

An Analysis of Dropout from Second Chance Education among Adults in a European Context

The aim of this paper is to analyse and evaluate the non-completion of second chance education among adults involved in lifelong learning in a European context. Inclusive educational policies are central to equity and participation and adult education enables individuals 'to improve their ability to adapt to changes in the labour market and society' (Europa 2011). However, one of the common concerns for adult educators working with mature students who return to education is the issue of adult dropout. Adults who return to education at any level have taken a brave step to improve their qualifications and in turn their career and life chances. Research demonstrates that individuals who have completed education at primary, secondary, further or higher education increase their job opportunities, social skills, life chances, health and wellbeing, civic and social engagement (Baum et al. 2010; OECD 2007). The benefits of adult learning plays a key part in improving the quality of life and contributing to the building of social capital (Bynner and Hammond 2004: 178). Further research from a vocational or economic perspective suggests that in Austria OEIB (2008) found that in vocational training participants earned 11% more on completion of a vocational qualification. A German study found that there were significant economic benefits for adults between 20 and 44 on training courses (Timmerman, 2010). This therefore suggests that there is a strong argument in favour of understanding and supporting adult retention in second chance education.

The basis for this paper was a small scale European survey involving seven countries (Austria, Norway, Germany, Portugal, Lithuania, Spain and Ireland). Within each country institutes representing different areas of adult education participated; secondary, vocational, migrant and higher level education. Each country identified the issue of dropout and retention as a major concern both for the institutes and also for the individual student. The aim here was to collect data on the issue of dropout to develop an intervention programme. This paper outlines the data collection methods, findings and recommendations.

The first stage of the project concerned collecting data on the reasons for student dropout. Quantitative data was collected in the form of questionnaires to teachers, trainers, lecturers and guidance counsellors. Secondly, semi structured interviews were conducted with students who had dropped out of second chance education. Thirdly, narrative life stories were collected from students who had a history of prior dropout but who had returned and successfully completed a course of study. The aim here was to identify both the restraining and enabling factors in the education of adults.

The research findings in this study demonstrate that adults drop out of second chance education for a wide variety of reasons. Two main categories were identified: policy related issues and educational or institutional issues. The key policy issues concerned finance, student funding, grant and access issues. The educational/ institutional issues that were identified fall under four key themes: poor motivation, supportive environment, unrealistic expectations and language difficulties. Significant in the findings showed considerable similarities among the European participant countries. The paper concludes with recommendations regarding policy, institutional and pedagogical interventions.

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Keywords

Lifelong learning, participation, inclusion, social justice, equity, adult education, dropout, retention