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

Ana Maria Ramalho Correia, ISEGI and INETI, Portugal

*Anabela Mesquita, ISCAP/IPP and Universidade do Minho
(Centro Algoritmi), Portugal*

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.

Overview of Literature

A literature review was undertaken as part of this Grundtvig project. It quickly became apparent that there is very little literature within the seven participating countries that addresses directly the issues of adults and learning and teaching practices in HE. There is an abundance of literature focusing on adult learning theories and the andragogy debate developed by Knowles and its recent criticism (Rogers, 2003). Within the French-speaking academic world, theories on adult learning and identities have been developed by the work of Bourgeois and Nizet (1997). Adult learning theories also are presented by radical adult educators, such as the work of Freire (1972), who argues for a critical pedagogy.

A growing body of literature is developing, some of it within a European context, that looks at HE, access, institutional culture, and the participation of adult students. Some of this literature is policy-focused or it explores the theory/practice interface, rather than being directly practice oriented. A gap, therefore, exists in this field. Increasingly, literature on HE is drawing on biographical methods for exploring and understanding adults' attitudes and experiences regarding learning (Antikainen, Houtsonen, Kauppila, & Huotelin, 1996).

Comparative European studies of nontraditional adult students in European HE have been undertaken but do not include specific research on learning and teaching. The study of Schuetz and Slowey (2002) of 10 countries, including a few outside Europe, is a useful one for identifying who the nontraditional adult students are and institutional factors that affect nonparticipation. It also discusses the processes for adapting HE institutions to meet the needs of lifelong learners. As cited earlier, the final report for the TSER project on the access of nontraditional adult students contains a small section on learning and teaching approaches. An earlier two country study (United Kingdom and Belgium) by Bourgeois et al. (1999) entitled "The Adult University" looks at institutional policies and practices and includes a chap-

ter on the voices of adult students and their university experiences. An article, stemming from the last study (Merrill, 2001), explores, through biographical methods, adult learners' attitudes towards teaching methods, assessment, and learning with younger students. With a growing adult student population in European universities, it is important that aspects relating to learning and teaching are explored and researched. The work of this project will make an important contribution to this underresearched field. Furthermore, the development of the knowledge-based society needs to have citizens of all ages with the necessary competencies and skills. The development of these competencies is not a task but rather a process that must evolve over a lifetime. The environment is changing rapidly. People must develop their competencies during their lifetime, so they can face the challenges.

LIHE Project

The studies concerning the expectations of these students, their main motivations for enrolling for the first time or to return to HE, and the barriers found in this process provide new information for policy making. The project LIHE was developed under the framework of the European Commission Socrates Programme and the Grundtvig action. It explored in depth the learning and teaching approaches experienced by nontraditional adults in HE. In particular, it aimed to promote lifelong learning in HE within a European dimension; to identify the learning experience and needs of adult students in HE; to raise awareness of the learning needs of adults in HE among practitioners and policy makers (institutional and governmental); to promote institutional change through developing strategies; and to develop, exchange, and disseminate innovative approaches and practices to the learning and teaching of adults.

The target group was *non-traditional adult students*, which means:

adults over the age of 25 who left school with few or no qualifications, have been out of the educa-

tion system for a long time, have no previous HE experience and come from a disadvantaged group (one or more facts may apply). This will, therefore, include adults who are working class, women, disabled, minority ethnic groups and adults across the age span.

This project was carried out as a European cooperation project among seven institutions in the following countries: Finland, Germany, Ireland, Portugal, Spain, United Kingdom (coordinator) and Sweden.

METHODOLOGICAL DESIGN OF THE PROJECT

The empirical methodological design of the project included three phases. In phase 1, mature students were asked to answer a questionnaire to elicit the difficulties they felt when they entered/re-entered HE, the pedagogical approaches, and the type of assessment used and preferred. This questionnaire was developed by the LIHE team and then translated and adapted to each partner country's situation.

In phase 2, 20 students from each country were selected for in-depth biographical interviews, which were carried out to obtain data on the learning, teaching, and institutional strategies required for such students. We endeavoured to obtain a complete picture of an individual's learning experience. The topics and questions were aimed at eliciting data about the reasons why they decided to return to HE at a certain moment in their lives, as well as the teaching and learning experiences and difficulties they experienced. In short, we asked them to tell the story of their lives (Polkinghorne, 1995), as one way to understand adult learners' problems and frustrations. Each student was asked to tell his/her story concerning school courses, and the interviewer only intervened to guide the interviewee towards one topic or another (e.g., asking him/her about pedagogical approaches or assessment methods).

Finally, in phase 3, lecturers were interviewed so that models of good practice for learning and teaching in HE could be identified.

THE PORTUGUESE CASE

National Context for Adults in HE

In Portugal there is a Framework Law for Education (Lei de Bases do Sistema Educativo, Law n° 46/86, Oct. 14), which will soon be revoked. The government aims to align the country's education system with that of other European countries by expanding compulsory education; the compulsory period will be increased to a total of 12 years (instead of the existing nine years). For HE, the aim is to create a positive environment for the implementation of the Process of Bologna in Portugal (*Bologna Declaration*, 1999).

Nevertheless, the term HE, in Portugal, embraces both universities and polytechnics. This dual system emerged in 1973, when "higher education of short duration" to address training in new technological areas was first envisaged (Lei n° 5/73, Aug. 11). Some of the polytechnics were created by decree law n° 402/73 of Aug. 11. However, the formal creation of polytechnics only took place after 1977 with the introduction of decree law n° 427-B/77 of Oct. 14, when polytechnic education was expanded to include the training of qualified professionals in technological areas and for the education sector.

In Portugal, adult students normally access HE either by having completed secondary education or by passing the Exame Extraordinario da Capacidade de Acesso ao Ensino Superior (Portaria n° 106/2002, Feb. 1). According to the Gabinete de Acesso ao Ensino Superior, the unit within the Ministry of Science and Higher Education² that coordinates access to HE in the country, the number of students accessing HE via this special examination is very small within the universe of the HE population³.

There is another route to HE access via post secondary education—Escolas Tecnológicas—which was only recently implemented (decree law n° 393-B/99, Oct. 2 and subsequent legislation). The courses offered at these Escolas Tecnológicas are at level IV—technical training, post secondary⁴.

Programme of studies attended by adult students interviewed and answering the questionnaire

Within the limitations of the resources available for the project, and its exploratory nature, it was decided that the approach to identify adult students would have to be simplified, without sacrificing the reliability or accuracy of the data being collected. In these circumstances, it was decided that in Portugal, the study would focus on two institutions with programs of study where the majority of attendees are adults. These are Case Study 1, the Licenciatura em Estatística e Gestão da Informação, of Instituto Superior de Estatística e Gestão da Informação (ISEGI)—Universidade Nova de Lisboa (UNL); and Case Study 2, the Licenciatura em Línguas e Secretariado and Licenciatura em Marketing de Instituto Superior de Contabilidade e Administração do Porto (ISCAP) of Instituto Politecnico do Porto (IPP) (Oporto Polytechnic Institut). This ensured a sample of adult students attending both types of HE institutions, university and polytechnic. Each program of study is briefly characterized in the following paragraphs.

ISEGI. The Licenciatura em Estatística e Gestão da Informação (two years) of ISEGI, created in 1990 (Portaria nº 1137/90, Nov. 16), aims to prepare qualified professionals for higher positions in the areas of statistics and information management “to perform the new functions that the Information Society requires in the national statistics systems, as well as in the private, public and European Union institutions (ISEGI, 2005).” The course lasts four semesters and is organized in units of credits corresponding to lectures and contact hours. It is delivered after working hours. Candidates should have at least a Bacharelato degree or two completed years of HE.

ISCAP. The Licenciatura em Línguas e Secretariado has been lectured in ISCAP since 1975-76. It consists of two cycles: the first one lasting three years (with classes during the day) and the second lasting for four years (with classes held after working hours). Successful

students are awarded the diploma of Bacharelato. The second cycle, which is available only after working hours, awards the Licenciatura. Students with the Bacharelato can work in an office as executive managers or as technical staff supporting the management function. Those with the Licenciatura can perform management functions.

The Licenciatura em Marketing was created in the year 1996-97 and awards diplomas of Bacharelato (three years of study) and Licenciatura (Bacharelato plus 2 years of studies). It aims to prepare students in the marketing area as well as in the domains of accounting, law, management, economics and quantitative methods.

Questionnaires Findings

In order to elicit the learning experiences, needs, and difficulties from mature HE students, a questionnaire, centrally developed by the LIHE team, then translated and adapted to the Portuguese reality, was administered between January and March 2003 to students enrolled in both programs of study referred above via e-mail or in person during lectures. The sample was drawn from those students who satisfied the nontraditional adult/mature student definition introduced above. Following this validation procedure, the sample consisted of 36 students from ISEGI and 19 from ISCAP. These are not considered to be a representative sample of mature students in these institutions; however, they were acceptable for the preliminary intended survey of mature learning needs.

Personal Profile

We observed a slight difference between students of ISEGI and those of ISCAP, as far as their jobs/professions are concerned. Those from ISEGI had higher positions in firms, than those from ISCAP. We do not have enough data to say that this is relevant, but there is an ongoing discussion concerning the kind of education/training that polytechnics provide. The academic profile of polytechnics is not as high as that of universities, so employers

might prefer those with a Licenciatura from a university. This could explain the fact that some of the mature students interviewed at ISEGI said that they interrupted their education after a Bacharelato, then decided to enroll for a Licenciatura at a university (e.g., ISEGI). Even though they could have obtained the same diploma at a polytechnic, as seen in the Portaria nº 413-A/98 of June 17.

In ISEGI, the majority had followed the normal progression of studies in Portugal's education system, that is, completion of secondary-level studies before studying at the HE level. The period of interruption of their studies, for the majority of these students, occurred when they attained a Bacharelato or diploma at secondary level (12th year-general). As for ISCAP, the type of education for the majority also followed the normal progression of studies in Portugal before reaching HE. Of those that reported an interrupted education, the results were equally distributed between the ninth and 12th years of secondary education and Bacharelato.

Higher Education Studies

In ISEGI, the most important reasons to return to school and, in particular, to HE, are: career enhancement (1st), to gain more qualifications (2nd), to become better informed as a person (3rd), and self development (4th).

As for ISCAP, the most important reasons that led these students to return to HE are: to gain more qualifications (1st), self development (2nd), interest in learning for learning's sake (3rd), to become better informed as a person (4th), and career enhancement (5th).

Although, in general, the factors influencing the decision to return to HE are the same for students from ISEGI and ISCAP, they do not appear in the same order. For instance, in ISEGI, the most important reason is career enhancement, while in ISCAP it is to gain more qualifications. One could argue that these are almost the same. Yet, and taking into consideration the answers to other questions (e.g., professions/jobs and qualification when they interrupted the studies), we are inclined to think that those students from ISEGI might

be more ambitious in terms of their careers, that is, they are not studying just to obtain a Licenciatura but to improve their position in the labor market. Those from ISCAP, as they do not have a diploma, see their first goal as obtaining a qualification. This conclusion also is supported by the item "changing employment." At ISEGI, this item was chosen by 10 students, while at ISCAP only 2 students chose it.

The respondents also were asked to rank 12 factors according to their importance (very important, important, less important, and no importance) as barriers in accessing HE. The greatest difficulties faced by ISEGI students when enrolling in an HE program of study concerned the "lack of time" (100% considered it as very important or important), "employment commitments" (57.6% considered it as very important, while 42.2% referred to it as important), "family commitments" (93.5% considered it very important or important), "time of classes" (58.1% considered it very important and 25.8% saw it as important), and "finances" (90% saw it as important or very important). Probably among these, payment of fees, books, displacements, and being away from the family home could be included. The least important factor was "friendship commitments."

As for ISCAP, the most difficult barriers in accessing HE were related to "self-confidence" (or lack of it) with 37.5% referring to it as very important and 31.2% as important and to "lack of information" with 33.3% saying it was very important and 40% as important. After that, the issues were concerned with "time of classes," "friendship," "employment commitments," "time," and "finance factors." The least important barriers were "distance to travel" (55% answered slightly important or not important).

It is curious to note that the self-confidence (or the lack of it) was much more important for ISCAP respondents, than it was for ISEGI ones. Could it be that this answer also was related to the social image of polytechnics? Or do students think that courses might be easier at polytechnics and as they do not have self-confidence, they prefer to go there instead of universities?

Or might there be other underlying reasons for these choices? These are aspects that deserve further research.

As for teaching approaches, the majority (27.7%) of ISEGI students preferred lectures or a combination of lectures and project work (55.6% total). They also said that these approaches were the most useful for mature students. They justified their answers by saying that “lectures minimize the time losses,” “there is no unnecessary deviation and they go directly to the core issues,” “it allows contact between the tutor and the student,” “it facilitates information gathering,” and “it encourages the development of reflective and critical thinking and learning the basics.” The project work “makes possible the sharing of ideas and knowledge creation,” “it is organized and oriented towards the students,” and “it helps the practical application of the knowledge acquired and allows self work and information gathering.” Curiously, the approach mentioned as least useful was also the lecture (by 27.7% of students), and the reasons presented for this answer were: “this approach does not arouse students’ interest,” “it does not give the students an opportunity to show their perception of the content of the discipline,” “it reduces the stimulus of the constructive criticism regarding the subject,” and “it is boring and less dynamic and less effective.”

The ISCAP students consider discussion groups as the teaching approach most useful with mature students (31.5%), followed by “lecture” (21%) and project work (21%). The reasons for choosing lecture were: “it allows a wider range of topics to be addressed,” “it facilitates learning, idea sharing, and knowledge creation,” and “it helps to develop the capacity for intervention and debate.” The reasons for “discussion groups” were: “this approach allows more interactivity and opinion diversity, besides encouraging closer involvement.” Finally, project work was useful because respondents felt that they learned more and it encouraged closer involvement. The least useful approaches were seminars because this did not allow for a close relationship between the student and the teacher.

The type of “assessment” mostly used at ISEGI (50%) was a mixture of assessed assignments and examinations. This was also the most preferred one (36.1%). Students also mentioned that they liked “project” (8%), “open book examinations” (8%), and “examinations only” (8%).

At ISCAP, the type of assessment used was “examinations only” (21%) and “a mixture of assessed assignments and examinations” (21%). The most preferred ones were those mentioned.

Results of Students’ Interviews

In order to obtain a full picture of an individual’s learning experience and needs, the second phase of the research involved in-depth interviews of mature students. The interview approach was biographical to obtain data on the types of learning, teaching, and institutional strategies that were needed for such students. The topics and questions were aimed at eliciting data about the reasons why they decided to return to learn at a certain moment in their lives, their teaching and learning experiences, and difficulties they encountered during this process. We interviewed 15 students (12 from ISEGI and three from ISCAP) and asked them to look at their working lives, family, and initial schooling. In short, we asked them to tell the story of their lives (biographical interviews) (Polkinghorne, 1995), as one way to understand adult learners’ experiences of past and anticipated life.

On average, the interview lasted for 50 minutes. The student was asked to tell his/her story concerning school courses, and the interviewer just intervened to direct the interviewee towards one topic or another (e.g., asking him/her about pedagogical approaches or assessment methods). The interviews were conducted as a conversation. All the interviews were taped and transcribed, after which a content analysis, using the application NUDIST, was conducted. Analysis of interview results, addressing the themes of “expectations regarding attendance in HE,” “learning and teaching approaches,” and “dif-

difficulties felt during attendance of HE classes" are presented in the following sections.

Expectations Regarding Attendance in HE

We can divide the expectations of students into two groups: those reporting that they had always dreamed of having a Licenciatura and those who realized that they needed to change something in their lives (change profession or career).

In the latter group, for instance, the reasons given are:

- Competition in the marketplace is high, so the student recognized the need to finish her secondary-level education, followed by an HE course of studies; otherwise, she would not be able to find a job.
- At a certain moment in her life, the student felt that she needed to do more for herself and decided to enroll in an HE course.
- The idea came after some deep reflection.
- The disappointment that the student is feeling in his actual job and the lack of recognition of his value.
- He felt some pressure in his job to obtain an HE degree.
- He felt that the market wanted something more than his first degree. Somehow, he was experiencing a kind of marginalization because he did not have a Licenciatura.

Other students also expressed these kinds of feelings.

Although the reasons behind the decision to enroll in HE might differ slightly from one student to another, in general, these persons present a similar personality. For instance, they all describe themselves as being "ambitious," "used to making sacrifices to attain something in life," "curious," and "used to fighting for life." One student argues that "we have to make an effort to learn things. If we don't make this effort, the satisfaction that we will have at the

end will not be the same." Another says that "[she has] always been an independent woman and a fighter."

It is also of note that some of these students interrupted their studies because the course they were initially attending was not what they liked and wanted. Generally, the choice of their course of study was not made by them but by parents. A student said that she decided to enroll in the course because her "father had [this] course and his dream was that at least one son/daughter followed him," so her choice "was not conscious." Another reported that he wanted to do veterinary work but he did not get a place in this course, so he was obliged to enroll in another one which he didn't like, abandoning it two years later. Another student says that his wish was to obtain a diploma in computing; but there was no such a course where he lived, so his father forced him to enroll in management. The result was that three years later he left the course unfinished and pursued his dream in another part of the country. Other reasons for abandoning an HE program of studies are: not enough information when one had to decide which course to choose or family difficulties; problems during the attendance of the course (e.g., one student enrolled in an after-work hours course, but in that year, this course was cancelled. The student was asked to attend the normal day course; this was not possible because he was already working).

Learning and Teaching Approaches

Pedagogical Approaches

Generally speaking, the students do not complain about the learning and teaching approaches used in classes. They say that usually there are lectures and project work. Mature students, although recognizing that project work takes a lot of time (which they don't have), they learn better and deeper with this methodology because it makes them study continuously (instead of studying only for examinations).

As far as the lectures are concerned, students say that their interest in a discipline

depends greatly on the teacher and on his/her capability to motivate them. Students also say that they like lecturers who know how to teach, how to present the subject, how to involve the student in the subject, and being available to clarify any doubts that may arise.

Another problem concerns teachers ignoring students' knowledge and experience. For instance, one student says that, in a certain subject, he knew more than the teacher, but the teacher didn't want to know about that. While there are students confirming the existence of gifted teachers, there are also students, who stress that there are teachers who are not gifted at all. Students suggest that classes should be more practical and participatory. The relationship between the subject and the real world should be established. They also suggest that the lecturer summarize the subject in one or two overhead projections and then breaks the class into small groups, making them solve real cases. In this way, students can become more involved with the subject being taught and learn better.

To sum up, students do not dislike lectures, but they also need more practical classes, where they can put into practice what they have learned, combining this with their other experiences. Without this practical component, students do not realize if they already know the subject or not.

Another important aspect concerns the pedagogical preparation of the lecturer. Interviewees claim that side by side with good ones, there are those teachers who do not know how to prepare a lecture or even how to do a presentation. In parallel, there are also those lecturers who are concerned about their students, want to know what their difficulties are and their experiences. Others simply ignore these aspects, which are particularly relevant for mature students.

It is worth noting that although we have two different case studies, belonging to two different types of HE institutions, in practice the students from both institutions report that the same pedagogical approaches are used—lectures and project work—and they have similar

criticisms. When asked to suggest other pedagogical methods, they were unable to think of different ways of teaching. It seems very hard for a student, used to being taught in a certain way, to think differently. If it is difficult for the student; we believe that it might also be difficult for the teacher. At present, an HE teacher does not have to do pedagogical courses in order to become a teacher, as the focus is on his/her competence. So far, in Portugal, HE lecturers do not have any specific pedagogical qualification to teach. The focus of the HE lecturers is on scientific competencies. The findings of these studies, on issues related to “teaching and learning approaches,” points to the need to perform further research to identify and develop pedagogical approaches suitable for mature students. Furthermore, it is emerging that there is a need for lecturers in HE to be trained in innovative pedagogical approaches, to enable them to address the needs of mature students.

Assessment

As for the assessment, students prefer being assessed by their project work rather than an examination. In the examination, something might go wrong and the effort of a semester is lost. Almost all the interviewees prefer to have continuous assessment. They do not want to see their efforts over the whole term assessed by a two-hour (or any other limited period) examination. Some students also feel that their presence and participation in classes also should be taken into consideration for assessment purposes; this opinion is not shared by every student. Some say that if they already know what the lecturer is teaching (and sometimes know more or have more experience than the lecturer), they do not want to be obligated to attend the class. Furthermore, there are also some students who say that they are shy and do not feel at ease when participating in classes.

Difficulties Regarding Their Participation in an HE program

The difficulties reported by the interviewees are:

- At the start of the course of studies, mature students were afraid of feeling like outsiders, as they were older and were afraid of not being accepted. However, they soon realized that their younger colleagues welcomed them and this problem disappeared.
- Students that work and study at the same time do not have time to spare. They arrive late at home in the evening and the following day everything starts again. They do not have time to study (they study late in the evening or on the weekends, “stealing” time from their families—wife and children) and have few opportunities to work in groups with colleagues.

Sometimes students do not understand the subject because they cannot see the way one subject integrates with others. They need to see the “the whole picture.” As a matter of fact, “the whole picture” is sometimes more than the sum of the parts. Sometimes this difficulty is related to the lack of a lecturer’s preparation.

Administrative services also cause some problems. Very often students have to miss classes in order to solve administrative problems (e.g., academic services are not open in the evening or if they are, only for a very short period, not long enough to deal with the administrative matters of every student).

Some lecturers are not sensitive to students’ problems (e.g., time to do home work or to finish projects, and thus be more flexible with deadlines). Lecturers also should take into consideration students’ knowledge and experience. It can be very boring to hear a lecturer present the basics, when some students already know more. But knowing “how to do” something must be complemented by an understanding of the fundamentals, the theories, and the logic. Perhaps the solution is to find a balance between what the student knows and the topics to be taught.

Taking into consideration the analysis of the results emerging from the questionnaires and interviews done with students and lecturers, it is possible to offer some guidelines and

advice that should be taken into account in the development of the strategies to increase the number of nontraditional adult students at HE institutions.

Activities and Strategies to Increase of the Number of Nontraditional Adult Students at HE Institutions

This project produced a handbook with several activities and strategies to increase the number of adult students accessing HE. This handbook covers the macro (national and European structures and policies), the meso (institutional issues), and the micro (learning experiences of adult students) levels. In this paper, we only focus on the micro level. The issues at this level are: (1) preparatory phases for HE, (2) personal study plans, and (3) assessment, evaluation, and feedback. A complete version of this handbook entitled “An Overview of the Different national Contexts”, is available at the LIHE project Web page (<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/study/cll/research/lihe/>).

Preparatory Phases before HE

HE institutions should be prepared to welcome adult students through the development of strategies and activities to recruit and retain nontraditional adult students. These activities, among others, could include providing seminars and staff-development events where staff outline and address the institutions’ strategies and activities for nontraditional adult students; embedding adult student participation in all planning activities by providing an adequate and flexible curricular structure and educational framework; promoting a flexibility encompassing, for example, modularization/credit accumulation and transfer schemes as well as the possibility of different entry points; establishing and maintaining a management information system that will support tracking of adult student progress, including pre-entry phases, as well as assessing the effectiveness of measures taken by the institution to promote retention and achievement.

The development of a friendly and welcoming environment for nontraditional adult

students should begin even before they apply for admission to an HE institution. The aim should be to create an approachable public image by developing marketing materials; promoting outreach in the community; working with further education colleges and other adult education providers; and initiating foundation year/year 0 courses, taster courses, and so forth.. Examples of best practices include the promotion of Open Days for prospective adult students; the development and offering of pre-entry guidance by assigning specific people from the institution to answer their questions; providing up-to-date information about programs of study, advice on access routes, and the options available; and the implementation of mentoring schemes involving members of staff and/or HE students, either using face-to-face or e-mail contact; offering of summer courses (residential or nonresidential), taster courses (for those who are still unsure about studying) and open- and distance-learning courses.

Another solution is also the offer of preparatory courses for nontraditional adult students with the aim of preparing adults for study at the HE level. These courses would address the specific learning needs of adults who may have left school at an early age and who have been out of the education system for a number of years.

One of the problems identified among these students is the lack of confidence to pursue and complete an HE course. This confidence could be enhanced through the provision of predegree (preadmission) course modules, which could provide a manageable re-introduction to learning. Another problem is the anxiety that many students feel in their first days; this could be overcome through a program of induction days/weeks before the start of the degree program. These programs could provide information about the institution, its facilities, timetables, study skills, and so forth. The induction program should include a tour of the university's library, to acquaint adult students with its services and regulations, and an introduction to the computing facilities available to first-year students. University

regulations should be prominently displayed, including those relating to resits and retakes, assessment, existing systems of mentoring, and personal tutoring. The students also should be made aware of the availability of financial and personal advice and where to look for these. The induction days/weeks also can provide opportunities to meet fellow students who are in the same situation and to talk to current adult students.

Personal Study Plans

A natural part of the development of a positive attitude and close collaboration among students is involving the student in his/her own learning path, that is, the development of a personal study plan (PSP) or personal development plan (PDP)⁵. The PSP/PDP are plans and commitments, written in cooperation with the student, to improve the study process, while enabling discussions about everything having to do with studying: experiences, family, work, friends, hobbies, obstacles, and so forth. During PSP/PDP discussions, the tutor and the learner build a common understanding of the starting point of the studies, its aims, and how the studies are related to other aspects of the student's life. Together, they consider alternative paths for HE studies by determining the aims of the studies and the best ways for accomplishing them. Guidance provides tools for planning the studies and solving problems related to studying.

Assessment, Evaluation and Feedback

Adult students provided contradictory comments regarding assessment. Some prefer examinations, while others prefer assignments/assessed essays. Those preferring examinations argue that assignments are time consuming. Others argue that examinations only test memory with the knowledge being forgotten once they leave the examination room. Furthermore, many students get very stressed about sitting an examination as it brings back memories (often negative ones), and they feel that they are out of practice, having to write quickly in a specific length of time. Those who prefer assessed essays

argue that this kind of evaluation allows the student to explore a topic in more depth.

To overcome those difficulties, it is important to implement processes for formative assessment, including feedback (written and verbal), from the students themselves and not to rely on summative assessments only. Some suggestions include providing a study skills session near examination time, which looks at how to revise and offers tips for coping in examinations; allowing time for revision sessions; making past examination papers available to students; integrating advice and guidance about how to write an assessed essay/project; spending time giving clear and detailed feedback; and giving written comments and suggestions for improvement.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

No longer is it possible to ignore the contribution of adults to the development of a knowledge society. An important percentage of the workforce did not have the opportunity to attend HE institutions for several reasons. Today, this reality is changing. Universities have opened their doors to them but are still catering to ages 18-23. Adult students have different characteristics and learning needs, which should be taken into consideration. The concern of the LIHE project was to identify those needs and propose some suggestions and guidelines to help with the integration of adult students into HE. In this article, we presented briefly the project, its methodology, and some of the results. We also presented some of the best practices identified. We are aware that one way to ensure the success of a knowledge-based society is to help people become independent and reflexive learners. So the next step will be identifying how this can be done.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 http://trendchart.cordis.lu/scoreboards/scoreboard2004/indicators_1.2.cfm
- 2 <http://www.mces.pt/>
- 3 According to data available from the Gabinete de Acesso ao Ensino Superior, Ministry of Education, in the year 2003 only 732 mature students were approved through the Exame Extraordinário de Acesso ao Ensino Superior to enroll in an HE course, out of a total HE student population of 3,592.
- 4 It is envisaged that these Escolas Tecnológicas courses will be undertaken under the auspices of an agreement with at least one higher education institution (Portaria nº 392/2002, April 12; Portaria nº 989/99, Nov. 3; preamble, art. 3). Successful completion of the Escolas Tecnológicas diploma confers Diploma de Especialização Tecnológica. Graduates with a Diploma de Especialização Tecnológica (DET), conferred by the attendance of a Curso de Especialização Tecnológica and with 18 months of professional activity in the area of the diploma, can become candidates to for entering an institution of HE (d Portaria nº 392/2002, April 12; Portaria nº 989/99, Nov. 3; preamble, art. 3). There would be a quota of places in public HE institutions for these candidates.
- 5 Examples can be found at <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/progfileHE/contents.htm> and at <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/progfileHE/contents.htm>

Professor Ana Maria R. Correia, obtained her first degree in chemical engineering (1972), her PhD (organic chemistry), at the University of Liverpool, United Kingdom (1979) and her Agregação (equivalent to Habilitation) (Information Systems and Technology, area of information management) (1998) from the Universidade Nova de Lisboa. She is “Professora Professora Convidada”, at Universidade Nova de Lisboa (UNL)/ISEGI (Instituto Superior de Estatística e Gestão de Informação – Higher Institute of Statistics and Information Management). Since 1993, she has been a professor associate at the Department of Information Studies, at the University of Sheffield (United Kingdom). She is a senior researcher (Investigador Coordenador) at INETI (Instituto Nacional de Engenharia e Tecnologia Industrial), an R&D organisation under the Ministry of Economy, in Portugal. She has been involved in several research projects, including the European SOCRATES project on Improving practices for non-traditional adult students in Europe. Since 1998, she has served as the Portuguese representative on the Information Management Committee (IMC) of the NATO/RTA (Research and Technology Agency). She lectures on knowledge management, information policies, information systems, research methodologies, information resources.

Anabela Mesquita. T. Sarmiento is professor at school of accountancy and administration (IS-CAP) at the Polytechnic Institut of Porto (IPP), in Portugal. She holds a PhD in technology and information systems, also from the University of Minho (Portugal). Her research interests include the human issues of the impact of information systems on organizations, knowledge management, intellectual capital and adult education in higher education (lifelong learning). She has published in journals and books, as well as in the proceedings of national and international conferences. She belongs to the programme committee and scientific committee of several national and international conferences acting, in some cases, as referee. She is member of some professional and scientific organizations such as Information Resources Management Association (IRMA), being the Portuguese representative of this association in Portugal. She is member of the editorial board (associate editor) of the Journal of Information Resources Management and the International Journal of Technology and Human Interaction. She is a member of the Idea Group editorial advisory review board. She is a researcher in some European SOCRATES (Grundtvig and Comenius) projects. She served as evaluator of project proposals for the European Union (FP6).