Access is not enough: perspectives of mature students' and professors of the Universities of Aveiro and Algarve

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Introduction

The introduction of Law 64/2006 allowed creating alternative forms of access to Higher Education (HE), leading to a significant increase of mature students at Higher Education Institutions (HEI). From the academic year of 2006/07 on, Portuguese HEI implemented an alternative access to students with 23 years old or more. These mature students could apply even without completing their secondary studies. After a written test that includes a general and a specific scientific component (done and evaluated by the university staff), the professional experience and training of the students are assessed, and an individual interview is conducted. In Portugal more than 86.000 mature students were approved since the year of 2006 by the HEI; despite the fact that a lesser number of students are effectively enrolled in HE (GPEARI/MEC, 2011). It seems a fact that access was made easier to students that traditionally were not at the university. But easier access means little if nothing is done to tackle the traditional problems of drop-out and retention that are commonly associated to non-traditional students in HE. It is time, therefore, to go beyond access and get a deeper understanding on the main obstacles mature students face while in HE, or how they perceive the factors that influence both the learning and the teaching processes. This will allow us to produce some recommendations to improve mature students' academic success.

Our particular position concerning this issue entails the basic principle of responsibility. In fact, Portuguese HEI face increasing funding difficulties as state provision strongly decreased since 2006. To attract "new students" becomes a matter of surviving for many HEI, especially those located in peripheral regions of Portugal, affected by a negative population growth. Although we understand this economic perspective from policy makers and academic management (for whom mature students are welcomed as contributors to university revenue), a legitimate issue of responsibility arises. Should universities stands silent and simply expect students to adapt their academic, social and cultural demands? If this principle is questionable to regular students, how should we frame it towards the ones we know to be disadvantaged both in economic and social terms? As Tett (2004) states, institutions should also adjust their wider institutional procedures and learning processes to accommodate students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Building an integrative learning experience is a two-way process of change for both the students and the institutions.

In this paper we analyse mature students and professors perceptions on students motivations and expectations (e.g., motivations to enter HE and expectations concerning

with what to find in HEI). We will explore also some dimensions of the relationships between mature students, younger students and professors and on the teaching and learning processes (e.g., teaching methods, practices and major identified difficulties).

Theoretical Framework: non-traditional student and mature student

There is an on-going debate on the meaning of the concept of non-traditional student. Although this debate is very important to begin with, the term 'non-traditional student' does not picture a rigid concept. Rather, it is useful for describing different groups of students that are in some way underrepresented in HE (Bamber, 2008) and whose participation in HE is constrained by structural factors (RHANLE, 2009): disabled or mature students, women, students whose family has not been to university before, working-class or specific ethnic groups who do not fit the so called 'traditional' major group are included, among other, in this category. Using this type of flexible definitions allow us to look at our own context, in all its specificities.

We believe that in the last years Portuguese HEI have been including these specific groups in a very distinct way. Women were traditionally away from HE because of the dictatorship regime that lasted in Portugal until 1974 (in fact, women were excluded of their condition as citizen during this period). Barreto and Preto (2000) point some numbers that illustrates our statement: in 1960 only 29% of the students in HE were women; in 1995 they represented already 57%. The gender differences are even bigger when we consider only the students that conclude their degrees: in the turning of the century 63% of the graduates were women. By this time, Portugal was the European country with more women in HE (130 women for each 100 men), followed by Sweden (124), Denmark (122) and France (121). Meanwhile in Austria, Germany, Greece and Holland, for example, the numbers of men in HE were superior to those of women. So to conclude, generally speaking women are in majority in HE – although this does not mean that there are not gendered mechanisms in HE that in specific situations make women a fragile group.

Mature students seem to us the specific group that is nowadays changing more noticeably their situation towards HEI in Portugal. But before we try to advance with some conceptual comments on mature students, it is important to say that mature students do constitute a diverse group that includes the attention to other characteristics that have been pointed to non-traditional students. For example, they are often the first of their families to reach HE; and at least in Portugal they are usually working-class students, as we tried to discover using a survey, in this project. Very briefly we found that mature students in the University of Algarve (Gonçalves et al., 2011) have the following age structure: 46% were 24–34 years old, whereas 34% were 35–45 years old, 19% were 46–57 years old and 1% were 58–69 years old. The mature students of the University of Aveiro are not "so older": 43% of the students have 30-39 years old, whereas 20% were under 30, 28% were 40-49 and 10% were over 50 years old. For the students of *both* universities there is a remarkable similitude in the remaining characteristics: mature students with a job and a family requiring care (usually one or

two children and a smaller percentage with three); low family incomes (28% (Algarve) and 27% (Aveiro) earn less than €1000/month and 26% / 25% earn €1000–1500/month); parents with low educational achievements (some of the students have low educational achievements too); high probabilities of being the first in the family to access HE.

From this brief portrait of our mature students, some comments can be useful: first, we are dealing with working-class students, despite the fact that maybe most of them do not have a clear conscience of their identity as such. Second, there is a significant span of ages among mature students, leading to a simple statement: age is not, *per se*, a direct important feature. On the other hand, others characteristics that stem from age would be important, especially when it comes to understand the barriers mature students face: mainly, paid work and family responsibilities.

Mature student is therefore a difficult concept to define if we want to be precise. As already stated, age is not enough nor does it have an instrumental purpose. Those who commence their studies over the age of 21 are sometimes considered 'mature students' whereas others confine the category to those embarking on HE over the age of 23 (the official Portuguese definition) or even 25 (the official definition in Spain). McCune et al. (2010) define younger mature students when aged 21-30 and older mature students when aged 31 or over. At this light, we would say that the great majority of our students are, in fact, older mature students that, in some situations, can relate to their peers just as they relate to regular, younger, traditional students.

It seems that most of the times mature students are looked upon by research as a problem, even if indirectly. There is a natural tendency that we search for their constraints as adult participants, because we want to have practical recommendations for institutions and social actors to know how to manoeuvre around these barriers. The barriers experienced by mature students include personal factors, family constraints, factors related to paid work and institutional factors (e.g. McGivney, 1990). Also Bowl (2001) points that while younger students can prioritise their academic life, mature students are obligated to fit their academic responsibilities between financial responsibilities, childcare, and family expectations. There are, of course, other researchers that find other barriers that seem to be important according to their research contexts. For example Swain and Hammond (2011) found that the more important learning constraints were young children, high-pressure jobs, unsupportive partners, health problems and difficulties with language. But more important than listing barriers is to have some concluding comments on this issue: first, a significant number of researchers mention the more important barriers to be those who stem from the difficulties of joining simultaneously academic responsibilities, family responsibilities and paid work obligations. These constitute a kind of harsh triangle that often mature student's fell they are trapped into. Second, even if is true that access to HEI is today more easy, we have the responsibility to look beyond access. Widening the accessibility of HE as intended to promote social mobility and social development, is mostly twofold: it rests on staying and emerging in good standing. In this sense, the way that

students generally perceive learning and specifically teaching situations is fundamental to the quality of their learning (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999).

Methods

This paper stems from a broader research project aiming to understand deeply the situation of mature students in the universities of Algarve and Aveiro (south and north of Portugal)[1]. To reach this aim we considered student's perspectives, but also the university staff and university management perceptions. As main methods we used a very extensive survey; focus-group interviews (Morgan, 2001); semi-structured interviews (Arksey and Knight, 1999) and we conducted a few biographical interviews (Atkinson, 1998) on selected cases of students. The quantitative and qualitative data we collected over the last two years and a half will be used to produce recommendations to the various levels of academic management, in an attempt to contribute to the improvement of the students' lives.

For this paper however only a part of our data was considered. To get a representative and extensive view on various dimensions of the academic live of students and professors we conducted a survey in both universities. As to the students survey, we included in our pool who registered HE using the alternative access method for mature students in the academic years 2006/07 to 2009/10. Instead of making a sample, we chosen to collect as many answers we could. We collected (both personally and via online) answers from 361 mature students from the Algarve and 250 from Aveiro (69% and 38% of the universe). Concerning professors we made a selective sample from the two universities and we got 128 and 140 answers respectively.

These results were combined with results coming from focus-group interviews (Morgan 2001). For these interviews, we gathered a heterogeneous group of students that enrolled university in the academic year 2006/07, to follow the evolution of their perceptions during the three years of their Bachelor's degree. Students were invited according to following criteria: scientific area of their bachelor, age, gender, paid work and having a family to care. Therefore we managed to have a group characterised by diversity.

Findings and discussion

Due to family responsibilities, paid work, and consequent time constrains, entering HE seems to be a very carefully reflected decision for mature students. They take into account personal, familiar and professional factors to ground such a decision, at the same time they expect family and work to benefit the most from their experience in HE. For mature students to allow themselves to go back to education, they have to have a basic economic sustainability (which they would like to improve and HE is looked as a way to do it). Linked with the fact that they are working-class, mature students select mostly degrees which are, somehow, related with their profession. These choices comprise mainly in the areas of education, arts and social sciences, law and heath (with some differences amongst Universities also linked with the context). A second

fundamental factor concerns family dimension and it refers to their children's age: the older they are the more autonomous they become, releasing the weight of everyday tasks from their parents. It is thus common that future mature students wait until their children are in secondary school, or even at university, to go back to education. The decision to enrol HE also involves professional motives. Primarily mature students wait until they got a stable job – whatever that might mean nowadays in Portugal – and a HE graduation is seen as giving access to career improvements (again associated with a better income).

So to conclude, family responsibilities and paid work are the major factors that influence mature student's decision to enter university. These decisions are reflected in usually over huge periods of time – years in some cases – until they perceive the right contextual conditions appear. It seems also that as time goes by there is a growing lack of confidence closely connected to their academic background, skills and basic habits of academic work (writing, reading scientific texts, researching, etc.). In fact, as much as 39% of mature students have not completed compulsory school (12 years), which gives expression to the central feelings of lack of confidence or even fear mature students experience, in terms of their possible academic success.

In the literature concerning mature students there are some references to this issue. For example, Burton et al (2011) showed mature participants in HE used various strategies to lighten their roles as carers for family dependents. Both in this study as in our own, the most important factor we have to stress is that mature students previously think in all that concerns family and work with one central thought on mind: start their academic lives with support in place.

Our typical mature student has spent an average of five to 10 years away from formal educational institutions, but there are students who returned to education after 15, 20, or even more than 30 years. They tend to be males, but with the maximum difference of 19%, corresponding to nine students. It is therefore not strange that mature student's expectations as HE students are pretty much connected with their past experiences as students and learners. So what do our students expect from HE at large and HEI?

They expect to have a bachelor degree that gives practice a major role, allowing them to acquire professional (instrumental we add) competencies. This aspect is much more stressed by Aveiro's students, which can be understood at the light of the predominant scientific areas they are involved in, when compared to the Algarve, among other specificities of the context.

Mature students expected their professors to be distant in the relationships they build with students. They also expected to have difficult relationships with their younger colleagues. This view seems to be influenced by their own experiences as parents of children attending school as a reference. Although mature students appear to be highly motivated[2], they expect to have difficulties in achieving the minimum

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2   Their decision in entering HE is also linked with the fact that they are very motivated for the degree they have chosen (it is perceived as the main reason for selecting a certain degree – 75,5% and 61,3% in Algarve and Aveiro, respectively).

academic standards – this is to say they expect not to have success and to finish their degrees later than the traditional younger students. Their perceptions towards (in)success are related to the time they have been away from formal education and issues related to their academic background. This is probably why we have, in the survey, a majority of students who state they cannot understand the content of some courses. Such difficulties in following the courses are also linked with the fact that they consider the teaching situations in the same space of examples to the ones they had in their previous formal education, influencing, thus, such perception the quality of their learning (e.g., Prosser and Trigwell, 1999).

When reflecting on their actual situation in HE, mature students perceive themselves in a somehow distinct context than the expected. They have professors with whom they could (friendly) talk and count with to help them whenever needed (and not only issues related with the content of the courses) – in the majority of cases. They recognize that the nature and kind of relationships with younger colleagues differs from the expected difficulties as now they recognize the existence of a soft relationship, considering the younger students also a point of support. Although they do not feel themselves as an outside group, but integrated in the set of HE students, they do stress some of the natural effects of age, experience and familiar and professional constrains at the time of studying for examinations or when group work is involved, as core aspects in and/or for their (in)success. Concerning their difficulties in following the content courses, it corresponds to an expectation becoming true mainly in the "hard areas" (e.g., mathematics, physics) – this was also one of the reasons that lead them to choose the degree.

Thinking on professors, mature students perceive them in a contradictory space as they are, from one side, perceived rigid but then friendly, but on the other side mature students stressed classroom practices and the teaching methods as similar to the ones they were used to while students, a long time ago. Classes continue to have the same structure they could remember with similar implications for their discouragement. Their comments focus mainly on pedagogical aspects concerning both evaluation methods and given feedback, linking them also with their difficulties in following the content courses and the lack of professional (instrumental) competencies.

Although mature students perspectives and perceptions on professors and courses is important, looking throughout the professors views on their own courses and expressed practices (its nature and focus) and perception and recognition of mature students' specificities is also relevant, contributing to a perceptions from "the other side of the wall".

While focusing on professors, the surveys reveal that a large amount of them is able to identify the mature students attending their courses (knowledge acquired mainly at the first class in the discussion/presentation of the course curriculum; through the physical aspect of mature students – older than the remaining students –, by participating in the selection process or during the teaching and learning process). Professors' expect mature students to be a group with main difficulties in following the content courses, due to their deficiencies in working methods and to the large amount of

classes they skip – identifying profesional motives as the main reason for such absence. Although professors (at both universities) identify such factors as constrains to mature students learning and success, they opted for maintaining their teaching strategies/approaches. Although we do not have, at the moment, still, data to confirm this, it seems that the professors in the educational areas stressed more the use of strategies involving mainly group work, discussions/debates grounded in analysing papers as the one on the other domains focus more on the traditional exposition of contents and followed by group work.

These results from the surveys to professors allow also perceiving the results concerning mature students' perspectives in a more sustainable way. Although mature student's expectations on professors were not completely fulfilled (professors are not distant/rigid but friendly and willing to help), the teaching methods used are seen as an obstacle as they are in the same space their initial perceptions (focused on the teacher – expositive classes, some group work and evaluation moments).

Some final remarks

Looking on mature students perspectives, and focusing on the perceived obstacles identified, such obstacles are aligned to the ones already mentioned in literature (e.g., McGivney, 1990). In our study we still identify similar barriers (e.g., paid work and institutional factors). This is, for us, perceived as problematic as it is a topic which has been a focus of research and stressed at least in the last two decades and little effect has in practice – professors' practices, institutions practices, society practices. This recalls also to the mismatch between theory and practice and on the effects of research in the individuals lives.

Such fact is leading us (try) to equate different possible approaches to each one of them individually and all intertwined in order to get a deeper understanding on it and on equate the (im)possibility of such factor being, or not, out of HEI reach. Although mature students point some aspects that are considered to constrain their academic live, there is a somehow "natural" inability of awareness to point the concrete aspects needed for a change (except on the professors practices), although they mention the need of such change (one don't know what to change outside his/her own space of experiences/perceptions/"knowledge").

The preliminary presented results evidence the need for supporting mature students at different levels, including the personal and academic increasing their willing to learn, and not only concerning the self-esteem (e.g., Jarvis, 2004). Considering the large span of areas were to focus and the diversity of mature students at HE, the ways of support need to be carefully addressed in order to allow improving mature students path (and thus success – not perceived only in terms of academic success) in HE.

From amongst the different dimensions, there seems exist the need for fulfilling the gap concerning professors' perceptions and practices which may open an effective new door for improving such practices, also by being knowledgeable on the existence of mature students in their courses as well as for the associated specificities. An improving

of such practices and increasing of such knowledge can also be linked with the so call *Specialized Knowledge for Teaching* (e.g., Carrillo, Climent, Contreras and Muñoz Catalán, in press) also at University level, maintaining/increasing a high stand level and allowing also mature students to achieve it.

On the other hand, Institutions must assume also effectively its responsibility and role in promoting the improvement of mature students' path while HE students supporting them at different levels (one can always blame the others). Although the majority of our mature students waited their children to become older to enter HE, the children's age could stop being a constrain (as mentioned by Swain and Hammond, 2011) if HEI took it into account and used their resources (e.g., in both our HEI we have degrees specifically oriented for early years' teachers).

Such responsibility concerns, amongst others increasing its flexibility and assuming multiple perspectives approaches. By such we mean, for example, flexibilize operational rules, bureaucracy and consider different specificities of different particular groups (and the general group) as well as taking into account the multiplicities of involved variables – which increases highly when "non-traditional" students are involved as the system was not thought or adequate (yet) for them and the range of its specificities.

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