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# Gender, Lifelong learning and Social Class (GLAS)

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**Gender and Class:  
Perspectives in terms of  
access to higher education  
from Spain and the UK**

**FINAL REPORT**

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## 1. Introduction

GLAS is a European Audio-visual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) co-funded project designed to compare, develop and disseminate best practice in supporting the social inclusion and progression of working class individuals and, in particular, women, in lifelong learning. The project is trans-national, trans-cultural and has been set up to produce practical outputs to support staff working in this area.

This core theme within the GLAS project was tasked with examining partner's perspectives of the role of an individual's gender and class in affecting their access to lifelong learning opportunities and higher education. The situation in the UK and Spain will be considered first, followed by a case study of a discussion between mature learners in Spain and the document will conclude with recommendations for further research and policy.

## 2. Gender and class as barriers to accessing HE: perspectives from Linking London in the UK

### Introduction

In England in the 1950s only 5% of young people went to HE, the figure now (depending on which data you engage with) is closer to 45%, this compares with an OECD average of 28%.

This post war expansion of HE which has been replicated across most industrialised countries, came about mainly as a result of the publication of the Robbins report of 1963. This report recommended the expansion of universities and famously stated that they should be available to all who were "qualified for them by ability and attainment" (the so-called Robbins principle) and that such institutions should have four main "objectives essential to any properly balanced system: instruction in skills; the promotion of the general powers of the mind so as to produce not mere specialists but rather cultivated men and women; to maintain research in balance with teaching, since teaching should not be separated from the advancement of learning and the search for truth; and to transmit a common culture and common standards of citizenship<sup>1</sup>."

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/papers/policy-paper-98.html>

### The situation in 2013



Figure 1. Young people’s participation in HE

As the Figure 1 above shows the national participation rate for young people into HE in England has increased overall since the cohort entry year 1994/95. There are obvious specific troughs which mark points of policy change, such as student grants being replaced by student loans and the rising levels of tuition fees, but the trend is clearly increasing. What this figure does not show, however, is that participation in higher education is class related. This means that the likelihood of a young person participating in higher education is closely linked to or intersects with their background, gender and ethnicity.

### The effect of gender on the participation rate

Prior to the implementation of Robbins, women (as a whole) were under-represented as learners in HE, however, in recent years this trend has been inverted. In fact since 1992/3 the participation rate for young women has exceeded that of young men<sup>2</sup>. This is illustrated by the Higher Education Initial Participation Rate (HEIPR) which measures initial participation for 17-30 year old English domiciled first-time entrants to Higher Education (Table 1 below).

Year	Men (%)	Women (%)
2007/08	37.8	49.2
2010/11	42	53
2011/12	45	55

Table 1. Note that these figures relate to 18-20 year olds.

<sup>2</sup> Thompson and Bekhradnia, (2009), Male and female participation and progression in Higher Education, available at: <http://www.hepi.ac.uk/466-1409/Male-and-female-participation-and-progression-in-Higher-Education.html>. Accessed 12/06/2013.

The difference between these figures is wider still when participation is explored to completion. The retention and success of males in HE is therefore a further issue.

Differences in participation by gender is further illustrated by work completed by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in 2010 showing how participation rates for women have increased steadily since the early 90s, to the situation in 2005/6 when women are 35 times more likely to enter HE than men. It should be noted that whilst women’s participation in HE has been gradually increasing, men’s participation had until recent increases remained unchanged at 29%.

This difference is relatively larger in more disadvantaged areas and therefore intersects with social class as well as other factors such as ethnicity (which is beyond the remit of this report).

Women have higher subject specific participation rates for all subjects apart from Technologies; Physical Sciences; Architecture; Building and Planning; Mathematical and Computer Science and Engineering. Therefore women’s higher participation in HE can be considered to be across gendered subject areas, which apart from ‘Architecture’ and ‘Building and Planning’, neglecting ‘strategic subjects’ for which government believes there is insufficient demand. Another way of looking at this is to suggest as the HEPI report of 2009 does that “men are over-represented in the less popular subjects<sup>3</sup>”.

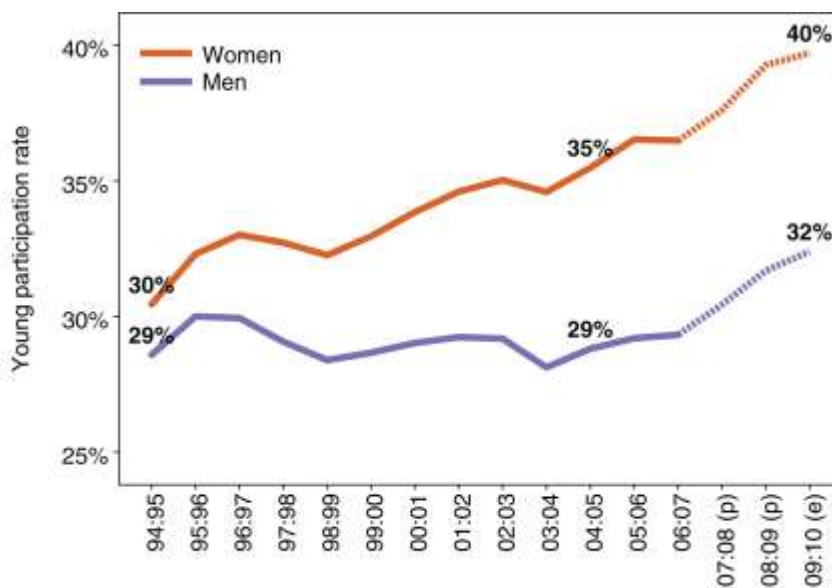


Figure 2. Participation rates of 18-20 year olds to HE in England by gender.

There is an assumption that women as a whole are found predominantly in less prestigious institutions. Table 2 below adapted from the HEPI report of 2009, suggests that this is not the case, at least in relation to the participation of young people.

Type of institution	Men (%)	Women (%)

<sup>3</sup> p.7 (HEPI, 2009)

<b>FE College</b>	2.5	3.1
<b>College of Higher Education</b>	1.4	2.2
<b>Post-92' university</b>	18.0	23.8
<b>Pre-92' HEI (not Russell group)</b>	8.6	11.3
<b>Russell group (not Oxford or Cambridge)</b>	6.5	8.0
<b>Oxford and Cambridge</b>	0.7	0.7
<b>All types of institution</b>	37.8	49.2

Table 2. Adapted from HEPI, 2009.

These figures do not, however, clarify the participation rate of each gender by social class according to institution type. As will be explained next social class is a key determinant of educational attainment.

### **The intersection of gender with social class**

The UK Schools Secretary of State for education, Michael Gove, rather crudely summed up the link between poverty and a lack of achievement when he told a Commons Education Select Committee in 2010 that “rich, thick kids do better than poor, clever children, even before they start school”<sup>4</sup>. This is a fact that has been known (though maybe conceptualised in different ways) for many years, yet despite numerous attempts to challenge this seemingly intractable problem, it remains that “within British education, attainment is overwhelmingly linked to parental occupation, income and qualifications”<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, educational inequalities, according to social class alone continue to widen throughout compulsory schooling.

Researchers, who have used the eligibility for free school meals (FSM) as a proxy for deprivation, have shown that white British girls and boys on FSMs do significantly less well in terms of attainment than the national average. This translates into 26 percentage points less well than average attainment at GCSE. Therefore, at school, working class students struggle regardless of gender, however, by the time HE is reached the HEPI 2009 study, which used data from a 2008 DIUS communication, suggests that whatever socio-economic (SE) measure is used women have a higher participation across all SE groups in higher level learning compared with men.

Table 3 below, illustrates a similar result but uses a different proxy for deprivation/disadvantage, that of national statistics social economic class (NS-SEC), which is obtained via the HE applicants descriptions of their parent’s occupations. It should be noted that there are some suggestions that responses to such questions can be gendered. In a similar way to the conclusions from table 2, what is not evident from this data is the type of institution which women from all NS-SEC groups are attending.

<sup>4</sup> P.5. Perry and Francis (2010) The Social class gap for educational achievement: a review of the literature. RSA Projects

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

NS-SEC classes	Men (%)	Women (%)
4,5,6,7	16.2	22.0
1,2,3	35.7	43.5
All (including unknown, unclassified, class 8)	26.6	33.4

Table 3. Adapted from HEPI, 2009.

HEFCE data provides us with a breakdown of the overall participation rate for young people from Figure 1 according to the “nature” of the neighbourhoods they live in. This is called Participation of Local Area (POLAR<sup>6</sup>) data and can be used as a proxy for social class. The classification separates all neighbourhoods into one of five quintiles, the lowest quintile (the red line on the Figure 3 below) being the most disadvantaged. The lowest quintile representing the least advantaged 20% of the population, shows a slight increase in participation rates from 13% in the mid-90s to 19% for the cohort entering HE in 2009/10. However, as can be seen clearly in this figure, the increase has also benefited the most advantaged parts of the population.

This evidence demonstrates that instead of reducing social class stratification and enhancing social mobility, opening HE up to the masses or the massification of HE is replicating the social class inequalities found across the school system and wider society.

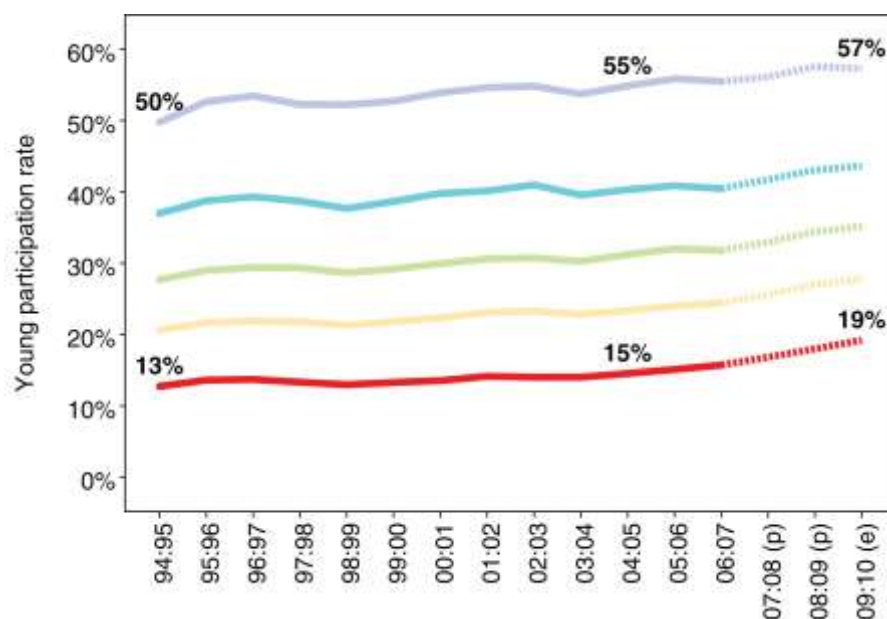


Figure 3. Overall participation rates for young people by nature of domiciled area.

Unsurprisingly there is a wealth of research in the UK on the effect of social class on access. Qualitative research has been done to explore the ways students choose where to study and finds that working class individuals often make intuitive choices or rely on luck when choosing an HEI.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/wp/ourresearch/polar/>

Class identity clearly plays a key role, therefore the choice made can be thought of as being classed. One could argue that fitting in is more important and it is therefore an appropriate choice that these individuals are making. Quantitative research in the UK looks at admissions data and also shows that, despite a number of government interventions, working class individuals are admitted less. Recent investigations also suggest that despite achieving the same grades as middle class learners, working class students are less likely to be admitted to the more prestigious institutions<sup>7</sup>. This would point to entrenched presumptions made by “gatekeepers” during the admissions process of the potential successes of working class students, as is explored in Burke & McManus’s work “Art for a Few” which attempts to deconstruct admissions policies and practice within academic departments of art and design<sup>8</sup>.

### **Mature learners**

The majority of the data presented in this paper refers to young people, i.e. learners aged 17-30 years old and to first time entrants to HE who either progress straight into HE after school or college or enter after a gap year. Therefore, consideration has not yet been given to the participation rate of mature learners of any age or those who progress after a period of employment. One reason for this is that it is difficult to find accurate and reliable data on the participation in HE amongst mature learners which was broken down into categories such as gender and class<sup>9</sup>.

Purcell et al, (2006) however provides data on a substantial longitudinal study on mature learners, who she describes as a “heterogeneous group officially 21+ years, which range from those who may have delayed entry for a few years to retired people making up for a lack of earlier opportunity or adding to qualifications in 3<sup>rd</sup> age”. In her study she notes some characteristics of mature learners, e.g. mature learners are more likely to identify as black African students and to be doing courses in subjects allied to medicine. Purcell also showed that mature students were less likely to come from a family of higher managerial and professional occupations, but were more likely to come from a semi-routine or routine occupational background. Young mature and older mature students were less likely than younger students to study at a highest tariff university and more likely to study at a general or special higher education college. These characteristics are more likely to be found amongst learners who are currently under-represented in higher education and are therefore of importance to the target groups of the GLAS project.

### **The current HE landscape**

The UKs Higher Education sector in 2013 is often described as “being in a state of flux”, “in transition” and “undergoing seismic shifts”, this is in recognition of the effect which the incumbent Conservative - Liberal Democrat coalition’s policy towards HE and HE funding is having in particular. The ideology behind these policies is around the application of neo-liberal free market principles to higher education and has been characterised by the tripling of tuition fees and the reconceptualising of HE as an individual benefit rather than a societal good.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2013/jun/09/cambridge-oxford-places-south-east>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.ukadia.ac.uk/en/projects/projects--research/admissions-research.cfm>

<sup>9</sup> A recommendation for HESA to provide more data on the participation of mature learners in HE can be found in McVitty and Morris (2012) Never too Late to Learn: Mature Students in Higher Education. London: Million +. [Available at: [http://www.millionplus.ac.uk/documents/reports/Never\\_Too\\_Late\\_To\\_Learn\\_-\\_FINAL\\_REPORT.pdf](http://www.millionplus.ac.uk/documents/reports/Never_Too_Late_To_Learn_-_FINAL_REPORT.pdf)] [Accessed 03/10/2013].



This ideology is succinctly summarised in the report from 2010 entitled “Securing a sustainable future for higher education”. This became known as Browne Review<sup>10</sup> and has been described by Reay (2012) as an “Economistic approach which denies a relationship between HE and social class”. It is too early to say whether or not the changes will bring further inequalities into the system. However, an initial report by HEFCE on the “Impact of HE reforms”<sup>11</sup> has found a significant decline in part-time undergraduate and postgraduate entrants. This is important for work such as that being undertaken by the GLAS project as young students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are twice more likely than the most advantaged to study part-time than full-time. In addition the number of mature students entering HE has seen a 7% decrease at full time undergraduate level. Such is the sector’s concern about these initial findings that a commission has been set up to try to understand in more detail why these changes have taken place and at the time of writing is expected to report soon. It seems incongruous that, with an increasingly insecure job market and aging demographic profile in the UK that the idea of earning at the same time of learning does not appear to be such an appealing option in 2012, to avoid taking on upwards of £27,000 worth of debt.

### International Perspectives

The link with social class and educational attainment is a widespread international problem though the UK has a particularly high degree of social segregation<sup>12</sup>.

Similarly the differences found in the UK in terms of participation rates by gender, is replicated in other OECD countries<sup>13</sup>. OECD data suggests that if trends continue female participation may be 75%. Some commentators have begun to ask how will this affect the future experience of men and women in HE, and bearing in mind the additional holistic benefits of HE participation, how will this effect the health and wellbeing of males?

### Conclusion

Despite a number of initiatives to redress the balance remarkably persistent social class inequalities still exist within mass HE. The recent reforms are likely to complicate the issue, as information in order to make HEI and study choice will increasingly rely on social capital. Austerity is complicating the issue, and we find that in the UK austerity measures are and will continue to disproportionately affect women. We have shown that participation (at all stages of education) for women in the main is probably not problematic. Issues around disadvantage and a lack of opportunity for women occur after undergraduate study in HE, upon entry into postgraduate study or more significantly into the labour market.

The absence of women (and other under-represented identities) from positions of power in public and private organisations is addressed in the recent report from the Counting Women In Coalition<sup>14</sup>. This states that despite women in the UK making up 51% of the population they are significantly and

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<sup>10</sup> [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/31999/10-1208-securing-sustainable-higher-education-browne-report.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/31999/10-1208-securing-sustainable-higher-education-browne-report.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/about/intro/abouthighereducationinengland/impact/>

<sup>12</sup> Cassen and Kingdon (2007) Tackling low educational achievement, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

<sup>13</sup> Vincent-Lancrin (2008). The reversal of gender inequalities in higher education – an on-going trend, in Higher Education to 2030. Volume 1: Demography, OECD, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Counting Women In (2013). *Sex and Power: Who Runs Britain?* Available at

<http://www.countingwomenin.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Sex-and-Power-2013-FINALv2.-pdf.pdf>

“routinely excluded from decision making roles in society as a whole<sup>15</sup>”. The report notes that this is effectively a waste of resources considering the investment made in the education of women and girls, and the future demands of the labour market.

### **3. Gender and class as barriers to accessing HE: perspectives from Universitat Rovira i Virgili (URV) in Spain.**

#### **Introduction**

In this short report we aim to understand the Spanish workforce by educational attainment level, that is, see how the workforce is distributed among different educational levels. This can be helpful to know where the potential lifelong learners are hidden, and who can be targeted for lifelong learning.

In the current context, we cannot ignore the economic crisis that has affected the country for the last years, being especially harsh when it comes to unemployment. We aim to understand what has been happening between the years 2007-2013, that is, in what way have lifelong learning opportunities been affected by external factors.

For the purposes of this report, educational attainment is considered as a socioeconomic variable associated with social class, as this is the most consistent data we have found to compare. The sources for data used in this report are the Instituto Nacional de Estadística, the Eurostat and United Nations Economic Commission for Europe.

#### **Workforce at a glance**

One of the main characteristics of the population in Spain, compared to the other EU countries, is the educational attainment for those members of the population aged 25-64 years old. The percentage of people with educational attainment of level 5 and 6 is around one third of the population, slightly higher than the EU average. This has been due to the democratization of the Spanish university system during the last three decades, fostered, amongst many other factors, by the decentralization of the HE institutions. The main differences appear in qualification levels three and four, where Spain has only 22% of its population, and levels zero to two, where almost half of the population is found, when compared to only one fourth in the EU average. The population of Spain has, therefore, a good attainment in higher education but a big gap between those and the lower or no skilled groups.

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid* p. 6.

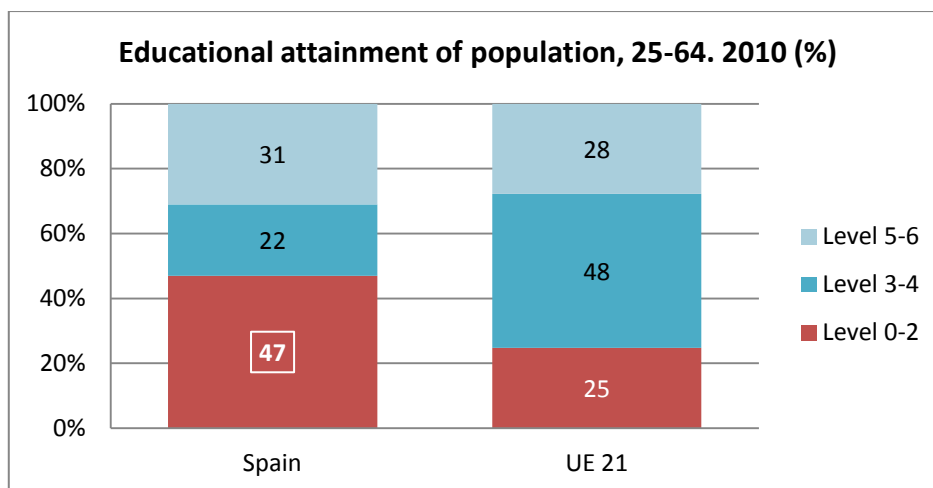


Figure 4.

Regarding the unemployment levels, there is an obvious relationship between the employment situation and the educational attainment, unemployment being much higher amongst the lower or no qualified workforce. This group may be, then, the potential lifelong learners in Spanish labour market, as they are the ones who could see in education a benefit for their employment situation.

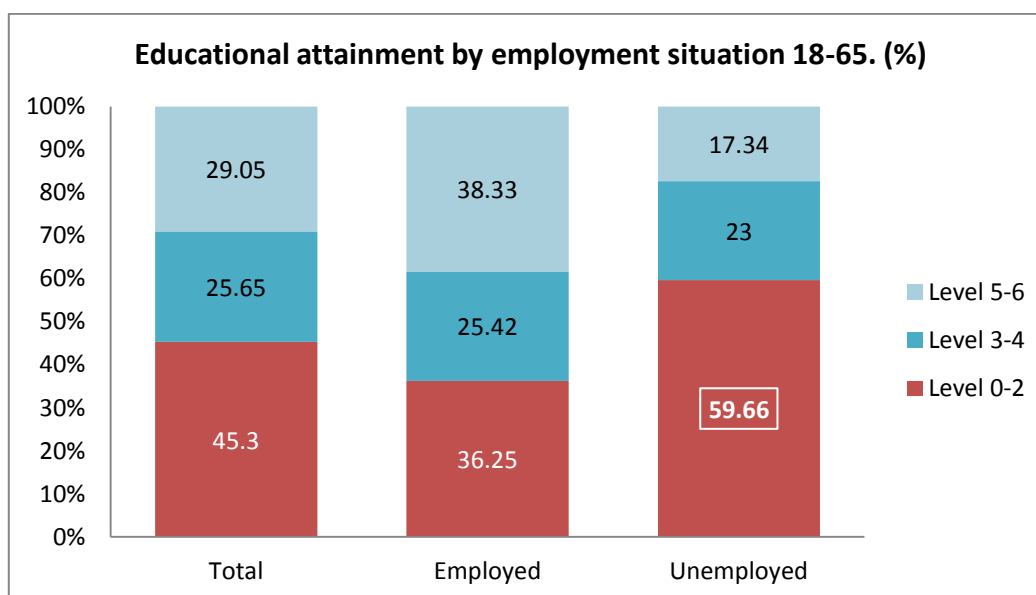


Figure 5

Another of the important factors to take into account related to the attainment level of the workforce has to be the needs of the labour market, both the current one and the forecasted one for the next decades (Horizon 2020). The needs for lifelong learning amongst the workforce, therefore, should be looked for in the groups of undereducated workers, that is, workers who have less education than the level required at their workplace.

### Women in Higher Education in Spain

Broadly speaking, women in Spain, do not have an access problem to Higher Education, or at least, not if we only consider the gender factor in isolation. By 2011, women are more than half of the

university students, read almost half of PhD dissertations, and have greater access to HE through exams for mature students, than men. In addition to that, performance is better for women in almost all fields of studies, they complete their PhD dissertations earlier.

If access to HE is not a problem for women, it should be considered then what are the obstacles they face in the labour market. It is important to note that all these figures are total averages for all fields of study. In HE, as it happens in the labour market, there is a gender gap by field of study, as women are concentrated in less status, and therefore lower-paid, occupations and studies, the so-called horizontal segregation.

### Social mobility through generations in Spain

When considering intergenerational mobility, that is, the evolution of the educational attainment of individuals in relation to their household educational context, there are also differences between men and women. In households with secondary education or higher, women have higher upwards educational mobility while men have higher downwards mobility. That means more men are less educated than their parents. One of the reasons for this phenomenon can be the conditions of the labour market. During the years previous to the economic crisis in Spain, the constructions sector grew rapidly. Entering the labour market was a motivation for the dropout of 33,1% of men and 24,2% of women. Jobs requiring low levels of qualification were available in higher numbers for men, and this resulted in men dropping out of education. With the economic crisis tables have turned, and this group of men is now unemployed and out of the education pathway.

Parents' educational attainment level	Upward mobility	Downward mobility	No mobility
<b>TOTAL</b>			
<b>Total</b>	74,52	7,2	18,28
<b>Primary education or less</b>	95,31	.	4,69
<b>Secondary education (compulsory)</b>	<b>65,91</b>	.	33,36
<b>Secondary education (non-compulsory)</b>	<b>42,4</b>	20,36	37,24
<b>Tertiary education</b>	.	41,01	58,99
<b>MALE</b>			
<b>Total</b>	74,19	7,76	18,04
<b>Primary education or less</b>	96,02	.	3,98
<b>Secondary education (compulsory)</b>	61,23	.	38,09
<b>Secondary education (non-compulsory)</b>	39,05	<b>22,97</b>	37,97
<b>Tertiary education</b>	.	<b>44,15</b>	<b>55,85</b>
<b>FEMALE</b>			
<b>Total</b>	74,85	6,63	18,52
<b>Primary education or less</b>	94,58	.	5,42
<b>Secondary education (compulsory)</b>	<b>70,73</b>	.	28,48
<b>Secondary education (non compulsory)</b>	<b>45,76</b>	17,74	36,5
<b>Tertiary education</b>	.	37,95	62,05

Table 4. Intergeneration mobility in Spain

### **Participation in Lifelong learning: who are the Lifelong learners?**

In Spain, participation in LLL has increased over the period 2007-2012, with an increase of 1.7% for women and of 8.6% for men. Again, lifelong learners' behaviour is affected by labour market conditions: what has already been called the "men-recession". Low skilled men who are currently unemployed need to go back to education to fit the needs of the labour market.

If we look to the educational attainment level of lifelong learners, we can see that despite slightly more unemployed and low-qualified men than women going back into training, overall it is the low-qualified individuals that participate less in LLL, with rates of participation for the whole population between the ages of 18 and 64 years of age being lower than 10%.

For the medium qualified population, men's participation has increased slightly, while women's participation has decreased, slightly as well. We can see when comparing participation rates that the highest educational attainment has the lowest increase in LLL participation rate over the period 2007-2012. This may indicate that, the lower-qualified individuals may have seen the need for upgrading their education to fit in the labour market.

Finally for highest qualified individuals in the population, there has been a slight decrease in participation for both men and women, although it has stayed below the EU decrease. When combining the educational attainment with gender and participation in lifelong learning over the period 2007-2012, it can be noted that with the highest educational attainment, comes the highest participation of women in LLL opportunities. Therefore, lower qualified women are more affected by their gender condition to accessing to lifelong learning than their higher qualified peers.

### **Barriers to participation in Lifelong Learning (LLL)**

The reasons given for not participating in LLL can be grouped into personal and non-personal reasons. Interestingly the reporting of the incidence of these reasons has increased over the period 2007-2013. Therefore, becoming a lifelong learner in Spain is more difficult now than before the crisis started. The difficulties related to non-personal reasons are faced by individuals of all educational levels, but the increase in that difficulties has specifically affected people with the lowest educational attainment, those who are as well most affected by the economic crisis

Examination of the details of the obstacles faced to participate in lifelong learning, illustrates more clearly the differences between men and women.

Women's main obstacle is, being almost twice as for men, family responsibilities. Lack of time due to family responsibilities is considered to be the main obstacle, at any educational level, therefore public policies to better balance personal and professional life are needed in order to increase the LLL participation rate.

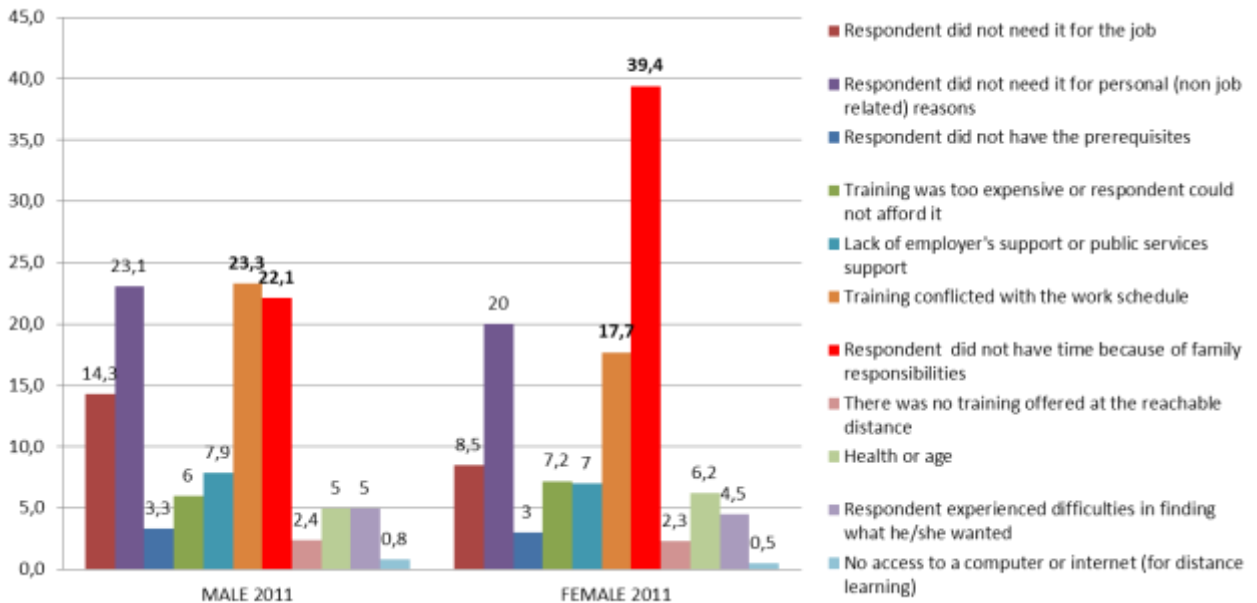


Figure 6. Obstacles to participation in lifelong learning, by sex, 2011

As can be seen in the figure above a lack of support from the employer or public services is still a bigger problem amongst men than women, this issue is reported to have also significantly increased as an obstacle for women over the period 2007-2011. This may be due to the cuts in balancing policies during the economic crisis , which in turn is making balancing personal and professional life more difficult.

In general, potential learners in the workplace can easily find information about what they want and training is offered at a reachable distance. Access to Internet and online learning opportunities are not reported to be an issue and difficulties in finding a training course or online training are not seen as important obstacles. Therefore, policies to improve LLL participation in Spain should not focus on training opportunities on offer, but on re-establishing work-life balance measures.

## Conclusions

Low or no skilled individuals are in a strong need of LLL, and in the case of Spain low-qualified men have been more affected in this sense by the economic crisis and unemployment.

Gender imbalance does not seem to be an issue when accessing HE, but instead causes barriers for women when entering the labour market. We suggest therefore that solutions not be focused on improving access, but at an output level, to make sure opportunities in the labour market are more within the reach of women.

It is important to consider gender in combination with other aspects such as social class, educational attainment, background and the labour market, to have an in-depth picture of the situation of women. When considering only gender, many imbalances which disadvantage women may be overlooked.

## **4. Case Study: A discussion into how gender and class can affect lifelong learners, by URV.**

### **Introduction**

In the context of the GLAS project we have come across different strategies related to lifelong learning that could help to improve the employability of individuals. We decided to compare the conclusions of theoretical discussion with the reality of three individuals that match our final target. In this case, we carried on a discussion in June 2013 with three female students of Universitat Rovira i Virgili. They have accessed university studies in Nursing through the new access path for +40 and who are in this moment in their first or second year of studies. They all work as care assistants, two of them in a public hospital and one in a private one.

### **Alternative paths of accessing University**

Traditionally, there has been in Spain two ways of accessing University studies for mature learners who did not follow the traditional path to Higher Education at a younger age. One of them is aimed at students older than 25, consisting of a set of exams to certify their knowledge on content similar to the ones traditional students have to prove when they have their University entrance exams straight from Secondary Education. The other one is aimed at students older than 45, and it is based in a smaller set of exams and a personal interview with the candidate.

From 2010, it is also possible in Spain to access University through the accreditation of working experience for people older than 40, without the need for sitting an exam. For this access path it is a requirement not to have any qualification that gives access to the university through the other possible ways. It is only valid for the year of application and for the University applied. A series of criteria regarding professional experience and training are set, and according to them a grade is given. Besides, a personal interview has to be carried out and passed successfully. The places available for this type of students are only 1% of each degree, which means it is important for students not only to be suitable, but also to have a better grade than other possible candidates.

### **The role of APEL in the application process and its possible role within the studies**

In this case study, we do not deal with APEL to recognise prior learning, as there is no possibility to recognise any previous knowledge as a part of the studies. It is only used for admission purposes, and this degree is regarded, by the students themselves, as an upgrade of their knowledge and not a certification of what they already know. When asked about the possibility of recognising prior learning, students state it would only make sense with the first work based learning experiences, in which the main purpose is to get in contact with the healthcare environment. This is something they already have, but for the rest they admit they do not have the knowledge.

### **University and professional world, what are the links?**

The relationship between the academic and the professional world is not always close, and sometimes it even seems they are two isolated worlds without connections. The participants of this

focus group, being part of both, point at this separation on both sides. On the one hand, they explain the lack of awareness in professional context of how the studies are organised and have evolved during the last decades.

*C: "At my working place they are totally lost about what I do, they do not even know how long does it take, to earn a degree, or what are the admission requirements. They still think it is the same as 20 years ago."*

On the other hand, according to these participants, the academy is also not aware of the everyday reality of the professional world. In this case, the comparison is particularly obvious because these students already work in the environment of their study field, even though they are doing different tasks.

*M: "Some things from the professional practice are not as they are being told in class. You come from that environment, and you know how it works."*

Once again, as stated in various reports and conclusions from GLAS project, interconnection between academic and professional world arises as an issue where further progress should be carried on. This is especially important when it comes to maximise the benefits of any work based learning experience, as well as improving the employability of graduates.

Work based learning is also a different experience when practised as a mature learner. Especially in the cases where the work based learning experience takes place in the same environment as their current job, only with different tasks. The change of role in the same working environment may be difficult sometimes, as one of them states: *"My brain is split in two. In the morning I'm a training nurse and in the afternoon I do my current job. Tasks are different, relationship with colleagues as well, the role is completely different."*

### **Which are, from a gender perspective, the difficulties of lifelong learning?**

According to these participants, gender differences arise with time, and are more significant for lifelong learners. Difference between men and women arise with families, but are not significant amongst young learners.

*M: "For them it is all the same, both boys and girls need to do nothing at home. But when you are older it is not the same for a man or for a woman. When a mature man wants to study, he has a wife taking care of the house and the kids, so he can work and study. If a woman wants to study while working, she also has to take care of the house; the family burden is on the woman."*

This is shown also by statistics dealing with the main obstacles to participation in Lifelong Learning<sup>16</sup>, in which family responsibilities are more often an obstacle for women, almost twice as for men. On the other hand, women are nowadays more than half of the University students, so these differences are clearly not obvious amongst young students.

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<sup>16</sup> Eurostat data on Education and Training; Lifelong Learning (last updated 2012)



### **Difficulties of lifelong learners and differences with traditional learners**

The main difficulties for these learners happen to be time and the studies themselves. It is obvious that having to work simultaneously adds time constraints to studies.

*C: "Motivation is high, but time is short. You take it out from sleeping hours."*

Regarding the study field, they feel the difference from their younger colleagues and feel they have been out of education for a long time. The students who have accessed through the traditional path have the basic knowledge that constitutes the foundation for further development.

*C: "Your knowledge basis is poor, and sometimes you do not know what they are talking about. My son helps me sometimes."*

The habit of studying and the use of new tools and techniques constitute also a difficulty, especially the use of ICT. New generations use these tools for their studies as well as for all areas of their lives, so they are more familiarised with them. Mature learners, on the contrary, do not have such a good command of these tools.

Although the relationship with younger learners is good, the participants also state the professors make no distinction between learners, and sometimes this can be perceived as not enough attention to their needs. Support is needed more during the studies than in the moment of application.

*M: "You just need to gather all your certifications; you are quite used to do that when you've been looking for a job."*

During the studies, though, a place for support would be appreciated, somewhere where queries could be made about the classes, assignments, ICT, etc.

### **Expectations and role of the economic constraints**

Regarding the expectations, for all of them the studies are an opportunity to upgrade their status as well as their working conditions. With the possibilities to access a better job, the difficulties are taken into account as well.

*C: "You can earn more money working as a nurse."*

*G: "But it is a brand new start, we will have to take postgraduate studies (after this degree). That will be money and willingness of keeping up studying."*

The time in which these expectations can be fulfilled is also different with mature learners.

*G: "If this is going to take you another ten years, then it is not worth it."*

The cost of the studies is also an issue of importance for these participants. The tuition fees are high and it is difficult to obtain grants. The fact that tuition fees increase if a subject has to be re-taken a second time adds some more pressure on the results. Besides, there may be children studying at the same time in the family and that can be an overload for the family economy.

*G: "If your children want to study at the same time, they are going to be first."*

## 5. Recommendations for further policy, action and research

- Further research is needed on the intersection of gender and class within and through HE and in terms of access to the labour market across EU countries.
- Structural changes are needed to redress the class and gender balance amongst staff across all types of HEIs in EU countries.
- We need better engagement of learners with employers whilst the learner is in HEIs, to improve the two way understanding of both.
- We need specific subject based initiatives focusing on male participation and lack of female participation in some subject areas.