Distance Education as a Tool for Transformation in Adult Life

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Abstract

Distance education (DE) has become an important alternative for adult education, allowing individuals to balance studies with other responsibilities such as work and family. However, returning to education, particularly after a long interval, entails a series of challenges and opportunities that vary according to each student's context. Returning to studies, especially at an advanced age and in the distance education modality, represents an increasing challenge for many. This article aims to explore adult students' perceptions of the opportunities and challenges arising when resuming their educational journey, based on testimonies collected in online forums. The methodology used was qualitative content analysis. A total of 199 statements collected from online forums of students sharing their experiences in resuming studies in a degree programme X were analysed. The responses were categorised into two major themes: "Opportunities" and "Challenges," based on their perceptions of the positive and negative aspects of this educational journey. We found that while distance education offers flexibility and accessibility, balancing personal life, work, and studies remains a significant challenge. Maturity and resilience emerge as key factors for overcoming obstacles, while personal and professional growth are seen as the main rewards.

Keywords: distance education, adult learners, return to study

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Introduction

Online education has grown significantly in recent decades, promoting inclusion and accessibility for various age groups. Online learning has been a fundamental tool for adult education, allowing them to resume their studies with greater flexibility. For adults who have interrupted their studies, this modality offers the possibility of returning without compromising professional and family responsibilities (Garrison, 2017). This work seeks to understand the factors that drive and challenge the return to study, through an empirical analysis of adult students' experiences in online education.

Literature Review

Online education has established itself as a tool for social and educational transformation, especially in adult life. According to Bates (2015), contemporary society seeks continuous retraining, driven by technological transformations and the need to acquire new skills to face current socio-economic challenges. In this context, online education stands out for providing flexibility, autonomy, and inclusion, allowing individuals to reconcile studies with work and family responsibilities (Garrison, 2017). In addition, online education enables student-centred learning, respecting individual rhythms and contexts, which makes it particularly attractive for adults returning to the academic environment after a long break.

The concept of lifelong learning has become increasingly central to adult education, challenging the traditional model that presupposes a single, definitive training programme for the whole of one's career. Knowles (1980) already pointed to andragogy as a method centred on the adult learner, emphasising autonomy and self-management as essential characteristics of this training process. The development of autonomy in learning is especially relevant in the context of online education, as it requires adult learners to have self-management, discipline, and self-regulation skills. The emergence of educational technologies reinforces the need to develop digital skills and competences for independent learning, as emphasised by Siemens (2005) and Anderson (2008). In this sense, Siemens' connectivist approach suggests that learning takes place in networks, where the learner connects information from different sources, something that is enhanced by online platforms.

In addition to the opportunities, returning to the academic environment presents significant challenges for adult students. Studies such as those by Merriam and Bierema (2013) identify barriers such as time management, adapting to new technological tools and reconciling multiple social roles (work, family, and study). The transition to the online format can generate insecurities, especially for those who have little familiarity with digital resources. However, maturity and resilience are factors that contribute to a successful academic career, corroborating the perspective of Tough (1979), who recognises self-direction as a vital characteristic for adult education. According to Mezirow (2000), transformative learning, which occurs when the individual critically reflects on their experiences, also plays a crucial role in the context of online education, enabling significant changes in personal and professional perspective.

Returning to formal online education is not just a simple technological adaptation but involves building socio-emotional skills such as resilience and time management. These skills are crucial to maintaining academic engagement and success in the educational process and are essential components in the development of autonomy and the personal and professional transformation of individuals. In addition, institutional support, including pedagogical

guidance and technical support, plays a fundamental role in the permanence and success of adult students in online courses.

Thus, by understanding the factors that facilitate and hinder returning to study in online education, it is possible to improve pedagogical strategies and support resources, guaranteeing a more inclusive and efficient training path for adult students. The development of educational policies that value continuous training and curricular flexibility can promote a more welcoming and accessible learning environment, encouraging a return to study as a continuous and natural process in adult life.

Methodology

Objective

The aim of our study was to find out how a group of students view their return to study, its opportunities, and challenges.

Sample

Our study sample consisted of 199 statements collected on an online forum by students sharing their experiences of returning to study on an X degree programme. The students were of both sexes, were attending online education for the first time and had an average age of 40. They are all working students.

Procedure and Instrument

At the start of the school year, a forum was set up within the Y course on returning to study. They were asked to tell us about their motivations, expectations, and fears about the experience of returning to study. There was no fixed response period. At the end of the semester, we collected all the reports found in this forum, totaling 199, which make up our corpus of analysis.

Analysing the Data

Thematic analysis is a methodology used to interpret written, spoken, or visual messages within a specific context. In this case, the analysis focuses on the reflections of forum participants on returning to study in an online education environment. The data was extracted from the document provided and reflects the perceptions, challenges and motivations of individuals who have chosen to return to study in an online format. Thematic analysis was carried out using AI. It was an automated analysis focusing on online education versus Opportunities and Challenges.

Results

The results obtained from the thematic analysis point to five broad categories, as shown in Figure 1.
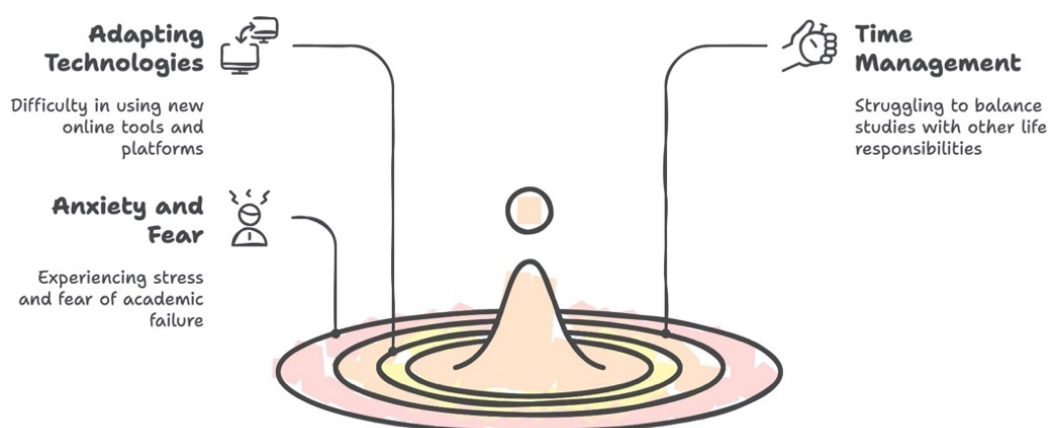
Figure 1
Thematic Analysis Categories

The thematic analysis of the statements reveals that returning to online education is a challenging yet highly rewarding journey. The need to adapt to technologies, manage time, and overcome fear are present obstacles, but motivation, organisation, and resilience make this path possible and fulfilling. The accounts show that, regardless of age or stage of life, the desire to learn and evolve remains a strong driving force for those who decide to return to study.

How are each of these categories operationalised? Let's look at the figures below.

The "Challenges of returning to study" category is based on 3 dimensions: adapting to new technologies, time management and reconciling roles and, finally, anxiety and fear of failure - Figure 2.

**Figure 2**
Challenges of Returning to Study Category

Examples:
- "The start, even though the outline says slow, was intense, two weeks that required assiduous attendance." **S9F**
- "I'm 49 years old and it's never too late for anything." **S7F**
- "I'm still trying to figure out the best way to manage my schedule, considering that I work from 9am to 5pm and have a son aged almost 4, who requires a lot of attention." **S13F**

In category 2 we have elements that can be grouped into the following dimensions: Personal and professional fulfilment, Career change or professional progression and Satisfaction in learning and developing skills, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3
Motivation and Personal Growth Category
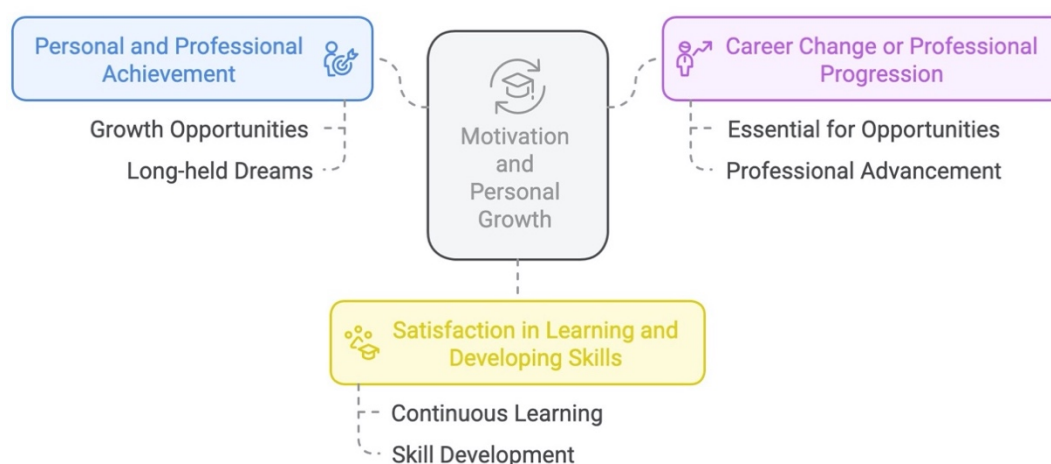
Examples:
- "This challenge demands method, priorities, determination, and a lot of resilience from me." **S18F**
- "Maturity is certainly an asset, but there is also greater tiredness as a result of the fronts we have as parents, professionals and other activities in our personal lives." **S11F**
- "I took on this challenge to fulfil a childhood dream: to get a degree in X ! At 63, I'm finally ready for this new stage in my life." **S18F**

Category 3 deals with issues related to Organisation and Planning. As with the previous categories, it is also supported by 3 dimensions relating to efficient time management, the use of digital tools and support materials, as well as the creation of an appropriate study method - Figure 4.

Figure 4
*Organisation and Planning Category*

Examples:
- "It's important to start slowly, because only then will I be able to understand and apply the study techniques best suited to my daily rhythm." **S4F**
- "I'll have to start more slowly until I gain a working rhythm, without accumulating tasks/challenges, writing everything down in a diary or calendar to better manage my time." **S27F**
- "I'm learning day by day to be more organised and have a more efficient study method." **S88F**

Category 4 brings together factors of a more personal and social nature, such as overcoming difficulties and obstacles, willpower and self-confidence and the importance of social and family support - Figure 5.

Figure 5
Resilience and Persistence Category
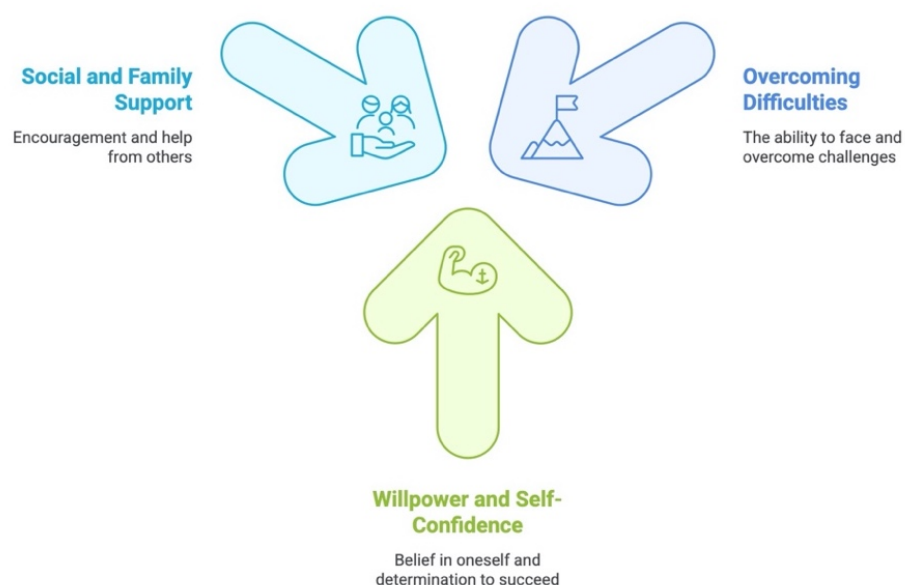
Examples:
- "The secret is to start slowly, go back, if necessary, understand the study techniques, be calm, persistent and achieve the end goal." **S183F**
- "Failing is part of it, but never giving up. It's important to be resilient and, if necessary, take a step back to climb up with the right strength." **S14F**
- "With persistence, calm and dedication, I'll be able to complete my degree and the fact that I'm more mature may be a strong point in my favour." **S27F**

Finally, we find category 5 - Benefits of Study. This category includes elements related to broadening horizons, the impact on self-esteem and personal satisfaction and the creation of new personal and professional opportunities - Figure 6.

Figure 6
Study Benefits Category
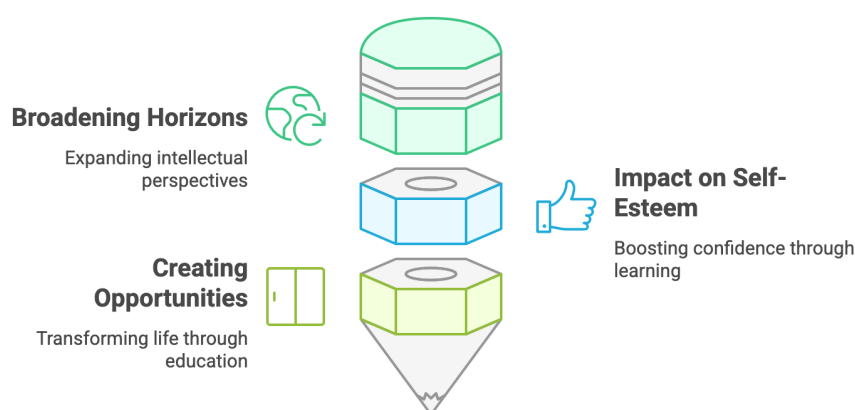
Examples:
- "Learning and knowledge enrich our lives, our culture... I'm loving this new experience and hope to complete all the course units successfully and proudly." **S34F**
- "I feel grateful and excited. It all seems a bit daunting at first, but I know it will be worth it." **S120F**
- "Returning to study is a significant step towards professional and personal growth." **S174F**

Legend:
    S = Student
    X = Number of students
    F = Gender (F= female | M = male)

Discussion

The empirical analysis of the accounts of adult students who have returned to study in online education reveals both the challenges and the opportunities encountered along the way. From the analysis of the 199 testimonies found, five main categories emerged: Challenges of Returning to Study, Motivation and Personal Growth, Organisation and Planning, Resilience and Persistence, and Benefits of Study.

The challenges faced by adult students corroborate the theoretical discussions presented in the literature review. Time management and adapting to new technologies, pointed out by

Merriam and Bierema (2013) as common barriers, were also identified as significant difficulties by the participants. The need to balance family, professional and academic responsibilities proved to be a constant pressure factor. As Tough (1979) had already suggested, self-management and resilience are fundamental characteristics for facing such obstacles, and this was evident in the reports, where many highlighted the importance of self-management and organisational skills.

> I think it's important to organise our time, define our objectives well and not procrastinate' (S8F); '(...) we must be resilient and take risks. Method is the key to being able to take this boat to a good harbour' S28M.' 'The technology issues will be a huge challenge, as it will require effort and knowledge appropriate to the needs required here.' (S48M)

On the other hand, intrinsic motivation, mentioned by Mezirow (2000) as essential for transformative learning, was a prominent factor in the testimonies, especially regarding personal fulfilment and the desire for continuous development ("'I know that it will require some demanding planning, and that I will have to be rigorous in its realisation, but I am very excited and motivated." [S29F]; "(...) the thirst to learn has been motivating me to achieve and I don't intend to stop here." [S31F]). By providing flexibility, online education has proved to be an inclusive modality adapted to contemporary challenges, as discussed by Bates (2015). This flexibility was valued by the participants, who pointed to the possibility of adapting their studies to their routine as a positive differential.

The Organisation and Planning category proved to be central to maintaining academic engagement ("Going back to school, having a routine is going to be the biggest challenge for me, reconciling work and family life, managing all this in just one day is going to be complicated." [S48M]). As Siemens (2005) emphasised in his connectivist theory, the ability to connect information and use digital resources is essential for success in online education. The reports highlighted that students who develop study routines and use digital tools effectively have a greater chance of success ("I decided to do it online, to avoid missing work and reduce costs, but it will require me to do a lot of time management, to learn to work better with technology, to develop study techniques." [S52F]; "At U.Y. I saw the opportunity to return to studying because it's a method that allows us to manage ourselves, to map out the path of activities at our own pace and to reconcile professional and family life." [S74M]; "For me it's a blessing to be able to do my degree in the comfort of my own home, I'm grateful to the new technologies for making it possible, otherwise it would be unthinkable for me to go to university every day." [S94F]).

In addition, resilience, and persistence, combined with social and family support, were identified as crucial elements for continuing studies. Maturity, pointed out by Garrison (2017) as a factor that contributes to autonomy and critical thinking, was frequently mentioned as an advantage of adult students compared to younger students ("I would like to ask my colleagues for their support and say that they can count on me to do whatever is necessary and possible. With help and support we will go far." [S127F]; "I think that persistence and calmness are important for this journey. It will be an arduous challenge, but thanks to maturity and dedication it will be a very achievable goal." [S148F]).

Finally, the benefits perceived by participants, such as professional and personal growth, broaden the understanding of the impacts of online education on adult life. Lifelong learning, discussed by Knowles (1980), is valued as a continuous and necessary process, especially in

times of rapid social and technological transformation. ("The decision to return to study was a decision that, despite being very well thought out, was really necessary, not only because it would allow me to progress professionally, but also for my development as a person." [S97F]; "When I enrolled on this degree, it was with the aim of acquiring academic knowledge and skills to progress in my career" [S129F].)

In conclusion, the empirical analysis reinforces the theoretical references that indicate online education as a viable and positive path for adult continuing education. Although there are significant challenges, adaptability, resilience, and institutional support are key to success. Therefore, educational policies that promote support and training environments for digital competences are fundamental to widening access and ensuring that these students remain.

Conclusion

The growing demand for continuing education reflects a structural change in the way lifelong learning is perceived. Training done in each period and for life increasingly no longer makes sense. There is a need to retrain or acquire new skills that can respond to the challenges that society poses to individuals. In this context, traditional teaching models are being challenged by more flexible approaches adapted to the needs of different audiences. Allied to this need to adapt and respond to the challenges of society, the labour market and social inclusion, there have also been major technological changes that have helped to promote online learning through digital platforms. Knowledge societies demand continuous re-skilling. It is therefore technology that is leading economic changes, the way we communicate and relate to others, and the way we learn (Bates, 2015).

The empirical analysis carried out in this study shows that online education is consolidating itself as an essential modality for the continuous training of adults, providing flexibility, inclusion, and personal and professional development. The results show that although the challenges are significant, such as time management and adapting to technologies, the benefits outweigh the difficulties. Adaptability, resilience, and institutional support are determining factors for educational success in this modality.

In conclusion, to promote a more inclusive and accessible learning environment, it is essential that educational policies encourage the development of digital competences and offer adequate support to adult students. In this way, it will be possible to increase access to continuing education, promoting not only professional growth, but also the strengthening of autonomy and personal resilience.

It is therefore imperative that educational institutions continue to invest in innovative pedagogical strategies that respond to the needs of adults returning to education, guaranteeing a learning experience that effectively contributes to the personal and professional transformation of individuals.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

As mentioned above, the thematic analysis of the 199 student statements was initially carried out using AI (ChatGPT).

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