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# OPEN UNIVERSITY AND ZERO-ADVANCED STUDENTS – WHO THE STUDENTS ARE AND WHY THEY DON'T PROGRESS?

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## Abstract

In recent decades, the talk of lifelong and continuous learning has become an internationally prevailing trend. Lifelong learning has many meanings depending on the interests and the determinants. On the other hand, lifelong learning is understood in the context of adult education as the OECD's contribution to market-liberal social and economic governance. In this case, the main actor is the individual with responsibilities and duties to ensure social competitiveness. On the other hand, lifelong learning is defined by adult education, cultural democracy, narrowing educational disparities and cultural equality. In the ethos of lifelong learning and in the spirit of continuous education, many adults are optimistic and goal-oriented towards Open University studies. Adult agency would seem to appear in accordance with the ideal concept. The Open University also seeks to take into account the everyday boundaries of a heterogeneous group of adult learners through flexible arrangements, thereby creating equal opportunities for learning. But sometimes, and in fact, very often, Open University adult student studies do not progress and do not graduate. For these undergraduate students, there is little visibility from the spotlight of top performers. Who are these students who enrol and pay, but who do not progress at all and why? According to the results, the zero-advanced students had preparedness, ability and enthusiasm for studies, but at the same time different challenges. Three perspectives were built on the analysis to explain the lack of progress: (1) holistic challenges of balancing life, (2) poor academic learning skills, and (3) individual student-related issues.

Keywords: Open University, adult student, zero-advanced student, learning skills.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Internationally, and also in the Finnish context, the mission of lifelong learning at the University has been fulfilled by the Open University for a long time. The Finnish Open University was born in the 1970s following the example of the British Open University. Already at that time certain weaknesses were identified, such as the thin link between teaching and science and the lack of awareness among citizens of the potential of an Open University [1]. On the other hand, since its inception, the Open University has been a pedagogical innovator and has developed online and flexible teaching practices [1]. The Open University has fulfilled the task of lifelong learning and continuing education and has responded to the communal and individual needs of different eras [2]. Open University students form a heterogeneous set of starting points and goals [1], but the cumulative nature of education is also evident in the Open University. Many students already have an academic degree. On the other hand, students are adults for whom the Open University offers another opportunity to pursue an academic degree. In addition, some will try to see if the academic studies are suited to their own needs, either on their own or from work-related needs. [3.]

In addition to studying and working, those who start their studies as adults usually have a family. Adults with family and work have less time to study than full-time students. Difficulties in reconciling living areas have proven to be the biggest challenge for adult learners. Lack of time, especially due to work, has been perceived as an obstacle to the progress of studies [4]. Working is also characteristic of young university students who are poorly advanced in their studies, who put work, family or other activities ahead of their studies.

There is still little research on how to reconcile studies with work and family. Instead, work-family interaction has been extensively studied. Studies have examined the contradictions between work and family roles, the mutually enriching effects of different roles. Areas of life balance or imbalance have also been studied. [5.] What does the everyday palette look like when you add study to it? Adult students experience contradiction especially when studying for a family when studying has to reduce family time. On the other hand, family and work responsibilities are prioritized and free and regular study time is abandoned. Studying also involves sacrifices, reducing leisure time, social contact, and reducing the amount of time spent sleeping. [6; 7.] Regardless of the boundaries of everyday life,

adults feel that different roles increase resources and support the learning of skills learned in different areas of life.

Educational polarization on the one hand, and the diversification of Open University students, are reflected in many ways in the Open University. There are differences, for example, in the abilities of lifelong and continuous learning. Academic meta-skills and the processes of their development are well recognized at the Open University. Meta skills are particularly valuable when operating in a complex world [8; 9]. The prevailing ideology of continuous learning emphasizes the ability to learn and appropriately regulate one's own learning and activities. Self-regulation of learning is emphasized in independent academic studies. Students must be able to take overall responsibility for their studies, set and change their individual goals, and guide and evaluate their learning. The responsible university student possesses especially metacognitive control skills. In this case, the student recognizes his or her strengths and weaknesses and develops his or her own learning skills spontaneously and over a long period of time, but if necessary, he or she also seeks guidance to develop these skills [10].

For an adult student at the Open University, time planning is a vital meta-skill. For Open University students, like adult academic students in general, have difficulties in study planning, lack of scheduling and excessive study volume which are slowing down studies [4]. The slow pace of academic study also involves inability, that is, delays that are self-inflicted. Lack of schedule, task demands, fear of failure, perfectionism, and lack of motivation make human move on to starting tasks and engaging in other, more attractive activities [11].

In addition to effective time management and coping, successful reconciliation between work and family life requires support from the family, the workplace, and peer students [7]. Also, a strong belief in self-ability to cope with the demands of different roles predicts successful reconciliation of work, family and study, and satisfaction with different aspects of life [12].

However, the personal everyday perspective of adult students is not the only way to look at adult students. A fresh understanding of adult students has built the image of a market-oriented university as a purposeful and effective customer student [13; 14; 15]. These students are rapidly generating degrees and credits for the University, to which the University's funding is partly based. In addition, efficient adult students take responsibility for their own studies and are employed in their field [14]. On the other hand, studies provide evidence of adult students being deficient or weak, especially in terms of academic meta and learning skills and needs in a controlled and school-oriented learning environment [14]. From these diverse starting points, we can structure the different pathways of study, both successful and unfinished.

## **2 METHODOLOGY**

The study is aimed at adult students at university. The study focused on students whose studies did not progress. The research material was acquired through an online survey. The survey was sent to 414 students and was answered by 185 students, with a response rate of 45%. The survey contained both closed and open questions. The research answers the following question:

1. What kind of obstacles do they face when they are not studying?

The material of the study has been analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively, and both dimensions are present and alternating in the result section. For example, students rate their own, differentiated learning skills on a scale of 1-5. In addition, they wrote about their own experiences from the point of view of their zero-advanced studies, which are analyzed through content analysis.

Demographically, zero-advanced students correspond to a typical Open University adult student. 60% of the respondents were in the 30-49 age group. Women accounted for 84%. 76% had a university degree and 76% were in working life. 81% had families and 57% had families with children. 52% of those participating in the survey are pursuing a university degree or are in the process of integrating Open University studies with their university degree.

### 3 RESULTS

#### 3.1 Reasons why adult students' studies didn't progress

Almost all zero-advanced students (93%) recognized that their studies did not progress according to their own goals. Interestingly, the zero-advanced students exhibited a great deal of preparedness, ability and enthusiasm for meaningful study, but at the same time different challenges. Three perspectives were built on the analysis to explain the progress of studies. The lack of progress was based on (1) holistic challenges of balancing life, (2) poor academic learning skills, and (3) individual student-related issues. Next, we present the main results of the analysis in a multi-method way.

##### 3.1.1 Challenges of Reconciling Life - "Waiting for Life to Calm Down"

Quantitative results showed that co-ordination of life areas was a burden on the lives of zero-advanced students. 90% of respondents felt that balancing study, work and family was a burden and 84% found it challenging to study. From the aspects of life, work was reflected more negatively in studying than in the family. Work took too much time from studying (mean 3.08 on a scale of 1-4) and work-related stress interfered with the focus on studying (2.68). The family, in turn, wanted to give time to study (3.04). The qualitative answers said the work consumed resources from studying. The work was perceived as a burden and the employer did not support studies. Work also unreasonably occupied resources from leisure time. Difficulties in reconciling study and work were also manifested in unexpected and unexpected life situations, such as divorce, infant life, passing away and becoming ill.

Despite the challenges of reconciling different aspects of life and using time, zero-advanced students did not feel very exhausted (mean 2.67, on a scale of 1-6), but felt enthusiasm for studying (ka 4). 85% regard studying as a meaningful thing in their lives. However, 50% of the zero-advanced students recognized feelings of inadequacy in their studies, and 65% felt less accomplished than before.

##### 3.1.2 Challenges in Academic Learning Skills - "I Just Can't Get Started"

Zero-advanced students had high self-esteem in relation to their studies, although their studies did not progress as expected. 90% of the zero-advanced students believed they could do well in their studies. They rated their learning skills as good (average 2.98, on a scale of 1-4) and the objectives of the study units were largely clear to them (average 3.37). Zero-advanced students rate their interactive skills as good (3.29), knowledge acquisition (3.16), computer skills (3.08), and reading scientific text (3.07) and knowledge parsing (3.02). On the other hand, zero-advanced students rated their writing skills as weak specially in scientific writing (2.83) and reading foreign language literature (2.61). There was a desire for clear and scrupulous instructions and assignments for scientific writing, *"I would hope that they were made clear on your part, so that the energy would not go to understanding the tasks but to doing the tasks."*

Poor learning skills were particularly evident in the planning of time use and the organization of studies. Most of the zero-advanced students (67%) had no systematic way to study. 71% did not make a schedule for their studies. The time devoted to studying was not used efficiently (mean 2.15, on a scale of 1-4) and no effort had been made to study (1.91). Qualitative analysis also showed that zero-advanced students were expecting structured schedules, externally set deadlines and teacher-based guidance. The overall management and perception of the studies were subtle, and external control and traction was expected to manage it. Poor academic learning skills turned into expectations for Open University, with an emphasis on a school-like culture.

Independent online learning was perceived as lonely, described as *"lonely drilling"*. Students needed peer support for e-learning, and other students had not seen help when needed (mean 2.05, on a scale of 1-4). They felt that teachers were not difficult to approach (3.11), but about a third hoped that Open University staff would contact the student. Students wanted open messages from the Open University staff and personal messages activating and encouraging learning at different stages of their studies; *"I would be contacted and fill in the hops at the same time as the instructor would tell me how to promote my studies, so take that course first"*. The qualitative analysis also revealed that a common start was sought from the beginning lecture or online meeting.

For some students, e-learning was technically demanding, with challenges particularly at the beginning of their studies, due to the confusion of different study systems and the difficulty of enrolling (2.62). In particular, the transitions between different study systems between studies were perceived as stressful. Study systems and the various passwords involved caused stress to adult students and

even led to the complete dropout. "It's been awkward, I don't know which courses I can find, and I've never signed up."

### 3.1.3 Challenges in Student Self - "A Lot Is Matter to You"

In the foregoing, we have highlighted issues that indicated factors related to the lack of progress in studies other than directly from the student himself. As one of the explanatory factors for the lack of progress, the analysis revealed factors in which the progression was built on the student's own. In these situations, the reasons for the inferiority were not sought by others, but the inferiority was rooted in individual qualities and choices.

Above, we have outlined an aspect where one of the factors behind poor academic learning skills was related to students' expectations for teacher contact. Students who linked the lack of progress in their studies to their own individual activities did not expect contact from the Open University. These students were aware of the availability of guidance, guidance would have been available had they only been self-activated and involved (3.02). Responsibility for studying was seen by the student himself: "I feel like an adult student, I have to prioritize and organize my own life so that I also have time and space for studying," The information and support needed was well-located (ca. 2.95), and support was always felt to be available upon request.

Some students had realized the importance of meta-skills and the starting point for self-directed academic study. They were "learned" to respond to this statement of claim in the right way: "I'm used to the fact that the self-dig and sources of information".

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

Zero-advanced students in Open University context appears as a multidimensional phenomenon. Both the individual student and the individual background factors, the Open University as the organizer of academic education, and social and economic realities are involved in the whole. For an adult student's academic studies to progress as expected, many things must be in order at the same time. As the results prove, the zero-advanced students had preparedness, ability and enthusiasm for studies, but at the same time different challenges. It is important to note that the reasons for the progression and non-progression of studies can be traced to different parties. Three perspectives were built in this research to explain the lack of progress: holistic challenges of balancing life, poor academic learning skills, and individual student-related issues.

According to the analysis, the reasons for the lack of progress in studies seem to be related to the lack of academic learning skills and competences and the challenges of time management. Those who didn't advance in their studies wanted ready schedules and teacher-oriented guidance. A meta-level awareness of the nature of academic study and the process-oriented development of academic skills appear to be central when trying to understand the phenomenon.

And finally, using concept of Zero-advanced students is a conscious choice, through which we want to emphasize the power of used language and words and quantifying – also when regarding learning. We do not refer to the value of the individual or the inefficiency of learning, even if it is not seen as a performance and credits, learning can take place in many ways. In this paper we challenge to reflect and discuss the phenomenon of more widely, to outline the backs and blind spots.

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