



## MATURED STUDENTS IN GREEK UNIVERSITY: DIFFICULTIES IN ATTENDING UNIVERSITY AND STRATEGIES TO OVERCOME THEM (A QUALITATIVE APPROACH)

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### **Abstract:**

The aim of our study is to highlight the characteristics of mature students who study in person in Greek universities<sup>ii</sup>, the difficulties they face and the strategies they use to overcome them. The research was conducted through semi-structured interviews with a sample of 10 students of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities of a regional Greek university and the data were analyzed using Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework. The results of the research showed that the characteristics that differentiate mature students from university students of typical age (18 - 22 years old) are related to adulthood. They enroll at university mainly to increase their institutional and symbolic capital, while the obstacles they face are mainly related to their family and professional obligations. They also develop specific strategies to achieve their goals. Finally, the Greek university needs to focus on this particular group of students and formulate a specific policy to contribute to addressing their problems.

**Keywords:** matured students, adult students, nontraditional students, higher education, cultural capital, strategies

### **1. Introduction**

The internationally observed expansion of higher education and widening participation in studies in recent decades has resulted, among other things, in an increased interest in studying from population groups that, traditionally, faced significant difficulties in

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<sup>ii</sup> The paper refers to students who study in person in Greek universities except the Hellenic Open University, which is aimed at adult students and the educational process is distance learning.

accessing and studying (Hardin, 2008; Saddler & Sundin, 2020). These students are described by the term “non-traditional students”, a term that is utilized to describe mainly groups that are underrepresented in higher education and whose participation is limited by structural factors (Device, 2012). We refer to people with disabilities, mature students, first-generation students, students from lower social strata and those from low-income or minority families (Cotton et al, 2017; Šestanović & Siddiqui, 2021).

“Mature students” or “adult students” are a distinct category of non-traditional students (Baxter & Britton, 2001). It is a fact that there is no commonly accepted definition for the term “mature students” (Šestanović & Siddiqui, 2021) and often in the literature it is used differently and according to the individual aims of the researchers (Fragoso et al, 2013; McGivney, 1996). Relevant studies converge on the view that “mature students” constitute a subgroup of the student population with specific characteristics and needs. In this subgroup we include, in addition to students “*who return to education after a long period of absence*” (Karalis, 2020, p. 25), “*to anyone going to college or university after some time out of full-time education. Typically, this will mean students who are over 21 years of age at the beginning of their undergraduate studies or over 25 years of age at the beginning of their postgraduate studies and up to pensionable age*” (Qureshi, Khawaja & Zia, 2020, p. 458).

Alternatively, the term adult students are also used, which in several studies is identical to the term “*non-traditional students*” (Šestanović & Siddiqui, 2021). As Lin (2016) mentions, “mature” or “adult students”, also referred to in the literature as “non-traditional”, “re-entry students” or “returning students” are a special group of “*adults who return to school full- or part-time while maintaining responsibilities such as employment, family, and other responsibilities of adult life*” (Lin, 2016, p. 119).

In the Greek education system, adults, after completing secondary education, if they are not admitted to conventional universities, can enroll, regardless of their age, in undergraduate programs of the Hellenic Open University. In conventional universities, according to the current institutional framework, adults can enroll after qualifying examinations if they already have a higher education qualification, or after national examinations, together with secondary school leavers, which are held every year. Both former cases enable a small number of adults to enter higher education. A small group of adults can also be admitted to university by making use of beneficial arrangements for people with a high degree of disability or certain incurable diseases.

In addition to the three previous groups, Greek universities have a significant number of students older than the expected age. These are students who have not graduated after completing the final year of their studies, who remain enrolled and potentially active for several years. We consider this category of students to be like that of mature students, as they share common characteristics and needs (Sakkoulis & Vergidis, 2023).

Regardless of the way of university admission, when we refer to “mature students” in Greek universities, we refer to heterogeneous groups who are required to overcome several barriers to participate in the academic process. We refer, in addition to the age difference from the usual student age to difficulties such as:

- family responsibilities,
- professional commitments,
- their place of permanent residence (Vergidis & Panagiotakopoulos, 2003; Fragoso et al, 2013; Sakkoulis & Vergidis, 2022; Šestanović & Siddiqui, 2021; Webber & Dismore, 2021).

Moreover, this category of students has the basic characteristics of adult learners. These are dominated by elements such as the extent of their experiences, which is an ever-increasing source of learning, and the gradual shift in the orientation and focus of learning from cognitive objects to problems and situations (Karalis, 2020).

The aim of this paper is to highlight the characteristics of mature students who attend Greek universities, the difficulties they face and the strategies they use to overcome them.

First, we conduct a brief literature review and present the concepts we used for the analysis of our data, which we derived from P. Bourdieu's theory. Next, we list the research questions and the methodology we adopted. We then present and analyze the research data and conclude with the discussion and conclusions drawn.

## 2. Literature Review

As mentioned above, the number of mature students has increased internationally in recent decades (Faulkner et al, 2016; Hardin, 2008; O'brien et al., 2009). For example, in countries such as Australia, Canada, the USA and the UK, this category of students covers one-third of the student population (Saddler & Sundin, 2020).

Mature students enroll in higher education for a variety of reasons. Some attempt to obtain a university degree to improve their position in the labour market or to become first-time degree holders. Other adults return to university to obtain an additional university qualification, which will allow them to change their field of employment or improve the professional position they already hold. Finally, others want to gain new knowledge and make creative use of potentially available time (Hardin, 2008; Smith, 2018).

Regardless of the reason why they return or start their university studies late, they all have one thing in common: they are adults who form a heterogeneous group. They share common characteristics and similar difficulties but have individual differences (Hardin, 2008; Wilson, 1997).

Although there is a common finding of an increased demand for study by older than usual people, the existing structures of conventional universities are still designed almost exclusively for traditional students. The rationale behind their operation is tailored to individuals entering university at age 18 with no other commitments (O'brien et al., 2009). It is significant that, even in the 1990s, many universities treated adult students as a "*historical accident*" (Wilson, 1997).

The barriers faced by mature students in a significant part of the literature are divided into institutional barriers (barriers related to institutional and organizational

issues), situational barriers (family, work) and dispositional barriers (capabilities and consciousness) (Osam, 2017). Hardin (2008), partly differentiating from the previous typology, refers to institutional barriers, psychological, educational, and academic barriers.

Regardless of the typology adopted, it is common to find that mature students face specific difficulties that either emanate from themselves and are related to the demands of adult life, or from the institution they attend and its operating conditions. In particular, Lin (2016), after studying the relevant literature, distinguishes three major problems: the commitments of mature students to multiple roles (e.g., employment, family, and other responsibilities of adult life), the low level of self-esteem/low level of self-confidence of a significant proportion of students belonging to this category, and insufficient family and social support.

Focusing on the impact of family, we find that most of the relevant research converges on the view that family responsibilities are a source of significant difficulties for mature students (Guan & Ploner, 2020; Janis, 2013; O'Brien et al, 2009; Webber & Dismore, 2021; Wilson, 1997). The university and the family are two "greedy" institutions in an antagonistic relationship (Webber & Dismore, 2021). University studies require sufficient available study time and space for uninterrupted work. For students who are mothers in particular, the issue of space and time is crucial. The family provides resources:

- a) economic capital, which covers the cost of study and the 'buy-in' of time to be allocated to study,
- b) cultural capital, which contributes to the creation of a space that allows for uninterrupted study; and
- c) emotional capital, which ensures moral and psychological support from other family members (Webber & Dismore, 2021).

The gap between university and home is difficult to bridge, especially in the case of women who maintain both previous roles of mother and worker. While, in the case of men, managing studies seems to be easier (O'Brien et al., 2009), women are required to manage their work, childcare and household responsibilities while at the same time having to meet the responsibilities arising from their studies. The difficulty in managing the combination of responsibilities becomes even more difficult for women from lower socio-economic backgrounds who decide to study. Often, even when they do manage to complete their studies, they pay a significant price: they have a "poor" social life and lack of time to "look after themselves" (Reay, 2003).

Regarding the impact of the academic environment, it is found that in universities where a collaborative culture prevails and academic staff (e.g., lecturers) is supportive, mature students are particularly facilitated in their studies (Busher et al., 2014). The role of lecturers and the pedagogical practices they adopt is very important. The practices commonly observed are instrumental (development of skills), affective (building trusting relationships and forming supportive environments) or organizational (providing

structural spaces). The practices when considering the specificities of the particular student group have a crucial role in their smooth process of learning (Busher et al., 2015).

The previous professional and life experiences of adult students have a significant impact on managing and overcoming difficulties (Cooper, 2011). Also, valuable, and dynamically intertwined with the current situation are students' previous learning experiences which can act both positively and as a barrier to progression (Fenge, 2011).

In Greece, research on mature students in universities and the difficulties they face has not yet started. Several studies have been carried out only at the Hellenic Open University, which focuses mainly on the problems that adult students face in the context of their studies, and which are often a reason for abandoning their studies (Ginou, 2001; Pisli et al., 2022; Pierrakeas et al., 2004; Vergidis & Panagiotakopoulos, 2002; Vergidis & Panagiotakopoulos, 2003; Xanthopoulou & Stavrakakis, 2019; Xenos et al., 2002).

The previous studies, although not using sociological analyses, have over time converged on the same factors. They refer to work or family commitments, academic difficulties, and personal problems. Although the degree of influence of the difficulties varies, the reference to the same difficulties in almost all the surveys demonstrates their constant influence over time and the inability of the university to respond to the 'demand' for flexibility and adaptation.

### 3. Theoretical framework

In our paper, for the sociological approach and analysis of the data we have used P. Bourdieu's theory, a theory that is often used in the study of higher education and offers an insightful and interpretive language for the systematic description of phenomena that manifest in the university field (Pather & Chetty, 2015).

Concepts of this theory that we utilized in our analysis are "field", "capital" and "strategy".

According to Bourdieu (1992), the social world is a set of «*social microworlds*» or fields. The field is the social space where social actors operate and within which interactions and events occur. As Bourdieu (2005, p. 24) says: "*there is a universe which I call [...] the field, that is, the universe in which social actors and institutions are embedded [...]. This universe is a social world like all others, but subject to specific social laws.*"

The field is space structured, created by social actors and the relationships they develop (Bourdieu, 2005, 1992). A derivative of the concept of field is the university field, which is a scientific field (Bourdiou, 2005). The university field is governed by relations of powers, it exercises constraints, it has monopolies, it is a site of contestation and struggle. The positions of subjects within the field depend on the type and volume of capital they possess and carry (Bourdieu & Waquant, 1992; Bourdieu, 2005).

Capital determines the position of social actors in the field and the kind of strategies they pursue within it. According to Bourdieu (1986, p. 241), "*Capital is accumulated labor (in its materialized form or its "incorporated," embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to*

*appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor*". It is the properties that confer power over the game and other players, the set of visible (objectified capital) or invisible (symbolic capital) elements that the acting subjects possess or try to acquire (Bourdieu, 1994).

Bourdieu (1992) distinguishes three types of capital: economic (possessions, assets), cultural and social capital (network of social relations). Cultural capital is divided into embodied (permanent and lasting dispositions), objectified (cultural goods works of art, books, paintings, ...) and institutionalized (goods validated by respective institutions, qualifications) (Bourdieu, 1994).

Capital, in all its individual forms, is an important resource, which provides important tools for mature students to "move" within the university. It allows them to identify elements of value within the field, understand how it works and formulate their strategies (Gale & Parker, 2017).

Finally, regarding the concept of strategy, in contrast to the use of the term in everyday language, where it is conceptualized through conscious and implicit calculation, in P. Bourdieu's theoretical scheme it is linked to the dispositions and the network of objective relations of the positions occupied by actors or institutions. The principle of strategies is not a cynical calculation, a conscious search to maximize profit, but an unconscious relation between an "hexis" and a field (Bourdieu et al., 1991).

For Bourdieu, the strategy or "sense of play" shapes the moves in the "game" that result from knowledge of its logic, knowledge acquired through experience (Eacott, 2010). Mature students within the university field develop individual or collective strategies to improve or maintain their position in relation to other actors - actors and position holders.

#### **4. Research Questions - Methodology**

In this paper, we attempt to answer the following research questions:

- a) Why did mature students decide to enroll at university and continue their studies?
- b) What are the main difficulties that mature students face in the Greek university?
- c) What strategies do mature students attending the Greek university adopt to overcome the difficulties they face?

The research is a case study, that is, it is "*developing detailed and in-depth knowledge about [...] a small number of related cases*" (Robson, 2010, p. 105). The sample size and the methodological approach we chose do not allow us to generalize the results to the wider population (Cohen et al., 2008; Kyriazi, 2011). Moreover, in the field of qualitative research, the concept of generalization, as defined in quantitative research, is not feasible. As Kyriazi (2011) argues, in qualitative research the classical concept of generalization is redefined and replaced by the concept of compatibility.

A small number of mature students were selected who are studying at the School of Humanities and Social Sciences of a regional Greek university. The group was studied

in context and the semi-structured interview technique (Robson, 2010) was chosen to collect information.

The research participants were selected using the available sample method (Kyriazi, 2011; Robson, 2010 - 315; Cohen et al., 2008). Specifically, we interviewed 10 students (2 males and 8 females), aged 26 - 51 years old. At the time of the interview, all students were enrolled in semesters beyond the 8th semester at a four-year school (Table 1).

The semi-structured interview was used as a research tool, which gave us the opportunity to highlight the views of the respondents and to explore their own “perspective” on the issue under research (Cohen et al., 2008).

**Table 1:** Demographic table

	Sex	Age	Marital Status	Year of Study	Way of Admission	Previous Studies
ST1	M <sup>1</sup>	31	Single	7 <sup>th</sup>	National exams <sup>3</sup>	Yes
ST2	F <sup>2</sup>	31	Married	7 <sup>th</sup>	National exams	Yes
ST3	F	51	Single-parent family	7 <sup>th</sup>	National exams	No
ST4	F	28	Single	10 <sup>th</sup>	Non graduated after completing the final year... <sup>4</sup>	No
ST5	F	26	Married	8 <sup>th</sup>	Non graduated ...	No
ST6	F	31	Single	7 <sup>th</sup>	Qualifying exams <sup>5</sup>	Yes
ST7	F	38	Married	10 <sup>th</sup>	Qualifying exams	Yes
ST8	F	41	Single	10 <sup>th</sup>	Special category <sup>6</sup>	No
ST9	M	26	Single	7 <sup>th</sup>	Non graduated...	Yes
ST10	M	26	Single	8 <sup>th</sup>	Non graduated...	Yes

**Notes:** 1=male, 2=female, 3=participated in national examinations at an age older than 24 years, 4=participated in national examinations at the age of 18 years and are still enrolled after the expected time of completion of their studies, 5=participated in special examinations in which university graduates participate, 6=enrolled in university without examinations as a person with a disability.

The interviews were conducted, following a pre-arranged appointment, on digital platforms chosen by the participants. Participants were informed, prior to the interview, of the objectives of the research and asked for their consent to record the conversation. The interviews were conducted between October and November 2022 and ranged in duration from 20 minutes to 30 minutes.

After the interviews were completed, they were transcribed and followed by a qualitative analysis of the content of the data collected (Creswell, 2011). According to the purpose of the research and the theoretical framework we adopted, we proceeded to categorize the data having the subject as the unit of record (Kyriazi, 2011). In terms of the degree of reduction, we stuck to the manifest content of the text (Kyriazi, 2011; Robson, 2010). We put together three conceptual categories which we used to present, analyse and discuss our findings. The conceptual categories we recommended are as follows:

- 1) Study starting points: endogenous differentiations,
- 2) Barriers and facilitators within the field,

3) Students' strategies for achieving their goals.

## 5. Presentation and analysis of the research findings

### 5.1 Study starting points: endogenous differentiations

For most adults, enrolling in a university program is a conscious act with specific goals. It is the result of a consideration of factors and usually has a clear justification.

A proportion of students decide to start their studies at an advanced age to satisfy a long-standing desire or to meet needs that have arisen in their working life. Our ST8 reported on this:

*"I finished high school, and I didn't succeed in university. At that time, I could not study, it was difficult for the family, I left the village and moved up to Athens. But the desire remained unquenched. When, because of my disability, I was given the opportunity to enter any University Department I wish, I didn't think about it at all. I entered the department with great enthusiasm!" (F8, 41 years old).*

ST3 decided to participate in national entrance exams for professional development purposes:

*"I took national exams to admit in the university. I believe that this bachelor's degree, apart from providing me with knowledge, will help me move forward. It is a way to advance in my profession. Until now I have not had the opportunity." (ST3, 51 years old)*

The increase in institutional capital, in a difficult and competitive labor market, as reflected in the previous statement, is an important motivation for other students. And while the two previous students are pursuing their first bachelor's degree, cases such as ST6 and ST7 demonstrate that many workers with substantial institutionalized capital seek to increase their capital through study. Indicatively, ST6 told us:

*"I already have a degree. I also have a postgraduate degree. But the unemployment rates that teachers face pushed me to continue. I thought it would be good to get a degree related to the first one. I also wanted to do a PhD, but I don't know if I will manage it in the end." (ST6, 31 years old)*

Adults, as reported by Asimaki et al. (2016), invest in the convertibility of institutionalized capital into token capital, hoping for future gains. ST5 tries to complete her studies hoping for convertibility:

*"I think it is purely a social reason. I can't accept being in a group and saying I haven't obtained a degree; I studied only in high school. No matter what I am, no matter what I do,*



*a degree is the greatest asset. If I can finish University, I'll do it, and I'm sure I've got nothing but to gain!"* (ST5, 26 years old)

For some students, enrolment in the school is a "corrective move" in relation to their previous study choices. Indicatively, ST10 told us:

*"My first degree was from the Department of Geology. I had nothing to do with that subject! But I always liked, as a subject, education. It was with this in mind that I chose the Department of Nursery Education"* (ST10, 26 years old).

Some students, who have not graduated after completing the final year of their studies, stated that they chose the department they were attending by chance when they were 18 years old, and since then they have faced serious difficulties in completing their studies. ST2's response is illustrative:

*"I got into the Department of Philosophy, by accident actually. As I started, I thought it might be something I would like, so I went ahead with it."* (ST2, 31 years old).

## **5.2. Barriers and facilitators within the field**

Mature students, being within the university field, must face difficulties that are, in the first place, linked to their adult life and their characteristics. As adults, most of them have family responsibilities (motherhood, family care) that prevent them from fulfilling their student obligations. The following extracts are typical:

*"Shortly after I enrolled in the University, my first child was born. I had to dedicate myself to it. A few years later the second one followed. The family obligations, the fatigue, the morning work. I wasn't involved in my studies at all. I had left it."* (ST7, 38 years old)

*"I am a mother of a child, which I support as much as I can. I am a single-parent family. There are practical issues and issues of survival, livelihood."* (ST3, 51 years old).

Alongside family responsibilities, almost all research participants have work commitments that prevent them from attending classes regularly. ST2 stated in this regard:

*"Don't forget that I was also working. I was a career counsellor at the Second Chance School in Santorini [Aegean Island]. I had to go to Santorini on Monday, return to Athens [place of residence] on Wednesday and go down to Patras [the University's headquarters] on Friday for the workshops."* (ST2, 31 years old)

ST9 complements:

*"To most employers, I mention that I have a workshop [at university] and I want to attend it and they say it's not their problem" (ST9, 26 years old)*

Parallel work during studies is an absolute necessity for most. ST1 told us:

*"I've been working since I was 15, I can't do anything else. I work alongside my studies, as I told you. I didn't get into university at 18. I'm 30 years old, I'm going to 31, so I can't afford not to work." (F1, 31 years old).*

Family and work commitments force mature students to study at a distance, away from their place of residence, at a university where face-to-face teaching is a prerequisite for several courses, mainly of a laboratory nature. They told us about it:

*"I don't live in Patras; I live in Athens. In the university we have workshops and I had to find a way to attend them, but it was impossible for me. So, I left the workshops for about 3 years." (ST2, 31 years old)*

Along with the difficulties mentioned above, there are also difficulties that are directly related to the university, its anthropogenic environment, and the demands of the curriculum.

Regarding the lecturers and their pedagogical practices, they reported:

*"We had some professors who had a very dismissive attitude towards us. Their attitude was not helpful." (ST4, 28 years old).*

In addition, the university's way of functioning and culture is not familiar to people, such as mature students who return to education after years without previous university experience. ST3 referred to the related difficulties they face:

*"The courses have a high degree of difficulty. You have to work academically. Go beyond what the professor hands you. This is dealt with differently when you are in your 18s or 20s and differently from a person who is in their 50s, like me." (ST3, 51 years old)*

To add to the above, the difficulty in the content of the studies:

*"The lesson is difficult ... the curriculum is sometimes quite demanding. A lot of difficult courses." (ST2, 31 years old)*

Both intra-university factors and the family environment contribute to overcoming difficulties. Regarding the former, several participants refer to the positive treatment they received as mature students from lecturers and other faculty members. The response of ST8 is illustrative:

*"When I joined the department, I found a community that was very supportive. Most of the faculty members had tremendous interest and responsibility for their students. They are very friendly, helpful, and they are empathetic."* (ST8, 41 years old)

Very important, however, as documented in the relevant literature (Webber & Dismore, 2021), is family support. The economical, but especially the emotional and social capital provided by the family is crucial for the progression of studies. ST3's testimony is typical:

*"I live with my parents, and I don't know if I would have managed to be here if I was alone. My parents have helped me a lot. We are like.... If it wasn't for them, I might not have gotten into this process."* (ST3, 51 years old)

She adds:

*"My son is 20 years old. He is studying and that helps me. There is motivation for both. We talk. We are like a crutch for each other"* (ST3, 51 years old).

### **5.3. Students' strategies for achieving their goals**

The desire to complete their studies, which is evident in the mature students in the sample, leads them to develop strategies within the university field that help them to overcome obstacles and achieve their goals.

The most frequently cited strategy is the creation of a network with students, mature and non-mature, with whom they exchange information and material useful for maintaining contact with the school and taking exams. In other words, it is sought and achieved to increase social capital within the field (Sakkoulis & Vergidis, 2022) to overcome difficulties, such as those mentioned in the previous section. ST3 told us:

*"I was lucky enough to find other fellow students besides E. [name of mature fellow student] who helped me. They kept me informed and gave me lesson notes. I was lucky in that respect. We helped each other and there was mutual understanding."* (ST3, 51 years old).

Social media, such as Facebook, act as an adjunct in strengthening the support network. We were told:

*"There is a Facebook group and there we help each other. Even if we haven't seen each other in person, we support each other."* (ST2, 31 years old).

The maturity and life experience that characterizes this group of students also shape their respective practices in the field. As testified by their speech they can study

the field better and act accordingly. They have “a sense of the game” and formulate corresponding strategies. The following statements are indicative:

*“It is very important to understand that you are in a different context. To change the way you study. You need to cultivate your critical skills. When you read a text, you have to do a comparative study to be able to decode it.” (ST4, 28 years old).*

In this perspective, practices such as the use of digital resources or systematic study are called upon to cover fragmented learning. We were told:

*“Access to knowledge and information is easy through the computer. I am provided with the opportunity to access libraries and journals. I don’t have to go to the library. I download books, articles, exam papers, material uploaded to e-class and notes from classes.” (ST8, 41 years old).*

*“The point was to advance to the next semester, not to fall behind. I wanted there to be a flow, no stagnation, even if I didn’t pass all the courses.” (F3, 51 years old)*

ST6, understanding the difficulties of the field, in order to complete her studies, decided to temporarily stop working:

*“I took a year off work. I was in the private sector as a teacher. I stopped for a year so that I could do the mandatory workshops.” (ST6, 31 years old).*

When external obstacles are insurmountable and difficulties prevent systematic study, strategies for superficial completion of student obligations are followed. Preparation is incomplete and participation is superficial. ST10 reported to us this:

*“I was not able to study, to do comprehensive preparation. So, the process was as follows: we were informed what the SOS exam topics were, i.e., the topics that are most likely to be taken in the exam, we read the material once to get an overview and then I focus on the SOS topics (ST10, 26 years old).*

## **6. Discussion – Conclusions**

The research questions that concerned us in this study were related to the reasons for the enrolment of mature students in the Greek university, the difficulties that this group faces during their studies and the strategies they adopt to overcome them.

As adults, mature students come for the first time or return to university with specific goals. Their range of experiences is broader and different from that of students of ordinary age.

They have decided to enroll at university, seeking to increase their institutional capital to meet the demands of a difficult and competitive labor market. Having had short- or long-term work experience, they attempt through their studies to enrich their CVs with certified institutional capital, a choice that will make them more competitive in the labor market and take them out of the realm of job insecurity. Secondly, they invest in the convertibility of institutional capital into token capital, hoping for future gains. Previous research (Asimaki et al., 2016) has found that adult students of Second Chance Schools follow similar practices. In other words, we find that adults, depending on their previous studies, return to university to increase their institutional and token capital to meet their emerging or even fixed needs.

For a proportion of mature students, enrolment in school is a “corrective move” in relation to the previous study choices they had made, having found that they did not meet their interests.

Enrolling and attending university at an older age than usual is also for some students the fulfilment of a long-standing wish which they had not been able to fulfil. Finally, in Greek higher education, the category of mature students includes students who remain enrolled and potentially active after the end of the prescribed years of study and constitute a subgroup of students like that of mature students. In both cases, we are referring to heterogeneous groups who are required to overcome a few barriers to participate in the academic process.

The barriers to attendance that mature students have to overcome, apart from the age gap, are difficulties related to the demands of adult life such as:

- Family responsibilities. They are often married and/or have dependents. Family and university are two “greedy” - competing institutions and attending university, especially for mothers, is an arduous task (Webber & Dismore, 2021).
- Professional commitments. Working hours, work-related stress and job insecurity form conditions that deter systematic and effective university attendance (Vergidis & Panagiotakopoulos, 2003).
- Place of residence. Often mature students, due to family and work commitments, are forced to permanently reside far from the seat of the university they are attending, resulting in inconsistent student obligations.

Also, in some cases, obstacles are the individual characteristics of the university of attendance: the human environment (lecturers and other staff), pedagogical practices and the curriculum.

Both intra-university factors and the family environment contribute to overcoming these difficulties, which are mainly due to the demands of adult life. In particular, the supportive context and the university's inclusive culture and family support make attendance manageable and completion of studies a likely possibility (Webber & Dismore, 2021).

In addition, mature students develop strategies within the university setting that contribute to overcoming barriers and achieving their goal of degree completion. According to the data we collected, these strategies are:

- creation and utilization of support networks within the university field. These networks are also enriched using digital social media. The augmentation of social capital within the field is crucial for the outcome of studies and is an important mechanism to address the inability to participate in the educational process regularly and consistently within the field (Sakkoulis & Vergidis, 2022).
- exploring the requirements of the field and formulating appropriate practices, such as making use of every available resource (e.g., digital platforms, support material), systematic study, organizing a long-term study plan, or temporarily suspending professional obligations.
- inadequate preparation and involvement of a process-oriented nature.

In conclusion, we find that mature students constitute a special student category for which Greek universities do not have a formulated proposal for its management. International experience shows that the number of mature students is increasing and the need to readjust university education to the new reality arises. In this respect, it would be useful for the university community to formulate a concrete policy proposal in time, taking into account the increased enrolment requests from people who are different in age from the normal student population. In order to formulate this proposal, we believe that issues such as the access and possibility for adults to attend conventional universities and the framework for their studies should be reassessed. In this direction, inclusiveness, in terms of the composition of the student population, and flexibility, in terms of curricula and pedagogical practices, are possible guidelines.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### **About the Author(s)**

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