The impact of communication between tutors-counsellors and university students in Open and Distance Education on the autonomous and effective learning

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ABSTRACT: The conditions in the adult life of modern people sometimes do not allow the attendance of conventional education programs in order to receive the required education and vocational training. The purpose of this study is to highlight how communication between tutors and students in a remote learning environment helps to achieve an autonomous and effective learning. Students of the undergraduate and postgraduate programs of the Hellenic Open University (HOU) participated in the achievement of this goal with six-month modules, as their views, as we found from the literature review, have not been studied enough by previous researchers. Regarding the research methodology, the quantitative approach with the research tool the questionnaire was chosen. The results showed that the communication with the tutors contributed significantly to the students' studies, however much remains to be done so that they feel supported both academically and emotionally.
KEYWORDS: Open And Distance Education, Communication, Support, Autonomous Learning.

I. INTRODUCTION

The changes that have taken place in all areas of everyday lives, with the rapid development of science and technology, require the continuous education and vocational training of people belonging to the productive part of society (Kokkos, 1998). However, the living conditions of those who decide to be educated at an older age do not allow them to attend conventional training programs. Thus, distance education is a method that is now widely accepted and supported by many people who are interested in educating at a later stage in their lives, as it provides them with the flexibility they

need to move forward and achieve a higher level of education and greater professional skills.

A key feature of open and distance education is the distance that exists between the student and the teacher or tutor, but also the educational institution in general. The adult student is required to operate independently, until the final acquisition of knowledge. Of course, autonomy as a component of the "adulthood" of the student is not self-evident and is not always achieved easily (Tsitlakidou and Manousou, 2013; Naoumidi, 2017). Crucial to achieving it is the form of communication that develops between student and educator as through it the student is guided, encouraged and ultimately bridges his distance with the tutor and the institution, leading to the successful completion of his studies (Natsiou, 2017 Tsitlakidou and Manousou, 2013; Naoumidi, 2017; Iliadou and Anastasiadis, 2010; Papazoglou, 2015; Konstantopoulou et al., 2013).

Therefore, the role of communication between tutors and students in the context of the open and distance education in promoting student autonomy and ensuring success in their studies in a remote learning environment is explored. For the needs of the current research we investigated the views of the students (undergraduate and postgraduate) of the new study programs of Hellenic Open University with six months thematic units concerning the communication that develops between them and their tutors-counsellors but also the degree of autonomy that is achieved, in order to see how interconnected the two concepts are and how catalytic their role is in practice, in formation of learners who will not dispel their adulthood, but will be able to be autonomous throughout their lives.

Carefully studying relevant empirical research, we found that most of them aimed to highlight the role and characteristics that a tutor

should have in order to achieve effective communication with its students and to help them to successfully complete their studies (Xanthopoulou, Papadakis and Mouratidou, 2020; Vassala and Andreadou, 2010; Zygouris and Mavroidis, 2011; Iliadou and Anastasiadis, 2010; Anastasiadis and Karvounis, 2010; Sarakatsanou and Vassala, 2011; Pavlakis and Georgiadis, 2011; Konstantopoulou et al., 2013; Klimova and Poulova, 2011 2015; Nikolaou, 2016; Terzis, 2017; Natsiou, 2017; Jimenez, Rodriguez and Vidal, 2017). Also, in many of them there are presented the advantages and disadvantages of the various forms of communication that are developed within the exAE and contribute to the effectiveness of learning. However, we observed that less research (Tsitlakidou and Manousou, 2013; Naoumidi, 2017; Giagli et al., 2010; Fanariti and Spanaka, 2009; Santos and Camara, 2010; Murphy, 2007; Masouleh and Jooneghani, 2012) focuses on the concept of "Autonomy", which is what is required in an educational context that concerns adult learners and for which the communication with tutors plays a decisive role. Also, most of the relevant research is mostly aimed at postgraduate students, and in fact the older study programs of Hellenic Open University or other institutions.

Therefore, the originality and necessity of the current research lies in the fact that it focuses on the connection of "communication" - "autonomy". Specifically, as researchers we addressed both undergraduate and postgraduate students, as they have different profiles. Undergraduates, for example, may be younger than graduates, have fewer work and family responsibilities, they have no previous experience in the open and distance education, or pursue different goals through their studies. Therefore, it was interesting to study these two categories of students comparatively and to present their differentiated answers to key research questions. At the same time, the present research concerns the new curricula of Hellenic Open University (HOU) with six months thematic units, which on the one hand have not been studied enough and on the other hand apply various innovations in relation to the older ones, such as online meetings.

Finally, the current research not only confirms the conclusions of previous research by making them valid and credible, but also proceeds to draw new conclusions. These conclusions promote scientific knowledge and promote scientific truth and should be used appropriately by all those involved in the administrative and educational processes of HOU, in order to upgrade the quality of the institution for the benefit of all those students who choose and trust it.

II. THE COMMUNICATION IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

Kokkos (1998) defines communication as the exchange of messages between two or more people, through which relationships are developed. However, achieving effective communication between transmitter and receiver is not an easy task. Prerequisites include the clarity and completeness of the messages exchanged, the expression of feelings of both parties, the self-esteem of the interlocutors, the active exchange of their messages and their harmonization with their thoughts, feelings and actions, as well as the mood for empathy, reshaping the pre-existing system of perceptions of reality, negotiation and animation (Kokkos, 1998). When the above conditions are not met, it becomes difficult to "meet" those involved in the communication process.

Especially for open and distance education, "continuous communication between the institution and its students" is its fundamental principle (Holmberg, 2002, cited in Natsiou, 2017). As the learner is at a physical distance from the institution, the communication with the tutor-counselor, with the fellow students and the educational organization becomes imperative in order to support his/her learning path. In fact, this communication takes the form of simulation, when the student carefully deals with and studies the educational material and becomes "real" when he converses with the representatives of the institution (Holmberg, 2002, cited in Natsiou, 2017). Communication in the open and distance education forms creative relationships between tutors and students, stimulates the formulation and achievement of educational goals and promotes mutual respect between all members of the educational team (Dhanarajan, 1996). Holmberg develops the theory of guided educational dialogue, emphasizing the student's involvement in the learning process. This two-way communication in the open and distance education serves: a) to support the student's mobilization and interest, b) to support and facilitate the student in the learning process, c) to provide opportunities for the student to develop critical thinking and to deepen knowledge) the evaluation of the student's progress, which helps student to evaluate his/her personal needs (Iliadou and Anastasiadis, 2010).

Moore and Kearsley (2005, op. Cit. In Naoumidis, 2017) distinguish interaction and communication in the open and distance education into three types: a) between learner and didactic

content, b) between learner and educator, and c) between learner and learner. Xanthopoulou (2016) provides a matrix of interaction which explains the dynamic variety of correlations that are considered essential to promoting a socially structured learning environment. Given the full range of possible interactions, the Interaction Matrix shown in Figure 1 that illustrates the basics of a socially structured learning environment, as various collaborative interactions are involved. Sims and Stork (2007) suggest that designers should be aware of the unique cultural and social contexts of learners, which affect their ability to participate in online learning environments. Emerging designs allow students to integrate their individuality, experience and culture into teaching and learning. Such designs will increase the completeness of the interactions. Designers need to be aware of each of these potential interactions and incorporate as many of them as possible in an effort to provide learners with the maximum level of control over their learning experience.

In addition, Hillman, Willis, and Gunawardena (1994, op. Cit. In Naoumidis, 2017) add another type of interaction, that between learner and technological environment, which is very important especially due to the existence of new technologies in distance education. According to Xanthopoulou and Stavrakakis (2019) students' support is considered essential for attending open and distance education. It is imperative in cases where students face difficulties and obstacles with their studies and are considering dropping out. The participation and contribution of the instructor in the development of an appropriate climate of trust, encouragement and support creates a positive trend and acts as a deterrent to dropout. For Papazoglou (2015) tutors cover both educational and emotional needs of students, while at the same time acting as a catalyst for the educational process, activating those learning processes that promote active participation and interaction between students. Despite the obstacles they face in achieving regular and meaningful communication with their students, they believe that they should always insist on their effort by taking the first step. Moreover, Terzis' research (2017) deals with the contribution of communication between tutors and students in open and distance education in three master programs of Hellenic Open University. The findings show that this communication primarily helps the student to successfully complete his academic obligations and gain new knowledge, as he solves questions, deepens the material and is supported in the preparation of his written assignments.

Undoubtedly, tutor is the one who through his communication with the students creates a pleasant learning climate by removing the negative emotions and strengthening their mood for learning. At the same time, it promotes the autonomy of the students, who manage over time to need less and less the assistance of tutors, in order to meet the requirements of their studies. In the research of Iliadou and Anastasiadis (2010) the usefulness and the quality of the communication of tutors and students in the master of "Studies in Education" of Hellenic Open University is investigated and a profile of a successful tutor is formed in the opinion of the students. From the results it is found that the object of the communication of the students with tutors is mainly the written works or some question in their study, while few are students who ask for emotional support. For most students, communication with tutors is crucial for solving questions, deepening their study and the effective organization of time. As for the characteristics that tutors should have, the research first highlighted in the hierarchy the knowledge of the subject and the clear and sufficient feedback, followed by the availability, the friendliness and the personal interest for their students. According to the results of Vassalas and Andreadou (2010) the communication of the students with the tutors contributes decisively to the solution of questions, to their encouragement, as well as to the understanding by the tutors of the difficulties they faced.

In addition, the role of tutors seemed to be particularly important regarding the formulation of instructions regarding the written assignments and the final exams but also regarding the emotional support of the students during their studies. Other interesting results can be found in the study of Zygouri and Mavroidi (2011) who highlighted the special role of tutors in the distance training program of trainers of the Distance Adult Education Center in Western Macedonia mainly in relation to communication with the trainees. Most of the trainees stated that the need for communication with tutors is great, as it helps mainly in the preparation for the written assignments, in the solution of questions and in the management of the difficulties they faced. At the same time, the communication between educators and students manages to animate the latter. Nikolaos' (2016) research highlights the views of both tutors and students on the meaning of communication between them in both undergraduate and postgraduate programs of Hellenic Open University. The results showed that the students feel a great need for frequent communication with their

tutors, which helps them cope with the stress they experience.

The prompt response and availability of tutors is crucial for students to be able to meet their obligations, as well as the encouragement for active participation. The research highlights the need for training of tutors in new technologies and consulting issues while concluding that tutors should devote more time, take initiatives and encourage their students to communicate more. In addition, the research of Konstantopoulou et al. (2013) highlights through the findings of twenty-two empirical studies, the complex role of tutors in the environment of distance education of HOU and how it contributes to the support of students through their two-way communication. The results highlighted the need of students for "face to face" communication, as well as for primarily academic support. In addition, a set of characteristics required for a tutor to be identified was recorded, such as, among others, cognitive competence, training in the principles of open and distance education and adult education, empathy, the ability to encourage and guide the student, immediacy in communication, flexibility.

Finally, Jimenez, Rodriguez and Vidal (2017) examined the views of twenty-nine tutors in Spanish open and distance education programs aimed at small and medium-sized enterprises, regarding their role and tasks in this new educational framework. Specifically, through this research, certain "functions" that a tutor should perform were highlighted, such as, among others, "pedagogical, social, guiding, technical" and "administrative and organizational functions". In other words, a tutor must guide students on the path to knowledge, plan and organize the educational process but also be the "mediator" between theoretical knowledge and its practical application. He must be able to introduce the students to the subject in the appropriate way but also to promote the interaction between his students. In addition, the new tasks of tutors include the motivation of students for active participation and their orientation through and through the provision of counselling support. Finally, according to the research findings, he must be familiar with new technologies and make frequent cumulative assessment of students and the educational process in general.
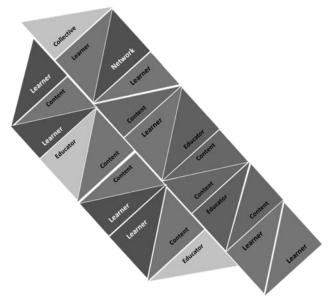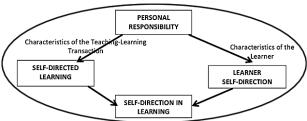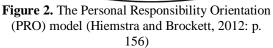

Figure 1. Interaction matrix in an e-learning environment (Xanthopoulou, 2016)

III. THE ROLE OF THE EDUCATORS IN ACHIEVING STUDENT AUTONOMY THROUGH RELEVANT RESEARCH

Especially in open and distance education, effective learning acquires another special feature; it is autonomous. This concept has long been confused with other pedagogical terms, as it did not have a solid theoretical background. Thus, in the literature we find among other things, such as autonomy, independence, lifelong learning, self-directed learning, self-regulated learning, independent study, self-action, etc., while in the global literature the number of semantically related terms is impressive, such as, including: autodidactic (learning), autonomous learning, self-directed learning, self-direction in learning, self-education, self-efficacy, self-planned learning (Giagli, Giaglis and Koutsoumba, 2010). In any case, the concept of autonomy is currently associated with the right of the learner to take responsibility for his learning process and, in particular, to define the purpose, content, method and evaluation of the learning process (Brockett and Hiemstra, 1991; Knowles, 1975; Moore, 1972, op. Cit. In Giagli, Giaglis and Koutsoumba, 2010). Brocket and Hiemstra (1991) talked about two distinct dimensions of the concept. The first dimension refers to what is found in the literature as "autonomous learning" and concerns the process in which the student takes the leading role in the design, execution and evaluation of his teaching process, while the educational institution plays the role of facilitator. The second dimension concerns the personality of the autonomous student and focuses on his desire or preference to take responsibility for his learning. Therefore, the term "autonomy in learning" refers to both the external characteristics of a teaching process and the internal characteristics of the student, which appear in a social, educational or other context. Hiemstra and Brockett (2012) argue that self-direction in learning refers to two distinct but related dimensions: as an instructional process where a learner assumes primary responsibility for the learning process; and as a personality characteristic centering on a learner's desire or preference for assuming responsibility for learning Figure 2 shows the Personal Responsibility Orientation (PRO) model as developed by Hiemstra and Brockett (2012: p. 156).

Figure 2. The Personal Responsibility Orientation (PRO) model (Hiemstra and Brockett, 2012: p. 156)

The role of tutors is a catalyst in achieving student autonomy. Specifically, the qualitative research of Tsitlakidou and Manousou (2013) demonstrated the different role that an educator is called to play in the open and distance education and its importance in strengthening the autonomy of the students. In particular, those responsibilities of tutors that lead to autonomous learning in an environment where there is no life communication were highlighted, while the importance of the student-centered approach to the learning process was highlighted. At the same time, the research concludes with proposals to the HOU in order for the institution to eliminate outdated practices that are not in line with the philosophy of the open and distance education but also to remove the obstacles to the autonomous learning of its students, adapting its functional structures to their needs.

Naoumidis (2017) found that autonomy emerged as a key component of the open and distance education. However, as it depends on both internal and external factors, it varies in the degree of its conquest from person to person. To achieve this, the institution plays a decisive role with its structures, practices and general philosophy, the student himself and his disposition for autonomous action, but mainly tutor, as he/she is the one who can guide through communication and to activate the learner towards an autonomous learning course. The research of Giagli and Koutsoumba (2010) makes imperative the need for a complete transformation of the open and distance education towards pedagogical approaches that focus on the student and his autonomy. The constantly evolving technology will contribute in this direction in the coming years, as it finds, creating new opportunities and possibilities.

The role of the tutor remains important, who is renamed a tutor-counselor, just so that he can stand by the student, support him/her and make him/her autonomous. However, the research emphasizes that the desire to accept the responsibility of learning presents grades from
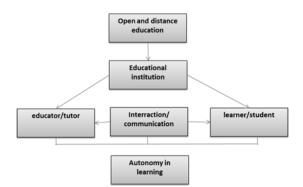
student to student, while at the same time the institution with the restrictions that it imposes, does not achieve complete autonomy for its students. In the qualitative research of Fanaritis and Spanakas (2009) on postgraduate students of HOU regarding their autonomy during the elaboration of their written works, the researchers concluded that the role of tutors is catalytic. The same results come from Tzotzou and Bigilakis (2013) who explored the views of the students of the Master program "Studies in Education" for distance personalized learning in HOU, through six main components of its implementation and specifically: a) educational material, b) interpersonal communication, c) student support, d) the role of the tutors, e) the use of new technologies and f) the provision of services (administration and library). The results showed the low familiarity of students with the principles and models of personalized learning, while the need for modernization of educational material with the use of new technologies emerged.

However, the greatest importance for the continuation of studies seemed to be for the students the interpersonal communication and support mainly from tutors, whose role proved to be a catalyst. Santos and Camara (2010) argue that the focus should be more on the student himself, who should have an active and independent role, make decisions and create the conditions for the acquisition of knowledge. They point out that the educational model in Brazil remains traditional, where educators transfer knowledge to students without stimulating their "creative loneliness". The biggest challenge, according to the research, is the training of tutors to function as mediators and not as "transmitters of knowledge". They consider it equally necessary to train the learners themselves, in order to function as collaborators and not as passive recipients of knowledge, in an effort to gain autonomy and to feel truly responsible for their learning. According to Murphy (2007) at the Open University of the United Kingdom, the role of educators is crucial in addressing students' difficulties and achieving their autonomy. As students have difficulty in making decisions, tutors must enhance their active participation and initiative by implementing individualized teaching methods tailored to the needs of each student. They should also help them realize their strengths and weaknesses, boost their self-confidence and cultivate the ability to "learn how to learn" but also to manage their negative and positive emotions, so that they are led to self-determination and to their academic success. Klimova and Poulova (2011) in a higher education environment in the Czech

Republic focuses on the need for a student-centered approach versus a teacher-centered one, where tutors will no longer be the "teacher-authority" but will have more of the role of counselor and mentor. The research outlines the basic characteristics that a tutor should have, such as familiarity with ICT, communication skills and good knowledge of the subject, elements that can guide the student and help him improve his own skills, boosting his self-esteem. A prerequisite for a quality education is that a tutor agrees in advance with its students on a plan of instructions and creates the climate so that students are not afraid to communicate with him in any case. The same findings come from the research of Masouleh and Jooneghani (2012) which focuses on the special importance that the role of tutor acquires in terms of achieving student autonomy in an open and distance education environment. According to their results students often do not consider themselves autonomous enough, do not want to take responsibility for their learning, while still seeing educator as the person who makes decisions for them.

Therefore, the task of the tutor is to mobilize its students, to make them mature and responsible and to direct them towards an autonomous learning process. They must respect students' ideas, share with them any decisions, set common goals, provide them with the tools so that they can manage their own educational material, resources and capabilities, thus showing them the way to success. Altunay (2013) conducted a study to investigate the degree of autonomy of distance teaching students of the Turkish Open University (Anadolou University), who were attending an English language learning program. According to the results of the research, the students did not have the autonomy required in a distance learning program, mainly due to their many years of study in conventional forms of education. This fact showed that the need to cultivate a more autonomous behavior on the part of students is imperative and can only happen with the assistance of the institution and the faculty. The latter are called upon to motivate their students to take more initiatives and responsibilities in the context of their learning activities. In conclusion, correlation of communication and autonomy in open and distance education can be presented in the following figure (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Correlation of communication and autonomy in open and distance education

IV. CONVERGENCE POINTS OF THEORIES FOR LEARNING AND CONDITIONS FOR EFFECTIVE ADULT LEARNING

In recent years, many education theorists have studied the way adult learners learn. And despite the differences, their theories converge on three basic elements (Kokkos, 2008):

i. The knowledge transfer model is ineffective, as it weakens critical thinking, maximizes dependence, and nullifies learners' ability to process problems on their own. Thus, the active participation of the trainees in the course of learning is favored.
ii. Different ways of learning characterize learners, depending on their personality traits and abilities.
iii. Experience is the basis of all learning.

Taking into account the above assumptions, the basic conditions that contribute to effective learning for adult learners the above results were identified (Kokkos, 2008):

i. Education must be voluntary
ii. It is appropriate to clarify the educational objectives
iii. The educational program must be perfectly organized at all levels
iv. The educational content must be directly related to the needs and experiences of the learners
v. It is necessary to take into account the preferred ways of learning of each learner
vi. Active participation in the educational process is essential
vii. More ways must be sought to overcome the obstacles faced by learners
viii. Essential communication, collaborative spirit and mutual respect must characterize the learning climate that is formed.

V. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research followed is a survey research. Primary data were collected using an online questionnaire which was distributed through social media due to pandemic circumstances which took place during the current research process. The survey research is mainly suitable for the collection of information about preferences, attitudes, opinions or intentions, just as it happens in this case, where they were investigated the views of the students of the six months study programs at the HOU regarding the communication between them and the tutors within the framework of the open and distance education with the aim of autonomous and effective learning.

The quantitative approach was preferred, which is the most common in terms of education. We chose this approach, taking into account time, cost and the fact that using independent and dependent variables we can evaluate the answers to research questions and present the general trend with objectivity and impartiality. The research questionnaire consisted of 6 question axes, where the Likert scale was used for the answers. The design of the questionnaire was based on the study of the existing literature on communication between tutors-counselors and students and autonomy in the open and distance education, while data included in the theoretical framework of the present research were utilized.

As a research sample we selected the students of the new curricula of HOU (undergraduate and postgraduate) of the six months thematic units, in order to see the way they understand their communication with the tutors in terms of autonomous and effective learning. But also in particular, we tried to compare the views of students with different profiles (undergraduate-postgraduate) who study in these new programs with a new structure and new communication tools (group counseling meeting through Skype for Business or WebEx from 2020), which have not been sufficiently studied so far. As the population was quite large, we targeted those who were willing and available to answer our questionnaire by following the convenient sampling and being aware that the participants were certainly not the most representative of the population, however they may give us useful information on the subject under consideration (Creswell, 2011).

The purpose of the research was to examine how the communication between tutors and students in a distance learning environment contributes to the achievement of autonomous and

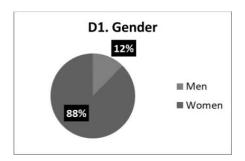effective learning. More specifically, the research objectives were:

i. To explore the views of students of the new undergraduate and postgraduate study programs on the communication between them and their tutors-counselors in order to achieve an autonomous and effective learning.

ii. To define the concepts of communication, support and autonomy and their role in the successful academic course of students.

iii. To identify the role and characteristics of the tutor-counselor and his/her contribution to students' support.

iv. To draw new, useful conclusions that could lead to the improvement of the communication between tutors and students at HOU in the future.

Specifically, the research questions that arise from the above research purpose are the following:
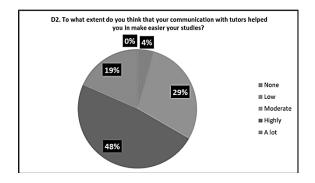
I. How do students define the concepts of "communication" and "autonomy" in the context of the open and distance education and how do they perceive the role of communication with their tutors in achieving an "autonomous" and effective learning?

II. What are the students' perceptions about the characteristics that a tutor must have in order to help them in the successful course of their studies by contributing to their autonomy?

III. What do students suggest to improve the effectiveness of communication?
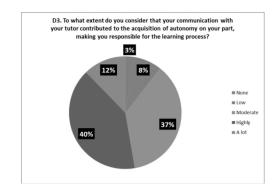
IV. RESEARCH RESULTS

The questionnaire was answered by 114 people, all students of undergraduate and postgraduate programs of HOU with six months thematic units. Regarding the gender of the participants (Diagram 1-D1), our sample in the vast majority consists of women (87.7%), with men having a much lower participation rate (12.3%). In terms of age characteristics, the majority of students belong to a middle age (37.7% belong to the age category between 41-50 years and 34.2% between 31-40 years), while both the youngest (under 30 years old) and the older ones (over 50 years old) are only the 14% of the total number respectively. None of the respondents is over 60 years old. Concerning their level of studies, the 56.1% of the individuals attend one of the postgraduate programs of HOU in six months thematic units, while the 43.9% attend an undergraduate program from the available programs of HOU, also in six months thematic units.

Regarding the role of communication between faculty and students in terms of autonomous and effective learning, the answers given by students by category ("None", "Low", "Moderate", "Highly", "A lot" are presented.) as well as their percentages in the twenty questions of the axis.
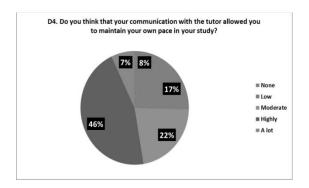

We observe from diagram 2 (D2) that 48.2% answered "highly", the 28.9% "moderate", the 18.4% "a lot" and only the "4.4%" answered "low". The answer "none" did not collect any percentage. From these answers we find that a large percentage of students believe that communication with their tutors contributed greatly to make easier their studies.
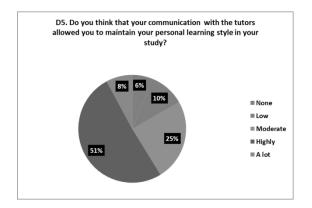

Concerning the contribution of communication with tutors to the acquisition of autonomy on students' view (Diagram3- D3), the 40.4% answered "highly", the 36.8% "moderate",
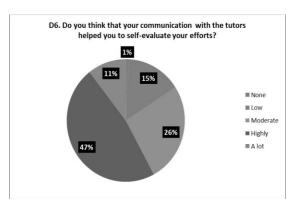
the 12.3% "a lot", while low percentages were collected by the answers "low" and "none" (7.9% and 2.6%). The answers show that about half of the students in the sample believe that communication with their tutors contributes greatly to the achievement of their autonomy. However, there is a total percentage of 47.3%, which indicates that this is achieved "moderately", "little" or "none".

D4. Do you think that your communication with the tutor allowed you to maintain your own pace in your study?

It is characteristic that more than half of the students (52.6%, if we add the answers "a lot" and "highly") consider that their tutor largely allow them maintain the personal rhythm in their study and therefore provide them with the corresponding degree of autonomy. Of course, the fact that the remaining 47.3% answered "moderately", "low" and "not at all" raises concerns about whether such a thing could be improved on the part of the tutors (Diagram 4-D4).

D5. Do you think that your communication with the tutors allowed you to maintain your personal learning style in your study?
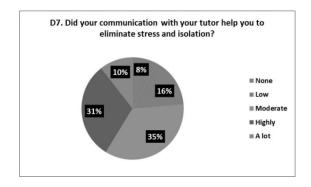
As we can see from the Diagram 5 (D5) a fairly large number of students believe that tutors respect the learning style of their students by strengthening their autonomy.

D6. Do you think that your communication with the tutors helped you to self-evaluate your efforts?

To the question "Do you think that your communication with the tutor helped you to self-evaluate your efforts?" (Diagram 6-D6) the 47.4% answered "highly", the 26.3% "moderate", the 14.9% "low", the 10.5% "a lot" and only the 0.9% "none". From the answers we conclude that the communication of tutors with the students helps to a great extent in the self-evaluation of the latter (57.9% answered "highly" and "a lot") making them responsible for their learning. Indicative is the very low percentage of 0.9% in the answer "none". However, the rest 41.2% shows that for many students their communication with tutor did not help them enough to evaluate their own efforts.
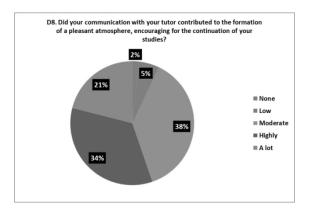
In addition, diagram 7 (D7) presents another significant aspect of distance education, the feelings of stress and isolation. We observe that more than half of the students consider that the feelings of anxiety/stress and isolation due to their communication with tutors are not eliminated to a large extent (in total 58.8% answered "moderate", "low" and "none"), while the rest 41.2% believe that something like this occurs at "highly" and "a lot" levels.

D7. Did your communication with your tutor help you to eliminate stress and isolation?

Next, diagram 8 (D8) describes how communication with tutors contributed to the formation of a pleasant atmosphere, encouraging for the continuation of students' studies. To that question the 37.7% answered "moderate", the
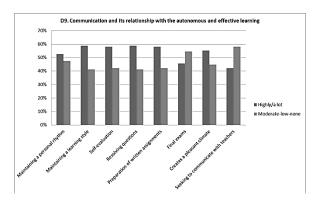
34.2% "highly", the 21.1% "a lot", the 5.3% "low" and only the 1.8% "none". More than half of the students (55.2% in total answered "highly" and "a lot") consider that their communication with the tutors contributes to the formation of a pleasant and encouraging atmosphere. However, there remains a significant percentage of 44.8% in total who believe that this happens "moderately", "low" or "none".

In conclusion, concerning the role of communication in achieving an autonomous and effective learning from students' point of view, the results are summarized in the following Table 1 and diagram 9 (D9).

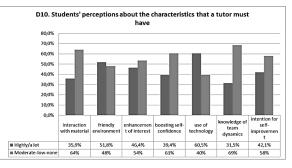**Table 1.** Communication and its relationship with the autonomous and effective learning

	Highly/a lot	Moderate-low-none
Maintaining a personal rhythm	52,60%	47,40%
Maintaining a learning style	58,80%	41,20%
Self-evaluation	57,90%	42,10%
Resolving questions	58,70%	41,30%
Preparation of written assignments	57,90%	42,10%
Final exams	45,60%	54,40%
Creates a pleasant climate	55,20%	44,80%
Seeking to communicate with teachers	42,10%	57,90%

Furthermore, the results of the second research question on what are the students' perceptions about the characteristics that a tutor must have in order to help their students in the successful course of their studies by contributing to their autonomy, can be summarized as follows (Table 2, Diagram 10-D10).

Table 2. Students' perceptions about the characteristics that a tutor must have

	Highly/a lot	Moderate-low-none
interaction with material	35,9%	64%
friendly environment	51,8%	48%
enhancement of interest	46,4%	54%
boosting self-confidence	39,4%	61%
use of technology	60,5%	40%
knowledge of team dynamics	31,5%	69%
intention for self-improvement	42,1%	58%

Finally, the results of the third research wuestion on what do students suggest to improve the effectiveness of communication with their tutors are presented in Table 3.

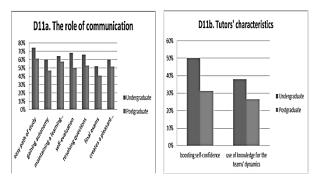**Table 3.** students' suggestions to improve the effectiveness of communication

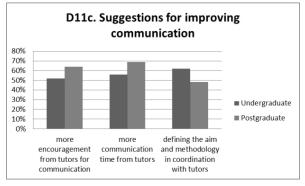|	Highly/a lot	Moderate-low-none
more communication time from tutors	63,2%	36,8%
more use of technology	58,8%	41,2%
reduction in the number of students per	48,2%	51,8%
more meetings in classrooms	68,4%	31,6%
more meetings through internet (Skype	64,9%	35,1%
more tutors' training in the principles of	58,7%	41,3%
operation of Study Centers	53,6%	46,4%

All the above results of the groups of answers "Highly/A lot" can be examined and compared between the group of undergraduate students and postgraduate ones in Table 4 and diagram 11 (D11).

Table 4. Comparison of answers between postgraduate and undergraduate students

	Highly/a lot	
The role of communication	**Undergraduate**	**Postgraduate**
easy path of study	74%	61%
gaining autonomy	60%	46,90%
maintaining a learning style	64%	57,70%
self-evaluation	68%	50%
resolving questions	66%	53%
final exams	52%	40,60%
creates a pleasant climate	60%	51,60%
Tutors' characteristics		
boosting self-confidence	50%	31,30%
use of knowledge for the teams' dynamics	38%	26,60%
Suggestions for improving communication		
more encouragement from tutors for communication	52%	64,10%
more communication time from tutors	56%	68,80%
defining the aim and methodology in coordination with tutors	62%	48,40%

D11a. The role of communication

D11b. Tutors' characteristics

D11c. Suggestions for improving communication

V. DISCUSSION

Most of the students who participated in the research answered that their communication with tutors helped them significantly in the smooth course of their studies. Other previous researches have reached the same conclusion (Vassala-Andreadou, 2010; Iliadou and Anastasiadis, 2010; Tzoutza, 2010; Iliadou, 2011; Terzis, 2017). In fact, KS, according to most students, were very willing to contact them, as other researchers have found (Vassala and Andreadou, 2010; Iliadou and Anastasiadis, 2010; Pavlakis and Georgiadis, 2011; Terzis, 2017) . Also, the response to the students'

request for communication was immediate and their feedback on their work was very informative and helpful. And these results are consistent with those of previous studies (Iliadou and Anastasiadis, 2010; Iliadou, 2011; Nikolaou, 2016; Terzis, 2017).

In terms of whether student autonomy was achieved during their studies, the students in our study are presented as divided. About half of them believe that this has been achieved to a large extent, but the other half believe that it is mediocre, little or not at all. The view is similar in terms of whether the communication with tutors allowed them to maintain their personal rhythm in the learning process. The results are a little better in terms of whether the communication with the tutors helped to maintain the learning style of the students but also in their self-assessment, however the percentages of the answers "very" and "very much" here are not high. These results show that the tutor did not adequately meet the role imposed by the philosophy of open and distance education, according to which they must contribute to the formation of mature and responsible students, as reported in relevant research (Murphy, 2007; Fanariti and Spanaka, 2009; Giagli and Koutsoumba, 2010; Klimova and Poulova, 2011; Masouleh and Jooneghani, 2012; Altunay, 2013; Tsitlakidou and Manousou, 2013; Naoumidi, 2017). The answer to whether the communication with tutor helped the students in solving their questions in relation to the material, in the written assignments and the final exams, but also in the formation of a pleasant atmosphere or in their emotional support, the answer is somewhere in the middle. A little over half of the students answered that all this happened to a great extent while the rest answered that this was achieved moderately, little or not at all. These results differ from those of other surveys (Vassala and Andreadou, 2010; Zygouris and Mavroidis, 2011; Nikolaou, 2016; Konstantopoulou el al., 2013; Terzis, 2017) on the basis of which students seemed to be more supported both in academically as well as emotionally by their mentors.

Characteristically high are the percentages of students who, when asked about the frequency of communication with their tutor-counselor, answered that they communicated "moderately", "little" or "not at all" to solve their questions in relation to the educational material, to be helped in preparation for written assignments or final exams. These results are sometimes contradictory and sometimes in line with previous research. More specifically, Iliadou and Anastasiadis (2010), Tzoutza (2010) and Iliadou (2011) conclude that

students communicate very often with tutors to solve questions, while Vassala and Andreadou (2010) and Terzis (2017)) agree with the current research's results on the low frequency of communication of students with the tutors in terms of their preparation for the final exams. On the contrary, Tzoutza (2010) concludes that students often contact the tutors to help with their exams.

Comparing the answers given by both undergraduate and postgraduate students to the most critical questions of the research, it was found that postgraduate students are less satisfied with the communication formed between them and the tutors during their studies compared to the undergraduate students who seemed to be happier. Significant differences (15 to 20 percentage points) were also found in the characteristics and skills of the tutor within the context of open and distance education. Specifically, the questions explored whether the tutors helped students in their interaction with the learning material, in managing their time, in boosting their self-confidence, but also whether they applied active teaching techniques in their teaching practice or showed willingness for self-improvement. From the answers to all the above questions the postgraduate students who chose the categories "highly" and "a lot" are significantly less than the undergraduates who answered in the same way. Therefore, we conclude that postgraduate students would like a more "active" presence of tutors in their academic path and a more intense academic and emotional support. However, it is worth mentioning here that in all the above questions the answers "highly" and "a lot" gathered remarkably low percentages in both undergraduate and postgraduate students.

In conclusion, from the results of the research, the postgraduate students appear more demanding in relation to the undergraduates towards their tutors and seem to expect much more from the communication with them. From the researches we studied, only two (Nikolaou, 2016 παν Papanikolaou, 2017) proceed to the analysis of the results, dividing the participating students into undergraduate and postgraduate students and making the corresponding correlations. In Papazoglou's research (2017), which concerns the formal and essential qualifications of the adult educator, the requirements of postgraduate students for their tutors- as in the current research - seem greater, especially regarding the material organization and educational process, the evaluation, the utilization of students' experiences and the cooperation within the group. These results may be due to the fact that postgraduate students

view their studies as a transitional stage between education and work, they are particularly concerned about their future and professional development, and they already have an educational background and a greater undergraduate experience in their curriculum. Therefore, their expectations are higher. On the contrary, in the research of Nikolaou (2016), the undergraduate students seemed to see with greater distance and hesitation the communication with their tutors compared to the postgraduates, who seemed to show greater confidence and immediacy in the communication relations with their tutors.

VI. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

With the present research we tried to investigate the role that communication plays between tutors-counselors and students in achieving an autonomous and effective learning. We looked for the ways that the students choose to communicate with their tutor but also the characteristics that according to them should be gathered by him/her in the open and distance education context.

Regarding the communication most of the students who participated in the research stated that it helped them significantly in making easier their studies. For most of them, the response of the tutors to their request for communication was immediate, while the feedback on their written assignments was very informative and useful. However, their communication did not contribute to gaining autonomy equally for all students. Half of them stated that the tutor guided them to become autonomous, to maintain their personal rhythm and their own learning style in the learning process but also to evaluate their own efforts, but the other half did not seem to believe the same to a large extent.

Respectively, half of the participating students stated that their communication helped them significantly in solving questions, written assignments and final exams, but the other half did not seem to agree (or at all) with such a thing. In relation to the characteristics and skills that a tutor had within the HOU, the vast majority of students stated that the he/she did not help them enough in the organization of their study, the bibliographic search and the time management while they did not give largely opportunities for initiative nor did they teach them enough how to learn. Also, there were many students who did not seem particularly satisfied with their tutor in terms of the use of active teaching techniques or knowledge of group dynamics in their teaching work, although these

must be found on instructors. Regarding the creation of a friendly learning environment, incentives for active participation and conditions for boosting self-confidence from the tutors, about half of the students answered very positively, but the other half did not. In addition, the results on how much the tutor helped them to interact with the learning material were similar.

In terms of ways to improve communication more than half of the students seem to strongly believe that tutors need to spend more time and encourage more communication with them, but they should also take more initiatives to do so. Approximately the same percentage of students largely believes that the HOU needs to upgrade its infrastructure in order to improve, among other things, the communication between them and their faculty members. In addition, about half of the students seemed to agree to a large extent with the proposal for the operation of Study Centers, in order to have more opportunities to meet and communicate with their tutors, but the other half did not seem to appreciate their contribution to their academic and emotional support.

Finally, the answers of undergraduate and postgraduate students regarding the role of communication and the ways of its improvement, as well as the characteristics of the tutors, were quite different. In short, postgraduate students appear more demanding than undergraduates and seem to expect much more from communicating with them.

From all the above we conclude that communication with the tutors is crucial for the smooth development of studies in an environment where the student feels isolated and needs support. This research shows that instructors have tried a lot to fulfill their complex role in this relatively new educational context, contributing to the smooth development of the students' academic course. However, much remains to be done to make students feel deeply supported both academically and emotionally. At the same time, they should try harder to form responsible and mature students who will choose not the heterodetermination but their independent and autonomous course. But this is something that the students themselves should defend and seek. The institution itself should be a companion of both tutors and students, supporting the work of educators and investing in their training but also actively helping students with modern infrastructure, organization, personalized approach and fewer limitations in their autonomy, so that they feel safe and confident. Only then will the open and distance education will be able to stand firmly on its feet and achieve its true goals, gaining everyone's appreciation.

As we have already mentioned, 114 students from all study programs (undergraduate and postgraduate) in six months thematic units responded to our research. Because this number is relatively small for the specific population volume, it would be appropriate to repeat a similar survey with a larger sample, in order to be able to generalize the results. In addition, it would be appropriate for the academic research to be enriched with interviews, especially with tutors-counselors, in order to highlight and analyze in depth the views of the "other side", in order to have a more comprehensive picture of reality. At the same time it would be interesting to see how different the answers of the students are not only based on the curriculum they attend, but also their familiarity with the new technologies (since they are more and more integrated in the methodology of the open and distance education over time) but also based on their previous experience in open and distance education or their age. Finally, it would be interesting to apply a similar research to other study programs of HOU or of other open universities (such as the Open University of Cyprus) so that the comparison between them can yield useful conclusions that will help our institution to develop in many ways.

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