

"Higher Education and mature students. A case study on students learning and organizational experiences."

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1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper we present the design and some preliminary data of a research study recently launched – a case study –, focused on mature student's learning and organizational experience in a Higher Education institution in Portugal.

Recently in this country a new law was approved in order to widen the access to Higher Education of mature students. Adults can apply to higher education without having previous diplomas, since the knowledge and competences gained in any other contexts of life, professional and personal experience, and the motivation towards the higher education degree are the factors valued in the selection process. In Portugal, however, Higher Education institutions do not have a strong tradition of teaching mature students, and are not really prepared for the educational and organizational challenges raised by adult learners.

With this study we intend to shed some light on the expectations, motivations, main needs and difficulties of a group of mature students in a particular context – one of the institutions that belong to the Polytechnic public offer.

In previous studies we analyzed the recent legislation on the recognition of adult prior learning in the Higher Education system in Portugal (Pires, 2007-b). In the beginning of 2006 the Portuguese government approved a new law² regarding the access to Higher Education – Universities and Polytechnics – that allows adults to accede to H.E. without having a previous degree.

Adults – the legislation refers to those more than 23 years old – can apply to this special access regime presenting a CV, a motivation letter, and they also have to do a special examination, theoretic or practical, made specifically by each institution. Interviews are

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² Decreto-Lei 64/2006

recommended, although are not compulsory. The focus of the evaluation process is to identify if the candidate has the capability to study at the H.E. level; the result of the process is the access to the H.E. studies and can also be the accreditation of the prior experiential learning (mainly gained from professional contexts).

This political concern to widen the access of adults to H.E. has been developed in parallel with the interest of raising the level of qualifications of the Portuguese population. The new access regime, although seen as a political instrument towards qualification goals, it is also an opportunity for adults who have been away from studies and want to return to the education system. And, from the theoretical point of view, it is based in the recognition of prior learning principles. From the educational perspective, recognition of prior learning is a gate for new learning opportunities and has an emancipatory dimension.

In the year 2006/07 we made a content analysis of the specific legislation created by the public universities (available in the websites), following the implementation of the law about the recognition of prior learning, aiming to characterize the object of recognition, the methodologies used and its effects (access without previous degree, accreditation, advanced positioning,...). Although the law was already approved in January 2006, from the 16 institutions of the universe only 8 had put this specific legislation on the web. The components of the evaluation were distributed between the theoretical or practical examination and the evaluation of the curriculum and the motivations. This analysis pointed to the fact that the institutions use mainly traditional practices of evaluation, reproducing closely the traditional pedagogical model (grades, written examinations, disciplinary knowledge, and so on).

The results of this exploratory study (Pires, 2007-b) pointed out to the existence of paradoxes and contradictions: at the political-legislative perspective, the focus is to widen the access of non-traditional students to Higher Education – particularly to mature students. However, the models and theoretical referential that sustain the current practices of recognition of adult prior learning seems to be rooted on a traditional concepts of academic education, organised by disciplines, evaluated by formal examinations, with formal and scholar grades.

The results have led us to question the concepts of experience and knowledge in use in H.E. practices to recognise it, since experience seems to be taken into account in a peripheral way. As stated by Peters (2006), practices of recognition of prior learning aim to open universities to different types of students, and they challenge academia to look at different forms of knowledge as well as using different strategies to evaluate it.

As we had also analysed before (Pires, 2007-c) H.E. institutions adopt different types of models to valorise knowledge gained from informal and non-formal contexts, establishing different relationships at the pedagogical level between informal and formal knowledge.

These different academic pedagogical models reflect different concepts of knowledge, and attribute different status to the experiential prior learning.

Another important axis considered in this study is related to adult motivation dynamics. It has been pointed out by several studies that adults' motivations to participate in learning activities are multiple, complex and subject to change (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999). Nowadays the understanding of the motivational structure related to adult learning is becoming more and more important.

We had already referred that there is a lack of studies and research about the adult reasons and expectations regarding learning, education and training, especially from a lifelong and life wide perspective (Pires 2006-b). Their reasons, their interests and needs, are seldom known in depth, although they play a fundamental role in their demand and their participation in education and training activities. According to Merriam and Caffarella (1999: 45), participation in adult education is largely a voluntary activity, so "providers of adult education therefore need to know who is participating, why they are participating and what conditions are likely to promote greater participation".

There is still a considerable progress to be made in order to broaden the access, remove existing the barriers, develop new paths and structures to qualifications, and respond to the needs and requirements of adult learners (Gordon, 2004).

With this study we intend to shed light on these relevant aspects in order to understand the new challenges faced by H.E. with adult learners, and, in that sense, to promote the reflection and contribute to the educational change.

2 METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

In this paper we present some of the preliminary results from the case study that is being developed in a higher education institution – the College of Education of a Polytechnic Institution³ –, created with the aim of promoting both professional expertise and scientific knowledge as a basis for the education of professionals.

Besides Education and Training, the Polytechnic Institute aims to develop research, applied research and experimental development, participation in projects with national and international cooperation, as well as cultural initiatives. It has a strong commitment and link with the community – through the provision of services to the network of education establishments and business in the region.

³ The Polytechnic Institute, created in 1979, has four more Colleges: College of Health Technology, College of Business and Administration, and two Colleges of Technologies, covering areas such as Health Care, Business Administration, Engineering and Technology.

Nowadays the College of Education has around 800 students and offers the following diplomas: Basic Education⁴, Social Communication, Social and Cultural Action, Sports, Arts and Translation and Interpreting in Portuguese Sign Language.

Following the approval of the law regarding the adult population access to higher education without a previous degree, the College of Education settled the procedure to evaluate the applicants:

- a) Defining the methodological procedure, composed by:
 - professional and educational Curriculum Vitae evaluation (through the analysis of the CV)
 - motivation evaluation (through the analysis of the motivation letter);
 - a written examination in an area related to the degree;

The CV is the main component of the evaluation (50% of the grade), followed by the motivation (20% of the grade) and the written examination (30% of the grade). Applicants need to have a minimum grade of 10 (in a scale 0-20) in order to be considered approved.

- b) Settling the number of available places for the adult admission process in each degree: In every academic year, the Scientific Council of the College decides on the number of available places through this admission process. According to the legislation, the number of places should be more than 5% of the total places available for each diploma.

The Ministry of Education settles annually the total number of places available for each College, for each degree. In the academic year of 2006/07, the number of places available for the general application (authorized by the Ministry) was 195. The College decided for the new adults admission process on 39 places.

Table 1 – Available places (2006/07)

Degrees offered by the College	Total of places available for the national admission process	Number of adults' admissions
Social Communication	38	6
Sports	20	11
Social & Cultural Action	28	6
Translation and Int. PSL	16	5
Education – 1 st cycle	28	3
Education - music	15	1
Education - preschool	25	4
Arts	25	3
Total	195	39

⁴ This is a new degree created according to the framework of Bologna process, that replaces the existing diplomas in Education offered by the College (Education – preschool; Education – first cycle; Education – music).

1) As we already stated, the study is focused in the particular situation of a group of mature students that entered the College of Education in the academic year of 2006/07 through the special admission procedure to Higher Education studies.

The first step of the research is to identify the socio-graphic characteristics of the larger group of applicants to the College – in the year of 2006/07 the number of applicants was 90 people –, as well as the socio-graphic characteristics of those who were admitted to the College, through this access process – 39 people.

We will present and discuss this data in the paper.

2) The second step of the research is developed through the application of a questionnaire to the students – conceived by a multidisciplinary team of teachers and researchers of the College.

The questionnaire was filled by the students at the beginning of the second year of studies in the College – October / November 2007.

The aim is the identification of the motivations and expectations of the group of mature students towards the course, the main obstacles and difficulties they had felt, their level of satisfaction and their perceptions about the organizational strategies to support them.

Five parts compose the questionnaire:

1. Personal and social characterization
2. Educational Trajectory
3. Professional Activity
4. Access to Higher Education
5. Academic experience

As we are currently doing the analysis of the questionnaires, is not possible to present results in this paper.

3. PRESENTATION OF DATA: CHARACTERISTICS OF THE APPLICANTS

3.1 GENERAL CHARACTERIZATION

To characterize the applicants population – the universe is composed of 90 people – we considered the following factors: age, gender, nationality, local of birth, place of residence, level of education, last year of study, professional experience (years and employments) and previous training.

Concerning gender, 30 of the applicants are men (33.33%) and 60 are women (66.67%). This gender distribution confirms the tendency observed in the recent years regarding the issues of gender and H.E. students in Portugal.

Table 1 – Gender

Gender	Number	Frequency %
Women	60	66.67%
Men	30	33.33%
TOTAL	90	100.00

After the selection process, the people admitted to the College have the following distribution: 24 women (61.54%) and 15 men (38.46%).

Younger adults are strongly represented within the applicants population, since 36.67% of people belong to the group between 24 and 30 years old, and 35.56% belong to the group between 31 and 37 years old.

They are followed by the group of adults who are between 38 and 44 years old (17.78). Adults older than 45 years old are only 10% of the population.

Table 2 – Age (all applicants)

Ages	Number	Frequency %
24-30	33	36.67
31-37	32	35.56
38-44	16	17.78
45-51	8	8.89
52-58	1	1.11
TOTAL	90	100.00

If we compare the group of all applicants to those admitted to College, we can see that the younger adults – from 24 to 30 years old – are still those who came in first place (38.46%), followed by the group between 31-37 years old (28.21%) and by the group between 38-44 years old (17.95%). Adults between 45 and 51 years old are the least represented in this population (15.38%).

Age seems to be a relevant factor: the younger they are, the more they applied and acceded.

Table 3 – Age (admitted)

Ages	Number	Frequency %
24-30	15	38.46
31-37	11	28.21
38-44	7	17.95
45-51	6	15.38
52-58	0	0
TOTAL	39	100.00

The majority of the applicant population is Portuguese (only one person is Brazilian), although they have born in different countries:

Table 4 – Place of birth

Place of birth	Number	Frequency %
Portugal	79	87.78
Brazil	2	2.22
Angola	4	4.44
Mozambique	1	1.11
South Africa	2	2.22
Luxemburg	1	1.11
Did not reply	1	1.11
TOTAL	90	100.00

The group of people admitted to College is composed by 35 adults who were born in Portugal (89.74%), by 2 adults who were born in South Africa (5.13%), one in Brazil (2.56%) and one in Angola (2.56%).

Regarding the place of residence, the majority of the applicants live in the same District of the College (90%). This is a main characteristic of this College population: the tendency observed since its creation is the attraction of students from the same region. From the 39 people admitted, 33 (74.62%) live in the district and 6 (15.38%) outside the district.

3.2 EDUCATION AND TRAINING TRAJECTORY

Regarding previous qualifications, the majority of the applicants (53.21%) had studied beyond compulsory education (certificate of the 9th year): 32.22% of the applicants had completed the secondary level (certificate of the 12th year of education), 15.55% had completed the 11th year and 4.44% had completed the 10th year of education. We can also see that 17.77% of the applicants had completed the compulsory education (certificate of the 9th year) and only a very small percentage of people had not completed the compulsory education certificate (3.33%).

Table 5 – Certificate (all applicants)

Certificate (completed)	Number	Frequency %
6 ^o	2	2.22
7 ^o	0	0
8 ^o	1	1.11
9 ^o	16	17.77
10 ^o	4	4.44
11 ^o	14	15.55
12 ^o	29	32.22
No answer	24	26.66
TOTAL	90	100.00

If we have a look at the qualifications of adults admitted, we can see that the percentage of certified adults beyond the compulsory education has risen, compared to the previous group: 61.54%. And it is still the group of adults that had completed the secondary level 43.59% who are more represented in the group of admitted. Amongst these, there are no certified people below compulsory education.

Table 6 – Certificate (admitted)

Certificate (completed)	Number	Frequency %
6 ^o	0	0
7 ^o	0	0
8 ^o	0	0
9 ^o	7	17.95
10 ^o	3	7.69
11 ^o	4	10.26
12 ^o	17	43.59
No answer	8	20.51
TOTAL	39	100.00

Concerning the last year of study, 45.56% of the applicants had been studying in the last five years before the application. The percentage of people that have not studied for seven to eleven years is 26.67% and the percentage between twelve and sixteen years is 13.33%. People that have not studied for twenty years are 4.44%. These results show that those who have studied recently are more significant in this population than those who have not studied for longer periods of time:

Table 7 – Last year of study (all applicants)

Years	Number	Frequency %
1976/80	4	4.44
1981/85	4	4.44
1986/90	4	4.44
1991/95	12	13.33
1996/2000	24	26.67
2001/06	41	45.56
No answer	1	1.1
TOTAL	90	100.00

In the group of people admitted, 41.03% had been studying until the last five years before the application, followed by those who have not studied for seven to eleven years (28.21%) and by those between twelve and sixteen years (12.82%). After seventeen years without studying, percentages are smaller:

Table 8 – Last year of study (admitted)

Years	Number	Frequency %
1976/80	3	7.69
1981/85	0	0
1986/90	3	7.69
1991/95	5	12.82
1996/2000	11	28.21
2001/06	16	41.03
No answer	1	1.1
TOTAL	39	100.00

Regarding previous training, 61.11% of the applicants had received training in the area of the degree against 38.89% of the people that did not received any training in the area. Regarding the number of hours spent in training, the most relevant group (21.11%) is the one that got more than 400 hours of training courses, followed by those who got between 101 and 300 hours (16.67%) and those who got up to 50 hours (11.11%):

Table 9 - Training in the area of the degree (all applicants)

Number of Hours	Number	Frequency %
0	35	38.89
Up to 50 hours	10	11.11
From 51 to 100 hours	9	10.00
From 101 to 300 hours	15	16.67
From 301 to 400 hours	2	2.22
More than 400 hours	19	21.11
TOTAL	90	100.00

All the admitted people had received training in the area of the degree. As we can see, there's no one that had not received training:

Table 10 - Training in the area of the degree (admitted)

Number of Hours	Number	Frequency %
0	0	0
Up to 50 hours	11	28.21
From 51 to 100 hours	4	10.26
From 101 to 300 hours	10	25.64
From 301 to 400 hours	2	5.12
More than 400 hours	12	30.77
TOTAL	39	100

In the group of all applicants, the percentage of people that had received training in a different area from the degree is higher – 75.56% – against 24.44% of people that did not received any training in a different area. Training courses up to 50 hours (21.11%) and training courses more than 400 hours (20.00%) are the most frequent within this population.

Table 11 - Training in a different area of the degree (all applicants)

Number of Hours	Number	Frequency %
0	22	24.44
Up to 50 hours	19	21.11
From 51 to 100 hours	11	12.22
From 101 to 300 hours	15	16.67
From 301 to 400 hours	4	4.44
More than 400 hours	18	20.00
No reply	1	1.11
TOTAL	90	100.00

Regarding training in a different area, all the group of admitted people had received it, and 46.15% of this population had received it in courses up to 50 hours.

3.4 PROFESSIONAL TRAJECTORY

Regarding professional experience, the majority of the candidates have already worked (96.67%). Only 3.33% have never worked in their past.

38.88% of people have between 1 and five years of work experience, followed by people from seven to twelve years of work experience, 23.33%. People that have more than twelve years of professional experience are more than a third of the population (32.21%):

Table 12 – Work experience (all applicants)

Work experience (years)	Number	Frequency %
0	3	3.33
Less than 1 year	5	5.55
From 1 to 6 years	35	38.88
From 7 to 12 years	21	23.33
From 13 to 18 years	11	12.22
From 19 to 24 years	12	13.33
More than 25	6	6.66
TOTAL	90	100

In the group of admitted people, there is no one that never worked or worked less than one year: all the population has worked before, and half of it has done it for more than seven years (55.54%):

Table 13 – Work experience (admitted)

Work experience (years)	Number	Frequency %
0	0	0
Less than 1 year	0	0
From 1 to 6 years	14	35.90
From 7 to 12 years	9	23.08
From 13 to 18 years	7	17.95
From 19 to 24 years	5	12.82
More than 25	4	10.25
TOTAL	39	100

Regarding the number of employments, we can see that the 34.44 % of the population had only one employment, followed by 30.00% of those who had four employments and by 15.55% who had two.

Table 14 – Number of employments (all applicants)

Number of employments	Number	Frequency %
0	3	3.33
1	31	34.44
2	14	15.55
3	11	12.22
4	27	30
5	2	2.22
6	1	1.11
7	1	1.11
TOTAL	90	

The majority of people admitted (51.23%) have had between two and three employments; 41.03% had 3 employments, followed by those who had only one (20.51%).

Table 15 – Number of employments (admitted)

Number of employments	Number	Frequency %
0	0	0
1	8	20.51
2	4	10.26
3	16	41.03
4	2	5.13
5	2	2.22
6	1	2.56
7	1	2.56
TOTAL	39	100

Number of employments can be considered an important element to characterize mobility of people, combined with the years of work experience.

In the group of people admitted, the majority (53.5%) had more than 3 employments.

3.5 APPLICATION AND SELECTION PROCESS

Between the degrees offered by the College, applicants had chosen in the first place Social and Cultural Intervention (28.89%), followed by Education (Preschool) (21.11%), Social Communication (15.56%), and Sports (13.33%), followed by the other degrees – Arts, Education (First Cycle), Translation and Interpreting Portuguese Sign Language and Education (Music).

Table 16 – First choice degree

First choice degree	Number	Frequency %
Social and Cult. Action	26	28.89
Social Communication	14	15.56
Sports	12	13.33
Education (preschool)	19	21.11
Arts	5	5.56
Education (first cycle)	5	5.56
Education (music)	4	4.44
Translation and Int. PSL	5	5.56
TOTAL	90	100.00

Regarding the number of degrees chosen, 80.00% of the applicants made only one choice, 16.67% made two and only 3.33% made three choices. This can be interpreted as an element to characterize the motivation towards the degree, and the strength of their options.

Table 17 – Number of degrees chosen

Number of degrees	Number	Frequency %
1	72	80.00
2	15	16.67
3	3	3.33
TOTAL	90	100.00

Grades obtained with the evaluation process were distributed as follows:

Table 18 – Grades

Grades	Number	Frequency %
5	2	2.22
6	0	0.00
7	1	1.11
8	1	1.11
9	4	4.44
10	2	2.22
11	11	12.22
12	12	13.33
13	20	22.22
14	18	20.00
15	10	11.11
16	6	6.67
17	0	0.00
18	3	3.33
19	0	0.00
20	0	0.00
TOTAL	0	100.00

Regarding the results of the process, 82 people amongst the universe of 90 – representing 91.11% – were approved by the evaluation process. They were considered approved and able to study in H.E. However, only 39 adults could register in the degree, due to the number of places available in this academic year.

DISCUSSION

Analysis of data points to some interesting findings:

. The gender distribution confirms the tendency observed in recent years in H.E. in Portugal: women are strongly represented at this level of studies; a deeper analysis of data will identify the type of choices made (professional choices are shaped by social and cultural factors; traditionally education is a degree that attracts more women than men, while sports is traditionally a men professional activity);

. Regarding age, we see that younger adults are strongly represented within the applicants population (36.67% of people belong to the group between 24 and 30 years old, and 35.56% belong to the group between 31 and 37 years old). Age seems to be a relevant factor: the younger they are, the more they applied and were admitted;

. Another factor to take into account is the number of years that people are out of the education system. Data shows that those who have studied recently are more significant in the applicants population than those who have not studied for longer periods of time; amongst people admitted more than 60% had studied in the last ten years. Although this access regime was conceived to widen up the H.E. entrance door to adults implicitly far away from the system, we see that people who have been closer to the Education System that were admitted to H.E studies;

. Although this special access regime – that intends to value prior experiential learning –, was conceived for adults who don't have previous formal qualifications to enter into H.E. system, the majority of people that applies had studied beyond the compulsory education (and a relevant percentage of the applicants had completed the secondary level (32.22%), having the certificate to access by the national acceding process. And if we look at the level of qualifications of those admitted, we see that 43.59% had completed the previous level.

. Regarding previous training, we identify that the majority of applicants had frequented training courses in the area of the degree and in different areas; it's interesting to point out that all the admitted people had received previous training (in the area of the degree and in a different area).

. Concerning prior experiential learning, one of the most important elements to take into account is the professional experience of the applicants; this is a factor strongly valued in the evaluation process (as we stated before, the result of CV evaluation is 50% of the grade); we can see that the majority of the candidates have already worked (96.67%); in the group admitted, all the people worked for more than one year; the majority of this group had done it for more than seven years (55.54%);

. Motivation is also an important factor within this group of applicants; the way they made their choices regarding the degree can be interpreted as a strong commitment to it, since 80% of them had made only one choice;

. Although approved, the majority of people was not admitted to H.E., due to the number of places available for this type of access. This is a political-administrative decision, of the responsibility of the Ministry and the Colleges.

FINAL REMARKS

There is a large number of questions raised by this exploratory analysis of data. However, only with a deeper look from the analysis of the questionnaire data will allow a deeper understanding of these adult perspectives.

As Young (2006) states, there is evidence from a large number of countries that recognition of prior learning principles have provided important opportunities for adults to access into H.E. However, there seems to be some important factors that should be taken into account regarding the practices that are being implemented and their results.

The changing role of Higher Education in a context of a knowledge society and a life long learning society, are forcing institutions to reflect on their strategies and models. H.I. have to go deeper on their level of understanding of adult expectations and motivations, on their concepts about knowledge and experience, their organisational and pedagogical practices – namely the recognition of prior learning – in order to respond to the new demands from individuals and from the society.

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Comunicação apresentada no Colóquio AFIRSE que decorreu em Fevereiro de 2007 na Faculdade de Psicologia e Ciências de Educação da Universidade de Lisboa e publicada nas Actas respectivas.
