Learning in Higher Education: the ISEGI case[1]

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THE LIHE PROJECT

The development of a knowledge-based society needs a technological infrastructure as well as a workforce with the necessary skills, knowledge and competences, supported by a well-structured initial education and by a continuous learning program. This education should be available to all citizens, not only to the traditional, young students but also to those whose circumstances prevented them from progressing through the formal educational process. For some considerable time, universities were the domain of the elite and only a privileged few had the opportunity to go on to a university. Recently, this situation has changed dramatically. Universities have now opened their doors to benefit from a wider intake. This expansion has allowed new groups of students, traditionally excluded or under-represented in Higher Education (HE), to participate in it. Although these students may be rich in experience, they may have difficulty 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. Nevertheless, they are still expected to fit into educational institutions designed for younger students.

The studies concerning the expectations of these students, their main motivations to enrol 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 – Learning in Higher Education* [100703-CP-1-2002-1-UK-GRUNDTVIG-GI] - developed under the framework of the European Commission Socrates Programme and the Grundtvig action – was built upon the issues highlighted by an 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* (Merril, 2001)[2] and explores in more depth the learning and teaching approaches experienced by non-traditional 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 amongst practitioners and policy makers

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[1] Correia; A and Sarmento, A (2005). Learning in Higher Education: The ISEGI case. Proceedings of the IRMA International Conference "Managing Modern Organizations With Information Technology", San Diego (CA), 15-18 May.

[2] This 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).

(institutional and governmental) of the learning needs of adults in HE, to promote institutional change through developing strategies and to develop, exchange and disseminate innovative approaches and practices to 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 education 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 being carried out as a European cooperation project among seven institutions in the following countries: Finland, Germany, Ireland, Portugal, Spain, United Kingdom (coordinator) and Sweden.

THE METHODOLOGICAL DESIGN OF THE PROJECT

The empirical methodological design of the project included 3 phases. In phase 1, mature students were asked to answer a questionnaire aiming to elicit the difficulties felt by them when they entered / re-entered HE, the pedagogical approaches and 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 and in-depth biographical interviews were carried out to obtain data that would inform 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 learn 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 in which 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.

In Portugal, two case studies were completed. These are (Case study 1) for students attending the Licenciatura em Estatística e Gestão da Informação, of Instituto Superior de Estatística e Gestão da Informção (ISEGI) – Universidade Nova de Lisboa (UNL) and (Case study 2) for students attending the Licenciatura em Línguas e Secretariado and Licenciatura em Marketing of 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 University or Polytechnic. Each programme of study is briefly characterised in the following paragraphs.

ISEGI

The Licenciatura em Estatística e Gestão da Informação (2 years) of ISEGI, 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" (http://www.isegi.unl.pt/ensino/presencial/lic355/default.asp). The Course lasts 4 semesters and is organised 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 Higher Education.

ISCAP

The *Licenciatura em Línguas e Secretariado* has been lectured in ISCAP since 1975/76. It consists of two cycles, the first one lasting 3 years (with classes during the day) or 4 years (with classes 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 this *Bacharelato* can work in an office as an executive manager or as a 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 the diplomas of *Bacharelato* (1st cycle, 3 years of studies) and *Licenciatura* (2nd cycle, plus 2 years of studies). It aims to prepare students in the marketing area as well as in the domains of Accounting, Law, Management, Economy and Quantitative Methods.

In the next section, we will present the most important findings related to the best practices and suggestions to improve the increase in the number of adults in HEI[3]. These are presented as prescriptions, meaning that not all of them are already implemented in Portugal.

ACTIVITIES AND STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE THE INCREASE OF THE NUMBER OF NON-TRADITIONAL ADULT STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

The activities and strategies aiming to improve the number of adult students attaining HE cover the macro (national and European structures and policies), the meso (institutional issues) and micro (learning experiences of adult students) levels. In this paper we will only focus on the micro level. The issues concerned under this level are: (1) preparatory phases before HE, (2) personal study plans, (3) assessment, evaluation and feedback.

Preparatory Phases Before HE

Institutions of HE should be prepared to welcome adult students through the development of strategies and activities to recruit and retain non-traditional adult students. These activities include, among others, providing seminars and staff development events for staff to outline and address the institutions' strategies and activities towards non-traditional adult students; embedding adult student participation in all planning activities by providing an adequate and flexible curricular structure and education framework; promoting a flexible provision encompassing, for example, modularisation/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

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[3] A handbook with all the suggestions and best practices identified during the development of the project is available. Please contact the authors of the paper.

progress, including pre-entry phases as well as assessing the effectiveness of measures taken by the HEI to promote retention and achievement.

The development of a friendly and welcoming environment for non-traditional adult students should begin even before they apply for admission to HE. 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, initiating foundation year/Year 0 courses, taster courses etc. Examples of best practices include the promotion of *Open Days* for prospective adult students, the development and offer of pre-entry guidance by assigning specific people, in the HE institution, to answer their questions and provide up-to-date information about programmes of studies and advice on access routes and the options available, the implementation of mentoring schemes involving members of staff and/or HEI students, either using face-to-face or email contact, the offer of Summer Courses (residential or non-residential), Taster Courses (for those who are still unsure about studying in HE) and courses in open and distance learning, improving time flexibility.

Another solution is also the offer of preparatory courses for non-traditional adult students with the aim of preparing adults for study at 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 a HE course. This confidence could be enhanced through the provision of pre-degree (pre-admission) course modules, as these provide a manageable re-introduction to learning. Another problem is the anxiety that many students feel in the first days which can be overcome through a programme of induction days / weeks before the start of the degree programme. These can provide information about the institution, its facilities, timetables, as well as study skills etc. The induction programme should include a tour of the University 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 and indicated, including those relating to resits and retakes, assessment, existing systems of mentoring and personal tutoring. The students should also be made aware of the availability of financial and personal advice and where to look for these. The induction days/weeks can also provide opportunities to meet other fellow students who are in the same situation and to talk to existing adult students.

Personal Study Plans

A natural part of the development of a positive attitude and close collaboration and relations among students is involving the student in his/her own learning path, i.e., the development of a personal study plan (PSP) or personal development plan (PDP)[4]. The PSP/PDP are common plans and commitments, which are written in cooperation with the students. It is aimed to improve the study process while enabling discussions concerning everything that has to do with studying: experiences, family, work, friends, hobbies, obstacles, etc. During PSP/PDP discussions the tutor and the learner build together a common understanding of the starting point of the studies and aims and studies related to other aspects of their life. Together, they consider alternative paths for HE studies by

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[4] An example can be found in http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/progfileHE/contents.htm and in
http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/progfileHE/contents.htm

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 express contradictory comments regarding assessment. Some refer preferring 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 students themselves and not to rely on summative assessments only. Some suggestions include providing a study skills session near to 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

It is not possible ignore any longer the contribution of adults for the development of a knowledge society. An important percentage of this workforce did not have the opportunity to attend HE for several reasons. Today, this reality is changing. Universities have opened their doors to them although keeping the context the same. Adult students have different characteristics and learning needs, which should be taken into consideration throughout this process. The concern of the LIHE project was precisely to identify those needs and propose some suggestions and guidelines to help the integration of adult students in HE. In this article, we presented briefly the project and some of the results. We also presented some of the good practices identified. We are aware that one way to attain the success of the development of a knowledge based society is to help people to become independent and reflexive learners. And so the next step should be identifying how this can be realised.

References

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