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Combination Study
of Teaching Special Subjects

Abstract

The paper informs about experience of realization of the combination study "Specialization in Pedagogy – Teaching Special Subjects" at the Pedagogical Faculty, University of Ostrava. It also presents results of the research focused on the evaluation of the organization aspect of this study, study and text support and the balance between the distance and presence form.

Key words: *combination study, text study support, organization, research*

1. Introduction

The so called combination study (the type of study which is a combination of full-time as well as distance form) is now quite common at universities around the Czech Republic. At the Pedagogical Faculty, University of Ostrava, for example, approximately equal number of students is accepted to the first year of the study fields accredited as the combination ones as those belonging to the full-time study. In spite of that there is no general opinion how the combination study should be realized and organized, and individual faculties or even departments look for their own optimum ways. Also there is not enough information about it. Therefore our manual summarizes important data concerning the way how the combination study guaranteed by the Department of Technical and Vocational Education, Pedagogical Faculty, University of Ostrava, is realized.

2. Study fields characteristics

The Department of Technical and Vocational Education guarantees a three-year bachelor's degree study field Teaching Special Subjects in two specializations – Trade and Services and Engineering, followed by a master's degree study. These study fields are accredited as the combination ones, no fee; the bachelor one in the study programme within the study programme Specialization in Pedagogy, the master one within the study programme Secondary School Teacher Training. The bachelor study is finished by the defence of the bachelor dissertation and state exam, and the master study by the defence of the diploma thesis.

The students are often secondary technical school or comprehensive school teachers who do not have the university education. They are mostly highly motivated to graduate, because it is often connected with higher salary, or they even need the degree to keep their job.

At present there are about seventy-five students in one year in the specialization of Trade and Services in the bachelor study, about forty in the master study, while the demand exceeds the offer. There are fewer candidates interested in the specialization of Engineering. About eighteen students are accepted to individual groups.

2.1. The Course of the Study

In every term there are usually six or seven subjects, approximately one quarter of which is credited, the others are finished by an exam, always on the presence basis. The students obviously fulfil the tasks assigned by the teachers, they write seminar papers, etc.

About half of the subjects consist of pedagogical and psychological disciplines, shared by both specializations. The remaining subjects develop the chosen study field. For the specialization of Trade and Services these are for example: Economics, Marketing, Management, Accounting, Tax System, Firm Economy, etc.; for the specialization of Engineering for example Technical Drawing, Statics, Machine Parts, Machines and Equipment, Engineering Technology, Materials, etc.

The full-time study is realized on the premises of the University of Ostrava once a week (on weekdays), in two four-hour blocks, nine times during a term at maximum. The amount of time for individual subjects ranges from 4 to 24 hours. The definite range of the full-time study is fixed after consultation with particular teachers and it depends on the type of the subject, personality of the teacher, suitable teaching aids and the students' needs.

During the last two years the full-time study has been reduced for some subjects, mainly in connection with the fact that suitable study support has been created. Besides, the structure of this form of study has been changing – "classical lecturing"

has been replaced by a combination of lectures, seminars, tutorials and work-shops – according to what is most suitable for the particular subject. It is mainly the teacher who decides that (after consultation with the guarantor of the subject).

This transformation is carried out gradually, without sudden changes. There are several reasons for it. First, we consider the study as a well-established and good quality form of study and thoughtless radical changes could harm it. So far we do not have relevant studies which would show the effectiveness and optimum level of establishing distance forms of study with regard to increasing the quality of teaching. Another factor is obviously the negative attitude of some colleagues as far as using modern teaching methods is concerned. We must also consider abilities and possibilities of the students. A considerable number of students, for example, do not have an easy access to computer technology, so it cannot be applied so widely (of the research results).

2.2. Organization of the Study

Organization and administration of the presented combination study fields is shared by three teachers and the secretary of the Department of Technical and Vocational Education. One clerk in the study department is appointed to deal with all the "non-full-time" study fields at the faculty. We do not consider these conditions to be ideal, but we cannot expect that a university or faculty workplace "covering" distance and combination study will be established in the near future, so this is the only way.

The teachers are University of Ostrava employees as well as external teachers. In the Trade and Services specialization, the external teachers (mostly from the Faculty of Economics, VŠB – Technical University of Ostrava) cover about 40 % of the teaching, for the Engineering specialization the number, of external teachers amounts to only about 10%.

Mutual communication between the organizers, administrators, teachers and students is mostly realized personally, but also by telephone, e-mail and post (which is the least frequent form). An office with two organizers serves as the information centre (of the research results).

Administration is realized partly in "paper" form, partly by means of information system IS-Student, used by the whole university. Originally it was focused only on the full-time study, now, after some adjustments it can be used for combination study as well. The teachers can, for example, set examination terms and give marks via Internet; the students can apply for the exams in the same way. In the past, making use of special information system for the distance study was considered, but they were not proved very practical, or, as the case may be, the weak points outbalanced the strong ones.

The basic information about the study can be found in the Internet, in the media, by means of information material at education fairs, etc. Each candidate receives a letter containing the necessary information before the entrance examination. Each student enrolling in the first year of the study gets a booklet called "The Information on the Study".

2.3. Text Study Support

In the course of several years, text study supports have been created for a considerable part of the study. They are written mostly by the teachers of the subjects. Part of this material has been printed and a sufficient number of issues have been located in the University Library where the students can borrow them. The remaining material is in the Internet, the students can find it on the pages appointed for these subjects. The particular teacher gives the students two security code words to have an access to this material. Some study fields have both a printed and electronic form.

The form of the individual text study support differs (no model has been chosen). The authors – teachers have certain freedom, because it is mainly the teacher of the particular subject who should know which form is the best for his/her subject. One part of the research has been devoted to the students' evaluation of the individual "distance elements" in the text study support.

3. Research

The goal of the research was to find out information concerning the students of the presented study fields and the students' evaluation of the organization aspect of the study, text study support and balance between the distance and full-time study so that the standard of the study could be increased on the basis of the results. The research was carried out in March 2004 by means of questionnaires. Closed questions were used with the possibility to express additional opinions.

3.1. Set of Respondents Characteristics

The respondents were the students of the above-mentioned study fields. The students of the combination bachelor study field Information Technology in Education guaranteed by the Department of Information and Communication Technologies at the Pedagogical Faculty were included as well, to provide the comparison and to increase the research validity. The total number of the respondents was 302; 68 % of them were women and 32 % men. The average age was about 36 (of the picture 1 for details).
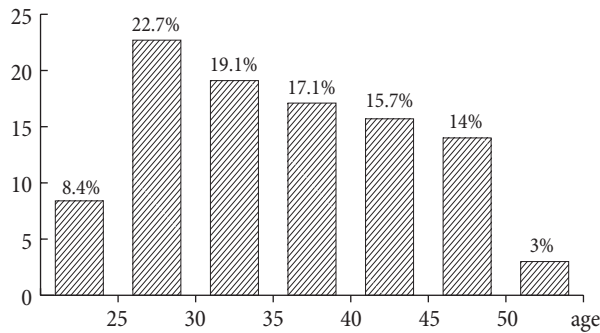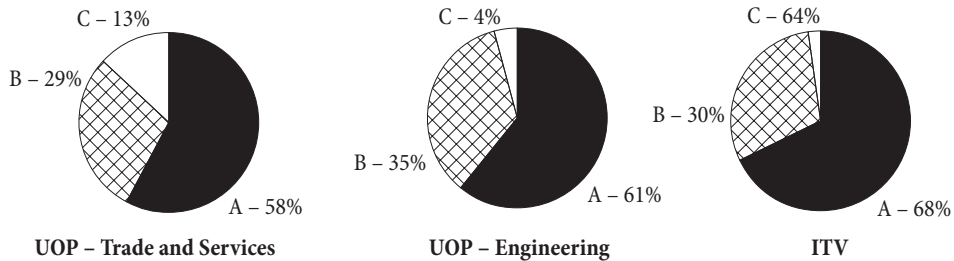
Picture 1: Age range of the respondents.

The important data is the time accessibility of the educational institution. It takes less than one hour to get to the place of teaching for clear majority of the respondents (62.2 %), less than two hours for 15.7 %, less than three hours for 9.7 % and over three hours for 8.3 %.

It is also very important that most students of the study field Teaching Special Subjects (UOP) work (or worked) as teachers. On the other hand, in the study field Information Technology in Education (ITV) there is a minority of teachers (of picture 2).

UOP – Trade and Services   UOP – Engineering   ITV
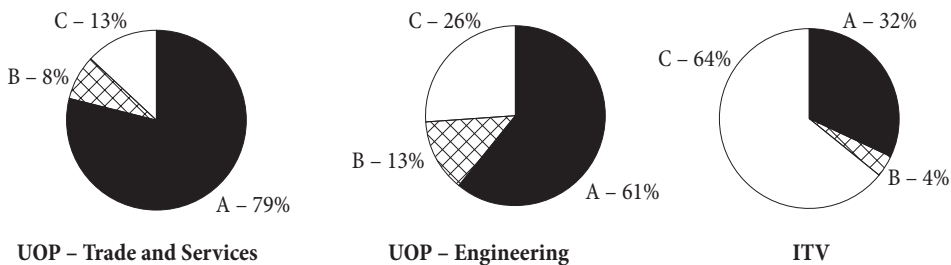
**Picture 2:** Respondents' employment (Clue: A – teaches; B – have taught; C – have not taught).

About 60 % of the respondents have a computer at home or at work, but for 40 % this presents a certain complication (29 % have a limited access to computer – at home or at work, 11 % are entirely dependent on libraries, internet cafés or friends, etc.). As far as Information Technology is concerned, the situation is a little better (of picture 3 for details).

C – 13%
B – 29%
A – 58%
UOP – Trade and Services

C – 4%
B – 35%
A – 61%
UOP – Engineering

C – 64%
B – 30%
A – 68%
ITV

Picture 3: The respondents' access to computer and Internet (Clue: A – without problems; B – limited at home or at work; C – problematic in the library, at a friend's place, etc.)

3.2. Research Results

The research has shown that most students are fully satisfied with the present range of the full-time study. The students do not want to decrease the teaching time, on the other hand, about 10 % of the students would welcome a larger extent of the full-time (of picture 4).
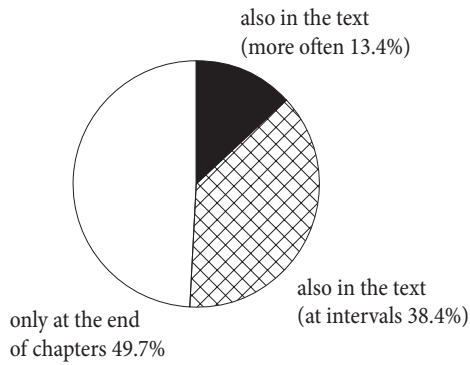
4.7% — would appreciate fewer hours
85.1% — agree
10.2% — would appreciate more hours
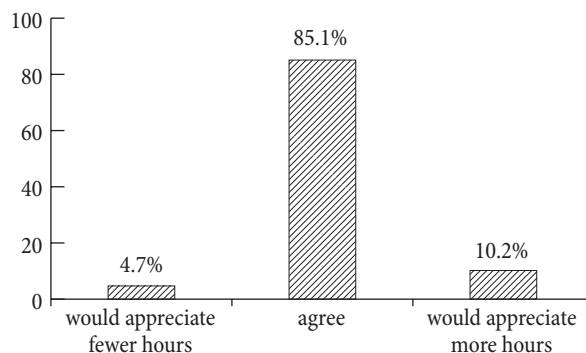
Picture 4: The results of the research evaluating the extent of the presence form of the study.
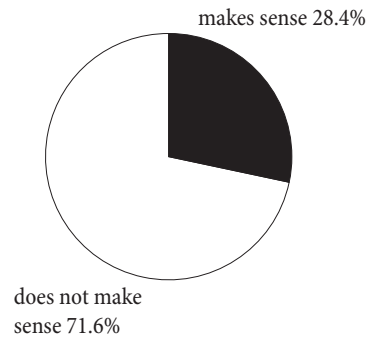
Another set of questions within the research klas focused on the preparation of the students. Almost half of the respondents (49.7%) prefer learning from the text study support. A considerable part (20.8%) of the respondents find no significant difference. What is very important is the fact that almost everybody prefers studying from printed text (98.3%), only 5 students (1.7%) stated that they prefer studying directly from the computer screen.

Also the students' answers concerning the text study support itself provide interesting information. Frequent questions and tasks do not comply with the students' wishes (of picture 5a). Almost three quarters of the respondents state that it makes no sense to give time necessary for studying over individual chapters (of picture 5b). On the contrary, the majority of the respondents (88%) appreciate using
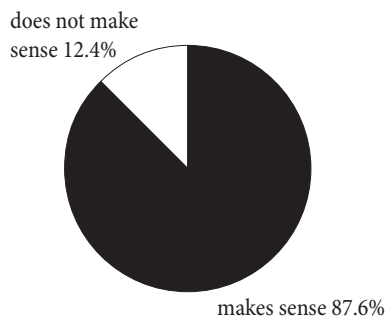
key words for individual chapters (of picture 5c). As far as the importance if the information marks is concerned, the research result is ambiguous (of picture 5d).
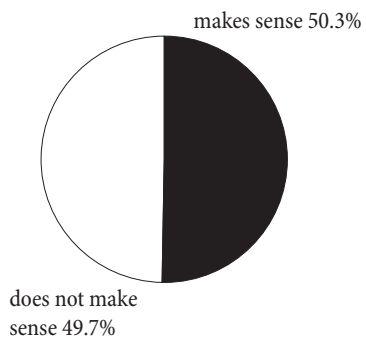
also in the text
(more often 13.4%)

makes sense 28.4%

only at the end
of chapters 49.7%

also in the text
(at intervals 38.4%)

does not make
sense 71.6%

Picture 5a: Questions and tasks.

Picture 5b: Giving time necessary for study.

does not make
sense 12.4%

makes sense 50.3%

makes sense 87.6%

does not make
sense 49.7%

Picture 5c: Giving key words.

Picture 5d: Giving information marks.

The research results prove that the students are generally satisfied with the way of communication with the organizers, study department and the teachers. Only 5 % on average have some objections (of table 1).

Table 1 Standard of communication

	With the organisers	With the study department	With the teachers
Satisfied	94.3 %	94.6 %	94.1 %
Satisfied with some objections	4.7 %	4.7 %	4.8 %
Not satisfied	1.0 %	0.7 %	1.1 %

On the whole, the respondents are also satisfied with the standard of teachers – almost 80 % evaluated their standard as excellent or very good (of picture 6).
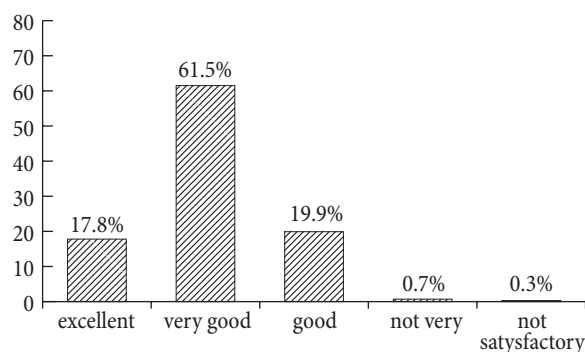
Picture 6: General standard of teachers.

The research also tried to find out how the students of the combination form of the study made use of the services of University of Ostrava Library. One third of the students do not use the library at all. A considerable part of them, however, consists of the first year students who will probably start using the library later in the course of the study.

Conclusion

The research results provide important information which will serve as a basis for further development of the presented study fields.

The research showed that the students were satisfied with the present extent of the full-time study and they did not want it to be reduced. The students refused to study directly from the computer screen, they preferred printed texts. As far as the text study support is concerned, most respondents do not like frequent questions and tasks, they consider the information about the time necessary for studying a chapter useless. On the contrary, they appreciate using key words. The importance of using information marks is ambiguous. In spite of the fact that no special information software is used, the students are satisfied with the organization of the study and with the level of communication.

What is interesting is the fact that in spite of different specializations of study fields, different professions of the respondents and different attitude to information technologies, no significant difference has been found for any of the items in question. The same is true about individual study years (with the exception of less frequent use of the University Library by the students of the first year).

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