

Book Review



Agnes Engler (2014). Student Dimensions – The Mature Students of Higher Education. Debrecen: CHERD.

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Reviewed by Bella Hejja⁴² & Orsolya Joo⁴³

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In her work called Student dimensions – The mature students of higher education, Agnes Engler presents mature part-time students who study in higher education in a non-traditional form, in two different dimensions. First, she looks at the students' academic results, and then she explores the academic process from the aspects of private life, career path and learning path. This collection of studies provides a multidimensional picture of mature students to its readers.

It was published in 2014 as part of the CHERD study collection. The research was supported by the Janos Bolyai Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. The study also presents results from independent empirical research which was part of the OTKA (K-101867) research led by Prof. Dr. Tamas Kozma entitled Learning Regions in Hungary: From Theories to Realities. The study collection was proofread by Gabriella Pusztai.

In 2013, questionnaire surveys were conducted in three institutions of higher education located in Hungary's Northern Great Plain region: the University of Debrecen, the College of Nyiregyhaza and the College of Szolnok (as of 1 Jan 2017 the latter two are universities). The full-scale survey was preceded by focus group interviews and structured interviews.

Agnes Engler earned her academic rank at the University of Debrecen in 2010. Her doctoral dissertation was published a year later by Gondolat Publishers with the title *Kisgyermekes nők a felsőoktatásban* [Women bringing up small children in higher education]. From 2006, she was a junior assistant professor, since 2012 she is an assistant professor at the Institute of Educational Studies of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Debrecen. Her works are published in both Hungarian and foreign journals. She is a permanent participant of several researches as co-researcher, research leader, workgroup leader or project manager.

⁴² University of Debrecen, Debrecen (Hungary), Email address: bellaemerencia@gmail.com

⁴³ University of Debrecen, Debrecen (Hungary), Email address: orsolyajoo@gmail.com

This collection of studies contains four parts which deal with the success and the attitudes towards studying, social genders, the interrelationship between studying, work and family, and finally, it respectively describes students from the point of view of educational sociology.

The first chapter explores the motivating forces that motivate mature students to enrol in higher education. Significant forces are the need for professional advancement, the change of profession, interest, social relations, but the pursuit of equal opportunities can also be mentioned. Non-traditional students used to carry negative stigmas because they entered higher education not immediately after leaving secondary school or because their parents weren't intellectuals. These students are generally older than full-time students, they have professional experience and they expect different things from a university. Pinning down and fulfilling these needs while maintaining the quality of education presented a great challenge for academic institutions.

Looking at life-long learning, Northern countries are on the top the list; based on the figures from Hungary which had an average of 2,5% in 2012, which can be considered a very low figure. Typically, part-time students in Hungary are below 35 years. Although part-time students share some traits most of these diverge, these students do not form a heterogeneous group. It seems that women regard themselves as being more successful; similarly, students in a relationship or those having small children judge their studies successful. There is a correlation between motivating forces and academic success. Students driven by the desire to learn or to have deeper knowledge (internal motivation) are more successful in their studies than those who are driven by the need to prove to their family or to advance in their career. Social relations (both with the tutors and fellow students) correlate positively with academic achievement; however, it is not as decisive as in case of full-time students.

The second chapter points out the correlations between gender and studying. 1092 students took part in the survey, 70% of them were women, and also 70% of the participants had a partner. The high participation rate of the women is a good indicator of the results of academic expansion. Students (typically women) delayed their studies due to family reasons or starting to have a family; others were dissuaded by experiences in secondary school. The results of the Hungarian Graduate Survey 2010 show that the majority of those who hold more degrees are women. There is also a difference between courses: women tend to choose arts and humanities or law courses; whereas men prefer engineering courses. Although women are more motivated, men are still more successful among mature students. There are also differences regarding the education level of the parents: men usually have better-qualified parents and they come from bigger cities. In contrast, women are more determined; they prepare more for exams and are better regarding meeting deadlines.

In the third part, the author collates a research based on several databases and which is more significant from a social and gender point of view. She examines the opportunities

and challenges of higher education from the perspective of students, employees and parents, focussing mainly on the education path of students with families. With the help of the Hungarian Graduate Survey 2010's database, she analyses the academic success of the correspondence students against family status. There is probably no doubt about the fact that study environment and academic success are connected; also there can be little doubt that mature students require more flexibility and more concrete information than their full-time peers. By analysing the Learning Regions in Hungary regional study, the author was trying to find out what kind of education paths students had and what difficulties they had during their studies. Her results pointed out that in praxis alternative education paths are relegated to the background in the academic institutions. Reconciling studying, family and work poses several difficulties during the student years. Overcoming these difficulties depends greatly on the student's personal environment. Despite these difficulties, students with families can be considered as successful, comparing them to students who were single as they yielded unexpected results. Still, universities and colleges are not flexible enough for mature students. This is indicated by – amongst other factors – the level of cooperation with fellow students, which showed a significant difference between successful and less successful mature students; whereas this difference was minimal regarding the contact with tutors. Less successful students also have discernibly more difficulties with administrative affairs, acquiring books and getting time off work to study; whereas more successful students would be more interested in attending full-time lessons, academic days and conferences. This means that higher education cannot cater to the needs of students working in set hours: student administration offices, tutors' office hours and library opening times are restricted to during the day. The needs of mature age students with more flexible daily schedules willing to explore more opportunities are also left unfulfilled.

Looking at female and male students' plans for private life, the author saw nearly no difference. Less than 5% wish not to marry at all, and both sexes think that marriage and having children are timely following a few years spent working and having found a suitable partner. Pursuing a career is more influential for men, although the difference is not substantially significant. Agnes Engler's large sample surveys confirm that plans for starting a family change the latter stages of life when having only one child instead of the originally planned two or three becomes preferable.

An important part of the study is the issue of women with small children pursuing post-secondary education. The author had previously investigated this topic and this research further confirms that when deciding to enter post-secondary education the main motivation for 95% of female students with small children is to find a job easier or to retain their position at their workplace, but the wish for career advancement was also visible. In a second survey, the author looked at students' entry into the labour market and the investment in education showed positive results. Two-thirds of the surveyed students managed to fill better positions following graduation, but the index of success was also positive for the remaining one third. Therefore, young mothers' pursuit of post-

secondary education clearly shows positive indexes. However, the fact that during the years of childcare they were exempt from tuition fees must be highlighted; only 42% of those would have agreed to pay tuition fee.

A noteworthy benefit of the research of mature students is that it reveals the nature of the connection between success and family status. Although the basic hypothesis continuously was that students who work and have families have less time to study and are consequently less successful than those who do not have families, the contrary proved to be true. Literature cited by Engler presumes that the skills acquired while managing a family are carried over to manage studies and later work. Some countries are already making efforts to acknowledge such competences in some form. Do these research results confirm the validity of such efforts?