

Workshop An ageing Europe and the role of ULLL

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Over-fifty returning adult learners: another neglected species?

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Abstract

Even though universities are now familiar with concepts such as 'Lifelong Learning', 'Recognition of prior experiential learning', etc., it is still difficult for over-fifty returning adult learners to find their path through the universities' courses and trainings. How much do we know about those older returning learners? What about their specific motivations, their specific needs? How can they formalise their informal and non-formal learning in order to gain the recognition of sometimes really rich and complex CV?

In this presentation, based on the results of a research program held in the Université libre de Bruxelles, we will discuss the way institutional transformations should be implemented to allow a successful admission and learning process of those older returning adult learners. In the first part, we will discuss some key-concepts about recognition of prior learning and returning adult learners inclusion in ULLL, referring to the seminal works of Carré, Knowles & Dominicé.

In the second part, we will discuss the specific motivations of over-fifty returning adult learners (OFRAL) in comparison with younger adult learners. This comparison will be made using the two models we developed in earlier works, based on Carré's typology of students' motivations. We will discuss the impact of individual habitus versus institutional habitus, as we already did for other target-groups, highlighting that the phenomenon of stigmatisation is clearly anticipated by those adult learners.

In the third part, we will deal with the description of those older students' life history in the context of prior learning recognition. We will show that three effects affect the formalisation of the more complex life history of the OFRAL: a linearization effect (the tendency to construct linear timelines of experiences), the cause-consequence scheme (the simplification of multiple, complex factors influencing each experience and the tendency to summarize them as simple consequences of those simplistic causes) and the biographical illusion (the tendency to consider life history independently of the context). Those three bias can badly invalidate the recognition process.

The fourth and last part of the presentation will deal with the OFRAL expectancies towards universities' programs. We will show that 'the pleasures of learning' are the most important expectancies of those 'students', those concepts being somehow quite unfamiliar in higher education. Of course, this is linked with their high level of epistemic motivation that can sometimes reinforce the stigmatisation process those students undergo. As we already showed in a more general case, this stigmatisation can badly affect the OFRAL retention within the university. We will also discuss the ambivalent link with university that some of these OFRALs develop and its impact on classroom dynamics.

As a conclusion, we will give some recommendations about new ways to admit and to welcome those students to the universities. Hopefully, really simple techniques can indeed improve significantly OFRALs chances of success on their pathway within the university.