

# Adult Learners in Higher Education

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## INTRODUCTION

The development and promotion of the strategic goal of the European Union (EU) to become a competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy and society (Lisbon European Council, 2000) can only be achieved with relevant technological infrastructures together with people equipped with necessary skills and competencies (European Commission, 2002). This must be supported by a well-structured initial education, constantly updated by a continuous life-long learning programme, so that people can face the challenges of a series of new jobs, maybe separated by spells of short-term contracts or even unemployment. This continuous education programme should be available to all citizens regardless of their age and social or economic status. In a knowledge-based society, education and training are among the highest priorities because they are central to the creation and transmission of knowledge and are a determining factor for societal innovation. It is also recognized that human resources are the main assets for every organization and country (Lisbon European Council).

In this context, universities play an important role in the development of human capital as they are instrumental to enable the acquisition of such skills by all citizens, including adults. For a long time these institutions were the domain of an elite, as only the privileged ones had the opportunity to apply for a higher education course (Merrill, 2001). However, in recent years, as a consequence of changes not only in the economy but also in the labour market, leveraged by globalization, this situation has changed dramatically and now universities have opened their doors to attract a wider range of students with a variety of backgrounds. This expansion has allowed new groups of students, traditionally excluded or underrepresented in higher education, to participate

(Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). These include adult nontraditional students.

Recognizing the essential role of the universities, some European policies were initiated. The Sorbonne declaration in 1998 stressed the need to create a European area of higher education as a key element to promote mobility and employability. In 1999, the Bologna declaration recognized the need to build a European area of higher education having a system of compatibility and comparability through coordinated policies.

Although there has been an increase in the use of concepts such as flexibility, choice, excellence, and personal responsibility for learning in the political agenda, imposed on universities by governments, adult students are still expected to fit into educational institutions designed for younger ones. It creates a gap between adult students' expectations and the real situation they face when entering (or reentering) a higher education institution.

This article looks at the problem from the perspective of the adult learner in higher education by presenting some of the results of a project funded by the European Commission Socrates programme *LIHE* (Learning in Higher Education [100703-CP-1-2002-1-UK-GRUNDTVIG-GI]). The article is structured as follows: First the background of the project is described, then the experiences of the adult students, concerning their induction and tuition, are presented. Some future trends concerning adults in higher education and lifelong learning are outlined and conclusions drawn.

## BACKGROUND

Being aware of the need to promote lifelong learning for all citizens and to encourage adults to exploit

higher education so they can develop the necessary skills and competencies in order to remain competitive and contribute to the development of a knowledge-based society, the European Union launched the Grundtvig action under the Socrates programme ([http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/socrates/socrates\\_en.html](http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/socrates/socrates_en.html)). Its aim is to promote a policy of lifelong learning at the European level as well as in each of the participating countries. The action supports all levels and sectors of adult learning and includes learning that occurs within the formal or nonformal systems as well as on a more informal basis ([http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/socrates/grundtvig/home\\_en.html](http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/socrates/grundtvig/home_en.html)).

Adult students are defined in the literature as being adults over the age of 25 who left school with few or no qualifications, who have been out of the educational system for a long time, have no previous higher education experience, and come from a disadvantaged group (one or more of these conditions may apply; Bourgeois, Duke, Guyot, & Merrill, 1999). This definition will, therefore, include adults who are working class, women, disabled, or who belong to ethnic groups. In the last years, some projects concerning adult students and higher education have been developed. ALPINE (Adults Learning and Participating in Higher Education; [http://video.ut.ee/helen/ALPINE/MAIN\\_PAGE.htm](http://video.ut.ee/helen/ALPINE/MAIN_PAGE.htm)) is one example. Its aims were to examine key issues affecting participation of adults in universities in 20 European countries. It also explores the role of information and communication technologies (ICT) in adult learning, as a means of supporting flexibility, in the learning process. The project IAML3 (Introducing Appropriate Methodologies for Lifelong Learning) aims to contribute to overcoming geographic dispersal and time constraints by developing and providing online distance learning. FLEX-ALL (Flexible Learning Environment for Adult Learner) aims at motivating adult learners to integrate e-learning utilities in their learning activities as one source of flexibility. Tutoring Adults Online— (@duline) aims to promote the use of online learning among adult educators in lifelong learning. These are just a few examples of the projects being developed in Europe which see adults and their needs as a core concern (Socrates Compendium, 2002).

The LIHE project grew out of an EU Targeted Social and Economic Research project entitled *University Adult Access Policies and Practices Across the European Union and their Consequences for the Participation of Non-Traditional Adults*; this looked at the access of nontraditional adult students in European universities both in terms of access to the system and their experiences while undertaking a degree programme.

LIHE is a European cooperation project with seven institutions in different countries (Finland, Germany, Ireland, Portugal, Spain, United Kingdom, and Sweden) taking part. Its aims include the following:

- promotion of lifelong learning in higher education,
- raising awareness, amongst practitioners and policy makers, of the learning needs of adults in higher education,
- identification of the learning experiences and needs of adult students,
- promotion of lifelong learning in higher education by developing a pedagogy,
- a curriculum which will appeal to those who feel that higher education is not for them,
- sharing good practice,
- promotion of the institutional change,
- increasing knowledge in the field, and
- identification of policy recommendations for EU at national and institutional levels.

The following section examines the perspective of adult students concerning the higher education issues in Portugal, such as

- expectations regarding higher education, learning, and teaching approaches,
- difficulties regarding their participation in a higher education programme, and
- the adult types of students, taking into consideration the types already identified by Alheit and Merrill (Merrill, 2003).

The authors are convinced that those implementing the use of ICT and Internet solutions to deliver programmes for adult learners need to know in advance the typology of adult students concerned.

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