

Enriching Higher Education: Learning and Teaching with Non-Traditional Adult Students

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This handbook has been produced as part of a SOCRATES Grundtvig project entitled 'Learning in Higher Education: Improving Practice for Non-traditional Adult Students' (100703-CP-1-2002-1-UK-GRUNDTVIG –G1).

The definition used for non traditional adult students was that previously adopted by the earlier European Union Targeted Socio-Economic Research Programme Project (1998-2001) on adult access to higher education and which involved several of the same partners:

“A new mature student entrant (by age in respective countries) with no previous HE qualifications whose participation in HE is constrained by structural factors additional to age.”

The aims and objectives of the project were to:

- promote lifelong learning in higher education (HE) within a European dimension
- identify the learning experiences and needs of adult students in higher education
- raise awareness amongst practitioners and policy makers of the learning needs of adults in HE
- promote institutional change through developing strategies for adapting HE institutions to the needs of adult students
- develop, exchange and disseminate innovative approaches and practices in relation to the learning and teaching of adults.

It involved the following partners:

- University of Barcelona, Spain
- Dundalk Institute of Technology, Ireland
- University of Goettingen, Germany
- Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Portugal
- University of Stockholm, Sweden
- University of Turku, Finland
- University of Warwick, UK

This booklet aims to:

- identify policy issues at national and European levels
- suggest good practices at departmental and institutional levels
- identify key issues in relation to the participation and learning experiences of non-traditional adult students in higher education
- identify learning and teaching approaches to enhance the learning experiences of non-traditional adult students in higher education

How to use this booklet

This booklet is divided into different sections: macro, meso and micro.

The macro level looks at national and European structures and policies, the meso level focuses on institutional issues while the micro level looks at the learning experiences of adult students. However, it is important to remember that all three levels also interact with each other.

This booklet can be used and read as a whole or as individual sections.

This booklet will be of use to:

LECTURERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

CENTRES FOR ACADEMIC PRACTICE

ADMISSIONS TUTORS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

THOSE WITH RESPONSIBILITY FOR ACCESS POLICY

POLICY MAKERS AT INSTITUTIONAL, NATIONAL AND EUROPEAN LEVELS

This section focuses on broad international, European and national developments which shape and affect learning in higher education for non traditional adult students.

It covers:

- **Social and Economic Change and Higher Education**
- **Policies on Lifelong Learning: European and International Organizations**
- **An Overview of the different national policies of the seven project countries**

1. Social and Economic Change and Higher Education

The world is changing and higher education institutions across the world need to respond to rapid change at economic, political, social and cultural levels. In this context, Ulrich Beck identifies a ‘risk society’ as being typified by uncertainty and risk, a new phase of late modernity, ‘reflexive modernization’, where the very conditions that facilitated the development of modern industrial society become problematic themselves and where modern institutions increasingly struggle to cope with the global insecurity of life (Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994). Beck, Giddens and Lash identify two key aspects of a risk society as being ‘detraditionalization’ and ‘individualization’. This macro section recognises these key aspects and looks to explore critically their particular implications for higher education.

The broad process of ‘detraditionalization’ where “...traditions are routinely subject to interrogation” (Beck et al, 1994: viii) is evident in, for example, the gradual dissolution of class and gender divisions, in changing patterns of family work and community life. In relation to higher education, four key processes of **detraditionalization** can readily be identified:

- at a *structural level*, as the established boundaries of higher education or universities begin to break down and become problematic;
- at a *theoretical/ideological level*, where the underlying modernist assumptions about the established values and purposes of universities are being increasingly called into question (Hake, 1997);
- at an *epistemological level* where established disciplines are seen by many to be no longer sufficient to equip students or citizens to survive and thrive in a fast-moving, global society and a volatile global labour market; and
- at a *policy level*, in the growing challenge to traditional Higher Education traditions from the broader-based, more economically and politically pragmatic discourse of Lifelong Learning.

This process of detraditionalization links with the parallel process of **individualization**. For Beck, individualization’ or ‘Individualisierung’ is significantly different from individualism; in fact, it actively critiques and tries to demystify, the whole neo-liberal ideology of the unrestricted, self-sufficient autonomous self (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: xxi). Rather, Beck and others see individualization as a structural characteristic of highly differentiated societies, involving “the... disembedding and ...re-embedding of ways of life by new ones in which individuals must produce, stage and cobble together their biographies themselves” (Beck, Giddens and Lash 1994: 13). This is beginning to be reflected in social and economic policy across Europe with the encouragement and development of active labour market strategies, a focus on individual responsibility for ‘employability’ within an increasingly ‘flexible’ labour market and a responsive welfare state geared to draw people away from a ‘dependency culture’.

These changes have prompted universities to interact more visibly with society locally, nationally and globally. Multiple stakeholders now have claims on higher education, for example, industry. (Barnett, 2003) This has led some to argue that its traditional stronghold on academic knowledge is being challenged as wider epistemologies enter the university curriculum (Delanty, 2001). A key part of this opening up to the outside world has included the admission of a wider and more diverse student body as universities have moved from elite to mass institutions (Scott, 1998).

More adults, including non-traditional adults, are entering higher education across Europe as part of this change process. It is, therefore, essential that higher education institutions take into account the learning needs and biographies of adult students. (as this project has done – see Section C, Micro level). Non-traditional adults’ learning experiences and biographies are often shaped

by previous learning experiences, particularly by initial schooling, sometimes in negative ways. Adults also bring with them more and wider life experiences than younger students. This presents a different form of knowledge for universities. Past biographical experiences also shape the attitudes of non-traditional adult students towards learning and their engagement with academic knowledge. This is reflected through the presentation of different types of educational biographies and learner identities amongst adult students. In policy terms it is important that change takes place at the institutional level and that universities across Europe recognise the need to initiate a cultural and pedagogical shift to adjust to its changing student population

2. Policies on Lifelong Learning: European and International Organizations

Lifelong learning policies are becoming increasingly important for higher education practice. We now live in a context marked by rapid economic and technological change where people have continuously to update their competences and qualifications, not just to stay in employment but also to consolidate their citizenship and to fully realise their potential at a personal level. In higher education this is leading to a massification of higher education, an increasingly heterogeneous student body, a growing emphasis on the quality of education, increasing concerns about the employability and competitiveness of students in the labour market and questions about the contribution HE can make to social cohesion.

Many international organizations have begun signposting the path towards a learning society. Since the publication of *Lifelong Learning for All* in 1996, *OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development)*, Education Ministers have declared lifelong learning as a central policy objective. Since then, this guideline has been the basis for the OECD programme on education and training. In November 2000, the European Commission issued a *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning*, based on the conclusions of the 1996 *European Year of Lifelong Learning*, which formed the basis for wide consultation in Europe, including the candidate countries. The result of this consultation stressed that cooperation and coordination in this area is essential. Public consultation on this *Memorandum* has emphasised a new breadth of this definition and drawn attention to the full range of formal, non formal and informal learning activity. Thus, lifelong learning may contribute to preparation for the labour market, prepare people to become active citizens in a democratic society, contribute to their personal development and play a significant role in the development and maintenance of an advanced knowledge based society.

Lifelong learning is one of the fundamental pillars of the European economic and social strategy adopted at the Lisbon European Council Meeting, in March 2000 [Lisbon European Council...2000]; the aim is to become, by 2010:

the most competitive and dynamic knowledge based economy in the world, capable of sustainable growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion.

In October 2003, the Brussels European Council identified the following objectives in relation to lifelong learning [Commission of the European Communities, 2003:14-15]:

1. Put in place comprehensive, coherent and concerted strategies
2. Target efforts at the disadvantaged groups – (one of the challenges) “will be to increase the awareness of the disadvantaged groups of the advantages of education and training and to make the systems more attractive, more accessible and tailored more closely to their needs”
3. Apply common European references and principles

2.1 Lifelong Learning and Higher Education

The *Bologna Declaration* [Bologna Declaration, 1999] signed by Ministers of Education of 29 European countries, on 19 June 1999 has been identified as a political document introducing a different concept of how to build a Europe of Knowledge and a European Area of Higher Education, based on the intellectual, cultural, social, scientific and technological dimensions and respecting the diversity of cultures, languages, national education systems and the autonomy of universities.

This document initiated the on-going Bologna process in which lifelong learning in higher education has been seen to encompass developments in Continuing Education (CE), Adult Education (AE) and Continuing Professional Development (CPD). This process has begun to address, over time, the demand for and the rise of a political awareness which reflects a profound change in the status of knowledge and skills in society.

One of the outcomes of the 1999 Bologna Declaration was that Ministers agreed to meet periodically to evaluate the progress achieved. Since 1999, there has been a summit in Prague in 2001 (18-19 May) and a more recent one (September 2003) in Berlin.

In the Prague Summit, the participating Ministries reaffirmed their willingness to promote the mobility of students, teachers, researchers and other personnel; at the same time, they also recognised the need for an educational perspective of lifelong learning. As stated in the final *Communiqué of the Prague meeting* [European Ministers, 2001:2]:

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.

In the Berlin Meeting, Lifelong Learning is highlighted among the principles and the priorities agreed. As stated in the Final Communiqué of the Conference [European Ministers, 2003:6],

“Ministers underline the important contribution of higher education in making lifelong learning a reality. Steps should be taken to align the national policies of the different countries in order to accomplish this goal and Higher Education institutions must enhance the possibilities for lifelong learning at higher education level including the recognition of prior learning.”

It also recommended that,

those working on qualifications frameworks for the European Higher Education Area should encompass the wide range of flexible paths opportunities and techniques and make appropriate use of the ECTS credits [op. cit., 6].

and highlighted the “need to improve opportunities for all citizens, in accordance with their aspirations and abilities, to follow the lifelong learning paths into and within higher education” [op. cit., 6].

Of particular relevance to the work of this project has been the Bologna process’s reference to the social dimension of Higher Education and issues like:

equitable access, student finance, motivating members of new or under-represented groups to pursue higher education, adapting learning methods and institutional working schedules and certainly a host of other issues [Bergan, 2003:14].

3. An Overview of the different national policies of the seven project countries

The ‘Learning in Higher Education’ project has involved seven different countries in Western Europe. Each of these countries has and is being affected by social and economic change and by developing European HE Policies. However, each has a different set of policies, norms and traditions. The tables below outline these differences in summary form. They have been derived from a much in-depth analysis of each of the partner countries’ national contexts and, as such, are, inevitably, over-simplifications of often complex factors. (for a more in-depth comparison, see the document ‘An overview of the different national contexts’ available on <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/study/cil/research/lihe>) However, they give some indication of the different contexts and experiences which have influenced and shaped the findings of this project and the development of this handbook.

3.1 Summary Comparison of National Contexts

Countries with Widening Participation Policies

Long experience	Shorter experience	No specific policies
England	Ireland	Spain
Sweden	Portugal	
Finland	Germany	

Student Fees in Public sector

No Fees	Small Fees	Fees
Sweden	Germany	England (+discounts)
Finland	Spain	
	Portugal	
	Ireland	

Financial Support to Students

Extensive support	No support	Some support
Sweden		Spain
England		Portugal
Ireland		Germany
Finland		

Entry Routes for Non Traditional Students

Specially supported routes	Special entry exam	No special routes
Sweden	Spain	Ireland
England	Portugal	
Finland	Germany	

Proportion of Non Traditional Students

High	Low
England	Spain
Sweden	Portugal
Finland	Germany
	Ireland

Mode of Teaching

Mixed groups	Special part time courses (mainly adults/working people)	Special full time courses (mainly adults/working people)
All countries	Finland	England
	England	Finland
	Sweden	
	Ireland	

Summary: overall differentiation of approaches, recognition of differences

High	Medium	Low
UK	Ireland	Germany
Sweden	Finland	Spain
		Portugal

(for a more in-depth comparison, see the project document 'An overview of the different national contexts')

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Introduction

The following section discusses institutional-wide issues which may have an effect on the participation and learning experiences of adults in HE.

Institutional strategies are influenced by external factors, such as national and regional policies and the institution's relationship with its local environment (Bourgeois et al, 1999), and by internal factors, for example, the overall structures and culture of the HE institution and its component parts.

Institutional policies and strategies are important for shaping the adult student experience, even in universities where academic departments remain autonomous. Creating a welcoming environment for adult students is important at both the institutional level as well as the departmental level to ensure that adults feel part of the campus environment. For example, it is important that a university's mission statement and publicity about its programmes states explicitly that local adult students are welcomed and valued.

Academic departments also operate at the meso level. Research (Williams, 1997, Bourgeois et al, 1999) indicates that departments differ in their attitudes towards adult students. As Becher (1989) points out, disciplines influence the cultures of the academic tribes. In research undertaken by Bourgeois et al (1999) the 'hard' disciplines such as the sciences were seen to be less supportive and welcoming of adult students than the 'soft' disciplines such as the social sciences. Departments, through admission tutors, can also act as gatekeepers keeping 'non-traditional' students out of their departments (Williams, 1997). As a result non-traditional adult students are more likely to be found in the humanities and social sciences and in new and reform universities rather than traditional, elite institutions.

The following sections look at strategies and issues which can promote good practice at the institutional level. It is organised under the following main headings:

- Curriculum Structures
- Accreditation and Recognition of Prior (Experiential) Learning and Using Experience in the Curriculum
- Student Advice and Guidance
- Web-based Support
- Staff Development

Each category has some questions for discussion and reflection at the end.

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1. Curriculum Structures

Adult students are diverse, not homogeneous, and this has implications for the curriculum structure. Part-time students who may be in part or full-time employment require a curriculum structure which fits in with their working hours and, therefore, want lectures and seminars in the evening. In contrast, adults, particularly women, with children often need classes to be during school hours. Some institutions have introduced a modular curriculum system which many adult students find more accessible and flexible.

Key issues in attracting and supporting adult students

1.1 Overall Mode of Attendance

Offer part-time and full-time degree programmes in a wide range of disciplines.

1.2 A Modular Approach/Choice of Modules

a. Provide a choice of modules delivered both during the day and evening.

At one institution part-time degree students felt that the choice of evening module options had become limited in recent years forcing them to take modules which they were not interested in or motivated to study. Some felt that this affected their grade for this module.

"If you are going to be serious about encouraging part-timers you will accept that these will be in full-time employment. Make sure they are offered the same choice and receive the same commitment from tutors as do the day students." (UK).

b. Ensure that there is enough choice of modules within school hours for adult students with school age children.

At the University of Warwick the first two years of the 2+2 degree are taught at local further education institutions where the teaching takes place within the school day.

"I am not saying that there should be concessions but I think that certain things could be done that would make it somewhat easier for women with children. It is not that I do not want to be in at 9 o'clock, it is just that I cannot be in very easily by 9 o'clock. If you are going to say yes we welcome mature students then I think that you have to accept the fact that there are extra difficulties and do something about that. It seems idealistic if you say yes we welcome you but we are not actually going to do an awful lot to make it easier for you." (UK).

Students often take what they are given, but if the student group has the ability to ask and demand something else, the structure can become more tailored.

1.3 Information and Notice of Changes

a. Give adult students adequate notice of the timetable for a new academic year to enable them to arrange childcare or time off with employers

b. Part-time students also need adequate notice of the examination timetable as they have to arrange time off with their employers.

In one institution notice is not given until about three weeks before the exams begin and this causes difficulty for some part-time students who are in employment.

c. If the university has a crèche, make sure that lecturers and seminars do not occur when the creche is closed, for example at lunchtimes.

'A lot of lectures start at 1pm and the nursery doesn't open after lunch until 1pm and that's at one part of the campus and the lectures are on main campus' (UK).

1.4 Distance learning

Distance learning provides the opportunity for many adults in full-time employment and/or in shift work or who live in rural areas to study at HE level. For some, it is the only possibility for studying at HE level as it enables them to study at a time that suits them. The Open University system, which is popular in the UK and Finland, is a good example of this approach.

“With so much going on in my life, open and distance learning gives me enough flexibility. Although being so busy, I also need some kind of a schedule, which makes me do my assignments at a certain time” (Finland).

1.5 Information and Transparency

It is best to be transparent in relation to the curriculum by being clear, either through a handbook or the website, what is expected from students in relation to reading, studying, essays/assignments, examinations and department regulations. Non-traditional adult students often experience the culture and the environment of universities as unfamiliar and maybe alienating. Being transparent and explicit makes it easier for them to decode the situation more easily:

At one institution I studied at it was very clear how the education was planned, at another it was much more diffuse and difficult to grasp, - the latter made it much more difficult for me (Sweden).

I've been in classes like that where you don't have to say one word, and you know you have to be there all day, you know, and then, there's a lot of note taking, notes that they are throwing at the class, which many times if you put it on paper you can benefit from the classes, but to do more field work, more debates, you know, more things of reflection, more to do with sharing opinions,...(Spain).

Having a well-organised and structured curriculum helps students to know what is needed and expected of them.

1.6 Flexibility

- a. Offer flexibility for essay/assignment deadlines if necessary. Adult students have multiple roles and responsibilities and the illness of a child or parent or other problems may arise making it difficult for them to meet deadlines.
- b. Provide a form to apply for an extension with evidence from a doctor etc if necessary

Questions for Reflection/Discussion

- How does your institution score on the six key issues above?
- Identify areas where you/your colleagues can do something now
- Identify areas which require longer-term structural change

2. Accreditation/Recognition of Prior (Experiential) Learning: and Using Experience in the Curriculum

APL is the Accreditation of Prior Learning which has been certificated and assessed by a formal education institution.¹ APEL is the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning. It refers to experiences gained in informal or non-formal learning situations such as in the workplace, family or voluntary work. These experiences are then formally recognised through, for example, the development of a portfolio.

2.1 Key Aspects of APL/APEL

- APL/APEL offers a second chance to adults who have been failed by the education system or inequalities of society
- APL/APEL can be used: for entry to HE, towards an award, as advanced standing on a course or programme
- It widens access routes into HE
- It offers flexibility as it is not tied to the timing of a prescribed course
- Specific strategies, policies and marketing need to be in place to make potential students aware of the possibilities of APL/APEL

2.2 The Particular Advantages of APEL

APEL has potential beyond its use for entry, helping adult learners to make connections between their own experience and academic knowledge and culture. By reflecting upon their past achievements and experiences and skills gained, non-traditional adult students are able to consider their options and plan their future studies. APEL is also a tool for building confidence in students' abilities by valuing their life experiences and prior learning. Prior learning can be assessed with different tools; portfolios, specific APEL forms, Personal Study Plans, interviews etc.

- APEL develops learning skills and confidence
- It recognises and values the importance of life experiences as a form of 'useful' knowledge
- APEL processes provide adult learners with reflective practice and learning skills
- APEL processes help adults to become independent learners
- It enables learners to take responsibility for their learning and progression
- Learning starts with the experiences of the learner – where they are at – and is, therefore, student-led
- APEL should be recognised as an institutional wide initiative and not confined to a particular department such as adult education. It needs to be embedded within the institution.

2.3 Making a Claim for APEL

Normally, it is the student's responsibility to make a claim for APEL and it is the institution's responsibility to establish a flexible but clear APEL system, provide information and guidance for students, allocate funding for APEL and encourage and train staff who can guide students through the APEL process. Writing a portfolio is often a new learning experience for adults so clear guidance and structure needs to be given:

I didn't find it difficult to write from my experience. The problem I had was one of format. I didn't know how to – I didn't know what was going to catch the reader's eye to actually enable them to give me credit for something I have already done. So it was style and content. (UK)

It's hard initially to get going and you have to be very motivated because you've got an open ended model of learning and its down to you...But that in itself is no bad thing because it is about your own life experiences (Finland)

2.4 APEL as part of the curriculum

At one institution part-time degree students can opt to take a module entitled APEL which involves writing a dissertation on prior learning experiences, for example in the workplace or in the home or community.

2.5 Using Experience in the Curriculum

What was clear from the experiences of student respondents was that their experience was important to them. While they tended to favour inter-active teaching and learning approaches and largely welcomed some use of their experience in the curriculum, what appeared most important to them was the fact that their experience was acknowledged and respected as part of their identity as adults.

I was the eldest person in the seminar group and I think because I was my opinion was valued...the seminar tutor always used to say how are your grandchildren. So not only was she interested in me as a student she was interested in me as a person (UK).

I've always worked with this issue but more independently and because in terms of work, because I've been a teacher with young people, I thought it would be an area that would allow me to gain more knowledge and use what I learn in my current job (Spain).

2.6 Problems with using experience in the curriculum

It is important to value the value the life experiences that adults bring with them as some adults feel that lecturers live in an ivory tower divorced from the real world.

The only downside I would say about that is that there are some staff who perhaps don't appreciate that you do live in the real world and you have lived the real world for a long time. You probably know more about the real world than they do and I think its that dismissing fact that you do know about these things because they don't fit in the theory they talked about (UK).

2.7 Experience in Specific Subject Areas

Lecturers need to enable adult students to relate their life experiences to concepts and theory. This is easier in some subject areas than others.

Studying sociology has made me look more critically. Your experiences are put into theory. Maybe that was the factor for me, being able to do that more than the younger students and also with being Asian and being a woman. I have got so much knowledge of my own personal life to think about (UK).

One of the adult students' strengths is their experience. It is easier for them to relate the theory with their experience. This helps them to learn faster. When I feel that they have some experience to share, I try to ask them questions so they can reflect about what they know. I try to help them to criticise what they know and have learnt. (Lecturer, Portugal)

Using experience in the curriculum is easier in social science subjects. Some lecturers do recognise the value of this as illustrated by the following lecturer teaching on a teacher training degree:

The subject is very appropriate for their learning needs and most of the mature people are very interested, in that a lot of them have had their own children and can refer directly back to their own experience even if they have not been in the classroom very much . In the third year they write an extended piece on learning to read and a lot of them use their children as a model. In fact it is a very interesting piece of work (UK).

Questions for Reflection/Discussion

- What are the limits of APL/APEL?
- How can the APEL process be used to encourage independent learning?
- How can APEL procedures be simplified to avoid undue bureaucracy?
- How can student experience be used effectively in the 'hard sciences'?

3. Student Advice and Guidance

3.1 Introduction

In the project interviews, non-traditional adult students emphasised the importance of receiving student advice and guidance, both in advance of and during study time. This section focuses on facilities which students have identified as being useful and helpful both before and during their studies with some examples of how institutions and national policies meet these needs. There are countries – e.g., Finland and Sweden where this type of support is offered both to traditional and non-traditional students. Nevertheless, non-traditional students may have more extensive need of support in order to overcome certain barriers.

3.2 Support before Studying

One of the main issues which students point out as problematic is access to information - how to get information, where to find it and where to go are questions that are particularly problematic for non-traditional adult students. The reason for this lack of information and knowledge is often related to the fact that the student is usually the first in the family to enter higher education and

therefore it is not possible to obtain support and advice from significant others. As a result some are deterred from entering HE.

Key questions often asked by adult students are:

- what are the possible programmes of study available to them?
- how can studies be financed?
- how to get access to the courses or programmes?

3.2a Student advisers: In Sweden and Finland there are advisers at several levels in the educational system. The first contact with a study adviser is often in municipal adult education or at the employment office. The latter often encourages an unemployed person or an adult student to go and study in further or higher education. Advisers can investigate both the interests and motivation of an applicant for different professions. They offer information about the possible ways to reach different goals.

In universities and university colleges in these countries, there are well-organised systems of advisers both at institutional and departmental levels. At department level more detailed and specific information and guidance can be obtained and related to the subject. In contrast, institutional advisers give more overall information. One problem that seems to be frequent with this system is that non-traditional students do not know in advance about the university's student advisers. They get access to advisers only when they have started their studies. Non-traditional students can get guidance at the other levels e.g. at municipal adult education but those counsellors are not always well informed and familiar with issues related to higher education. In addition decentralization of the higher education system has consequences for the huge amount of information that exists and it is almost impossible for anybody to remain well informed. Very often in fact the best way to become informed is to start learning and get to know the system through experience. But this is an expensive and not so efficient strategy. In addition it might involve making wrong choices as well as obtaining study loans that have to be paid back.

Information given by advisers can be in writing or in person to groups and individuals. A kind and friendly reception is just as important as information.

Lack of confidence in an unknown university culture might inhibit students from applying to courses as well as from understanding the information given.

The mentoring of adult students by other adult students is also a good way of helping students new to the institution to 'learn the ropes' and culture of a university.

Support before Studying

In Spain non-traditional students enter university through a written test that evaluates their knowledge. It consists of two parts: a common test that is the same for all the candidates, and a specific test, depending on the chosen option that can be one of these five: Science-technology, Health sciences, Humanities, Social sciences and Arts.

According to the University Department of Research and the Informational Society of the Autonomous Catalan Government, the objective of the exam is to determine the maturity of the candidates, their capacities for reasoning, comprehension and written expression in any of the official languages in Catalonia (Catalan and Spanish), as well as the knowledge of a foreign language, these are capacities that are considered necessary to be able to study a university degree.

In Spain different centres exist, both private, like academies, and public like adult schools, that carry out preparation courses for this test. One of these centres is the Adult School of Verneda-Sant Martí. Here, the basic characteristic is its democratic management; the access test is prepared from the demands and necessities expressed by the participant people, that is, by the students themselves. This is established through the different spaces provided, such as, assemblies, evaluation meetings, permanent attention and work in interactive groups. During the preparation course, the support given to the pupils is translated into several practices: on one hand egalitarian meetings and reinforcement classes, in the assemblies the students are informed of the contents that are going to be worked with in the classes and they are encouraged to evaluate and decide on how the classes should work. On the other hand, as well as the lecture classes, the methodology of dialogic learning is developed.

Outside normal school hours, the Adult School of Verneda-Sant Martí also provides reinforcement classes as a form of learning support. These classes are provided to resolve doubts or provide additional information to the students during the preparation for the test, encourage group and autonomous working and cooperative learning. Another form of reinforcement consists of being able to use a classroom to study that has internet connection, twelve hours a day, every day of the week, especially on the weekends and holidays. In this space, interactive groups can study together intensely and completely free of charge.

Support during Studying

Once the access test has successfully been taken, the Adult School of Verneda- Sant Martí also provides a support service for those people that have accessed higher education. Between the centres, teachers and students a feed-back is established that consists in carrying out a review of the work developed and the subjects chosen by the non-traditional student throughout the degree.

See [HYPERLINK "http://www10.gencat.net/dursi/ca/un/25anys.htm#convocatories"](http://www10.gencat.net/dursi/ca/un/25anys.htm#convocatories) <http://www10.gencat.net/dursi/ca/un/25anys.htm#convocatories>

See [HYPERLINK "http://edaverneda.org"](http://edaverneda.org) <http://edaverneda.org>

Flecha, R. 2000. Sharing words. Theory and Practice of Dialogic Learning. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

3.3 Support during Study

During study different questions can arise about the future. What will happen after the studies and how choices made now can affect the future profession and career of a non-traditional student. Study advisers and career advisers are of course helpful and important in those situations as well. There are also other problems that arise when study begins. Since a non traditional student has not been studying for several years and often lacks support from family and friends it is important to get support for learning to learn, how to structure your studies as well as support in handling computers and dealing with health issues.

3.3a Support for learning to learn Learning skills are often developed during initial education and study habits created. After a long break from educational studies the beginning of studies and learning can feel strange and frustrating. For example, a large amount of books have to be read and academic papers written. Sorting out what is important, structuring and taking notes during lectures can be hard tasks. Courses in how to learn might be one way of helping students to overcome initial struggles and help them to develop the necessary skills.

As an example, at Stockholm University, both lectures and longer courses are given in study skills and study technique. There are also courses on “How to talk in front of a group” and there is a “language laboratory” where students can receive guidance in how to write essays and academic papers but also how to use correct language, which can be useful for both native speakers as well as for those from other ethnic backgrounds. Similar support is given at almost all institutions in Sweden but under different designations. At the University of Warwick adults on the part-time and 2+2 degrees also have study skills incorporated into their degree programmes.

3.3b Learning Psychologists are a particular resource in Finland for students in helping them to overcome study problems.

3.4 Special support for people with disabilities

All universities and university colleges provide educational support to students with disabilities in Sweden. This is regulated by the state and a special agency for special educational support (<http://www.sisus.se>) has the responsibility to do this. Most public universities and university colleges also have action programmes to assist disabled people (mainly those with physical disabilities) to study on their own. Almost all institutions also have a coordinator whom people with disabilities can contact and get advice and information from. This person can, for example, give information about physical accessibility and different educational support the student can get. There is also a specific home page where all information is given (<http://www.studeraimedfunktionshinder.nu>)

In addition:

- A special introduction for students with dyslexia might be one way to support those students and can include training in study skills and techniques for making notes.
- In Sweden special support is given to those students, which means they can obtain help from other students in making notes. The assisting students receive a small financial compensation for the work from the state authority.
- It is also possible to borrow recorded course literature from the libraries for listening instead of reading. Literature is also available in Braille, in large text or as electronic text. Not all literature is available immediately but has to be recorded if only one student in a group has a need. This might take rather a long time, which of course makes problems for students who need this support. Long-term planning is therefore necessary but not always easy.
- Deaf students have the right to get lectures and seminars interpreted into sign language.

A new law has recently been introduced in the UK on disabilities aimed at eliminating the barriers which disabled students face in universities.

3.5 Student Health

Different physical and psychological health problems can occur during study. They might be directly or indirectly caused by study but irrespective of that they affect the situation and often the ability to learn. Physicians, nurses and psychologists might be a helpful support for non-traditional students. This does not mean that traditional students do not have a need for health support but that their problems might be different as they are in different situations and phases in their lives. With age, comes special kinds of problem, like divorce, children's or relatives' sickness or death which might not be so common in a younger persons life. Also the adult might have bigger responsibilities for people in the family. Such life crises can affect the study process and sometimes support is needed.

3.6 IT support

There is a generation shift in relation to new technology. Very often it is assumed that all students can master IT but some cannot. Non-traditional adult students might be one group that lack experience in computing and therefore need some support. Some institutions have IT support for students and manuals for different programmes are available on the home page. Libraries giving courses in how to search databases is another kind of support that is useful but might demand some pre-knowledge and experience.

Questions for Discussion/ Reflection

- what is the most effective way for universities to reach out to and advise prospective adult students?
- what role can tutors play in advising adults students and when are specialist advisers eg counsellors, study or health advisers necessary?
- what scope is there in your institution for using students to support other students?

4. Web-based support

At its best web-based support enables students to plan their own learning paths and motivates the student by linking assignments with the students' everyday life. Non-traditional adult students may encounter more difficulties when using IT than younger students. Difficulties may be at a technological or mental level and it can take time to familiarise oneself with the learning environment. Non traditional adult students should be encouraged to ask for help from the tutor or other students. In time the need of support will diminish as the students develop their IT skills. The development of these skills can be promoted by organising special courses.

4.1 Guidelines

Clear guidelines promote the utilisation of the web. Good planning of web-based support material is essential. It should be clear and interactive. Different kinds of tools can be included in the web. The benefits of web-based materials are that they are independent of time and space and all of the materials can be found on the web.

4.2 Support

A support package can be built for increasing the self-knowledge and self-regulation of the student, for guiding the learner to reflect and assess his or her own learning and for activating the student. These tools offer guidance and support for controlling learning and learning skills and for developing these skills. For the educator they offer guidance for developing teaching skills.

4.3 Self-evaluation

Self-evaluation tests may be built for assessing learning motivation and expectations towards studies, learning strategies, skills, strengths and weaknesses. With the help of the tests, a student gets information about him/herself in those areas. A student can also observe his/her development as s/he studies further. S/he can also compare his/her own results with the other members of the group. A teacher can examine the group results and use them as an aid when planning his/her teaching.

4.4 Learning Diary

A learning diary (where students are encouraged to record and reflect on specific work they are carrying out) is most suitable for profiling the development of learning skills of an individual student. It is also possible to print the learning diary as a whole or email it, for example, to the teacher. When used in this way the learning diary reflections can be part of the evaluation process. The teacher can also guide the usage of the learning diary by giving assignments and topics for discussions on the course.

4.5 Tutor support on the web

The role of the tutor online is a different one from that in a more traditional teaching context. An online tutor needs to offer guidance and make sure that studies are proceeding as planned. The tutor's role is to:

- Encourage learning
- Guide students to take control of their own learning process
- Provide individual advice and guidance
- Support the student and
- Remove possible learning obstacles.

Tutors and other academic staff also need support and guidance to be able to better fulfil their tasks as a web tutor. In some institutions there are special teaching technology units, which organise tailored training for academic staff both on pedagogy and the technology of web-based support. Equally important would be putting emphasis on IT equipment and providing digital learning resources on the web.

4.6 Peer support on the web

Non-traditional adult students can also be encouraged to interact with others on the web. This includes supporting the social aspect of the web as well as learning in a web-based group.

Teamwork is something that is very good and once you start it is always an enriching experience(Spain)

A web logbook (like a learning diary but accessible on the web), for example, guides the students to self-reflection and to joint reflection of the team members. It also motivates students to share their experiences about learning in a web-based group with the teacher of the group. The logbook functions as a support in peer tutoring and as a tool in collaborative knowledge creation towards which the students are guided. Utilising web-based learning is very flexible. It offers a possibility for cooperation in spite of distance; even people living far away from each other can work together.

4.7 Distance Web-based Learning

Distance learning web-based programmes are essential in remote rural areas such as Finland and Sweden but for some adult learners it can be an isolating experience:

I think it would be important to see other students to widen your perspectives and share views. I almost wish that a meeting with other students at some stage of the programme would be compulsory. Well, maybe not compulsory, since for adults at this stage nothing should be compulsory (Finland).

Strategies for overcoming this sense of isolation need to be considered.

4.8 Collecting Data

Web-based support can be used to tutor students as well as to collect quantitative and qualitative data about the qualities of the students. The data can also be exploited in pedagogical research related to the Web.

Questions for Discussion/ Reflection

- how can web-based learning best be developed in your particular subject area?
- how can web-based support link best to more conventional teaching and learning methods?
- how can web-based learning best be monitored ?

5. Staff Development

All the above approaches need to be underpinned by appropriate staff development. With new and different student groups entering higher education there is a need to reflect upon and change teaching and learning approaches to take into account the heterogeneous groups of learners now present in HE. Staff need to take account of the following factors:

- *Different needs and motivations:* non-traditional adult students will have needs that are distinctive from younger students. For example, adult students bring with them a wider range of life experiences but may lack confidence in their learning.
- *Wider responsibilities:* adult students also have to juggle their lives more than younger students as they have to cope with multiple identities in their daily life as a student/parent/partner/worker etc.
- *External constraints:* sometimes external problems such as a child or elderly relative being ill, divorce or financial problems affect their learning. In some cases this will mean having to ask for extensions to essays and assignments.

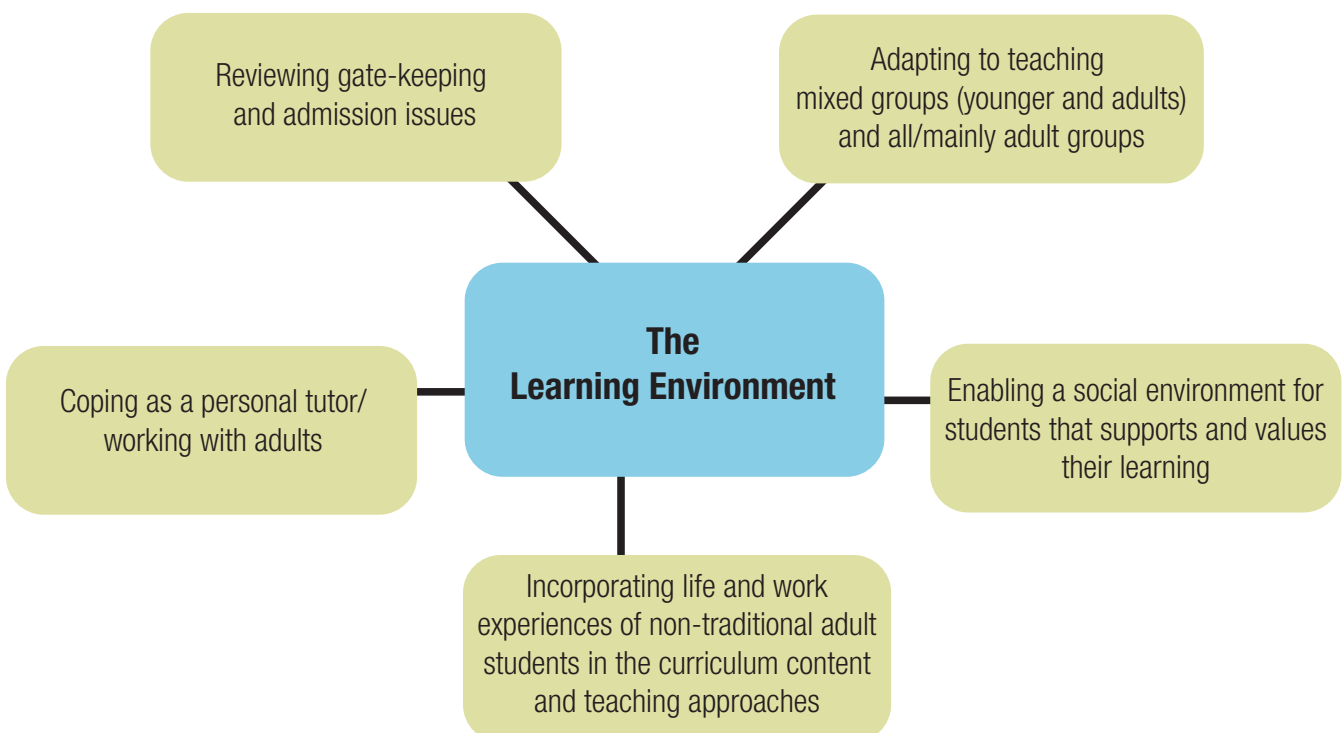
5.1 Staff Development and Reflective Learning

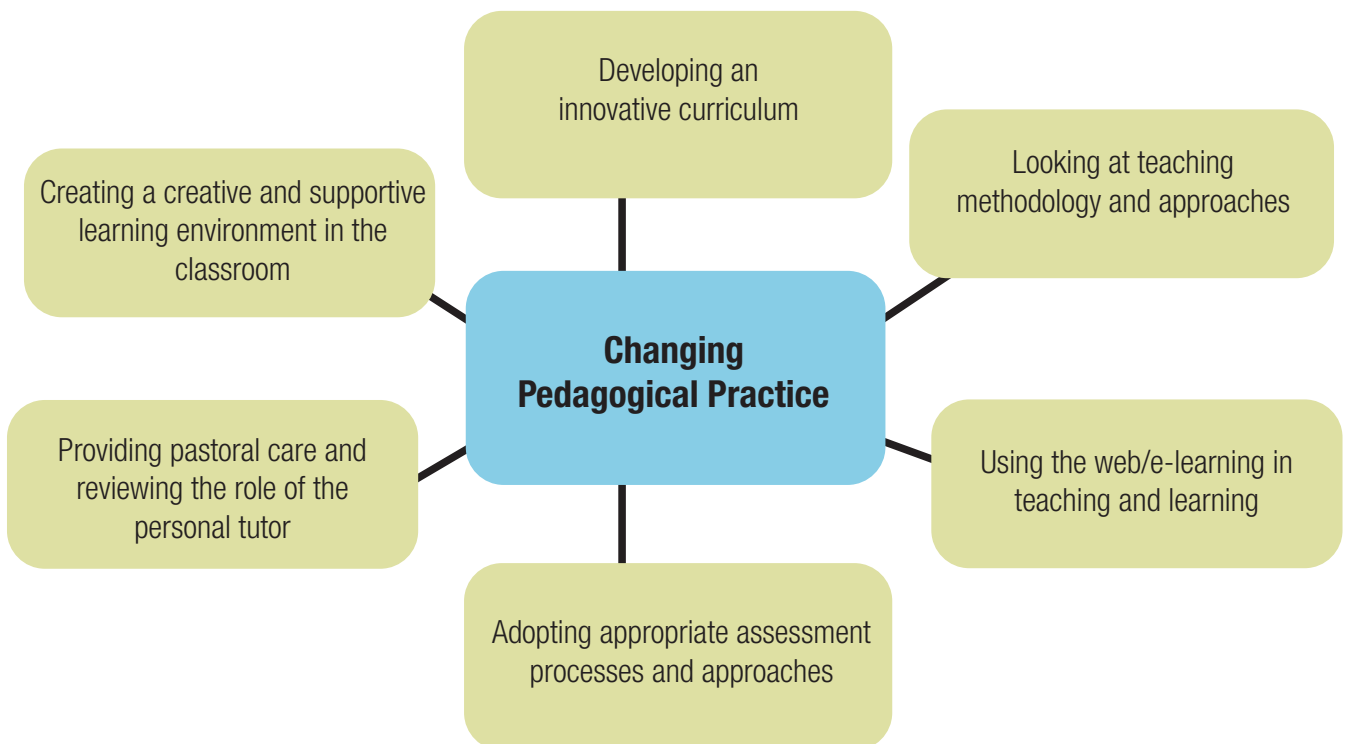
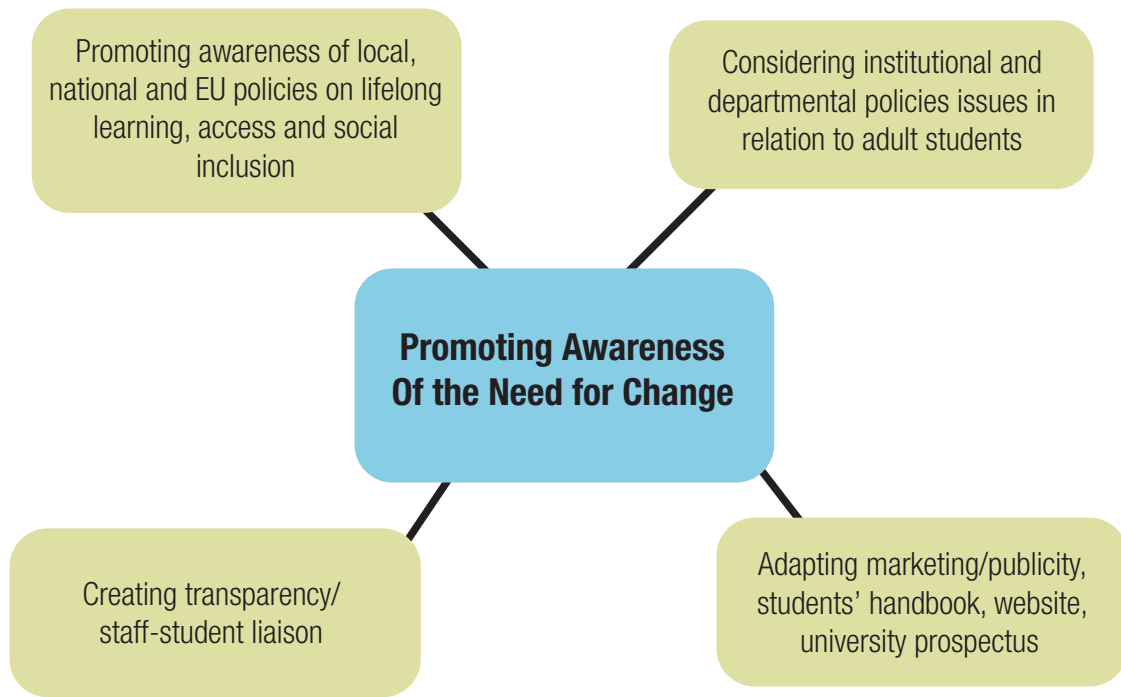
It is important too that staff development programmes try to raise awareness of issues like those above in order to develop a new level of consciousness within higher education institutions and to help staff to become 'reflective educators' and institutions to become 'reflective institutions'. Staff development in this area will also encourage institutional innovation to take place in relation to teaching approaches and institutional cultures.

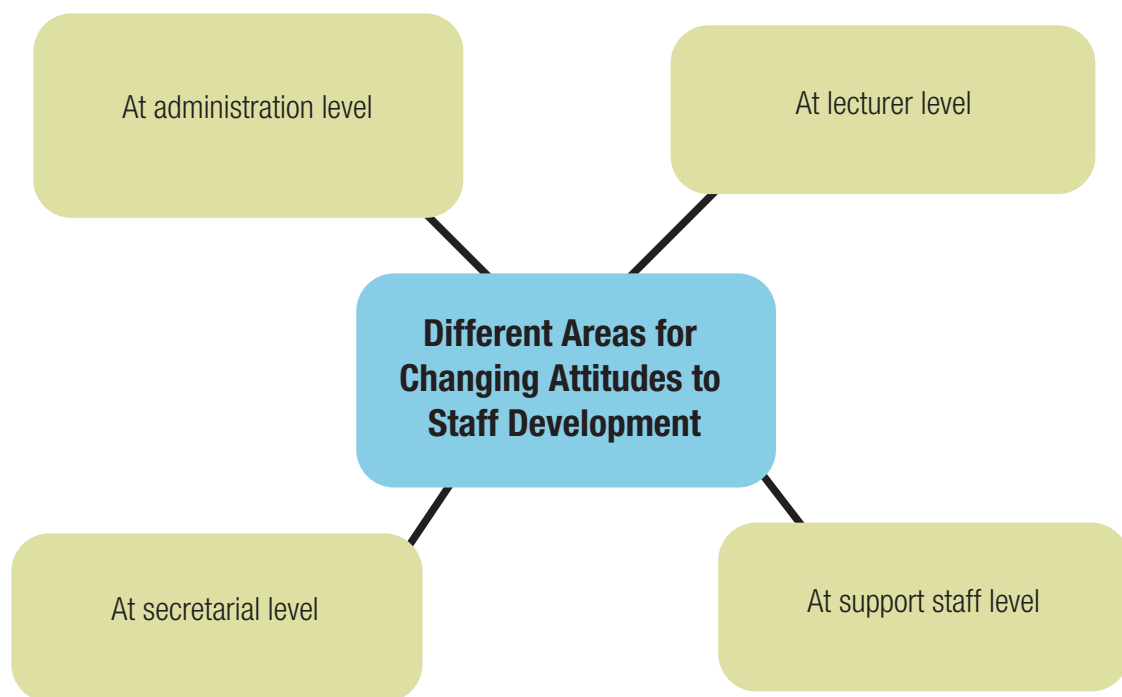
5.2 Staff Development for All

However, it is also crucial to offer staff development, not only to lecturers but to other groups of staff who work with adult students such as department secretaries, careers advisors, library staff and advice and guidance staff as well as institutional policy makers. In the UK, for example, some degree programmes such as Foundation Degrees (two year practice-oriented courses of study which can later be converted to a full honours degree) and 2+2 degrees (2 years in a Further Education College followed by 2 years at University) are taught in partnership with further education colleges and other institutions. It is important that these staff are also included in relevant university staff development events and to provide specific staff development which relates to that degree programme and teaching context.

The following are examples of issues for staff development arising from the participation of non-traditional students in HE.







Institutional Support for Staff

Staff development events are important for raising awareness of issues, reflecting upon and improving practice and looking at new and innovative ways of working. It is also important, however, to provide continuous institutional support for all staff working with non-traditional adult students and to encourage networking amongst staff.

For example, at the University of Warwick, UK, there are Co-ordinators of 2+2 degree programmes and a Director of Part-time degrees who offer support to teaching staff in different departments. With the 2+2 degree there are regular meetings between university teaching staff and further education college teaching staff (2 years of this degree programme are taught in local colleges) to discuss curricular and other issues relating to the programme (UK).

Teaching Certificates and Training

In universities where teacher training or certificated courses on teaching in higher education are taught issues of student diversity needs to be considered and a special session on teaching adults should be included.

Questions for Discussion/ Reflection

- How can staff development officers ensure that staff development events are not attended by only by those who are 'sympathetic' towards teaching adult students?
- What strategies can be identified to deliver staff development for lecturers teaching on university programmes which are taught by partner institutions such as further education colleges?
- How can ideas and practices identified at staff development events be embedded within institutional structures?
- What should be the agenda for the special session on teaching adults?

¹ APL/APEL is used in some project countries and in others attempts are still being made to introduce it at policy level.

Introduction

The micro level looks at learning and teaching from the perspectives of actors (students and lecturers) in higher education.

In recent years there has been an increase in research and literature which looks at the micro experiences of adult students in higher education (West, 1996, Merrill, 1999) through biographical approaches. Such studies look at the experiences, attitudes and expectations of adults in HE and how these shape their learning. Past experiences of learning in school also impact upon their attitudes to learning later in life. Adult students also have to juggle and balance a variety of roles and commitments in the family, workplace, and community. It is important that lecturers teaching non-traditional adult students are aware of the issues, context and, sometimes, problems which adult students experience and have to cope with.

This section looks at learning and teaching approaches and the interaction between adult students and lecturers. It is organised under the following main headings:

- Preparatory phases before HE
- Learning Environment and Facilities
- Teaching and Learning Approaches
- Mature Students' Learning Strategies
- Assessment, Evaluation and Feedback

Each category includes illustrative quotations from students or lecturers from different countries. At the end of each category there are questions for further discussion and reflection.

References

Merrill B (1999) *Gender, Change and Identity: Mature Women Students in Universities*, Aldershot, Ashgate

West L (1996) *Beyond Fragments: Adults, Motivation and Higher Education: a biographical analysis*, London, Taylor & Francis

Introduction

Adult students are not homogeneous, they come from a wide range of social, economic and educational backgrounds. To help them be successful in their studies in higher education, it is important to prepare and support them for entry into HE institutions (HEIs).

Many adult students may have been out of education for a number of years and some are insecure and lack confidence about their learning abilities. Although many adults are very motivated to learn, some will have had negative experiences of schooling and previous learning. Some may also have less formal qualifications than younger students. However, what they do have is a wide range of life and work experiences, which is a valuable learning resource in its own right.

They may feel anxious entering HE and being with younger students, using new technology, having to study different subjects and studying at this level, even though they are usually capable of doing so. In this context, it is important to employ strategies and practices to develop their skills and learning confidence. It is important for them to feel that university is a place for them, not just for younger students.

The process of preparing adult students for participation in HE should include the development of personal and study/learning skills and familiarisation with the institution. These will operate at different levels – personal, institutional, academic, societal:

- **Personal** – the organisation of work life (if part-time), family life (e.g. child care), support of family members, development of confidence.
- **Academic** – development of study skills, IT skills (how to log onto computer facilities, how to use a computer), information literacy skills (how to search, to retrieve and evaluate information in any media), communication skills.
- **Institutional** – knowledge about university facilities such as the location of the Administration Office, University Library services and how to use them, Students' Union, relevant University Departments, Support Services, Sports Centre, Coffee Bars and any mentoring schemes aiming to promote their socialisation and inclusion.
- **Societal** – policy support for lifelong learning and adults learning in HE.

The following sections offer recommendations to overcome the difficulties experienced by adult students. These recommendations address the difficulties from two different perspectives: the preparation of the institution to welcome adults and the support to get them started. Some of the “Preparatory phases before HE and initial support” activities are general and far reaching, for example activities “to support institution’s NTAS (non-traditional adult students) strategies” (para. 1.1) and activities concerned with “raising aspirations and demand for HE by adult students” (para 1.3.). Others are more personal, such as “Pre-entry activities, Admissions and First-Term Support and On-Course activities (para 1.4.) and Personal Development Plans (para 1.5).

1.1 Activities to support Institutional strategies for non-traditional adult students

To ensure that a HEI is both welcoming and friendly to adult students it is important to promote, to both academic and non-academic staff, the strategies and activities to recruit and retain students from groups that the HEI have identified as under-represented, *i.e.* Non-traditional adult students. These activities include:

- providing **seminars and staff development events** for staff to outline and address the institutions' strategies and activities towards non-traditional adult students;
- **training academic staff** to address adult students' aspirations, requirements and learning needs;
- embedding **adult student participation in all planning activities** by providing an adequate and flexible curricular structure and education framework (lecture/seminar schedule, non-traditional modes of delivery – part-time, work-based learning and AP(E)L (Accreditation of Prior (Experiential) Learning, etc.);
- promotion of **flexible provision** encompassing, for example, modularisation/Credit Accumulation and Transfer Schemes; the possibility of different entry points, the ease of FT (full-time)/PT (part-time) conversion;
- establishing and maintaining a **management information system** that will support tracking of adult student progress, including pre-entry phases as well as assessing the effectiveness of measures taken by the HEI to promote retention and achievement.

1.2 Pre-entry contact of prospective candidates: targeting adult students

The development of a friendly and welcoming environment for non-traditional adult students in HEIs is essential and should begin, even before they apply for admission to higher education. The aim should be to create an approachable public image by developing marketing materials, promoting outreach in the community, working with Further Education Colleges and other adult education providers, initiating foundation year/Year 0 courses, taster courses etc.

Examples of best practices are:

- Develop and maintain **partnerships between Further Education Colleges / other adult education providers and HE institutions** to raise aspirations and promote the benefits of HE to prospective adult students;
- Prepare and distribute **promotional material**, which is relevant and accurate at the time of publication, to disseminate information, provide advice and guidance to potential adult students, encouraging and supporting them to continue their education;

Examples:

From Sweden (in English) http://www.umu.se/studentcentrum/verksamhet/stvl/eng/index_eng.htm

<http://www.umu.se/studentcentrum/verksamhet/stvl/studieteknik.htm>

- Prepare and distribute **information packs** containing the University Prospectus (both in print and in the Web version), with a section on adult student participation in HE, to enable applicants to make informed decisions about their options;
- Promote **Open Days** for prospective adult students – these are organized visits and tours around the HEI, showing facilities, meeting people (lecturers/ support staff/ Students Union), as well as adult students already enrolled in the HEI, to answer questions and to provide information;
- Develop and offer to prospective students **pre-entry guidance** by assigning specific people in the HE institution, to answer their questions and provide up-to-date information about programmes of studies and advice on access routes and the options available. Provide booklets about the university, including information about financial support, academic departments and support services.

“Well the first day obviously was like your first day at school – frightening, a bit scary. I thought I was going to be OK as I know the campus quite well because my husband works here and I have friends who work here. I thought I would be fine but after the first week it was hell, absolute hell. I don’t get stressed very easily at all – I am quite laid back and I am quite competent. I ended up crying because I couldn’t find the Law Department anywhere...you just get so worked up about it that you do silly things.” (UK)

- Implement **mentoring schemes** involving members of staff and/or HEI students, either using face-to-face or email contact.

“We have discussed our situations in life with other adult students. It has helped a lot to discuss with others how they have managed the same kinds of situations in their lives and studies.” (Finland)

“We have discussed different alternatives to carry out assignments and how they fit in each one’s situations.” (Finland)

“We have given each other essays to read and taken different classes too. Then we have been able to tell each other hints or what to expect in those classes when the other one has taken it later.” (Finland)

- Offer **Summer Courses** – either residential or non-residential; the advantages of the former (residential), by immersing students for a whole week, really give prospective students a chance to escape any negative environment although this is difficult for those with family commitments.

“I think a summer school through the summer period would be very helpful” (UK)

- Offer **Taster Courses** – for those who are still unsure about studying in HE.
- Offer courses in **open** and **distance learning**, improving time flexibility

“With so much going on in my own life, open and distance learning gives me enough flexibility. Although being so busy, I also need some kind of a schedule, which makes me do my assignments at a certain time.” (Finland)

“Students often take what they are given, but if the student group has the ability to ask and demand something else, the structure becomes more tailored.” (Finland)

1.3 Raising aspirations and demand. Preparation for access to HE

*“Access to HE courses” are **preparatory courses for non-traditional adult students** with the aim of preparing adults for study at HE level. They address the specific learning needs of adults who may have left school at an early age and who have been out of the education system for a number of years. Courses are particularly designed to equip them to succeed in study at HE level. They provide, apart from the underpinning knowledge necessary for progression into HE, core elements on essential study and learning skills, particularly relevant for students who have had little or no recent experience of study.”*

Examples are:

- *Access Courses* in the UK - these are offered by further education colleges, adult education centres, community centres and universities. They are developed and approved locally by colleges and universities working together, so that they take into account the opportunities in a particular HE institution. *Access Courses* include subject modules or units, key skills in information technology, numeracy and communication, study skills, tutorial support. They are offered part-time and full-time.
- UCAS.com. *University and Colleges Admission Service*
<http://www.ucas.com/>
http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/access/guidance_notes.htm
- *La Verneda School for Adults*, <http://www.edaverneda.org>
Verneda is a school for adults in Barcelona, Spain– it prepares adults for the entrance exam to HE – Adults undertake a variety of classes until they have enough time and motivation to begin a university degree.
- *Foundation/Zero Year* – Some universities in the UK offer a 1+ 3 year degree. The first year is a foundation year with an emphasis on study skills.
- Some universities in Sweden, also run a Zero Year for students applying for Technology or Natural sciences disciplines, to prepare them, in mathematics, at the level required for higher education – the reason for the Zero year being geared to courses in these fields lies in the low number of applicants to these disciplines, as well as being one way to attract non-traditional or mature students).

1.4 Pre-entry activities to help non-traditional adult students get started

The confidence of adult learners can be enhanced through the provision of **pre-degree (pre-admission) course modules**, as these provide a manageable re-introduction to learning. One example of this is the *Open Studies programme organised by the Centre for Lifelong Learning at the University of Warwick*. Courses are offered in a wide range of subjects and are 10 week credited modules. Credits can be built up to reach level 1 (year one of undergraduate degree) and used as entry to part-time degree courses. (www.warwick.ac.uk/cll/openstudies)

Many students are nervous on their first day. This anxiety can be overcome through a programme of **induction days / weeks** before the start of the degree programme. These can provide information about the institution, its facilities, timetables, as well as study skills etc. The induction programme should include a tour of the University Library, to acquaint adult students with its services and regulations and an introduction to the computing facilities available to first year students. University regulations should be prominently displayed and indicated, including those relating to resits and retakes, assessment, existing systems of mentoring and personal tutoring. The students should also be made aware of the availability of financial and personal advice and where to look for these. The induction days/weeks can also provide opportunities to meet other fellow students who are in the same situation and to talk to existing adult students.

Induction Days for Mature Students

For many years, the University of Southampton ran an Induction Day for mature students entering HE. This involved:

- an initial welcome by a senior university figure, usually the Vice-Chancellor
- a series of interactive exercises to help students meet each other, share experiences and anxieties, and identify key contacts/support people for the future
- a plenary discussion of key issues and problems and how to solve them
- information on available student services
- a tour of the campus in subject groups
- meeting with mature students already studying in their faculty
- meeting with a key member of staff in each faculty with designated responsibility for the welfare of mature students

Student feedback from this Induction Day was always very positive and it provided a springboard for further staff development activities around the needs and interests of mature students

University of Warwick

Another example is the Induction day for 2+2 students, University of Warwick, UK organised by former 2+2 students:

new students are given a sheet of paper with questions and information that they have to find out, for example, finding a particular book in the library, finding a particular Department secretary etc to familiarise them with facilities and the geographical layout of the campus

“Very frightening. What I did through the summer (before starting) was to come up to campus & wander around on my own just to get the feel of it. There were times when I did feel very sad, very frightened and I would sit in the cafe and my chin would be quivering but I kept saying it will be alright. I would walk round the corner and there would be a band playing and there would be lots going on just to lift my spirits. So yes the first three weeks were very, very challenging.” (UK)

Another aspect of good practice is to offer a **bridging study skills programme /classes on study and key learning skills** before the beginning of the academic year or at the start of term. The contents of these would address topics such as:

- capacity to manage self and time – to keep coursework deadlines; to follow assignment guidelines; how to balance paid employment, home and family activities, leisure activities with study
- capacity to study and learn independently – note taking; how to read an academic text; information literacy skills – *i.e.* how to search and evaluate information in any kind of media; how to read outside the set texts; essay writing; how to learn from and act on feedback; how to participate in seminars and becoming a reflexive learner
- the development of students' reflective skills about how they learn best and how to develop effective learning strategies within HE

1.5. Personal Study Plans

One solution to help non-traditional adult students prepare themselves for HE is to offer them courses which fit into their own availability, that is, by offering them a Personal Study Plan/Personal Development Plan (PSP, PDP, HOPS in Finnish). In this way, the unemployed have the possibility to study whenever they want while those with a job and possibly a family have to plan their schedule more thoroughly. Returning to studies also has an effect on the daily routines of these students, which sometimes change completely, having both positive and negative effects.

*"I wrote a **Personal Development Plan** and studied accordingly. I mean you can never know what is the cause and what is the effect, but I really think that my plan helped me to find employment afterwards."* (Finland)

"I've done a thorough plan where I can see what is happening each month or week. With just one glance I am able to see which times are more hectic, load some energy for them or even begin earlier to prepare for them." (Finland, Female)

"The best thing has been that I have been able to make a plan, which someone reads through and comments, whether it is realistic and all. I have been able to divide my time better and with the help of the plan I have realised that I have time to do other things than study, too, since there is so much else going on in life as well." (Finland, Female 35-44 years)

Questions for Discussion/ Reflection

- Can you identify different ways to ensure that a HEI can become more welcoming to adult students?
- One of the aspects indicated in the handbook to ensure that a HEI is both welcoming and friendly to non-traditional adult students is to promote seminars and staff development events. From your experience, or experiences you know in your own country, what should be the content of these and how should they be organised?
- Can you provide, from your country, positive examples of training and motivating academic staff to address adult student's aspirations, requirements and learning needs, as one of the activities to support institutional strategies for non-traditional adult students?
- Can you provide other examples of how to raise aspirations of potential non-traditional adult student candidates for HE? Can you provide examples from your own country?
- One of the solutions to help non-traditional adult students prepare for and succeed in HE is to offer the course according to student availability – what is called "Personal Study Plans". In the Handbook the examples presented are from Finland. Can you provide examples on these from your own country? How are PSP being implemented?

2. LEARNING ENVIRONMENT AND FACILITIES

Introduction

Promoting university access for adults is one of the objectives of the project *Learning in High Education: Improving practice for non-traditional adult students*. This section will present some of the basic criteria that can provide facilities for non-traditional adult students to reinforce their presence and participation in the university world.

The learning environment is a factor that conditions the learning of students. It can be very different from the reality of their everyday lives. Aspects such as the structure of the class, the interactions with teaching staff, the arrangement of the classrooms, the timetable, relationships with classmates, all have an effect on the education received. On some occasions, these aspects act as barriers for non-traditional students since they obstruct their learning, whether because they do not take into account their needs, or because they prioritise the interests of the teaching staff and not those of the students.

Below, we describe the criteria that should be taken into account in the organisation of the university education of non-traditional adult students.

2.1 Flexibility

One of the inconveniences that adults face when entering university is the timetable. Frequently the schedule of the classes does not take into account that such students often work or have responsibilities that are difficult to ignore.

...the biggest difficulty for me is that I am over 25, I have a daughter, and of course this means that you have to be able to organise the time between things very well, yes I think the combination of work and social and family life, this is the greatest difficulty. (Spain)

I cannot manoeuvre with my time as easily as the full-time students". I can only carry out my practical work in my vacation (...). And that is normally not possible!! (Germany)

This also applies to deadlines for the completion of written work

For a start if you are a union officer you are doing more than 8 hours a day – then you will probably be involved in certain fringe groups and local labour party meetings... So you are already struggling to fit that in with home commitments and then you have got to fit in your coursework on top of that (UK)

It would be advisable if the design of the timetable took these aspects into consideration and offered a greater flexibility and variety of hours for all types of students, especially for this particular group.

A greater flexibility is also necessary on the part of teaching staff. They should be aware that non-traditional adult students come from a different reality and that maybe their interests or reflections are different to those of traditional younger students. In this sense, it is essential to provide spaces for dialogue as a mechanism that permit feedback between the teaching staff and students.

More counselling, discussion forums, talks, dialogue groups, counselling in learning strategy (Germany)

It has been very independent studying for me, partly because I have been working all alone. Let's say that you could get some kind of consultation if you thought to ask the professor. (Finland)

Many times there are beneficial results when the two parties reach an agreement on academic timetables, the hours and the forms of evaluation.

More information on the planning of the courses, how to fit it all together, which courses are useful etc. (Germany)

Practice sessions. These are the best ways of learning and testing theories. But sometimes these practice sessions do require separate talks with the teachers or tutorials. Practical work placements are good for differentiating between university and reality. (Germany)

2.2 Times of Access to Facilities

In general, adult students do not have the same amount of time available as standard students who can dedicate themselves solely to their studies. Earlier, the need for greater flexibility in the teaching community was mentioned, however it is also convenient to promote this flexibility in the structure of the hours of services that the university offers, by offering more extended time periods. In one institution the library has a special reserve section where books can be borrowed for 24 hours but part-time students in employment are unable to take advantage of this system and there is a fine if books are returned late.

I didn't have much time to go there. We hardly have enough time to eat something. We do not have time. But I regret not having gone there more often to look for information. I know that there is a lot of information and if I had more time I could have deepened my study (Portugal)

...you can have a book overnight but it just doesn't work when you are an adult and you have to go home and make the tea and if you are working as well you might not be able to do it on that night. So that did affect some of my assignments, directly affected some of them because I couldn't do the reading for them at all (UK).

Many adult students also stated that it was difficult to get books from the library as there is heavy demand for some books:

It is difficult to get all the books. I can't buy them for myself since I've been unemployed for such a long time and I don't have any money (Finland).

This addresses the issue that libraries, personal tutoring sessions, information sessions, hours for student consultation etc. should be services that are available for greater time periods than currently exists. This allows non-traditional adult students greater opportunities to gain the necessary information in relation to their degrees and at the same time promote and encourage their learning.

2.3 Accessibility to media rooms and virtual support.

The use of information technologies is one of the most essential requirements in today's society. The majority of existing degrees require this type of knowledge and it is an aspect that has become essential in the labour market. To facilitate this practice it is convenient and very constructive that teaching staff encourage their use in the classes they give. This educational use of new technology is even more essential in the case of non-traditional adult students. Many of them have not had the same opportunities to use them and the university becomes the most suitable environment to do so.

Previously, we identified the difficulty that adult students face in arranging their time around a university schedule. The virtual setting allows supported learning without the need of direct attendance. Establishing contact through e-mail, posting the educational materials or results on the internet, the use of the internet, all of these are examples of how the new technologies can help students achieve a university degree.

2.4 Accessibility and representation in university bodies (departments, etc).

Student representation on university bodies is still underdeveloped, particularly that of adult students. So it is essential to promote their presence in student associations, which are open spaces for the involvement of students and the demands of their rights.

In the UK many universities have a staff-student liaison committee. At the University of Warwick each degree programme has a staff-student liaison committee (SSLC) which meets 4 times a year. The chair and secretary are students with lecturers in attendance. It provides a forum for academic and policy issues to be raised by students and action identified if necessary.

The participation of adult students in student movements is an aspect that needs to be extended. Sometimes the lack of a connection between their interests and representative structures creates a situation in which non traditional adult students do not have any motivation to join such organisations. The inclusion of their interests facilitates their involvement and assures above all that their voices are taken into account, as well as their needs and interests, on aspects such as the structure of the classes and the operation of the university.

2.5 Student Facilities

In most universities younger students are the dominant group so many adult students welcome a space away from younger students. One institution has a common room for its 2+2 and part-time degree students which is open during the day and evening: it has a few computers, tea and coffee making facilities and daily newspapers.

Have a study room on campus where we can meet one another informally between lectures.(UK)

Other institutions provide reading rooms for students which offer space and peace for non-traditional adult students which they may not have at home.

There are a lot of reading rooms at the University and I've taken advantage of them. At home there is always something else to do.(UK)

2.6 Dissemination activities on how to access university (co-ordination with adult centres, etc).

Often what makes it difficult for adults to get into universities is the lack of information that they have on how to access them. Therefore, it is important to create methods of dissemination on the mechanisms that allow adults to access higher education.

It ought to be easier to get hold of information on the various ways in which non-traditional students reach the university. It was purely by chance that I came across information on study parallel with theIt was a pretty tedious business! (Germany)

These methods can be coordinated in combination with adult education organisations. Generally, these spaces have a high attendance of adults. In this way it can be assured that the people interested in continuing their training and participating in centres of permanent education have access to all of the information necessary to enter the university system.

Then my wife, who was going to La Verneda school for adults told me why don't you come and you'll pass it, now you have time. I went to school and in a year or year and a half I got the secondary degree since I was only a bit rusty in mathematics and then they told me why don't you take the access exam for over 25 year olds and I thought that it would be a way to occupy the time, and saw that I could combine it and I accepted. Then I took the exam and passed (Spain)

2.7 Peer Groups and mentoring groups.

Group work is an aspect that has been emphasised by the majority of the students interviewed throughout the research. The interaction that is generated among a group of equals and the moral support created are two elements that promote quality learning.

I think, yes, I like the group work and the discussion. I always find it so interesting how people can see things so differently. It used to frighten me to think that I hadn't come up with the same understanding or I hadn't discovered the same things as other people but now I have got better at that. I think it's really interesting to find what people come up with (UK).

Solidarity between non traditional adult students is often an important incentive to keep going:

.....because for the exams we have met together a lot to study and to, a lot, and I like it because when people want to get together to study, and you explain something you understand to another person, you have to organise your own thoughts and... when you have to explain to someone, so that they can understand it, you have to be able to understand it first, and that is very positive, very, very (Spain).

"I think it would be important to see other students. To widen your perspectives and share views. I almost wish that a meeting with other students at some stage of the programme would be compulsory. Well, maybe not compulsory, since for adult students at this stage nothing should be compulsory." (Finland)

"We have discussed our situations in life with other adult students. It has helped a lot to discuss with others how they have managed same kinds of situations in their lives and studies." (Finland)

2.8 Networks among different universities

Sharing knowledge is one of the factors that provides incentives and accelerates learning and at the same time, improves the quality of education. In this sense, the creation of networks that connect different universities permits the establishment of an exchange of experiences and educational approaches. This facilitates contact between non-traditional students from different centres and can act as means of support for learning (exchange of information, implementation of new educational methodologies, moral support, etc.)

Questions for Discussion/ Reflection

- Are these the most important aspects of learning infrastructure and facilities for non-traditional adult students? Have any important ones been missed out? Can you provide examples from your country?
- Can you identify any other forms of institutional flexibility e.g. in timetabling, availability of services to meet the needs and circumstances of non traditional adult students?
- Can you provide positive examples of adult students networking between universities?
- How can non traditional adult students best be represented on student/university decision-making bodies?
- Links with Adult Education Centres – how prevalent and successful are these in your own country?

3. TEACHING AND LEARNING APPROACHES

Introduction

The research project 'Learning in Higher Education' has demonstrated that non-traditional adult students do not form a homogenous group of learners. On the contrary, different individual life experiences and various professional skills, a wide range of particular cultural learning styles and teaching traditions, national attitudes of teaching and learning, different settings of courses and classes within the international context prevent us from conceptualising a unique type of a so-called "non-traditional adult student". Even more than "normal students" mature adult students are **individualised learners**.

Nevertheless, there are some structural observations on learning and teaching which can be made in a general way. In the following section, we try to point out, on the basis of the project's personal experiences with both non-traditional adult students and teachers, how adult learning processes within higher education could be improved.

3.1. Personal contact, communication, advice and guidance

The difficult problem of matching the institutional structure of higher education with the needs of the non-traditional students in organising their lives leads to a structural "lack of care" for the students. Criticism can be directed at different teaching contexts. On the one hand it applies to the size of the lectures and classes, which reduces the quality of the teaching. On the other hand there is criticism that the subject matter conveyed is out of date, and that presentation and preparation are inadequate (lack of books, little use of new media). Above and beyond this, what is sadly missing is a lack of intensive advice and guidance on the structure of one's courses.

3.1.1 Lack of Advice and Guidance

The desire for advice and guidance is aimed: firstly, at the transparency of the courses offered and the possibilities of combining them; secondly at a concrete level concerning the content of the courses. For non-traditional adult students who, as a rule, have had little contact prior to their university career with academic milieus there is a particular need for counselling with reference to the organisation and planning of their studies. They need to study as economically as possible and therefore need tips on distinguishing between those courses which are more or less important. As there is often no official advice and guidance, they often undertake courses that are irrelevant to their study direction and so tend to regard all lectures and seminars in a negative light. This phenomenon is particularly to be found among the students of "soft" sciences (e.g. social science and the arts), and less amongst those in the so-called "hard sciences" (science, engineering, law etc.). There is a desire for:

"The art of teaching adults is an art and it is an individual skill. Its not about knowledge, the possession of knowledge, its more about social skills, empowerment and being able to manage adult learning environments.It is about managing that individual's learning journey through your module. If it means taking time to say how do you want to play this. ...I don't see it as a major problem with one person realising that they have got 5 different paths going on here. You don't have to be an expert in the knowledge you have just got to be able to spot when someone needs help and don't gloss over it and realise when they don't turn up to lectures its because of things. Advise them really, empathy almost yes that's what I think." (UK)

"I think for the youngsters in universities it's a very well rehearsed sort of process and they are well with it and they know exactly what's going to happen. Whereas in adult education I think it's not realised that there are loads of different learning styles and people are advanced and people are there first time so I don't think you can have a uniform way of teaching. ...So what I think needs to be offered is a range of learning styles...a range of tools and options for individuals to be able to learn in their own style. If you want to come in and you are quite advanced and you know the game and you just basically want the deadlines and the essay titles and some support and some personal meetings with tutors to check whether this is right or whatever – that's the way you go about it." (UK)

3.2.2 Need for guidance in practice-oriented work

In the light of the lack of care for students, they are often encouraged to take part in group-work. However there is usually no-one to look after these groups - this means that accompanying courses like practice groups and tutorials do not appear to exist.

Students express a very concrete wish for work which is oriented towards projects and practice - and supervised. As a rule non-traditional adult students rely more on work in small groups for success in learning and teaching.

"Projects make for more intensive and supervised "free" work." (Germany)

"I find projects useful because you work in a straight line towards a goal, learning a lot about a given subject, you get into contact with other students and you can work things out inside the group. However there are areas where seminars are also 'helpful', for here you can increase your knowledge with the chance of discussing things with others." (Germany)

Many non-traditional adult students want more participatory classes. In some countries, students think that they learn better and more deeply through projects¹. In this instance, the transfer of knowledge depends a lot on the initiative of teaching staff and how they structure their classes. In any case, adults require links to reflection and debate.

"(...) there all day, you know, and then, there's a lot of note taking, notes that they are throwing at the class, which many times if you put it on paper you can benefit from the classes, but to do more field work, more debates, you know, more things of reflection, more to do with sharing opinions." (Spain)

Taking into account previous life experience (for example at work, at home, in a civic association, in school, etc) is one of the issues which adult students would like to see implemented as a way of improving university education. It assumes being able to integrate student experiences into the curriculum in order to enrich both the content and the functioning of the classes.

3.1.3 Personal relations

Non-traditional adult students express a significant need for 'communicative involvement' on the part of the teaching staff. This means there is a desire for more feedback which corresponds with a lack of supervision of the learning process in work with small groups.

An important role is played, of course, by the relationship with the lecturers.

"Feedback from tutors has been great. When I got my first essay back from social welfare I got 54 or something and I was devastated you know I thought all this work and this is the mark I have got. But after I had spoken to her and we had gone through the structure of it then I felt much better. For my first essay that was quite good and her comments were quite useful. I have always found the feedback that I have had very, very useful. It's useful and constructive and now I know where I am going." (UK)

"I like Sue and when I see Sue it's a good feeling. I have a good feeling with Sue and she comes across clear. I understand what she says. I know what she is saying is not ambiguous. I write an essay for Sue – it's a good essay – it's as clear as the relationship I have with Sue. You know good delivery." (UK)

A few lecturers seem to be particularly sensitive about 'communitative involvement':

"And I think that my success is due to the fact that I establish relationships with students. It is not all members of the teaching staff who can do that. That is why they all experience it very differently. But I would put it like this. I / my strategy is, I manage to establish a relationship with the students, which means that they on the one side accept me as a model and on the other that they, sort of want to show that they can do it too or that they are somehow motivated: "Now just take a look at this!" or something of the kind. So you've got to, it's difficult to put it into words, in the 60s and 70s they called it "pedagogic feel", but I call it relationships, which ensure that a development process takes place. That often has something to do with the fact that I show that I am still learning myself. So I, er, show that I am somebody who is still learning, often show how I do it and thus I give them the opportunity to go through and to show such processes themselves. In this way an interesting learning process grows up on both sides." (teaching staff, Germany)

"In virtual tutoring, I have the possibility to check the backgrounds of the students when needed and, thus, can encourage a student to take advantage of his or her profession in the learning situation." (teaching staff, Finland)

In conclusion, non-traditional adult students need a communicative, personal related learning atmosphere. Intensive and regular guidance, interactive work and learning situations seem to be preconditions for a successful learning career within Higher Education.

3.2. Personal Teaching Frameworks and Approaches

Nowadays, teaching staff use a range of different methods of teaching within the university system. The general trend, as already mentioned, is toward lectures but gaining in importance are classes organised in the form of seminars or those based on oral presentations.²

The quality of teaching and the methods used in lectures (the main type of teaching) are often criticised. This is sometimes brought out in the charge, firstly that the material is out of date, i.e. the subjects should reflect the current state of research and secondly, in the use of media, either new or old (e.g. libraries are inadequately stocked, literature is out of date, there are few or no texts on the internet). The reason for this is seen in the lack of involvement or interest and limited flexibility on the part of the teaching staff.

"Unfortunately I come up constantly with lecturers who are fed up with the students and who have nothing better to do than offer, say, their notes from 1978...very boring and for me a complete waste of time. Innovations in the media appear to put some lecturers into a panic, with the result that there are certain ways of lightening the burden which they never make use of." (Germany)

In general the quality of the lectures is not just criticised because of their impersonality and the large numbers involved, the criticism is much more fundamental. It refers to the format of a "lecture" itself. There is a call for either doing away with them altogether or at least breaking them up to leave time and space for discussion or questions.

"I find lectures completely superfluous as they are always so full that there is no chance of putting questions, so one is doomed to passivity. Often you can't even get a seat." (Germany)

"Lectures and essays are often without any context, monotonous, personally meaningless." (Sweden)

It was also noted in the research work that classes which are too academic and that do not take into account the voice of the adult students do not generate a real interest. The rigidity and manner that this group of students perceive on the part of the teaching staff sometimes is far from their own situation. In some cases, the reproduction of this more traditional methodology prompts a lack of motivation from the student body.

"I did say one day I really haven't got an idea what we are talking about and everyone was just laughing because nobody had any idea what we were talking about. Everyone was sitting there and you could just see blank faces and the whole topic had just sitting here if you don't understand just say something. Then I did and then it was sort of explained to the group but we all came out at the end and said we still didn't understand it." (UK)

On the other hand lectures can be appreciated if the lecturer shows personal engagement and presents his/her material interestingly enough and gives space for questions and discussions.

"I feel that they have got so much knowledge that I just want to take advantage of having one hour of them talking and get as much as possible. But I recognise that some get bored by that." (UK)

At the moment, the learning approaches most valued by non-traditional adult students are those that involve them actively as students. These approaches are, for example, seminars, discussions, work-based learning and projects. All these approaches are linked by dialogue, personal relationships and the exchange of ideas. It is perhaps surprising that at the same time non-traditional adult students appreciate lectures. This could be explained by the fact that they relate it to the experience that some teachers are good at explaining, in motivating students, in didactic abilities, in communication, etc. Non-traditional adult students appreciate lectures when they include spaces for dialogue.

The research that we have carried out has enabled us to pinpoint different successful teaching methodologies which involve students in developing their own evaluations and recommendations. Some of the proposals set out have been:

- **Promoting interactivity in the classroom as a way of improving and accelerating learning.**
- **Promoting feedback between teaching and student bodies so that classes are more participatory and that one is able to establish an open debate between everyone**
- **Introducing into the classroom education from previous experience of the non-traditional adult students.**

“Innovative assignments are the best. This year we had to write about how a building can tell something about the Middle Ages. It was connected to students’ own every day environment, which was motivating.” (Finland)

3.3 Interaction between theory and practice.

Non-traditional adult students demand that university education maintains a connection with practice, in a way that incorporates aspects of experience that can enrich the content of the class. This facilitates their learning because it takes into account aspects that are closer to their reality.

“Obviously with ...group discussions I think you get a lot out of mature students particularly. I liked that. The only downside I would say is that there are some staff who perhaps don’t appreciate the outside experience that mature students can bring. ...You probably know more about “the real world” than they do and I think it’s that (that is frustrating), dismissing the fact that you do know about these things because they don’t fit in the theory that they talked about.” (UK)

Still, theory should not be neglected. It provides a necessary reference in learning and an indispensable element in the area of higher education. Combining both these aspects, practice with theory, guarantees both quality education and greater student participation.

“Well, for example today there is a video, the following day we are doing a teaching theory class and the following day another person is coming as a visitor. Things have to be like this. At least when I had a deadly bore as a teacher, it seemed to me the most awful thing. What’s important is that people can participate.” (Spain).

3.5 Some basic criteria to evaluate teaching and learning approaches

To guarantee quality university learning and teaching, our research suggests the adoption of some basic criteria that take into account the needs and interests of non-traditional students. These criteria are:

- **Egalitarian relationship and mutual respect between teaching staff and non-traditional adult students.** It is important to have a relationship based on dialogue and in which there is an absence of hierarchies that prevent quality learning for everyone. This is one aspect that students value and demand in forms of teaching and in the general workings of the university.
- **Use of previous knowledge and experiences (creating bridges to acquire the knowledge required).** University recognition of the knowledge acquired by adults through their daily life is one of the priorities of the European Commission in the field of higher education. For example, in Portugal some students demand that classes have a greater link with practice and that the curriculum takes this into account in some way.
- **Content based on scientific criteria (important authors and theories).** The scientific community is a reference that guarantees the quality of classes because it is a form of ensuring the use of content most cited and used at an international level. In this sense, it is important to update this content so that it has a link with current reality.
- **Use of the new media.** The handling of information technology is one element indispensable for university training nowadays. The incorporation of this aspect in classes with non-traditional adult students makes it even more necessary.

- **Avoid deficit theories.** Everybody is capable of learning. Avoid approaches or practices that assume or imply that there are people that are not able to study at that particular level. Often prejudices are held in this respect about non-traditional adult students, not taking into account that this group also has a type of intelligence based on their experience. It is about cultural intelligence, which is forged in processes of interaction and communication that these people establish throughout their lives. (Flecha, 1997)
- **Support for non-traditional adult students.** Support measures for non-traditional adult students can be a reference to follow in European universities. This would be a way of promoting quality training and results. In the United Kingdom there are particular measures of this type that focus on the learning of non-traditional students (see paragraph 1 of this section).
- **Transparency.** Setting out the forms of evaluation, assessment and functioning of classes at the beginning of the course is one aspect that guarantees transparency. Coming to an agreement with the students on these aspects serves as a positive and democratic way of looking at university teaching.

Questions for Discussion/ Reflection

- How important is advice and guidance in fostering the motivation of non-traditional adult students and ensuring their success within Higher Education institutions?
- How can lectures be made more exciting and inter-active?
- How can more inter-active teaching and learning approaches be adopted in your country?
- How can you take greater account of student experience in the curriculum?

4. Learning strategies of non-traditional adult students: a broad comparison

The Learning in Higher Education Project shows that key reference points for developing teaching and learning approaches with adult students are the learning strategies adopted by different types of students. Below is an outline of research findings from the project which may impact on the teaching and learning approaches to be adopted with adult (and other) students.

Introduction

The choice of discipline tends to be an indicator of differing learning types. While in the so-called hard disciplines (e.g. engineering, natural science, law, economics etc) a learning type can be identified which can be termed **“instrumental”**, students of the soft disciplines (social science) can more readily be described as **“discursive”** learners.

Instrumental learners organise their study strictly “economically”, are very keen on transparent study planning, take account of financial investment and learning effects and seem in general to be better organised. These basic differences match the structure of the disciplines chosen, whose canon is usually firmly established and whose courses are clearly structured. The discursive learners prefer for their learning process, discussion with others concerning the content of their study, critical reflection on confusing seminar programmes and serious thinking on the meaning of it all for their own lives. These basic dispositions make it more difficult to plan study systematically and sometimes change a clear and structured career perspective. This basic attitude towards learning does however match the structure and curricular form of the chosen “soft” disciplines, which are as a rule more diffuse than the study disciplines of the contrasting group.

The two learning groups identified can be differentiated more closely in the following categories:

4.1 Reflection on the learning process

While the strategically instrumental learners judge their own learning process primarily in relation to practice and use on the job and the strict achievement of concrete results, the learning considerations of the discursive learner are linked to the self and oriented towards personal development. The call for practice is embedded in a way of thinking which is not only geared to the future job but to the needs of everyday life.

“Learning diaries which hardly bring any advantages for a future job” (strategic instrumental learner)

“Seminars: Too much hot air” (strategic instrumental learner)

“Project work, since it goes beyond the university bounds, bringing a varied and flexible use of what has been learnt and demands personal qualities such as creativity, spontaneity, resilience etc” (discursive learner)

4.2 Knowledge

The attitude towards acquired knowledge is also different between the two learning groups. The strategic instrumental learners regard knowledge as a system which is closed and available. The discursive learners have a more open approach to knowledge, see it as something unfinished, and have a critical attitude towards it.

“Since almost everything has to be learnt by heart, one gets used to finding a method of learning a lot in a short time.” (strategic instrumental learner)

“Individual essays - because I can learn things at my own speed. Learning diaries – because it’s a long time since I left school and with the learning diary I can discover my own learning cycle. Seminars - because there in contrast to lectures - I can bring in my own thoughts and discuss with other students and the teachers.” (discursive learner)

4.3 Goals

With regard to the goals of learning the two groups are very different. The strategic instrumental learners display a distinct tendency to want to use and apply their knowledge, while the discursive learners emphasise the question of the meaning of knowledge and the gaining of knowledge in a broader context.

“Tests and oral exams are useful both for examiners and students for applying what they have learnt through case histories.” (strategic instrumental learner)

“Teaching with reference to practice and learning in its entirety, in an interdisciplinary way” (discursive learner)

4.4 Relevance to context

It is characteristic of the strategic instrumental learners that they place their learning process in the context of its immediate use, while the discursive learners look for the meaning and link their learning processes to the horizons of the significance of their own life experience.

“Project work and laboratories since I always need a reference to show me what I am learning it all for.” (strategic instrumental learner)

“Tests are and remain the simplest and most effective way of judging a student’s work.” (strategic instrumental learner)

“I do want to hang on to my priorities, what interests me and what I find important for me and what not, how I can get hold of my certificate as quickly as possible. That would probably be easier, but I’m just not going to do it. There’s nothing wrong with the idea, but I just can’t cope with it. When I get the feeling that it’s just not the thing for me, then I can’t bring myself to go for even the simplest certificate, I just don’t tackle it, it’s crazy.” (discursive learner)

“The depth with which you tackle an essay or a thesis teaches you much more and gives you more information about the amount of knowledge you have than a test or an oral exam.” (discursive learner)

4.5 Group Work and Co-operation

The difference between the two learning types stands out most clearly in the area of group work and cooperation. Discussion groups are not much help for the strategic instrumental learners. The scepticism about group-oriented learning process on the part of the strategic instrumental learners comes from a view of the learning process which is strictly oriented to results. The openness to group-oriented learning on the part of discursive learners shows a preference for solutions which are sought not individually but only in discussion with others.

“since with all those different opinions and attitudes on a subject it’s very rarely that you get any results.” (strategic instrumental learner)

“I find project work helpful, because you work concretely and with reference to a result on a particular subject, get into contact with other students and discussion takes place in the group. But with some subjects I find seminars helpful, for here you can increase your knowledge with the possibility of discussion.” (discursive learner)

4.6 Expectations of teachers

With regard to the expectations of teaching staff, differences can also be seen between the two learning groups. While the strategic instrumental learners call for the directly recognisable use of what they have learnt, the discursive learners tend to expect general ideas and stimuli which will guarantee them an autonomous learning process.

“Like a catalogue of questions for exams, work papers (as learning aids), printed tables of content at the beginning of term” (strategic instrumental learner)

“More stimulus seminars to help one reflect on one’s own identity, moderation and presentation seminars, open meetings with expert advisers for the exchange of thoughts and experience” (discursive learner)

4.7 Learning strategies

Both learning paradigms can be seen in the strategic expectations of certain kinds of course. Here too the aspect of the immediately recognisable use is much more noticeable in the case of the strategic instrumental learners than in that of the discursive learners, who are evidently interested in the widening and combination of different courses. The learning process of the strategic instrumental students is linear and straight, it obeys the premises of a strict time economy. The learning process of the discursive learners tends to be “recursive“, it requires the support of a group consensus and anchoring in one’s own value base.

“Lectures and the practice sessions connected with them, since it is here that the content of the tests is directly dealt with. In addition books to deepen one’s knowledge.” (strategic instrumental learner)

“Lectures only with room for discussion (no more “pure“ lectures), more interdisciplinary podium discussions with audience participation inside the framework of regular courses, the abolition of pure seminars on the basis of essays in favour of mixed teaching forms.” (discursive learner)

The two learning concepts differ of course in the way in which the ideal-typical representation is displayed. There are undoubtedly mixed forms - such as with reference to the category of “reflexivity“.

But even here, if one looks closely, reflexive attitudes with some of the strategic instrumental learners can be seen in connection with use, while with the discursive learners the recursive character is foreground. Thus the observed contrast is repeated at another level.

It is symptomatic that the two learning types which have been discovered show interesting aspects in the biographical profiles found in our research programme. While “careerists“ and the “integrated“, who tend to select the “hard“ courses, represent the strategic instrumental learning type, the “social climbers“ and the “emancipated“ prefer the discursive learning strategy. They are as a rule also representatives of the “soft“ disciplines. “Patchworkers“ cannot be assigned to either of the learning groups. Their disoriented study planning and the fact that their biographical reflexivity is poorly developed makes them “confused“ learners.

In conclusion, we need to emphasise that particularly the non-traditional adult learner is an individualised learner. Strategies of teaching and learning targeting this group have to be extremely flexible, sensitive and communicative.

Table of students' learning types

types criteria	Instrumental learners	discursive learners
reflection of the learning process	geared to use, related to job and usefulness	related to persons, to meaningfulness
knowledge	knowledge as a closed system	incomplete, half-life of knowledge
goal-centredness	by-heart learning with reference to certificates	learning process is linked to own life/terms of relevance - Development of skills (personal development) in order to cope flexibly with problems of practice
contextuality	(closely defined) context of the examination	(widely defined) context of everyday life: both with reference to self and future job
groupwork/co-operation	Practice groups (work on cases with exemplary tasks): need of clear solutions	discussion in small groups: manifold perspectives
expectations on teaching	Teachers as a corrective (matrix right – wrong)	teachers as providers of stimulus
learning strategy	linear, straight-line	recursive

Questions for Discussion/ Reflection

- How should teaching and learning approaches take account of these broad differences in student learning strategies ?

5. Assessment, Evaluation and Feedback

Introduction

Most universities remain very traditional in respect of the types of assessment offered to students as examinations and assessed essays are the main methods.

Previous research (Bourgeois et al, 1999 & Merrill, 1999) and this particular Learning in Higher Education research project indicate that non-traditional adult students are contradictory in their attitudes towards assessment. While disliking examinations many also stated that assignments/assessed essays are time-consuming and, therefore, having some examinations is helpful in this respect.

The project survey revealed that across the seven countries the most common form of assessment experienced by students is a mixture of assessed essays and examinations (70%), with 20% who have examinations only. Universities in Spain, for example, are still examination dominated.

Oral presentations were part of a third of the assessment approaches. More innovative forms of assessment accounted for only a small percentage of students, for example, a portfolio 7% and a diary/log 11%. The majority do not have any choice in the type of assessment they receive.

5.1 Examinations

Methods of assessment in the form of exams are, perhaps, one of the aspects that non-traditional adult students would most like to change. This is one form of evaluating knowledge that does not take into account all the work carried out during the course and responds solely to memory criteria.

"I prefer assignments. Because I think it's almost funny the way that exams are supposed to be testing your knowledge whereas all they are doing is testing your memory ability. That's not what knowledge is about and it certainly isn't enjoyable for me and I don't know what it's proving. I suppose I get slightly nervous. I find it intimidating especially when you are in a large room." (UK)

Examinations are viewed as testing memory only with the knowledge being forgotten once they leave the examination room. For this reason some adult students feel that examinations are not a fair system. One Spanish student, for example, stated that:

'examinations always evaluate what you do not know in a given moment and in a given way. There shouldn't be many tests' (Spain).

He argued for having another type of assessment – one which 'allows for dialogue between teacher and student which is what should be valued the most'.

As many non-traditional adults have been out of the education system for a long time they express nervousness about assessment and examinations in particular. The majority will not have sat an examination since being at school. Above all, many non-traditional adult students become very stressed about sitting an examination as it brings back memories, often negative ones, of sitting in an examination hall at school. Also they feel that they are out of practice of having to write quickly in a specific length of time:

It all goes pear-shaped in an exam room. I always do very badly! I do well in assessed work but my mind goes completely blank and I develop a headache in exams (UK).

I am scared stiff quite frankly sitting there at an exam because I have not done it for years. That is one area where I would have liked a pre-run, a mock exam. That would be beneficial. I did not achieve what I thought was my potential because of my lack of skill in doing a written exam (UK)

Overwhelmingly the majority stated that they prefer assessed essays or a mixture of assessed essays and examinations. This supports evidence collected at Board of Examiners meetings at the University of Warwick. The assessment mark-sheets illustrate that non-traditional adult students overwhelmingly perform better in their assessed essay work – some with considerably higher marks – than they do in their examinations. Portuguese students also remarked that it is easy to go wrong in an examination and as a result the work and effort of a semester is lost. For this reason they prefer continuous assessment, and project work in particular

5.2 Assessed Essay Work

Rust (2002: 3) writes that there are two dangers while using essays as assessment: “they are easy to plagiarise, and that undue weights is often given to factors such as style, handwriting and grammar”.

Compared to examinations, assessed essays are often preferred because, as one student explained, they ‘ensure that one does the real work’. Assessed essays are also liked as they enable learners to explore, as an independent learner, a topic in more depth:

Assessed assignments can be very interesting as they give the opportunity to investigate particular areas of interest in greater depth but I generally get bogged down with all the reading required whereas for exam revision it is easier to pace the amount of reading. However, I am not so confident about exams to opt to be assessed solely by examination (female, UK).

The depth with which you tackle an essay or a thesis teaches you much more and gives you more information about the amount of knowledge you have than a test or an oral exam (Germany)

“Assignments give me the freedom to look at every perspective. To do a wide amount of reading. It’s an opportunity to look at a particular subject which I find interesting. Quite often a long way it will link into other things that I have learned previously and then it all kind of make sense. It’s a sense of achievement when it all starts coming together and you can get things into context. (UK)

Several learners mentioned that assessed essays are time-consuming when adults have other pressures on their time as they spend time trying to ‘perfect’ their essay by reading more and/or re-writing.

The snag with assessments is that you can go on for ever trying to make sure that they are perfect. You will only end up with a few more marks for three or four more hours work. It is very complicated really. I think on the whole I prefer assessments and not worry about the rest of your work. (UK)

5.3 Dissertation and Project Work

Dissertation modules are often favoured as they are fully assessed with no examination and as they often require about 10,000 words students can research a topic in depth. Dissertations are also a more flexible mode of study for adults as they are not tied to weekly seminars and lectures.

Dissertations can be compared to individual projects as far as assessment is concerned (see Rust 2002). For non-traditional adult students it is important that in both cases there are well established criteria for evaluation so that they would be fair when applied to different perspectives, methodologies and results.

5.4 Formative and more innovative forms of assessment

On one particular course in Finland some tutors stated that they disliked having to assess adults by grades as they realised that the students are primarily taking the course for the sake of learning rather than for the grades although one tutor did not agree:

We have been discussing whether it is appropriate to give adult students numerical assessments, but we have come to the conclusion that it gives them more motivation than if we just fail or pass them. It also makes them notice whether or not they have improved (Finland).

It is important to implement processes for formative assessment, including feedback from students themselves and not rely on summative assessment alone. Formative student assessment is often more innovative in its methods as this may include, as in Finland and increasingly in the UK, learning logs or diaries.

5.5 The Importance of feedback

In this context, feedback is crucial for further performance and for strengthening student's motivation and learning. Most commonly non-assessed essays are used as part of the formative process. However, it is important to provide detailed feedback as students want to know if their work is at the right level for a degree:

We just got the grades and there was a form attached to the evaluation which told what was good and what needs more consideration. That is really all I needed (Finland).

Many non-traditional adult students prefer both written and verbal feedback and value tutors who do this. As one lecturer (Finland) points out:

'adult students are often more motivated to learn and, therefore, want more feedback on assessment than younger students'.

In the project survey nearly 80% reported that written feedback in relation to assessments is the most common approach and about 60% stated that tutors offer face-to-face feedback. In contrast, however, in Spain the most usual type of feedback between a professor and a non-traditional adult student is one which takes place outside of the classroom normally through tutorials or through an email.

Even if there is awareness among lecturers of the importance of giving feedback to the students they have difficulties becoming engaged in such a process for the simple reason - too many students and too little time. Often students get their essays back without any feedback at all, getting only the mark. This is frustrating for most students, who want to know what they did well and what went wrong, where are their strengths and weaknesses to learn from them and improve in future.

5.6 Peer assessment

Some students who enjoy working in groups stated that they would like to have peer group assessment as a mechanism to support each other in their learning and to help them to improve in their assessed work:

When we are talking about adults the feedback from the teacher and the group are equally important.

A group-based assessment would be a good thing. A discussion to think about where we are going, what we need to do here and what this is all about...Or what the teachers were looking for in this essay and what kind of essays were returned this time. (Sweden)

In Finland one lecturer actively encourages peer group feedback amongst adult students;

'I have tried to tell them that there are as many people giving feedback as there are students. Students assess each others' oral presentations on paper, just because it is nice to have something that stays with you after the programme is finished' (Finland).

We use learning diaries. I wish students would give themselves feedback by reflecting what they have learned. And of course, their learning diaries give me feedback as well which is important (Finland)

According to Rust (2004, 4), from an UK perspective "there is strong evidence that involving students in the assessment process can have very definite educational benefits" ... "it involves the student in trying to apply the assessment criteria for themselves". In addition, including students in self and peer assessment can spare time that staff are lacking and give feedback that otherwise could be impossible to receive. In the Swedish experience, peer assessment is a frequently used assessment form when essays, group projects and dissertations are assessed.

5.7 The Need for transparency

As many non-traditional adults are unclear about what is expected at HE level it is essential to be transparent about the relationship between assessment and course objectives.

I want to know the conditions, goals and expedients to feel I have control...As a student you need to know the frames. Teachers and supervisors give so much freedom and sometimes it seems that they don't want any frames at all. But there are frames even if they are invisible. You realise it when you do something you shouldn't have done. For example how to write essays are typical examples of that. You have the freedom to work out what the teachers say but when you do they tell you that you should have done it different. Such situations take a lot of energy (Sweden).

It is important to have congruency between the course objectives and assessment. However there is a risk that such procedure can lead to a too rigid form of assessment that is similar to the lower levels of educational system. Freedom of teaching and learning that traditionally characterises continental higher education (Humboldt tradition) must balance such moves towards such congruency.

5.8 Key Issues

Changing assessment practices in universities, particularly elite institutions, is not an easy task as examinations and assessed essays are viewed by the academy as the 'best' method for assessing a students' ability at this level of study. However, the following approaches would help to alleviate some of the anxieties and issues faced by non-traditional adult students:

- Provide a study skills session near to examination time which looks at how to revise and tips for coping in examinations and how to answer examination questions – one institution holds a revision session for adult students only
- Allow time in the curriculum for revision sessions
- Make past examination papers available to students – at one university these are placed on the University's website.
- Either get your students to practice a timed essay in a class session or encourage them to time themselves for an essay at home
- Integrate advice and guidance about how to write an assessed essay/ write a project/thesis/ write a portfolio etc into the curriculum
- For writing a thesis or a research project provide a guidance booklet
- Either at department or institutional level provide a study skills booklet
- Spend time giving clear and detailed feedback on essays to the group as a whole and individually
- Give written comments and suggestions for improvement (in a positive way) on each piece of written work
- Encourage students to help each other with revision and writing assignments through peer group support.
- Students are anxious about what depth and level is required when writing assignments and examination papers. Explain and give out to students copies of the grades and marking criteria and illustrate the levels by showing examples of past assignments/ examination papers (anonymously).
- Arrange special seminars for discussing assignments, papers, essays, group projects and dissertation where both students and tutors/lecturers give feedback and assessment.

Questions for Discussion/ Reflection

- Is the academic achievement of non-traditional adult students disadvantaged by examinations?
- How can study skills for examinations and assignments best be integrated into the curriculum?
- How can departments/ institutions be persuaded to change their policy on assessment and introduce less examinations and/or more innovative forms of assessment?
- Is group assessment possible and if so how?
- How to establish the grade and marking criteria for the course, programme for each department (if at all) and share with the students?
- What can be learned from our experiences of assessment across European higher education?
- How can you implement these experiences to best fit your own working context and culture?

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Useful References

Throughout the handbook useful references – websites, books etc. – have been cited. Below are a few more.

www.ltsn.ac.uk – this provides practical information about teaching approaches in HE by disciplines

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¹ It deals with a method of teaching based on small investigations developed by students.

² The European Commission is promoting the creation of a Programme of Superior Education that prioritises the implementation of more dynamic teaching methods , such as is the case, for example, of the European credits. These credits unify the criterion of evaluation and output of the students in all of the universities within the European Union. Another guideline that receives importance is the convergence of all qualifications.

