

Original Research Article

Zero-Achievers Non-Progressing Studies in Open University: Three Preventive Factors

Abstract

This research examines Open University students whose studies do not progress at all. We call these students zero-achievers. The study explicates the preventive factors for the progression of studies for the Open University's zero-achiever students in Finland. This research is a descriptive mixed methods study. The research data was collected by an online survey sent to 414 open university zero-achiever students and 185 responses were received. The qualitative data utilized content analysis and the results of the quantitative data by percentages and averages. The data was analysed comprehensively combining the quantitative and qualitative data by themes according to the three main reasons for the non-progression of studies. The Open University student explained their non-progression in studies by three factors: difficulties in reconciling areas of life, lack of generic skills, and passivity in seeking guidance. The purpose of this study is to raise zero-achievement as a phenomenon at a time marked by the ideal of high performance, the ideology of lifelong learning and the digitalization and massification of higher education. Alongside the ideal of efficiency, a wide range of students must be remembered in educational systems. Open University adult students' experiences of their studies and study progression are less explored. Therefore, in the present study, we focus on these questions in the context of Finnish higher education.

Keywords: Open university, education policy, work-family-study, generic skills, guidance

Introduction

During recent decades, university has become an academic platform for many traditional academic functions, and for new expectations, like capitalistic goals (Slaughter and Leslie 1997), innovation production (Butera 2000) and working life connections (Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff 1997). Education expands both the opportunities for the individual and delivers the skills and competitiveness needed to develop welfare states. A high level of education contributes to the high quality of life and economic well-being of citizens (Isopahkala-Bouret 2019.)

The context of this research is Finland, but the same educational policy, systems and logics are common in Europe. Finnish higher education system is one of the most competitive in the world (Isopahkala-Bouret, 2019) and the national goal is to create more flexible learning pathways (Moitus, Weimer, and Välimaa 2020). In Finnish education system Open University has many roles, one of them is "Open University path" (Joutsen et al. 2021), which refers to the admission into a university degree. That supports the national educational policy goal for 2030, at least 50 % of 25- to 34-year-olds complete a higher education degree (Ministry of Education and Culture 2017). Other Open University roles are to serve alternative paths for career changers (Jauhiainen, Nori, and Aho-Malmelin 2007) and to develop competences of working-aged people alongside their work (Haltia, Isopahkala-Bouret, and Jauhiainen 2021). Open University students are a heterogeneous group by age, background education and employment status (Jauhiainen, Nori, and Alho-Malmelin 2007; Haltia, Isopahkala-Bouret, and Jauhiainen 2021) Education is expanding by

the number of participants, there were 72,000 students in 2010 and 142,000 in 2020 (Vipunen 2021).

Many countries' education systems and working life, including Finland, faces a genuine challenge to adapt to rapid global and technological changes (OECD 2020). Most new jobs created require high 21st century skills, meta-cognitive and digital skills (Tight 2021). At the same time, discussions of higher education marketization highlight the difference between ideologies, the extent to which the higher education market is a reality or a metaphor for education politics and prevailing processes (Bowl, 2018). However, globalization, digitalization, and accelerating change in working life drive lifelong learning, which has become a common cause for the individual, working life, educational organizations and society as a whole. The starting points of lifelong learning have been located to the UNESCO objectives of democracy and solidarity, now the entrepreneurial interests of economy and competitiveness (Laalo, Kinnari and Silvennoinen 2019). As a result of changes in education policy, there has been a shift to continuous learning, emphasis on working life skills and competencies (OECD 2020).

In the societies of continuous learning, many adults enrol in Open University studies that are open to all and address communal and individual learning needs. Today, the universities, as well as Open University's activities emphasize, rather than educational equality, the needs, financial objectives, and efficiency of working life (Siivonen and Filander 2020), including that funding is based on measurable performance. The economic perspective is also emphasized in the Open University and students are being repressed as effective executor-clients (Bunce, Baird & Jones 2016; Siivonen 2017) who quickly generate credits and employ more challenging jobs in the field they study (Siivonen 2017). In reality, studies do not always progress as hoped. Who are these students who pay for their studies but complete zero credits? Throughout our determination as a zero-achiever, we question the quantitative way of talking about top performing and students as talent capital machines for continuous learning (see Laalo, Kinnari, and Silvennoinen 2019). With the zero-achiever, we do not refer to the value of the individual, but to those adult students who do not respond in "the right way" to educational policy performance ideals. We examine the phenomenon of zero-achieving, both at the individual and systemic level to find out what factors explain the unprogression of studies.

The research answers question:

1. What factors prevent an Open University student from progressing in their studies?

Theoretical frame

Studying as a personal project in life - work, family and study reconciliation

The requirements related to the different areas of life, such as work-family-study both compete, and support each other. According to the effects of different roles on working student parents, they often face a role strain due to conflicting role requirements. (Andrade et al 2021; Cinamon 2016; Creed et al. 2015; van Rhijn 2014). In the role strain the individual faces conflicting expectations and situations impossible to please everyone (Mullis 2003). According to Kremer (2016) students with families who were working and day students, the school-work conflict was linked to stress and exhaustion.

Simultaneous work - university conflict is reflected in student study commitment and well-being (Creed et al. 2015) and work impairs success in studies (Riggert et al. 2006), especially if the work and study are from different fields. Distant students at the university, meanwhile, experienced stress from work and family to study (Waterhouse et al.), because family and work obligations are often prioritized at the expense of studying (Stone & O'Shea 2013). Wimpenny ja Savin-Baden (2013) found that the academic culture with its habits can also show students as strange. Recently, the Covid-19 pandemic has presented further challenges for reconciling work, family and study, especially for studying mothers (Andrade et al. 2021).

Reconciliation of study to work and family requires students organize their lives, such as switching to part-time work, scheduling work and family to be suitable for study (Samra et al.), or reducing free time and sleep (Stone & O'Shea 2013). Support from family and peers and strong self-efficacy predict the successful reconciliation of study and other areas of life (van Rhijn & Lero 2014). Work and family can support study by adding resources to study and reducing the risk of mental distress (Waterhouse et al.). The family provides ongoing present support, and adult student's satisfaction with their family life increases when the spouse supports and shares responsibility (van Rhijn & Lero 2014).

Studying can also produce positive experiences, study engagement and a generally satisfied state of mind. (Ketonen et al. 2019; Salmela & Aro & Read 2017.) Study engagement is linked to success and positive study emotions and is positively reflected in other areas of life. Study engagement is the highest at the beginning of studies but decreases as study progresses (Ketonen et al. 2019), it is essential to focus on guidance, particularly at the beginning of studies and to strengthen positive experiences (Ketonen et al. 2019). In online study, students' commitment to study and study engagement varies. The study engagement is enhanced by evaluation, teaching and knowledge sharing practices, as well as interactions between the teacher and the student. Commitment and engagement are undermined by competing requirements, multiple simultaneous deadlines and out-of-study engagements. (Muir et al. 2019.)

Studies as a global political project: generic skills as learning goals

Learning is not just a personal project; it also has broad global educational policy goals. In recent years, the construction of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), with the aim of national comparability of qualifications and the development of a wide range of competencies among students, has been the cutting edge of the development of the European higher education policy. (EU 2008; EU 2019.) A broad range of competencies has been accompanied by the strengthening of students' overall professional life skills, or generic skills, which have been seen as one of the key competencies of lifelong learning. (EU 2008; EU 2019.) In the EU definition, generic skills are built through life as a developing combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes (EU 2019). The list of generic skills has been considered a description of the ideal characteristics of European individuals (Laalo et al. 2020) and these skills are seen as particularly valuable in the complex world when delivering (Davidson 2017).

Internationally the importance of generic skills will be constantly emphasized in working life in the future (EU 2019). Also in Finland, strengthening the generic skills of students has been seen as important at all levels of education (Ministry of education & Culture 2017). In Finland the Competences and Skills in 2035 report predicts that in the future, generic skills such as problem-solving skills, self-direction, learning ability, personal competence development and management, and knowledge assessment skills will be highlighted. Competences related to digitization, such as the utilization of digital solutions and platforms, are also increasing in importance. (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019.) To strengthen students' generic competences, universities in

Finland have introduced competency-based curricula, in which generic skills and working life competencies have an important role (Uljens & Rajakaltio 2017).

Educational polarization with socioeconomic backgrounds and gender is strengthened, although more and more have the opportunity to seek education. The harms of the global pandemic have also been hit hardest by the most vulnerable. The position of a lifelong learner is therefore not even a priori possibility for everyone. (OECD 2021.) At the same time growing student masses appear in higher education as students' heterogeneity. Significant differences have been found in the generic skills of college students (Hyytinen, Toom & Postareff 2018). In Finland, nearly 60 % of college students had generic skills at most satisfactory levels and about 40 % at least at a good level. The differences in skills were most fundamentally explained by factors related to the educational and socioeconomic background of a college student. Generic skills develop somewhat over the course of studies. (Ursin, Hyytinen & Silvennoinen 2021.) In particular, communal and interactive teaching practices, as well as the features of the constructivist learning environment and integrative pedagogy, predict the learning of generic skills. (Virtanen & Tynjälä 2019). According to studies students often do not perceive generic competencies as learning goals, and their importance remains invisible to students (Bauer ym. 2021).

Many goals of guidance in higher education

All students need and benefit from different guidance during their studies, including students at the Open University. The concept of guidance is an umbrella term with several nuances. It refers to different aspects and functions related to student support, such as informing, supporting, supervising and career counseling (Moitus and Vuorinen 2003). Guidance reflects students' satisfaction and graduation schedule and is a strong predictor of students' self-assessed development of their academic and generic skills (Skaniakos et al. 2018). One of the goals in guidance in higher education is the development of the student as an actor, the author of choices and decisions (Smith and Allen 2006). Guidance strengthens the student's experience of professional identity and social capital (Jensen and Jolanda 2015) and can enhance education and reduce study hours (Skaniakos et al. 2018). Academic guidance is traditionally included in the faculty domain and focuses on holistic student development (Moitus and Vuorinen 2003). Due to the massification of higher education, guidance is shifting from faculty responsibility to administrators, also in Finland (Skaniakos et al. 2018).

According to Siivonen and Filander (2020) university students have adopted the ideal of a student as consumer culture consistent with the neo-liberal order. Mature students position themselves as clients and satisfied with the demands for self-directedness and self-responsibility, younger students position themselves as "pupils of the school" and are critical of being left alone without adequate support. Further, in Siivonen's (2016) examination, adult students divide into achievers who believe in the "great salvation of education" as well as their own educability. For the other half, education produces disappointments and doubts about one's own prowess as students and learners. Guidance in the early stages of studies confirms students' self-regulation and motivation and reduces study problems (Honkimäki and Tynjälä 2007). At the same time, the teacher - student ratio is increasing considerably, leading to lack of resources (Hoffman, Välimaa and Huusko 2008). Anyway, online mediated guidance for massed university studies becomes more common, increasing student non-committal (Bedenlier et al. 2020) anonymity, stress, and dissatisfaction (Welch 2020).

The aim of the European education policy is to improve socio-economic positions and increase social cohesion and economic competitiveness, but the objective is not to be achieved (Kauppila, Kinnari and Niemi 2020). Low-income, first-generation, or minority students are less likely to get to university or finish a degree, compared with their more privileged peers with strong academic

qualifications (Simmons, 2011). Also, at the Open University, heterogeneity and diverse guidance needs of students have long been identified (Skaniakos et al 2018). There is a clear need for diverse student guidance methods (Vuorinen, Kasurinen & Sampson 2006), such as taking into account different life situations and automatized digital guidance opportunities. Web-based guidance is both an opportunity and a challenge; multiple guidance tools can reduce the slow progression of different students' studies (Skaniakos et al. 2018).

Method & Data

The focus of the study was Open University students who enrolled and paid for their right to study but did not complete any credits during a 14-month period. The research data was collected by an online survey sent to 414 students and 185 responses (45 % response rate) were received. In the study, descriptive mixed methods combine both quantitative and qualitative research practices.

Students assessed the unprogression of their studies with open and scale-based questions. Student well-being was measured using Salmela-Aro's (2009) University and college student burnout and engagement scales. Burnout was measured by ten items divided into three subscales: exhaustion (four items), cynicism (three items) and sense of inadequacy (three items). The sample items for exhaustion "I feel emotionally drained by my study", for cynicism "I doubt all the time the significance of my study" and for inadequacy "I have often feelings of inadequacy in my study". Study engagement was measured by nine items: vigour (three items), dedication (three items) and absorption (three items). The sample items for vigour "When I study, I feel that I am bursting with energy", for dedication "I am enthusiastic about my studies" and for absorption "Time flies when I'm studying". All responses were rated on a six-point scale (1=completely disagree; 6= strongly agree). Generic skills, such as scientific writing, data acquisition and self-direction are assessed on a four-step scale (poor, satisfactory, good, excellent). In other scale issues, quadriplegic (disagree - agree) was used. Other themes of the quantitative part included studies in everyday life and experience of managing studies.

The qualitative part of the research data consisted of open-ended questions. Open qualitative questions covered issues how the Open University can help with the challenges of studying and what kind of guidance is needed. The qualitative data utilized content analysis and the results of the quantitative section are described by percentages and averages. The data was analysed comprehensively combining the results of quantitative and qualitative data by themes according to the three main reasons for the non-progression of studies.

The study participants correspond to a typical Open University student in a Finnish context. 60 % of the respondents ranked in the 30 to 49 age group. Women accounted for 84 %. Of respondents, the higher education degree was 76 % and 76 % were in employment. Adult students with families were 81 % of whom 57 % with children. Of respondents 42 % were pursuing a university degree, 23 % developed their professional competence, and 13 % wanted to improve employment through Open University studies.

Results

Almost all zero-achievers (93 %) identified the unprogression of their studies relative to their goals. They experienced enthusiasm for study, but at the same time a wide range of challenges. According

to this research, the unprogression of Open University studies can be explained by three factors: (1) difficulties in reconciling different areas of life, (2) lack of generic skills, and (3) passivity in seeking guidance. These factors are presented more detailed with citations.

Difficulties in reconciling different areas of life: “prioritizing at the expense of study”

The unprogression of the studies of zero-achiever was partly explained by the difficulties of reconciling different areas of life. Of the zero-achievers, 90% felt the reconciliation of study, work and family and 84% felt the lack of time was challenging. Work had a more negative impact on studying than family. Work took too much time (68%), work stress disrupted concentration (59%). The unprogression was partly explained by personal qualities. In addition, they valued their free time.

“The problems are mainly in my own head; I haven't been able to promote or really even start planning studies after workday”

Starting studies after working days was overwhelming and would have required effort, which also indicated the lack of study motivation. In addition to work, family and related everyday realities affected study negatively (69 %). Studying was the first to be given up in busy everyday life. Studying time was defined as a separate period of family time and separate even from one's time. Combining study with a part of everyday life was not successful.

“As a busy mother with hobbies, organizing my own and study time is really challenging and when facing ambiguous study tasks, I give up and choose the needs of my family.”

In busy everyday life, different areas of life compete for the student's time. Everyday life fragmented into separate temporal sectors, where hobbies, the role as a parent, and your own free time and time for study with requirements appeared separate from each other. Other areas of life were prioritized at the expense of study, which was perceived as personal inflection. Zero-achievers experienced inadequacy (50 %) and identified getting less done than before (65 %). Studying was described as an “ambiguous task,” yet students understood the limited opportunities of Open University to support the challenges of reconciling areas of life. Still, they hoped Open University would contribute to facilitating study. Studying was also hampered by unexpected life events such as divorce, death, and one's own or close person's serious illness. Despite the busy everyday life, zero-achievers were not very exhausted (2,66) but experienced a learning interest (4) and considered studying meaningful (85 %).

Lack of generic skills: “the hardest was that there were no deadlines”

In addition to the challenges of reconciling different areas of life, the non-progression of the studies of zero-achievers was explained by the lack of generic skills. Despite the lack of progression, zero-achievers experienced prowess, 79 % believed they were successful in their studies. They estimate that they have good data acquisition (3,16) and computer skills (3,08), as well as scientific text reading (3,07) and knowledge structuring skills (3,02). In contrast, scientific writing (2,83) and reading foreign-language literature (2,61) was weak. Zero-achievers had a need for school-like guidance. They expected school-like simplified chopped instructions and mission statements. No time was desired to be spent reading and understanding the instructions; learning tasks were expected to be accomplished easily and without greater effort. For students, studies and learning were thus shown as learning the substance of study, not for example learning or thinking skills. Studying was expected to be easy in order to advance their studies. Any kind of extra reflection and

effort was desired to minimize. Generic competencies were not perceived or identified by zero-achievers as the object of their studies and learning.

“I would hope that the instructions would be made clear on your part, so that the energy would go not to understanding the tasks but to carrying out the tasks.”

Although zero-achievers described theirs with good computer skills, online learning and e-learning environments were technically demanding for them. In particular, at the beginning of studies, 41 % found study guidelines confusing and 53 % logging into information systems complex. As with learning tasks, online study was hoped to be as easy and effortless as possible. The generic competencies listed by the EU, such as digital skills, appeared to zero-achievers as an extra effort to quickly skip the actual task when hurried.

“My studies would help if many IDs or passwords or systems were not needed, so it would be easier to take advantage of even a short time for studies.”

Zero-achievers did not study systematically (67 %) and did not schedule their studies (71 %). The study time was not used effectively (60 %), and no effort was made to study (67 %). Instead of self-referrals scheduling their studies in a self-directed manner, they expected deadlines and ready-made timetables from the outside.

“The hardest part to me was the fact that there were no so-called deadlines, other than the fact that the study period ended.”

Zero-achievers were adrift in their studies in many ways. They had big challenges in planning and scheduling their studies. The development of their own generic skills to be more self-directed was not, and thus, invested in it. Study planning was perceived as an extra burden. Instead, the time available for study was wanted to be directed in a straightforward way to doing tasks, not planning studies or reflecting on scheduling. For the zero-achiever, the freedom and flexibility of studying at the Open University appeared to be a factor in slowing down and inhibiting the progress of their studies.

Passivity in seeking guidance: “A lot is up to yourself”

In addition to the challenges of difficulties in reconciling different areas of life and the lack of generic skills, Open University zero-achievers explained the non-progression of studies by guidance challenges though they were aware of the guidance available. While zero-achievers said guidance was adequate (58 %) and easy to find (48 %), still 34 % of them missed contact by staff. They longed for the Open University to carry the main responsible role in interacting and resemble the student. They expected guidance to come automatically to them and that someone would follow the personal progress or nonprogression of their studies. Zero-achievers estimated that the guidance especially at the beginning of the studies would have been important. Writing a personal study plan at the beginning of the studies and based on that, a discussion with the teacher would have been useful.

“I was trying to fill out some study plan forms. It would have been easier like this: the teacher contacts me and together we fill out the form and she tell me how to proceed. The same teacher would contact me if I hadn't done anything for a month and ask if I had problems.”

However, 72 % of zero-achievers assessed that teachers were easy to approach and 78 % assessed that they dare ask help for obscure things. Zero-achievers missed live group orientation in the classroom or online. In web-based studies reaching the teacher as a quick chat service was also hoped. Web-based study required more self-directness, which some did not have enough, and they felt left alone.

“It would be good to have an appointment at the beginning to get a feel of studying, setting up a schedule together would also help. I'm bad at setting deadlines for myself.”

There were also adult students, who linked the personal responsibility belonging to higher education studies. According to them, one of the core skills in academic studies is self-direction. The conception that an adult student should automatically know academic generic skills led to passivity in seeking guidance.

“As an adult student, it is necessary to organize your everyday life so that it also leaves time for study. It has long been a tradition in university studies that everyone works independently and responsibly.”

The lack of study progress was partly explained by their own passivity applying for guidance. The awareness of Open University guidance multiple roles, varied benefits and guidance practices were hidden. The students' perception of the active agency in guidance was different from Open University practices. Part of zero-achiever placed the responsibility of progressing studies on the Open University, others instead saw their own responsibility as central. Zero-achievers did not consider generic skills as developing that could be learned during the Open University study process, and guidance as a tool to understand the multiple learning path alongside different areas of life.

Discussion

Based on the results, the unprogression of studies by Open University students can be explained by difficulties in reconciling areas of life, lack of generic skills, and passivity in seeking guidance. Zero-achievers differentiated studies from other areas of their life, even working life. The studies appeared to them as an opportunity for quick completion of substitution information. The importance of the generic skills of lifelong learning in the EU (2019) was also unknown. The various goals of guidance, such as skills to combine different areas of life or general skills of learning, were not identified. The studies were narrowed to executions without a deep understanding of the multidimensionality of the learning.

In line with previous research (Andrade 2021; Creed 2015; Kremer 2016) zero-achievers also faced challenges in reconciling different aspects of life. Also, in terms of generic skills awareness, the results correspond to previous research (Bauer et al.). A new and interesting finding is that the studies were desired to be conducted quickly, efficiently, and narrowly. Conception of learning objectives in higher education seems contradictory between student conceptions and education policy. It is important to pursue common understanding about and through guidance. Previous studies have identified many goals of guidance (Jensen et al. 2015; Skaniakos et al. 2018; Smith et al. 2006). Based on this study, timely guidance is at best a win-win activity. Students learn general skills in addition to knowledge and higher education gets accomplishments and incomes, and working life gets workers with 21st skills. Today, however, massed higher education and datafication drives guidance into digitalized systems, reducing human interaction and conversation to a minimum. The danger is the erosion, polarization and inequality of the idea of lifelong learning.

Zero-achievers crystallize the educational policy assumption about the ideal student by being the opposite of it. Instead of acting within educational policy expectations independently in global learning environments, they drift aimlessly in their studies. The enthusiasm for studies does not automatically lead to action and agency. On the other hand, zero-achievers share common characteristics with the student-client perspective (Bunce et al.; Siivonen 2007) while waiting for services for higher education that simplify their studies. From the point of view of the ideal citizen competencies outlined in the European Qualification Framework (EQF), the results of this study are of concern. The phenomenon of zero-achieving in higher education and in Open University reflects the ideology of efficiency and execution, or rather its flip side. Education presents itself globally as a tool of competition, increasingly visibly dividing individuals into winners and losers.

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