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# Design and Delivery of Quality Study Programs for Adult Part Time Students in Scandinavian Universities

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## Introduction

Universities today have several tasks to fulfil, but many of them have not adjusted to this. Their culture, organization, pedagogy, selection and motivation of staff etc. still linger in times when the main obligations for universities was to do research and alongside with this teach a small elite of socially well off students to prepare them for crucial jobs in society afterwards. What society needs and expects from universities today in the educational field is instead mass education and engagement in lifelong learning. This alongside with a need in society for universities to engage actively in the development of business, industry and society on a regional, national and global scale calls for changes in universities in many respects. To analyse what changes are needed and to implement these changes universities must to a much higher degree learn to get into true dialogues with the world outside universities and learn to listen and adjust to the needs, wishes, thoughts etc. of the end users of university offers.

This papers analyses and discusses problems in the field of lifelong learning. What do universities need to know and what and how do they need to change to cater properly for different groups of adult part time students? A new collection of empirical data on adult part time students in Scandinavian university study programs will be presented, analysed and discussed. This data collection has taken place in 2004-2006 in parallel in Norway, Sweden and Denmark by a research network supported as an expert group on the 'invisible student' by the Norwegian Netuniversity.

## Postmodern adult part time students – what do we know about them?

The first important characteristic for adult part time students is that this group of students differs from young students in many respects (experience, family obligations, job situation etc.). We often tend to forget this although it seems a trivial observation, nonetheless it has been custom in many universities that the same study programs which have originally been developed to young students are also offered to adult students, unfortunately often leading to high drop out rates and modest satisfaction rates in this group. Distance education has been introduced in many universities, however, as a means to overcome some adult characteristics.

Realizing that good knowledge of existing and future adult groups in part time education in universities is scarce (Støkken et al. 2002) and that future developments must be built on such knowledge (Jarvis 1995) a survey has been made in both Denmark, Norway and Sweden on characteristics of existing adult part time students and how they experience studying and combining study obligations with everyday life in their jobs and in their families. In each of the countries Denmark and Norway 1500 adult part time students have answered a detailed questionnaire on part time studying and everyday life. As the Swedish data collection is not finished yet, so far 700

respondents have answered the Swedish version of the questionnaire, this paper will only draw in Danish and the Norwegian data.

Our data clearly show that adult part time students in Scandinavia have a very complex everyday life. On the other hand this together with their age means, however, that they have a lot of experiences to build on. As for age Scandinavian part time students have become younger than years ago but still considerably older than the traditional first time student in universities. About 40% of the Norwegian respondents are 30-39 years old, about 36% 40-49 years old. The Danish respondents are a bit younger 42 % being under 35 years old and 33 % between 35 and 45 years old. Family obligations of adult part time students must be characterized as important and no doubt demanding. Almost 80% of the Norwegian respondents – 78% of the Danish respondents - live together with a partner and about 73% of the Norwegian respondents – 59% of the Danish respondents - have children at home. On top of this nearly all adult part time students are also working while studying. 84% of the Norwegian respondents – 95% of the Danish respondents - are working while studying, and only 33% have part time jobs in Norway – in Denmark even less, e.g. 11%. So half of the adult part time students in Norway combine full time jobs and a part time study program, in Denmark even the number is even higher, e.g. 83%. All in all Scandinavian adult part time students of today must be characterized as a student group with a very heavy work load and very complex and demanding study conditions.

A less trivial observation than the group of part time adult students being different from young students would be that it may be more correct to think and talk about postmodern adult students as individuals than as a group.

However, subgroups seem clearly relevant in many respects, as will be shown below, when correspondences between adult characteristics and appropriate design and delivery principles are analyzed. First and foremost sex and educational back ground turn out to be two very important subgroup factors which each of them and in combination are linked to specific needs and wishes in adult education and different ways at looking at what defines appropriate design and delivery of educational programs. As for sex it is worth noticing that male students are very often underrepresented in adult education in Scandinavia today. In the Norwegian sample almost 79% are female. In the Danish sample .... Therefore a profound challenge for universities must be to broaden and/or change their lifelong learning offers in such a way that they also appeal to men. Besides this another sex related challenge in adult education seems to be that sex highly influences what adults think about good learning environments. This will be discussed further below.

Also educational background seems to matter highly when it comes to describing successful design principles in adult part time study programs. Lorentsen (2004 and 2007) as will be discussed in detail below show for instance that different cultures in 3 year professional educational programs in health, education etc. and more traditional 5 year academic master programmes and the differing working conditions and cultures which these two groups meet after finished education lead to quite different opinions on for instance how lifelong learning programs and jobs should be integrated, what contents support working life best etc.

Both differences between adult and young students and differences among adult students themselves constitute challenges for universities, when they try to (re)design appropriate study programs for adult part time students. The more you know about adult students the higher the probability is, however, that you can design and deliver better programs than today. Therefore a discussion of what we already know and what new knowledge we should create about adult learners, their lives and thoughts and how we should use this knowledge is important.

### **Broadening our knowledge on everyday life for adult students**

As data show adult part time students are woven into a net of everyday obligations which a successful design of adult part time programs must be aware of. For adult part time students it is not enough, therefore, to study the traditional didactic relations between teacher, student and subject/materials. A much more complex design model must be applied. Elements in such a more complex model are: work, family, spare time and study activities (Grepperud et al. 2006). How these fields of activity are woven together varies, but the important point is that adults try to create a totality of them to live as sound human beings and that the design and delivery principles of adult part time programs may support or work against the creation of such a totality. Therefore more profound knowledge of how adults integrate studying into their everyday lives and what kinds of roles and relations are needed to succeed becomes important.

To build up such updated knowledge a survey has, as mentioned above, been carried through in all three Scandinavian countries. Since the Norwegian data analysis has been developed further than in the two other countries, for the time being, the following will build on the Norwegian data only.

In Norway 40 adult part time study programs have been studied. 1477 students in these programs have filled in the questionnaire from autumn 2004-2005. All 4 elements in the mentioned complex analytical and productive model for adult part time study programs – family, spare time, job and study program – are investigated, analyzed and discussed in the Norwegian survey (Grepperud et al. 2006).

As for family the Norwegian data show clearly that studying for adults is a family matter, not an individual matter. Support from family members when you start studying as an adult is characterized as very important by the Norwegian respondents. Almost all who have started studying have experienced support from their partner and/or children. And the main part of all students also value support from partner and children highly while studying. Lifelong learning as a family matter is also underlined by the fact that home is the most important study arena for adult part time students. 88% of the female and 73% of the male respondents in Norway primarily study at home – often in rooms also used by other family members (40% describe their study context like this). Finally also spare time activities – individual and in the family – are influenced by studying. About 70% of the Norwegian respondents indicate that they have had to reduce such activities to cope.

Adults' part time study activities have almost always been thought of as linked to their job situation in one way or another. The Norwegian data show, however, that this link is more complex and filled with more obstacles than our traditional a bit naïve linkage between lifelong learning and job is aware of. In that respect the Norwegian data points to aspects which future design and delivery of lifelong learning offers must take into account.

Firstly motives for studying have normally been divided into job related motives and personal motives and lifelong learning offers have traditionally focussed on one of these kinds of motives. The Norwegian data show, however, that these two groups of motives are not any longer looked upon by adults as parallel and dichotomous but as interdependent, interrelated. Thus it seems important to bear in mind when creating new models of lifelong learning that work in modern society often has both a more instrumental function (earning money) and at the same time is related to identity building, personal development etc. (Hochschild 1997). Linking contents of study programs to adults' job situation therefore must be looked upon now and in the future as more complex than before.

It is also worth noticing in the Norwegian data that adults seldom have the opportunity to study in their working place (almost 70% never study during working hours), and that they seldom experience substantial financial support from their employer for lifelong learning activities, not to mention experience that they are relieved of tasks to spend time on study activities (53% never experience that others take over some of their tasks while studying). On the other hand they feel morally supported by their employer and colleagues to study. All in all not an ideal study context, however.

### **From everyday life to design principles in adult part time study programs**

A bearing principle in the research carried out by the mentioned Scandinavian research network under the Norwegian Netuniversity is that adults' everyday life conditions – once we know more about these and we will when we have completed our Scandinavian survey in the field – and their own thoughts on good lifelong learning design and delivery principles should be reflected in future part time study programs and that universities will not reach its full potential in the field of lifelong learning until this happens. To get to know more about what adults themselves think about appropriate design and delivery principles in lifelong learning a major survey on design and delivery principles has been carried through in Denmark among potential – not actual - customers of university part time study programs (Lorentsen 2004). 3740 respondents contributed to the survey of whom almost 83% had not taken part in part time programs offered by universities during the latest two years. So they were in fact adults who had not so far been reached by university part time programs, although they were indeed – according to their educational background and occupation - part of the potential target group of these.

The key word resulting from the survey is a wish for more *flexibility* than what is now offered (Collis & Moonen 2001) – both more structural flexibility (a more modular organization instead of fixed programs of several years is called for), more organizational flexibility (individual flexibility stressed as to time and place of study – for instance through distance education) and more content related flexibility (choosing between modules, stressing the implication of program contents for the individual learner). Another key result of the survey is, however, that more flexibility does not mean that all respondents want to skip *traditional ways of teaching and learning in Scandinavia* - on the contrary. Many of the respondents explicitly express that they want to combine the two concepts of flexibility on the one hand and interaction, contact, dialogue on the other hand.

Consequently, the survey concludes that the main challenge for universities when designing part time programs in the future seems to be to be able to create the right mix of individual flexibility and more traditional Scandinavian social constructivist teaching and learning methods.

To deepen our understanding of these results and to be able to transform these results into the most appropriate design and delivery principles for future adult part time offers at university level a qualitative study has been carried through afterwards. This study will here be analyzed in more detail in the following, because it widens our perspective on adult part time design and delivery principles and through that both show clear future challenges for Scandinavian universities offering adult part time study programs and help us find out how these challenges may be solved building on Scandinavian traditions and ways of thinking in the field of education and adult teaching and learning..

### **Interviewing adult part time students in Denmark on the ideal design of part time programs**

54 adults have been interviewed in Denmark on their ideas about the ideal design of part time programs for adult students. The 54 respondents were chosen to represent potential university part time students as well as possible, and - as first and foremost sex, educational background and sector of occupation had been proven to play an important role for adults' opinions about design of good part time study programs in the survey - the 54 interview persons were also chosen in such a way that they represent different important groups according to these parameters. So about half of the persons interviewed were female, about half of them male (56 and 44%), about half of them had a 5 year university degree (an arts or language degree, a degree in natural sciences, law or engineering, or a degree as dentist etc), the other half a 3 year degree either from a university or an educational or health school or a similar institution (librarians, physio therapists, nurses, teachers, social workers), and 65% were working in the public sector, 35% in the private sector. Interview persons were also chosen from all regions of Denmark to represent potential geographical differences.

The interviews all covered some fixed themes and an open ended theme in order to both supplement existing knowledge in the field and build up new ideas which had not perhaps been covered before. An open ended theme started all interviews, as people were asked to express in their own words and with their own priorities what they thought defines a good design of part time programs and what they would suggest be improved in existing programs to make them more successful. After this a number of fixed themes were introduced, covering important aspects of adult part time program design known from earlier research such as the relation between part time study program and job and distance education and the concept of flexibility in a Scandinavian context.

#### **1. Narratives about the ideal design of part time study programs**

The interviewed persons' free narratives on the ideal design of part time study programs may be divided into three categories, parts where they talk about the ideal *form* of such programs, parts where they deal with *content* issues, and parts where more *overall* issues are covered.

As for the overall issues they confirm what we already know from earlier research, namely that financial matters related to lifelong learning and how one's working place responds to education means a lot to adults. The general impression of the interviewed persons is that lifelong learning is too expensive, that they have to pay too much themselves and that employers do not give them good enough conditions for taking part in lifelong learning activities. All of this needs to be improved according to the interviewed persons.

Interesting is, however, that other softer overall issues matter just as much to the interviewed persons when describing a more ideal world of lifelong learning. Two types are especially stressed as important, namely the lacking or bad dialogue between institutions offering lifelong learning and business and industry, including the potential participants themselves, and the - according to many of the interviewed persons - much too one eyed, narrow and academically traditional opinion in universities about what constitutes knowledge and how knowledge is generated. A true and open dialogue about needs and ways of collaboration is an important prerequisite for more ideal lifelong learning offers and activities to many of the interviewed persons. Such a dialogue might even also improve universities' attitude towards other ways of looking at knowledge generation and knowledge sharing than what is part of the typical academic epistemology according to many of the respondents. Important is that many of the interviewed persons - and especially those with a non university degree themselves - interpret the reigning epistemology in universities which is copied in

their lifelong learning offers as disrespect towards learning and generating knowledge from practice and experience.

Form issues which dominate in the interviews are especially 1) talk about time and place and 2) the interplay between structure and processes in programs dedicated to adults.

Time is definitely seen as a scarce factor by adults of today due to many different obligations in working life, family life and their spare time, and their lives are characterized by an abundance of offers and possibilities of which only some can be chosen. In order to create as much coherence in such an everyday life as possible and to make it possible to squeeze in lifelong learning activities as well the interviewed persons ask for activities which suit especially their conditions. This means that all kinds of different activities are asked for, a much richer variety than what is offered today where the interviewed adults feel they are the ones that have to adjust to the offers of universities whereas the opposite should be the case according to the respondents. In the obvious wish for a more differentiated and varied offer of lifelong learning activities some patterns can be located, however. Firstly many of the interviewed persons mention that a much more explicit, planned and well thought through coherence between institutional lifelong learning offers and work as a place of learning should be established. The respondents see this a huge challenge for universities who – as mentioned earlier – according to the interviewed persons are used to offer what they think best in what way they think best. Secondly an important pattern is that everybody wants increased flexibility in lifelong learning offers but the price different groups are willing to pay to gain increased flexibility varies considerably. So traditional distance education is not an appropriate general answer to this enormous wish for flexibility as claimed by many researchers and practitioners earlier. Flexibility must be catered for in many different ways, perhaps though introducing a customer driven cut and paste ideology into all existing and new delivery methods – a challenge to all who deliver lifelong learning activities.

Being realistic the interviewed persons know that living with a rich number of choices in lifelong learning offers – as they not only ask for but demand themselves as described above – is demanding, so a demand for help and support to navigate through this richness of choices successfully is also expressed by nearly all of the interviewed persons, the aim being that the individual through support, good materials, dialogue etc. will be able to establish an explicit, well reasoned and thought through balance between structure and flexibility which suits the individual participant.

Engaging the individual in planning his or her own activities in lifelong learning can be seen as part of a broader wish by the interviewed persons for increased engagement and involvement of the participants in good lifelong learning offers. The interviewed persons talk about themselves as co-creators of their own lifelong learning activities. To succeed in that less constraints related to issues of access, less set curriculum's etc. in lifelong learning offers are important according to the interviewed persons. Instead a much closer relation to the participants working life is a general wish by all interviewed persons. Interesting is, however, that a close link to working life doesn't mean the same to all. A clear difference can be seen between how people with a long academic educational background and how persons with a professional education as teachers, nurses, physio therapists, librarians etc. define and talk about links between lifelong learning and their jobs in the interviews. Whereas educational and health persons etc. talk about that lifelong learning should contribute more directly to problem solving in their actual working context, people with a more traditional academic background ask for relevant contents in lifelong learning defined as new ideas, input to be able to understand and put their work into perspective etc.

## **2. Interrelations between part time study program and job**

As mentioned in the analysis of the free narratives of the interviewed persons about more ideal lifelong learning offers a better link between part time study programs and work is seen as important by all interviewed persons. For universities this defines several challenges, some of which will be discussed here.

The crown jewel of educational offers by universities is that they are based on research. However Lorentsen (2004) could conclude from nearly 4000 adults responding to a questionnaire on design of adult part time offers that 26% of the respondents, all of whom represent potential participants in university part time offers, only give little or no importance at all to lifelong learning being based on research. The interviews try to locate *why* this is so and to deepen our knowledge of what reasons *specific groups* give for not valuing research in lifelong learning.

In the interviews a huge number of myths about research are expressed. Research is described as diffuse, airy, long haired, foggy, abstract, strange activities, the worth of which therefore in the perspective of the individual adult is often seen as too risky to bet on in a context where time is a scarce factor and more consolidated knowledge therefore is preferable.

Especially men in the private sector and persons with a professional education as teachers, nurses etc. reject research as important in lifelong learning. In the interviews it becomes clear that men in the private sector are the ones most influenced by speed and fast financial output as decisive factors in their working life, and that research doesn't go very well together with these priorities. As for people with a professional education as teachers, nurses etc. other factors seem decisive. Research to this group represents a closed, to them unknown world driven by its own internal needs and priorities with too little interaction with needs and priorities of the outside world. As a consequence this group, which is oriented very much towards operative input and answers to daily problems, doesn't value such research as important. Their basic education has taken place in an educational culture not based on traditional research, and in their working life they think of themselves as patricians with practical problems, who mainly learn from experience. All of this makes traditional research in universities less attractive and relevant to this group. To universities the general bad image of research and the two mentioned groups' strong rejection of research as relevant in lifelong learning form a huge challenge.

Another challenge to universities when trying to live up to adults' wish for a better link between lifelong learning and working life as described above is to better understand different groups' specific identity linked to working life, since linking lifelong learning and working life must be based on such an understanding. Through the interviews clear differences in working culture and mentality are expressed, especially when traditional academics are compared to persons with a professional education in education, health etc. People with a traditional long academic education seem to see themselves as more closely connected to their subject field, their educational field than their concrete actual job. Having studied mathematics for instance it seems you see yourself primarily as a mathematician, only secondly as a teacher. Independence, curiosity, willingness to take risks, abstraction etc. are key words which by all groups interviewed are linked to persons having completed a traditional long academic education. Opposite this people with a shorter education in a specific professional field like education, health etc. seem to think of themselves as patricians in a specific profession with concrete daily problems to solve. Integrating long periods with practical work as part of their basic education supports this identity. Differences in identity, culture and mentality makes it challenging for vendors of lifelong learning to create offers relevant to all.

### **3. Developing flexibility and distance education to be appropriate delivery methods to adults in a Scandinavian context**

Denmark has not had a long tradition of distance education as in Norway and Sweden. This can be explained by geographical reasons. However, a growing demand for distance education can now be noticed also in Denmark when adults themselves are consulted about their needs related to lifelong learning (Lorentsen 2004). It is the intention of the interviews conducted to further a better understanding of *why* such a need is expressed now in order to be able to support the development of the most appropriate version of distance education possible. It is also the intention of the interviews conducted to shed more light on why especially females with a professional education in health, education etc. don't join in in the general wish for more distance education, on the contrary, they highly reject distance education in our data.

Independence of time and place has always been stressed as important in distance education. It seems, however, that these concepts take on a new meaning today. Whereas independence of time and place used to a solution for practical problems or matters of educational inequality today they seem to a much higher degree to be reflections of postmodern living conditions. Postmodern human beings, including our interviewed persons, express that they need delivery methods which interfere as little as possible with the rest of their lives on a structural level, on the contrary the ideal delivery method in lifelong learning would be one that can adjust to the conditions of each individual adult and in that way help them cope with both everyday obligations at work and at home and lifelong learning activities. Distance education is by many seen as exactly such a method which lets everybody become director of his or her own life. Many of the interviewed persons are, however, well aware that the individual flexibility you may gain through distance education also may mean setbacks if you are not able as an individual to make use of such a flexibility in a constructive way. Firstly many of the females interviewed express doubts about how well distance education would work for them. What they fear is that the flexibility of distance education can be exploited by the rest of the family so that they as females would still be main responsible for duties at home and always accessible by the rest of the family while studying resulting in lack of concentration and coherence in their study processes. Secondly a general concern about distance education is reflected in the interviews as to what degree of self-discipline you need to be able to exercise while studying in distance education, and postmodern human beings are normally not characterized by strong discipline. Finally many of the respondents fear that they will loose contact to other participants if studying at a distance. In spite of individual flexibility being a must for postmodern adults – in order to survive in a world of many possibilities and obligations – at least Scandinavian postmodern human beings don't want to give up discussing with others and establishing networks through lifelong learning activities. So the describes doubts about distance education don't question the general growing need for more distance education in lifelong learning in Denmark. Instead they must be interpreted as directions for what kind of flexibility and / or distance education should be offered in Scandinavia in the future. Traditional distance education models from countries with a long tradition of individual distance education cannot be copied. Instead new models suiting the needs of postmodern human beings must be developed.

Females with a professional education at bachelors level within education, health etc. highly reject distance education both in our survey on design of part time offers for adults (Lorentsen 2004) and in the interviews (Lorentsen 2007). As this very group in all Scandinavian countries is a very important player in lifelong learning activities at high level and potential important participants in part time studies organized by universities it is crucial to understand why this is so in order to

analyze if something can be done and if so what can be done to make distance education which corresponds with all adults' need for flexibility also attractive to this group. From the interviews it becomes clear that this group's negative feelings towards distance education are rooted in three characteristics of this group. They are female, they belong to a specific educational culture and working culture, and they don't feel comfortable with the technical aspects of distance education. As mentioned earlier it seems to be a strong characteristic of females that they value communication and interaction highly in education. In this case this is supplemented by a strong wish for a highly collaborative learning and working environment, which we find in most persons with a professional education at bachelor's level in health, education etc. And on top of that the same group finds use of computers a bit alienating. As distance education is traditionally associated with working on your own without much interaction and communication with other participants using computers for whatever contact is foreseen it is obvious why especially this group of females reject distance education so strongly. However, no one says that the traditional picture of what distance education is like needs to guide Scandinavian universities in their future developments in the field. On the contrary it must be a challenge to Scandinavian universities to develop new models of distance education which both meet adults need for more flexibility due to their living conditions and preserve traditionally highly valued characteristics of Scandinavian teaching and learning philosophy, that is communication, interaction, collaboration and networking.

## **Conclusion**

Scandinavian universities must work on and overcome huge but also very interesting challenges to design and deliver appropriate part time study offers to future generations of adults. To succeed a more profound knowledge and understanding of the target group as such and important subgroups is crucial. What do adults think constitutes good lifelong learning, and how do they experience and organize their lives when trying to cope with lifelong learning as a parallel activity to job and family life? How can differences of opinion defining important subgroups among potential participants in lifelong learning at high level be understood and explained? Our collection of empirical data in all three Scandinavian countries aims at shedding light on questions like these. Once a better understanding of the potential target group and its important subgroups has been established models for future design and delivery of specific lifelong learning programs and offers may be formulated. In a Scandinavian context many interesting questions seem to arise here: How can we develop new models of lifelong learning which can give adults both huge individual flexibility and traditional Scandinavian quality learning processes characterized by communication, interaction, collaboration and networking? How can new models help create a totality – although a complex one - of adults' lives instead of - as is often the case today - introducing a battle between lifelong learning activities on one hand and everyday activities at work or in family life on the other hand, resulting in stress, bad conscience etc.? Scandinavian traditions of thinking holistically about people, their activities and contexts could be a strong starting point for solving such global challenges.

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