

Adult learners and entry to higher education: motivation, prior experience and entry requirements*

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Abstract

In this paper preliminary findings are presented from exploratory studies in Portugal, Greece and England, within the context of widening participation in higher education. The focus of the enquiry is to investigate the personal and professional identities of adult learners entering or re-entering higher education, to highlight their characteristics and learning needs and identify key factors affecting their entry and progress in education related and other courses. Quantitative and qualitative data are presented and discussed on mature students' prior experience, motivation and application process in two university departments of education and one college of education of a polytechnic institution. Mature women students predominated in all three institutions. All the adult learners were highly motivated to enter or return to higher education and had considerable prior experience, especially in the areas chosen to study. However, the very different application procedures in the three countries, including quotas for mature student entry in Portugal and Greece, led to differing opportunities for adult learners. The writers conclude that considerable progress still needs to be made to improve access for mature entrants to higher education.

Index terms: adult learning, higher education, motivation, prior experience.

INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES

The purpose of the study is to engage in comparative evaluation of entry requirements, progress and success rates in application of mature students to higher education, thus promoting reflection and ultimately contributing to educational change. The paper focuses on application and entry requirements, motivation to study and prior experience of adult learners applying to enter or re-enter higher education in England, Greece and Portugal. With this study we intend to shed light on these areas by identifying key characteristics of adult learners and

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factors affecting mature entrants' experiences, in order to understand the new challenges faced by adult learners in different higher education contexts in Europe.

The study focuses on the particular situation of three groups of adult learners who entered two departments of education in universities in Greece and England and one college of education in Portugal in the last four years, (i.e. 2003-07) through admission procedures to higher education.

In Greece, the sample was drawn from successful applicants to a university BA primary programme; in England, from those applying to a recently introduced teacher education route, the Graduate Teacher Programme, and in Portugal, from those applying to a range of degree courses offered by a college of education in a polytechnic institution. Further details of the research questions, sample and methods used are included in the methodology.

In order to contextualise the research, let us first look at the increase in diversity and mature student numbers in higher education in Europe.

WIDENING PARTICIPATION TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN ENGLAND, GREECE AND PORTUGAL

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There has been a rapid expansion of higher education in Europe over the last ten years. For instance, in Greece, numbers entering higher education have doubled since the 1990s [1], with particular increases in technological higher education institutes. In the UK, enrolment in higher education has increased by 33% since 1996 [2], especially in part-time courses, with increasing diversity in the student body.

This includes a dramatic rise in the number of mature students, representing 52% of undergraduates by 2005 [3].

In Portugal, the higher education expansion policy since the 1990s has contributed to the increasing participation of students (48.2% between 1992-93 and 1998-99), both in the public and the private sector. However, drop out rates are high, around 50% by the end of the nineties. This can be related, amongst other factors, to the increasing diversity of students and to the difficulties felt by higher education institutions in dealing with the new public diversity [4].

In Portugal, a new law (Decreto-lei 64/2006) was recently approved in order to widen the access of mature students to higher education. Adults can apply to higher education without having certificates from post- or simply compulsory education, since the knowledge and competences gained in other contexts of life, through professional and personal experience, and the motivation towards

obtaining higher education degrees are the factors valued in the selection process. In Portugal, however, higher education institutions do not have a strong tradition of teaching mature students, and are not really prepared for the educational and organizational challenges raised by adult learners [5] and [6]. In Greece and England, although increases in numbers of adult learners in universities have been rising steadily over the last ten years, many aspects of higher education are not yet adapted to their needs and requirements.

The increasing political concern to widen the access of adults to higher education has been developed in parallel with the interest of raising the level of qualifications of the population in all three countries. It must also be seen in the context of the Bologna agreement and moves towards greater harmony of qualifications frameworks across Europe. The new access regime, although seen as a political instrument towards qualification goals, is also an opportunity for adults who have been away from studying and want to return to the education system. From a theoretical point of view, it is based in the recognition of prior learning principles. From an educational perspective, recognition of prior learning is a gateway to new learning opportunities and has an important emancipatory dimension [7].

ADULT LEARNERS

It should be noted that definitions of the age range of adult learners vary in different countries. The legal age of adulthood (i.e. 18 in most countries) does not also represent mature studentship, as traditional students conduct their undergraduate studies soon after completing compulsory or postcompulsory education or in many countries, access courses to higher education. In the UK, the age of above 21 years old on admission defines mature studentship [8]. In Greece, the majority of undergraduates enter higher education between the age of 18 and 20 depending on the results of the entrance examination to higher education each year. Mature studentship is the age of above 22 years old, the minimum respective age of graduation from most Schools in higher education (except Medicine and Engineering which last six and five years respectively). In Portugal the new law (Decreto-lei 64/2006) regarding access to higher education in both universities and polytechnics, allows adults to accede to higher education without having a previous degree. The legislation refers to those above 23 years old. Therefore, adult learners as mature students for the purpose of this study are all those of the age of 24 and above.

Studies such as [9] and [10] have identified particular characteristics of mature students in higher education and found that they have different needs and expectations compared to younger students. Research has also shown that mature students face a range of constraints, including institutional and course factors [11], as well as personal constraints, such as domestic responsibilities [12]. Supporting adult learners in their decision to re-enter education is regarded as an influential factor in following and completing courses. Factors influencing academic self-concept, self-esteem and academic stress have been identified in several studies, for example [13] and [14]. Particular emphasis has been paid to mature women's

access, progression and experiences in higher education due to boundaries they face in private and public life [15], [16] and [17]. The combination of such factors for mature women students, in particular, can give rise to loss of confidence and feelings of exclusion, and the impact on their personal life can be considerable [18].

METHODOLOGY

Based on the above, the key questions of the study are shaped as follows:

What are the characteristics of adult learners in university departments of education in Greece and England, and in a college of education in Portugal? This includes age, gender, nationality, local of birth, place of residence, level of education, last year of study, professional experience (years and employment) and previous training.

What motivates them to return to study in higher education?

What entry requirements are set by higher education institutions in each country?

What are the implications of adult learners' enrolment for university departments of education?

In order to answer the above questions, let us start by looking at numbers of adult learners admitted and the age range of the samples in each of the three countries in this study.

In Greece the number of mature applicants to the specific BA in primary education ranged between 130-180 people for the academic years of 2003-4 and 2004-5, of whom ten (10) in each academic year were admitted through the access process. A sample of 15 students on the BA was studied, consisting of 11 women and four men, whose ages ranged from 26 to 42 (seven 24-30 year olds, seven 31-40 year olds and one over 40). In England, there were four mature applicants for each place on a primary teacher education programme, owing to target numbers for each programme being designated by the government, but there is no quota for the number of mature students overall. A similar sample to the Greek students was included in the study: 11 women and four men, with ages ranging from 24 to 48. The average age of the Greek students was 32 and the English students 36.

In Portugal, the number of mature applicants to degree courses in the college of education (education, social communication, social and cultural action, sports, arts, and translating and interpreting Portuguese sign language) was 90 people, of whom 39 were admitted through an access process. 30 of the applicants (33%) were men and 60 (66%) were women. Their ages ranged from 24 to 58 years old, with 33 (37%) aged between 24 and 30 years old, 32 (35%) between 31 and 37 years old, 16 (18%) between 38 and 44 and 9 (10%) in the group over 45 years old. Younger age groups predominated in those admitted, with 38% from the 24 to 30 year olds.

In all three countries, the adult learners represented a range of gender, age, educational background and previous work experience. The gender distribution confirms the tendency of women to predominate in education departments of higher education, particularly those specialising in primary education. The ages of the adult learners demonstrate a considerable range in all three countries: although younger adults in their 20s and 30s were strongly represented, there were also significant numbers in their late 30s and 40+ age group in Portugal and England.

In order to answer the research questions, a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods was used. In Greece, the research methods used were informal discussions and in-depth, biographical interviews with all 15 students, using a life history approach [19]. Once the adult learners had agreed to participate in the research process, anonymity was guaranteed. As well as hour long interviews, informal discussions occurred in various circumstances such as chatting at the university campus and co-travelling as most of them commuted a long way to attend university. The data used from the Greek learners for this composite research in the three contexts were qualitative.

In Portugal, data were collected from the application forms. A questionnaire was filled in by the students at the beginning of the second year of studies in the college, after pre-testing. The aim was the identification of the motivations and expectations of the group of mature students towards the course, the main obstacles and difficulties they had felt, their level of satisfaction and their perceptions about the organizational strategies to support them.

A questionnaire exploring similar areas was administered to the English adult learners at various stages in their studies, including early, mid and end of course evaluations, exploring their experiences on the programme, areas of development, types of support and any problems they had faced. This had been piloted in a previous study. In-depth, follow up interviews were carried out with seven of the students (four women and three men), with confidentiality assured. These explored the same areas in greater depth and followed up any individual issues arising from the questionnaires. The interview material formed the main basis of case studies, with questionnaire data also referred to as a wider reference point and triangulation method [20].

APPLICATION AND ENTRY PROCEDURES

As mentioned earlier, changes in national policy in Portugal, Greece and England over the last ten years have led to some new initiatives involving widening participation of entrants to higher education programmes. We will now look at policies regarding higher education programmes in colleges of education and education departments in these three countries.

In England, departments of education offer three or four-year BAs in Education (usually primary) programmes which normally attract students straight after completing secondary education. In addition, one year postgraduate certificate courses (PGCE) are available to those who are already graduates in a relevant subject, and these are increasingly attracting older entrants of at least 22 years and

above. More recently, employment-based routes such as the Registered or Graduate Teacher Programme (R/GTP) have targeted adult learners in order to increase recruitment to teaching in shortage subjects such as mathematics and science [21]. Entrants can either complete a four-year course, including a three-year first degree programme, or alternatively follow the one-year programme for which they have to hold a first degree or equivalent already. It is from the one-year course that the sample of adult learners in this study is drawn. Although such programmes are not usually seen as access routes, they do at least partly fulfil that role, because many of the adult entrants have gone straight from secondary education into paid employment and only later return to study for a first degree, or they have completed access programmes to enter higher education.

Applications to all English teacher education programmes have to meet the same government requirements, including an application via a central registry, followed by an interview process. Candidates may be rejected at the application stage because of insufficiently high secondary school exam results (for undergraduate programmes) or degree results (for postgraduate programmes). Personal statements are seen as particularly important on application forms, and candidates are often rejected for insufficient information or poor communication skills. Mature applicants often do well at this stage because they have greater experience to draw on and are more used to completing forms. Interviews will normally include school as well as university representatives, so that decisions are made jointly about those most likely to succeed in the profession. Most interviews also include a written and/or mathematics test and some also include specific tasks or time in a school to assess applicants' potential with children. Mature applicants who have prior work experience with children or in schools do better in these contexts and are more likely to be selected than those changing careers without such experience. All those who are successful at the interview stage are offered provisional places subject to health and criminal record checks. In addition, mature entrants to courses are often recommended to take additional preparatory courses to boost their subject knowledge, if they have been out of education for a long time, and this may be a condition of entry. Transition to teaching for adults specialising in mathematics and science subjects is particularly well supported by government funding.

In Greece, four-year university degrees in primary education (BA in Primary Education) attract a number of mature graduates of a bachelor degree from various scientific areas with low numbers of recruitment who decided to change career paths. Teaching has become an attractive profession due to the secure image it has in the Greek state: the majority of schools are government owned and ruled, therefore, state teachers are permanent official workers. Also, in the last six years the shortage of primary school teachers due to the extension of the school day, meant that all graduates from BAs in Primary Education have been employed. As well as taking on final year pupils of secondary education, university departments of primary education accept a limited number of tertiary education graduates (9% of the total student number) after passing written exams conducted internally in each department. In addition, some late entrants (19+ years old) who have completed postcompulsory education (senior secondary school – Lyceuo) can

enter the BA in Primary Education via the entrance examination for tertiary education (similar to the Advanced levels in England, Abitur in Germany and Baccalaureate in France).

As most adult learners on university courses of primary education in Greece are already graduates from other university or polytechnic departments (vocational courses in higher education institutions), they have therefore experienced higher education and have developed the necessary skills to obtain a degree. Entrance exams for those mature candidates include three main subjects of the syllabus which are specified independently in each four-year department for primary education at nine Greek universities. Due to their previous experience a legislative decree allows those candidates who succeed in entering the course to enrol in the second year of studies; however, they have to pass exams in subjects which were not directly relevant to their bachelor degree (i.e. Mathematics graduates need not pass pure Maths subject but have to pass subjects of teaching Maths in primary school). It is important to note that there is not an official policy for mature students, either re-entry or first time, pursuing a first degree, to select part-time or full-time studies. They all have to follow the full-time route during the course of studies.

In Portugal, following the approval of the law regarding adult learners' access to higher education without a previous degree, the college of education decided the following procedure to evaluate applicants:

- professional and educational curriculum vitae evaluation (through analysis of the CV)
- motivation evaluation (through analysis of the letter of application);
- a written examination in an area related to the degree.

The CV is the main component of the evaluation (50% of the total grade), followed by motivation (20% of the total grade) and the written examination (30% of the total grade). Applicants need to have a minimum grade of 10 (in a scale 0-20) in order to be considered to be approved.

In order to agree the number of available places for adult admissions to each degree, the Scientific Council of the College decides each year on the number of available places through this admission process. According to the legislation, the number of places should be no more than 5% of the total places available for each diploma. The Ministry of Education decides annually the total number of places available for each college, for each degree. In the academic year of 2006-07, the number of places available for general application (authorized by the Ministry) was 195. The college in this study offered thirty nine (39) places to adult learners.

Let us now turn to the previous experience that adult learners bring to their higher education studies on education programmes in Portugal, Greece and England.

PRIOR EXPERIENCE

It is argued that prior experience contributes to the coping strategies that adult learners can employ while studying, and the ability to transfer existing skills to a new context may be particularly important. For example, research on how life experiences of mature student teachers influence their learning to teach primary school children has shown that previous activities such as other jobs, parenting, travel, reading, coaching and community work influence decision making in the classroom and help to reconstruct previous experiences into meaningful ideas about teaching more than age [22].

In the Greek sample, all the mature students were already graduates of a BA or BSc or polytechnic course, except one case who entered the course at the age of 38 as a second chance student via the national entrance examination to higher education. He had worked for the army as a trainer and gave up his job ten years ago in order to complete secondary education by taking evening classes and working in various jobs, showing determination to succeed in his studies. There was also another adult learner who had an MSc in technology and had entered the BA in primary teaching as a BSc graduate 12 years ago but did not follow the course then and decided to complete it after many changes in his life. Six of the mature students had completed a university BA or BSc in fields such as economics, classical studies, agricultural studies, theology and English. Eight had completed polytechnic courses on pre-school education and child care or in the social services. In addition, most of the adult learners' professional background was directly or indirectly linked to some forms of education. Of the 15 adult learners, all but two had previous work experience; eleven of them in teaching-related work (trainer in the army, pre-school, secondary and further education teaching) and two of them in agricultural administration offices prior to training. Although none of them had work experience with children in primary schools, the majority had direct previous experience or training in the field of education which gave them an advantage over younger students on the courses.

In England, seven of the sample had completed first degrees, but more than ten years ago. Of the others, four had taken courses which counted as equivalent to degrees, such as art and drama courses, while the other four had completed a first degree just prior to moving on to the GTP, as part of a planned preparation for teaching. The older starting age and prior experience of most of the sample gave them a head start in their education courses. Of the 15 adult learners, all but two (95%) had previous work experience, which was quite varied and in some cases quite extensive. Nearly half the respondents (42%) had worked with children or in teaching-related work prior to training and this provided particularly useful experience for their studies. For most of these adult learners, prior experience contributed to their feeling of preparedness at the start of their studies and their ability to cope with the transition to teaching (see also [22]).

In the sample of adult learners from Portugal, over half of the applicants (52%) had attended post compulsory secondary education (10th year and after): of these, 32% of the applicants had completed the secondary post-compulsory level of education (certificate of the 12th year of education), 16% had completed the 11th

year and 4% had completed the 10th year of education. If we look at the qualifications of adults admitted to the course, we can see that the percentage of adults with a post-compulsory education certificate has risen to 62%. It is still the group of adults who completed the post-compulsory secondary level of education (43%) who are more represented in those admitted. Amongst these, there are no adult learners with a certificate below compulsory education (9th year).

Regarding professional experience, the majority of the candidates had already worked (97%), while only 3% had never worked in the past. 39% of people had between one and five years of work experience, followed by 23% with seven to twelve years of work experience. Those with more than twelve years of professional experience were a third of the population (32%). In the group of adult learners admitted, there was no one who had never worked or worked less than one year: all the population had worked before, and half had worked for more than seven years. In the group of adult learners who answered the questionnaire (33 students), 32 were employed and one was unemployed during the last year. In this group, amongst those who are studying in teacher education courses (6 students) four of them work already in the field of education, and two in a different area (administrative work).

We can see therefore that in all three countries, the adult learners were highly experienced and brought a range of knowledge and skills to their studies. However, in England and Greece the majority of adult learners held a higher education degree or diploma compared to the Portuguese adult learners who held a certificate from compulsory or post compulsory education.

MOTIVATION TO ENTER OR RE-ENTER HIGHER EDUCATION

If we turn to motivation for study, the three groups of adult learners entering or re-entering higher education demonstrated high motivation for the courses they had chosen, as other studies of mature students in higher education have also found [23] and [24]. In many cases, this was directly related to the prior work experience and training that they had undertaken, often in direct preparation for their chosen courses.

In both Greece and England, because all the adult learners had chosen teacher education courses, there was a high degree of consensus in the motivation to study and a mixture of extrinsic and intrinsic reasons. For example, extrinsic motives included the high employment rate in the state sector of primary school teaching in Greece during the last ten years. Intrinsic motives included personal interest in primary school teaching and/or future professional development in teaching. As already indicated, most of the mature students had prior work experience or training in the field of education.

The English adult learners also demonstrated high motivation to study, especially those who had made a planned progression into teaching from a childcare or teaching assistant route. This matches previous studies of women adult learners' high motivation to study, often from disadvantaged backgrounds, and the important contribution that their skills and previous life experiences can make

[25]. In this study, the chosen GTP course was attractive to older entrants to teaching, particularly those with children, because they earned a small salary while they studied. In comparison, six of the Greek adult learners were part-time working (five females and a male) and four were full-time working during the course, while only five (four females and a male) stopped working in order to follow the course, as financial considerations were important. This created competing pressures during their studies.

In Portugal, regarding the number of degrees chosen, 80% of the applicants made only one choice, 16.7% made two and only 3.3% made three choices. This can be interpreted as an element to characterize the motivation towards the degree, and the strength of their options. Some gender differences were evident in the choices of degree course: for example, women showed preference for education courses, while men preferred sports degrees. Closer analysis of the data is needed to identify the range of choices and reasons for these.

DISCUSSION

If we look at initial data collected on adult learners in education departments in Greece and England and in one college in Portugal, a number of factors are apparent related to gender, age and prior experience.

Firstly, the gender distribution confirms the tendency observed in recent years in higher education in Europe: women are strongly represented at this level of studies, particularly in education courses. Professional choices are shaped by social and cultural factors; traditionally, primary education and teaching degrees are more likely to attract women, while sports degrees are more traditionally male in orientation.

Regarding age, there were some differences between the three countries. In Portugal, we see that younger adults were strongly represented within the applicants' population. Age also seemed to be a relevant factor in admissions: the younger they were, the more they applied and were admitted. In Greece and England, the samples were smaller so care must be taken in drawing conclusions, but there were not large age differences in numbers of adults applying and being accepted.

These differences were partly to do with major differences in application procedures between the three countries. In Portugal and Greece, the quota system for numbers of mature students meant that not all suitable applicants could be accepted, whereas in England, all those mature applicants meeting entry criteria were likely to be accepted, as long as the overall target number for that course had not been filled. In the Greek context, even though there was a need to train more primary school teachers, adult learners with the valuable experiences they were bringing with them were not all admitted owing to the limited number of places offered for this type of access. In England, there were also shortages in particular subjects (such as science specialists) and areas of the country and so applicants, of whatever age, in these subjects, were more likely to be accepted, although they often had to complete a subject enhancement or booster course before starting

their teacher education programme. In Portugal, although approved, the majority of adult applicants were not admitted to higher education, due to the number of places available for this type of access. This is a political-administrative decision, of the responsibility of the Ministry and the Colleges whereas in Greece it was only a political decision of the Ministry of Education.

Concerning prior experiential learning, one of the most important elements to take into account was the professional experience of the applicants in all three countries. In Portugal, this was a factor strongly valued in the evaluation process (as we stated before, the result of CV evaluation is 50% of the grade). In all the contexts of this study, the majority of the candidates had already worked, some for substantial periods, and most had experience in the area or subject for which they were applying.

The findings regarding motivation to enter or re-enter higher education support those of previous research (e.g. [26]) which emphasised strong motivation of adult learners. Motivation was shown in the choice of degree courses selected and in the prior preparation of many of the students in all countries. Those studying on teaching programmes in Greece and England were also motivated by the professional stability and security it offers, particularly in the Greek context, as well as personal interest and passion for teaching primary school children.

Most of the adult learners in this study were seeking a change in direction of their professional life based on improving their employment chances and subsequently, their financial situation, therefore labour market associated reasons were strong motivating factors in all three countries.

CONCLUSIONS

As Young [27] states, there is evidence from a large number of countries that recognition of prior learning principles have provided important opportunities for adults to access into higher education. However, there seem to be some important factors that should be taken into account regarding the practices that are being implemented and their results.

The changing role of higher education in the context of a knowledge society and a life long learning society, are forcing institutions to reflect on their strategies and models. Higher education institutions have to look deeper into their level of understanding of adult expectations and motivations, their concepts about knowledge and experience, their organisational and pedagogical practices – namely the recognition of prior learning – in order to respond to the new demands from individuals and from society.

University departments also need to pay attention to the skills that adult learners demonstrate and consider how and what types of support are appropriate. They also need to develop processes that recognise the contingencies of family life and financial pressures. It is argued that successful teaching of adult learners who enter or re-enter higher education through non-standard routes involves the provision of extra time and support.

There is still considerable progress to be made in order to broaden access, remove existing barriers, develop new paths and structures to qualifications, and respond to the needs and requirements of adult learners [28].

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