

Will I still study ... "When I'm Sixty-Four"?

University experiences of mature students: challenges and obstacles

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Abstract

In 2006, the introduction of the Bologna Process in Portuguese Universities brought significant changes in the academic world, opening new doors to adult students in order to (re) join (again) in Higher Education. Returning's to school has become, a difficult task due to a number of obstacles and difficulties that exist in the academic career (eg, reconciling family and professional lives, the understanding of specific programs contents, etc.).

In this article we intend to explore the academic experiences of mature students when they decide to enter in Higher Education. What are main motivations and barriers during the academic career? What are the relationships established between teachers and other traditional students? What are the expectations for the future?

Keywords: adult, motivation, higher education, bologna process, mature students.

Introduction

In Portugal, the implementation of the Bologna process, through the law 64/2006 of March 21st, allowed a bigger and easier way into Higher Education (HE). With this new law a new way of accessing HE was created, allowing the entrance of candidates older than 23 (M23), or 23 in December 31st are allowed to apply to HE through to the realization of some written tests. This special application is divided in several steps:

- i. the appreciation of the candidate;
- ii. a written test of knowledge, according to the chosen degree and
- iii. an interview such a selection process has different characteristics from the “traditional” one – grades from secondary school and national examinations.

The analysis of the *vitae curriculum* allows valuing the personal trajectory and life experience of the candidate, acquired in formal and non-formal contexts. In the written tests, the candidates must show some evidence of knowledge about several pragmatic contents according to the intended degree. After the result of the written tests, the candidates are submitted to a personal interview, with the purpose of accessing and evaluate the main reasons and motivations to enter HE – and in that specific degree.

In the University of Algarve, the access to higher education by M23 has been experiencing an increase since the beginning of the implementation of Bologna Process. In 2006, they were only around 80 students and in 2010 they were already around 150 students.

The process doesn't consider age, welcomes all candidates with more than 23 years, which allows individuals with older ages, far beyond from the traditional contingent, being accepted at HE. This breaks, undoubtedly, with the traditional model of the student type. It's however, a sign of the times. The aging of the population had, inevitably, to end up changing a few myths, for example, what gives an age for the performance of some activities such as studying and learning. It also illustrates the value of primacy of experiential learning in contexts that usually didn't consider it.

For authors like Rocha (2007), “the aging population, shouldn't be viewed as a crisis, since the elderly contribute significantly to the healthy development of their families and communities” (pp.17-18). The current situation suggest, that the issues of adulthood needs a “new look”, meaning, it shouldn't be seen as a problem but as an opportunity, which is realized both in the acquisition through older people, new skills, such as the refinement of others, previously acquired (Bynner, 2001).

There are several reasons for the re(entr) in higher education by this population: advance their careers; change jobs; turn an old wish to reality or just find an alternative meaning to their lives. This paper is part of a broader project focusing on non-traditional students conducted by two universities in Portugal (Algarve and Aveiro) and mainly focuses on identifying

the motivations, but also the challenges and obstacles that older students face when decide to enter (or re-enter) at the university.

In this paper we intend to find answers about the main reasons why adult students, in an older age (over 30), to pally higher education, what are the difficulties experienced during the academic career, how they describe the adaptation process compared to a new context and also the relationship they established with the remaining traditional students. Using a qualitative methodology, based on the analysis of biographical reports (Dominicé, 1990, quoted in Pineau, 1995), and of interviews with “older” students, we aim to access their motivations and expectations, gather their opinions about the academic course, identify their experienced difficulties, gains and possible changes.

1. Theoretical Framework

1.1. Definition of term “adult”

The term “adult” comes from Latin, *Adolesc*, whose etymological meaning refers to the last condition after adolescence. Thus, the concept of adult is defined as “a condition, the end of the growth, but there’s no consensus about the exact age from which the adult, also called adulthood begins” (Barros, 2011, p.43).

For many authors, the age, maturity, experience and autonomy seem to be determinants and characteristic of adulthood (Rogers, 2002). Erikson, outlines a trajectory to adulthood that is marked by several phases and stages that we summarize in three basic steps: a) the period of young adult, limited between 18 and 35 years old, whose primary concern is to create its own identify; b) the period of “medium” adulthood, determined by goals, dreams and plans related to career and family life and the period of maturity, the retirement age, or period of life when individuals have more time to devote to their well-being (eg. Caring of grandchildren), and or, “to try new psychological and social dynamics” (Erikson, s/d quoted in Lucio-Villegas, 2005).

Others theorists have been looking into the definition of the term “adult”, in particular the vital period of the cycle that marks the passage from adolescence to adulthood. This period corresponds to a new stage of life, which reaches a certain status and social role, due to a set of social changes that affects family life, professional and financial (Prager,1993 quoted in Ferreira-Alves & Gonçalves, 2001, p.80)

1.2. Education and learning

Education can be defined as “the action exercised by adult generations on generations that aren’t yet ready for social life, tries to raise and develop in the child, a certain number of physical phases, intellectual and moral, claimed by the political society and particularly by the

mean to where the child is intended” (Durkheim, 1922, quoted in Pires et al., 1991, p.25). It’s a classic definition, clearly dated, and that reports an understanding of the concept of education as an exchange of values and knowledge’s between mature generations and younger generations, from which is expected to do the same in the future. It’s also a definition that reduces the opportunities for education and learning to a certain period of life, childhood, appearing to reject that the learning process continues through all life.

The conceptions of learning opportunities in adulthood have in fact, recorded very significant changes. In the early 20th human development was represented by “rungs of age” (Épinal, quoted in Vandenplas-Holder, 2000), it is believed that among the 51-60 was reached the maximum of progress ability. The subsequent stages of life were arranged in a downward direction, and are classified, respectively, a decline age (61-70), expires age (71-80), age of decrepitude (81-90) and age of imbecility or of childhood (91-100).

It was a very simplistic view, which considered the development in terms of growth and decline, in nowadays, is strongly challenged (Tennant, 2000). Recent studies show that although there are continuous processes and discontinuous of action, whose beginning, middle and end are located at variable times, no period of life has a primary importance; growth and decline don’t follow a line (Baltes, 1999; Damásio, 2011). The development is dependent on contextual variables, characterized by the multidimensional and multidirectional, and these processes are determined by the joint action of different and interactive factors (Cavanaugh & Blanchard-Fields, 2006; Csikszentmihaly; 2008).

This current conception, which puts into question the question the idea of common sense that correlates inversely the increase of age with the ability to acquire new skills and knowledge, reorganizes the learning opportunities and the development even ate older ages, and also puts several questions, such as, for example, the right to education of mature adults.

Considering the current increase in life expectancy and the extending of retirement age, aspects like learning at older ages, professional development and intergenerational relations in a professional context, problematize the role of lifelong education in the adaptation of the elderly.

In a more current and embracing way, the educational process is synonymous of “commitment” a kind of contract that lasts from the time of birth to death. This kind of alliance crosses a set of several generations, from our grandparents (family of origin) to the new generations of children and grandchildren (2nd and 3rd generations). Regardless to the environment to which it belongs, generation, class or social status, it reports us to a socio-cultural dimension of social life. Whether in the family or professional area, or even in leisure, relationships between individuals must be reflected by a particular socio-historical context.

1.3. Sources and motivation of lifelong learning

The sources and motivations for learning can be determined by several factors, both extrinsic and intrinsic. Extrinsic factors are external to the subject and refer to context(s) in which it appears, how it's understood and is influenced by him. The intrinsic factors are related to the internal characteristics of the individual, (for example, school records, meaning, the previous academic preparation, academic satisfaction, among others. (Gilly (1986), quoted in Câmara Municipal de Faro, 2006, p.12)

Sutcliffe (1998) argues that learning becomes more effective and motivating when there's a particular context or purpose. Give as an example "to pass a driving test, get a particular job or even pass an examination" (p.72). The author mentions five sorts of learning, which differ according to our personal goals; i) in a working environment; ii) in leisure; iii) for the independence; iv) in social relations context; v) for personal development.

One characteristic that highlight this new wave of young adults it's the list of uncertainty and concerns about theirs professional future. The need to learn more, acquire new tools, new valences, has become an essential in the curricula of individual lives. Is privileged more and more, new skills such as teamwork, knowledge of languages, the ability to solve problems, among other personal characteristics. Thus, and as explained by Sutcliffe (1998), when the learning is done, focused and dedicated to work contexts, allows the individual to build confidence and self-esteem in the place where is his occupation.

Learning in a context of leisure plays an important role in the development of skills related to the application of spare time. In this context, outlines activities like outdoor walks, workshops, and training sessions on various topics related to sports, culture, crafts, among others.

The experiences that occur in changing situations provide learning processes with a view to independence (for example: transition periods correspond often, to a stage in which mature students (re) enter to University; be autonomous).

Social relationships are, undoubtedly, a source of learning. Although the learning processes are present in every life moments, they are undeniably activated in (and by) the intensification of social life. This learning process is also a great contribute to ours social interactions (e.g. family, friends or classmates among others).

Finally, Sutcliffe (1998) refers to another source of learning, which aims the personal development. Says that personal development in learning may include creative arts, subjects in order to have fun, or the fulfillment of individual and personal goals, for example, photography, painting, ceramics, among others. It is, therefore, a private domain of choice, and which results from personal choices that people makes on issues or areas that interest them.

1.4. Work and family

Working life is a central line, one of the most present and important aspects in adulthood. Embodied in the first instance, the subsistence of the individual promotes self-esteem and expands the range of opportunities for personal, social, formative and professional development. It's during this period and through the performance of a profession/career that we feel useful, valid and recognized. Despite the gain achieved (personal, material and knowledge that we acquire) is also in this period that we lose many other things.

The working life has also characteristics, and productivity requirements as well as competitiveness, which overlap the know-how, experience and skills acquired in and to work. However, the knowledge acquired and accumulated over the years is also synonymous of age. This is a *heavy* factor for most people, mainly from a certain age (55 years). Age is certainly one of the most conspicuous forms of discrimination and exclusion, not only on employment but also in general society.

The family as privileged place “of the social construction of reality from events and relationships that appear more natural” (Saraceno, 1997, p.12), has also changed its dimensions. It became organized differently living according to new values and new roles, suffering rapid changes in several social aspects. On the other hand, longer career and the transformation of values and morals, interfere, in the family sphere.

2. Method

2.1. Biographical interviews

In the present study was used a variant of semi-directive interview. The interview, as a qualitative methodology, captures the subjectivity of the actors, while allowing them to express in their own words and not by a predetermined set of responses. The truth is that each story is unique and special. The interviewer, being a privileged element, assume himself as a true “guide” that accesses to each chapter of life, told in first hand, a unique opportunity to enjoy life episodes marked between discontent or emotions, frustrations and achievements, scenarios that only the interviewer has the opportunity to enjoy (Pérez Serrano, 1994). We wanted to know the main motivations, which lead older adults (over 30) to join higher education and how they live this academic experience, which can mean an exciting challenge, as it seems like an awkward and intimidating experiences.

There were made seven biographical, interviews to M23 students from the University of Algarve (from 3 different Campus) - three female and four males, aged between 24 and 54 years, being one of them unemployed. Each interview lasted on overage one hour and they occurred inside the University buildings and, in two cases, near student's houses – in a public area.

In our analysis, here, we will focus on the following dimensions:

- Reasons for applications (entry) and it's difficulties;
- Mode of conciliation between the familiar, professional and academic spheres;
- Academic Experience (as they relate with other students, how they manage their own learning process and their difficulties).

3. Mature students profile

Reasons for application (entry) and its difficulties

The entrance to higher education is undoubtedly one of the most memorable moments in the academic life of many students. The way as this new stage is seen isn't always perceived and lived in the same way. For some is a new challenge, for others the fear on failure and anguish of the unknown can become a real obstacles.

For our interviewees, the main reason to apply for higher education includes the need to advance their careers and the consequent possibility of increased salary.

"Yes we are reclassified. Currently, I'm an administrative technical assistant and if I'm reclassified I became a Superior technical. Doubles the salary, it makes much difference." (Woman 39, Office of Administration – night work).

Under the current situation regarding to employment, having higher qualifications contributes to a repositioning of the work functions in the hierarchy and hence to an increased salary. The opportunity to achieve a higher level of training, often sealed in the "right time", now seems to want to be taken, being the most reported source of motivation by the individuals to join in higher education, by this way of M23.

One other set of reasons for the application is also mentioned. It's about the acquisition of new tools, techniques and conceptual knowledge, that M23 recognizes may be by the frequency of university courses.

"The learning level, the acquiring of a set of tools that are useful, of course, I learned, which is interesting. Acquired certain tools and learned, and I can use them, for example, at the work I'm doing now." (Male, 34 years, Artistic and Cultural studies).

"After almost twenty years working in local development, to know it all backwards, all the rural life problems, I realized I had a lack in Theoretical basis. It was also a bit why I chose Social Education." (Man, 51, School of Social Education).

In this last testimony we should emphasize the distinction he makes between the practical and the theoretical knowledge and the consciousness to complement them. Although usually the world of work can be used as a context for applying of the knowledge acquired in previously formations, in these case the reverse seems to have succeeded. The subject already had the experience, said he knew "*back to front all the rural areas problems*", which seems to have been the main reason for seeking a different kind of knowledge. We believe that he wasn't expecting that the knowledge he had about his territory action was questioned but rather consolidated, and eventually validated with the theoretical contributions that are provided with the training he attends.

The possibility of personal development is also part of the reasons that led them to apply to HE. As noted above, the reasons aren't always objective, with an immediate purpose, leading adults with responsibilities and family and/or professional commitments, to apply for HE. One other aspect mentioned relates with possible consequences in adults lives when enter HE, but they value, a personal desire of appreciation.

"Knowledge (...) was trough my husband (...) it's was impossible for him, so he asked me if I wanted to (...) I always enjoyed studying (...) and as I'm not working (...) I decided to went." (Woman, 48, School of Civil Engineering).

"(...) it isn't a monetary issue, I don't have may perspectives related to that issue (...) So I'm already in the first year. Work, we'll see." (Man, 36, Sociology)

Finally, and as difficulties found for admission, we highlight a single indicator that emerged in the analysis corpus: the appreciation of personal and professional experience. It's as we have seen, a selection of criteria, and consists in the analysis of the curriculum vitae of the candidates and appreciation through and interview, of their experience and motivation.

"I really think it was the interview (...) in fact, one of the problems (what's an *handicap* for the young M23), is that an individual without curriculum, is crewed (...) my curriculum, and the one from the guy who has behind me, was a little bigger than the one who stayed in front of me, was decisive (...) the professional profile was enough for access." (Man, 54, School of Tourism).

The validation of life experience hasn't been a selection criterion for admission into HE. Starting to be so, in the application process for the M23, it's understood and accepted by candidates who recognize the validity of this criterion.

Work and family

Today's society is more and more demanding relatively to these areas and, independently of gender, work and family are linked in the individuals lives. This situation is against to the previous model career (previous contemporary society), and it was based on the assumption that man was the "head of household" and that woman was a "home fairy". The problems between family and professional life were almost non-existent or ignored, since marriage and birth of children, were regarded as essential for personal responsibility and stability of a professional. Nowadays, and as family and work are two interdependent spheres, so that we can achieve affective performance in both, it takes time, energy and involvement of the individuals.

References in this category, work and family, are characterized, in a first level of analysis, because they had been given exclusively by female subjects. The established indications point to two types of references: those that emphasize the need for enforcement and sharing of home tasks, and those that refer the spirit of sacrifice that has to exist to reconcile personal (and family) with the recent life academic.

About the need to share tasks,

"My husband has always been a helper (...) when I joined school, my dilemma was: to iron the clothes, three people with a child, and he helped me, helped me a lot (...) he said: the smaller pieces you iron them; pants, shirts, sheets, these bigger things, let's make a deal with a laundry. (...) He handled with the laundry he goes shopping, to the butcher, to the market, and so he took care of the groceries." (Woman, 39, Advisory Administration – night work).

About the spirit of sacrifice that has to exist to reconcile personal (and family) with the recent academic life

"At the end of the week I have everything to do at home. I have the clothes of my children, who come home every Friday night with bags of clothes, and I have to take care of it (...) Sunday night, I have to have their bags made. They're studying in Faro, and I can't sacrifice them to take care of their clothes while they have to study and this is their time to study, not mine." (Woman, 45, Management – night work).

These words represent the spirit of sacrifice that is associated to this new experience, and which translates into acceptance of a burden of home tasks that have to be made, even if it's at the end of the week. But, more significantly, is the acceptance of this sacrifice by women. Refuses the right to be spared only because returned to school, giving the children who are also attending the HE, that exclusive privilege. In fact, and despite having taken the decision to

continue studies, she understands that she's "out of time" and therefore doesn't accept certain rights which, as stated, are associated to this condition.

The continuous preoccupation with the family and children, and the denial that can lighten responsibilities in this area,

"(...) I have my family; I also to separate things because my son is small, also needs attention." (Woman, 39, Advisory Administration – night work)

Academic experiences

Regarding to academic experience there's a set of characteristics traits that allows to characterize the adult student and that differentiates it from other students who applied to higher education in normal walk. They are: the relationship they establish with their classmates, intrinsic motivation and the definition of personal goals, and also problems that are distinct from those that are experienced by regular students. From the acceptance point of view, and according to reports obtained, students M23 don't feel discriminated by their colleagues.

"No, never! Nobody ever put me aside, even stopped talking to me as talking to other girls. And this happens for all issues. I'm a normal fellow. There's no discrimination or distinction. Nothing. I'm a normal fellow." (woman, 45, Management – night work).

About the academic tasks, in general, in group works, ends up growing affinities between the older students within the class, and prefer to work with each other's.

"In group works I prefer to stay with the older ones (...) since the first year, we stand together, the oldest three." (Man, 54, School of Tourism).

This preference may be explained by some difficulties in identifying with the way of being and work of younger students.

"(...) I am a person who feels comfortable with any social class, any age group (...) I say that with age, I lost the shame, all lost already. But, quite honestly, there are times, if there are little bits in the talks (with the younger) that are interesting, there are others that it's just teenagers conversations, and don't say anything to me anymore (...) the enthusiasm that they sometimes have with a situation or another, to me (...) I've been through it. At the time, if only I had that age, would be super wonderful." (Woman, 48, Civil Engineering).

Although there's an instruction manual on arrival at the University to ensure academic success, it's agreed that the performance of certain tasks and the acquisition of some work tasks can contribute to a good use during the academic route. We refer to the attendance, attention in class, the performance of tasks, etc... the non-traditional students are, per excellence, self-motivated beings, organized and can set their own goals.

One of the typical traits of the subjects in the study is their commitment and determination to complete successfully, this journey. Although each one has a rhythm and its own learning process, they identify rules and adopt procedures for this purpose. The following passages present rules, principles adopted, which, according to interviewees, contribute to the success of the academic career.

"(...) [what I learn] is more from what I listen in class. I go to school every day. I don't miss classes." (woman, 45, Management – night work)

"(...) I set myself the goal of fourteen! I said: - I have to finish my graduation with grade of fourteen! – and end up with fourteen". (Woman, 39, Advisory Administration – night work)

"I left my body there, and today people say to me: "-How can you have a language with these grades?" If I liked I would exploded with the scale. But it's like this. I'm in school, I'm not playing, and I thought: Since it has to be, I don't like but I have to do it. I'm not young enough to be here playing. It's such a difference among me and my colleagues. I've had their age (...) so is a different age, maturity is already different." (Woman, 39, Advisory Administration – night work)

As we said earlier, the difficulties that M23 students experience are different from those students that apply in the usual way. One of which was marked by the subjects, is the lack of previous knowledge about the contents and the difficulty in integrating the concepts taught with the life experience, even when attending courses that focus on the area of professional performance. Although present high levels of motivation, the academic knowledge background is poor and they are consciousness of such:

"[The main difficulty] is to link that to my knowledge (...) and I'm not exactly an uneducated individual." (Man, 54, School of Tourism)

Conclusions

We conclude that the professional area emerge as the priority that organizes the decision. About the adaptation process and strategies leading to academic achievement, it's certain there are no magic formulas for academic success. However, the results of this investigation confirm that non-traditional students reveal a set of practices that are common to each other, and that makes all the difference over theirs academic careers: it's not delaying their commitments, especially when their main goal is to complete a degree, the work is usually planned in advance and each task is achieved at the rhythm of each person. The ability to manage time is indeed a power that characterizes them. These students are rarely distracted by social events that aren't related to the academic programs, for example, the week of the refresh man reception, the academic week, among others.

The old saying *Stupid old man does not learn languages*, seems to be getting further from the Portuguese reality, especially in nowadays, where you need to invest more in education. Regardless of social position, the social roles they play in daily life, the social class they belong to, sex, ethnic group, or even from their geographical origin, the non-traditional student is investing more and more in studies and shows greater responsibility, maturity and true commitment to complete its mission at the university.

In this way, it's essential that the persons who contributed so much to the economy of its country, should be able to access jobs that give them pleasure but from which they can draw knowledge and, crucially, the opportunity to share what they have learned. Immersed in a wave of strong political and social instability, returning to school has become a major priority.

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