

Challenges for E-Learning and Adult Students in Higher Education

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INTRODUCTION

The development and promotion of the strategic goal of the European Union to become a competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy and society (Lisbon European Council, 2000) can only be achieved with the relevant technological infrastructures together with people equipped with the necessary skills and competences (European Commission, 2002). As stated in the European Council (2005, p. 7), “human capital is the most important asset for Europe.” This human capital must be supported by a well-structured initial education, constantly updated by a continuous lifelong learning program, 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 program should be available to all citizens, regardless of their age and social or economic status. As stated in the European Council (2006):

All citizens should develop knowledge, skills and competencies and keep them updated by education and lifelong learning. One should also take into consideration the specific needs of citizens that might be victims of social exclusion. These procedures will contribute to economic growth and will reinforce social cohesion.

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.

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 under-represented in higher education, to participate (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002); these include adult non-traditional students.

Recognising the essential role of the universities, some European policies were initiated. The Sorbonne Declaration (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 recognised the need to build a European area of higher education having a system of compatibility and comparability through coordinated policies. Later, in 2005, the European Council refers to the Universities and R&D as “the foundations of European competitiveness” (Commission, 2006, p. 2).

Although there has been an increased use of concepts, such as flexibility, choice, excellence, and personal responsibility for learning in the European 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 re-entering) 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 European Commission Socrates Programme, *LIHE, Learning in Higher Education*. It is structured as follows: first, the background of the project is described, then the experiences of the adult student, 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. 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 non-formal systems as well as on a more informal basis.

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*, 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 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. *PILPE-Promoting ICT Learning Processes in Europe* aims to identify the barriers that hinder adult learners

from using ICT in their learning process, as well as identify the factors that give adult learners negative attitudes towards using ICT. *WIT-Ways of Internet Teaching* intends to consider the different ways and possibilities of teaching adult groups in an enlarged Europe by including the use of Internet and e-learning as a daily tool in classroom and homework. These are just a few examples of the projects being developed in Europe that see adults and their needs as a core concern (Socrates Compendium, 2002, 2006).

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 non-traditional adult students in European universities, both in terms of access to the system and their experiences while undertaking a degree program.

LIHE was a European cooperative project with seven participating institutions in different countries (Finland, Germany, Ireland, Portugal, Spain, United Kingdom, and Sweden) taking part. Its aims included:

- The 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 the lifelong learning in higher education by developing a pedagogy.
- A curriculum that will appeal to those who feel that higher education is not for them.
- Sharing good practice, promotion of the institutional change.
- Increasing of knowledge in the field
- 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 program

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