

Flexible Studies as Strategy for Lifelong Learning

Liv Susanne BUGGE

*Department of Social Sciences, Faculty of Education and Natural Sciences, Hedmark University College, Norway
liv.bugge@hihm.no*

Gerd WIKAN

*Department of Social Sciences, Faculty of Education and Natural Sciences, Hedmark University College, Norway
gerd.wikan@hihm.no*

ABSTRACT

Many countries face a challenge in recruiting teachers. At the same time, the labour market is changing and the demand for re-education is increasing. In this situation, lifelong learning is seen as relevant and higher education institutions are asked to offer flexible and decentralised study programmes in order to accommodate the need for formal education for adults. High dropout rates, partly explained by a diverse student body with little time for study, aggravate the situation. Progress might be influenced by how the study programme is organised. In this quantitative study among 511 student teachers, we examine whether there are differences between students attending differently organised studies. The findings indicate that flexible and campus-based study programmes attract students with different characteristics. In a lifelong learning perspective, it looks to be a promising strategy to offer flexibly organised studies to meet the demands of an increasingly diverse student body.

Keywords: Study programme, flexible studies, teacher education, lifelong learning

INTRODUCTION

Many countries face a challenge in recruiting teachers and the mismatch between demand and supply of teachers is well recognised internationally. There is an ongoing discussion about what means could be used to expand the pool of qualified teachers. As UNESCO points out: ‘Universal primary education (UPE) will remain a distant dream for millions of children living in countries without enough teachers in classrooms’ (UNESCO, 2014). The same situation is observed in the area of Early Childhood Education and Care. For instance, in almost all countries in Europe there is a shortage of places in kindergartens (European Commission, 2014) and meeting this demand requires more kindergarten teachers.

Also in Norway, teacher shortage concerns educational authorities. The discrepancy between the number of student teachers and the demand for teachers is alarming. According to the latest estimates developed by Statistics Norway, the shortage of teachers will be about 38 000 in the year 2025 (Gjefsen, Gunnes & Stølen, 2014). There is thus an increasing need for teachers. However, enrolments in teacher education are too low, despite national campaigns aimed at increasing enrolments. Norwegian kindergartens and schools at all levels face a growing shortage of teachers and there are several reasons for this. The shortage in kindergartens is a consequence of the high rise in the number of places during the last decade. In primary, secondary and upper secondary school, a high proportion of teachers will retire in the period to come (Næss, Prøitz & Aamodt, 2014). The lack of teachers at all levels is even more concerning as the labour market is changing rapidly. The economy of the 21st century moves towards a situation where ‘the knowledge worker’ in what could be called the knowledge economy tends to be of the greatest importance for society (Lee, 2014). The proportion of jobs which presupposes higher education has augmented during decades to the detriment of the need for unskilled workers. The demand for re-education is present in many branches since new jobs often require new skill profiles. However, to assume that individuals are generally willing and able to develop employability skills and that this guarantees continuous employment is contested (Haasler, 2013). According to Serban (2013), labour market rigidities (among them scarcity of skills) prevent rapid adjustment of employment with regards to volume and structure. This situation, characterised by a scarcity of teachers and at the same time a growing demand for educated employees, implies a pressure on higher educational institutions to graduate more candidates.

Dealing with the above-mentioned challenges lifelong learning is increasingly mentioned as a solution. The discourse has emphasised equal learning possibilities for all, however this could cause problems for individuals not able to perform as expected (Siivonen, 2016). The EU seems to underline lifelong learning as a means to reform the national education systems (Volles, 2016). The aim is to give people of all ages equal and open access

to learning opportunities of high quality (Eurostat, 2016). As part of the EU Lisbon process, all member and associated countries should develop a strategy for lifelong learning. Lifelong learning is part of the strategy to increase Europe's global competitiveness. The term 'lifelong learning' is a political objective and implies that the conditions for learning shall be so favourable that individuals will continue to learn throughout their lifespan. Under the influence of the Bologna process, major reforms within higher education have had some effect of increasing opportunities for adults to have higher education (Saar, Täht & Roosalu, 2014). However, there are important differences across European countries (Souto-Otero & Whitworth, 2016). In 2007, the Norwegian Government launched the present strategy for lifelong learning (Ministry of Education and Research, 2007). However, the legislative roots are older and go back to the Adult Education Act in 1976 and the first 'Lifelong Learning Report' from 1986. So even though the concept was not new; the arguments had become more comprehensive and now focused on the need for individuals to continually upgrade their competence due to the fast changes in the modern labour market (op.cit.). As part of the strategy, higher education institutions are asked to offer flexible and decentralised study programmes in order to accommodate the need for formal education for adults who need to combine work or other obligations with studies. An Official Norwegian Report states that the majority of the population have to expect that choices regarding education and career have to be made several times during life span (NOU, 2016).

Because of many factors, the student body has become more heterogeneous as new groups seek higher education. This means that students are increasingly combining studies with other commitments such as family obligations in addition to paid work (Alltree & Quadri, 2007). The idea of the full-time student without paid work has become less and less true (Beerkens, Mägi, & Lill, 2011; Hall, 2010). Many students experience problems about time allocation. Students with children often meet challenges; a study from the UK finds that universities have a tendency to ignore students' conflicting demands of family and study (Bowl, 2003). The student role has changed and a consequence of this is that study time among full-time college students in general is lower than before (McCormick, 2011). At first glance, it seems obvious that less study time means lower progress and performance. However, this correlation is complicated, and empirical research in the field is inconclusive (Nonis & Hudson, 2010; Wikan & Bugge, 2014).

Progress and performance might be influenced by how the programme is organised. Programmes characterised by a high degree of compulsory lectures and seminars might be problematic for students who have paid work or other obligations. Flexible programmes presupposing more self-study might be easier to attend (Darmody & Smyth, 2008; Bugge & Wikan, 2014). There are many different models of flexible studies. Lectures can be offered at different times of the day, for example in the evenings or on Saturdays. Studies may be offered decentralised; educators travel to more remote areas to give lessons. Yet another way is studies based on online facilities, or a combination of net support and classes on campus. Research shows that net-based tutoring seems to be popular among students (Bugge & Wikan, 2013). One may argue that the universities must offer studies that are more flexible in order to accommodate a heterogeneous student group. This might not be easy for all institutions because there are studies - like many of the professional studies such as medical schools, teacher education, nursing etc. - where students' presence is needed to a high degree. So there are a number of dilemmas when planning a quality university programme designed for full-time and part-time, on-campus and off-campus students.

To sum up; teacher shortage is an issue of concern in many countries. The situation is aggravated because of a changing labour market, which triggers a demand for re-education. In this connection, lifelong learning has been launched as a strategy to create an adequately educated labour force.

RESEARCH QUESTION

A strategy for lifelong learning presupposes study programmes which are adapted to the target group. In this case, the institutions must develop studies which are possible to combine with students' many social roles, including roles such as employee, parent, etc. In this study, by analysing students attending differently organised studies, we show whether there are differences between the student groups attending the programmes. This will indicate what type of programme suits which type of students. In the present article we investigate students attending both Kindergarten- and General Teacher Education.

METHODOLOGY

Data was gathered in a quantitative study using structured questionnaires. Questionnaires were administered in May 2011 and between February and April 2012. Questionnaires were administered during compulsory lecture time. All students present on that occasion completed the questionnaires, which were collected immediately. Either one of the researchers or the lecturer in charge administered the data collection.

The questionnaire includes background variables (sex, age, living situation, parents' education, study program and grades from upper secondary school), reason for study choice, grades from their college studies, evaluation of study programme, study progress, time used on study, time used on paid work and other activities, motivation for study and questions on finances.

The respondents are students at a Norwegian University College. They attend Kindergarten Teacher Education Programme (KTE) or General Teacher Education Programme (GTE). In total, 511 students completed the questionnaire; of these 110 are KTE flexible students, 168 are full-time KTE campus students and 233 are full-time GTE students.

The students range from first-year students to third-year undergraduates. The response rates were 88% (flexible), 89% (campus KTE) and 84% (campus GTE). Compared to other studies the response rates are high, which strengthens the significance of the findings. However, given the objective of the study, we must discuss the consequences of the missing students. If those who were not present when the questionnaires were administered are students differing with respect to for example sex or age, this might influence the findings. However, we are not able to tell if the non-attendance is systematic.

STUDY PROGRAMMES

The purpose of the Kindergarten Teacher Education is to provide qualified personnel for educational work with children up to age six. The Kindergarten Teacher Education is a three-year course of 180 credits. The course includes a compulsory component of 150 credits and an elective component of 30 credits (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2013). The national curriculum regulations constitute a mandatory basis for the institutions, staff, students and practice kindergartens. On this basis, the institutions develop a *course curriculum* in collaboration with students and practice institutions. The curriculum must provide an outline of the course as a whole and also contain a practical training plan, individual subject/subject area syllabuses (for both compulsory and elective course modules) and syllabuses for interdisciplinary course modules. It is up to the institution to stipulate the number of teaching hours, how much compulsory attendance and compulsory work is required, and how to grade the students. The University College in this study has developed differently organised programmes for Kindergarten Teacher Education. The campus model is characterized by mostly compulsory student attendance. In addition, the weekly schedule is quite full; it is up to 18-20 hours a week with lectures and seminars. The flexible studies consist of part-time study (three years full-time study during four years) or full-time study comprising gatherings combined with online facilities. The flexible studies imply more individual opportunities to schedule the week according to personal requirements.

The General Teacher Education Programme qualifies teachers for the primary and lower secondary school. Subject studies and practical training form an integrated whole. General Teacher Education consists of a four-year vocational training course of 240 credits. The course comprises a compulsory component of 120 credits and an elective component of 120 credits (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2013). As was also the case with Kindergarten Teacher Education, it is up to the institution to develop a course curriculum and to stipulate the number of teaching hours, how many of the classes should be compulsory, obligatory work and how to grade the students. The University College in this study has also developed differently organised programmes for General Teacher Education. Similar to the Kindergarten Teacher Education the campus model implies a course curriculum where much of the attendance is compulsory for the students. The flexible study is a full-time study comprising gatherings combined with online facilities. In this article we analyse both Kindergarten Teacher Education (KTE flexible and KTE campus) and General Teacher Education (GTE campus) programmes.

STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS

In this section, we will analyse background characteristics of students according to study programme. We will look at sex, age, family situation and parents' academic background. In addition, we will investigate to what extent they have paid work, which implies less flexibility with regards to studies.

The majority of students are female (table 1). It is not surprising that these study programmes attract mainly women, regardless of how the programme is organised. In Norway, females have always constituted the majority of employees in kindergartens and primary schools. The flexible study programme is even more female-dominated than the other programmes. It would seem that becoming a kindergarten teacher is viewed as a viable option because there are so many kindergartens and it is therefore possible to find local employment. From 1.1.2009 all Norwegian children have the right to a kindergarten place from the age of one (Lov om barnehager, 2009).

The students enrolled in the flexible programmes are older than the campus students. 86% of flexible students are older than 24 years; among campus students the corresponding figures are 24% (KTE) and 15% (GTE) (table 1). These figures indicate that the flexible programme really is seen as an option for older students.

The flexible students are usually in a different family situation than the campus students (table 1). 87% of the flexible students live with partner, compared to 38% (KTE) and 44% (GTE) of campus students. As regards children, we see that 75% of the students on the flexible programme live with their own children; the corresponding figures for campus students are only 12% (KTE) and 11% (GTE). The family situation for the typical flexible student is one with many obligations and this makes it difficult to attend full-time campus studies. Attending a flexible programme is then a viable way to get formal education.

It is well known that social background is one factor that determines whether an individual attends higher education (Boliver, 2011; Field & Morgan-Klein, 2013). Flexible programmes offer education to persons where they are living and might be one way to rectify this social inequality. In the present study, we find that campus students more often have an academic background than do students on the flexible programme - that is, at least one of the parents has higher education. 55% (KTE) and 59% (GTE) of campus students have at least one parent with higher education, compared to 38% of flexible students (table 1). This difference indicates that the flexible programme reaches other social groups than the campus programmes.

Table 1. Student characteristics. Percentages

	Flexible KTE	Campus KTE	Campus GTE
Women	92	85	72
> 24 years	86	24	15
Live with partner (with/without children)	87	38	44
Live with children	75	12	11
At least one parent with higher education	38	55	59
Paid work	87	64	70
15 hours or more paid work per week	92	37	37
Work daytime on working days	88	27	44
Work weekends	1	34	19
Paid work is relevant for studies	92	45	55

Paid employment is often seen as a reason for adult individuals to be unable to attend university studies. In remote districts in Norway, many women work part time or full time as unqualified assistants or teachers in schools and kindergartens. In order to raise the standard of the whole educational sector, it is necessary that more employees get formal qualifications. Offering flexible studies is one important strategy to meet this aim.

In the present study most students, independent of study programme, have paid work during term time. The highest proportion is among the students on the flexible programme. 87% of the students on the flexible programme and 64% (KTE) and 70% (GTE) of campus students have paid work (table 1). As we have seen, both on a national and international scale, the proportion of students with paid job has increased during the recent decades. This could be explained in several ways and is mainly linked to meagre student financing programmes. That students attending the flexible programme are more likely to have paid work might be because they are older and more often have a family and thus have greater economic responsibilities. Another obvious reason for the higher working rate among flexible students is that they have better possibilities for adjusting working hours to study time, and lastly, they might have enrolled in the flexible programme because they already had another job.

As regards number of hours of paid work, the study shows a considerable difference between students according to study programme. 92% of flexible students have paid work for 15 hours or more per week. The corresponding figures for campus students are 37% for both groups (table 1). This result is not surprising, because flexible students have more possibilities to coordinate work and study and they might also have been in full-time employment when they enrolled in the programme (as discussed above).

The students were asked whether they work daytime, evenings, nights or weekends. Working daytime during the working days could be expected to be more common among flexible students, as day-time work probably could conflict directly with a campus-organised study. This is confirmed by our findings: 88% of the flexible students work daytime, compared to 27% (KTE) and 44% (GTE) of the campus students. 34% of KTE and 19% of GTE campus students work during weekends, compared to only 1% of flexible students (table 1). This finding could

be due to the fact that flexible students both have better possibilities to work Monday - Friday, and in addition more often have family obligations which in turn means that it is difficult to work weekends.

Paid work during term may be expected to have negative effects on study performance. Flexible students most often agree that paid work influences their studies negatively. This perhaps is a consequence of the fact that they work mainly during the day-time hours and more frequently than campus students. However, in all student groups a substantial proportion report that their paid work is relevant for their studies. 92% of the flexible students claim that their paid work is relevant: figures for campus students are lower, 45% and 55% respectively (table 1). Probably many students on teacher education programmes either work in kindergartens or in schools during term time.

The analysis of student characteristics shows that students enrolled in the flexible programme have different characteristics than campus students. They are more often female, older and have more often children and live with a partner than students enrolled in campus programmes. In addition, they more seldom come from an academic background than campus students. The fact that they work more hours in paid work, and mainly during the day, also indicates that they had work obligations before they enrolled in the study programme.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

According to the strategy of lifelong learning, institutions in higher education should offer study programmes designed to suit other students than just the traditional young childless student. In this article, several factors have been studied to analyse whether differently organised studies attract students in different life situations. The present study confirms that there is a relationship between organisation of study and student characteristics. The students who attend flexible study programmes are different from those attending campus studies on all variables analysed. In a lifelong learning perspective, one of the most interesting findings is the fact that students attending flexible programmes are considerably older than campus students. In view of this, it is not surprising that our data show that flexible students also to a much greater extent have their own family, with partner and children. In sum, this indicates that flexible study programmes seem to be more suitable for older, established people, who at the same time are the target group for lifelong learning.

As regards academic background there is a tendency that flexible students more seldom have parents with higher education. This means that a higher proportion of flexible students are the first people from their family to get higher education. This may be seen to agree with the social equity perspective raised among others by Lee (2014) and Weiss and Steininger (2013). In a study of distance learners, it was found that studying is bounded by social relations, among them social class (Selwyn, 2011). In sum, this indicates that flexible study organising could contribute to a more socially just educational profile.

The analysis of different aspects of paid work reveals notable differences between flexible and campus students. Flexible students have more often paid work during term time, they work more hours and they more often work on working days. Together this gives a picture of flexible students as people who really utilise the possibilities flexible study organising gives. We have no data that could tell how many of the flexible students would be able to study on a campus programme, but there are reasons to believe that a high proportion of them are dependent on wage-earning. This line of reasoning follows Lei and Chuang (2010) who find that older students more often are employed and hence have difficulties with full-time studying. Online facilities and flexible time for courses are seen as favourable for many students. This is also found in an Australian study (Hall, 2010).

Based on the findings of this study it seems likely that differently organised studies attract different kind of students. At the University College in this study the flexible Kindergarten Teacher Education Programme seems to fulfil the intention of offering an education to students who do not have the possibility of a traditional full-time student-life. Furthermore, the flexible programme does not compete with the campus programme regarding recruitment; as we have seen the two groups of students are quite different.

It has become a universal trend that attending a university study is not only for young people directly from college. Lifelong learning - learning from cradle to grave – is a strategy in Norway as well as in the EU to accommodate the need for formal education for adults. A growing proportion of students have family obligations and paid employment, a fact which must be taken into consideration when planning university programmes. If the study programmes are to be flexible, the persons designing them also have to be to some extent free from prejudices with regards to the advantage of traditionally organised studies. Many studies could be organised in new ways while still maintaining quality. On the other hand, there are also studies where students' attendance is crucial, so every education is not equally suited in the perspective of lifelong learning.

Another reason to develop more flexible studies is that by reaching a more heterogeneous student group the variety of age, social backgrounds and family situations among the students will enrich student life. In many study programmes students' diverse backgrounds might influence and enrich the climate of learning.

In this study, by analysing students attending differently organised studies, we have shown that there are differences between the student groups attending the programmes, which could be seen as an indication of what type of programme suits which type of students. This is one study from one specific university college, which of course limits the possibility to generalise the findings. However, our findings are in accordance with other findings that indicate that for many adult students it is the flexibility in the programmes which gives them the possibility to study.

Flexible study programmes will probably expand further as they meet students' demands in many different ways. However, at our institution most of the study programmes are still traditionally organised with on-campus lectures and seminars. Little activity is web-based and online even though it is well documented that flexible programmes based on more self-study might be easier to combine with paid work and family, and hence also facilitate lifelong learning.

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