Are Universities Really Open to Adult Students?

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Abstract

The topic "Adult Education in Universities" is not new, as people might argue that in fact in universities we are dealing only with adults. It is true, the focus is mainly on young adults, however for the older ones, the so called "non-traditional students," offers and services are more limited. This situation tends to become even more sensitive, once the different university ranking systems put more emphasis on the research aspect than on the didactic and social function of the university. This is the focus of this thematic journal, trying to bring together papers and reflections about the extent to which universities have become more open to "non-traditional students". The paper discusses efforts done at the European level to push member states and universities towards more systematic efforts, and reflections on how they can widen access to higher education for non-traditional students.

Key words: widening access to higher education, lifelong learning, adult student

Preamble

"Widening access to higher education for more mature adults is a tool for social and economic development" (EC, 2011, 2012, 2014) – this is an argument based on which universities within the European higher education area (EHEA), policy makers, researchers around Europe and beyond, and the academic community as a whole have introduced into the policy agenda issues like *opening access routes* to higher education and *providing adequate student services, lifelong learning (LLL)* in universities, integrating *non-traditional access routes* to higher education, *recognition of knowledge and skills* as an alternative route, *flexible part-time studies* etc.

This argument is complemented by one of the main goals to be reached by 2020, agreed upon by the 47 ministers responsible for higher education: "maximization of talent". Thus, the social dimension of higher education is seen not only as social justice, ensuring equity and equal opportunities, in order to create a better and more socially cohesive society, but also as a way to enhance social capital, maximizing talents (Orr, 2012, p.173). We might add, based on research findings (Manninen & all, 2014), that widening access to higher education and LLL creates benefits in a broader way, regarding "attitudes and social capital", "control of one's own life", "well-being", "mental health", active ageing etc., once the "universities respond positively to diverse demands from a broad spectrum of students – including adult learners, professionals who seek to up-grade skills for the workplace, senior citizens taking advantage of their increasing longevity to pursue cultural interests and others -, but all looking for high quality and relevant higher education throughout their lifetime" (Orr, 2012, p.174).

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Nevertheless, in spite of the policy discourse and the policy documents, a lot of countries still have no alternative route of access to higher education (Romania being amongst them). This contrasts somehow with the fact that LLL is a recognition mission in all HEI, but the restrictions of implementing it or the low effort made by universities in providing adequate educational offers and services, contribute to this remaining a limited rigid provision. On the other hand, there are countries reporting the existence of at least one alternative entry route to higher education, with little or no restrictions for provisions and services meant to attract "non-traditional" students, but "they are often unable to provide information on the proportion of students entering the system on the basis of alternative admission procedures. Such a situation indicates that in the majority of countries this area is not subject to a regular system-wide monitoring" (see EC 2012, p. 86), in spite of the BFUG (Bologna Follow-up Group) periodic reporting exercise.

Also, the universities do not yet have effective solutions and adequate offers for attracting their graduates back to further education, for upgrading their knowledge and competencies. The relationships with the alumni community are not vivid ones. Most of the indicators ask for data related to the relevance of the studies, counting the jobs taken on the labour market by graduates, but transversal records are less available. As M. Gallo (2013) underlines, the alumni community is "the only constant – and constantly growing – stakeholder group of higher education institutions (HEIs)", analysing, therefore, the wide range of interactive opportunities offered by universities to alumni over their lifetime.

Increasingly, universities have to face the pressure of academic ranking, of increasing their research performance (see Ciolan, 2013), and didactic and social dimensions tend to be neglected, in a risky way. The Emerging Global Model of Elite twenty-first universities worldwide (with their eight characteristics: global mission, research intensity, new roles for professors, diversified funding, worldwide recruitment, increasing complexity, new relationships with government and industry, and global collaboration with similar institutions) favours economic development, but the "social obligation" of the universities, the social function, is more contextualized to the region they belong to, so the concentration of elites only in some regions is favouring the respective regions (Gidley, 2012, p.1020). The tension between elite institutions and mass higher education, and also the changing views of quality in higher education with regard to social inclusion and widening participation are among the factors determining the re-imagining of the role and function of higher education in the future (Gidley, 2012, p.1019-1037).

Recent studies on the motivation of adults to learn (see Manninen and all, 2014) offer universities one more argument for opening up more offers for older adults, as "motivation to learn seems to play a crucial role for almost all participants, although they do not always mention their motivation explicitly" (p. 51). Such findings, from large scale research (more than 8000 adult learners involved in non-vocational adult education in the last 12 months, from 10 European countries) are strong arguments not only for increasing the educational offers for adults, the usual formal ones of further education, but also for diversifying them, by offering non-vocational educational programs and courses as well. Such offers are also responsibilities for the universities fulfilling their roles in contributing to spreading knowledge, cultural values, in acting in their communities as critical and cultural forums. Is there an increase in such offers, or a decreasing concern for such services?

In considering this paper, and the whole thematic journal, one should keep in mind the meaning of lifelong learning (LLL) in universities, as agreed by the members of the European University Association while launching the Charter of LLL in Universities (EUA, 2008), and committing to follow it:

'Widening access to higher education is not about introducing less qualified students, but rather about supporting all learners with the potential to benefit both themselves and society through participating in higher education. This means reaching out to an increasingly broad range of learners with different motivations and interests: not only offering programmers for professional development adapted to a fast-changing labour market, but also catering for the growing demand for personal development opportunities through the cultural enrichment that universities offer" (p.4).

In the following pages we will try to identify recent developments and critical issues concerning offering friendlier, more adequate, flexible and attractive courses and educational services for older adults (over 25 years old).

Recent developments, trends

The lifelong learning issue has accompanied all the reflections towards setting up the European Higher Education Area, as well as the ones for implementing the Bologna Process. The discourse can be synthesised thus:

"Lifelong learning is an essential element of the European Higher Education Area. In the future Europe, built upon a knowledge-based society and economy, lifelong learning strategies are necessary to face the challenges of competitiveness and the use of new technologies and to improve social cohesion, equal opportunities and the quality of life." (Prague Communique, 2001: Towards the European Higher Education Area")

Discussions have taken place at the European Level amongst Member States, on the future of the Bologna Process and on the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) including, as distinct possible policy priorities, "lifelong learning", "adult learning", "diversification of the students population" etc., under the "Social dimension" – these are also accompanied by the "Development of National Access Plans/measures" of acting, for the period 2012-2015[1] (EHEA, 2012). However, in spite of this development trend, and the other dimensions included[2], when the actual development taking place is studied, the progress towards including more older adults into HEI remains rather modest.

The strategic aim of "Providing quality higher education for all" can be reached (as shown in the Bucharest Communique, 2012) by making greater efforts to attract underrepresented groups to higher education as well, and by "widening access to higher education as a whole, as a precondition for societal progress and economic development" (ibid, p.1).

Systematic effort at the European level, in the last decade, aimed at increasing/ extending the social dimension of higher education (see EC 2011, 2011b, 2012, 2013, 2014) under the coordination of the European Commission, can be noticed not only from policy documents, thematic reports, efforts for data gathering, instrument launching, peer reviews, but also from the monitoring activities and systematic mapping of existing developments in the member states regarding both the participation of underrepresented groups, and lifelong learning in universities. This yearly mapping exercise is also a way to push universities and national bodies not only to record the developments on

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[1] The Erasmus project ALLinHE - *Access to Lifelong Learning in Higher Education for All* (2011-2014; nr. 517978-LLP-1-2011-1-NL-ERASMUS-ESIN) was coordinated by Inholland University, and run together with 8 partners and 2 associate ones, from nine countries, with West University of Timisoara as a partner: www.allinhe.eu

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different indicators related to lifelong learning, but also to get used to them and to reflect on them, and on how they can improve the existing situation.

The reporting exercise coordinated by BFUG since 2009 however shows that countries still do not make enough effort in improving the data reported: to the contrary, some even have registered a decrease in the participation rate of older students (EC 2012, p. 127-149). There are big differences between countries both in terms of allowing access to higher education in more flexible ways (through validation of previous learning –VPL, support services, alternative courses etc.), and in terms of attractiveness for and inclusion of the older students.

For instance, in Romania, the percentage of older students (over 30 years old) attending higher education in 2009-2010 (more updated statistics are not available) was 14.25%, with 2.5/% less than in the previous academic year (UEFISCDI, 2013, p.25). The point is that Romania does not have a national strategy regarding the social dimension of higher education, with clear targets and ways to implement it. Furthermore, in spite of developing a set of instruments for widening access to higher education, there is not a systematic monitoring of their use, so there is no updated data about their impact, neither is there available data in general for judging the social dimension, lifelong learning and widening access for older students. There is not enough stimulus for universities to increase the social dimension, and lifelong learning is not amongst the quality criteria for evaluating higher education. Neither are related resources available for universities to develop lifelong learning programs, the experts recommending separate budgets in the financing of higher education for lifelong learning programs and services, and data collection, as well as launching procedures for accreditation, for recognition of prior learning, for using transfer of credits, as well as guidelines for implementation (UEFISCDI, 2013, p.27-37). In most cases students pay the whole study fee, with no covering from other public sources, and there is no available data in this respect. Such a situation contradicts the recommendations from *rethinking education* (EC, 2012b, p.13), as greater sharing between public and private funds should be considered, to stimulate access to higher education for underprivileged groups. Such a recommendation is in line with the social dimension aspect and with the need to improve the skill level mainly of those with no qualifications at higher level. Furthermore, the RPL is not recognized as a possible way to get some credits from practice, to access higher level, and there is no specific focus in HE policy on promoting the flexible provision of HE studies/programmes, as the last reporting exercise for Romania shows (2014). The Romanian higher education system remains one of the most exclusive systems in Europe, with the lower educational level group underrepresented, and high education with relatively high overrepresentation. At the opposite end of the spectrum are the inclusive systems of higher education from Finland, Ireland, Switzerland, or Holland (EC, 2013).

Contrary to the situation in Romania, in the universities in Sweden, the majority of students have a working background, being over 25 years old (Anderson, 2014: 43). Such a situation might be a source of increased quality and enriching for the universities as well, as such students bring more experience, updated developments from the labour market/ from their working place, and their experience allows them to go to a higher level of more pertinent solutions and developments, which they bring into their studies and graduation papers. We might argue that reducing the duration of academic studies (mainly at BA and PhD levels) is a solution which mostly addresses those with working experience, and with a clearer view about what do they want to do, to update, to improve, in a more specific and focused way. Therefore, the universities should reconsider ways of removing the institutional barriers related to these issues. To name only two of them (Anderson, 2014: 44): the way of organising the provision of education (for example the form of instruction in terms of distance courses vs. on-campus courses could influence participation), or the system of admission, with requirements of eligibility and selection instruments (i.e. the Romanian universities have, most of them, as the main/ only criteria for access to MA level the results from graduation, without taking into account relevant experience or anything of this kind).

Among the measures reported by member states increasingly used for improving the opening up of higher education to older students (see EC 2013), the **VPL** is one of the most often quoted, a wider use being expected due to the implementation of the *national qualification frameworks*. It is well known that VPL "in the context of higher education can have two different purposes: firstly, to allow students to gain admission to a higher education institution and, secondly, to allow students to demonstrate that they have met, partially or completely, the requirements of a higher education programme" (EC, 2011, p.47). In some countries, legislation refers to alternative access to higher education in a relatively open way, i.e. it does not refer to any specific categories of non-traditional learners or to any approaches to be used in alternative admission procedures (e.g. Finland and Sweden). The United Kingdom represents a specific case, as there is no legislation referring to alternative entry into higher education, but higher education institutions commonly accept non-traditional candidates who do not comply with standard entry requirements. This is related to the fact that universities are autonomous institutions responsible for the quality of their qualifications and the recruitment of their student population. They can therefore set their own admission criteria and conditions (EC, 2012, p.85). Such a solution can be adopted into the Romanian HEIs, as a bottom up initiative, based on the universities' autonomy (Sava/Borca/Danciu, 2014). As was shown in ALLinHE project[3], the situation is very different in different countries. It is quite easy to implement such a tool in countries like The Netherlands, Denmark, or Portugal, since the regulations allow this, but for other countries it can be considered that the bottom-up approach is experimentation. The arguments for such a solution are synthesised as follows:

« It is expected that the shift to clearly identified learning outcomes will support alternative entry pathways in two different ways: First, clearly identified knowledge, skills and competences needed for study at higher education level could allow the implementation of measures to recognise non-formal and informal learning as a part of standard admission procedures. Second, national qualification frameworks are also expected to clarify the content of different national qualifications, which could allow certain "non-traditional" certificates and qualifications to be better understood and potentially accepted by higher education institutions as an alternative to standard upper secondary school leaving qualifications. Further studies are to be done, to explore the impact of such a measure.» (EC 2012, p.88)

If implementing such solutions might be delayed, due to further regulations, trust, cultural patterns, novelty compared to existing practices, and the efforts required to implement a new solution in a qualitative way, then a more accepted and easily implemented solution for universities is that of making the study programs more flexible. Some further possible solutions are presented below, mapping different good practices.

Possible solutions

Peer learning activities and the possibility of learning from the experiences of other countries are encouraged. In this respect, in 2013 the European Union launched the thematic study on "Opening up Higher Education to Adults" (EU, 2013), with a series of case studies and examples of good practice.

Some examples of good practice:

- Setting up *targets* for widening access to higher education for older adults, and other specific group of adults (i.e. trying to maximise talents also for the ones belonging to the underprivileged groups – see EC, 2011b) and put in place *adequate measures, monitoring their impact* (EC, 2014). VPL is one the measures to be addressed.

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- *Making study programs more flexible* is one of the most often-used solutions, keeping in mind the limited time volume of the older students and their professional and social constraints, but also their experience. D. Orr (2012) makes a clear distinction between the different ways of making study offers flexible, according to the types of students (i.e. highly skilled autonomous learners vs. students needing for a lot of support in their academic study, after a long period of time out-of-studies), but also connected to the institutional philosophy. All types can exist, but students should be informed from the beginning about these "entry requirements", to be able to self-evaluate, to adapt their expectations, in this way avoiding drop-out. Irrespective, we are talking about flexibility in terms of time, content, entry requirements, instructional approach and resources, and delivery and logistics (EC, 2014, apud Collins, 1997/ 2001). The new technologies for information and communication offer universities a wide range of tailoring the delivery mode of courses, which is to be explored by universities more intensively, even with large scale delivery, through inter-institutional consortia, and MOOC delivery. This trend is definitely recommended as one way towards modernising higher education, being somehow surprising that it is not followed and integrated more intensively by universities. Another way in which programs can be made more flexible is through offering study in modules. Designing study in modules allows a better connection to the labour market, and also addresses more specific needs of the adult learner.

- A possible solution to support the access to higher education is to offer *preparatory programmes* for non-traditional higher education candidates (EC, 2012, p. 85), as a *second chance* facilitating one step up (a situation existing for instance in Ireland and England). Such preparatory programs should be accompanied by services for educational and career counselling for students.

- One more solution to point out, as an illustration of different possibilities the universities can choose in order to be more inclusive, attractive and "friendly" to the adult students relates to the *flexibility of governance and control structures* (EC, 2013). In other words, universities, based on their autonomy, can set up the infrastructure of services towards older adults as they consider fit, the main standard being quality of provision and satisfaction of the students. Further aspects of flexibility are therefore to be kept in mind: flexibility in the development of practice- and occupational-related HE programmes, flexible (open) access and entry routes, flexibility in terms of space and time, financial flexibility and flexible lifelong learning processes (EC, 2013).

Some of these solutions can be found explained and analysed in a more detailed way in the pages of the thematic journal.

This **thematic number** covers, in a balanced way, considerations about the degree to which universities are open to the world of practice, with views and experiences from the USA, Australia and Europe, underlining the benefits for practice/ universities from such collaboration, but also the obstacles to setting up and running such a collaboration. To illustrate such considerations, a more in-depth analysis of the Hungarian higher education and their understanding and practice in opening up to older students is also included. Solutions are also debated concerning the enrolment of older students in universities (even for the third age, or students with special needs), but also solutions for all adults to return to higher education/ further education, by the validation of their previous learning experiences (VPL). The issue of validation of competencies comes up more often in the articles selected for this thematic journal, as a solution for the individual to reflect and build upon the learning outcomes of his learning in all life and professional contexts, to stimulate self-investment in learning and return to learning (see A. Osoian). The VPL is a suitable solution for meeting the demands of higher education in widening access to higher education, in improving the retention of students, increasing efficiency by improving completion rates, and reducing the time taken to complete degree courses (European Commission, 2013, p.35). Therefore, universities have to reconsider their

practices and to offer more diverse and tailored programs to non-traditional learners. Such practices are to be measured against indicators for quality assurance, with items related to the openness, inclusiveness and adaptation of the university offers to "non-traditional" adult students. Not only are such indicators analysed from a technical point of view in the journal, helping traditional higher education institutions to implement a functional internal quality assurance system and make a shift toward an orientation of adult education (see the article of Anca Prisacariu), but there are also practical solutions offered for enhancing the quality culture by means of validating competences of teachers and students involved in quality assurance (see Mihai Vilcea). Such solutions come more and more into the debates for the scientific and professional community as a whole, two related events of this kind being presented in the journal (the first VPL Biennale and the 4th International conference on adult education, with the focus on adults in university), as well as the books launched at these events.

However, these are just some of the possible solutions and approaches. It is up to each university to set up its own strategy of opening up to older students, with clear targets, as the older students are as important as the younger ones for fulfilling its mission. The number of traditional students is decreasing continuously, so the older students are a strategic option, both for their experience allowing them to keep a high level of expertise and quality of teaching, and for their potential and needs for up-skilling.

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