

Open Universiteit Nederland (OUNL)

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Facts about the institution

Name of institution	Open Universiteit Nederland
URL of institution	http://www.ou.nl/ Additional information taken from: http://www.ou.nl/eCache/DEF/36.html
Country	The Netherlands
Number of employees	585 full-time, appr. 115 part-time
Levels in the educational systems	University Level

Introduction

Open Universiteit Nederland, founded in 1984, is the youngest university in the Netherlands.

It is an independent government funded institution for distance learning at university level. The Dutch Government's purpose in establishing and funding the institution was to make higher education accessible to anyone with the necessary aptitude and interests, regardless of formal qualifications.

It is the only one in the country that provides open higher distance education. Its two other tasks as assigned by law are: contributing to the innovation of Dutch higher education, and to the solution of the shortage of teachers in Dutch primary and secondary schools. In addition, it aims to play a key role, both for the Netherlands and internationally, as the prime university for lifelong learning.

OUNL develops, provides and promotes innovative higher distance education of top quality, in collaboration with networks and alliances. As the prime university for lifelong learning, it addresses the wide-ranging learning needs of people during their course of life, plus the need to achieve a considerable increase of the knowledge level of the community at large.

OUNL seeks to be an institution that is strongly anchored in the Dutch higher education system through its educational, research and innovation activities, and that also operates successfully in the field of lifelong learning. It is a pioneer in open higher distance education and sees itself as a leader in educational innovation, both in the Netherlands and internationally.

With a scope of activities that links up with the needs of the community, OUNL can count on broad interest, as reflected in the significant enrolment number for its educational offerings. It also offers a professional and result-oriented work climate that activates the competencies of its staff toward joint realization of objectives.

http://www.ou.nl/Docs/English/Corporate_brochure_2006_UK_def.pdf

Some important figures:

The following information relates to figures from 2005:

The total budget of OUNL was €61,4 million. The total number of staff was 732 (including 115 part-time employees).

In 2005 the university had registered 18,474 active students, 51 percent female and 49 percent male. Course enrolments in 2005 were 44,432. (Statistics from 2006 shows a reduction, and ended somewhat over 38,000 course enrolments.)

8 percent of the students were in the age group 18 to 25, 35 percent between 26 and 35, 33 percent between 36 and 45, while 24 percent were over 45 years old.

44 percent of the student body were working in a full-time jobs, and half of the student population stated that they chose OUNL because of the university's time- and location-independent study programmes.

Over 40 percent (6,592 students) were categorised as "second-chance" students, i.e. students who have never completed a higher professional or university-level programme at a Dutch educational institution before (numbers not including Belgian students).

Courses and programmes can be studied from abroad. Approximately 400 Dutch students were registered with addresses outside the Netherlands in addition to the 2,082 students (11%) enrolled at a Belgian study centre.

OUNL operates 12 study centres in the Netherlands and 6 study centres in Belgium.

In addition to the solutions for Dutch speaking people in the Netherlands, Belgium and internationally who can study in the Dutch language, the university cooperates with the British Open University e.g. by offering support to English speaking students in the Netherlands through its study centre in the Hague.

<http://www.ou.nl/eCache/DEF/71/482.html>

Contextual factors concerning online education in the Netherlands

The Netherlands has in spite of its size and dense population a long tradition of private distance education. The market for OUNL is primarily the Netherlands with 16 million inhabitants, but also Flanders with its 6 million inhabitants, as they speak the same language. The market includes Dutch people living abroad.

The technology infrastructure for online distance education in the Netherlands is considered to be excellent, as broadband is almost everywhere available. The actual use of broadband is also among the highest in Europe, and was 27 percent in September 2006, and use is growing rapidly. According to spokesmen for OUNL the acceptance for e-learning in the actual target groups is considered to be very good.

Concerning **digital literacy, already in 2002 more than 75 percent of the Dutch population** has a pc at home, and over 60 percent had access to the Internet.

Concerning national policy in favour of the development of online learning at OUNL, it is a task assigned by law that the OUNL shall contribute to innovation of Dutch higher education. At present, 2007, the national government has decided to channel the funds for educational innovation in higher education and e-learning through SURF, a foundation in which higher education and research collaborate on the development of ICT in the Netherlands. This may have a negative influence on OUNL's prominent position as innovator of e-learning.

SURF is the higher education and research partnership organisation for network services and information and communications technology (ICT). The mission of SURF is to operate and

innovate a joint advanced ICT infrastructure, with the aim of fully utilising the possibilities of ICT to improve the quality of higher education and research, especially in situations where collaboration can yield results that transcend the possibilities of individual institutions. The SURF Foundation consists of a central office, which is responsible for formulating and executing a policy on educational innovation within higher education, and three central platforms which implement that policy: Research, Education and Organisation. Its two subsidiaries, SURFnet and SURFdiensten, are responsible for carrying out the policy on infrastructure facilities and software licences for higher education.

<http://www.surf.nl/smartsite.dws?ch=ENG&id=5290>)

History

OUNL was established in 1984. The OUNL actively explored the possibilities of online education from the very beginning. The Bulletin Board Systems of the early eighties were quickly superseded by the WWW. In 1987 the OUNL put its first electronic learning environment, Studienet, online. All courses and programmes were and are supported through Studienet. The platform was developed within the OUNL itself. Studienet was one of the first operational learning environments in the Netherlands.

OUNL sees the use of ICT as a means to improve the efficiency, effectivity and flexibility of distance education. It is not an end in itself. The education should be technology enabled, not technology driven

OUNL was from the beginning very active in the development of applications, but also in the development of standardisation. Educational Markup Language (EML) was developed at OUNL. On the basis of EML the internationally recognized IMS Learning Design, today's standard specification.

To fulfill its mission of encouraging innovation in higher education the OUNL needed from its birth expertise in pedagogy and technology. At the Open University of the Netherlands, that expertise is channelled through the Educational Technology Expertise Centre (OTEC). OTEC has ambition to be a leading party, in the Netherlands and internationally, in the field of educational technology. This mission leads to the following core activities:

- research in the field of educational sciences and educational technology
- the development of new educational technologies
- implementation of the latest insights in the field of education and educational technology in the courses and curricula offered by the Open Universiteit Nederland and her partners
- developing and offering educational programs in its own field of expertise: educational sciences and educational technology. Since september 2003 OTEC offers a MSc programme Active Learning (in Dutch).

<http://www.ou.nl/eCache/DEF/22/853.html>

OTEC has a long experience in designing, developing and implementating electronic learning environments. This means that systems, pedagogy and technology have been developed within the institution itself. Over 20 years of experience in the field has, according to OUNL, made OTEC one of the leading players in this field in Europe and internationally. The development of online learning has been characterised by an evolutionary step-by-step process.

O TEC combines research, development and implementation. It has a solid reputation in the field of evaluation research and quality control. This is the result of its monitoring and evaluation activities within the OUNL. The results from continuous evaluation research constitute input for the research, development and implementation processes. O TEC also participates actively in European and national projects in the field of innovation of education in order to share and develop its expertise. The expertise of O TEC is also available for other institutions in collaboration projects.

Technical issues

The competence in information and communication is by OUNLA described as above average to excellent. A programme for further developments in educational technology, The Learning Technology Development Programme (LTD) (2003-2008), was approved by the board of the OUNL in 2003. The programme concerns *Learning Networks*. It is the ultimate, long term aim of this LTD programme to develop a new approach towards eLearning, by searching for a coherent set of theories, models and technologies with the help of which one may establish and understand so-called Learning Networks.

Learning Networks - as they are defined in this programme - use ICT networks to connect people, organizations, autonomous agents and learning resources to establish the emergence of 'effective lifelong learning'. <http://www.ou.nl/eCache/DEF/17/732.html>

Although OUNL is actively experimenting with the newest technologies, what is offered the students as structural e-learning is always based on proven technologies and standard hardware/software. Additional hardware should not be necessary. Additional obligatory software is provided from the university if needed in specific courses. When students are participating in innovative pilot projects, the hardware/software (when needed) are provided by OUNL.

It is seen as quite a complex process to integrate IT systems used in online learning. There is a need from the view of cost-effectiveness to reduce the number of different systems. However, there is also a challenge to see which contributions new systems/new technology can provide to online-education. A strength of the OUNL is that online teaching and learning is integrated in one administrative system, called SPIL. At the same time it might be seen as a weakness that – because of this integration – changes require a complex process.

Courses

The OUNL offers 6 different bachelor programmes and 13 master programmes on Management Sciences, Cultural Sciences, Law, Psychology, Environmental Sciences, Informatics and Educational sciences. Student support and tuition of all programmes and courses is mainly organized online. An ever-increasing number of courses consist of a textbook and an online workbook or online tasks.

According to OUNL almost all subjects are suitable for online learning. Some – very few – exceptions are seen to be courses that include competencies such as argumentation, presentation, holding a plea (in law), defending a paper and similar areas. In these cases preparation and exercises can be done online, but at least once the students should perform the behaviour 'in real life' with real people as an audience or as adversaries.

Most courses of OUNL are arranged with flexible start-up and progression schedules. OUNL is an open university in many meanings of the word, also concerning starting dates and

flexible progression. In this respect, OUNL claims to be more flexible than e.g. the British Open University, as OUNL students generally can start a course at any time.

As a result of the priority to flexibility, it is only natural that concerning communication between students and teachers and between students emphasis has to be put on asynchronous rather than synchronous communication media.

Management, strategy and attitudes

The management of the OUNL is definitely very supportive towards online education and e-learning. E-learning/online-education is one of the main working-themes within the Executive board. It is also a central theme in the new strategy-plan (2006-2009) in relation to lifelong learning.

The different groups of staff also have a general and overall positive attitude towards online teaching. Positive attitudes and active involvement of both management and academic and other staff are natural and necessary as the OUNL was a dedicated distance education institution from the very start.

OUNL claims to have a clear strategy for online education. The present strategy is outlined in the new strategy-plan for 2006-2009. E-learning/online education in relation to lifelong learning is the central theme of the document. By the end of 2009 the OUNL is supposed to be recognised as a key-player in the field of e-learning. By 2009 all courses should be digitalised and offered as online/ web-based education.

At present, the strategy plan is quite new. The work to implement the strategy has just started (January 2007). In the process of writing the strategy plan several meetings were arranged, where the staff could contribute ideas etc. Within the phase of implementation, there will be a great number of staff-members involved. Besides that, communication within the OUNL regarding the implementation is seen as an important issue.

Quality issues related to online education is seen as very important. In the Dutch higher education system there is a new system for quality assurance/accreditation. All institutions, OUNL included, are taking part in the new quality system.

Within the OUNL the internal system for quality assurance has recently been renewed. One focal element within the system is the evaluation of courses by students. Comments etc. from students are used to update the courses. Overall, courses are being updated and revised every 5 years. The OUNL is known - in fact since the start in 1984 - for the high quality level of its courses. The formal continuous evaluation and revision system has, according to OUNL, definitely played an important role in the claimed success of the institution. Within the OUNL, OTEC has a specific responsibility for evaluation research.

In general, the OUNL is satisfied with the effectiveness of its administrative systems and routines for administration of online learning.

Regarding the development of online education, i.e. course development, workloads are considered to be quite good predictable and manageable. However, concerning student support and tuition for example, this is less predictable/manageable, mainly because students are to a great extent free to choose courses according to their own study-plan. Students can also start with courses at a moment of their choice.

In the past - and especially for the development of courses – the OUNL has collaborated quite often with other institutions. Over the last years the collaboration has seems to have become less intense. For the next years OUNL sees that there is a need, especially from the viewpoint of cost-effectiveness, to extend the collaboration again.

As a department within the OUNL, OTEC collaborates with other institutions for higher education, and also with institutions for adult education, companies and governments. OTEC participates in European and other projects in the field of innovation of education.

As an institution established by the government, the OUNL has a high degree of credibility with the government and public administration. This has been very important because the OUNL is depending for a substantial part of it's income on government funding. It is also important from the perspective of getting new tasks and new responsibilities from the government.

Since the start in 1984 the OUNL has always been concerned about handling large numbers of courses, large numbers of students and large numbers of assignments. As a distance teaching university the OUNL has for quite some years experience and expertise in doing so. This experience and expertise has helped in the perspective of providing efficient online services.

Economy

OUNL states that there is no data available on cost-effectiveness of its online courses. Concerning questions on stable and predictable income from the operation of online courses it is stated that data is not available. However, recruitment is seen as quite stable, and as the OUNL is financed mainly by state funds and less by income from student fees, this gives certain stability to the income level.

Although the major part of the university's income comes from state budgets, OUNL does experience some pressure to be flexible and to adapt to a continuously changing market. Specifically, OUNL is looking for measures to reduce development time and reduce the time it takes to launch new courses in the market.

To be able to be flexible and adapt to market needs reduce the percentage of “fixed” staff and increase the percentage of “flexible” staff. This is an issue in the new strategy plan.