INTERNATIONAL
ISD SCIENTIFIC DAYS
2022

Efficient, sustainable and resilient agriculture
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Demand for Short-term Distance Courses in Armenia to Boost Employability

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Abstract
This article discusses the needs assessment survey having been carried out with the identification of short-term distance courses needed to boost employability for organizing distance learning as lifelong learning (LLL) at International Scientific-Educational Center of NAS RA. The aims and objectives of the need assessment study were to find out the areas and specific topics of short-term courses needed to boost their employability after graduating an HEI and identify preferable ways of organizing distance courses such as duration of the course, required time, hour, structure, assessment methods, etc.

Keywords: distance learning/education, distance courses, needs assessment survey, target groups, employability

JEL Classification: I25, I21

1. Introduction

The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) prioritizes making education systems more inclusive, as the population becomes more and more diverse in line with regional and demographic changes (Yerevan Communiqué 2015, pp. 2-3). One of the priorities of higher education is to increase participation in higher education, support institutions that provide relevant educational activities for different students, including life-long education, develop transparency and coherence among different educational sectors, promote social orientation in higher education and improve gender balance also expanding access to education and degree opportunities.

Strategic Program of Prospective Development of the Republic of Armenia for 2014-2025 (p. 146), considering the particular importance of human resources for the long-term socio-economic development of the country, lays down the following priorities in the field of education:

1) Increasing access to the secondary and higher profesisonal education for all the segments of the population.

2) Improving the quality of professional education, its compliance with the requirements of the labor market, promoting the employment of graduates.

Despite the fact that the enrollment in higher education in Armenia has increased significantly over the past decade, reaching about 30%, it is still lower than the European average indicator (Professional Education System of the Republic of Armenia – Program on Expanding Integration to European Higher Education Area, p. 1). In Western Europe, the overall enrollment rate for tertiary education is 45-50%, while in Sweden and Norway it accounts to 65%.

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Enrollment rates in professional education in Armenia remain low compared to those of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). In 2019, the gross enrollment rate in professional educational institutions constituted 77.5%, including 50.4% in the first cycle of higher education (bachelor) and 14.6% in the second cycle of higher education (master).

The issue of access to professional education is reaching the wider community today. According to the publication of RA Statistical Committee "Social Image of Armenia and Poverty" issued in 2019, the largest group of the poor in the compared population was 60.5% with secondary and lower education, and 22.8 and 16.7% with secondary vocational and higher education, respectively.

Higher education remains inaccessible to the poor and the extremely poor. Thus, if the gross enrollment of the population aged 18-22 in universities amounted to 47% in 2017, only 17% of the extremely poor population and 29% of the poor population were enrolled in universities.

In particular, the income of children from low-income rural households is much lower than that of children from well-off urban families. The studies showed that in 2009 only 6.9% of Armenian HEI students were from the families indicated in the lowest income, while 32% of the students were from the families with the highest income group. This picture is relatively the same for 2019. Article 16 of draft law "On Approving State Program on Education Development in the Republic of Armenia till 2030" prescribes that the accessibility and affordability of professional education, especially those of higher education, is a serious problem Armenia is currently experiencing in terms of vulnerable groups of society (including people with special needs). According to the comprehensive household survey, 82.8% of students in higher education institutions in 2018 were not poor, 17.2% were poor (excluding the extremely poor), and 0% were from extremely poor households.

Thereby, increasing overall enrollment in higher education and ensuring its accessibility is a major challenge, which is also one of the main (social) directions of the EHEA action plan.

Distance education is a universally recognized educational model and a priority for the development of education, and its goal is for students to receive a high-quality education in their places of residence, especially in the regions of the Republic of Armenia and in the Diaspora at no additional costs. Another advantage of distance education is not so much the physical-spatial access, but primarily the financial accessibility compared to the traditional education models, which is a great advantage in the current socio-economic conditions.

1.1 Research Background

Within the framework of the Bologna reforms of education system, one of the commitments adopted by the Republic of Armenia is the organization and implementation of lifelong education in the country through the organization of distance education. In this context, International Scientific-Educational Center of NAS RA (ISEC NAS RA) implemented "Organization of Further Distance Education at ISEC NAS RA" project. Within the frameworks of "Education Quality and Relevance" project (Center for Education Projects PIU), the purpose of which was to direct development of the Armenian Education System towards the demands of knowledge-based economy through ensuring increase in the quality of General and Tertiary Education that meets the social-economic needs of the society. With the financial support of "Competitive Innovation Fund", International Scientific Educational Center of NAS RA implemented "Organization of Further Distance Education at ISEC NAS RA" project.

Within the framework of the Bologna Process, Armenia has undertaken commitments in education area reforms where distance learning is viewed as priority. In step with the scientific and technological development, the popularity of distance learning as lifelong education is increasing worldwide, which provides good opportunities to people in need to get further distance education or get further qualifications online at any place and time convenient to them. The project is was open to all social groups, regardless of their age, sex and religion. The only requirement to apply for distance learning courses at ISEC NAS RA was having a Bachelor's degree diploma, since distance learning education at ISEC NAS RA was considered to be as further education. The most important notion of this project, besides its main aims and objectives, was the educational content created in the Armenian language, which primarily increased the volume of online educational content in the Armenian language and promoted the involvement of young people both in Armenia and abroad to continue learning in their native language. With this project, ISEC, as a matter of fact, became the first higher educational institution in Armenia to offer massive open online courses (MOOCs) in the Armenian language in the context of lifelong learning and promoting employability in the regions.

2. Data and Methods

Prior to the implementation of the project, a needs assessment was conducted to identify attitudes of potential beneficiaries towards distance learning. The objectives of the needs assessment study were as follows:

1. To find out the level of awareness of different groups of the society about distance learning.

2. To find out the areas and specific topics of the courses which are needed (what additional knowledge is needed for different groups to find or improve their place in the labor market).

3. To identify the preferred ways of organizing distance courses (duration of the course, required time, hour, structure, assessment methods, etc.).

4. To find out what preconditions are needed for representatives of different groups to participate in further distance learning courses (price, credability, teacher qualifications, etc.).

In this research paper we will cover only two findings of the needs assessment survey: identification of the distance courses to boost employability and preferences in the organization of distance courses.

At the initial stage of the program, the following target groups were identified:

• Those who graduated from the university long ago but currently do not have a job due to educational reasons;

• Graduates and undergraduates;

• Employed people, HEI graduates, who needed updated knowledge to advance in the labour market;

• People with special needs.

Considering the specifics of distance education, the main age group was the population aged from 20 to 50.

The research was carried out with the following methods:

a) direct needs assessment

b) indirect needs assessment

In the framework of the direct evaluation, two methods of information collections were used: focus group discussions with representatives of different social groups, in-depth interviews with representatives of employers, employment agencies, and employment and career centers. In-depth interviews were conducted with people with special needs.

Indirect evaluation was made to collect additional/supporting information through the analysis of various documents containing information on labor market, labor supply and demand.

Indirect evaluation was performed by analyzing various documents containing information on the labor market, job supply and demand for additional/supporting information.

Methods of collecting information used to achieve the purpose of the research and the tools are presented below:

Table 1. Information Collection Methods and Tools

Information Collection Methods	Information Collection Tools
Focus group discussions	Questionnaire for focus groups
Interviews with employers, employment agencies, career center representatives	Questions of interviews with key stakeholders
In-depth interviews with people with special needs	In-depth interview questions

3. Research sampling

The number of focus groups constitutes 12, whereas the number of participants in each focus groups makes up 8-12 people on average.

When selecting focus group participants, the main criteria according to which the target groups of the program were identified were considered. The formation of the main part of the groups was carried out on the basis of two key criteria:

- Employment status (employed or unemployed)
- Type of location (capital and regions)

Based on the types formed in the range of crossing of the above-mentioned two criteria, the number of focus groups was distributed as follows:

Table 2. Distribution of Focus Groups in Regions of Armenia

	Yerevan	Regions
Employed	1	2
Unemployed	1	4

The gender, occupation and age of the respondents were also considered when selecting the focus group participants.

The main criterion underlying the selection of the regions was the distance from Yerevan. The economic situation, employment opportunities and socio-cultural characteristics were also discussed.

The choice of these criteria is based on their expected impact on the labor market and employment opportunities.

According to the data published by RA Statistical Committee, in recent years the proportion of people with higher education among the unemployed has been constantly increasing by an average of 11% per year. The unemployed with higher education are inferior in absolute value only to those without education. (RA Statistical Committee, 2013, pp 85-87)

The selection of the regions was conducted in the following manner:

1. The regions of the Republic of Armenia were grouped under the average distance each of them is located from Yerevan – the capital city of Armenia. The following subgroups were formed: regions located with an average distance of over 50, 50-150, and 150 km from Yerevan.

2. In the subgroups formed above, the specific regions were selected according to the following criteria: size (number of population), geographical location (north-south, east-west) and financial efficiency.

The average distance of the region from Yerevan (km)	Regions of Armenia13	Selected Regions
20-50	Ararat, Armavir, Aragatsotn, Kotayq	Ararat
50-150	Shirak, Gegharkunik, Vayots Dzor	Shirak, Gegharkunik,
150 and over	Tavush, Lori, Syuniq	Tavush

In addition to the aforementioned 8 groups, 2 discussions were held with the officers of the educational institutions subordinated to RA Defense Ministry and 2 discussions were organized with high school students and new graduates. The separation of these groups was due to the separation of the latter as an individual target group in the project. These four discussions were organized in Yerevan. The profession and the place of residence were considered when selecting the participants.

The selection of people with special needs was carried out based on criterion sampling. The main criteria were the nature of the disability, occupation, place of residence, employment status. The number of interviews constituted 10. In addition, interviews were conducted with the heads of two non-governmental organizations dealing with disability issues to identify common issues and assess the needs.

35 in-depth interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, particularly with 20 employers, representatives of 10 employment agencies, 3 representatives of career centers in 4 regions and

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13 The limited number of focus groups in each region (1 or 2) would not allow for representative representation of residents from different towns and villages from the given region. In order to neutralize the influence of the factor of distance from the regional center on the results of the focus groups, selecting the residents from the regional centers and the surrounding villages was chosen as a principle.

Yerevan. The criteria for selecting employers were the size of the enterprise and the sector of their activities.

Table 3. Distribution of Sampling

	Yerevan	Ararat	Tavush	Gegharkunik	Shirak
Employer	8	3	3	3	3
Employment Center/Agency Representative	6	1	1	1	1
Career Center Representative	3				

Labor market studies conducted in recent years were used for the secondary assessment, which included the description of the attitudes towards the institute of education, expectations, gaps of different groups of the population, the description of the knowledge and skills provided by educational institutions and compliance with labor market requirements.

3. Results and Discussion

Yorke defines employability as "the set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy" (2006a, p. 8). In the same way, Lourtie (2009) argues that employability should be a goal of any training in any cycle, be it first, second, third, or even short cycle. The aim is to increase the graduate's chances of obtaining employment and being successful in his/her occupation.

 In our case, the need for additional knowledge for employability or career promotion was more or less important for the focus group participants. However, there was a noticeable difference in the attitudes between those employed and unemployed. The understanding of the need for knowledge was more pronounced in the groups of the employed participants. Those unemployed, especially during the discussions in the regions, were frustrated and disappointed as they did not see connection between knowledge and employment opportunities. As to them, the main condition for getting a job was the strong network of friends and colleagues.

On the other hand, employers valued professional skills, work experience, and communication skills when hiring new employees. Based on their experience, it is difficult to find employees with the following skills and characteristics:

- work experience
- knowledge of languages
- computer skills
- management skills
- communication skills
- networking
- fundraising and grant writing skills

Considering that the above skills/knowledge can be obtained in short-term courses, they can also be organized in the form of distance learning. According to "Aspirations and Expectations

of the Youth of Armenia" report, 5.1% of people aged 18-30 study in short-term courses (RA Ministry of Sports and Youth, 2012, p. 41).

Based on the above-mentioned survey, 10.5% of young people in Armenia want to set up their own business (RA Ministry of Sports and Youth, 2012, p. 56), which suggests that training on business management skills may also be desirable for them. Such an opinion was also expressed by some participants in the course of the regional focus group discussions.

A major attraction of distance education is the ability to learn "anytime and anyplace". While seemingly abolishing the access barriers experienced by traditional students, distance education has its own set of restrictions for students. Distance education may be widely available, but it is not necessarily widely accessible, which has sparked much discussion and research into "information haves and have-nots" (Kerka 1989 , p. 2).

These student access barriers can be defined as follows (Galusha, 1998):

- Costs and motivators
- Feedback and teacher contact
- Alienation and isolation
- Student support and services
- Lack of experience/training

The needs assessment also aimed to identify the preferred ways of organizing distance courses (duration of the course, required time, hour, structure, assessment methods, etc.).

Duration

Most of the participants in the focus group discussions found it difficult to specify the specific duration of the course, as, according to them, it depends on the complexity, amount of materials and structure of the specific course. However, the maximum length of time acceptable to participants having taken part in the discussion was 6 months. The average duration was 2-3 months. It was desirable for both employed and non-employed participants.

However, the length of the course was not, in fact, a decisive factor in the decision to participate in the course. The participants of the discussion were ready to spend 4-6 hours per day on average.

Hours

The opinions of the participants having taken part in the discussions related to the course hours during the day can be grouped as follows: the employed preferred to have in the evening, the unemployed women until 16:00 or late in the evening, whereas the hour did not matter for the unemployed men. The approach was the same for people with special needs interviewed. The employers mentioned that the courses should be organized in the evening.

Price

The main tendency regarding the price of the courses during focus group discussions was that the participants found it difficult to answer how much they were willing to pay for short-term distance courses being inexperienced of participating in such courses and not having a clear idea about them. The prices discussed constituted from 20,000 AMD up to 50,000 AMD, which, however, they were willing to paid only if they had guarantees that the participation will directly contribute to being employed or promotion at work. However, the vast majority of participants said they would only take online courses if they were free. This attitude prevailed in all discussions.

Employers also found it difficult to say how much they were willing to pay for their employees' online training. Some of them, yet, mentioned fees, predominantly fees ranging from 25,000-30,000 AMD.

Based on the focus group discussions and the opinions expressed during the interviews with people with special needs, employers, employment centers, the identified list of short-term distance courses that are of interest to almost everyone, regardless of profession, field of employment (classified by importance and frequency of being mentioned) is as follows:

- Communication skills
- Basics of accounting
- English (different levels)
- Marketing
- Computer skills
- Business management
- Management psychology
- Project and time management
- PR
- Culture of speech, rhetorical art
- Basics of tourism development
- System graphics, design
- HR, staff management

Interestingly, the employers identified the following list of short-term courses based on their priorities and needs:

- Communication skills
- Marketing
- Customer service
- Negotiation skills
- Accounting
- Time management
- Advertising
- Computer design
- Foreign languages
- Market research
- Management skills
- Tourism management

4. Conclusions

As we can see, most courses and skills identified both among the respondents and the employers mainly match giving grounds to infer that higher education in Armenia basically fails to provide these skills within the frameworks of their academic curricula, though most of them can formally be found in the syllabi and curricula of the majority of the Armenian higher educational institution. The lack of the skills and knowledge identified as hindrance to future employability can be supplemented through short-term distance courses in the context of lifelong learning. Unlike different approaches to the format and organization of short-term distant courses, all the respondents were willing to pay for further education only in case of a

solid guarantee of being employed or promotion at work. However, the vast majority of the surveyed would only take short-term distance courses if they were free, which was a dominant attitude in all discussions.

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