



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

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Current education policy responds to changes and needs in working life by guiding individuals at different stages of working careers to develop their skills in the spirit of lifelong learning. More and more are applying with hope and enthusiasm to the Open University to strengthen their competence but are unable to get their studies completed. The article explores factors related to the non-progression of studies by students at the Open University in Finland. We call non-progressing students zero-achievers who enroll in studies but do not complete a single credit during the period of course. This research is a descriptive mixed methods study. The research data was collected by an online survey sent to 414 of one Open University zero-achiever students and 185 responses were received. The qualitative data was analysed through the means of content analysis and the quantitative data was examined through percentages and averages. The data was analysed comprehensively combining the quantitative and qualitative data by themes according to the three main factors for the non-progression of studies. The Open University student explained their non-progression in studies by three preventive factors: difficulties in reconciling areas of life, lack of generic skills, and passivity in seeking guidance. The purpose of this research 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. The research contributes important new knowledge to education policy, to academic community and for university students to identify and avoid preventive factors for the progression of studies. Based on the research, the construction of shared understanding about above aspects is recommended to reach common goals.

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1. INTRODUCTION

During recent decades, university has become an academic platform for many traditional academic functions, and for new expectations, like neoliberal goals [1], culture of entrepreneurship (Farny et al. 2016) and labour market needs [2]. 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 [3].

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 [3] and the national goal is to create more flexible learning pathways [4]. In addition to academic degree studying, it is possible to study academic studies in Finland on an alternative route. Open University offers open university studies to all without admission requirements. Students pay for studies and receive a right to study based on payment. (Ministry of Education and culture.) In Finnish education system Open University has many roles, one of them is "Open University path" [5], 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 [6]. Other Open University roles are to serve alternative paths for career changers and to develop competences of working-aged people alongside their work. Open University students are a heterogeneous group by age, background education and employment status [7]. Education is expanding by the number of participants, there were 72,000 students in 2010 and 142,000 in 2020 [8].

Many countries' education systems and working life, including Finland, faces a genuine challenge to adapt to rapid global and technological changes [9]. Most new jobs created require high 21st century skills, meta-cognitive and digital skills [10]. 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 [11]. 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 [12]. As a result of changes in education policy, there has been a shift to continuous learning, emphasis on working life skills and competencies [9].

In the societies of continuous learning, many adults enroll 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 [13], 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 [14,15] who quickly generate credits and employ more challenging jobs in the field they study [15]. In reality, studies do not always progress as hoped. By the non-progression of the studies, we mean a situation where students pay for their academic studies in Open University but do not complete any credits. We call these students zero-achievers. Who are these students who pay for the right to study 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 [12]. 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 preventive factors explain the unprogression of studies. The purpose of this research is to examine factors that prevent Open University students' progression in their studies.

1.1 The Research Answers Question

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

1.2 Literature Review

1.2.1 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. [16,17,18,19]. In the role strain the individual faces conflicting expectations and situations impossible to please everyone [20]. According to Kremer [21] 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 [18] and work impairs success in studies [22], especially if the work and study are from different fields. Distant students at the university, meanwhile, experienced stress from work and family to study [23], because family and work obligations are often prioritized at the expense of studying [24]. Wimpenny, and Savin-Baden [25] 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 [16].

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 [26], or reducing free time and sleep [24]. Support from family and peers and strong self-efficacy predict the successful reconciliation of study and other areas of life [19]. Work and family can support study by adding resources to study and reducing the risk of mental distress [23]. The family provides ongoing present support, and adult student's satisfaction with their family life increases when the spouse supports and shares responsibility [19].

Studying can also produce positive experiences, study engagement and a generally satisfied state of mind. [27,28] 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 [27], it is essential to focus on guidance, particularly at the beginning of studies and to strengthen positive experiences [27]. 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 [29].

1.2.2 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 [30,31]. 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 [30,31] In the EU definition, generic skills are built through life as a developing combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes [31]. The list of generic skills has been considered a description of the ideal characteristics of European individuals [12] and these skills are seen as particularly valuable in the complex world when delivering [32].

Internationally the importance of generic skills will be constantly emphasized in working life in the future [31]. Also in Finland, strengthening the generic skills of students has been seen as important at all levels of education [6]. 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. [33]. 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 [34].

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 [35]. 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 [36]. 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 [37]. 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 [38]. According to studies students often do not perceive generic competencies as learning goals, and their importance remains invisible to students [39].

1.2.3 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 [40]. Guidance reflects students' satisfaction and graduation schedule and is a strong predictor of students' self-assessed development of their academic and generic skills [41]. One of the goals in guidance in higher education is the development of the student as an actor, the author of choices and decisions [42]. Guidance strengthens the student's experience of professional identity and social capital [43] and can enhance education and reduce study hours [41]. Academic guidance is traditionally included in the faculty domain and focuses on holistic student development [4]. Due to the massification of higher education, guidance is shifting from faculty responsibility to administrators, also in Finland [41].

According to Siivonen and Filander [13] 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 [44] 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 [45]. At the same time, the teacher - student ratio is increasing considerably, leading to lack of resources [46]. Anyway, online mediated guidance for massed university studies becomes more common, increasing student non-committal [47] anonymity, stress, and dissatisfaction [48].

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 [49]. 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 [50]. Also, at the Open University, heterogeneity and diverse guidance needs of students have long been identified [41]. There is a clear need for diverse student guidance methods [51], 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 [41].

2. METHODOLOGY

The research adopted a survey research design, and the method of data collecting was a questionnaire with open and scale-based questions. The method is the descriptive mixed method combining both quantitative and qualitative research practices. The target group of the research is zero-achieving students in Finnish Open University. Zero-achievers are students who enrolled and paid for their right to study in Open University, but their studies did not progress. The sample was collected in one Open University, and it contains 414 students who did not complete any credits during a 14-month period. The research data was collected as an anonymous online questionnaire using Webropol software. 185 students of 414 zero-achievers answered in the questionnaire and the response rate was 45 %.

In questionnaire students assessed the unprogression of their studies with open and scale-based questions. Student well-being was measured using Salmela-Aro's and Read's [28]

University and college student burnout and engagement scales. Burnout was measured divided into three subscales: exhaustion, cynicism (three items) and sense of inadequacy. Study engagement was measured also by three subscales: vigour, dedication and absorption. 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 quantitative data was analysed by using Excel software and descriptive methods as percentages and means. These scores were computed for all responses and for each item. The qualitative data utilized content analysis by categorizing all answers in each question. 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. Quantitative descriptive results are presented closely by combine scores of different items into the same sentence. Qualitative results are demonstrated by the citations of students` answers.

The research 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.

3. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

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 preventive factors: (1) difficulties in reconciling different areas of life, (2) lack of generic skills, and (3) passivity in seeking guidance. These preventive factors are presented more detailed with citations.

3.1 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. 84% of all respondents felt the lack of time was challenging. Work had a more negative impact on studying than family. 68 % of all zero-achievers argue that work took too much time and 59 % of them said work stress disrupted concentration. 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, 69 % of respondents felt family and related everyday realities affected study negatively, but 31 % felt family responsibilities do not disturb studying. 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. 50 % of zero-achievers experienced inadequacy and 65 % of them identified getting less done than before. 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, 66 % of zero-achievers were not exhausted, but 34 % felt moderate or deep exhaustion. 83 % of respondents experienced a learning interest and 85% of them considered studying meaningful.

3.1.1 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 their generic skills by scale 1=poor, 2=satisfactory, 3=good, 4=excellent and results are presented as means (M). Zero-achievers evaluate that they have good data acquisition (M=3.16) and computer skills (M=3.08), as well as scientific text reading (M=3.07) and knowledge structuring skills (M=3.02). In contrast, scientific writing (M=2.83) and reading foreign-language literature (M=2.61) was weaker. 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 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. At the beginning of studies, 41 % of zero-achievers found study guidelines

confusing and 53 % of them 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.”

Of zero-achievers 67 % did not study systematically and 71 % of them did not schedule their studies. 60 % of respondents felt that they do not use study time effectively, and 67 % of them make not any effort to study. 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.

3.1.2 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. 58% of zero-achievers mentioned guidance is easy to find. 48% of respondents said guidance was adequate, but 20% was not satisfied with amount of guidance and 32 % can't estimate question. Half of zero-achievers (50 %) missed no contact by staff and 16 % have no opinion, but 34 % of respondents hoped that staff ask personally how studies

progress. 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 teacher were easy to approach and 78 % of them 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.

4. 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 [31] 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 [16,18,21] zero-achievers also faced challenges in reconciling different aspects of life. Also, in terms of generic skills awareness, the results correspond to previous research [39]. 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 [43, 41,42]. Based on this research, 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 [14] 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 research 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.

5. CONCLUSION

The aim of this research was to explicate the preventive factors for the progression of studies for the Open University's zero-achieving students in Finland. The unprogression of studies is explained by difficulties in reconciling areas of life, lack of generic skills, and passivity in seeking guidance. Based on the research, the broad goals set for academic learning contradict the perception of Open University students. The university provides guidance services to solve a variety of learning challenges and expects students to be active in guidance seeking while students expect customer service and quickly absorbed study content. Non-progressive students have a limited understanding about the processes of learning and guidance on academia. Different quiet expectations are formed by educational policy, academia and by student's point of view. The construction of shared understanding of would be the best interests of all, to strengthen the societies of high skills, the renewal of labour, academic functional and economic foundations, and especially from the student's individual perspective. Based on the research, a concrete presentation of educational policy objectives and of academic community practices as well as strengthening the student's competency and awareness can be proposed. Further examination of the topic is important, for example what key factors will determine the successful initiation of studies. The possibilities of digitalization to support university studies will be a key target for development and research in the future.

CONSENT

As per international standard or university standard, respondents' written consent has been collected and preserved by the authors.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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