particularly master's programs in order to take the next step in their careers. These students seek degree programs that will optimally prepare them for the professional roles they aspire to. As a consequence, the traditional focus of academic degree programs on domains of scientific knowledge must be shifted towards programs aiming to improve professional competence and prepare students for professional roles.

The OUNL is at the center of this significant trend. In the Netherlands, the main engine of change in higher education is the Bologna Process, which aims at creating comparable, compatible, and coherent systems of higher education in Europe. The Bologna Process led to important changes in the Netherlands Higher Education and Research Act, such as the creation of a new system of qualifications and a new system of accountability. The significance of the implementation of a three-cycle degree system, instead of a two-cycle degree system, is gradually becoming visible. The main consequence is a growing population of graduates with bachelor's degrees who are interested in master's programs. As a result, like many other institutes of higher education, the OUNL was forced to reformulate its strategic

agenda. In this new agenda, the main focus is reinventing educational services to remain an attractive university for distance education for the old target group of second-chance students seeking a degree, as well as the new target group of highly motivated professionals seeking qualifications and skills for career opportunities.

This paper describes the Bologna Process as a result of the broader European agenda, the aims and activities of the Bologna Process, the most important consequences of the Bologna Process for the educational system of the Netherlands, and the impact of these trends and other developments on the conditions under which the OUNL operates. The source for the factual information on the Bologna Process is Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org>). The OUNL launched a strategic plan in 2012 to cope with the consequences of these changes (Open Universiteit, 2012). The most important challenges for the OUNL are attracting new student groups, improving success rates and expanding lifelong learning services. The first steps taken towards higher success rates are described. Finally, some ideas are presented on how to tackle the problem of redesigning the OUNL programs in order to make them more professionally relevant.

The European agenda

The European Union (EU) began in 1957 as the European Economic Community (EEC) with six members, including the Netherlands. In 1973, the EEC enlarged to include nine members. In 1986, the EEC had twelve members. The reunion of Germany in 1990 (“the fall of the wall”) opened membership to the formerly communist countries of Eastern Europe. The European Union (EU) is now an economic and political union of 28 member states. In total, Europe has approximately 50 countries.

The EU operates through a system of intergovernmentally negotiated decisions made by the member states and supranational independent institutions. Generally speaking, laws made by the EU can be classified into two groups: those that come into force without the necessity of national implementation measures and those that specifically require national implementation measures. As a consequence, member states maintain their own sovereignty in many areas. That means that not all EU decisions lead to changes in national law. For instance, in 2002, Euro banknotes and coins replaced the national currencies of twelve of the member states. Since then, the Eurozone has increased to encompass 17 countries. Eleven countries still have their national currencies.

EU policy on a European Higher Education Area

EU policies aim to ensure the free movement of people, goods, services, and capital. The Bologna Declaration of 1999 is in line with this aim. It proposed a European Higher Education Area (EHEA), which is meant to ensure more comparable, compatible, and coherent systems of higher education in Europe. Students and graduates should be able to move freely between countries, using prior qualifications obtained in one country as acceptable entry requirements for further study in another.

One of the principal aims of the Bologna Process is develop a system based on a three-cycle framework of qualifications that is supported with a system of easily readable and comparable degrees. As a consequence, countries should adopt common standards and a common terminology. In UK terminology, this would mean a bachelor’s degree for a first degree, acquired over three years; a master’s degree for subsequent study; and doctorate for those who have “made a contribution through original research.”

Progress towards the EHEA

The formation of an EHEA requires national implementation measures. In practice, this means that countries do not have to take action at the same pace or in the same way. The Bologna Process currently has 47 participating countries. The EU has thus made an important impression on higher education over the whole of Europe. In a 2010 update, the following was stated: “progress is being made towards the Bologna Declaration’s aim of a European Higher Education Area. However, such an area is not universally accepted as being a desirable outcome.” This is a diplomatic way of saying that in some countries, there are controversies regarding the implementation of the Bologna Process.

Consequences of the Bologna Process for the Netherlands

The main consequences of the Bologna Process for the Netherlands were changes in the qualification system, the accreditation system, and the student population. The information on the qualification system has been published by EuroEducation.*Net*, an organization that provides accurate and concise descriptions of the educational systems in Europe (<http://www.euroeducation.net/>).

The qualification system

The higher education system of the Netherlands consists of universities, which provide academic and research-oriented programs, and polytechnics, which provide programs for professional higher education. Since the implementation of the Bologna Process in 2002 the polytechnics are called universities for applied sciences. In this paper the latter will be used. The Open University of the Netherlands belongs – due to legislation - to the academic and research-oriented universities.

Since September 2002, the higher education system in the Netherlands has been organized around a three-cycle degree system consisting of bachelor’s, master’s, and PhD degrees. At the same time, the ECTS system (European Credit Transfer System) was implemented as a means of quantifying all higher education study programs. One academic year corresponds to 60 ECTS-credits that are equivalent to 1500–1800 hours of study in all associated countries. The objective of the ECTS-credits is to facilitate transfer between universities in Europe. For instance, a certificate of course of 4 ECTS-credits can be given in one country and be accepted in a university in another country.

First stage: Bachelor’s programs. The focus of degree programs (applied arts/sciences versus research-oriented) determines both the number of ECTS credits required to complete the program and the degree that is awarded. A research-oriented bachelor’s program requires the completion of 180 credits (3 years), and graduates obtain the Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science (BA/BSC) degree, depending on the discipline. A professional bachelor’s program in the applied arts/sciences requires the completion of 240 credits (4 years), and graduates obtain a degree indicating the field of study (for example, Bachelor of Education).

Second stage: Master’s programs. A research-oriented master’s program requires the completion of 60, 90, or 120 credits (1, 1.5, or 2 years). Graduates obtain the degree of Master of Arts or Master of Science (MA/MSC). A professional master’s program in an applied arts/sciences program requires the completion of 60, 90, or 120 credits (1, 1.5, or 2 years). Graduates obtain a degree indicating the field of study (for example, Master of Social Work).

Third stage: Doctorate or PhD. The Dutch PhD is a research degree that entitles the holder to the title of Doctor (dr.), the highest university degree in the Netherlands. After the master's degree, the PhD can be obtained in two ways:

- I. By serving as an assistant researcher. Candidates are required to carry out the necessary research and to write and publicly defend a doctoral dissertation over a period of four years.
- II. By researching and writing a doctoral dissertation under the supervision of a full professor. The dissertation must be defended in public.

The accreditation system

A guaranteed standard of higher education is maintained through a system of legal regulation and quality assurance in the form of accreditation. The Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science is responsible for legislation pertaining to education. The source for the factual information in this section is Nuffic, the Netherlands organization for the internationalization of higher education (<http://www.nuffic.nl/>).

Quality assurance is carried out through a system of accreditation that is administered by the Accreditation Organization of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO). According to the Netherlands Higher Education and Research Act, all degree programs offered by research universities and universities of the applied sciences must be evaluated according to established criteria. Programs that meet the criteria are accredited, i.e., recognized for a period of six years. Only accredited programs are eligible for government funding; students receive financial aid and graduate with a recognized degree only after having completed an accredited degree program. All accredited programs are listed in the Central Register of Higher Education Study Programs (CROHO).

Since January 2011, the Netherlands has had a new accreditation system. The process described above still applies, but beginning in 2011, higher education institutions can request that the NVAO conduct an “institutional quality assessment” to determine the extent to which the institution is capable of guaranteeing the quality of the programs it offers. Programs offered by institutions that receive a positive evaluation must still be accredited, but the accreditation procedure takes less time and is not as extensive.

The student population

In 1984, 18% of the population of the Netherlands held a degree in higher education. In 2012, this number reached 37% (<http://www.cbs.nl/>). In Table 1, the actual numbers of institutes, students, and degrees are presented. About 245,000 students are attending research universities and studying for a BA/BSC or a MA/MSC degree. In 2012, 36,457 students graduated with a BA/BSC degree and 40,885 students with a MA/MSC degree. About 425,000 students are attending a university of the applied sciences (the available data were from 2011). In 2011, 66,395 students graduated with a professional bachelor's degree and 4,650 students with a professional master's degree. Although the professional master's programs are accredited, they are not eligible for government funding. In contrast, master's programs provided by research universities are funded by the government. The sources for the factual information in Table 1 are the Association for Universities in the Netherlands (<http://www.vnsu.nl/>) and the Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences (<http://www.vereniginghogescholen.nl>).

Table 1: The educational system of the Netherlands: Number of institutes, students, and degrees

	Universities (2012)	Universities for applied sciences (2011)
Number of institutes	14	40
Number of students	243,686	423,776
Number of bachelor's degrees	36,457	66,395
Number of master's degrees	40,885	4,650
Number of PhD degrees	8,400	0

Trends in higher education in the Netherlands

The Bologna Process is not the only change for universities. Other major changes in society included the transition to a full knowledge society; revolutionary breakthroughs regarding information and communication technologies; the emergence of entirely new media, such as the Internet; the changing role of consumers as critical co-producers of value and production; the boost in mobility of the population in general; and the government drawing back from society and promoting the use of markets for the provision of services. In the last decade, these trends have had an impact on the institutes, programs, and students of higher education.

Institutes for professional higher education have emerged within large universities for the applied sciences

The costs of the accreditation of programs are high. Every bachelor's program and master's program must be accredited every six years. Twenty years ago, the Netherlands had 14 research universities and about 400 institutes for professional higher education. In 2013, there still were 14 research universities, but only 40 universities for applied sciences provided higher education. The original 400 institutes were merged and reorganized into 40 institutes in less than 20 years. Though there are other factors involved, the necessary expertise and costs involved in becoming accredited played a significant role in this up scaling.

The OUNL became a full research university

In 1984, the OUNL was founded by an Act of Parliament. In this act, it was decreed that the OUNL was not allowed to perform research. In 1992, the Higher Education and Research Act passed through Parliament. In this act, the foundations for OUNL's transformation into a full research university were laid. However, when the accreditation system was implemented, research became a necessity for the OUNL. One of the criteria for BA/BSC/MA/MSC programs is that the scientific research of the academic staff is integrated with their courses. When there are no research activities, there are no BA/BSC/MA/MSC programs.

Postgraduate programs transforming into professional master's programs

In many professions, a career path starts with a professional bachelor's degree. After some years of work, the next career step can be taken by enrolling in a postgraduate training program. Before the implementation of the Bologna Process, most postgraduate programs had a workload of from 400 to 800 hours. For instance, this would have been true of a postgraduate program for educational leadership and a postgraduate program for remedial teaching. One of the effects of the new qualification system has been the transformation of these programs into professional master's programs with a workload of about 1600 hours (60 ECTS-credits).

Bachelor's programs of Universities of Applied Sciences are more focused on research

In the last decade, the bachelor's programs of universities of the applied sciences have become more and more focused on applied research. Students are meant to become "reflective practitioners." In many studies, this is interpreted as being able to perform action-based or practice-relevant applied research.

BA/BSC degrees have no meaning in the labor market

When the new qualification system was introduced, the universities with research-oriented four-year programs leading to so-called Drs., Mr., or Ir. degrees simply cut the programs into two parts: one of three years (BA/BSC) and another of one year (MA/MSc). In consequence, the BA/BSC degree has no real meaning in the labor market. Gradually, BA/BSC programs are being redesigned in order to have more meaning in the labor market.

Flexibility for Students via Pre-master's Programs

With introduction of the three-stage system, the opportunity arose for graduates of universities of applied sciences to enroll in the MA/MSc programs of traditional universities. Especially, master's programs in business, informatics, and education have great appeal for heterogenous groups of graduates. However, enrolling students can differ greatly in their academic and research skills. For bachelor's graduates lacking academic and research skills, so-called "pre-master's programs" are available in order to bring their actual knowledge to a level that will allow them to enroll in a master's program. For instance, the OUNL has an MSc program in Learning Sciences and a pre-master's program for those students who do not have a BSc degree in Education. These students may work as kindergarten teachers, assessment consultants, university teachers, staff members for the board, or teachers in vocational education and training. They could hold, for example, an MA in French literature, an MSc in Chemistry, a Master's in Remedial Teaching, a Bachelor's in HRM, a Bachelor's in Educational Leadership, or a PhD in Pharmacology.

Decrease in part-time students due to government policy

Government financial policies have a great influence on students' choices. When the three-stage system was introduced, the government decided not to fund the so-called "professional master's programs." The effect of this has been that the number of master's students in universities of applied sciences has become relatively low (see Table 1). Recently, the government decided – within a system that finances universities based on output – not to subsidize so-called second master's students. These are students in a MA/MSc program who have already graduated from one previously. This led to a drop in the enrollment of part-time students in research universities other than the OUNL (see Table 2). The OUNL was not subject to this government policy. However, the general opinion in higher education in the Netherlands is that the government will soon stop funding all MA/MSc programs, including those of the OUNL.

Table 2: Decrease in the enrollment of part-time students in Netherlands' universities (other than the OUNL) due to government policy

Part-time students enrolling a	2009	2010	2011	2012
Master's program at a research university	10,990	9,744	8,500	6,917
Master's program at a university for applied sciences	4,048	3,664	3,139	3,042

The Open University of the Netherlands

History and profile

The OUNL is a publicly funded university in the higher education system of the Netherlands. In a general sense, the OUNL can be characterized as a regular university for open distance education. Since 1984, 300,000 students have studied at the OUNL. In independent national surveys, the quality of an OUNL education has been shown to be highly appreciated by its students. The majority of OUNL students combine their personal and professional development with work, family responsibilities, or other activities.

In 1984, the OUNL began with the delivery of printed courses that were extended with audio, video, or computer applications if necessary. Now, the OUNL is working mainly with digital learning materials and online learning services. The OUNL has a main campus in Heerlen – a city in the southern region of the Netherlands – and 21 study centers in order to ensure full national coverage in the Netherlands and Flanders.

Tasks and mission

It is the OUNL's legal task to contribute to the development and accessibility of Dutch higher education. In line with this, the OUNL has formulated the following mission statement (Open Universiteit, 2012, p. 9):

The Open University of the Netherlands develops, provides, and promotes – in close relationship with research – open and innovative higher education. This is based on a diversity of learning needs of individuals and the requirements of the knowledge society as a whole.

The mission statement was an important point of reference in analyzing the way the OUNL should provide higher education, the identification of target groups, the way the OUNL should innovate higher, and the development of the current student population. The next sections describe the results of the analysis and the strategic decisions that are based on these results.

Providing open higher education

The OUNL has the aim of providing effective education to specific groups for whom traditional universities have higher thresholds. The OUNL realizes this particular task by developing and providing scientific education of an open and accessible character. As a research university, the OUNL will focus on the development of bachelor's programs and master's programs leading to degrees in the sciences and arts. However, these programs should not be purely academic. They should focus on skills that are relevant for the professional graduates.

Target groups

The OUNL focuses on the educational needs of people who are looking for further professional or personal development. The OUNL also focuses on older students who are now enrolling in a university for the first time, as well as those who do not have access to traditional higher education. There could be various reasons for this. Perhaps, their actual social conditions or personal study conditions complicate studying at a regular university (such as students with functional limitations, students who work or are living abroad, or athletes. More and more, the OUNL will focus on young people who do not want to start or complete their studies in full-time higher education.

Innovation in higher education

The OUNL aims to support other higher education institutions in carrying out their duties. In collaboration with other organizations, the OUNL strives to increase the accessibility of higher education. Activities in line with this ambition include offering mutual part-time programs, the enrichment of full-time higher education with elements of open and distance learning, and organizing preparatory programs for students who are not directly admissible to master's programs. When the OUNL is engaging in business-to-business relationships with non-public organizations, the development and provision of education and research should follow the OUNL's own mission and core business. As a public organization, the OUNL will have to constantly consider how other activities will contribute to fulfilling its specific public service mission.

Student population

On January 1, 2013, 19,157 students were studying at the OUNL; 15% were studying in a master's program, 52% were studying in a bachelor's program, and the remaining 33% were in other programs, were non-degree seekers, or could not be categorized. In 2012, the OUNL sold 47,013 modules (a module is used as a fixed time unit of 4.3 ECTS-credits; most courses are the equivalent of one module; the thesis is an exception to this rule). In 2012, 578 students graduated from the OUNL; 42% received a bachelor's degree, 55% received a master's degree, and 1% received a PhD degree. Comparing the number of students (19,157) with the number of graduates of bachelor's and master's program's (560) shows the OUNL's potential to graduate more students if the drop-out rate can be reduced and students can be kept motivated to study for a degree. In general, one could argue that the number of students studying at the OUNL is relatively high in comparison with the number of graduates.

The OUNL systematically researches student characteristics and study motives. Table 3 shows that there are more female students than male students at the OUNL, that 15% of the students are younger than 25, that only 2% are older than 65 (the Dutch retire at 65), and finally, that 55% of students already holds a higher education degree. Table 4 shows that 33% of the students mentioned intellectual growth as their primary motive to study; 41% mentioned career-related motives. Table 5 shows that the Psychology programs attract the most students. Learning Sciences is the only discipline that has no bachelor's program.

Table 3: Statistics on the OUNL student population on 1-1-2013 (N=19,157)

Characteristic	Value	N	%
Gender	Female	10,271	54
	Male	8,886	46
Age group	18-25	2,984	15
	26-45	10,546	55
	45-65	5,366	28
	65-99	351	2
Degree at enrollment	Secondary education	6,986	36
	University of applied sciences	7,131	37
	University	3,455	18
	Unknown/no category	1,603	9

Table 4: Statistics on the OUNL student population on 1-1-2013: Motives to study (N = 19,157; Missing Values = 9,798)

Motive to study	N	%
Personal intellectual development	3,057	33

Move up the career ladder	2,451	26
Become better at my job	1,429	15
Gain more knowledge about the course / discipline	1,104	12
Good way to spend spare time	980	10
Other motives	338	4

Table 5: Statistics on the OUNL student population on 1-1-2013: Discipline (N = 19,157; all disciplines have bachelor's and master's programs, except Learning Science, which has only a master's program)

Discipline	N	%
Cultural Science	2,491	12
Informatics	2,468	11
Business Science	3,903	18
Environmental Science	1,647	7
Learning Science	749	4
Psychology	6,177	29
Law	4,153	19

Trends in the OUNL student population

The number of students is declining. In 2009, 26,182 students were registered; in 2013, there were 19,157. Within the general trend, there are some interesting figures related to lifelong learning for professionals. Although the enrollment in master's programs has also declined, the proportion of students enrolling in pre-master's programs increased every year, from 43% in 2008 to 65% in 2011 (see Table 6). Students must attend a pre-master's program if they do not have a BSC degree in the same field as the master's program. For instance, when students hold a BSC with a major in Management, they can enroll the MSC program in Management directly. When students hold a Bachelor's in Accounting, they must follow the pre-master's program to develop academic skills and research methodology. This trend shows that the OUNL master's programs are becoming more and more dependent on students enrolling in the OUNL due to motives associated with lifelong learning. These students hold higher education degrees, and they are making choosing the OUNL to take the next step in their careers.

However, there are large differences between the disciplines. Table 7 shows that the proportion of students enrolling via a pre-master's program varies from 7% (Law) to 83% (Learning Science). Table 7 also shows that there are large differences in the numbers of students who enrolled in various disciplines during the 2008-2011 period, varying from 92 (Environmental Science) to 2,191 (Business Science).

Table 6: Trend in student enrollment in master's programs for all OUNL master's programs

Year	Pre-master's program enrollment	Direct enrollment	Total Enrollment	% Pre-master's program
2008	504	663	1,167	43%
2009	553	411	964	57%
2010	610	393	1,003	60%
2011	577	310	887	65%

Table 7: Trend in student enrollment of master's program for different disciplines

(2008-2011)

Master's program	Pre-master's program enrollment	Direct enrollment	Total Enrollment	% Pre-master's program
Learning Science	486	65	551	88%
Informatics	71	29	100	71%
Business Science	1,400	791	2,191	64%
Environmental Science	33	59	92	36%
Cultural Science	95	179	274	35%
Psychology	130	285	415	31%
Law	29	369	398	7%

The strategy of the OUNL for 2012-2016

In a document called *Learning in times of change*, the Executive Board provided an extensive analysis of the challenges facing the OUNL (Open Universiteit, 2012). The OUNL has a solid base within the public university system. However, there are a number of problems regarding student numbers, dropouts, and adapting to the changing demands on professional education. This has led to a number of strategic choices regarding the educational services the OUNL should focus on. The redesign of educational services can only be implemented if the OUNL will change its teaching model. The strategy of the OUNL will be briefly discussed below.

Challenges for the OUNL

According to the Executive Board, the most important challenges for the educational services of the OUNL are the following:

- The student numbers are steadily declining. As an institute, the OUNL should find ways to attract new student groups.
- Study progress is too low, the dropout rate is too high, and the actual workload is not in balance with workload norms.
- The services for professional lifelong learning must be expanded.

Target groups and reasons to study

In 2012, the OUNL completed an analysis on target groups and the reasons to study. This analysis began with individuals who had completed their secondary education (age: 18 years). In the analysis, the following target groups were identified:

- Students who are results-oriented, who are committed to achieving learning goals.
- Students who want to achieve learning goals with the maximum degrees of freedom.
- Students who have an obligation to engage in lifelong learning in order to maintain their professional status.

In the analysis, the following reasons to study were identified:

- Gaining access to a bachelor's program via preparation courses and exams.
- Gaining access to a master's program via a pre-master's program.
- Obtaining a bachelor's degree.
- Obtaining a master's degree.
- Obtaining a PhD.
- Obtaining a course certificate with ECTS-credits.
- Studying in order to revitalize professional skills and knowledge.

- Becoming licensed for a job with professionalization criteria.
- Becoming listed in a public register by obtaining a Certified Professional Program degree.

The OUNL's Strategic Choices for Educational Services

The OUNL could develop educational services for any number of reasons. However, it should focus on practical reasons. The following educational services have been labeled as having decisive strategic importance:

- Bachelor's programs and master's programs with structure, regulation, and support.

The following educational services have been labeled as having great strategic importance:

- Individual units/courses for those who want to study with a large amount of freedom and those who want to obtain academic certificates.
- Pre-bachelor's and pre-master's programs for students.
- Certified professional programs.
- Postgraduate courses relevant to professional development with or without a license structure.

A new model for open education for the OUNL

Improving the success rate is the central target for the OUNL's bachelor's and master's programs. In the longer term, the aim is obtaining a significant increase in the number of graduates. The traditional OUNL modular model of "self-supporting" learning materials for self-studying students is no longer suitable to tackling this complex mixture. There is a need for a new model of open education with a focus on concepts such as actuality, relevance, commitment, challenge, interaction, and social media. In this new teaching model, the challenges, target groups, study reasons, and prioritization of educational services meet. This teaching model begins with bachelor's programs and master's programs with a fixed study pace. The structured bachelor's and master's programs will still be characterized as open distance education: there will be open admissions, a large amount of freedom in terms of choosing the place of study, the freedom to determine the time of study within the limits of the examination rhythm and interim events, and the freedom to study faster by choosing to take parallel courses. These structured programs meet the expectation of many students who want to be supported in reaching their study goals within a clear timeframe. In the context of standard program lengths for part-time education, the standard length for a bachelor's program is 6 years. The standard length for a master's program is 2 years, except for a master's in engineering sciences. In that case, the standard length is 4 years.

The university bachelor's and master's programs are the core of the OUNL educational activities. Other educational services or programs are to be derived as greatly as possible from these bachelor's and master's programs. This choice leads to the following basic classification of the OUNL's provision of education:

1. Bachelor's programs and master's programs with structure, regulation, and support that are characterized by fixed start times, consist of larger courses, have fixed examination dates, have a fixed rate study, and include the formation of cohorts and learning communities, the active monitoring of students, and proactive support and service.
2. An open offer of individual units/courses for those who want to study in freedom and obtain academic certificates. These courses will be derived from the bachelor's and master's programs.

3. Postgraduate courses relevant to professional development. These courses will be derived from the bachelor's and master's programs.

In preparing for these changes, there should be careful research into the most optimal and effective way of implementing this structured teaching model. Although the standard length of a program is a given, there should also be a certain degree of adaptability for those students who want to study faster or slower. In those cases, guidance and support must be organized, and workload issues must be addressed. There are also limits for postgraduate courses for professionals. The OUNL bachelor's and master's programs cannot become demand-driven. Legal requirements and accreditation procedures will not permit this.

The strategy of the OUNL demands a teaching model with a focus on concepts such as actuality commitment, challenge, interaction, and social media. The bachelor's programs and master's programs should focus on skills that are necessary and relevant for the professional roles students and graduates fill in society and work. The case of the OUNL is not unique; on the contrary, it is part of a worldwide movement towards more authentic, more competence-driven programs. According to an influential report of the World Bank, traditional educational systems need to innovate to lifelong learning systems in order to provide people the tools they need to function in the global knowledge economy. Lifelong learning systems should reach people with diverse learning needs, should foster competences, like teamwork, learning by doing and problem solving, and should contribute to the employability of workers (World Bank, 2003). These theoretical notions on economy and education gradually entered and maybe even dominated ideas on the future of higher distance and open education. In 2013, Jung (2013) concluded that in general, Asian institutes of distance education should give more attention to supporting employability and career enhancement. This conclusion is valid for both private and public universities involved in distance education. In Korea, public universities such as the Korean National Open University feel the need to approach higher educational education from a "market and economy" perspective (Nam & Sin, 2009, p. 101). Also, the need for the OUNL to improve student persistence and graduation rates is part of a worldwide trend in distance education. A promising approach is supporting students to become more goal-directed and to stay involved in their studies. In the private Hanyang Cyber University in Korea, the worries and problems of students are explicitly addressed with a well-designed program for tutoring and mentoring (Im, 2013). In Japan, at the Kumamoto University Online Graduate School, programs are aligned from the competences for working professionals. Every course needs to contribute to the graduates' capability of meeting the demands of the real world of work. In order to gain relevance and authenticity a new teaching methodology was introduced: the Story-centered Curriculum (Suzuki, 2013). This teaching methodology is based on the work of Schank (2011) on teaching cognitive processes and reforming curricula.

Teaching for professionals: Some questions and models

An interesting phenomenon at the OUNL is the fact that a number of OUNL master's programs attract students who have worked for some time and want to take a next step in their careers. Often, those students are supported by their employers or the government, sometimes in the form of time to study, in the form of an allowance, or both. The organizations the students work at often provide rich complex problems that could be incorporated into the courses. The challenge for the educational specialists and the teachers of the OUNL is to answer the following questions:

- How can we define learning objectives for master's programs that focus on skills

- for professional lifelong learning?
- How can we organize learning and instruction in master's programs that focus on skills for professional lifelong learning?

Two interesting models to be explored are the corporate curriculum model (Kessels, 2001) and the co-creation experiences model (Pralhad & Ramaswamy, 2004).

The corporate curriculum model

Kessels states that the workplace can be a rich landscape in which opportunities can be created to develop professional competence. He defines the following facets of competence development:

1. *Subject matter expertise*: Acquiring subject matter expertise and skills directly related to the scope of the target competencies.
2. *Problem solving*: Learning to solve problems by using domain-specific expertise. It is important to develop competencies in tasks in which existing domain-specific knowledge is applied in solving new problems.
3. *Reflective skills and meta-cognitions*: Developing reflective skills and meta-cognitions conducive to locating paths leading to new knowledge, as well as the means of acquiring and applying this asset.
4. *Communication skills*: Securing communication skills that provide access to the knowledge network of others and enrich the learning climate within a workplace.
5. *Self-regulation of motivation and affection*: Procuring skills that regulate learning motivation and affections.

However, in order to be a rich landscape for learning, the workplace must meet the following conditions: *peace and stability* and *creative turmoil*. Peace and stability are necessary for gradual improvement. Creative turmoil brings out the dynamics that enable radical innovation and leaving traditional paths behind. One question that comes in mind is as follows: Can teachers use the workplace as a provider of cases and problems that can be incorporated in their courses or even programs?

The co-creation experiences model

Pralhad and Ramaswamy (2004) present a consumer behavior model in which producers and consumers interact and create value. They state that in the economy, markets are shifting from a product-centric view to a view embracing personalized customer experiences. Modern customers are connected, informed, mobile, and educated. Modern customers seek firms that empower them to co-construct personalized experiences. Instead of being the prey of the firm, customers are becoming hunters, looking for the firms that co-create the most interesting experiences. This view of the customer-firm relationship has a great impact on the ways markets function. Attractive firms see the individual customer as a partner. They need to interact and use the following building blocks of interaction:

1. *Dialogue*. Dialogue implies interaction, deep engagement, and the ability and willingness to act on both sides. Firms and customers become equals and joint problem solvers.
2. *Transparency and Access*. Transparency and access to information are critical for a dialogue with equal partners. Traditionally, firms have a monopoly of information.
3. *Risks-benefits*. Dialogue, transparency, and access provide customers with the opportunity to make informed choices about their consumer actions and decisions.

Universities can apply these mechanisms to optimize the value of their programs for professional students. One question that comes to mind is the following: Can universities develop a teaching model in which students become the co-creators of value? If universities should succeed in developing such teaching models, it would represent a step towards more student-centered, authentic learning.

Concluding remarks

In the last decade the OUNL successfully implemented the changes due to the Bologna Process, like the implementation of the three-cycle system of higher education and the implementation of the national accreditation system. This was a necessary step to take in securing a place in the European Higher Education Area. However, the OUNL still has to address a number of challenges, like improving study success, finding new target groups and expanding educational services for professional lifelong learning. In this transition, the OUNL is somewhat restricted by law, which postulates that the OUNL is a research-oriented university with a focus on programs with a BA/BSC or MA/MSC degree. Another restriction is that the OUNL is an open university that has to provide open access to the bachelor programs. For the master programs the OUNL has the same procedures and standards as the other universities.

The Executive Board of the OUNL gave the highest priority to the success rate. One of the fundamental principles from the past of the OUNL needed to be change: freedom of study pace. In September 2014 all master programs of the OUNL will have a fixed duration of two years. New students have to follow fixed programs in a fixed pace. Enrollment takes places in August or January. The OUNL will improve the support to these students with more mentoring and tutoring activities. It is expected that these programs with structure, regulation and support will result in higher success rates and less dropout. In September 2015 the bachelor programs of the OUNL will be changed according to the same principles. In the coming years, the new programs will be closely monitored and evaluated.

An improvement in success rate is a necessary step for the efficiency and accountability of the bachelor and master programs. However, these actions do not make the content of the courses more relevant for professional development. For that, more insight into teaching models for lifelong learning is needed. A small number of existing OUNL courses already allow some freedom in defining and planning assignments. These courses (with names like *Advanced Studies* or *Capita Selecta*) are being evaluated according to the principles of the aforementioned theories on co-creation experiences and on lifelong learning in the global knowledge economy (Kessels; Prahalad & Ramaswamy; Schank). The first results are expected at the end of 2014 (Moerkerke, accepted).

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