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Adult Students' Problems in the Distance Learning

Oksana Pozdnyakova[*], Anatoly Pozdnyakov

Transport and Telecommunication Institute, 1 Lomonosov St., LV-1019 Riga, Latvia

Abstract

A visible intention to encourage high-quality training of the adult population is evident in many EU countries. The Education Development Strategy of Latvia also anticipates an increase in the proportion of adult students. Distance learning is one of the most convenient forms of education for adult students who have priorities different from learning, such as work and family. However, this form of education has its own problems connected with the peculiarities of distance education as well as with the peculiarities of adult audience.

The article is devoted to the research, which purpose is to identify and explore the range of problems commonly encountered by mature students studying remotely, using the experience of Transport and Telecommunication Institute. This article emphasizes the factors causing the feeling of anxiety, concerns regarding the education process and learning results in adult learners, and can deter adults from participation in distance education such as: loss of learning skills, lack of experience in distance education, financial costs of education, lack of support by the family or by the employer, sense of hopelessness and irrelevance of their education, etc. The authors suggest some methods to cope with this anxiety and to optimize the learning process.

The findings of this article should be useful for academic and administrative staff of the university providing distance education for adult students.

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[*] Corresponding author.
E-mail address: Pozdnakova.O@tsi.lv

1. Introduction

Due to the changes in economic, political, social, and demographic areas, the visible intention to encourage high-quality training of the adult population is evident in many EU countries (Birziņa, 2014; Gordiyenko, 2013; Desjardins, 2015; Roosmaa and Saar, 2012).

The Education Development Strategy of Latvia also envisages an increase in the proportion of adult students (OECD, 2016). According to the "Adult education management model implementation plan for 2016-2020", the relative share of persons in this category is expected to grow more than twice and reach 15% of the total number of students from 2012 onwards (CoM, 2016). Similar trends exist in the higher education system as well (EAEA, 2011).

Focusing on the peculiarities of this type of students, many higher education institutions are searching for new, more flexible and effective forms and methods of teaching.

So, over the past few years Transport and Telecommunication Institute has been offering distance learning course studies. Experience has shown that this form of learning has a high demand and gives a chance to get university degree for people who are not able to attend full-time or either part-time courses due to certain circumstances. Moreover, distance learning is one of the most convenient forms of education for adult students with the priorities different from learning, such as work and family.

However, distance learning has its own problems connected with the peculiarities of distance education as well as with the peculiarities of adult audience. There is a great deal of pedagogical literature dedicated to the problems, advantages and disadvantages of distance learning (Bozkurt *et al.*, 2015; Cleveland-Innes and Garrison, 2010; Galusha, 1997; Moore and Kearsley, 2012; Muilenburg and Berge, 2001). There are also processes of developing the rules for working with a group of adults (Merriam *et al.*, 2007; Kunga and Machtmes, 2009; OECD, 2013; Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009). These rules are known as Andragogical Teaching Methods in scientific world (Knowles *et al.*, 2005). Nevertheless, the category of adult students has not been investigated fully in relation to distance learning yet.

The purpose of this study, conducted by the authors of this article, is to identify and explore the range of problems commonly encountered by mature students studying remotely, to determine the factors that can cause a sense of anxiety and even scare adult students and prevent their online learning, and to propose the ways to cope with this anxiety in order to optimise the learning process.

2. Methodology

While selecting the format of this study, the preference was given to the interviews as the most flexible information gathering method. The study involved interviewing both male and female first- and second-year undergraduate students, aged from 21 to 50 years, working either full-time or part-time and both single and married.

It is worth noting that this study operates with specific criterion on age restrictions. Despite the age criterion for the adult learners, determined in Latvia as from 24 to 64 (CSB, 2013), the lower border was shifted down to age 21 because the respondents in this age group had two or three year break after finishing high school and they also have the corresponding work experience, therefore they fell under the definition of "adult learner" (Merriam *et al.*, 2007). Additionally, the researchers interviewed adult students who take the part-time course. In total 100 respondents was interviewed.

3. Anxiety of adult students in distance learning

3.1. Advantages and disadvantages of distance learning for adult students

It is important to point out that the community of adult students is quite heterogeneous. In general, they are distinguished from the traditional student community by the following characteristics (Knowles *et al.*, 2005; Merriam *et al.*, 2007):