On Being Successful in UKTertiary Education

A Lifelong Learner's Perspective

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Abstract

The impact of the Widening Participation (WP) agenda in Higher Education (HE) is evident in the increasing numbers of under-represented groups of students accessing learning opportunities: adult learners from low socio-economic status backgrounds, low-income households and from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups (National Union of Students (NUS), 2012; Office for Students (OfS), 2020), and students whose first language is not English. These learners often bring with them experiences and expectations that can significantly affect their educational needs, and progress. Understanding the characteristics of the 21st century adult undergraduate and post- graduate students, can help HE providers design accessible and inclusive learning opportunities that transform lives and nurture abilities to succeed and ultimately change their world. I argue that underpinning the learning opportunities by the principles of Andragogy (Knowles, 1978), HE providers can address the range of situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers (Cross, 1981) that the adult learners encounter.

Keywords

adult learners – access – success – barriers – andragogy

1 Background

Post-1992 UKHEIs2 with WP roots and practices have seen an increasing number of under-represented groups of students including adult learners from low socio-economic status backgrounds, low-income households and from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups, and students whose first language is not English. My own HE provider has above the sector average for proportions of mature students (37%) and part-time students (38%, 99% of whom are mature)—the 9th highest figure in the sector; mature students account for 55% (under 21), 26% (21 to 30 years of age), and 19% (over 30 years old) with the majority enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate professional programmes, primarily for career-related reasons.

This chapter argues that to meet the diverse needs and motivations of this heterogeneous group of non-traditional adult learners, HEIs must understand the concept of Andragogy (Knowles, 1978) and the characteristics of adult learners (Smith, 2002) while addressing the situational, institutional, and dis-positional barriers (Cross, 1981) to ensure retention, progress and success in transforming their lives. First, an overview of the barriers will be given; second, each barrier will be examined through my philosophy of adult learning. Finally, I will propose some changes to practice addressing the needs of the ever-growing non-traditional adult students. My observation of my practice impacted by COVID-19 pandemic will be incorporated to demonstrate the extent to which HE institutes (HEIs), have motivated adult learners to persevere and achieve their potential.

2. Barriers to Participation and Success in Higher Education

> By prevailing over all obstacles and distractions, one may unfailingly arrive at his chosen goal or destination. (Christopher Columbus)

For adult learners to participate in HE learning opportunities and succeed, they need to overcome the predominant challenges that hinder them from advancing their lives through education (Goto & Martin, 2009): situational, institutional, and dispositional (Cross, 1981) with new meanings for the 21st century adult learners (Kerr, 2011). Table 1 provides an overview of the impediments as explained by Cross (1981, p. 98).

The following section discusses these barriers in the context of my own experience as well as those of the non-traditional adult students accessing one of the academic advice and guidance services, the Learning Development Unit (LDU).

3. Situational Barriers

Among the myriad situational barriers caused by a broad spectrum of circumstantial conditions, taking time out for learning and completing academic assignments was my main situational barrier throughout my learning journey. This barrier appears to be the common denominator among adults pursuing HE although the determinants are likely to be

different. For example, the perceived lack of employer support for my learning caused the time constraint for me. In contrast, the adult students on Degree Apprenticeship or postgraduate Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programmes are 'employees who study' rather than 'students who work' (Kazis et al., 2007); therefore, the employer commits to making a financial contribution as well as allocate time for study. Nonetheless, competing pressures of childcare, financial, and school responsibilities appear to challenge the female students more when compared to males (Bauer & Mott, 1990) with more female students from BAME backgrounds more likely to be impacted when compared with those from White backgrounds (Smith et al., 2019).

I believe that adult students including myself decided to continue education after taking into account the constantly overshadowing realities of life; we are accountable for our own decisions in our lives and, consequently, need to be considered by others as capable of self-direction (Knowles, 1984). In other words, situational barriers are individual deficits; hence, as a mature adult, it is my responsibility to explore new ways of working and studying, as well as adapting to changing circumstances in my personal life.

The COVID-19 pandemic is an example of changing circumstances beyond our control. In March 2020, the UK government's national lockdown rule required mature students with parental responsibilities to actively facilitate their children's learning while learning themselves—a challenge associated with juggling more 'roles' in their day-to-day life than before the crisis (Coughlan, 2020). This in turn caused a rise in stress and depression (Sellgren, 2021) exacerbating time management issues that impeded student-parents' academic success more. My observation of adult learners' lack of time, space, and computers to engage with the process of writing as they balance diverse roles is supported by the research by Gopee and Deanne (2013) resulting in studying at night which brings its own barrier of accessible academic support.

Table 1 Overview of Barriers

Barriers	Explanation	Example
Situational	those "arising from one's situation in life at a given time such as job and home responsibilities"	Multiple responsibilities at home/work, disability plus lack of suitable tools and technology at home, lack of affordable childcare services, limited time and lack of support from employers, relatives.
Institutional	HE "practices and procedures that exclude or discourage working adults from participating in educational activities"	Rigid schedules, lack of accessible information regarding procedures, mismatch of teaching methods with adult learners' needs, biased against or practices ignorant of the needs of the adult learner could prevent retention and persistence in HE studies.
Dispositional	"the attitudes and	Academic unpreparedness, limited

	self-perceptions of oneself as a learner"	confidence and self-belief, anxiety about returning after a significant gap in education, technophobia, attitudes and values of the "significant others, the community and the majority of education providers" (MacKerarcher et al. 2006 p.19)

4. Institutional Barriers

Institutional barriers arise because of HEI's policies, support systems, procedures, and curriculum that are inhospitable to the philosophy and process of andragogy. Every student including the non-traditional undergraduate and postgraduate adult student is entitled to the LDU's scheduled academic skills support interventions that aim to address their perceived academic needs for the purpose of retention, progression and success.

During my own adult learning journey in typical post-1992 UKHEIs, I was unaware of the existence of the ancillary support services.4 My experience resonates with that of non-traditional adult students. For example, the services are introduced at three-hour long Inductions when new students are excited and anxious about the HE experience. For postgraduate students, Induction day is also overshadowed by the realities of their life, particularly work commitments; this leads to being misinformed about the available provisions that can help them seek, access and participate in learning interventions. Hence, scheduling targeted interventions when the adult learners are orientated to learn with the immediacy of application could improve inclusive practice while improving retention and persistence (Kerr, 2011).

I recall how technology fulfilled to a certain extent, the needs of an adult part-time, distance learner in full time employment; it enabled my access to learning resources including my tutors. In contrast, the heterogeneous group of adult students today, are compelled to continue their studies online due to the unprecedented phenomenon, COVID-19 when, in March 2020, all HEIs swiftly suspended face to face, on campus teaching, and shifted to online digital learning. It highlights the significance of mature learners' digital literacy and self-efficacy in online learning processes (Johnson et al., 2018). I noted that using the technology due to the complexity of the institution's prescribed online learning environment Blackboard Collaborate was challenging for the adult learners. This indicates an institutional impediment where lack of technical skills limits access to learning resulting in a challenging instructional process for non-traditional adult learners (Erickson & Noonan 2010) affecting their capability to succeed academically (Saar et al., 2014). Furthermore, evidence (Chang & Kang, 2016; Dzakiria, 2012) supports my observation that lack of computers at home, intermittent broadband connection, and the learners' insufficient technical skills to access academic resources result in unsatisfactory participation in the online collaborative activities. HEIs must also acknowledge that adult learners are likely to

need more up-skilling, at greater speed, to engage with online learning opportunities rather than assuming that they will already have the level of digital competency required (Clay, 2020).

5. Dispositional Barriers

Dispositional barriers to participation and success in HE are more intrinsic than the extrinsic situational and institutional barriers. In my experience, not only can they be absolutely crippling but are also the most problematic of all the barriers to adult learning. The majority of non-traditional adult students I work with appear confused, anxious, and stressed not only by the academic conventions underpinning their assignments but also by the fact that academic success is partly determined by their competence and ability to produce assignments of diverse genres. Anxiety is a characteristic of many adult learners (Rogers, 1986) associated with their perceived lack of competent academic communication skills (Brookfield, 1986; Knowles, 1988). As a LD working alongside non-traditional adult students, I observe their low academic self-efficacy (Bandura, 1995, 1997). Clearly, this lack of confidence is attributable to their prior learning experiences being different from the UK environment and the long break from learning (Pennacchia et al., 2018).

However, the COVID-19 phenomenon exacerbated the challenge for the majority of the adult students who cite distress and anxiety during lockdown due to isolation, sudden change of mode of delivery highlighting their limited library search skills, and knowledge of referencing and avoiding plagiarism. They feel the loss of contact with their peers and the physical resources universities provided to aid their academic and social interaction resulting in emotional stress as seen in the email message from an adult student resuming the final year of study post clinical placements.

> I found the research methods module in year 2 really difficult and it was lockdown; so, I was unable to go to the university as normal. I did it on my own at home. I did not get a good grade, but I passed it. I hear Dissertations are a lot like the research methods assignments and I am really worried about it.

A number of inferences can be drawn from this comment. First, it demonstrates an adult student's self-concept about the gap between the drive to learn and succeed and the ability to be self-directive; second, it demonstrates "readiness to learn" (Knowles, 1973, p. 46) and third, her feeling of inadequacy in coping with the academic barrier may cause her to regress possibly leading to withdrawing from her studies. Research on student retention and withdrawal, in particular, tends to identify the role of the institution in this process, rather than placing responsibility solely on the student (Dodgson & Bolam, 2002).

6 Response of HEIs

In summary, according to my observations, the 21st century adult learners accessing HE via the WP schemes demonstrate some of Knowles (1984) assumptions of adult learner traits:

goal orientated, self-motivation, ready to learn and may bring sufficient prior experiences but are yet to be self-directed. Therefore, they appear to be "on a continuum ranging from teacher-directed to student-directed learning" (Merriam, 2001, p. 6). This requires HEIs to understand adult learner characteristics, work alongside them and their subject tutors to help them make sense of, and benefit from HE learning (Association for Learning Development in HE, n.d.).

Closer 'partnerships' (Orr & Blythman, 2003, p. 181) between the LDU and subject teams can enable the interventions being 'firmly linked to the curriculum' with 'strategies' for student support considering the 'culture of academic staff' allowing them a key role in determining and implementing initiatives (Blythman & Orr, 2002, p. 53). Targeting best fit, enriching interventions at strategic points in the adult student lifecycle satisfies the need for immediate application of acquired knowledge alleviating the situational and dispositional barriers and improving retention, progress and success rates.

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