Prerequisites for Persistence in Distance Education

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Abstract

In the last two decades, distance education has grown worldwide and is now established as a reliable educational method. Accompanying this development, questions about low rates of student persistence have come to interest governments, institutions, and university management. This article is based on an original local study at a university in Sweden investigating what it takes to get students to continue their enrolment in courses or programs. Teachers' views were captured in interviews and focus groups. These views were analyzed in the context of research in the field catalogued under the keywords "retention" and "persistence" in "distance education" and "distance learning." The results indicate that the teachers would like to see a shift in focus from students to the organization and its technical and administrative teacher and learner support. Staff attitudes, institutional structure, and the management views towards distance education seem to be critical factors.

Keywords: Distance education; persistence; retention; management; teachers; attitudes; views.

Introduction

As elsewhere in the world, distance education in Sweden has grown tremendously, and education at universities and university colleges is characterized by a rising number of online courses and programs. However, comparing the face-to-face environment with the online environment, student persistence, and rate of graduation has come to be considered as a problem in distance education. Persistence and completion of courses and programs are important for student achievement, institutions, managements, and governments. Dropping out of a course or a program can have deleterious consequences. It is therefore of utmost importance to develop knowledge about the dropout effects and about what to do to enhance student persistence.

At Kristianstad University in Sweden, distance education comprises close to 50% of the total supply of courses and programs. In distance education, about 60% complete their courses. The average completion rate for full-time students is 80%. As might be expected, students more often drop out from single, freestanding courses than from programs with a commitment of one or more years. This is true especially for programs that lead to specific professions, where high levels of persistence are achieved. According to our data, women are more persistent than men, age does not seem to play a role.

As many as 40% of distance students did not complete a single graded assignment in their course. Some students did not even start the course; others have followed some lessons but not completed anything. Among these students, students who did not study for grades but who wanted to acquire knowledge are included. The distance learner seems not to be a novice in terms of academic study; this learner tends to be a qualified person with an earlier experience of student life working towards a career. They seems to represent the lifelong learner. There is, however, lack of clarity associated with the data; courses change names and codes, change in their method of delivery, students leave courses without announcing their withdrawal and institutions have no authority to "deregister" a student.

As in most seats of learning, persistence in distance education at Kristianstad University has been noticed and questions have arisen about what to do. The author of this paper together with a colleague were commissioned to investigate what is needed to enhance persistence. A student questionnaire administered by my colleague resulted in findings that support what is known about students' withdrawal reasons relating to life situations and lack of time. This paper will not address these particular findings or other local resource mapping. However, the views of teachers, collected through interviews and focus groups, which were my responsibility,

appeared to be of interest and are the focus of this article (raw data from the responses is exemplified in Appendix).

Before the teacher meetings I carried out a review of research in the field. At a national level, it showed that the research question hides a complex problem. Many research projects point to certain solutions for persistence in distance education, often depending on the way the question is asked. However, most research performed in the field ends up with a long to-do list and a recommendation of an overall solution integrating every step in a model. Looking beyond the national research literature, Simpson (2010) undertook a wide literature review in which he is critical of retention projects that present these long lists of recommendations without evidence of their effects, as he puts it. Critical reflections towards these lists were also frequent among the teachers taking part in the interviews and focus groups. They perceived the lists as elementary. In this study, I try seek out what really matters by analyzing teachers' views in the light of a research review. What is of importance for persistence in distance education? What prerequisites are needed?

Research method and theoretical framework

This article is based on a local study at a small university in Sweden. About 14,500 students are registered, mainly in digital design, economics, health science, psychology, teacher education, and technology at Kristianstad University. There are 351 teachers. In this article the analysis of the dialogues with 28 teachers in focus groups and individual interviews are reported. The teachers are all engaged in distance learning and have long experience of working in this field. They all volunteered to participate in this study. Some also asked me to visit them at meetings in their thematic working groups and others completed the dialogues afterwards, providing me with further information. Most of the teachers were self-taught as educators in distance learning, except for a few who had gone through one or two short courses. They felt they had been thrown into distance education and obliged to learn how to manage it or they had thrown themselves into the field without know much about it. Of course, both the small number of teachers in this study and the characteristics of the teachers bring methodological limitations to the study. The purpose, however, is to search for clues and not to generalize.

The interviews were unstructured, taped, transcribed afterwards and read several times back and forward. After the first round of analysis, the result ended up as a long to-do list. Perhaps this was what could be expected from this experienced group of teachers who were well equipped with elementary knowledge in distance education and levels beyond. In a second round of analysis, the material was divided into levels. At meta-level, suggestions and thoughts expressed were categorized into four themes looking for prerequisites for persistence in distance education, and "what it takes". The material was analyzed in the context of a research review that covered research catalogued in the Academic Search Elite/EBSCO and ERIC databases under the keywords "retention" and "persistence" in "distance education" and "distance learning."

The research in this field has gone through a paradigm shift when it comes to the view of the distance student learner. Negative terms like "dropout" and "withdrawal" are history, and even "retention" is controversial. The more frequently used "persistence" is in accordance with a shift in theoretical perspective towards a constructive approach. New approaches are needed to achieve student success in distance learning, and new theories have been suggested based on evidence from studies that have confirmed increased retention or persistence. Existing models emphasizing development of learning skills and default support have to be considered. The theory of *Proactive Motivational Support* built on *A Self Theory*, *Proactive Support* and a theory of *Strengths Approach* is suggested. Embedded in these approaches is a shift from identifying weaknesses to enhancing strengths (Simpson, 2008). Tinto's (1975) model, built on by Kember (1995) and Tresman (2002), emphasizes social and psychological factors. In this model, it is important to integrate students' aims, needs, and perceptions of the life situation with their own priorities and to have the support of the institution, the tutor, and a certified level of course quality. It is a multi-dimensional picture that lies beyond reasons for dropping out and it has to be met by resources and strategies from the university and the tutor.

The focal issue of this article is situated in the discourse and theoretical framework that describes development in terms of a market economy with governmental steering. Universities have come to be driven like companies, striving to reach their customers (students) mostly because the number of students equates to the income provided by the state. Management principles mirrored in management terms like "excellence" are adopted in the hope of reaching efficiency and higher standards (Ball, 1997). Issues in education, however, are not solved by technics alone. Sociological theory is lost in this managerial perspective and is not in accordance

with principles of management and development (cf. Ball, 1995). The market economy adopted in universities has abandoned one of the most important goals of education: the aim to build knowledge for the good society (cf. Carr, 1997). Open educational resources and distance education could play an important role in educational development in this sense throughout the world (Richter & McPherson, 2012).

Research review

The research review is presented under the following topic headings: student support, economy of learning communities, lifelong learning and "swirling," teachers' competence and attitudes, knowledge and implementation, and commitment to distance education at all levels. The scope of the review builds on a search in the two most comprehensive and global databases: Academic Search Elite/EBSCO and ERIC.

Student support

There are no simple solutions that will raise the number of students "flowing through" the distance education course (Birgerson, 2011). Some reasons behind withdrawal, however, seem stronger and more common than others and seem to signal the importance of student support. This is also true for factors connected to the students themselves, such as satisfaction, which is of major importance for withdrawal (Levy, 2007). Lack of time is another dominant reason for withdrawal. Dafgård (2002) relates lack of time to unrealistic planning and not enough previous knowledge, but also to lack of technical support, blurred instructions, and the form of examinations.

Findings by Fahy (2003) indicate that students support each other in academic and social matters. Mentoring, however, needs the resources of a teacher (Boyle, Jinhee, Ross & Simpson, 2010), a learner support program (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlop, 2003), or websites developed for support (Serwatka, 2005). Collaborative learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1999) and propitious environments with computer support ought to be developed (see Stahl & Hesse, 2009). Hughes (2007) finds improvement in retention when blended learning is combined with proactive support from a tutor who facilitates peer support and cooperation among students online. Proactive tutor–student communication seems to be a critical factor (Vogt, 2008). Student contact and communication are mainly with a personal tutor (Macintyre & Macdonald, 2011).

Between 30% and 40% of withdrawals occur between course start and the first assignment (Simpson, 2003, 2006). Learner support should be integrated from the very beginning in a course and through every stage. New technology can help (Fozdar & Kumar, 2007) and is a potential for enhancing the teachers' role as a tutor, coach, and facilitator according to Tait and Mills (2003). Through inexpensive phone or e-mail, both tutor and institution can intensify support and work proactively (cf. Simpson, 2010). The communication could be synchronous, but as Laurillard (2002) suggests, asynchronous communication may be preferred; it gives time to reflect and provides the course with flexibility. This should be combined with course design clarity, interaction and active discussion among participants in the course (Swan, 2001; cf. Dennen, 2005).

Economy of learning communities

The economic potential of distance learning is important; distance education has to demonstrate its superior qualities in financial terms. It takes time, labour, and expense to retain students. However, interventions to increase retention will show that they are cost-effective and have positive effects on students as well as institutional and financial benefits to the university (Simpson, 2004). For global distance learning in a competitive world, a paradigm shift from traditional forms of education to learning and strategic planning integrating organizational support is crucial. Higher education distance students are diverse, and evidence indicates that this diversity and the changing needs of students demand even more learner support (Tait & Mills, 2003). By making courses and programs more flexible, institutions can ensure that students do not have to fall behind (Decal & McMurry, 2006).

It seems important that students have to perceive themselves as a part of the course context (Lindberg, 2003; cf. Joo, Lim & Kim, 2011). Shin (2003) refers to what has been called the "transactional presence" and defines it as the degree of connectedness to teachers, peer students, and the institution. Planning, recruitment, management, quality assurance, retention, faculty development, online pedagogy, and course design are essential for success (Rovai & Downey, 2010). For student persistence and economic outcome, it seems more important to build learning communities than to rush into course-building believing it will save money, time, and resources, as Hiltz (1998) has noted.

Locally placed centers are perceived as a complement, but technical expertise and pedagogy must be developed with teachers involved. In some cases, local examination centers are recommended, as they are seen to promote students' perceptions of accessibility (Macintyre & Macdonald, 2011). It is important, however, to distinguish between student support built into courses as a natural improvement of the course and student support service that offers targeted, predesigned interventions. Student support in the latter sense does not seem to be appreciated among students. Nichols (2010) interprets these findings in the light of Herzberg's well-known two-factor or motivation–hygiene theory. Decision making and success motivate students when they are perceived as efforts of the individual self as an autonomous learner. Support systems need to be evaluated in this perspective. This holds also for the IT and media center at the university. Development in technology currently seems to be moving rapidly towards "cloud computing" (see e.g., Greenhow, Robelia & Hughes, 2009), which may affect the institutionalized support at the university.

Lifelong learning and "swirling"

How to perceive withdrawals? Diaz (2002) writes that this may be the right decision from the student's point of view, necessary because of restricted time, job, or life situation. Talking about retention only in terms of students who pass an exam or achieve a grade is not the right thing to do. Also Simpson (2003) and Yorke (2004) highlight these phenomena relating to deliberate breaks and re-engagement. The need to know is in accordance with the policy and theories of lifelong learning. This is a phenomenon that distance education has to deal with. Boston & Ice (2011) take these trends a bit further; if it is possible to transfer credits, students may explore opportunities to combine courses across programs, different institutions, and universities. Courses delivered on demand and a clearly stated option to move between universities and other institutions for a degree, also called "swirling," is needed.

Teachers' competence and attitudes

Teachers need cooperation with other teachers locally and internationally, and training programs have been proven to make dramatic differences in retention (Simpson & Head, 2000). Sun, Tsai, Finger, Chen & Yeh (2008) recommend that teachers be carefully chosen and offered training. A highly skilled tutor is a prerequisite for effective learning (Herbert, 2006; Hughes 2007).

The necessary qualifications for teachers in distance education are a mix of technical and pedagogical competence, a blend of theory, practice, and attitudes. In a Swedish study, Wrenne (2011) focuses on teachers and their conceptions of distance education. The findings imply that the teacher's conceptions affect the instruction they give, which may conflict with students' expectations and relate to persistence. At Helsinki University a handbook has been written to assist distance learning teachers (Löfström et al., 2007). International, research-based education is the starting point in this book, which aims to promote quality in education and lay the foundation for constructive alignment in education (cf. Boyer, 1990); that is, meaningful learning, deepened understanding, and enduring knowledge. The writers of this handbook refer to classical research studies and milestones in educational research, such as the work of Ausubel (1968), Biggs (1996), and Entwistle & Ramsden (1983).

Knowledge and implementation

Many researchers hold that the amount of research taking retention seriously is low and that research focusing on withdrawal is needed (cf. Sutton & Nora, 2008–2009). On the other hand, Salmon (2011) states that the knowledge needed for persistence in distance education is considerable and emphasizes that the intuition method is too demanding, time-consuming, and frustrating. By this statement, it is meant that although a lot of research and knowledge to meet distance learning exists, teachers are still thrown into distance education with no prior introduction or training and therefore have to trust their intuition. In other words, teachers often are obliged to manage distance learning using the method of trial and error. This usually ends up as satisfactory because of generally trained, experienced teachers but the situation could be better if they have had a chance to be prepared.

Commitment to distance education all levels

There is a huge amount of research directed at quality in distance education. Salmon (2002) presents a five-step model together with a framework of "e-tivities" (interactive learning). The e-tivities are characterized

by "action" and words like activate, argument, confirm, describe, discuss, explain, reflect, or structure. The five-step model reflects progression. E-tivities aim at engaging students in meaningful work, capturing their imagination, and challenging their thoughts (cf. Biesta, 2005). Numerous investigations support Salmon on single factors and as a whole. Spitzer (1998) gives ten pieces of advice: focus the student, reduce the pain, read the context, make personal contact in the course, offer relevant and cost-effective technology, give the students' knowledge and technological prerequisites, technical support, provide time to students and instructors, and communicate intensively. The key to persistence and positive learning outcomes is a staff of stakeholders that provides technical support, administration, as well as educational developers and a distance learning team that shapes a positive environment. Nothing can replace a warm, non-threatening, caring environment. Other studies focusing on withdrawal come to conclusions about the importance of course design and quality, course flexibility, and content (Packham, Jones, Miller & Thomas, 2004). Research tells us that a teacher in distance education has to be a moderator and facilitator, not a "traditional teacher educating" but a "tutor facilitating learning." The teacher has to support collaborative learning, individualize, and encourage academic dialogue. Green, Alejandro & Brown (2009) come to almost the same conclusions. Summarizing, they state that there are three important fields that have to be prioritized: a commitment to distance education quality at all levels of the institution is paramount, as is training for instructors and assistance in development of courses. The tutor's facilitative role is crucial for distance learning and retention as is the environment created by tutors (Tait, 2004).

Organizational responsibility in every phase for persistence in distance education is emphasized also by Keegan (1996). Herbert (2006) states that faculty has to be responsive to student needs. Park & Choi (2009) emphasize the organizational support when it comes to enhancing the relevance of the course, and Simpson (2010) would like to see research that reveals the barriers to persistence:

> It is not enough to study what might increase retention – it is necessary to look at the barriers that militate against retention. These might include the attitudes of staff within an institution, the structure of an institution, who is responsible for retention, and 'dropout disempowerment' – the feeling that dropout is a fact of life and unchangeable by any reasonable activity. (Simpson, 2010, p. 8)

It is about staff attitudes and institutional structure. The teacher as a supporting tutor seems poorly understood and undervalued among managers, write Tait and Mills (2003).

Teachers' experiences and views on enhancing student persistence

In the inquiry searching for teachers' reflections about what prerequisites are needed for persistence in distance education, four main themes emerged. The themes are about the need for changes in views about the distance learner and flexibility in administrative regulations, management attitudes towards the new teacher role in distance education and communication between departments within the organization. Further technical and administrative teacher and learner support, and teacher training for development of teacher qualifications.

Changes in views about the distance learner and flexibility

The teachers interviewed emphasized the need for a new definition of the distance student. They perceive the distance student as different from those in face-to-face learning. Distance students seem to be older, employed, studying for personal development and not quite as often for an examination; more interested in knowledge than in achieving grades; learning what they find interesting, leaving the rest.Teachers in this study noticed how students leave a course, but later return and fulfill the intended study program; students jump off and on courses. This attitude towards studying is also frequent among young students. Students are satisfied with their courses, according to evaluations, even if they have to withdraw in the middle of a course because a job is offered. This proves that our students are employable, as a tutor in a water management program commented.

The teachers laid stress upon the differences in views about the distance learner and that a new view ought to be linked to a lifelong learning perspective and embraced at all levels in the organization. The behaviour of the new distance learner is not easy to change, but the course design is, they emphasized. To meet the distance learner jumping off and on courses, they suggest that the administration has to be more flexible when it comes to registration for example.

One teacher speculated about students who do complete their courses in the normally appointed time. These

students seem driven by external motivation; depending on financial support or a legitimation (as for example nurses) to get a job. The teacher suggested that certain courses perhaps could offer non-degree certificates or diplomas, which when framed on the wall in the graduate's future workplace, whether office or store, would indicate recognition of achievement and "be a feather in one's cap."

Managerial, organizational, and administrative lack of support

The teachers think that managerial, organizational, and administrative support is not adequately developed according to distance learning needs; similarly, that their own support as tutors is not recognized or appreciated in the university organization. As a teacher or facilitator, they say, you have to follow the course process, making the course lively, respond to e-mails as soon as possible in a kindly tone. You need to be proactive and see to it that new things happen in the online course every now and then. Knowledge about what it takes to work with distance education in management and administration is insufficient. The notion that distance education could bring huge profit to the institution still exists.

The teachers feel distrusted because of the facility to work from anywhere in the world or from their home. Their workload is not recognized. Teaching with distance education comes with a heavy and intense workload, and the teachers continually returned to the lack of time. Individual response to students is time-consuming but a necessity for students to feel that they are recognized and for their intellectual challenge. "Spoon-feeding" is not acceptable, as one teacher put it.

Communication between administrators and teachers could improve. Teachers are not consulted and the data that lie behind administrative decisions are blurred. What measures are used, teachers ask, when it comes to the date at which dropouts are counted? Semesters do not fit with the setting of examinations. Clarity and transparency in the decisions about cutbacks in resources, limitations on course offerings, time and student admissions are wanted. Administrative support to students during admission, registration, and induction is important; it has to be rationalized and changed also in attitude; it has to be kind and caring, giving the students a sense of belonging to the seat of learning as a whole. Are the administration's routines and controls cost-effective? Parallel to the growth in administration, teachers feel that they are buried in continually more administrative work that is hindering teaching and tutoring.

Media and IT technical support, communication and information

The teachers in this study put forward that systems like learning platforms, evaluation programs, and registration processes have to be coordinated. When digitized material has to be printed out and handled manually in between programs and then digitized again, the teachers find it annoying. This developmental demand holds for systems also between universities in order to support students who move from one university to another. The teachers wanted to see an intensified communication between teacher, media, IT and technical staff. Technology and education must meet and communicate; a dialogue can bring a harmony of the best of technology and pedagogy. Some teachers described how they plan to develop virtual laboratories and animations but cannot find resources in time or economic and technical support. Courses and programs are realized independently through web hosting because of rigid rules at the university. The administrative and technical departments develop new systems, programs and rules without consulting or integrating the educational sector and activity. This ends up in programs that do not benefit teachers and students. They rarely use them if they are not forced to do so.

Teachers hunger for development

Not every teacher has the qualifications to develop courses by new technology, but they manage to get the skills in an autodidactic style. This leads to a sense of insecurity. Teachers in this study raised questions like: What qualifications are of vital importance for us as teachers to develop? What kind of technical, IT, or media help is it appropriate to ask for? There was a hunger for knowledge in the field. The teachers appreciated courses they were invited to by the pedagogical service center and would like to see more advanced courses for scholarship (Boyer, 1990), courses connecting technology and pedagogy, as well as workshops focusing on new technology like Twitter, blogs, and smartphones. Various kinds of Internet-based forums – or, for that matter, even physical places to meet – where questions about distance education can be discussed with other teachers, were suggested.

Final reflections

The teachers in this study wanted to see new views about the distance learner. Their wishes were addressed to the management and the administration. They talked about diversity in views about the distance learner between departments and levels at the university. As presented in this article, there has been a paradigm shift from the negative to the positive in this field of research. Instead of talking about dropouts, terms like persistence are used, strengths rather than weaknesses (cf. Simpson, 2008). Teachers have experienced the shift in their daily educational activity but feel that the administration and management has not. In the statistics examined at the university management level, withdrawals are seen as a problem, an economic problem for the university management. The teachers, however, talk about withdrawals as the new normative way of studying. The withdrawal sometimes seems to be for a semester or two. The students turn up again later to complete their courses, according to what these teachers experienced. Boston & Ice (2011) among others have written about these deliberate breaks and the distance learner as a lifelong learner with need, aims, motivation and a life situation that steers more than the course agenda. This phenomenon called swirling has to be met by the administration and university organization. So are other student characteristics, as for example, procrastination (Klingsieck, Fries, Horz & Hofer, 2012). Opportunities to move between courses, institutions, universities, and countries should be met by the university.

In the interviews, teachers also talked about students who complete in the appointed time, speculating about these students as more externally motivated and how to reach this group of students. It could be a job, diploma, or employment that provides the motivation. This concept finds support at the Open University of Sri Lanka, where awards could be a strong motivating factor for choosing a study program that opens the doors to the job market (Dadigamuwa & Senanayake, 2012).

Satisfaction and lack of time seem to be crucial factors for persistence in distance education. To respond to these factors, the teachers have to work as facilitators using new technology: phones, e-mail, and so on (cf. Simpson, 2010). According to the teachers in this study, student support and proactive tutoring are critical factors (cf. Vogt, 2008). Student satisfaction is also connected to the administrative and technological support. Students should feel they are a part of the learning community at the university (Hiltz, 1998). Building a learning community seems important as a prerequisite for persistence in distance education. It includes attitudes towards the student and support from the administrative and technological departments. It includes developing flexible courses (cf. Decal & McMurray, 2006; Ivankova & Stick, 2005).

The teachers in this study question the need of an IT-department at the university because of its rigidity and lack of communication with the educators. Through cloud computing and other technologies, it is possible to get IT and media support systems without the help of an institutionalized IT-department – this is a new arena which has to be discussed and explored. And how about the usefulness and cost-effectiveness of service centers? It is questionable, according to the teachers in this study. On the other hand teacher training is needed, as well as media and IT technical support. Not every teacher has the attitude needed to handle distance education and new technology, or the necessary competence and knowledge. Knowledge attained by research and experience is one thing, implementation is another. The teachers' wish clarity about what is their responsibility and what is appropriate to ask for when it comes to assistance from the administration, media, and IT technical support is emphasized.

Teachers feel a pressure to deliver but at the same time do not perceive support to make it happen and not enough understanding from the managerial level. Distance education is not an easy route to profit, they say. The market economy has infiltrated the university sector putting talk about efficiency (cf. Ball, 1997) at the top of the agenda rather than knowledge building for a democratic society. Rather than searching for reasons in the students' behaviour, it is the organization, and administration prerequisites that seem crucial for student persistence; this along with changes in views about the distance learner, a paradigm shift in management attitudes towards the new teacher role in distance education, improved teacher and learner support, and teacher training. The responsibility lies heavily on the management, even if every factor in the end is more or less a teacher-driven activity.

Conclusions

In this study, the teachers in the interviews and focus groups emphasized the importance of management attitudes and the lack of communication between levels and departments within the institution and

organization: the administration, media and technical support, and the management levels. Prerequisites for student persistence in distance education, according to these teachers, are to be found in factors connected to the organization, administration, teacher and learner support; not primarily in student factors. Teachers would like to see a shift in focus from students to the organization, and technical and administrative teacher and learner support. Staff attitudes, institutional structure and management views towards distance education seem to be critical. The results of this study are supported by research in the field focusing on what it takes to enhance persistence in distance education, but the indications from this case study at a small university need to be evaluated in further evidence-based research.

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Appendix
Responses in the interviews and focus groups are summarized below.

Views about the distance student learner and attitudes towards administrative rules and regulations
The distance student is different from the student in face-to-face-learning, studying for personal development, studying for knowledge.
Distance students jump off and on courses. They leave and come back again.
Students choose courses if they are free in time and space.
Distance learning demands other methods.
Variations in the methods of examination take time.
The management does not seem to understand what it takes.
Attitudes towards teachers is negative and suspicious because we can work from anywhere in the world.
Students want a living course platform.
You have to "live with" the course, work with feed-back, meaning, response to e-mails as soon as possible.
Be friendly and build a sense of community.
Distance education can not be compared with lessons on campus.
Distance education is even more time consuming. Not a money-saver.
Spoonfeeding is not acceptable at advanced level.
Quality in teacher-student relationship is needed to challenge the learner.

Lack of managerial and organizational support and lack of information and communication between departments within the organization.

What are decisions taken by the administration built on?
How come a course is closed without information before the decision?
Is there a policy for the number of students registered in courses and programs? It seems to differ a lot.
We (the teachers) are totally without power.
The figures presented by the administration is blurred.
When to count the number of registered students ought to be discussed.
The semester is in administrative terms ended before the last exam is over and done with.
There ought to be more flexibility in schedule and time, as well as in the numbers of students in coursegroups.

Administrative, media- and technical support
We are buried in administrative work although the administrative section is growing.
What is the cost of all control, routines and documentation?
It would be great if the administrators could fetch the grades in a digitalized program. As for now we are getting a digitalized list, filling it with grades analogically, get a lot of documents to sign and then the administrators digitalize it again.
The centralized evaluation system is not working. The standardized questions are useless in our ambition to change the course for better quality.
Why not develop an information-bank for students. As teachers we answer a lot of mails with the same questions irrespectively of course or program.
International, English speaking programs are lacking.
The ICT-personal has to be aware of cloud computing that is developing.

Teacher training - development of teacher qualifications
What qualifications are of vital importance for us to develop as teachers?
What kind of technical, IT, or media help is it appropriate to ask for?
The courses for scholarship in teaching has given me a lot.
Courses about how to use Twitter for teaching and learning for example.
I miss the network among distance education teachers that used to function.
Groups for cooperation between teachers and between teachers and ICT-people is needed.
Why not a group on the Internet for communication in between giving each other help and ideas.
Or coffebreaks IRL with bread and cheese?