

A PROFILE OF THE PREFERRED INSTRUCTOR FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION AS CONSIDERED BY ITALIAN STUDENTS

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Abstract

Distance Education is gaining momentum in the current years. Apart from the relative infrastructure that facilitates communication and distance education, the main actors include the students and the instructors. An instructor who is “charismatic” could deliver online educational courses in a successful manner. One aspect of interest is the profile of the best performing instructor for distance educational programs. The current study is aiming at defining a number of teaching preferences that are considered more welcomed by students. The findings of the study are based on a structured questionnaire survey regarding distance education. Students from Italian universities participated in the research and 222 responses were collected and a corresponding database was organized in SPSS 29. The number of questions within the survey and the corresponding variables recorded were equal to 124. The survey was based on google forms and was disseminated to students studying through distance learning programs. The language of the questionnaire was Italian. The questionnaire survey recorded participants’ profile, distance education experience, their personal learning preferences, the learning preferences of their fellow students, their instructors’ preferred teaching style and the participants personality characteristics. One of the highlights of the current research is the fact that students like to see the instructors trying new teaching techniques and collaborate with fellow instructors. Furthermore, it became evident that students also like their instructor to be creative, spark creative ideas to students and at the same time set priorities and stick with them. It is also true that students prefer instructors that are open-minded and like to test new ways of approaching the educational process. Research is also aiming to identify whether the profile of the students correlates with their assessment of the desired instructors’ teaching styles.

Keywords: Distance Education, Students Characteristics, Instructors’ Teaching Preferences, Questionnaire Survey.

1 INTRODUCTION

Distance learning is not a new concept, however ever since the covid pandemic forced a period in which it became mandatory, the area has seen rapid growth in schools of every order and degree. The public health emergency of international importance (World Health Organization, 30 January 2020) has been an element of complexity capable of creating new scenarios and has affected the way schools are run, determining a succession of implementing provisions containing urgent measures regarding the containment and management of the epidemic, including the suspension of the teaching activity in presence and the implementation of methods of distance teaching. Distance Learning (fad) has been inserted as a form of teaching-learning certainly not new, but it has been configured as new and accelerated, compared to the times normally necessary for the introduction of such wide changes in the didactic contexts. This has required a great deal of effort on the part of teachers and has attracted the renewed attention of many researchers engaged in the study of the modalities of education and training, on the evaluation and effectiveness of online teaching practices inevitably imposed and implemented in each training segment [1].

These measures concerned schools of lower orders and grades than the university, which also made use of the school autonomy they enjoy to customize the forms of intervention. In compliance with the national provisions in terms of security, the interruption of teaching in presence has also involved universities, with the consequence that residential universities have faced the need with online video lessons, dating in sharing platforms and even online oral exams. The emergency led the institutions to equip themselves with the necessary infrastructure to manage an emergency that was not known how long it would last and the staff to equip themselves with new digital, educational and relational skills in a very short time. Once a more secure health and social situation had been restored, and after an initial

period of mixed activities (online and in presence), the residential universities resumed teaching according to the methods provided before the Covid emergency. A few years after the forced digitization and the online transfer of teaching activities we can say that the education technology market has had an unprecedented development [2].

In addition to these experiences of distance learning dictated by the pandemic emergency, in Italy there are many universities at the higher education level that are specialized in distance learning and that were born well before the pandemic emergency.

Telematic universities are those that have not had the need to differentiate their teaching in emergency, since it is already compatible with the distance imposed, and have certainly registered an increasing number of registrations. Distance learning is characterized by the ability to respond to the needs of many people, both workers and non-workers, who can flexibly cope with their training, particularly in line with the call for lifelong learning. Being able to benefit from training compatible with work and life commitments is configured as a support to workers, in particular, because it allows them to remain in the world of work while they are trained to remain up-to-date and competitive professionals. Being able to reconcile adult life and responsibilities with training, thanks to the flexibility of distance learning, also means that people can meet their own training needs even when they respond to their desire for self-realization, showing direct repercussions on their well-being and motivation, even if they are not designed for immediate employability.

From these introductory reflections we can already see how much the experience related to distance learning can depend on many factors; The aim of scientific research is to understand how distance learning takes place and to understand how to make the provision of training increasingly effective and responsive to the needs of learners. In the telematic environment spaces are interpenetrated and are therefore physical, digital and immersive; the classroom is enriched with multifunctional settings designed to create, collaborate, discuss and process: in summary, the class becomes laboratory [3]. It reverses the trend that in recent years had characterized the laboratory as another place, episodic, to go whenever necessary [4].

The roles of learners and teachers are sensibly shaped by the training environment in which they meet. In a stable telematic environment, not dictated by emergent dynamics that have inevitable repercussions also on the relationship and on the scope of its objectives, we must ask ourselves what are the limits and the potential of a telematic training environment? What are the reasons for the failure of distance learning initiatives? What specific characteristics does the teacher assume and how does the figure of the tutor fit into this new structure? Which strategies are most effective in building learner groups? To answer these questions, the scientific research in the educational field is fundamental and has a significant role to understand potential future trajectories and helps key actors make informed decisions as regards resource allocation. In this context, the ODLEP project aims to explore the avenue of personalized education for distance learning programs, through the creation of a framework for the matching of the ideal instructor for each potential student group. The objective of the present article is thus to explore the initial findings of the ODLEP project, specifically those regarding student's preferences as regards the "ideal instructor".

2 METHODOLOGY

Within the research project ODLEP (KA220-HED-27E729D9), dedicated to distance learning programs in Greece, Romania, Italy and Serbia, have been developed two questionnaires to record the characteristics of educators and the expectations and preferences of students. In particular, the latter was created on the basis of a series of research on the subject, in order to identify both the preferences of students with regard to the distance learning experience (Stenberg and Zhang, 2005) both the traits of their personality based on the big five personality traits and facets "measures personality".

The questionnaire was structured by George Aretouillis, George Tsaples and Eleni Aretouilli of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (Greece), translated into Italian and then administered to students attending at the Università Telematica degli Studi IUL.

The questionnaire was available for compilation for about 30 days; it was administered using the Google Forms tool to allow easy compilation of the same remotely and from different devices.

3 RESULTS

The present article will explore a section of the preliminary research carried out for the ODLEP project, specifically that of Italian student's preferences as regards instructors. To this end, a survey has been carried out across Italian distance universities, collecting a total of 222 responses from Italian students of Università Telematica degli Studi IUL. The total number of questions in the survey, and thus the corresponding number of variables generated, is equal to 124; the present article will explore only a few of these variables, particularly those regarding instructor preferences, and comment the results.

3.1 Characteristics of students

To begin with, it is interesting to explore some basic data as regards the details of the composition of the group of students that responded to the questionnaire, starting with their age as can be seen in Figure 1.

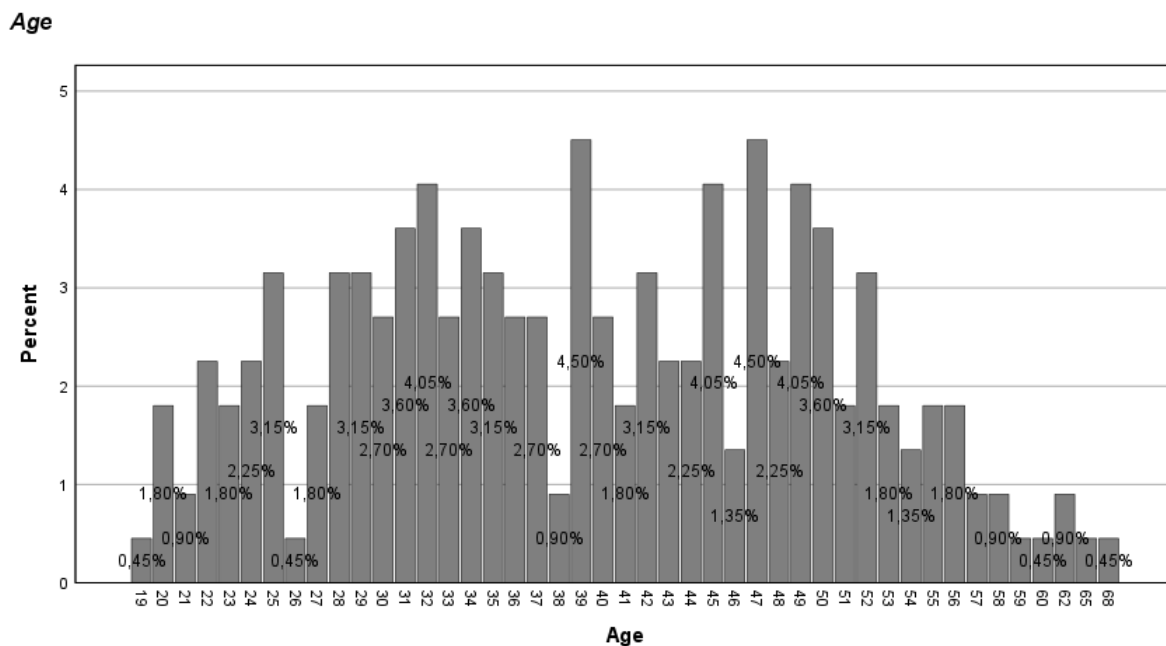


Figure 1, Age of survey respondents, Source: ODLEP Project

As can be seen, the age of survey respondents follows a normal distribution, centered roughly around 40 years old. This confirms what has often been said as regards distance education, namely that its flexible nature and comparatively lower commitment requirements as compared to traditional universities allows for a wider range of individuals to access higher education. This can be further compounded by the data as regards respondents' occupational status, as can be seen in Figure 3.

Respondents were predominantly women (72.4%). 51.8% of the 222 respondents were childless, 12.7% had one child, 22.4% had two children, 10% had three children and the remaining 1.8% were those with four children. To fully appreciate the value of these results you can compare them with the same value found, however, on those who attend traditional universities not telematic. If the hypothesis is confirmed that the percentage of those who have children is higher in telematic universities than in traditional ones, it may be appropriate to proceed with a further deepening, in order to highlight how much this aspect has counted in the choice of training at a distance and what are the training and organizational needs that derive from this condition.

How would you describe your occupational status

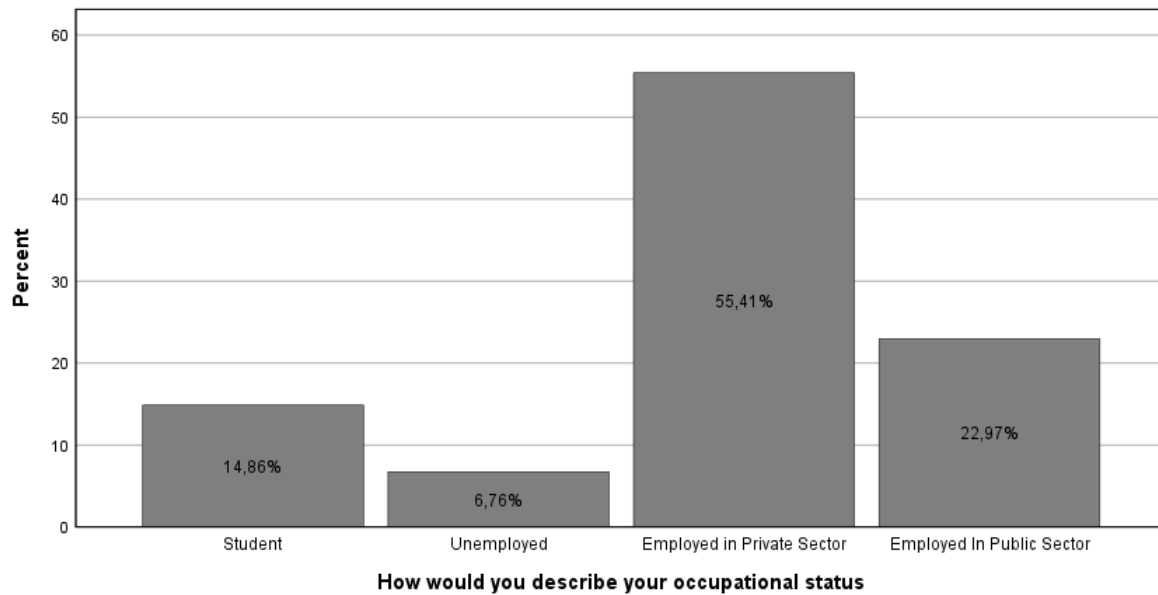


Figure 2, Occupational status of respondents, Source: ODLEP Project

Figure 2 illustrates just how flexible distance education is, with over 70% of respondents being employed; when taken together with Figure 1, it is clear that distance education is compatible with a wide range of potential students, of all ages and occupational status. The data found in Figures 1 and 2 would also seem to indicate that this flexibility also implies that the main “clients” of distance universities are precisely those individuals that need to maintain compatibility of their studies with other occupations.

Having gained a basic understanding of the students that participated in the questionnaire, we will now move to the focus of the article, namely said students’ preferences as regards instructors.

3.2 The preferences expressed regarding the instructors

The following figures will present the preferences of students as regards potential strategies and habits of instructors; respondents were presented with a list of instructor behaviors and asked to indicate, on a scale of 1 to 5, how well said behaviors describe their ideal instructor, with 1 being “Not at All” and 5 being “Completely”. A total of 10 behaviors were presented in the survey, however we will focus on only a few which presented the most interesting results. To begin with, it seems that most students prefer instructors that are open to the possibility of teaching in a team or collaborating with other instructors, as may be seen in Figure 3.

Instructor that welcomes team teaching or other opportunities to collaborate with fellow instructors.

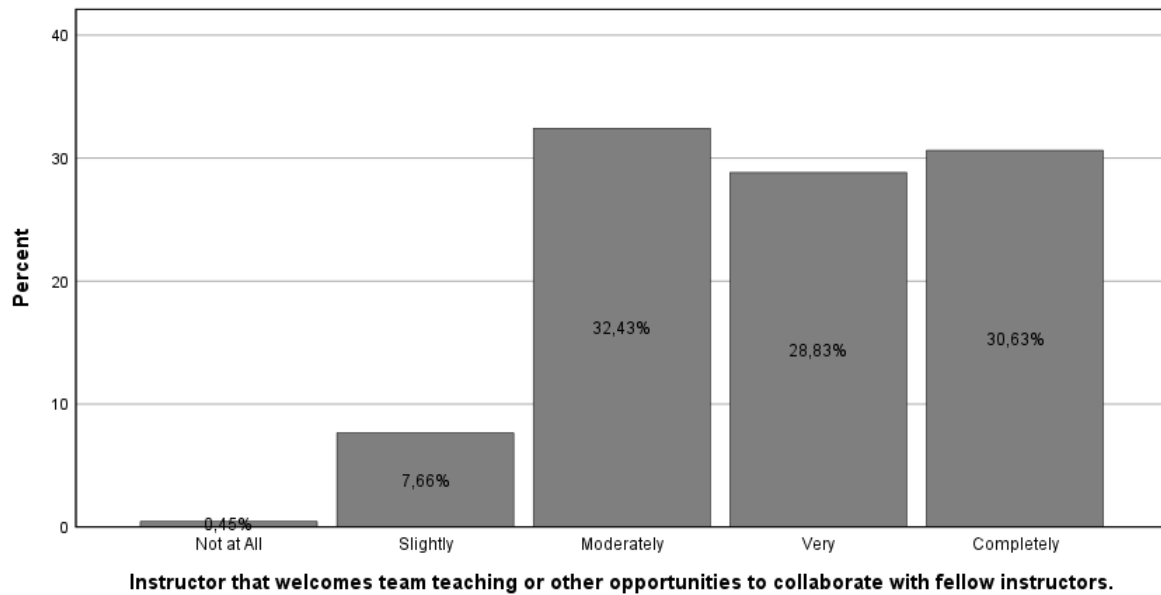


Figure 3, Preferences of students as regards group teaching, Source: ODLEP Project

As can be seen, most respondents were either indifferent to group teaching or very supportive of it as a method of teaching, with only 0.46% of respondents being against the idea. This is consistent with the data found in Figure 4, in which respondents were asked how important it is to have an instructor which is open to new teaching techniques.

Instructor that likes to teach in new ways and to try new teaching techniques.

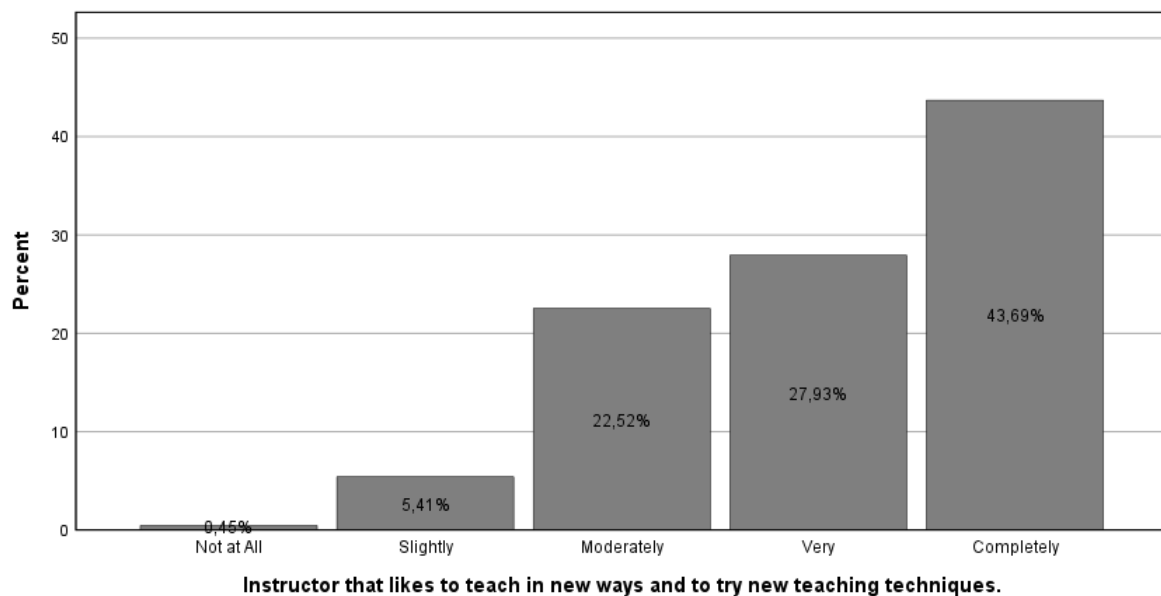


Figure 4, Preferences of students as regards new teaching techniques, Source: ODLEP Project.

As can be seen, 43% of respondents place a high value on instructors that are open to trying new methods of teaching, with very few being against the idea. This is consistent with Figure 3, as group teaching could be considered a new method of teaching when compared to traditional frontal lectures. It makes sense that if a majority of students prefer new methods of teaching in general, they will be more open to single specific “new” methods as well. It also makes sense that if most students prefer

more “innovative” instructors, they will be less inclined to appreciate instructors which follow a more traditional approach, as may be seen in Figure 5.

Instructor that likes to teach in traditional ways and is hesitant to try new ways of teaching.

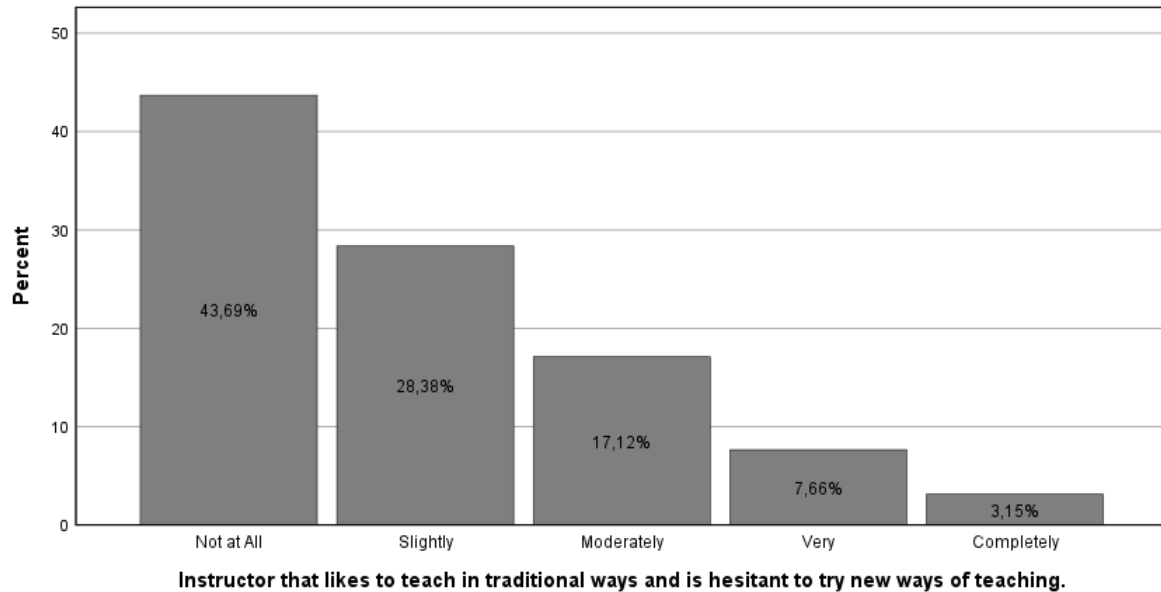


Figure 5, Preferences of students as regards traditional teaching techniques, Source: ODLEP Project.

Figure 5 presents a mirror to Figure 4, with most respondents presenting a strong dislike for traditional teaching methods. While this may seem like an obvious conclusion given Figure 4, it is worth reporting, as just because there is a preference for new teaching techniques does not mean that there must necessarily be a dislike for traditional teaching techniques; indeed, it could be possible that respondents presented a preference for both new and old forms of teaching, as such it is worthwhile to specifically investigate their attitudes towards both, and not leave anything up to inference.

While it is true that students seem to display a preference for instructors that are more open to new ideas, this does not mean that they prefer their instructors to constantly explore new avenues of education, as may be seen in Figure 6.

Instructor that carefully sets priorities and then sticks to them.

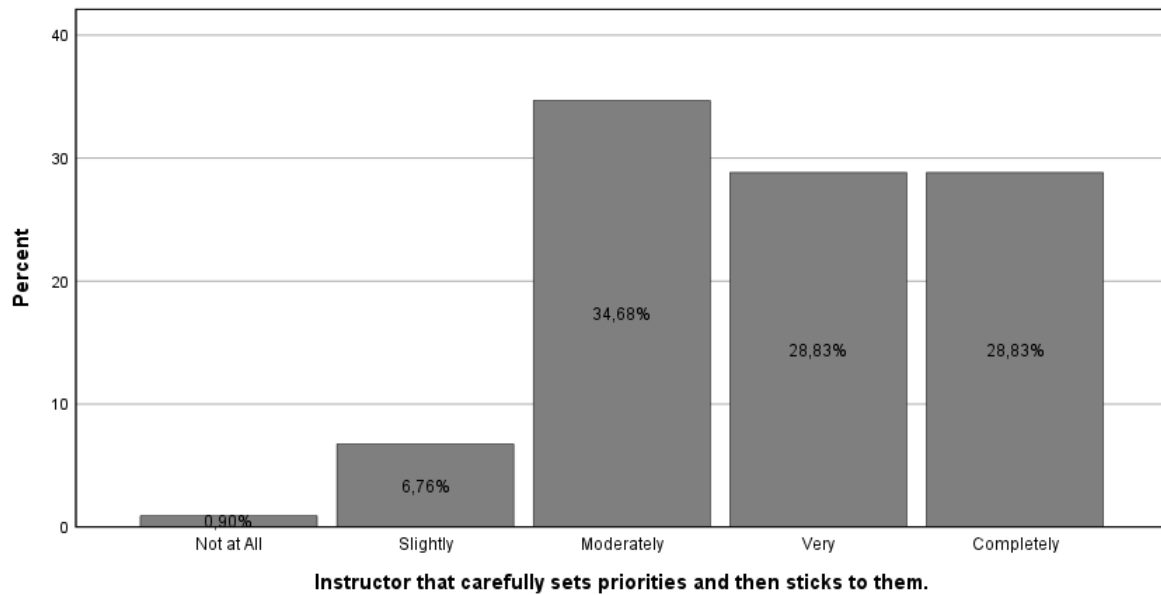


Figure 6, Preferences of respondents as regards instructors' priority setting, Source: ODLEP Project.

Figure 6 illustrates how, even though students prefer more forward-thinking instructors, they also value consistent ones, albeit to a slightly lesser degree. This means that it is not enough that instructors are open to trying new ideas, but that they carefully select these ideas and then follow through with them without deviating.

While these are just a few of the 10 instructor qualities investigated, they are the most representative of the overall "ideal type" of instructor desired by Italian students; an instructor that is open to teamwork and collaboration with others, that does not focus their instruction primarily on frontal lectures but carefully evaluates potential methods of teaching that are both innovative and pertinent to the subject matter, and provides a clear course of action which they then stick to.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The data explored in the present article represents only a small portion of the total data collected for the ODLEP project; the survey was carried out across a wider range of variables and in other countries; however, the current interest is that of exploring the Italian students' preferences. In particular, the full data from the questionnaire analyzed in the present Article and those submitted in other countries will be deeply analyzed in order to identify whether the profile of the students correlates with their assessment of the desired instructors' teaching styles; in other words, the goal is to seek out patterns between the profile of students and their ideal profile of instructors. This data will then be used as the basis for constructing a framework capable of matching students and instructors in an effective manner, in order to make sure that instructors will have a group of motivated students, and students will have an instructor that is able to meet their learning needs.

For now, it is interesting to note how the flexibility of distance universities is reflected in the students that frequent them, with a wide range of age groups being attracted to the prospect of balancing studies with work. Indeed, not only do distance learning students value flexibility in their own work life balance, but also in their instructors, with the results analyzed clearly indicating a preference for forward thinking teachers. The present contribution, therefore, attests a research in progress and an Analysis of Data that is proving wide spaces of interest. At the moment it emerges that gender, level of education, income, marital status seem to influence the scores assigned to the styles of teaching and learning, but it is still early to express themselves fully. The ODLEP project will likely continue to generate such insights along the research path to its ultimate goal, as such it is worthwhile to keep the project in mind as it continues to mature.

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