

I will never give up...
Life stories of mature students in higher education

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Abstract

The Portuguese law 64/2006 allows mature students, older than 23, (M23) to access university, widening the participation of adult population in higher education. This paper is part of a research project focused on the experiences of non-traditional students in higher education. In this paper we analyse the stories of four mature students, with the aim to identify their motives for entering higher education; to understand their relationships with younger students; and to identify the main obstacles they face in their academic life.

Keywords: Active ageing, mature students, life stories, Higher Education

Introduction

In Portugal, with the implementation of the Bologna process in 2006, the universities implemented a new form of access for non-traditional students (aged over 23) who want to (re)entry Higher Education (HE). Taking into account that this makes HE population more diverse, we designed a research project to understand from all possible angles non-traditional students situation in the universities of Algarve and Aveiro.

The non-traditional students that has been enrolling HE includes very different age groups. Mature students are in a different phase of their life course, concerning work and family, for example. They have different motives for enrolling HE, different expectations and experiences. So it is important to understand deeply the personal, social and professional factors that influence their motives for entering university and the challenges and obstacles they face in their academic life. This requires a biographical approach. According to Atkinson (2000, p. 122) life history give us “a clearer understanding of our experiences, our feelings about them, and their meaning for us”.

Theoretical Framework

According to Formosa and Findsen (2001), ageing is a phenomenon that results from a combination of multiple factors such as social, biological and psychological. With age, people meet important changes: the ability to memorise is worst; thinking is not as fast as it used to be; it is harder to accommodate new knowledge and concepts.

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These changes are often connected with the loss of abilities. Both common sense and an educational deficit model hold a vision of ageing as ‘decaying’, considering there is an inverse proportionality between age and the cognitive ability to perform. However, this is being challenged by development psychology, which rather sees ageing as an on-going process of constructing and modelling to life circumstances. For Baltes, Staudinger and Lindenberger (1999) human development is continuous, although there are continuous and discontinuous processes of action. It is related with a set of contextual variables (e.g., age; socio-economic factors and significant events of life) but also with other factors as gender, ethnicity or socio-economic status.

The social composition of universities has been changing; it is nowadays characterised by the increase of formerly minority groups, now encouraged to participate in HE (Robinson & Laing, 2003). Rau (1999) distinguishes two groups of mature students in HE: the first of those educationally disadvantaged, lacking basic skills and motivation; the second composed by part-time mature students that split their time between professional, academic and family tasks. If universities are to be concerned with the integration of these mature students, it is necessary to change its procedures and norms, making flexibility an instrument to make student’s live more compatible with academic demands. These changes can include “new types of courses; new ways of teaching; part-time study; courses arranged at convenient times for working adults to attend; the facilities for adult students” (Jarvis, 2001, p.31).

Structural factors such as globalization, fast technology changes, changes in the labour market, unemployment of career dissatisfaction, seem to push mature citizens to access higher education. More specific factors can include personal fulfilment or the development of social relationships. HE is a space that fosters the mutual exchange of knowledge and learning, which include important spaces of socialization, and the “sharing of affective relationships” (Antunes & Santos, 2007, p. 158).

Mature students have very different characteristics when compared to traditional, younger students. For mature students, experience and critical thought have a decisive role both for their learning or promoting their self-reliance and professional fulfilment. Rau (1999) claims mature students to be highly motivated and link “their lives and work experiences with their studies” (p. 378). Also the social dimensions of work and family have an important role in the academic life of mature students. Especially for women, there is a kind of a permanent tension between paid labour, family and learning in HE: if on the one hand the need to perform these multiple roles increase their confidence and self-esteem, on the other hand women often experience stress as a result of time or resource constrains (Kirby et al., 2004). Despite these and other obstacles presented to mature students in HE, it is possible for them to achieve the same level of academic performance as their younger colleagues (Boulton-Lewis, 2010). After all, their motivations and commitment are different – often seen as a life-time investment.

Methodology

This small research is a part of a wider investigation project⁵ designed to understand the holistic situation of those students that entered HE through the ‘over 23 years old’ means of access since the academic year 2006/07. The first year of the project was devoted to building and analysing the results of a survey of both students and staff. We also initiated focus-group interviews (Morgan 2001) with a heterogeneous group of

⁵ Project PTDC/CPE-CED/108739/2008, Non-traditional students in HEI: searching solutions to improve the academic success, funded by the FCT.

students who have entered university, and we will follow the evolution of their perceptions during the three years of their bachelor's degree. The second year of the project is devoted to biographical interviews of students and lecturers and semi-structured interviews with staff that have responsibilities in the various levels of management, for an approximate total of 60-70 interviews. At the end of the project, a focus-group discussion will be organised with the rector's teams to present and discuss our result and our recommendations.

For this paper we used biographical interviews (Ruiz 1999) to M23 from the University of Algarve, which provide us a new glance about mature students' experiences in HE. As these interviews were mainly exploratory (Bertaux, 1997), instead of conducting full life histories, we tried our subjects to concentrate on stories and episodes regarding their academic life. We conducted four biographical interviews to two female and two males, aged between 40 and 61 years. Although there is material in a number of issues, for this paper content analysis was focused on three main categories: motivations for entering HE; social and educational barriers to participation in HE; and relationships between non-traditional students (M23) and younger students.

Results

Our research subjects include Christine (53 years old) who is a civil servant and studies administration at university; Regina (50 years old), currently unemployed, who studies Psychology; Richard (40 years old) who studies nursery, works at the hospital as a nursery assistant; and John (61 years old), who has his own marketing business and studies marketing at the university.

For the mature students we have interviewed, education is something that carries an important personal, professional and social value. Their lives were deeply affected by an earlier abandoning of school during the period of adolescence (dropout is generally caused by the low economic resources of their families, changing place if life, or in some cases personal traumatic events such as the death of a family member). After this transition, their reality became progressively characterised by two intertwined dimensions, family and work, the central pillars by which and because of which most of the decisions were made in their life courses. Taking into account this basic situation, to enter university later in life is seen as an attempt to foster changes in their lives, in a phase where change is still possible. There are four basic motives that lead our students to access higher education: 1) the possibility of changing job, to print a new direction in their careers; 2) to get a professional specialization; 3) to continue studies that were interrupted in the past; 4) to acquire knowledge.

These four motives are all in some way related to working life. So there is a clear pattern in these stories: the need to change the life course through a HE degree means to direct their efforts to change their professional situation – with the expectations that this will bring further changes in their economic and social life dimensions.

The recent and present financial and economic crisis constitutes a contextual framework that also has influenced their choices and motives for enrolling higher education. As we speak unemployment rates in Portugal are already bigger than 16% and climbing. This has affected people in every professional field and, plus, fear of being unemployed is present in every-day life. This is especially felt by mature citizens; to be unemployed at the age of 50 means the possibility of staying unemployed and depending on state support – a terrible situation also because state support has been decreasing progressively recently:

Suddenly the problem was the crisis... I was working in real-estate, and then that thing of 'crisis' arose, and I was afraid about what will happen next, maybe we can't sell enough (...) My boss started to say – I don't know if it will be possible for you to continue with us – meanwhile the application to access university became available, and I decide to apply! (Regina)

Both Regina and Christine returning to education was partially determined by this specific situation. As for Richard, his qualifications did not allow him to do anything more than to assist nurseries. Since the “*State has frozen all the professional categories and wages*”, and feeling big labour market instability, he decided to enter university. Labour market integration and employability are therefore central to mature student's motives for entering university. They expect not only to re-direct their careers or escape unemployment, but also to climb up professionally and even to gain skills to have their own businesses in the future (this option clearly because of the fear to depend from others to have a job).

It strikes our attention the level of involvement that mature students show in higher education. The value of a HE degree is taken without doubts. They are highly motivated and seem to have high self-esteem. If at a one hand the four students showed to have very clear thoughts on the motives for brought them to higher education, at the other hand they seem correspondingly determined: there is a strong idea of commitment and effort in order to finish their first degrees as fast as possible. This desire, however, clashes with the real conditions they have to achieve their goals. Mature students have a family of their won with their own needs and professional life is time-demanding. Mature students are clearly disadvantaged in comparison to younger / traditional students in several aspects:

1. First, the earlier interruption of their school path determines some deficits that influence their learning in higher education: they can enter university without complete secondary studies, lacking some skills and lacking basic knowledge to follow the learning pace at the university (up to the point they admit to have difficulties in following some of the courses contents); their domain of English is poor; it is been a very long time since they faced formal educational demands; there is, consequently, a period of time in which they have to concentrate in regaining these type of study and research habits. But mature students seem to ‘compensate’ these types of deficits and obstacles. That is, they have clearly a bigger experience acquired in life at general or in their working-life. This seems to allow them to have a critical posture on the issues there are studied in their courses. Also this accumulated experience seems to be important in their ability to make connections between theory and practice – a common complaint by traditional students is that their degrees do not articulate these two dimensions properly.

2. Secondly, the centrality of work and family leaves them with less time to dedicate to read, research, study, elaborate essays, etc. Usually they have to do it during the week-ends. It is very hard to conciliate professional and family life with academic demands. Richard, for instance, claims that the lack of time to dedicate to her daughters is a discouragement – even if at the same time he thinks at their future to persist in HE studies. Family is, for these mature students, both a source of anguish (they feel not to support them as they should) and a source of encouragement (the anchor that maintains their emotional balance). Finally, there is a gendered mechanism which emerges from now and then in our subjects discourse. Women concentrated multiple roles prior to

their entrance to university. The support from husbands and other family members turns to be indispensable for them to be able to concentrate in HE studies (Maria is an example of this).

3. Thirdly, students' academic life has an important dimension apart from the strict dimension of lectures, study, essays and examinations. Attending seminars, extra-curricular workshops, conferences; participating in sports; and participating in social life events (students meetings, dinners, informal socializations events, etc.) are very important in global academic life. Mature students are unable to participate in all this. When formal lectures end, family and works wait.

An important dimension of mature students' perceptions in HE concerns the relationships established with their younger colleagues. It is evident that mature students know from day one that they live in a different world. Their goals, expectations, motivations, priorities, and participation possibilities are different. Mature students acknowledge their mutual differences (including also differences in their ability to memorise and the fact younger students seem more fast when it comes to traditional learning tasks).

I'm old enough to be their father (...), as I said before they have a different life perspective that differs from my own, maybe they see me in a different perspective, because they use to tease at each other and their jokes don't work with me!
(Richard).

We would therefore expect these differences to reflect in their relationships, depicting two separate groups of students with no contacts at all; or whose relationships reflect irreconcilable differences. However, this seems not to be the case. Mature students claim to establish positive relationship with all colleagues (young or older generations). We saw no signs of common sense misconceptions that attribute to mature students a conservative mentality, nor the existence of an intergenerational gap. Differences of age impede no friendship relationships to develop.

I enter higher education when I was 50 years old. My colleagues are younger than me, they have, in average, around 30 years less than me... there was a time when one of the younger girls started to call me by "grandmother" (...). I think I have friends from the University for the rest of my life
(Christine).

HE seems to represent an important space with different rules, thus favouring intergenerational contacts positively. It gives mature students the opportunity to create new younger friends and to build new relationships, in a different context when compared to family and work relationships.

Conclusions

The recent financial and economic crisis and the severity of the global situation in Portugal might be increasing the public perception of risk, with a special emphasis in the fear of losing our jobs. It is also possible that this scenario promotes a certain shift in the perceptions of the functions of higher education. Instrumentality is the logic outcome of these events. Higher education seems to be viewed as an instrument to

increasing people's qualifications and therefore to provide a way to improve the so-called employability. The fact is that most of the motivations claimed by our research subjects to enter university are clearly connected with the labour market or working-life. Jarvis (2001) states, accordingly, that we are living in a society where "knowledge in itself has no intrinsic value, it is only its use-value as a scarce resource which is significant (p. 29)".

If access is nowadays more easy than it used to be, the fulfilment of the wishes and desires of mature students depend mainly on their ability to stand in higher education with a considerable degree of success. This is not, however, an easy task. Even considering that we have not included in this study variables like social class – not at least explicitly –; mature students have a general context that carries basic problems: their basic skills and knowledge may not be enough to attain a comfortable situation at the light of the new academic demands; they experience some losses related to memory; they have a family to take care and a job. Generally speaking, the main obstacles mature students face in higher education is somewhat classical: the difficulties in managing time, due to their need to perform multiple tasks, specifically to combine work and family needs with academic life. It is interesting, however, to note that some of these obstacles are eventually compensated by other types of characteristics that are, in a way, determined by age: first, our research subjects seem strong-willed, focused in their objectives, and very certain to take no detours in academic life – their families, the sacrifices they are making, among others, are factors that explain this situation. Second, in our study becomes clear that mature students can make a use out of their experience, present themselves as critical and capable of a reflection capacity (already noted by Rau, 1999), that is very dear to some of us, as scholars. The challenge, in terms of higher education pedagogy, is to make use of these students experience.

Whilst age is clearly a disadvantage that determines a number of obstacles to mature student's success, it seems not to be a problem considering their relationships with younger students. Despite the fact that mature students are, generally speaking, unable to participate in a set of social and academic events, they seem to be socially integrated in their peers groups.

Our final comment goes to the need of rethinking processes and procedures, within higher education, to adapt the needs of mature students. Will we be able to create management structures, services, and pedagogical processes suited for them? Flexibility seems to be the key-word in this issue.

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