Learning in Higher Education: Strategies to Overcome Challenges Faced by Adult Students—Lessons Drawn from Two Case Studies in Portugal

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ABSTRACT

The development of a knowledge-based society needs a technological infrastructure and a workforce with the necessary knowledge and competences, supported by a well-structured initial education and a continuous learning program, available to all citizens, including those who did not have the opportunity to attend Higher Education (HE) when they were younger. We recognize that these students may be rich in experience but they also have some difficulties in adapting to the pedagogical approaches of learning and teaching. Furthermore, their attitudes and problems are not necessarily the same as those of traditional students but they are still expected to fit into educational institutions designed for younger students. The project LIHE – Learning in Higher Education aimed to improve the learning experience and environment of adults, particularly non-traditional adults as well as to promote lifelong learning in HE, within a European dimension. In this paper we will present this project together with some of the results.

Keywords: case study; education; higher education

INTRODUCTION

This research grew out of an European Union (EU) Targeted Social and Economic Research (TSER) project (SOE2-CT97-2021) entitled “University Adult Access Policies and Practices Across the European Union and their Consequences for the Participation of Non-Traditional Adults” involving six European countries (Belgium, United Kingdom, Germany, Spain, Sweden and Ireland). This was preceded by a pilot project between the University of Louvain, Belgium, and the University of Warwick, UK. The TSER project looked at the access of non-traditional adult students in European universities, both in terms of getting into the system and their experiences while undertaking a degree programme. Interview and questionnaire data revealed a wide range of issues. Within this project, looking at the attitudes and experiences of learning and teaching in higher education (both adult students and lecturers) formed only one of many aspects of the research. However, it highlighted that this is an under-researched area, despite the fact that it is an important one, particularly as widening participation strategies have increased the
number of adult students in higher education across Europe in recent years. For instance, in the majority of the European countries the percentage of the population between 25 and 64 years old that has completed a HE course is above 20%. However, the percentage for Portugal is about 10%. These figures show that if Portugal desires to face the challenges established by the Lisbon Strategy (European Council, 2003), it needs to upgrade the qualifications of adults in an active life as quickly as it can. The study revealed that institutional policies and practices are critical in facilitating, or not, the access of adults in HE and that the impact and nature of the provision varies across Europe (Bourgeois, Duke, Guyot, & Merrill, 1999). Despite the expansion in adult undergraduate students, universities continue to cater overwhelmingly for younger students. Many European countries now have a mass HE system as defined by Trow (1989) yet, as Parry (1997) points out, some HE institutions have retained their elite characteristics. Adults have to adjust and slot into this structure. The TSER project identified the need for institutional change, particularly in relation to the curriculum, teaching, and learning strategies, to enhance the access and learning experiences of adults in HE.

Lifelong learning, social inclusion, and widening participation are now high on the agendas of the EU and national governments across Europe. Interest in lifelong learning policies stemmed from economic and social changes, not only within Europe, but globally, brought about by the transition to a knowledge society. The knowledge society, as Castells (1996) points out, has introduced a new form of inequality based on the acquisition—or not—of knowledge: the “haves” and the “have nots.” The significance of lifelong learning for the European Commission was evident in the 1994 “White Paper”:

Preparation for life in tomorrow’s world cannot be satisfied by a once-and-for-all acquisition of knowledge and knowhow… All measures must therefore necessarily be based on the concept of developing, generalising and systematising lifelong learning and continuing training (Commission of the European Communities, 1994, p. 136).

The EU’s commitment to lifelong learning was more recently highlighted in its “Memorandum on Lifelong Learning” (Commission of the European Communities, 2000) and the communication of the commission, “Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality” (Commission of the European Communities, 2001), which asserted that:

The principles which underpin lifelong learning and guide its effective implementation emphasise the centrality of the learner, the importance of equal opportunities and the quality and relevance of learning opportunities (Commission of the European Communities, 2001, pp. 3-4).

This current Socrates Grundtvig project LIHE—Learning in Higher Education [100703-CP-1-2002-1-UK-GRUNDTVIG-GI] is, therefore, being undertaken against a policy background that promotes lifelong learning. Building upon the issues highlighted by the TSER project, this project explores in more depth the learning and teaching approaches experienced by nontraditional adults in HE. For example, adult participants in the TSER project indicated that they were not very satisfied with some aspects of teaching practices. Many were disappointed with the lack of feedback and support from lecturers regarding their written work. As adult learners may not be as confident in their learning techniques as younger students, guidance and support is vital. Questionnaire data revealed that lectures are the most common teaching method employed in universities, yet the adult respondents preferred a mixture of methods, such as lectures, discussion groups, and seminars. Many would like to have a variety of assessment methods, but exams remain the dominant method. If national and EU lifelong learning policies are to become a reality, institutions need to change their structures to encourage more diverse and underrepresented groups, such as working-class women and men and minority ethnic groups, to enter degree programs.
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