



Work Package 3: Comparative report

Supporting access to higher education,
with particular reference to mature
students

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with input from the partner universities



Declaration

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1. Introduction

This report provides a comparative analysis of the individual country studies produced for Bulgaria, England, Poland and Portugal. It takes as its focus the issue of mature entry to higher education, and examines the strategies and approaches which exist to support this particular group of learners into and through their university experience. It begins with an examination of what can be gained from educational comparisons, before moving on to a discussion of definitions, commonalities and differences, and concludes with a number of recommendations for change.

1.1. What can be gained from educational comparison?

One justification for international comparative study relates to the notion that “comparison is actually essential to educational progress” (Alexander, 2001:27). Examining common challenges and approaches to dealing with them in other contexts may lead to a more nuanced understanding of issues, as Grant (1999:139) argues: “Comparative education can render a particularly useful service by providing a background of contrasts against which to examine our own problems.”

Phillips (1999:18) reiterates this potential benefit and discusses how an examination of alternative scenarios can serve to identify new possibilities and produce “new perspectives on those issues which can be of enormous benefit to our understanding of them,” thus helping to refine our understanding of educational phenomena. Sharper insights into such phenomena may also contribute to developments in educational policy and practice (Phillips, 1999, Crossley and Watson, 2003), highlighting the link with the meliorist potential of comparative studies (Phillips, 2000). Though the practical recommendations which emerge from comparative research may provide a sound rationale in themselves, it would also be fair to argue that “the development of an increasingly sophisticated theoretical framework in which to describe and analyse educational phenomena” (Phillips, 2000:298) is an equally worthy justification.

Broadfoot (1999:21) further identifies the usefulness of comparative study in shedding light on “the internal dynamics of education systems and how these influence the idiosyncratic effects of educational practices in any particular context.” The importance which the discipline of comparative education attaches to the link between socio-cultural backgrounds and educational issues is another



feature that resonates with this analysis, which explores the interface between national context and HE systems. Michael Sadler's much quoted thoughts strike a chord in this respect: "In studying foreign systems of education we should not forget that the things outside the school matter even more than the things inside the schools, and govern and interpret the things inside..." (Sadler in Higginson, 1979:49)

Crossley and Watson (2003) also refer to this important connection, suggesting that comparative approaches can help us better understand the relationship between education and society. This is clearly a justifiable pursuit in all educational research since comparisons are "a fundamental part of the thought processes which enable us to make sense of the world" (Phillips, 1999:15). Investigating phenomena against a breadth of backgrounds additionally allows judgements to be made about the generic nature/cultural specificity of educational issues (Alexander, 1999) and again contributes to a more nuanced understanding of complex topics.

1.2. Mature students and higher education

Despite persistent systemic and organisational differences (for example, a unified HE system in the UK, compared to Portugal's binary system and a more differentiated Polish sector with academic universities and specialist institutions for technology, agriculture, economics, teacher training, etc), the landscape of the post-Bologna European Higher Education Area (EHEA) shows clear signs of growing convergence, perhaps most visibly in the adoption of a common qualifications framework, but also in terms of national policy commitments to expanding and widening participation. However, the priorities defined by individual member states in relation to these targets vary considerably. Consequently, mature students as an under-represented category of HE learners have received variable amounts of policy attention between different countries. There is also considerable variation in how maturity is defined, based on differences in national classifications and cultures. The reasons for variable levels of focus can be explained in a number of ways. For example, one interpretation suggests that the relatively recent concern to increase participation in some member states has been driven by an undifferentiated desire to demonstrate compliance with generic expansion directives.

Elsewhere, the lack of focus on mature learners can be explained in terms of desires to improve the participation of other groups identified as more pressing social priorities. In this respect, it is worth



noting that HE policy in Bulgaria, for example, has focussed more on strategies for encouraging the participation of students from Roma backgrounds, while Poland has identified the under-representation of students from rural areas as a focus for concern and action. Such contextual differences help to explain mature learners' lack of prominence in the HE policy contexts in these two countries, compared to the UK (especially England) and Portugal, where longer expansion histories have perhaps facilitated a broader set of categories for concern and focus. In the UK context in particular, it might be argued that a more embedded culture of lifelong learning and higher participative patterns associated with adult engagement in education have played a part in identifying mature learners as a more pressing focus of attention.

Notwithstanding such contextual differences, the reports reveal a consensus that improving the participation of mature learners and other under-represented groups in HE is an important area to be addressed, and in all four reports, this understanding appears to be based on economic and social values. On the one hand, there is wide acknowledgement of the social, individual and professional benefits that increased and widened participation offers; the reports also reveal an awareness that while such gains are significant, the current financial and economic situation in all the countries highlights the importance of retaining such under-represented groups in order to maximise national returns on educational investment, alongside improving the professional and personal futures of the individual students themselves.

1.3. Definitions

The reports reveal no unified definition of the term mature student, and as such, there is a degree of definitional fluidity between the settings. The most commonly adopted definition in UK contexts refers to students who begin undergraduate study after the age of 21. Portugal categorises mature students as those who are over 23 years old and did not formally finish their secondary education (12 years in Portugal) but want to enrol in a university degree. The typical profile in Portugal includes mature students who have a job and a family to care for, a low family income and low levels of parental education (some students also have low levels of education themselves). They are also likely to be the first in their family to access university and to have spent a number of years outside formal education (5-10 years or more) (Fragoso et al., 2011). This is a very diverse group and public institutions are embracing changes to meet the needs of the non-traditional student. start their



studies at 23 or over and did not achieve secondary school leaving certificates. As such, this definition includes so-called 'delayed-transition' students who have repeated years at secondary school in line with a national system of grade repetition. In Poland and Bulgaria, those over 25/30 (respectively) are considered mature, yet such students are relatively invisible in policy formulations, despite there being widely noted assumptions that part-time Polish students are likely to include a majority of mature learners, and Bulgaria recognises 'young parents' as a particular category, many of whom are likely to correspond to the English and Portuguese definitions. In Bulgaria mature learners/ students (or adult learners/adult returners) represent a category of HE students that according to the Adult Education Survey conducted by the National Statistical Institute (NSI) is defined as students of active working age i.e aged between 25 and 64¹. This lack of a unified definition might be regarded as problematic in that the conceptual drift in the identification of mature learners could be seen to compromise the validity of the comparisons. On the other hand, there is arguably sufficient commonality of definition for this danger to be minimised, and despite differences in definitions, it is clear that mature students in all the four countries, however defined, are regarded positively, and valued because of their life experience and the ways in which they can contribute to enriching the overall student constituency.

¹ After the pilot survey held in 2007, the Adult Education Survey was conducted by the National Statistical Institute for the second time in Bulgaria in the period December 2011 - January 2012 with a representative sample of 3 600 regular households using Eurostat methodology.



2. Factors influencing the participation of mature students in Higher Education

Cullity (2010) offers a useful conceptual framework for analysing factors which inhibit and facilitate the participation of mature students in Higher Education. Her tri-partite model includes external influences; specific factors relating to the courses and measures in place aimed at supporting mature student transitions; and individual variables relating to the students' circumstances, attitudes and dispositions. Given that collecting data on individual student variables is beyond the scope of this study (and that such individual factors will arguably be similar across contexts), the report will focus on a comparative analysis of the first two sets of influences.

In fact, a strong awareness of common barriers and constraints faced by mature learners in all the countries emerges from all four reports. There is also a common acknowledgement that factors relating to social class influences and individual psychological variables create a complex amalgam of influences.

External factors include the following:

- Lack of a national strategic focus on supporting and promoting mature student entry to HE (Poland, Bulgaria),
- Lack of preparation for higher education,
- Inflexible institutional entry requirements based on selection through special examinations and/or secondary school diplomas (Portugal, Poland, Bulgaria),
- Lack of formally recognised national schemes for recognising and accrediting prior experiential learning, i.e. learning gained through professional experience and on-the-job training (Poland and Bulgaria),
- Potential financial deterrents related to tuition fees and loan arrangements (England in particular),
- Family responsibilities.

Course-specific factors include:

- Transition challenges – personal, social, academic and institutional,
- Lack of specific strategies to support mature students with the above challenges,



- Lack of monitoring requirements and data collection mechanisms in respect of the above, leading to inadequate data available across the board to inform policy on attracting and retaining mature students

2.1. External factors influencing mature learners' participation

2.1.1. Awareness-raising

The Portuguese and English reports highlight the importance of developing marketing strategies that target non-traditional learners and raise awareness. By profiling HE as an option for mature learners, such students can hopefully be incentivised to consider study at this level. The potentially persuasive power of specialist events and open days is important, and it is worth considering how the inclusion of older learners in marketing materials and literature can help to raise the profile of mature learners and make them more visible in HE.

2.1.2. Financial factors

Clearly, the availability of financial support is likely to play some part in encouraging and facilitating study for mature students. A national loan system operates in England for all students, regardless of age, though the recent government decision to raise tuition fees to a maximum of £9,000 a year may prove to be a significant deterrent to prospective students, especially those with more conservative attitudes towards the accumulation of debt. Annual student fees are much lower in Portugal at around 1000 EUR, and even lower in Bulgaria, while full-time study at public HEIs in Poland is funded fully by the state. For instance, in Portugal many HE institutions have introduced measures to support students to remain at university. These measures are aimed at all types of students (traditional and non-traditional): fee payments can be renegotiated with the institution when students find it difficult to pay them and it is simpler to transfer to part time study. The differences here are striking, and it remains to be seen whether the much higher fees introduced in England will eventually result in a smaller proportion of (mature) students in HE compared to the other countries.

Though full-time study is free in Poland, as in Portugal fees do apply to part-time study (and full-time study at private HEIs), which may of course be a more attractive option for mature students with family or professional responsibilities. In Bulgaria, though there are no financial support strategies



targeted directly at mature students, these may apply for a number of financial loans, grants, scholarships and other awards available nationally.

2.1.3. Entry requirements

The mechanisms employed for determining entry to HE are of course in themselves important in either facilitating or deterring the participation of mature learners. In Bulgaria, university entrance is usually based on secondary school leaving diplomas, though institutional autonomy means that universities are able to set their own admissions policy, thus allowing for a degree of flexibility. In Poland and Portugal, secondary school leaving qualifications from academic pathways are the standard entry requirements for HE. Reliance on these mechanisms is likely to remain something of an obstacle for prospective mature students who leave school without successful completions. In the case of Portugal, recent experiments with special courses to prepare mature learners for university entrance are noteworthy. Specific courses organized to help “Maiores de 23” candidates to prepare for entrance examinations are one example of this. Some of these candidates are returning to the educational system after many years and thus need support to prepare them for the exams. This is a first step to help in the transition. Also, some HEIs have tutors, in some cases the professor responsible for the degree, who are asked to monitor the progress of first year students, particularly those who have not come directly from secondary education or who have specific support needs. In addition, reception and induction activities are organised to integrate new students and a wide range of informative sessions are available to introduce students to HE study. Examples include sessions focused on evaluation systems; ECTS organisation; library induction; and the use of online resources.

Bulgaria also offers specialist preparatory courses for students without secondary school leaving diplomas, though these tend to be targeted at particular under-represented groups such as Roma (some of whom may of course be older learners), rather than specifically at mature learners. Specific strategies like these, aimed directly at mature students are surely to be welcomed, though one criticism might be the continued reliance on restrictive examination structures to determine entry. Mature students who leave school without the required qualifications may well do so because of poor performance in examinations, and the prospect of entry based on an alternative exam structure may still be a deterrent for those with difficult experiences at school (Eurydice, 2011). In England, institutional autonomy sees a wide range of entry criteria and policies that include a raft of qualifications from the secondary and further education sectors, alongside specialist access courses,



similar to the Portuguese “Maiores de 23” courses, and systems for accrediting and recognising prior and relevant experiential learning. Such systems are clearly important in terms of facilitating mature access to HE; it is worth noting that there are no nationally regulated systems for accrediting prior learning in Bulgaria or Poland, or for basing entry on experiential expertise. In Portugal framed in the New Opportunities Initiative (“Iniciativa Novas Oportunidades”), the process of Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competences (RVCC) ensures a high level of educational (RVCC Scholar) and professional (Professional RVCC) qualifications for adults through the enhancement of learning acquired outside the educational or training system. They are intended for all adults over 18 with limited educational qualifications who have acquired knowledge and skills through experience in different contexts, which can be formalized into a school certificate. When the candidates do not have the necessary skills, they undertake a short training course tailored to their individual needs. The process culminates with the presentation of the candidate to a panel which validates the skills and formalises the certification. Despite the apparent advantages of this system, this initiative has been discontinued, pending further guidelines.

2.1.4. Support with pre-entry systems

Irrespective of the merits or demerits of exam-based selection, it should be noted that the Portuguese courses referred to above illustrate how specialist programmes can be used to facilitate mature entry to HE. These courses usually last some weeks or months (depending on the disciplines and higher education institution) in duration and are aimed directly at adults who finish school without leaving diplomas. Students enrolling are supported in preparing for the specific examinations and interviews used as part of the “Maiores de 23” admission process. This experience is important in orienting mature students to the expectations and routines of university life and academic disciplines. As mentioned previously, Bulgaria also offers preparatory courses for prospective students without secondary school leaving qualifications, though these are targeted at under-represented groups such as Roma students, some of whom may clearly be mature.

In England, so-called ‘Access to Higher Education’ courses, usually taught in further education, share the same aims as the Portuguese “Maiores de 23” courses. These courses cover a range of generic study content in an attempt to support students in developing the kind of practical academic skills and dispositions required for successful study at this level. Some universities, such as Aston University, use the links they have with local colleges to provide pre-entry e-mentoring for prospective adult learners. Using such technology-facilitated ‘buddy-schemes’ allow mature



students the chance to develop supportive one-to-one links with other mature students already engaged in higher education, who can act as an invaluable source of personal information, guidance and encouragement. Such schemes can thus be significant in reducing some of the affective barriers which can deter mature students from pursuing higher studies, and are thus worth noting.

2.2. Course-specific factors

The sections above reveal a number of strategies employed to encourage adults into higher education in the four countries. This is clearly only part of the story, as ensuring successful transition is key in retaining mature students. All four national reports highlight the growing importance attached generally to student retention in HE, as member states aim to fulfil expansion targets in economically challenging times, a challenge heightened by demographic decline in some contexts, e.g. Poland. The retention of mature students constitutes an additional challenge, given the factors identified in the literature that may lead to adults deciding to end their studies prematurely. The economic and individual consequences of adult attrition in HE are thus identified in the four contexts. The next section therefore examines the range of attempts and strategies employed across the four HE systems to support the retention of mature students.

The first year of study is widely acknowledged as an important 'pinch-point' – students need to be able to negotiate the initial stages of transition into HE as successfully as possible to stay the course. It is therefore unsurprising that much attention is focused on the quality of post-enrolment guidance for mature students. Though there are no specialist support mechanisms for mature students in Portugal, they are of course included in the generic induction events offered to new students. These include the full range of guidance talks and information sessions, during which students are alerted to the additional services provided by Student Unions and counselling services.

In the UK, some universities have established specialist associations for mature learners which aim to provide a forum for communication and peer support. Cardiff University has a Society for Mature Learners which allows such students to meet, share ideas, network socially and arrange collective events. The society makes use of electronic platforms to facilitate access and engagement by creating a specific space for mature learners to convene and assert their identities as a discrete group within the wider student constituency. Ulster University has similar projects targeted at mature students, involving the use of social media technologies such as mobile texting to engender an ethos of mutual support, self-help and social connection.



Alongside support strategies, modes of delivery are also regarded as important factors in retaining mature students. Part-time study is now offered in all four contexts, and, as stated earlier, is an attractive option for many working adults. Distance, weekend and evening study arrangements are widely offered in Poland, the UK and Portugal, though there is considerable institutional variation in the provision of these modes of study. Flexible patterns of delivery are complemented in some countries by more experimental and innovative delivery formats which aim to appeal to some adults' learning styles and preferences. The University of Bedfordshire in England, for example, has incorporated Business Pods in its redesign of business education to emulate corporate working environments and inject a greater sense of relevance and student appeal.



3. Conclusions and recommendations

At this point, it is worth reflecting on the main commonalities and differences which have emerged from this analysis. Broadly speaking, the similarities can be summarised as follows:

- A consensus on the importance of HE expansion, and a shared commitment to widening the participation of under-represented groups, and indeed to retaining these students,
- Broad agreement that the Bologna process has been important in facilitating flexibilities that have improved access to HE for such groups,
- Common acknowledgement of the varied factors which constrain the participation and retention of adult learners in HE,
- Little or no integrated policy initiatives focussing on mature students at national level.

Key differences between the four countries include the following:

- Different definitions of 'mature students' and differing priorities in terms of improving participation of under-represented groupings,
- Different HE structures,
- Divergent systems of selection and admission,
- Different funding arrangements and fee levels,
- Wide variety of strategies in place for recruiting, supporting and retaining mature learners.

3.1. Recommendations

Acknowledging the differences above and the differentiated nature of the four systems of HE, with varying levels of institutional autonomy and differing national priorities, highlights the need for caution when it comes to making recommendations for change. These must be made with due regard for the contextual and socio-cultural differences discussed. As such, the following tentative proposals can be identified at various levels:

3.1.1. Policy level

- Development of national guidelines on strategies to support specific groups of under-represented students in HE



- Development of mechanisms for monitoring and reporting on the recruitment and retention of such groups
- Developing guidelines on selection procedures for mature and other under-represented groups that rely on alternatives to examination-based mechanisms/APEL
- Monitoring the impact of the new fee regime on mature student participation in England

3.1.2. Institutional level

- Further experimentation with (flexible) delivery formats and modes of attendance that are more attuned to the learning preferences of mature students
- Further experimentation with improvements in pre-entry guidance, marketing and on-course support for mature students

3.1.3. Individual level

- Further experimentation with 'buddying' students and (e-) mentoring systems that ease transitions and facilitate social engagement and interaction among mature learners



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