

## THE NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENT IN THE CONTEXT OF THE FIRST-YEAR TRANSITION TO UNIVERSITY

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**Abstract:** *In recent years, universities have undertaken an important social role in promoting lifelong learning by opening their doors to adult learners and tailoring training programmes to best suit their needs. A series of statistical indicators point to the fact that by 2030, students aged over 25 will represent the growing population involved in higher education, at European level, whereas the number of students aged between 18 and 25 will record a constant decline. This study aims at identifying the challenges non-traditional students face during their transition towards upper education, with a focus on the first year a study. A second aim is to examine the role of first year seminars organised by universities in facilitating the students' adaptation to the university environment and in stimulating their participation in studies. A good understanding of the characteristics and vulnerabilities faced by non-traditional students is an important prerequisite for providing an adequate response to their needs and planning specific interventions focused on retention and persistence in studies.*

**Keywords:** *non-traditional students; first year seminars; transitional pedagogy; lifelong learning*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In the past few decades, it has become increasingly obvious that larger access to higher education requires much more than minimal relating to non-traditional cohorts. Hence the need for investments in significant resources to ensure that a more diverse student community is enrolled in this educational stage. Universities have undertaken an important part in promoting lifelong learning by opening their gates to adult learners and adapting their training programmes and learning conditions to suit the needs of this category of learners. The larger access to upper education meant more than relating to the 'non-traditional' cohorts – students aged over 25, students of a certain ethnic, socio-economic or professional background that differed from that of the majority (Gibaldi & Guglielmetti, 2011). Significant resources had to be invested in order to ensure the enrollment of a more and more diverse student body in this educational stage.

### 2. THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES IN PROMOTING LIFELONG LEARNING

The essential part played by universities in promoting lifelong learning has been explicitly expressed in many public policy documents that

emphasize the imperative need to diversify the provision of educational services, the involvement of higher education institutions in initial and continuing teacher training, aligning research with theoretical contributions from the field of adults education and continuing learning and the creation of various opportunities aimed at encouraging community-based learning (Popescu, 2012; Yang & Schneller, 2015; Samoila, 2018).

A succession of statements from the European Commission (EC), starting in 1991 with the *Memorandum on Higher Education in the European Community*, have expressed a common set of sentiments that have included adult access as a specific focus. The 1991 Memorandum challenged HEIs to support an increasingly knowledge-driven economy and society by widening access to higher qualifications. It also urged them to create opportunities for updating and renewing qualifications, to increase preparatory courses, and to do more to recognise prior learning and experience (EC, 1991). The *Agenda for the Future* adopted in 1997 during the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education includes a provision according to which formal education institutions, from the primary to the tertiary level shall open their gates to adult learners, adapting their learning programmes and conditions to meet their needs.

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There followed a *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* (EC, 2000) according to which lifelong learning is no longer just one aspect of education and training, it must become the guiding principle for provision and participation across the full continuum of learning contexts.

The project to increase adult participation in HE was given further impetus by the *Lisbon Strategy* (Council of the European Union, 2002) which sought to make Europe 'one of the most competitive knowledge economies in the world', and by the European Commission's Communication, *Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality* (EC, 2001). This Communication of the EC stated that Member States would aim to improve the quality and effectiveness of education and training systems, and ensure that they are accessible to all. The achievement of these objectives would require enhancing quality in higher education across Europe, removing barriers to teacher and student mobility and promoting lifelong learning and guidance (UNESCO, 2015: 22). Other document issued by UNESCO (2020) states that "adult learning and education (ALE) is a core component of lifelong learning. Adults have a critical role to play in the development of societies because of their accumulated knowledge and experience, which can be mediated by educational processes to strengthen it and make it socially useful." The need to involve education institutions in supporting adults during and after the pandemic is also voiced in the Eurydice Report (2021) according to which education systems can play an important role in identifying and reaching out to the most vulnerable groups of adult learners in order to encourage their participation in education and training.

### 3. THE PROFILE OF THE NON-TRADITIONAL ADULT STUDENT

Considering the globalization processes, demographic changes and the unprecedented rhythm of technological development, upper education institutions are challenged with an increasingly more acute need to facilitate the access of the population to lifelong education, to reconsider learning services and opportunities so that the educational system destined to elites can be turned into a mass system in which learning and education are provided to an increasingly diverse student population. What causes this tendency? First of all, there are the demographic factors correlated with the decrease of the birth rate and population aging, which result in a constant decrease of the number of traditional young students

(18-25 years of age) who enrol in bachelor studies; on the other hand, upper education is striving to meet the need to train a highly qualified workforce, as a response to the current social requirements. A series of statistical indicators point to the fact that by 2030, students aged over 25 will represent most of the higher education population (undergraduate studies), whereas the younger population of students aged between 18 and 25 years will decline substantially (National Centre for Education Statistics, 2006).

Adult students are described as non-traditional because of several factors that influence their participation in the educational process. Bourgeois et al. (1999:3) define the non-traditional adult student as "a person who interrupted his/her studies for a significant period of time to undertake responsibilities related to their family and profession". The category of non-traditional students includes *older students* (Bennett et al., 2007; Bourgeois et al., 2009; Chao & Good, 2004; Forbus et al., 2011; Hart, 2003; Kim, 2002; Rosário et al., 2014; Scott & Lewis, 2012; Tilley, 2014), *those who come from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds (with poor socio-economic resources or from minority ethnic groups* (Thomas, 2002), *people with extended previous educational and professional experience* (Billett, 2017) and *those recording discontinuity in their educational itinerary* (Kasworm, 2018; Souto-Otero & Whitworth, 2017). In other conceptualizations, the non-traditional adult student is described as follows: *aged over 25, undertaking multiple responsibilities (professional, marital, parental, social), interruption of education in most cases, professional and educational activities often overlapping, numerous experiences related to the involvement in community-related activities* (DLL, 2010a). As non-traditional students fulfil multiple roles and undertake different responsibilities in relation to their family, friends, employers, etc., joining a new course of formal education is relegated to the background.

Other authors (Correia & Mesquita, 2006; Johnson & Merrill, 2004; Lynch, Chickering, & Schlossberg, 1989) synthesize the main characteristics of non-traditional students according to the following criteria: (i) age – adult students are aged over 23/25 years, while traditional students are aged between 18 and 23 years; (ii) interruption of attendance of formal education after completing mandatory education – adults students spent a while outside the formal education system and have no university experience, often being the first generation in their family to access this type of studies, (iii) professional experience – adult students have a more significant professional experience than traditional

students (who often have very little experience or hardly any) and often undertake parallel professional responsibilities, working either full or part time and (iv) attitude towards upper education – adult students are more preoccupied by the practical application of knowledge and are also more determined and dedicated than traditional students, since their decision to attend upper education is based on the desire to develop their career and update their professional knowledge (Ambrosio et al, 2014; Correia & Mesquita, 2006).

#### 4. EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES FOR NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS

Numerous studies investigate the manner in which adult students relate to the experience of university education. The research mentioned below falls into two broad categories: a. studies that explore the manner in which adults perceive the university environment in terms of their own *academic competences*; b. studies that analyse how adults perceive the university environment in the context of inter-generation and intra-generation interactions, in term of *social competences*.

**4.1. Non-traditional adult student's academic competence.** Regarded as a quantifiable outcome of learning, *academic competence* is defined in a series of studies as the balance between the student's performance and the existing assessment standards applied by institutions (Cole, 1991, Wentzel, 1991). Other researchers use the concept as a synonym of *academic performance* or *academic skills*. Di Perna & Elliott (1999) define academic competence as a multidimensional concept that includes study skills, academic skills, interpersonal skills, academic self-concept, and academic motivation. A series of studies that analyse the academic competence of the non-traditional student (Chism, Cano, & Pruitt, 2006; Lynch & Bishop-Clark, 1994; Schlossberg et al., 1989) report that during the initial stages of integration, the students are confronted with anxiety and poor awareness of the self with regard to their place in a youth-oriented learning context; anxiety is triggered by concerns regarding their ability to perform, believing that they are disadvantaged because of their age and the fact that they interrupted their studies, finding it difficult to cope with the respective intellectual requirements. In an investigation conducted in 2010, Carol Kasworm analyses the experiences of adult students enrolled in university studies in research universities. The respondents in this study were selected by means of a non-probability sampling strategy oriented towards

adults who were at least 25 years of age, had good academic training according to the criteria established by their institution, attended at least 15 academic courses, represented various academic specializations and had professional and family-related responsibilities. The study conducted by Kasworm (2010) indicates that *adults relate the academic competence to the following indicators: orientation towards tangible purposes, persistence, capitalization of their own maturity and active involvement in the learning process.*

Adult students considered that, unlike their younger colleagues who are perceived as being less focused on tangible educational objectives and committed to their tasks, they are more successful in setting and following their own goals with regard to the learning process, since they are more aware of their intention to learn and this intention are correlated with their professional evolution. On the other hand, younger students were described as being rather passive in the classroom and more preoccupied with being accepted by their peers and with the quality of their social life at the expense of their academic performance. Many adults reported they had inadequate knowledge and skills and admitted that they enrolled in evening high school classes in order to refresh their knowledge related to working with formal content or to update their basic high school skills (Brücknerová et al., 2021).

Kasworm's (2010) study indicates that adults associate competence with perseverance, continuous involvement and the mentality according to which 'the most adapted survives'. Respondents report numerous hours of study and explicit preoccupations in the interactions with their professors during courses and seminars, as compared to traditional students. The adults interviewed by Kasworm (2010) identified four stages of integration in the university environment: (a) *The initial stage* – the university is perceived as a competitive environment due to its prestige at the social level, the key role of the academic community being to appreciate adults as suitable or unsuitable for university studies; (b) *The functional stage* – the professors are perceived as efficient trainers, leaders and managers for all students; (c) *The acceptance stage* – the community provides open support to adult students; (d) *The collegial stage* – adults become resources in an open, supportive community. However, they continue to believe that they have to constantly prove they meet the standards set by the university's prestige.

As far as the culture of competition in universities is concerned, students compared the university studies experience with their previous learning experiences (in high-school or community

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centres), perceived as more favourable, less competitive, during which they benefited from support and counselling in developing their competences. As they advance in their studies, students acquire a more powerful feeling of appurtenance to the university environment and perceive the institution as being less conflicting and competitive (Kasworm, 2010).

**4.2. Inter- and intra-generation interactions in upper education.** There are studies that explore the climate of acceptance of adult students in various institutional contexts in specific bachelor, masters or doctoral programmes and in various stages of their academic journey (the first year of study, for instance) during inter-generation classes (for example Apps, 1981; Darkenwald & Novak, 1997; Faust & Courtenay, 2002; Kasworm et al., 2002). Aiming to identify the level of adults' presence and participation in groups dominated by younger students, these studies started from the general idea of 'the self in the' mirror, according to which we get to know ourselves through the lens of our interactions with the others and in relation to the expectations of the society regarding age-related roles. A number of recent studies have examined the preconception common to institutional culture regarding the various sociocultural roles that affect the identity of adult learners. These studies have focused on the institutional context and suggest limitations of power, and poor support for adult learners, leading to institutional invisibility and alienated and marginalized identities. (Quinnan, 1997; Sissel, 1997; Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001). These studies refer mainly to the experiences of women from socially and racially disadvantaged backgrounds (e.g., Cohen, 1998; Jacobs and Berkowitz, 2002; Studdard, 2002).

The research conducted by Kasworm (2010) indicates that adults identified three different patterns that describe the relationships with young students: (a) *positive relationships* and valuable exchanges with the traditional students; The interactions with the younger students provide opportunities to understand modern mentalities and develop relations of mentorship; (b) *the poor academic quality of the accountability of the traditional students*, perceived by adult students as poorly prepared for involvement and displaying a passive behaviour that is not centred on the tasks; (c) *the negative relations with the traditional students* who excluded the adults from their communities by social distance and discrimination, perceiving them as being too close to their parents' age to be understood and integrated.

As far as intra-generation interactions are concerned, adult students claim to feel alone in the classroom, with few fellow students of similar age. The causes that determine the deficient interactions with students of similar ages are: (a) the distribution in distinct groups and their options for the study of various disciplines correlate with the existence of very few contexts that encourage intra-generation interaction; (b) lack of interest from the universities in organizing meetings and activities that could promote socialization between non-traditional students; (c) lack of counselling and tutoring services adapted to the profile of the non-traditional student; demanding life rhythm – they do not have the time to establish friendly relations with other adult students outside their existing group of friends.

Upper education for adult learners is not only meant to help them develop skills, but also to encourage them to maintain and improve the position they hold within the community and society, and thus to improve the quality of their life.

### 5. FIRST-YEAR SEMINARS (FYS). KEY FINDINGS FROM PREVIOUS STUDIES AND NONTRADITIONAL STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

The concept of *first-year seminars* refers to the introductory courses organised by universities to facilitate the integration of first-year students and familiarize them with the main skills to be developed and with the supporting university community (faculty, administration, other students).

Adult student participation in the first-year seminars is minimally documented in the literature. In fact, there are only a few empirical studies in this area (Bailey & Marsh, 2010; Hatch, 2003; Julian, 2001; Welch, 2004), and the literature exploring this issue is rather descriptive and generally focuses on learning purposes, content, and processes (Anderson, Gardner, & Kuh, 2006; Swing, 2001) or assessment issues (National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, 2009). While some authors (Gast, 2013; Osam et al., 2017) argue that time (limited due to work responsibilities) and finances are the most common situational barriers at the undergraduate admissions stage, there is at least one study (Lundberg, 2003) that argues that work do not negatively influence participation and retention, adult students being confident in their time management skills. Other research shows that lack of confidence is perceived by adult learners as the main barrier to success (Potter, 2021; Osam et al., 2017; Samuels et al., 2011).

Beyond the diversity of characteristics associated with the adult learner profile, numerous studies argue that the most difficult challenges identified by non-traditional students in the transition stage to university are institutional ones, such as confusing enrollment, remediation, and financial aid programs and policies, issues that can discourage retention and persistence (Gast, 2013; Osam *et al.*, 2017; Soares, 2013; Soares, 2017).

Institutional responsiveness and support have been found to have a positive impact on retention and completion (Bergman *et al.*, 2014; Ray, 2012; Samuels *et al.*, 2011; Serowick, 2017). From the investigation coordinated by Bergman *et al.* (2014) it appears that “campus environment and institutional resources influence adult student persistence more than internal characteristics or other external factors” (p. 98). A 35-year study (1966-2002) conducted by Astin *et al.* (2002) found that student participation in introductory seminars in the first year of study determines the adaptation and transition to the university environment, while other authors suggest that classrooms are the central stage for learning in adulthood (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Kasworm & Marienau, 1997). Students develop a sense of institutional belonging when they feel that the institution cares about them and their success.

Bailey and Marsh (2010) claim that when adult learners were presented with the standard first-year introductory seminar syllabus, they found the content inadequate, most of them suggesting additions to the syllabus in line with adult learning needs. From the results reported in the above investigations, it appears that the organisation of first year seminars for non-traditional students should consider ensuring the following conditions: (a) inclusion of non-traditional adult students in small classes; (b) conducting introductory seminars in such a way that they do not overlap with the academic programme, preferably in the summer before the academic year; (c) the existence of a designated university representative to represent the interests of adult learners; (d) involvement of adult learners in action research projects to help develop a curriculum for non-traditional learners

If we consider the results of Carol Kasworm's (2010) investigations and the two challenges for the integration of non-traditional students in the university context, the academic and the social component, the activities carried out in the introductory seminars can be summarised in the table below:

Tabel 1. First-year seminars activities.  
Source: Liston & Breslin (2013).

Academic component	Social Component
<b>(a) Knowledge of human resources in the university (meetings with professors, management and administrative staff)</b>	(a) Student services tailored to the learning and social needs of non-traditional students
<b>(b) Course management: - Types of examinations and assessments - Structure of modular courses - Timetable</b>	(b) Support services (medical, financial/scholarships, accommodation, meals, campus rules)
<b>(c) Forms of organising teaching activity (seminars, lectures, laboratories, internships)</b>	(c) Knowledge of the physical space of the university (professors' offices, administrative services)
<b>(d) Academic community and bibliographical services</b>	(d) Transport services (e) Local attractions

Student participation in these activities has the following benefits (Pickenpaugh *et al.*, 2021): (a) Helps academic and social integration; (b) Encourages active student involvement in learning; (c) Provides a supportive framework for ensuring student belonging to the university environment; (d) Helps students make the transition to a new learning environment and community; (e) Communicates the culture and expectations of the institution; (f) Increases academic performance; (g) Improves student persistence in the transition stage from first to second year

From an investigation coordinated by Padgett and Keup (2011), it appears that nontraditional students identified the following goals achieved as a result of participating in first-year seminars: (a) Develop academic skills; (b) Develop a connection with institution; (c) Orient to campus resources; (d) Encourage self-exploration and personal development; (e) Create a common first-year experience.

Experts distinguish other ways in which the participation of adult learners in the educational process can be made more accessible: 1. developing coherent mechanisms for identifying the results of learning in various contexts and ensuring the transferability of credits both within one institution and between institutions, sectors or even states; 2. establishing common research and training activities at the university/community level; 3. bringing university services to external groups; 4. conducting

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interdisciplinary research on adult learning and education; 5. creating adult learning opportunities through flexible, creative and open programs, also considering the specific needs and requirements of male and female students; 6. providing systematic continuing training to adult trainers (European Commission, 2013).

During the first semester of undergraduate studies, non-traditional adult students must manage and balance both social and academic responsibilities, which often feels overwhelming for successful academic integration. The studies reviewed in this paper demonstrate that the organisation of first year seminars in higher education institutions has the potential to reduce the gap between the expectations of adult learners and the actual demands they face in their first year of study. Both academic and social competences contribute to successful integration, and adult learners succeed when they understand that competence development is a continuous process that does not end with the completion of an educational programme.

In the first year, students have special learning and support needs, dependent on social conditions and transitions correlated with the academic environment (Kift, 2015). The experience of first-time students is not homogeneous, but instead varies widely, depending on age, level of prior preparation correlated with average admissions, motivations, social networks and patterns of engagement. A transition pedagogy is

a philosophy of guidance and support, embedded in a formal first-year curriculum, and is operationalized at the level of attention paid in the first-year academic learning experience for contemporary heterogeneous cohorts (Kift, 2015).

### 6. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has shown the critical importance of improving adult access and success in higher education by encouraging participation in the activities organised during the introductory seminars held in the first year of studies.

With regard to counselling and tutoring services for non-traditional adults, universities need to design strategies to support the integration of non-traditional students in the first stages of interaction with the academic environment, such as *first year seminars*, to create flexible and open inter-generation and intra-generation learning communities, taking into account the specifics of adults' complementary social roles that often compete with learning. Support sessions

for non-traditional students facing stressful situations provided by specialists who assist them in the transition towards the new form of education should be included in the educational offer of all upper education institutions.

The way in which lifelong learning in tertiary education can contribute to the students' wellbeing as well as the way in which universities are capable to respond to the constantly growing learning demand recorded primarily at the level of communities facing demographic decline and population aging represent critical priorities that require mature and rigorous scientific thinking, while the expertise should be deeply rooted in the social dimension and the experiences of the current student population characterized by unprecedented diversity should be carefully considered.

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