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„Distance higher education in Spain”

Summary

The subject of this doctoral thesis is the use of distance learning in Spanish higher education. The aim of the research is to present both the current state as well as the many changes that have occurred in this area in Spain. The issues addressed fit into the considerations on the practical applications of the idea of lifelong learning and the tradition of Polish research in the field of comparative andragogy.

The thesis consists of nine chapters. The main part is preceded by the introduction, in which the author justifies the choice of the topic, reviews the Polish and Spanish literature and presents the methodology of the research conducted.

In the first chapter, attempts were made to determine what distance education is. Based on the subject literature, the author lists various types of this modality. References are made to solutions based on the exchange of correspondence, the application of radio and television for the purpose of the teaching process, and multimedia systems, where the modern IT tools and Internet capabilities play a key role. In the further part of this chapter, the author seeks to determine the role that the teacher and learner have in the process of distance learning, and which of their characteristics are of particular importance in this context. Due to the fact that the thesis focuses on the problems of higher education, it has been decided to limit the considerations to the issues of adult education. This fact is reflected in the selection of scientific literature, which is mostly works within andragogy. Discussing the issues of distance education, reference was made to the role played by appropriately designed and selected teaching materials, both in printed and audiovisual form. This aspect also is reflected in the content of the chapter. The author of the thesis is aware that distance learning has its determinants and does not lead to didactic success in every context. Based on the literature analysis, the aspects of distance education that offer many hopes and possibilities as well as those that awaken – or, under certain conditions, may awaken – doubts and reservations were presented.

The second chapter presents the historical outline of distance education in the different regions of the world (Europe, the United States of America and Canada, Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia, Australia and Oceania, Africa). Taking into account the subject of this

thesis, special attention has been paid to the experience of university institutions. This step enabled placing Spanish achievements in a wider international context.

In the next, third chapter, the author presents the socio-historical determinants of Spanish higher education. Beginning with the presentation of general information about the country, he then goes on to discuss the most important aspects of the education system. This move allowed for embedding key issues for the thesis in the relevant, this time national framework. In the further part of this chapter, the author brings closer the most important facts of the history of higher education in Spain and discusses its current state.

The content of chapter four is a direct reference to the issues covered in the topic of the thesis, that is the use of distance learning in higher education in Spain. An overview of selected examples is preceded by the presentation of the genesis of the aforementioned phenomena in the local education. Then the author concentrates his attention on those institutions that specialize in distance higher education and base their didactic system on it. The following fragments of the chapter show the experiences of regular universities, which implement part of their educational activity in such a form. The next part of the thesis discusses the activities of consortia of Spanish higher education institutions interested in the implementation of joint projects in the field of distance learning. In the final reflections, the author discusses system solutions aimed at evaluating the quality of remote teaching and granting appropriate accreditation.

The next four chapters are devoted to the activities of the National Distance Education University (*Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia – UNED*). This institution, since its start in 1972, has constituted the face of higher distance education in Spain. The origins, organizational structure, as well as scientific and international activity are the aspects raised in chapter five. It has the task of showing UNED as a higher education institution that, despite all its specifics, fulfills a number of functions and duties attributed to traditional universities.

The content of the sixth chapter consists of didactic model used by UNED. Firstly, the role played by the teaching staff is discussed. Particular attention is paid to the tasks completed by the tutors in the individual Associated Centers (*Centros Asociados*). Consultations with them, the so-called *tutorías*, play a very important role in the UNED system, being a support for students in their self-education process. The reader then has the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the function that UNED attributes to didactic materials. In the past, they had a traditional, printed character, whereas nowadays the importance of audiovisual and multimedia teaching aids is growing. What is reflected in this chapter is the fact that, since the beginning of its activity, the University has used the latest

technical and communication solutions in the didactic process. The author refers here to the application of virtual platform for educational purposes. A separate issue discussed in this chapter is the UNED's way of evaluating students.

The next, seventh chapter refers specifically to the educational activity of the University. As a higher education institution that pursues a mission of openness and eliminating barriers in access to education, UNED offers the chance to study also for candidates without certificates or titles. Any person wishing to pursue higher education, regardless of previous educational experience, may undertake UNED education. Special University Access Courses are aimed not only at catching up but also at introducing students to proper self-education. After drawing the reader's attention to this aspect, UNED's offer within bachelor's, master's and doctoral studies was presented. This three-tier division, so characteristic of European higher education, is an important element of UNED's educational offer. In addition to programs regulated by the ministerial guidelines, the university also offers its audience a number of courses and majors which are its own initiative. This offer is aimed at people wishing to raise (supplement) their professional qualifications and develop their own interests. The offer addressed to seniors and widely-understood local communities was analyzed separately. The next two subchapters focus on the University's approach to the two groups of students. The first of them are prisoners of penitentiary establishments, and the second group are disabled people. In both cases, the UNED model of distance education provides an opportunity to overcome objective obstacles and to acquire higher education. An important component of the chapter is statistical data, whose purpose is to give the reader a fuller picture of the University's educational activities.

The aim of chapter eight is to show the activity of selected UNED Associated Centers from a closer perspective. They are an integral part of the didactic model implemented by the Spanish university. This is where consultations with tutors and extensive cultural activities take place. The reader has the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the activities of the six Centers, each of which is located in a different region (autonomous community) of Spain. As in the previous chapter, statistics are presented relating to the number of students studying in individual institutions and, where possible, their age profile. The source of information for the author of the thesis were the official reports prepared by the Associated Centers.

Chapter nine is a peculiar summary of previous discussions. The author, referring once again to UNED's activities, aims to confront the model of distance education with the principles and postulates of lifelong learning. In this case, the concepts and interpretations that the andragogical literature attributes to this educational idea are important. This part of the

thesis reemphasizes those aspects of distance education at UNED which the author considers as practical implementation of the idea of lifelong learning.

The main part of the thesis ends with the author's attempt to transfer the findings to the Polish educational reality. His attention focuses on the possible use of Spanish experience in Polish higher education. In the final part of the thesis, the author also points out those areas of research that are worth exploring further and worth presenting to Polish readers. He refers here both to the university's distance education in Spain and, in a broader context, to other important issues related to adult education in Spanish-speaking countries.

The content of this thesis is supplemented by a nearly 100-page annex containing a series of materials on the activities of the National Distance Education University (UNED), which were collected during the study of the dissertation subject.