

A Phenomenological Study of Adult College Student Experience in Nontraditional Education Programmes

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Abstract: Since the early 1980's, many universities in Puerto Rico developed programmes focused on the adult student, but did not take into consideration if they appealed to this population. For that reason, the new curricula offered were not in accord with the reality of the students they were intended for. The study was done with the purpose of knowing this reality from the perspective of the students themselves.

Three universities and nine adult students (three from each university) were selected to take part in this study. The subjects were required to complete a brief questionnaire, in addition to answering 13 guide questions in individualized interviews. The researcher brought forward suggestions, based on the outcome of the study that might be able to improve and transform nontraditional education programmes in Puerto Rico. One outcome was that the subjects expressed having felt fear and anxiety prior to deciding if entering these programmes. They were worried about people's reactions knowing they would be college students and thinking that they could have lost their learning capacity. These feelings changed when assured that in college, all students are considered equals in terms of their pursued objectives, regardless of age, so long as they are confident in their capacities and the desire to complete their degree. The study also showed that the subjects perceived the academic goals as the peak of their self realization, this being to complete the degree that were not able to complete by lack of economic resources among other reasons. The researcher understands that adult programmes may provide that population the learning experiences that will capacitate them as professionals, as well as human beings.

Key-Words: Andragogy, Adult Student, Advanced Adult, Senior Education, Programme

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1. Introduction

Education is strongly linked to social, psychological and moral development of a human being. This continuous and permanent process is not exclusive to a determined stage of growth and development, but independent of the peer group, one that is made up of older adults. In accord to this task, there is a marked increase in the number of older adults that show interest and join universities, in Puerto Rico as well as in other parts of the world. This was foreseen by the father of adult education, Malcolm S. Knowles (1969, p. 3): “The university alumni, that is now mixed,[...] will change drastically in the next 35 years [...] They will aspire something different than that that is now known as continued education”. This constitutes a phenomenon that has sparked worldwide interest in all sectors of society: governments, organizations and individuals (Longworth, 2003).

It is understood that deeper understanding about this phenomenon enriches the educational context in which it occurs, allows for different perspectives and fortifies the learning process of the aforementioned groups. Because of this, it is important to ponder about several elements that are considered important in the adult education phenomenon. They are: the inflow of people fifty and over into the universities; their participation in the labor market; tendencies reflected on the different census concerning adults fifty and over; life expectancy; and the new perspectives regarding “education for adults”, that are proposed by international organizations and scholars. Tables I through IV and Figure A reflect that in Puerto Rico there had been a marked increase in the first four elements mentioned.

| Academic year | Students 50 years of age or over |
|---------------|----------------------------------|
| 1999 – 2000 | 972 |
| 2001 – 2002 | 2,040 |
| 2002 – 2003 | 1,482 |
| 2003 – 2004 | 2,569 |
| 2004 – 2005 | 2,887 |
| 2005 – 2006 | 3,416 |
| 2006 – 2007 | 3,807 |
| 2007 – 2008 | 3,939 |
| 2011 – 2012 | 4,546 |

Table 1. Students 50 years of age or over in the universities in Puerto Rico: Academic years 1999 to 2000 and 2011 to 2012

The data was collected in periods of two years, since that date. Source: Education Counsel of Puerto Rico. Evaluation, Planification, Statistics and Research Area. Data from Fall Enrollment, data base: Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2013.

| Years | Total of Persons Employed | Persons Employed 45 Years of Age or More* | Percent from the Total |
|-------|---------------------------|---|------------------------|
| 1980 | 760,000 | 221,000 | 29.1 |
| 1990 | 972,000 | 308,000 | 32.1 |
| 2000 | 1,162,000 | 386,000 | 33.0 |
| 2010 | 1,089,000 | 447,000 | 41.0 |

Table 2. Employment in Puerto Rico: Years 1980, 1990, 2000 and 2010

The Division of Labor Statistics groups the total of people of fifty years of age or over, in the following groups: 45 to 54, 55 to 64, and 65 or over. Source: Department of Labor and Human Resources, Government of Puerto Rico, Division of Labor Statistics, Historical Data of Employment and Unemployment, Puerto Rico. Average years 1970 to 2010, Revision, 2010 Census. Table 10.

| Census | Total Population | People 50 Years of Age or Over* | Percent of the Total | Life Expect. |
|--------|------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------|--------------|
| 1940 | 1,869,255 | | | 46.01 |
| 1950 | 2,210,073 | 252,446 | 11.42 | 60.85 |
| 1960 | 2,349,544 | 321,358 | 1.68 | 69.36 |
| 1970 | 2,712,033 | 460,685 | 16.99 | 71.97 |
| 1980 | 3,196,520 | 606,828 | 18.98 | 73.11 |
| 1990 | 3,522,037 | 768,562 | 20.82 | 74.05 |
| 2000 | 3,808,610 | 1,004,500 | 26.37 | 76.12 |
| 2010 | 3,725,789 | 1,223,503 | 33.10 | 79.09 |

Table 3. Total population of Puerto Rico and people 50 years of age or over: 1950 through 2010 Census

Obtaining the data for the decade of 1940 was not possible. Source for data 1940: Truesdel, L. E. (1942). Population, Bulletin No. 1, Amount of Population Puerto Rico. Washington: United States Government Printing Office. Sources for data of 1950 to 2010: Federal Bureau of Census, Population Census of Puerto Rico: 1950 – 2010. Planification, Social and Economic Program, Office of the Census, San Juan, PR. Department of Health of Puerto Rico, Office of Planification and Development. Yearly Report of Vital Statistics, San Juan, PR.

| Years | Male | Female | Both Genders |
|-------|-------|--------|--------------|
| 1902 | 29.82 | 31.00 | 30.36 |
| 1910 | 37.72 | 38.64 | 38.17 |
| 1920 | 38.18 | 38.85 | 38.46 |
| 1930 | 40.07 | 41.46 | 40.65 |
| 1940 | 45.07 | 45.11 | 46.01 |
| 1950 | 59.45 | 62.43 | 60.85 |
| 1955 | 65.96 | 69.58 | 67.71 |
| 1960 | 67.14 | 71.88 | 69.36 |
| 1961 | 67.18 | 72.48 | 69.76 |
| 1962 | 66.68 | 72.37 | 69.45 |
| 1963 | 66.86 | 72.59 | 69.90 |
| 1966 | 67.49 | 73.11 | 70.18 |
| 1968 | 68.25 | 73.79 | 71.15 |
| 1972 | 68.92 | 76.05 | 72.10 |
| 1973 | 69.03 | 75.63 | 72.24 |
| 1975 | 69.74 | 76.98 | 72.32 |
| 1976 | 70.21 | 77.11 | 73.52 |
| 1977 | 70.45 | 77.42 | 73.80 |
| 1978 | 70.91 | 77.59 | 74.06 |
| 1979 | 69.60 | 76.07 | 73.12 |
| 1980 | 69.88 | 76.87 | 73.11 |
| 1981 | 70.29 | 77.52 | 73.90 |
| 1982 | 70.53 | 77.39 | 73.91 |
| 1983 | 70.45 | 77.25 | 73.11 |
| 1984 | 70.26 | 77.28 | 73.64 |
| 1985 | 72.07 | 79.01 | 75.28 |
| 1986 | 70.70 | 78.94 | 74.74 |
| 1987 | 71.12 | 79.44 | 75.28 |
| 1988 | 70.14 | 79.57 | 74.21 |
| 1989 | 70.17 | 78.53 | 74.24 |
| 1990 | 69.74 | 78.50 | 74.05 |
| 1991 | 69.60 | 78.50 | 73.96 |
| 1992 | 69.33 | 78.80 | 75.18 |
| 1993 | 69.07 | 78.09 | 73.49 |
| 1994 | 68.83 | 77.87 | 73.27 |
| 1995 | 69.33 | 78.39 | 73.96 |
| 1996 | 69.57 | 78.29 | 74.04 |
| 1998 | 71.41 | 79.34 | 75.17 |
| 1999 | 71.46 | 77.02 | 75.49 |
| 2000 | 72.28 | 79.90 | 76.12 |
| 2001 | 73.02 | 80.89 | 76.87 |
| 2002 | 73.22 | 80.88 | 77.08 |
| 2003 | 73.73 | 81.14 | 77.48 |
| 2004 | 73.67 | 80.90 | 77.16 |

Table 4. Life Expectancy in Puerto Rico: Years 1902 through 2004

Source: Department of Health of the Government of Puerto Rico, Office of Planification and Development, Division of Statistics Analysis, San Juan, PR.

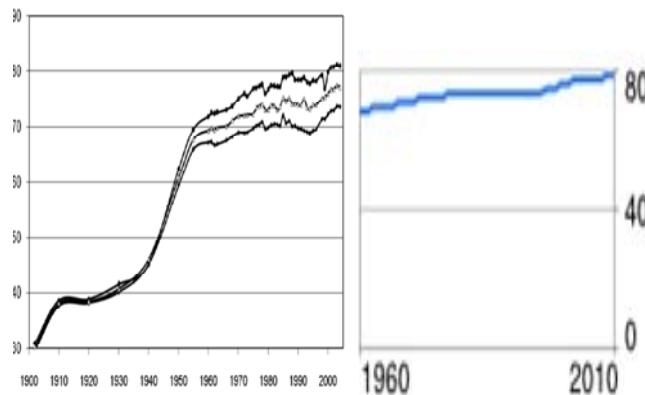


Figure A. Graphics regarding life expectancy in Puerto Rico: Years 1902 through 2004 and 1960 through 2010 Census

First graphic: Legend (from top to bottom): first line- female population; second line- female and male populations; third line-male population Source: Federal Census, Population Census of Puerto Rico, 1902 through 2010, Center of Census Data, San Juan, PR. Second graphic: Legend: Blue line – female and male populations Source: World Bank, 2012, Bureau of Census of the United States, 2012.

The mentioned data has changed the usual panorama in the universities in Puerto Rico, according to the needs of the older adults. This also proves the need for governmental entities, in charge of providing educational services to the older adult population, to focus their attention on the aforementioned aspects. It is of vital importance that they keep up with the new tendencies and educational needs of this population. This will allow them better efficiency and sensibility at the moment of planning strategies for the present and develop new projects for the future.

Problem

The problem that was addressed in this investigation is the following: Even when universities in Puerto Rico establish nontraditional educational programmes targeted to older adults, studies show that these programmes were developed without having explored in a deep level several aspects such as: feelings, life experiences, perceptions, beliefs, descriptions and opinions of the older adult population, regarding what it means to them to be a university student. Due to this, in the universities in Puerto Rico, there are curriculum and educational services for the older adult student, which does not

correspond to the reality of those experiences. (Bowman y Burden, 2002; Torres Nazario, 2003; Rivera Claudio, 2008; Fernández, 2008).

2. Objectives of the study

Understand the aforementioned experiences at a deeper level, would allow the following objectives: a) to understand the reality behind the experience, by comprehending and discovering its meaning, by the feelings, life experiences, perceptions, beliefs, descriptions and opinions coming directly from the adult student, as the main character of the experience; b) to know how the factors that motivate the people 50 years of age and over to study a bachelor degree in Puerto Rico, gives meaning to the experience; c) to interpret how that people perceive the academic challenges; and, d) to make recommendations, which will contribute to the transformation and betterment of the nontraditional programmes focused on older adults in three participating institutions.

Below are the terminology and their definitions that will be used for the purpose of this study: a) experience = all living incident had by an adult 50 years of age and older as a university student in Puerto Rico, b) andragogy = art and science of educating an adult, c) adult student = a person who forms part of a nontraditional educational programme targeted to older adults in a university in Puerto Rico, or a person who has all the requirement to participate in a similar programme, d) mature adult = person whose age is between 50 and 59 years old, e) older or advanced adult = person whose age is 60 or above, f) participant or best informant = adult student chosen for this study, g) Programme = curriculum or nontraditional study targeted to persons 25 years of age or older, in a university in Puerto Rico.

The literature used as a reference and analyzed for the better understanding of the education of older adults was demarcated in three main aspects: conceptual, historical and methodological. The conceptual aspect focuses on two schools of thought: education as an activity that extends throughout life and andragogy, as the art and science of educating an adult. There are several additional concepts being explored in this study, among them: “vital cycle”, “life expectancy in Puerto Rico” and “motivation”, because these are considered to be closely related to this study. In regards to the historical aspect, the revised literature exposes the way that adult education has developed in Puerto Rico, as well as in the rest of the world. Regarding research methods, studies about adult education in Puerto Rico and internationally, are analyzed; likes and differences are established among these and the research at hand. In terms of the methodological aspect, the design of the investigation and the concepts related to the design are exposed. As part of this aspect, the researcher present facts related to education for

older adults in Puerto Rico and in other places of the world, as well as likeness and differences among these and the research.

3. Methodology

The purpose of this study was to get to know, from the phenomenological perspective, the experience of the university student 50 years of age and older, that is admitted in a university in Puerto Rico to start or to continue a bachelor degree in a nontraditional programme targeted for adult students. This phenomenon was explored using the following research questions:

1. What is the learning experience for the university student 50 years of age or older, in Puerto Rico, in bachelor level?
2. How do the motivational factors in the people 50 years of age or over bring meaning to the decision of starting university studies oriented to finish a bachelor degree, in Puerto Rico?
3. How the students 50 years of age or over, in Puerto Rico, perceive the academic challenges in bachelor degree?

The design of this research was qualitative, focused on the interpretative hermeneutical phenomenology, based in the inductive method of investigation and marked in the constructivist paradigm. The research was done in three universities in Puerto Rico that offer bachelor degrees targeted to older adults. The selection of these universities was made at random, from a list of universities provided in the document: "Institutions of Higher Education in Puerto Rico and its Carnegie Classification", published by the Carnegie Institute. All the requirements established by the participating institutions for developing the research in their campuses were followed. The population of the study was made up of the total amount of students enrolled in the first semester of the academic year 2011 to 2012, who filled all the requirements to participate in the study. The nine participants or best informants were selected by invitation, through a bulletin posted in each of the three campuses; there were three students of each institution. The criteria for the selection was as follows: a) being at least 50 years of age at the time of enrolment or returning to university; b) be enrolled in a bachelor degree in any major; and, c) be enrolled in a nontraditional program targeted to older adults, during the first semester of the 2011 to 2012 academic year.

The main data base for the research was obtained through the individual interviews to the best informants, which added to the phenomenological character of the study from its primary source. The instrument of investigation was a document called: "Guide questions contained in the technique of deep investigation". This document contained a total of 13 questions, and was the

final product of the rigorous evaluation by the Panel of Experts, out of the first draft that was submitted to them, to determine if through the responses to these, the purpose and objectives of the study were achieved. This was attained by organizing the guide questions in three groups, so that by answering the 13 guide questions, the 3 research questions would be answered.

The interviews were semi structured, as each guide question was followed by follow up questions, according to how these flowed. The qualitative methodology allows for the use of these types of questions with the purpose of obtaining answers with rich and profound content, until reaching the level of saturation (Rubin y Rubin, 2005). A question that did not correspond to any of the three main research questions was formulated: "Express an anecdote, comment, and/or suggestion related to one of the topics exposed in the interview that you wish to share". At the time of the questioning, the participant had the opportunity to share experiences, opinions, thoughts, perceptions and/or feelings that were not related to the previous questions. The saturation required to achieve the purpose of the interview, and therefore know that it was finished, was confirmed through this question. All the questions were formulated in a way that they would recall experiences had as adult students, which allowed for a more vivid narration of the experiences through fresh and clear responses (Rubin y Rubin, 2005).

Informants were asked to complete a short questionnaire with sociodemographic data. In addition, there was a diary where details about the atmosphere in which the interviews took place (before, during and after the interviews), and the nonverbal expressions of the best informants were registered. These documents served as a valuable resource for the researcher, at the time of the analysis of the answers of each best informant. Each 90 minute interview took place in the campus where each participant studied, it was audio recorded, transcribed in a literal manner and sent through e-mail to each informant for revision and approval. When this process was done with each interview, the answers were added to the study data base.

Three categories and 13 subcategories were established, according to the 3 research questions, and corresponding to the 13 guide questions respectively, in order to analyze the data that was collected from the interviews. It was attempted to capture the way in which the participants experimented the aforementioned phenomenon through the analysis of the results of the study. The researcher explored perceptions, descriptions, feelings and memories of the best informants, as well as the meaning to their experiences, how they judged them and how they expressed these. This allowed for the description of the essential relations of the phenomenon, directly through their experiences; not through the physical aspect of it. According to the analysis of the answers, two tables were made: one to group the similar answers and one for the diverging answers.

In accordance with the credibility of this study, Rubin and Rubin (2005) express that a study acquires credibility when it provides solid evidence for each argument that exposes the discussion of the results, when the interviewers are quoted in a literal manner, and through the meticulous description of the design of the research. The authors express that there is added credibility when the way that there was access to the data and the way in which the participants were selected are exposed and when the style and tone of the results of the study are precise and as desired. They relate credibility with meticulousness and propose that this is demonstrated when aspects such as the researching method, the people interviewed and the period spent on each interview are described. Castillo and Vásquez (2003) on the other hand, propose that the credibility of a qualitative study is achieved when the researcher gathers information through prolonged conversations and when it generates discoveries that can be recognized by best participants as that they feel and think.

In this study, the credibility was established first and foremost through the “membercheck”. According to Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2007) this “membercheck” helps the participants, as they can confirm if their responses were expressed with precision. An issue that can add to the credibility of the results of the study, according to Rubin and Rubin, is that the researcher makes sure that he/she interviews a person that represent diverse perspectives of the topics at hand, aspect that was also addressed in this study. This is furthermore observable through the multiple divergent responses that were described and analyzed. According to the exposed, it is understood that the study completely fulfilled with all the elements of credibility.

The presentation of the results was realized in a descriptive way, in accordance with the 3 investigation questions and the 13 guide questions of the interview. As part of the discussion of the results, the grade of accordance is established between these and the results of the revised studies, as well as the literature that was used as a reference. The likenesses and differences in the responses to the questions of each best informant were established. The triangulation needed for the analysis of the findings of the study from diverse aspects was achieved, when the particularities of each revised study, especially the ones done in Puerto Rico, were considered (Hernández Sampieri, Fernández Collado, Baptista Lucío, 2006). With the purpose of solidifying the credibility of the study, the researcher contrasted the aspects of the development of each interview, registered in her diary, which included the nonverbal communication that she observed in each participant (Rubin y Rubin; Hernández Sampieri et al.). By doing this, she obtained valuable information that contributed to the triangulation and interpretation of the data. The sociodemographic data brought by the participants allowed the demarcation of the findings of the study in the social context in which they occurred, which contributes to the richness of the study.

As for the terms of the internal validity of the study, the process used to prove the instrument of investigation and the aspects that were considered by the evaluators, make evident that this instrument was the result of a rigorous process of evaluation; through the aforementioned process the validity of the study is established. The technique chosen to obtain the data base, the protocol used to obtain the authorizations needed for the realization of the interviews and the rigour with which the information was compiled for the study, are elements that add to the validity of the investigation.

4. Results

The results of the study were obtained through three sources: the questionnaires regarding the sociodemographic data of the informants, the observations registered by the investigator in a diary and the individual interviews. Because the confidential character of the investigation, the names of the participating institutions were substituted by the letters A, B and C; and the names of the informants were substituted by the numbers 1, 2 and 3, in each institution, according to the order in which they were interviewed.

4.1. Sociodemographic data

Regarding the sociodemographic data obtained, it was found that in terms of age, 4 participants belonged to the 50 to 54 age group, distributed among three institutions; 2 participants belonged to the 55 to 59 age group and 3 belonged to the 60 to 64 age group. Regarding the gender of the participants, five were male and four were female; in the three institutions there were representation of both genders.

On the topic of when the 9 participants graduated from high school, the answers prove that the older date was 1964 and that the most recent date was 1982, which indicates that there is an 18 year gap among the participants of institution A, while institutions B and C have a 12 year gap regarding the same topic. The nine informants responded that they had been university students that had started the Program; but none had finished a bachelor's degree. When asked about the number of years that they had remained outside of university studies, the least amount was 4 and the longer period was 41 years, both informed in institution C, while the 8 participants responded that they had been outside of university studies for a period of 16 years or more. In the category denominated "academic progress", the responses indicate that the three participants, from Institution C, were in their second academic year, and the rest were in their third year, fourth or fifth year in their respective program targeted for adults.

Regarding their employment, six participants said to be employed, among them all participants of Institution A, five of the employed participants worked in the private sector and three indicated they were unemployed.

Concerning the positions that they occupied in their jobs, three mentioned that they had management positions; they all belonged to Institution A.

4.2. Responses to the guide questions

The following descriptions correspond to various answers: concurring and diverging, offered by the participants to each guide question in their respective interviews. The first research question was: what is the experience of the adult of 50 or over, as university student in Puerto Rico, who enrolled in a bachelor's degree? The first three guide questions in the interview were regarding this topic.

The first approach to the best participants was: describe the feelings and the thoughts that you experienced when you decided to return to school at the age of 50 or over. The response, in which all of them concurred in, was about the feeling of fear, doubt, disorientation and/or anxiety that they experimented. Seven of the participants indicated that this was due to the challenge of competing with younger students, while two of the informants said that they feared the reaction of their friends and family might have when they knew that they were going back to the university. About this feeling, two expressions were cited: Participant 2 of the Institution C (P2C): "I felt fear at the beginning because I am older and almost all of the other students are younger ... I feared people's reaction, I feared how I was going to feel, what was going to happen". Another response to the first question, to which six participants concurred, was that they thought of finishing the degree that they had not ended, unfinished studies that had not allowed them to develop professionally. This is how P2A described this issue: "I had an unfinished degree that did not allow me to develop, and wanting to return, and having the determination to return, I did it in order to be prepared."

Concerning the same question, the answer to which four participants concurred, was related to the feelings of happiness and satisfaction of working for their goal of finishing their studies. Contrary to the responses in which a couple of the participants expressed fear, three of them confessed to feeling confident in being able to achieve their goal. There were three participants that described how important it was for their families that they finish their studies. Regarding this, P3B said: "I was happy for returning, were I see an opportunity to progress my intellect and help my family and my children, to be able to educate them in a more efficient way."

About the divergent answers to the first approach, some of them were: she felt that she became a person again; that she felt obsolete, null for not having finished her degree; going back to university was a refreshing experience and it meant going back to her youth; she felt excited for returning to a university atmosphere; and, felt euphoria when told that she was eligible for financial aid.

The second guide question was: what does it mean to you, as an adult of 50 or over, to be a university student? Seven participants concurred in that returning to college was a source of pride (includes: feeling proud, respected, useful and a status symbol). The answer of P3C was evidence of this: "The meaning is that it can become a status symbol in society, but more than a status, it's what I can contribute; that is the meaning that finishing a degree has for me". In relation to this question, five participants concurred in that being a university student means making people think. About this, P3C said:

"The most important meaning is that being a university student allows me to have and use my critical awareness, that I can give my opinion, not only believe what a professor or a book tells me, but have my own critical awareness. From the first day of class, I let professors know what it means to me to change the way that people think".

According to the four participants' opinion, being a university student allows the student to develop abilities needed as a human being: learn and manage life, goal establishment, making the right decisions. Three participants concurred in that being a university student meant serving society. Regarding this, P2B said: "When I thought of a university, I thought about being able to help when needed. I like helping everyone, I like when people approach me". There were three divergent answers to the previous one: being a university student meant entertainment; a person is a student for all of his/her life; and, will die the day that he/she stops learning.

The third guide question was the following: what is your opinion regarding your role as a university student, related to your life experiences and your learning experiences? Five informants concurred in that, regarding their life experiences, they wanted to help to their peers and to young classmates, through the transmission of their experiences so that they could be more efficient. This was expressed by three informants of Institution B; P3B said:

"I have become a model for the younger students, they look at me as a person with experience due to my age and they come up to me in different parts of the campus. To me it is amazing that I can still express my perceptions as a student that they can come up to me to ask questions show that they see me as a mature and experienced person".

On the subject of their role as university student and their learning experiences, all the informants thought that they had learned and/or clarified many of their concepts and skills. Four participants said that these learning experiences allowed them to see and understand the things that they thought were not important, and that those experiences had changed their daily life. P2C gave a good example of this in his response:

"I have learned so much in the year and half that I have been enrolled in the university, and I apply them when dealing with my daughters. If knew before what I knew now, I would have thought different in many aspects, in

things that had happened in my office. Concerning my job, I can see things better, I can understand things better, I can see the meaning of things, things that I did not care for before. Now I prioritize many things in my job; I have analyzed myself and I believe that I have changed”.

Some of the diverging answers regarding the relation that the participants establish between their role as university students and their life experiences and with their learning experiences are as following: come from a family in which all the members were professionals, they had transmitted these experiences and motivation to return and finish their career; their grades were low, while in college they maintained an A grade average; they worried that young professors would identify more with young students; they were surprised that young students and adult students had the same worries; in the classroom they did not feel inhibited at the time of wanting to ask questions to the professor. Some of the participants had identified their learning experiences with their life experiences; felt anxiety when thinking about finishing their degree and felt that missing a class meant missing a lot of material; felt that they might not have the same learning capacity, while they felt that they had the same level of intelligence; and, felt that standing out and being first in everything is important.

The second investigation question: how do the motivation factors in people of age 50 or over make sense regarding their decision to start and continue their studies leading to a bachelor's degree, in Puerto Rico?, correspond to the guide questions 4 through 8. The fourth guide question in the interview was: What do you believe was your motivation at the moment of making the decision to continue the bachelor's degree, as adult of 50 years of age or over? Among the concurring answers was: returning to the university to serve as an example to their families, especially to their children and show them that “it's never late”; this was a motivation factor for eight informants concurred. This is how P3A expressed it: “My son went for a master's degree; the same way that I feel proud of him, for me to attain a bachelor's degree, so my children would feel proud about their father also reaching this”. An answer in which seven participants concurred was in that finishing an uncompleted goal and feeling happy were their motivation. Participant 2B expressed: “I did not see myself finish my degree. Completing this degree for my own desire, to feel happy with myself and as a human being, as a person: that motivated me to make this decision.”

On the other hand, the answer in which three participants concurred was in that their motivation to feel capable to helping those in need, their family, their church, the community, the working places or rehabilitation centers for recovering drug addicts. Participant 3C's expressions were a reflection of this: “I was a drug addict for 30 years, I tried to study [but] I could not finish. Now that I am clean, I feel at peace and I believe that my experience can contribute a lot.” Two informants said that their motivation to go back to the university

was that they did not feel satisfied professionally. About this topic, P2A's opinion was:

I was not fulfilled professionally, even though I had achieved a successful professional career [in the construction industry], when you go out in search of a job and you take your data sheet, they find out that you have not finished your studies and this is a hindrance that I am not willing to carry anymore.

Several of the concurring answers to the aforementioned question were as follows: "I did not want to be economically dependent on anyone; I did not want to carry out a job that I did not like"; the demand for the construction of buildings and houses in the island went down; graduation motivated him, which he anxiously awaits; he felt still had enough neurons to be able to study; and, he hoped that his daughter would be able to notice change in him.

The fifth guide question was expressed as follows: How do you perceive the services offered by the programme to maintain the students, 50 or over, motivation to finalize their bachelor's degree? An answer that seven students concurred in, who perceived that the institution had dedicated support professionals. This was evidenced in P2A's answer: "They are very committed to help and they make sure that you enroll in classes, they call you and if there is a problem regarding finance or with anything else, they 'look for a way' to make things right." Seven participants concurred in that they perceive that the Programme had knowledgeable professors. Regarding the professors, four best informants mentioned that they were available to help them; an example of this was P3C's opinion: "The professors were 99.9 percent, very open to help, and to not be 'easy on them'; I wanted to learn and they were willing to teach me."

Regarding their perception of the services offered by the Programme to the adult students, five participants said that the University offered them all the essential services, according to their needs and/or the services were excellent. PIC said:

"The Programme is amazing; it takes away all the excuses to say: "we can't", because it's after works, you can do the homework from home, communicate through the internet; because it is very easy to obtain a bachelor's degree, primarily because this Programme is so excellent".

With reference to the physical structure in the University, two participants said that it did not have buildings that did not have the adaptations needed by people with impairments. Participant 1B said the following regarding this issue:

"I have a physical impairment that does not allow me to go up to the third floor. There is no ramp that would allow me to go from the second to the third floor, if the elevator is not working. If a person with impairment that has to use a walker or a wheelchair, they have to take the class in the first floor, in the library or in an office; there are no accommodations. Maybe they have thought about making some accommodations, but they have not made them".

The following expressions are diverging answers regarding this question: the programme allowed for the fulfillment of labor commitments and study at the same time; the Programme was offered in slots of four months, which allowed for the visualization of a closer goal when compared to a traditional six months semester; the participant considered that it was the adult, not the Institution, who should assume the compliance of the inherent responsibilities regarding being a university student; if the Programme did not exist, he would feel confused and lost among the younger students, because of his age; the library should be equipped with better resources; the library was well organized, in proportion with the needs of the students; during the first semester in the Programme, he had difficulties in mobility due to a special condition, because the elevators were out of service, but he complained and these were repaired; and, in the Institution there were no students with impairments because they preferred institutions that had the structure readily available with their needs in mind.

Other diverging answers to the fifth guide question were: the Programme was more flexible than the other traditional programs; they should coordinate the sociocultural activities that are offered to the students, so that these would not conflict with the classes; they recommended that the activities should be more related to the culture; there was bad communication between Programme and the offices that offered services; the professors were available through email and through their private phones, but these were not enough to fulfill the needs of the adult students; the professors did not have mailboxes and there were no office personnel to receive the student's documents; the best informant presented the need to establish an office for professors, and the need to establish content of the course guide, but these needs were not taken into consideration. He had also presented letters with suggestions over other aspects of the Programme were addressed; and, the parking did not have protection for the ladies on the Programme.

The sixth guide question expressed: how do you perceive the activities and behavior of the students of traditional academic program towards the students of the Programme, regarding the acceptance and the disposition to offer tutoring? One of the answers concurred by the majority of the participants, who said that their younger classmates and/or employees of the institution believed that they were professors, and that they felt good about that.

Participant's 1B and P'3A answers are examples of this: "When they see me ask me if I am a professor, and if I am teaching a class, which class do I teach, and I say 'I am not a professor, I am a students like you'". "It was interesting, it was good, because that means that they respect me, they look at me with level of respect."

Seven participants concurred that they had not observed negative attitudes from the younger students towards the adults; P2C said:

“They are not people that target you, that point at you, they look at you as a regular student, I can go to the halls, sit with a group of students [younger]; they think that we are part of them”.

Three participants thought that the younger students did not expect that adults were studying in a university, due to their age. One of these was P1B, who expressed: “[The younger students feel] surprised, because they did not visualize older adults as students; they think that there is a time to study [in] university, maybe 18 to 30 [years old]”. Three informants responded that they had been instrumental in the facilitation and motivation of the younger students to finish their degree. An example of this is what P3A expressed: “More than them coming up to me for inspiration, I have been an instrument to them; I have felt good about this because I have been able to help them”. Two participants thought that negative comments said by a younger student towards an adult, were not accepted by the student in any age in a university; P2B said:

“They have commented, with fear, but the group does not accept them and the students kept quiet, because they understood that they should not have said anything. Also, it was good to know that the younger students were the ones that corrected their peers when they would say unnecessary comments”.

Regarding the perception about the disposition of the younger students to tutor the adult students, six students concurred in that they had not needed tutoring from the younger students, that they had been the ones to tutor the younger students, reason for which they had felt pleased. These were the expressions of participants 3B and 3A, respectively: “Many times my classmates come up to me and say ‘how can I make this better?’ they hand me their papers so I can recheck them”. “Obviously, I have felt good about being a helping hand to them”. One response that was repeated in the interviews of four participants was that the students gave tutoring to the adults in the subjects of accounting, and/or computing.

Among the diverging answers of the participants to the sixth question are the following: the University was focused primarily on the adult students; he became a little inhibited because he did not express his opinions as the younger students and he was worried that they would not understand; he noticed that the Institution was very motivated and enthusiastic about helping the student, which he did not observe in other institutions; his classmates were impressed by his knowledge about history; when he was in the university he did not think about his age; and, he felt that because he was a university student he could have a conversation with anyone. Regarding his perception toward the younger students’ willingness to give tutoring to adult students, a best informant said that he accepted the help, from his younger classmates, when it came to managing the computer and that he would go to the tutoring center of the Institution if it would be necessary.

The seventh guide question was: what is your opinion regarding the level of communication and empathy that should exist among the students of the traditional academic programmes and those of the Programme (regarding diversity)? The answer of eight of the participants concurred, they said that the younger students respected the diversity, at the time of integration with the adult students, for which the fraternization of both groups was possible.

Other answer concurred by eight best informants was that the younger students respected the older students, which was demonstrated in P1A's expressions: "They respect us when, for example, we are in the cafeteria line and they say 'you may go before me if you wish...'".

About the answers for that question, seven participants concurred in that there was a lot of empathy among the young students and the adult students. This is exemplified by P3C's quote: "Much, when I say much, much empathy. They look for me and I look for them and we get together throughout the day". A total of five informants answered the aforementioned question by stating that the young students kept high level of communication towards the adults, because they looked for their support and they always wanted to consult their university and private situations with them, for which they felt very proud. A total of three informants responded that they were worried when they observed little interest, maturity and/or responsibility among the younger students, because they saw their children reflected on the attitudes of their younger classmates.

There were several diverging answers to seventh guide question; they are as follows: the fact that the group size in every classroom was small and homogenous, and that the students took many curses together made for a better communication among them; the younger students made them feel as they were not different to them, since they went to the same activities; they understood that discipline was an essential element in order to finish their studies; outside of the classroom, some younger classmates treated them in a distant fashion when outside of the classroom, but in the classroom they all participated equally; they considered that there should not be any difference when it came to treatment, because of age; the participant had noticed certain group forming among the younger students that studied during the day and those that studied during the night, in a sort of 'posy' and there was only a connection between them in the library.

The eight guide question formulated in the interviews was: how do you describe your personal, social, economical and academic expectations, when you finished your bachelor's degree? When responding to this question, P3C said: "I want to finish a degree that I like, I want to feel happy and at peace; there is no amount of money that can buy peace." Regarding the social expectations, a total of four informants concurred: having time for religious, social and/or organizations or social clubs to which he belonged. One participant, P1A, said: "Once I finish my bachelor's degree and my master's

degree, that I plan to start as soon as possible, I will have more time to spend with them [with the members of the Club]”.

When asked about labor expectations, three informants expressed that they hoped to be able to help to those in need of professional services; exemplified by P3C'S quote: “Working in counseling with drug addicts, mainly with ‘white collar’ addicts, which are the ones that worry me the most. In relation to their economic expectations, three participants responded that they did not expect to have a higher salary; P1A said: “I don’t believe that I will get a higher salary because of my bachelor’s degree, I am not doing it with that purpose, getting more money is not a motivation for me to finish my degree”.

Among the academic expectations expressed by eight participants regarding their decision to continue their studies in a university, at undergraduate and graduate levels, in diverse careers, five of them in Law, to serve as an example to their families. Regarding this, P3B said:

“I want to continue to a doctorate degree, I want to continue bettering myself, personal reasons, my family, my children, I want to be able to provide them with the best, the best route to education, and I believe that the first step is to get a better education, and then I will be able to be a serve as a guide”.

At the same time, the participants expressed diverging responses towards the eight question. As personal expectations they mentioned: be an example for their daughters and granddaughters, reason for which they plan to send a copy of their diploma; be able to manage their time better and help their sons and daughters with the caring of their grandchildren; and that their families were present on the day of their graduation, day that they visualize in a very distant future.

The best informants said the following divergent answers regarding their social expectations: the hardships that they had been through had thought them to maintain a ‘low profile’, reason for which they did not attend social activities; she wanted her friends to be able to feel as good as she does as a member of the Programme; her community saw her as an inspiration of what an older adult is capable of going back to finish a degree; and, felt that she had an education and intellect to become part of social organizations.

In terms of the economic expectations, the diverging answers were as follows: receiving pension and social security benefits; having a salary, which is a source of satisfaction to the participant; she considered that earning a high salary was not synonym to professional success; she would not accept employment in which there were bad working conditions, even if it was a high paying job; having a stable job would allow them to have a fixed income; continuing to feel economically independent; and, be able to discuss her salary with her supervisor, without the limitation of having an unfinished degree.

In terms of their labor expectations, one informant expressed that she felt very proud professionally, which she did not feel before because she did not have the degree, and now she was working to obtain it. She visualized herself as a lecturer in an accredited institution; she also saw herself in a different light, the way she walked, the way she dressed and interacted in her job. She mentioned that she happily waited the moment that she would be able to work and she thought that her bachelor's degree would allow her to have a more diverse job offering, as an office worker or as a teacher. She responded that she would be willing to accept the job that would be offered to her, and that a schedule that would allow her to take care of her family affairs would be best. Other answers were: feeling active while she is still healthy, although she did not want to retire when she were very tired; apply for the realtor license, which was denied because of the lack of academic preparation; and, work again in a company that values and pays an appropriate salary for her experience and her academic preparation.

The third research question in this study was: how do you perceive the university students of 50 years of age and over, in Puerto Rico, the academic challenges in undergraduate level? With the purpose of answering this question, questions 9 through 12 were asked. The ninth guide question was: as an adult of 50 years of age and over, what meaning does your academic knowledge, your technical skills, and your labor skills, in terms of achieving a successful transition from being a university students and becoming a worker? When answering this question regarding the academic knowledge, four informants concurred that through the academic knowledge they would acquire a better oral expression capacity in the professional scene. Participant 1B's answer is example of it: "It satisfies me, to have the ability to be able to speak, to be able to express myself with someone that does not have a degree, and letting them know, somehow, that I am a professional." Two informants agree in that knowledge helps the employee understand the decision that their bosses take. Regarding the meaning that their technical ability, there were concurring responses. Eight participants concurred in that they had acquired and/or recovered, through seminars, workshops, tutoring and/or classes in the University, the skills needed to carry out their duties as students and to prepare them as workers.

In relation to the degree of knowledge that the informants had of computing before being in a university, there were concurring answers; three said that they knew well how to work with a computer, while two said that they knew nothing about computing. Participant 2B said the following about this:

"I knew nothing about technology because, while I was an institute I barely used a computer, so you tend to forget. When I got to the university, one of my worries was how. I was going to deal with technology, I'm afraid, I don't know".

Concerning this aspect, two informants concurred in that they felt prepared in all aspect to reenter into the labor world. One of them was P1B, who said:

“[I feel] prepared to do the type of work that I am applying for, because it is not the same thing when you only have a high school diploma than when you have a bachelor’s degree in a specific skill”.

The ninth question had many diverging answers. Some of them are as follows: regarding the meaning that their new found academic knowledge had for them, in terms of having a successful transition between the university and their future jobs: he had gained the analytical skills, through the presentations, which would helped them in the job market; he appreciated knowledge more now; was more mature because he recognized the importance of recycling and the importance of taking care of the planet for future generations; and, he did not only expect to pass his course, but to actually learn.

Other diverging answers to this question were: knowledge quenches the human spirit, it opens doors in many aspects; knowledge has a great moral, spiritual and also academic weight; academic knowledge allows she to feel happy and sure about herself, which allowed her to participate; he had changed his vision of himself; she just wanted to be of services, because he was also helped; and, he could talk about specific topics in a more credible way.

Regarding the technological skills in the aforementioned context, the following was said by the informants: the adults thought that they did not have to work with computers; the university had helped them make the transition “from the old to the new”, that this difficulty with technology existed, but they did not want to recognize it; not having computing skills traumatized them and caused the university a lot of hardships when making the Programme’s portfolio; he considered that the computing course was very inclusive and that it was taught by an excellent professor, but since that the time was too short, no learning took place because too much material was crammed in a very short time.

On the topic of the labor skills in this context, the following are examples of the diverging answers: to obtain theory knowledge would allow him to recognize errors made in their profession, since he learned “in practice” that the authoritative styles of “whip and fear” do not work and that the younger workers of the XXI demand to be treated differently; the oral presentations help the students loose helped the student loose the fear of public speaking. One participant said that he had to take advantage of his university experience; he had many “scars” in his souls, due to his being ignorant in many issues in which he was better informed now; and, he visualized himself applying those in his job.

The tenth guide question in the interview was: how do you perceive the academic challenges for the student of 50 years or over, in Puerto Rico? A

total of eight best informants concurred in their answer. They said that their grade average was very important to them. Participant 1C said: “I have 4.00 up to now; I like to have the best grades in class, which is my goal, always an A”. Three informants concurred in their answer regarding their academic challenges: they perceived that coming back to the university they expected the academic challenges to be very arduous, just like P3A pointed out:

“I expected the challenges to be hard, [but] I have been able to manage them, I had made my mind in that if I enrolled in classes I would continue in them until the end of the year, regardless of how difficult they were”.

Like for the other questions, the tenth guide question had diverging answers: he had had to learn technological skills, in front of young students that already had them; his work in the auction field helped him to develop the habit of always working in a timely fashion; studying had been an accomplishment for him; to be able to achieve a goal responsibility is a must; he considered herself very prepared to apply her new knowledge and to be happy when he thought about being able to transmit these to other classmates; maybe because of his level of education, his maturity and his experience that allowed him to reach university level, the academic challenges did not intimidate him; universities should be more rigorous regarding the course requirements; the discipline was fundamental to reach an effective educational process; the adult students only need the determination and the need to go into any profession; and, in occasions she felt that her mental capacity had gone down, reason for which she had to spend more time and dedication to comprehend the class material.

The eleventh guide question in the interview was: how would you describe the meaning that the Programme’s curriculum gives to your life experiences as an adult of 50 years or over? The answer in which all participants concurred in was that the professors took their contribution to the class into consideration, because of the experiences that they had had. About this issue, P3B said: “In many cases [my professors] ask for additional detail from my experiences that I could add to a topic, to make it more clear and better understood by the rest of the students.” Six participants concurred in their expressions, when they mentioned that the younger students understood better through the narration of experiences from their peers. Regarding this expressions, P2A said:

“Sometimes the professor would express himself in a way that only he understood, and the student was sitting there looking at him, not knowing what he meant. If one has the opportunity [to ask]: ‘Professor: ‘is this what you mean?’ In that moment, people start associating terms and they become more dynamic and attentive; professors are very open in that aspect’.

When it came to the eleventh interview question, there were diverging answers: the Programme was created to consider the life experiences of the adult student; he learned about the importance of pacification when

developing infrastructure in the Programme; he exposed in class the way that he had taken care of situations in work and asked that the professors to evaluate his style as an administrator; because of his life experiences, the adult students tended to be more responsible, they challenged themselves to standout and they were not satisfied with just “any” grade; the student felt proud when his or hers life experienced was added to the classes explanation of a topic; he had offered recommendations to professors, according to his life experiences; in many courses, the professors did not take advantage of the experiences of the adults; and, through the content of some of the courses, the Participant achieved a deeper identification and understanding of his life experiences and got to know himself better.

The following is the twelfth guide question asked to the participants in the interview: how do you perceive the attention that the professors of the Programme showed to issues such as: the teaching methods (examples: going over discussed topics, introduction to new topics, participation of the students in class and the redaction of the exams), the use of the resources (equipment and teaching material), the individualized attention and the management of time?

Some of the concurring responses to this questionnaire are as follows: Concerning the teaching methods employed by the professors, an answer concurred by three best informants was that the professors had conferences in class, whose speakers spoke about topics related to the class. When it came to the evaluations, three participants concurred in that these were very fair. This is what P1A said regarding evaluations: “Yes, they are very fair: we have reviews, we have the convenience of doing our own work. I have felt very well evaluated; we are provided with the material to have excellent grades in our exams”. In addition, two informants thought the same way about the professors teaching method in the Programme, and two informants concurred in that this was due to the assignments of oral presentations. Two of the participants said that the professors tried hard so the students understood the material presented in class. About this, P2C commented: “The professors went through efforts to cover the material, so that we can absorb as much as possible in the given time”. Another response concurred by two participants was that professors showed that they were truly worried about being well prepared for teaching their curses. In the exams, all students were evaluated in an equal way, the younger and the older students were treated equally in this sense, this was the response of two participants regarding the aspect of the tests and the exams administered to the students.

An added aspect investigates was the use of the resources by the professors of the adult targeted programme. Five informants concurred in that both professors and students used the computer and the projector to develop the classes and when making oral presentations, yet two informants said that they thought that often the course guides of the Programme were not up to

date. About that question, P3C answered: “One of the criticisms is how obsolete the module was, the majority of it was obsolete and has no relation to the textbook; we have to improve ‘as we go’ sometimes”. Eight participants said, about how they perceived the individualized attention that the professors of the Programmes gave to students, that they were very available for it. An expression about this, for P3A, was: “[Professors] have been very ‘open’ so the students can progress, develop, and learn; that the students ask the availability to communicate after class if we have any questions. Many have given us their personal number, they have been facilitators”.

Three informants concurred in that the Program was flexible with the adults so that they could fulfill their duties as students; P1A said: “Some students have not been able to take some of the exams due to health problems. They have not been able to [do] some presentations, so they were granted the opportunity to present in later dates”. Three informants said that the professors had offices that allowed them to assist the students that needed help.

Concerning the last aspect, the perception of the informants towards the attention that professors pay to time management, there were concurring answers as the following. All the participants in the study mentioned that the professors distributed time well. Regarding this topic, three responded that they needed to take additional time to finish their workload, which was established in the module of the class. Participant1C’s answer represents the perception of these participants: “There is a lot of material, time is ‘squeezed’, sometimes I have finished class at 10:30 at night, but one comes to the university to study, regardless of the time that I have to return home”. In this context, three informants concurred in their response, when they said that the periods assigned to the courses in some occasions were enough to address appropriately the topics that correspond to the courses.

There was a great number of diverging responses to the twelfth guide question. In terms of the teaching methods, some informants mentioned that: the professors of the Programme encouraged the discussion of the topics happened in a very professional fashion; the professors made sure that they knew how the students perceived the class; a professor used a diary for investigating what was the student’s perception of the courses, the students made simulations of meetings of employees in management positions for product merchandising; some professors presented their life experiences as an introduction in class; the professors assessed the students feelings regarding how they felt about the topics chosen for the class; the professors educated the students about how to prepare the oral presentations and have stimulating comments about the good quality of the presentation; and, the professors emphasized on the specific material that the tests would include.

The participants expressed their diverging perceptions about the attention that the professors gave to the teaching methods: the course guides

don't contain anything to the assigned text; the emails in the guides were not up to date; some professors informed the students about their progress in the course only when it was about to end; sometimes the professors paid for the didactic material; and, the evaluating method was not very strict, considering that they were adult students.

The diverging answers regarding the perceptions of the professor's individualized attention to the students were: the professors were available in their office hours and they helped the students with any doubts that they had; the professors gave students their private phone numbers; the professors used reference books and they went over the material so that the students that were not able to get the textbook, would not get behind; the professors helped the students so that they would be able to work at their own pace; the professors tried to give students individualized attention in the classroom, but the time assigned did not allow this to happen; the professors did not have offices or other places to meet with the students, reason for which they were unable to help them individually, in person, to the students; and, if the professors would be able to give individualized attention to students of the Programme in their offices, they would be able to also prepare better and obtain better grades.

The last guide question was: express the anecdote, comment and/or suggestion that you wish to share about some of the topics exposed in the interview. One of the comments in which five participants concurred was that their experience as an adult university student had been excellent and/ or, marvelous, and they were very thankful. About this, P3B said:

“My experience in the Institution has been wonderful, interacting with the young students, getting used to a new style of studies, interacting with professors, learning [to manage] electronic equipment at a university level. I am very happy and I want to keep developing as well as I can”.

About the answer to this question, four informants commented that they felt grateful for this investigation, and honored because they were chosen to participate in it. The words of P2B about this were: “Thank you for thinking about us, the adults, and for making this investigation. I am thankful about being able to have expressed my experiences here”. Three informants concurred in that; it was the exhortation for the adults to study, as P1B suggested:

“Those people that have the desire to study and feel inhibited, that take advantage of the opportunity, that seeing themselves accomplishing academic life, is more than an achievement that they can use for their personal benefit. It is great to be able to let your kids, that are university students themselves, know that you feel satisfied, accomplished and that you have a good grade average”.

Three best informants commented that the adult students in their Institution had financial aid to be able to finish their degrees, as P2A's anecdote shows:

“In the Institution they find a way so that we can continue forward with our studies, the times that I have had economic problems, I have spoken to them and they have always helped me. I am very satisfied with the Institution and with the Programme”.

The answer given by two participants was that they wanted to graduate so that they could lend a helping hand. About this, P2B commented: “I don’t know if I should be a teacher, advisor or what, but I am going to be something to be able to help many, and that gives me a lot of satisfaction, it fulfills me”. Two informants said that being able to study in the university had allowed them to perceive people in a different way. As P1A puts it: “I have a different perspective of what my kids and my employee do things, I can understand better the people that surround me, I can be a better human being, better supervisor, better colleague and a better mother.”

The following descriptions correspond to some of the individual answers to the last guide question: One participant exposed that he felt very comfortable when restarting college and observed that all of her classmates in the first couple of classes were adults. She added that when she started to take classes with younger students, she thought that they had advantage over her because they had “fresh knowledge”, but she was able to contribute a lot in her classes because of her understanding and her previous experiences. This best informant also commented that she had felt good when she proved that she was able to understand information quickly; and that she had observed how the younger university students and her colleagues saw her physical and emotional effort as an adult that went to the university after fulfilling her professional obligations. Also commented that she had gained the respect of her peers, of her employees and that of the university management, because they had noticed her consistency and effort. She expressed her interest in not letting down all of those who had believed in her and commented that her answers had come from deep in his heart.

Another participant commented that he was satisfied with the attention that he had received in the University and in the Programme. He considered that the fact that the Institution recognized all of his work experience, in addition to the university courses that he had previously taken in other stages of his life, allowed the adult to think of a degree as something obtainable. One informant exposed, as an anecdote, that when he studied as a young student, his grade average was deficient, which drastically contrasted with his excellent grade average as an adult student. Another participant said that she considered that all of the adults of the Programme felt very enthusiastic with their university studies as she did. The comments of another informant was that he had been through difficult moments, but that education was very important to him and he mentioned that time management was key to be a victor in his studies.

Feeling very thankful and very happy for the universities that had created academic programs for adults was the comment expressed by another informant and she added that it was impossible to allow obstacles in the path of the adults that wanted to achieve their academic goals, which they are so determined to finish. The Participant also commented that the adults wanted to be an example that would motivate the youth, for which they need to have to be allowed the opportunity to continue to stand out and keep contributing to the university, to the government and to society. Another opinion of this Participant was that adults also need to have their rights protected, to be valued and to have more career opportunities; commented that the Island was mostly populated by mature adults and older adults. Never the less, she thought that adults were seen as important by agencies. She believed that it is very important to oppose to those laws that seem discriminatory towards the adults, like those that prohibit them from buying some types of insurances or the fact that the older adults must renew their driving license annually. Finally, this participant commented that the adults have to make their voices be heard because they had life experiences and education, all of which make them capable to participate in Puerto Rican society.

Another informant commented about the course's guides: she considered that they were very rigorous for the adult students and suggested that these should have more work done, so that they become less deficient. She comments that professors should consider that adults don't have the same intensity or the same capacity to study as the younger students have. Also, this informant suggested that students should inform their professors when they had any doubts and/or fears so that these can be addressed in a timely fashion. In regards to the final comments of another participant, he said that the most relevant issue in the interview was, for which it should have been longer, suggestions to the institutions. He said that the universities tried to enroll the biggest amount of students, because this was economically favorable to them, because they were immersed in a capitalist world, in which the student is seen first and foremost in an economic perspective, not from the educational quality perspective.

Another issue that the participant commented on was in regards of the "accelerated" Programme offerings. He said that universities, very frequently "damaged" the potential of the students when they said that they would be able to finish their degree in a short period of time. Other comments given by him was that he thought that it would be best if the institution should offer careers that, even though they would take a longer time to finish, this would allow them to feel better prepared and with better possibilities of becoming quality human resources to society. He reaffirmed how important the academic orientation services were to him; commented that the interview had helped him look for a background and that there were many questions

regarding it, that made him aware of issues that he had never reflected upon before.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The discussion of the findings of the study are based in the phenomenological model, that include to describe, know more about, analyze and interpret the answers offered by the best informants to the questions formulated in the interviews in a profound fashion. This discussion is framed in the answers to the three research questions, regarding the research problem and the central question of the study. The revised literature, related to the diverse issues addressed to the informants, the sociodemographic data and the observations that were registered before, during and after the interview process, enriched the analysis and interpretation of the results, as they allowed for the demarcation of the answers of the social contexts in the places where the described experiences took place.

During the description processes and the profound analysis of the answers, it was observed what each participant commented towards them, essentially, towards one of the following aspects: the achievement of the academic goal of obtaining a bachelor's degree as the peak of their self fulfillment, the development of critical thinking as an appendix of their learning experience and their self growth as a human being. The analysis allowed the observation to unexpected questions, hat did not adjust to the studied theoretical demarcations, even when they were rich in content and they were expressed verbally, in a categorical form and confirmed through the body language of the participants. Confirms what was pointed out in the study, because the phenomenological interview is not tied to preconceived or established norms, which allowed the participant to express their thoughts, ideas and opinions about the addresses issues with spontaneity and in a very natural fashion. This motivated the election of the modality of "refocus on the interpretation", to complement the modality of "extension of the analysis", both suggested by Wolcott (1994), as a guide to the interpretation of the answers.

The researcher aspires to fix the attention in exploring through the answers, how important it was for the informants each of the mentioned aspects, like a complement when considering the interpreted answers, the applicability of the Knowles hypothesis (in Knowles, Holton, Swanson, 2001), of Maslow (1991) and of other scholars of the subject which were revised (Wolcott). This refocus in the interpretation of the results of the study, was said about the professional experiences of the researcher, as well as their learning experiences and their expectations as an adult university student, 50 years of age or over.

The following are the answers to the first research question: what is the academic experience of the university student of 50 years of age or over, in Puerto Rico, at a bachelor's degree level? The academic experience had by the informants of the study is the transformation that the adult of 50 years of age and older, when becoming part of the university alumni, as a student of one of the diverse academic programs of a bachelor's degree, targeted to adults, that are offered to the institutions of higher education in the country. This transformation was verified through the comparison of the expressions of the informants in regards to the feelings and their thoughts at the time of making the decision to go back to the university: fear, doubt and anxiety because of the reaction that people might have, and the challenge that sharing a classroom with younger people meant to them; and their expressions regarding the way that they perceived those feelings, during a semester that they were interviewed.

Regarding these feelings and thoughts expressed by the informants, says Knowles in the third premise of his Andragogic Model that both feelings have a reason to be rejected by the adult student exposed to it, from his or her younger classmates. He establishes that, as a consequence of the experience that the adult has in the classroom, since there is not a lot of experience had by the younger student, he believes that the adult only wants to get the attention from the facilitator and that of his younger classmates. The transformation is shown when we consider that one of the thoughts that the older adults have is that because of their age they lose the capacity to understand, for which they consider that they cannot internalize the new information that is presented to them in the courses.

In regards to the transformation of the best informants, when they were asked about their opinion regarding their role as university students, about their life and about what they learned, they seemed sure and very confident of themselves. They showed it when they said that they: desired to transmit their experiences to their younger classmates and help them to become more efficient; felt more integrated and respected; underestimated their capacities and their experiences; had acquired the skills and knowledge needed for life; and, that the university allowed them to see and understand issues that they had not paid any attention to before. It is important to consider that the majority of them were enrolled in their third year or later, reason for which they understand that they had abundant experiences that allowed them to comment on the issues that the researcher spoke about.

The expressions of the participants implied that the learning experiences had transformed the way that they think and the way that they act. The transformation experimented by the participants is particularly notable; because of this, one participant considers that her "come back" to the university was only a hobby. Nevertheless, she demonstrated, throughout the whole interview process, a serious commitment with her university career:

fulfill all of the responsibilities as a student and keep her good grade average: these were vital matters for her. She emphasized that the university experience had allowed her to see the world and humans from another perspective, and that she uses the new understanding in his work and in his daily life.

As for the second research question: how have the motivational factors in the people of 50 years of age or over, gave them meaning to their decision to start or to continue their university studies conducive to a bachelor's degree, in Puerto Rico? There was the following answer: the motivational factors expressed by the nine informants of the research give meaning to their decision to continue their studies, because they believe that having made this decision had been a determining factor in the achievement of their self-realization, and particularly in the wellbeing of their families, of their communities and of that of Puerto Rican society in general. The factors that were considered were the following: the reasons for which they decided to continue their degrees, the services offered by the professors and by their aids, the quality of the campuses, the attitudes of the young students towards them as adult students, the level of communication and empathy between both groups of students, and their expectations (personal, social, laborale, economical and academic) once they finish their bachelor's degrees. The informants perceived that they should pay special attention to these motivational factors, like adult students of 50 years of age or over, as they considered these very important to have their university experience be a successful one and allow them to achieve the university degree that they aspired to.

An answer that surprised the researcher was the one expressed by all of the informants, in respect to the motivational factors in their decision to return to the university, was the categorical way in which they expressed the way in which they felt that they had already reached their goal, even though they had not obtained their degree. This was the answer interpreted in the view of the study done by Maslow (1991) in regards of the needs of the human and the self-realization, like the highest of those needs, as the analysis has exposed. The educator Jaime Escalante, (cited in Machicado Saravia, 2010) called "want" (the motivation) that impulses them to beat all obstacles to reach the place that they want to be in. In terms of personal expectations, the answer of the participant was that he was motivated to think that the degree would help him change the direction of his life, since he was in a place that he did not know before and in which he had worked in for many years. This participant expressed, in a verbal and nonverbal way during the interview, that he felt self-realized, that his life had taken a different direction and that he shared those experiences in the university with his family and with other people in his social and labor surroundings.

The third research question was: how do you perceive the university students of 50 years of age or over, in Puerto Rico, the academic challenges in

a bachelor's degree level? The perception expressed by the participants about these academic challenges in a bachelor's degree level was that these trials become a challenge that they should confront and exceed on a daily basis, in the highest level possible, their university goals. To the adults, the academic rigor is related to the quality of the education, for which they not only accept these challenges, but they auto-impose very high goals in aspects such as academic average, the quality of their academic duty and their responsibilities as university students.

The answers of the informants implied that they saw their academic and technical knowledge as very important, and as skills that they can get with their experience as university students. The participants said that through the academic knowledge that is acquired in the university, they could attain the skills of oral expression, which he considered very necessary to execute their professional duties and in their daily tasks. Due to this all the participants had work experience, several emphasized that the academic knowledge could be applied in their jobs, and they said that the knowledge allowed them to understand the decisions that the administrators took. They said that the academic knowledge could be applied in a personal way and that these contribute to make them a better human. Regarding the technical and labor skills acquired by the participants in their respective programmes for adults, they mentioned that they had acquired skills that are required in the job market; the majority of them don't have vast technological knowledge. The participants expressed that they felt prepared in all aspects, even though they had not finished their degrees, to start working professionally, or to continue working in their respective professional careers.

Since they decided to return to college, the participants perceived that there would be academic challenges that they should overcome, which implied that they should be open to confront them, as they did. They counted with the support of the Programme, because the professionals in it had valued their life experiences. The best informant considered that the life experiences would help him to achieve his goal and allow him to help his young classmates, who lacked those experiences, to project his ideas and perceptions in the world from another angles.

The participants counted on the attention that the facilitators had given to them in regards of the learning methods, the use of learning resources, the individualized attention, and time management in the classroom. The factors mentioned contributed to the participant's perception of the academic challenges as a positive element, as an objective and consequence of the degree that allowed them to acquire the knowledge and the skills needed to work effectively in the careers that they had chosen.

Through the exposition of the answers to the research questions, the research problem is exposed: Even though the university institutions in Puerto Rico establish academic nontraditional programs targeted for adults, these are

developed without a profound exploration of aspects such as: feelings, life experiences, perceptions, believes, descriptions and opinions about what the experience of being university students means to them, reason for which there are curriculum modalities and complementary services for the adult student that do not respond to the reality that belongs to the experience. In this aspect, the study sustains that the findings of various investigations, done in Puerto Rico and abroad (Bowman and Burden, 2002; Fernandez, 2008; Rivera Claudio, 2008).

The following was the central question of the research: how do you explain, from a phenomenological perspective, the experience of the university student 50 years of age or over, that are enrolled in a bachelor's degree in Puerto Rico, through the nontraditional programs targeted for adults? From the phenomenological perspective, this experience is considered as transcendental; to expose the informant to the exercise of giving ample responses and profound guide questions to the interview, it guided them to go into the reality of the phenomenon. In this sense and in a natural way, it was observed that there was an extraordinary change on the core of each adult, through the inductive reasoning that was employed when the answers were analyzed, and that they exhibited the maturity of the experiences of the university students had represents in all aspects of their lives.

Here lies the essence of this study; through it the research was able to know the reach of the experience described by the participants, in all of their roles. This occurred when they were asked about the meaning that the expression "being a university student" had for them, even though their first answer was pretty shallow, when the researcher meddled a little and when throughout the development of the interview, some of the participants said that to them it meant "to make people think". They said that the university experience had made them look at the world through a new lens, it made them comprehend people, their surroundings, and themselves better.

The findings of the studio sustained all the premises of Knowles's Andragogic Model (Knowles et al., 2001), as for the hierarchy of the Necessities of the Human Being, postulated by Maslow (1991), of which the highest was auto-realization. Of this he says (p. XIX): "Human life cannot be addressed if the highest aspirations are not taken care of". The mature adults and older adults in Puerto Rico, who took the decision to enroll or return to the university with the goal of obtaining a bachelor's degree, as the most elevated aspiration, they demand and deserve to have opportunities and the conditions provided to help them reach it.

Focused on the results of this research, there are a variety of recommendations, some of which are mentioned as follows. One of them is to modify, in universities in Puerto Rico, the oral and written vocabulary used in the promotional signs and in the efforts to have people enroll in the university. Through these, conscious or unconsciously, there is special focus on youth

and the presence, which is growing rapidly, of the adult as a university student is ignored. Through the special attention given to adults, the institutions would be able to integrate them to the rest of the alumni and expose the marked presence of the people of a mature age to the rest of the university's population. The researcher also recommends that the institutions of higher education in Puerto Rico consider among their strategic plans, the revision and the strengthening of the curriculum targeted to adults, in accordance to their demands and needs, in which the results of studies like this should be considered. She recommended that when the academic programs for adults refocus, they should consider as a cornerstone, the life experiences of the mature adult and the advanced adult. A practical way of taking advantage of this experience would be through a mentoring program, through which the young students can receive the supplies with the experience of the adults, related to the content of the courses and with others aspects of university life.

This program would allow the younger students, in a simultaneous fashion, to support the adults in math courses and in regards to the management of electronics, areas that represent big academic challenges for adults, according to that expressed by the participants. In addition, the researcher urges the establishment of the curriculum for adults, it is considered as an issue of urgent need, analyze if the time assigned to the courses is appropriate, according to the students profile, as well as to the content and to the level of difficulty of the courses. During the process of adjustment to university life, it is particularly important that the adult had enough time to adjust to his/hers new style of life as a university student.

It is recommended that, both in the governmental as well as in the corporate Country, the public policies that are established should be revised, so that these can foster the complete development of the mature and of the advanced adults: as human beings, as thinking beings and as professionals. This recommendation is tied to the established in the preamble of the World Declaration regarding Superior Education in XXI Century: Vision and Mission (UNESCO, 1998, p.3), it establishes that: "...education is one of the fundamental pillars in the human rights, democracy, the sustainable development, peace, reason for which it should be accessible to all, throughout their life."

The first part of the XXI Century, denominates the Digital Era, imposes unsuspected challenges in regards to education, all over the world. This study demonstrates that education for adults should not be perceived as a fleeting issue, that should be addressed at a fast pace, from the starting point of the premise that the adult only aspires to acquire and/or develop skills and knowledge in a specific area, to become a professional as fast as possible. Because of this, the researcher recommends that universities adopt more ample and profound conceptions regarding authentic meanings of education

for adults, in accordance to how the adult university student themselves perceive it.

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