An explanatory model of the intention to continue studying among non-traditional university students

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Abstract

Background: Although academic achievement is believed to be an important factor in students’ decision to continue studying at university, research on this topic is limited. Method: The current study analyzed the relationship between academic achievement and the intention of 327 non-traditional students to continue studying at university, using a path model. Results: The central hypothesis of the study was confirmed, as the intention to continue studying was determined by previous academic results, although the amount of variance explained was relatively low (13%). Conclusions: The results from this study indicate that the intention to continue studying at university depends less than expected on the performance achieved. So, universities should consider other variables such as the quality of the academic support offered to these students continue their studies.

Keywords: Non-traditional university students, academic achievement, intent to continue, study methods, structural equation model.

Resumen

Un modelo exploratorio de la intención de continuar estudiando en alumnos universitarios no-tradicionales. Antecedentes: a pesar de la importancia que se atribuye al rendimiento académico en la toma de decisión de los alumnos mayores de 25 años sobre si continuar o no sus estudios en la Universidad, la investigación sobre este tópico es limitada. Método: se analizó la relación entre el rendimiento académico y la intención de 327 alumnos no-tradicionales de continuar sus estudios en la Universidad mediante el ajuste de un modelo de relaciones causales. Resultados: la hipótesis central del estudio fue confirmada en la medida en que la intención de continuar con los estudios resultó determinada por los resultados académicos previos, aunque la cantidad de varianza explicada fue relativamente escasa (un 13%). Conclusiones: de los resultados obtenidos en este estudio se concluyó que la intención de continuar en la Universidad depende menos de lo que se cree del rendimiento logrado, por lo que las universidades deberán dirigir su mirada también a otras variables como, por ejemplo, la calidad del apoyo que estos estudiantes reciben para continuar sus estudios.

Palabras clave: alumnos no tradicionales; rendimiento académico; intención para continuar; métodos de estudio; modelos de ecuaciones estructurales.

Similar to other European countries, Portugal is encouraging and widening the participation of new groups of people in higher education (HE) as part of a social agenda to promote the equality of opportunities and increase the number of higher education graduates. As a result of these policies and the demographic trends (the number of 18-20-year-olds is decreasing and is expected to continue to fall in the next decade), there is a growing presence of mature students in HE (Russell, 2008). This is a welcomed path, but universities should ask, as Hay, Tan and Whaites (2010, p. 578) questioned: ‘Is higher education ready to receive these non-traditional students?’ (NTS).

Depending on the authors, NTS are known as adults or mature. Thus, age is an important criterion, but the age at which a student is considered an NTS is not unanimous (e.g., 23 years old in Portugal, 25 years old in Spain). Another criterion is the students’ working status: “student-worker phenomenon has transformed the concept of the traditional university student” (Munro, 2011, p. 118). Many other criteria are used in different countries and contexts (Cantwell, Archer, & Bourke, 2001; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2010; Laing & Robinson, 2003; Munro, 2011). For example, the U.S. Department of Education (2002) has identified NTS as students who fulfill at least one of the following characteristics: delayed enrollment (at least one year postponement of university entry); is a part-time student; has full-time employment; is financially independent; has family responsibilities (e.g., married or dependent). In sum, the features that characterize NTS do not follow a standard definition (Kim, 2007); rather, they are context-dependent. Thus, caution should be exercised when analyzing and comparing data from the literature.

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