

Listening to Adult Learners in Higher Education: A Life Course Perspective

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Abstract

Higher education as an institution of society has a specific role to play in promoting lifelong learning for adult learners. This paper examines the concept of the life course as an issue of critical importance in the context of teaching and learning policy and practice for adult learners in higher education. By undertaking a life course perspective, this research seeks to understand the learning experiences of part-time adult learners in higher education within the context of changing social structures and historical events. The research informing this paper draws on a sequential (quantitative followed by qualitative) mixed methods approach incorporating online survey results (171 respondents) and semi-structured interviews (26 in total). Research findings present the 'voices' of adult learners to illustrate challenges experienced, best practice considerations for higher education, and suggestions for national and international educational policy makers seeking to promote adult learning in an ever evolving society.

Keywords: Higher Education; Adult Learner; Life Course; Lifelong Learning

1. Introduction

In the context of globalisation, significant socio-economic transformations, and the rapid pace of late modernity, much of the debate on lifelong learning centres on how best to prepare individuals in the early decades of the 21st century for the challenges of the life course, underscoring the need to reconceptualise lifelong learning (Slowey & Watson, 2003). As noted by Slowey (2008), the predominance of economics as a core component of European Union (EU) lifelong learning perspectives and policies reflects a narrow understanding of learning, and fails to take serious account of the changing demographics and life patterns in the developed world. Learning and educational opportunities must therefore be reflective of the life course of individuals, and ultimately 'lifelong learning policies must embrace a life course approach' (Slowey, 2008, p.2). With lifelong learning featuring so prominently within national and

international discourse, the culture of support and recognition for change within higher education would appear to be strong; however, the pace of such change remains relatively slow, particularly for part-time adult learners (Fleming et al., 2017). In terms of access to formal learning, higher education has a key role to play in providing people with the resources and conditions necessary to cope with, inform and shape a rapidly changing society. This requires a culture of change at an institutional level to move away from the traditional emphasis on front-loading initial education for full-time students, in order to actively embrace a more diverse student cohort with equally diverse needs (Fleming et al., 2017).

This paper examines the concept of the life course as an issue of critical importance in the context of teaching and learning policy and practice for adult learners in higher education. By choosing to adopt a life course perspective it seeks to understand the learning experiences of adult learners in higher education within the context of wider society and changing social structures. Since the late 1990s, both EU and National educational policies have largely supported a concept of lifelong learning which focuses on upskilling and re-training for the labour market to keep pace with the demands of the knowledge economy (El Amoud, 2025). This has led to the increased recognition within higher education of the need to expand the range of part-time, blended, on-line, flexible, and outreach programmes for adult learners. But, what do adult learners actually require from higher education, and what challenges does higher education face in order to encourage, promote and enhance learning opportunities and experiences for adult learners now and into the future?

2. Background

Learning seeks to promote the ability to understand, adapt to, and influence change, ultimately it empowers people to take control of their lives across ‘...different spheres: civil society, the workplace, the home’ and throughout the life course (Schuller & Watson, 2009, p.13). Formal education - and, more specifically for the purposes of this paper - higher education, has a specific role to play in maximising the learning potential of adult learners, extending beyond intellectual and professional development to enabling individuals to cope with the changing nature of the life course. Having spent over 25 years as an educationalist working with part-time adult learners participating in community education programmes within higher education, the author has become increasingly aware of the need for research that reflects the voices and ‘lived’ realities of adult learners. Therefore, by choosing to adopt a life course perspective incorporating biographical approaches, this paper seeks to ensure that the ‘voices’ of adult learners directly inform national and international educational policy.

3. Theoretical Framework

The life course theoretical framework underpinning this paper builds on the core principles of the life course paradigm, which has become increasingly prevalent across a broad range of disciplines, but particularly the social and behavioural sciences. Life course theory seeks to understand how individual's lives unfold over time shaped by both structural contexts and social change. Heinz (2010, p.230) defines the life course as: '... the interface of society and the individual because it transfers macro-social conditions and requirements via institutions (meso-level) to guidelines of individual action (micro-level)'. Core principles of the life course paradigm outlined by Elder et al., (2003) remain widely cited across life course research, these are: 1. *Life-span development*- focusing on individual development over the life-span; 2. *Agency*- analysing how individuals shape their life courses by pursuing opportunities and making decisions within the constraints and options they encounter; 3. *Time and place*- considering the life courses of individuals as interwoven with the historical context and places they have experienced over their lifetimes; 4. *Timing*- investigating the social timings of transitions during the life course; 5. *Linked lives*- exploring the interdependence of life courses through personal networks of shared relationships.

Adopting a life course approach to the research (Elder et al., 2003) ensures a more complete investigation of the individual learning experiences of adult learners; going beyond a focus on one particular life stage to consider the wider life course, framed within changing socio-economic structures and historical events. In recent decades, increasing attention has been paid to the diverse needs of adult learners, and much of the discussion with regard to the study of learning now advocates a life course perspective (Slowey, 2008). By emphasising the interdependence of different kinds of learning, and the variation of learning needs and processes across the life course, within the wider context of individual development and social change, the life course perspective provides an appropriate theoretical framework for this paper.

4. Methods

This research uses a mixed methods approach combining the findings from both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection for analysis. The target population for the purposes of this study are adult learners (usually categorised within Higher education as non-traditional, mature students) who have graduated from one or both of the following part time higher education programmes (applicants for these programmes must be over 21 years in order to meet University criteria for adult education part-time programmes).

- (i) NUI Diploma in Community development practice (1 year part-time, level 7, 30 ects).
- (ii) BA in Community and Family Studies (4 year part-time, level 8, 180 ects)

The use of quantitative surveys sought to identify key themes relevant to adult life course learning experiences (historical, social and cultural contexts), life span educational history, learning attitudes, motivations and potential suggestions or considerations for higher education from an adult learner perspective. The quantitative surveys sought to objectively condense the scope of enquiry and thereby form the basis for the design and implementation of the qualitative semi-structured interviews. The first survey was issued to 124 Diploma graduates (full population of the previous 4 years) attaining a response rate of 55.6% ($n=69$). The second survey was issued to 143 BA graduates (full population of the previous 4 years) with a response rate of 71.3% ($n=102$). Both programmes were predominantly female (75%). BA graduates were mainly aged 40–49 (36%, $n=36$), while Diploma graduates were younger, with most aged 30–39 (32.35%, $n=22$). Overall, both programmes showed an even age spread, largely between 30–59. Most respondents (64%; BA $n=65$, Diploma $n=44$) had been out of formal education for under 5 years. Smaller proportions had been out for 5–10 years (BA 17%, $n=17$; Diploma 11.5%, $n=8$), while 19% of BA ($n=20$) and 24.5% of Diploma ($n=17$) respondents had been out of formal education for over 10 years.

Qualitative methods of enquiry through semi-structured biographical interviews were designed to reflect key findings of the quantitative surveys and to ensure a richer, more in-depth and interactive exploration of the potential components of life course learning. Interview participants had volunteered to proceed to this stage of data collection on completion of the previous survey questionnaire. As the number of volunteers was extremely high the author subsequently chose a convenience sample of 15% (26 interviews) ensuring representatives of different age categories to reflect a life-span perspective. The University of Galway (previously NUI Galway) Research Ethics Committee granted ethical approval for this research.

5. Findings

Several themes, including those previously noted as key principles of the life course paradigm (see theoretical framework) became prominent from data analysis. Learner views and experiences, with supporting quotes, are presented within the six thematic areas below, using pseudonyms to maintain anonymity in relation to interviews, whilst all survey responses were anonymous. In view of the scope of this paper, the findings primarily default to the qualitative interview data, as the interviews build on the original survey data that served to provide an initial broad overview, allowing the semi-structured interviews to provide a more nuanced exploration of the same topics enabling richer insights.

5.1. Life-span development

Age and stage in life featured significantly in the interview data, particularly in the context of formal compulsory primary and secondary education systems, which were age graded and

reflective of societal norms and expectations largely supported by a human capital rationale for the purposes of employability. Despite the difference in age bands among the interviewees, the experience of participating in education, whether primary or secondary, was something that you did because it was part of life and front loaded in preparation for employment. Where families could afford to fund further non-compulsory education the decision regarding the course of study to be undertaken was directly informed by “...*where the jobs were and would be*” (Sean). Initial formal education therefore, for the majority of interviewees was interwoven with life stage norms, with the prospects of employment and employability determining life choices and developmental pathways thereafter. Interviewees emphasised the importance of higher education supporting educational opportunity for part-time adult learners throughout the life course.

5.2. Agency

All interviewees were absolute in their conviction that their return to formal education had an immensely positive impact on their sense of agency in relation to all aspects of life; work, family, community, and socially. Both self-esteem and confidence were regularly cited in discussions as having flourished ‘unbelievably’ as a direct result of having completed the programme/s. A greater sense of personal agency, noting enhanced capacity to navigate within life’s trials and tribulations to determine their own individual life course was particularly evident. As a result many emphasised the role of education in contributing to personal and societal development, but in doing so highlighted the responsibility of education to ‘get it right’ because: “...*it can be very daunting for the adult learner to come back into the class*” (Tricia). ‘Life changing’ as a term arose consistently on the attainment of a learning milestone. Many spoke of looking at life through a different lens, becoming a more critical, questioning person: “...*at a personal level it [return to education] enhanced all aspects of personal development. Made you think more, made you question things more, made you a deeper person, to go about the same business, but you question things moreso and you look at things differently*” (Joe). Such findings highlight the importance of inclusive educational practices: flexible timetables, affordable courses/funding, childcare, and disability access to counter cumulative educational disadvantage in supporting adult learner agency.

5.3. Time and place

As adults returning to education all interviewees spoke of the significance of life experience not only in terms of impacting on their decision to return, but equally, in terms of the benefits this real world knowledge brought to the quality of their learning. There was also a real expression of having a ‘greater appreciation’ of the opportunity to return to education not having had that choice available to them in earlier life: “...*maybe people presume that this is your second time around, you should have done it the first time around, but what about people who couldn’t, like*

people don't just drop out of education for the sake of it. Usually adults coming back to education are coming back because their circumstances didn't support them doing it when they were in their 20s, that's usually why, or they didn't have the opportunities or the money, or they couldn't, you know" (Molly). Historical time and place, economically, socially, politically, and even in terms of place/position within family significantly impacted on interviewees potential to progress to, or in many cases retain their place within higher education.

5.4. Timing

As programme graduates all participants had evidently made a decision to return to formal education, reasons for doing so were many and varied reflective of unfolding lives, changing times and life transitions due to family life circumstances, working life challenges/ concerns, wider societal and personal changes. Time and timing featured as a factor in this decision-making for many interviewees, in the majority of cases this timing in conjunction with the personal motivation of the individual created the impetus to return to formal learning. In terms of motivation one interviewee spoke of a sense of regret for a lost opportunity: *"There was a part of me that felt that I would never be able to get a degree, that that was something that I had missed in my 20s and that I hadn't finished and that I just had to let that go"* (Edel). The predominant view offered within the interviews was that returning to formal education had been a challenging and difficult journey at times, but ultimately life changing: *"I'll be 52 this year, but I don't feel old. I feel I have my life in front of me, because I feel that over the last couple of years with all the life experiences good and bad, getting my degree and everything else, my life is beginning again. So that's the huge positive outcome of my degree"* (Tricia). The immediate transition from second level to third level in line with the perceived norms of social timing was not an option for the majority of interviewees. Returning to formal education as an adult learner provided the interviewees with the opportunity to redress this 'missing transition' and its subsequent implications on their life course.

5.5. Linked lives

Another key theme evident within the qualitative data focused on the importance of relationships as a factor in terms of return to formal education. Interviewees emphasised that they were not returning to education as an 'independent agent' as such, that their lives were very much linked and in many cases, particularly for those with caring responsibilities, committed to a whole range of external relationships. For each individual, family background influenced either directly or indirectly their perception of formal education and was a factor in their decision to re-engage with same: *"I do think that family impact on you... not necessarily in a negative way or a positive way. I do think they impact on you, if you're educated it makes a difference and family influence that"* (Carmel). The changing nature of existing family and social relationships, the importance of family and social links for learning motivation and

support, in addition to the creation of new relationships with peers, were all deemed to be an essential component of the formal educational experience as an adult learner.

5.6. Adult learners in higher education –best practice in higher education

The final theme to feature within the interview data was reflective of both the interests and the characteristics of the research population in focusing on best practice to promote adult learning in higher education. Suggestions provided reiterated those previously identified within the survey data emphasizing the importance of the following: group work, active debate and discussion, engaging lectures, stimulating course content, a positive learning environment, student supports, provision of part-time and flexible blended learning programmes. Additional suggestions included a change in higher education policy facilitating the provision of financial assistance to adult learners: “...a payment plan would be great, a lot of people don’t have a huge wage coming in ..”(Jill). One of the key suggestions in relation to best practice offered by interviewees was the need for part-time programme offerings within higher education to actually be ‘part-time’: “...they’re offering more part-time programmes now, but what they’re really doing is rolling out a full-time programme and allowing people to sit in on different components of it. But those classes are 3 hours on a Monday, 2 on a Tuesday afternoon and whatever; that isn’t part time, that’s just trying to fit people into what we provide full-time, and it’s putting a huge strain on people” (Paul). In this context, in particular, many interviewees spoke of a need for an overall culture of change within higher education, to recognise and value part-time adult learners as a distinct, but committed cohort, with varied learning histories, a range of external commitments leading to many life challenges, requiring access to genuine student supports and financial assistance.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This study illustrates that higher education policy must adapt its traditional focus on full-time mainstream learners in order to equally cater for part-time learners and the challenges they encounter. This requires significant change at an institutional level, in recognition that adult learners do not return to education as ‘independent agents’ and that their lives are directly linked to a whole range of commitments, responsibilities, family, and social networks. Higher education institutions require radical re-structuring in order to keep pace with the scale of global change and greater individual life course variability. Different modes and styles of learning within formal education are core to ensure a positive learning experience reflective of the diversity of adult learners’ learning histories (Hardiman, 2018). Life-experience coupled with programme content makes for an enriched learning experience, and should be promoted within formal education. Although educational policy, particularly in the context of changing demographics and globalisation, reinforces the need for the formal acquisition of skills and

knowledge throughout life, higher educational institutions are still primarily defaulting to outdated models of frontloaded initial educational provision. In order to remain current and relevant to the demands of the 21st century, higher education must adopt a life course approach to teaching and learning to fully respond to the needs and requirements of adult-learners through-out their lives.

Lifelong learning as a concept within higher educational policy has been distilled from its humanistic origins to a more narrow focus on the needs and requirements, primarily economic, at national and European levels (El Amoud, 2025). It outlines a macro perspective on learning to be transferred through educational institutions at a meso level to the micro level of the individual learner. It is a top-down approach involving the provision of learning ‘opportunities’ in line with the economic imperatives of the market. Life course learning in contrast starts at a micro level in recognising the importance of the individual in the learning process within the context of wider structural realities. Through the promotion of learning opportunities reflective of the actual needs of the learner, it seeks to enhance both personal agency and empowerment, and thereby contribute to social development. The multi-level nature of the life course concept offers educationalists and policy makers the opportunity to identify new higher educational policy measures that accurately reflect the life-worlds of individuals in an ever-evolving society.

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