

Open Universiteit Nederland (OUNL)

Facts about the institution

Name of institution	Open Universiteit Nederland
URL of institution	http://www.ou.nl/
Country	The Netherlands
Number of employees	The total number of employees is 727. Of those 378 work full-time, 349 part-time.
Levels in the educational systems	University Level
Interviewer	Torstein Rekkedal
Interviewed persons	Secretary to the Executive board Harry Ummels Communication advisor dr. Marga G. M. Winnubst Additional information taken from: http://www.ou.nl/eCache/DEF/36.html

Information from the website:

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

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 a leader in educational innovation, both in the Netherlands and internationally.

With a scope of activities that links up well 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.

Open Universiteit Nederland in figures (2005):

Budget: €1,4 million

Staff: 732
Active students: 18,474

Student profile:
Gender 51% female, 49% male

Age 18-25: 8%
Age 26-35: 35%
Age 36-45: 33%
Above age 45: 24%

44% of the student body has a full-time job.

49% of students choose OUNL because of the time- and location-independent character of its study programmes.

35% (6,519 students) follow an academic programme.

43% (6,592) are second-chance students, who have never completed a higher professional or university-level programme at a Dutch educational institution before (numbers not including Belgian students).

Student segmentation: 88.7% (16,392 students) are enrolled at a Dutch study or support centre, including 398 students who live abroad, while 11.3% (2,082 students) are enrolled at a Belgian study centre.

Study centres: 12 study centres in the Netherlands and 6 study centres in Belgium.

Support centres: 3 support centres in the Netherlands.

Electronic learning environment: 21,857 students and alumni use an electronic learning environment.

Bachelor programmes: 6
Master programmes: 13
Academic courses: 270
Course enrolments: 44,432 (Course enrolments 2006: 38,098)
Course certificates in 2005: 24,223
Propaedeutic certificates: 592
Academic certificates in 2005: 463

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.

Contextual factors

Market size

Our market is the Netherlands (16 million inhabitants) and also Flanders (6 million inhabitants) as they speak the same language. The market includes Dutch people living abroad.

Market readiness to use online technology

The technology infrastructure is excellent, almost everywhere broadband is available. The actual use of broadband is among the highest in Europe (26,8% in September 2006 and growing rapidly).

Target group acceptance of e-learning

Overall, the acceptance is considered very good.

Digital literacy in population

Data (2002): 76% from the Dutch population has a pc at home. 62% has access to Internet.

National policy

It is a task assigned by law that the Open Universiteit Netherland shall contribute to innovation of Dutch higher education. This year 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.

(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

1. How would you describe the history of distance education in your institution?

As mentioned the 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. It 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 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. It developed EML (Educational Markup Language) and on the basis of EML the internationally recognized IMS Learning Design, today's standard specification.

2. How has competence in distance education developed in your institution, and how would you describe this competence today?

To fulfill its mission of encouraging innovation in higher education the Open Universiteit Nederland needed expertise of a specific kind. At the Open University of the Netherlands, that expertise is channelled through the Educational Technology Expertise Centre (OTEC). The Educational Technology Expertise Centre wants to be a leading party, nationally 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 (Dutch) MSc programme Active Learning.
<http://www.ou.nl/eCache/DEF/22/853.html>

OTEC has a lot of experience in designing, developing and implementing 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 have made OTEC one of the leading players in this field in Europe and internationally.

3. Has this development been abrupt or would you describe it more as a gradual step-by-step process?

It has been a gradual step-by-step process.

4. How has online education been followed up by evaluation and research through the years and what is the situation today?

As mentioned, OTEC 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 of this evaluation research forms input for the research, development and implementation processes. OTEC actively participates in European and national projects in the field of innovation of education in order to share and develop its expertise. And the expertise of OTEC is available for other institutions in collaboration projects.

Present developments: 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>

Technical issues

5. How would you describe competence in information and communication technology in your institution?

As seen from the above, it should be described as above average to excellent.

6. To which extent are distance education courses in your institution based on widely used technologies that can be taken into use by students without requiring them to buy additional hardware or software? (in addition to what they have from before)

Even though we experiment with the newest technologies, what we offer our students as structural e-learning is based on proven technologies and standard hardware/software. Additional hardware is not necessary. Additional obligatory software is provided when needed. When students participate in innovative pilot projects, the hardware/software (when needed) are provided.

7. How would you describe the integration between different IT-systems that are involved in distance education in your institution?

It's a quite complex process. There is a need (from the view of cost-effectiveness) to reduce the number of different systems; but there is also a challenge to see which contributions new systems/new technology can provide to online-education.

8. What are the strengths and weaknesses of technical systems for administration of distance education, in terms of being effective?

The strength is that it is integrated in one administrative system, called SPIL. The weakness is that – because of this integration – changes require a complex process.

Courses

9. Which subjects are covered by online education in your institution and what is the relative importance of different subjects (in terms of student “production”)?

We offer courses and 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.

10. How would you describe the “onlineability” of the subjects your institution has chosen for distance education?

Almost all subjects are onlineable. Some – very few – exceptions are courses that include competencies as argumentation, presentation, holding a plea (in law), defending a paper and such. Preparation and exercises can be done online, but at least once they should do this ‘in real life’ with real people as an audience or as adversaries.

11. Do the online courses provided by your institution have flexible start-up and progression?

Yes, most of them do. OUNL is an open university in many meanings, also concerning starting dates and flexible progression. In this respect we are e.g. more flexible than the British Open University as OUNL students generally can start a course at any time.

12. What is the relative importance of synchronous and asynchronous communication between students and teachers (and among students if they communicate with each other)?

As a result of priority to flexibility it is natural that emphasis has to be put on asynchronous communication.

Management, strategy and attitudes

13. How would you describe involvement from the leadership in terms of being supportive?

Very supportive. E-learning/online-education is one of the main working-themes within the Executive board. It's also a central theme in the new strategy-plan (2006-2009) in relation to lifelong learning.

14. How would you describe the attitudes of the different groups of staff towards online teaching?

The overall attitude is a very positive one.

15. Does your institution have a strategy for online education? If yes, what is (briefly) the content of the strategy and how is it followed up by employees in your organisation?

The strategy is outlined in the new strategy-plan 2006-2009. E-learning/online education in relation to lifelong learning is the central theme. By the end of 2009 the OUNL has to be (recognised as) a key-player in the field of e-learning. All of our courses will be digitalised/online (web-based).

The strategy plan is quite new. We are now working to implement it. In the process of writing the strategy plan there were several meetings where the staff could give 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 an important issue.

16. How does your institution deal with quality issues related to online education (e.g. in terms of strategy, control and management)?

In the Dutch higher education system there is a new system for quality assurance/ accreditation. All institutions (incl. OUNL) are taking part in this system.

Within the OUNL we have reviewed our own system for quality assurance. One element within this system is the evaluation of courses by students. Comments etc. from students are used to update the courses. Overall, courses are being updated each 5 years. The OUNL is known - in fact since the start in 1984 - for the high quality level of its courses. This has definitely played an important role in the success of our institution.

Within the OUNL, OTEC is responsible for evaluation research.

17. How would you describe the administrative routines related to online education in terms of effectiveness?

The effectiveness is good.

18. To which extent do teachers involved in online education have predictable and manageable workloads?

Regarding the development of online education (courses) the workload is quite good predictable and manageable. Regarding for example student support and tuition, this is less predictable/manageable as students are free (to a great extent) to choose courses according to their own study-plan. Students can also start with courses at a moment of their choice.

19. To which extent does your institution collaborate with other educational institutions?

In the past - and especially for the development of courses - the OUNL collaborated quite often with other institutions. Over the last years the collaboration has become less intense. For the next years there is a need (especially from the view of cost-effectiveness) to extend the collaboration again.

O TEC collaborates with other institutions for higher education, with institutions for adult education, companies and governments. O TEC participates in European and other projects in the field of innovation of education.

20. How would you describe the credibility of your institution (both formal and informal) with the government and public administration?

The credibility is good. This is/has been important because the OUNL is depending for a substantial part of its income on government funding. It is also important from the perspective of getting new 'tasks' from the government.

21. How are you able to handle the large number of online courses and students?

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

Economy

22. How would you describe the cost-effectiveness of online education in your institution?

Data not available.

23. To which extent is income from operation of online education stable and predictable?

No data available. However, recruitment is quite stable and the OUNL is financed by €32 million from state funds and €12 million from student fees, which give a certain stability to the income level.

24. To which extent does your institution experience a pressure to be flexible to be able to adapt to a changing market?

The OUNL does experience some pressure. In this perspective we are for example looking for measures to reduce the time-to-market of our courses.

25. To which extent does your institution apply a strategy of flexible employment and use staff to adapt to changes in markets?

This is a theme in the new strategy-plan. In the coming years the percentage of 'fixed' staff members has to be reduced in favour of 'flexible' staff.

Additional factors

26. What other factors have contributed to sustainability, robustness and the achievement of critical mass in your institution?

No answer.