

Beyond allowing the disadvantaged in: Biographical perspectives of online higher education alumni with migratory backgrounds

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Abstract

Since the United Nations made a call in 2016 to facilitate online education for migrants worldwide, the number of online initiatives targeting this profile of students has been growing. The rapid growth in course offerings and students' enrolment has mistakenly been considered evidence for the increased accessibility of university education. However, improving access to higher education is a complex and multidimensional social issue beyond allowing the disadvantaged in universities. Thus, our research aims to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the accessibility of online higher education rooted in an actual online HE practice, going beyond the point of entrance. This article focuses on the biographical narratives of three alumni from the Open University of Catalonia, each with migratory backgrounds from a different continent of origin and previous university experience, illustrating the journey of obtaining an online bachelor's degree. A set of influencing factors has been identified, based on which the *accessibility* of online education has been reconceptualised. Additionally, we suggest strategies to better support this profile of students in the context of online universities.

Keywords: migration, higher education, online education, authentic accessibility

INTRODUCTION

Around 272 million people worldwide are international migrants¹, representing 3.5 per cent of the global population (IOM, 2019). The role of resuming studies to gain knowledge and skills for employability, develop a voice and foster successful integration has been widely documented (Arar et al., 2019; Cin & Doğan, 2021; UNESCO, 2017). However, migrants are perceived as unskilled and higher education (HE) a luxury (Ibid.). To cope with this challenge, in 2016, the United Nations made a call to facilitate online education (OE) (UNHCR, 2016). The rapid growth in course offerings and students' enrolment that followed has mistakenly been considered a way to increase the *accessibility* of HE, whilst this is a complex and multidimensional social issue beyond allowing the disadvantaged in (Lee, 2017).

Our research aims to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the accessibility of online HE based on the biographical narratives of three alumni from the Open University of Catalonia (UOC), with migratory backgrounds from a different continent of origin and previous university experience, illustrating the journey of obtaining an online bachelor's Degree (BD). A set of influencing factors has been identified, based on which the *accessibility* of OE has been reconceptualised. Additionally, we suggest strategies to better support this profile of students in the context of online universities.

THE HYBRID SPACE OF BEING MIGRANT AND ADULT LEARNER

Numerous studies have examined how adult migrants with high levels of pre-migration education face occupation downgrade in the host-country and seek to engage in HE to validate prior experience and reenter their previous occupation or as a means of changing occupations and starting over (Banerjee & Verma, 2011; Muñoz-Comet & Miyar-Busto, 2018; Sanromá et al., 2015). However, two main challenges appear: gaining understanding of the host country's HE system (Streitwieser et al., 2019) and providing appropriate documentation both to prove the own identity (Mkwananzi, 2019) and the previous academic qualifications (Streitwieser et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2019).

Barriers persist after enrolling, such as: coping with a different learning culture and instructions in a new language and academic vocabulary (Streitwieser, Loo, Ohorodnik, & Jeong, 2019); confronting discrimination from peers and educators (Cin & Doğan, 2021; Kochhar-Bryant, 2019); and, lack of institutions' staff awareness coupled with limited support from the institutions (Earnest et al., 2010). Above all, many migrants face significant economic hardship by taking university courses while struggling to establish themselves. Researchers believe that OE, considering its flexibility, can *potentially* better accommodate them (Eisenhauer, 2013; Jaggars, 2011), especially for women who otherwise sacrifice their careers due to family-care responsibilities (Banerjee & Verma, 2011).

Research also portrays the challenges adult learners confront to succeed in OE: feelings of isolation (Kwon et al., 2010), heavy workloads, family and social responsibilities (particularly women) (Choi et al., 2013), and lack of study time (Carnoy et al., 2012). Correlations between retention and students' internal academic locus of control and their satisfaction have also been identified (Lee & Choi, 2013). However, little is known about the extent to which online BD really accommodate students who must navigate the hybrid space of being both migrants and adult learners in online environments. To fill this gap, our research seeks to provide more realistic accounts of the factors influencing the focused group's OE experiences.

AUTHENTIC ACCESSIBILITY: BEYOND ACCESS

Providing access to educational institutions means accommodating students by recognizing their prior situations and needs, thus allowing them to benefit from their institutional experiences (Levin, 2007). Accordingly, increasing the authentic accessibility of HE is to give opportunities to the have-nots and accommodate the special needs of the disadvantaged (Lee, 2017). OE has been suggested as a solution to

¹ *Migrant* in this article refers to 'a person who is living in a country other than his or her country of birth' (UN DESA, 2017, p. 3).

diverse educational problems of inequality (Contact North, 2012; Younes, 2020). Indeed, this is the idea behind the United Nations' call to facilitate OE for migrants worldwide. However, adopting OE does not automatically increase the accessibility of HE, which is a complex and challenging process (Lee, 2017). In addition, online HE providers, including open universities, often have a business-oriented agenda to increase the competitive advantage in the market, aiming to attract the *general* population seeking more convenient educational opportunities for themselves instead of those being underserved by the traditional university system (Brabazon, 2007), which makes increasing the authentic accessibility for the disadvantaged even more challenging.

METHODOLOGY: MULTIPLE CASE STUDIES

Multiple case studies were conducted between October 2020 and February 2022 with 13 alumni participants selected from a UOC database of the 337 foreign-born alumni settled in Catalonia that graduated with a BD from 2017 to July 2021. Participants' nationality, place and date of birth, place of present residence, and date of graduation were considered to make the selection diverse. The three alumni in this article constitute one sub-group sharing two characteristics: they arrived in Catalonia in the early 2000s with previous university experience in their countries of origin. However, they were born in three different regions: Latin America, Africa, and Asia – who will be called Mateo, Aksil and Zumrat in this article, respectively.

The primary data source is three two-to-three hour-long semi-structured *life history interviews* undertaken between October 2020 and December 2021. *Life history interviews* are in-depth interviews that range over one person's entire life (Atkinson, 2012). This method is useful for educational research with a social purpose as it allows participants to reflect upon prior learning and living experiences (Gouthro, 2014).

The interviews were conducted using each participant's preferred language between the two official local languages in Catalonia, Catalan and Spanish. Interview questions had four foci: participants' educational experiences in the country of origin; their migration experiences (including the planning-arrival-settlement process) in Catalonia; their experiences enrolling in the Catalan education system (more specifically at UOC); and their experiences and plans after graduating. During the interviews, the idea was to identify what factors made the accessibility potentially authentic and factors that worked as blockers at different stages of the participants' academic journey, even when they were in their countries of origin.

Interview transcripts were coded and thematically categorised. Key themes and issues regarding authentic accessibility emerged based on patterns and distinctive factors identified from the participants' narratives. Lancaster University granted ethical approval for the study, and the study was further guided by BERA's ethical standards (BERA, 2011). Data analysis followed Europe's General Data Protection Regulation.

Case 1: Mateo

Mateo was born in a peasant family in a small town on the Ecuadorian coast in 1984. When he was a child, his elder brother dropped out of High School to support the family. Mateo was determined to be a good student. He received the best student awards during all academic years. He dreamed of studying a BD even though no one in his family had. However, in 1999 Ecuador fell into a financial crisis. Mateo participated in nationwide student strikes to make education more accessible but could not see much hope. He started to aspire to study abroad. In 2003, although he was accepted into Business Engineering at a state university one hour away from home, it was hard to combine work and study. Thus, he transferred to a university branch in his hometown offering blended learning courses. In his second year at the university, he applied for an International Food Retailer that sent their staff to Spain.

In May 2006, Mateo arrived in Barcelona, working long hours at a supermarket. He did not have time to think about his university education. When he was ready, his previous education was not recognised. It took six months to ratify his Secondary Education Certificate and another three years to complete a Technical and Vocational Program. In 2013, Mateo finally enrolled in Administration and Business Management at the University of Barcelona. However, he dropped out after a year. It was impossible to study full-time. UOC was the only option for him to keep studying and working. Mateo successfully completed his BD in Marketing in 2018. He is currently the Marketing Director at a remittances company pursuing a master's degree in Digital Marketing and is planning to set up his own business.

Case 2: Aksil

Aksil was born in 1973 in a big family to an illiterate couple from a rural village in the Moroccan Sahara Desert. He was a diligent student and accomplished his dream to obtain scholarships to a public boarding high school and then Rabat University. He was the only student from his region and age with these achievements. He graduated in Biology and was accepted into the PhD program, but despite his outstanding grades, he was barred from being a PhD candidate. At the university, Aksil joined the Students' Union, where he became aware of the inequality of rights existing in the country, which significantly pushed him to seek out opportunities abroad.

In 2004, Aksil travelled to Cornella, taking advantage of a friend already living there. When the tourist visa expired, he remained illegally working in precarious and unskilled jobs and staying in various bedsits. The engagement with local pro-migrants' organisations was key for his integration. He was also involved with the *Assembly for the regularisation without conditions*, leading protests all over Spain. Thanks to the regularisation process that followed, Aksil was granted a legal residence and work permit. He was hired on his first quality job coaching youth migrants. It took five years to have his BD approved, and by then, his life had changed. He decided to leave his original field, Biology, and obtain a BD in Social Education. UOC was the only option for him to keep studying and working. He enrolled in 2012 and graduated in 2019. During the interview period, Aksil worked for a non-profit organisation as a social educator supporting unaccompanied minors' migrants.

Case 3: Zumrat

Zumrat was born in an educated and middle-income family in a Kazakhstan city in 1976. She grew up in a communist society where education was free at all levels. Zumrat was a good student and graduated with a BD in Interpretation and Translation, English-Russian in the late 90s. In a context of a country abandoning the soviet style of economic management, favouring a more open market-driven approach, being a proficient English professional was an advantage. In 1999, she was working at an international travel agency when she decided to take the new opportunity to travel abroad and visit Spain. She arrived in Lloret, a hot spot in the northeast of Catalonia, where, by chance, she met a person with whom she fell in love. She decided to return to Catalonia on a tourist visa and then remained illegally. She obtained legal residency when she married.

Zumrat's previous education was not recognised. She started from scratch, passing primary education exams as an adult learner. At the time, she had a child. Her life as a mother exposed her to other unknown professions related to supporting school children with learning difficulties that interested her. Thus, she kept studying and participating in a relevant Vocational Training Programme. However, the job market restriction for foreigners highlighted that she needed to have a Spanish university certificate. OE was the only option for her. She enrolled in a BD in Social Education at UOC in 2015 and graduated in 2021. A few months before the interview, Zumrat was hired by a non-profit organisation working in a supervised flat with minors under government guardianship. She finally feels like being part of the right community, giving back the support she has received for years.

FINDINGS

We have identified the following factors that influenced participants' online HE experiences at UOC - either increasing or decreasing authentic accessibility of online HE to students with migratory backgrounds. The three participants' stories should not be understood as homogeneous. The significant discrepancies among those voices will be highlighted to give readers a more accurate representation of the stories.

Table 1. Migrants' life stages and factors shaping their online HE experiences

Stage1: Pre-migration	Stage 2: Post-migration	Stage 3: Experience at (online) HE	Stage 4: Post-graduation
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Educational opportunities	Legal status	Information	
Academic achievements	Languages	Connectivity	
Individual backgrounds	Networks / Engagement with social movements	Finance	Career promotion/changing occupation
Parental influence	Information	Individual skills and self-confidence	Recognition (by family and community)
Engagement in social movements	Previous studies recognition	Learning culture, language and academic vocabulary	Discrimination
Discrimination	Discrimination	Discrimination	
	Living conditions (work-study balance)	Representation (in classroom, curricula, research, and academia)	

Stage 1: Pre-migration

All three participants used **to be good students** before migrating and had the academic skills to fulfil their educational aspirations despite differences in **educational opportunities and individual backgrounds**. Aksil's and Mateo's life stories demonstrated persistent inequalities encompassing all aspects of their life. **The parental influence and support** emerged as a key factor for their previous success:

My mother tried her best to provide us with uniforms, shoes, a school bag and other basic school supplies. Many classmates were in a worse situation... (...) Didn't graduate from primary school... because they had to work to help their families. (Mateo)

Being part of the students' social movement made Aksil and Mateo aware of their lack of rights and voice. While they committed to fighting for a more equitable society, this first-hand awareness of **discrimination** worked as a pull-push factor in their migration journey:

I realised that the only possible future was abroad. I had to escape to achieve my goals. (Mateo)

I discovered many things. I met students from other regions and found out that there were higher standards of living. (Aksil)

Zumrat's context was completely different. Growing up in a communist society, the accessibility of education was not an issue. In her case, to take advantage of the post-soviet openness era to discover different ways of life was the reason for travelling abroad.

Stage 2: Post-migration

The Spanish migration policy appears as a first blocker to all three participants. **The legal status** affected participants' living conditions and finance. Mateo managed to have legal permission to reside and work in Spain despite working in low-paid jobs for a while. Zumrat stayed and worked illegally as a cleaner for months until she legalised her situation by marriage. Aksil stayed undocumented for two years. Zumrat and Aksil also had to deal with the handicap to navigate between two local **languages**. Having **networks** appeared as a key factor for success during all post-migration processes, especially for Aksil during his illegal stay.

The three participants saw further education as the way to progress professionally and economically. As has been highlighted by literature, the first challenge they had to confront was **gaining an understanding of the education system** and **providing appropriate documentation to prove their academic**

qualifications. It took 5 years for Mateo to enter university, 6 years for Zumrat, and 9 years for Aksil. All of them experienced a sense of **discrimination** throughout the process:

Why did they say that [my BD] was not valid? Why? Because I'm from Kazakhstan? (...) Why does it really matter if I can prove my knowledge? I could pass any test. (...) It's like they were excluding me. (...) It's extremely discriminatory. (Zumrat)

Aksil and Zumrat indicated that despite the challenges faced, the migration process exposed them to opportunities and professions that they had not been previously aware of—subsequently, new programmes of study, where they ended up enrolling. **OE appeared as the only way to fit their work-life-study balance:**

[Without the online option] I guess I wouldn't have been able to study. (...) Because attending in-person would have been impossible. At night after work, there were no courses available... and in the mornings, I had to work (...). Thanks that UOC has been created. (Zumrat)

Stage 3: Experience at (online) HE

The three participants graduated even with outstanding scores; Mateo was the best student in his cohort. Thus, OE appears as *potentially authentically accessible* to them. Their experience shows that this profile of students can succeed when the opportunity is provided. In this sense, findings are consistent with the idea of the strong relationship between students' internal academic locus of control and retention at OE. However, a deeper analysis of participants' narratives reveals barriers that persisted and suggested strategies to make the accessibility *more authentic* for this profile of students.

Mateo identified that he met a higher percentage of students with migratory backgrounds in virtual classrooms than in his previous brick-and-mortar experience. However, their representation remained still low. Mateo considers that **online universities should pro-actively approach people with migratory backgrounds.** Especially because OE is regarded as low-quality in many countries and, consequently, is a dismissed option by many migrants.

We [migrants who must work] seek to develop personally or professionally (...) it seems to me that [universities] aren't interested in attracting this type of students (...) Online universities should organise more information meetings ... make themselves more visible where migrants go. (Mateo)

The **need for financial support** to cover tuition was also mentioned. Mateo, in different semesters, was granted the Governmental Equity scholarship. Aksil did not apply due to a **lack of information.** Overall, tuition did not seem to be a barrier, although, in Aksil's case, it was a factor that slowed his study plans:

On many occasions I wanted to (...) enrol in more subjects, but my earnings didn't allow me. (...) I never applied [for a scholarship] (...) due to a lack of time (...) to really have time to understand how to apply. (Aksil)

Nevertheless, this is an interesting counterintuitive finding because financial resources (or the lack of them) are generally considered a significant barrier to pursuing HE.

Once enrolled, the transition to OE was a challenge. Mateo and Aksil commented that they first had low marks for their assignments, but they started to get special mentions after a certain point. Zumrat also stressed problems she had with **connectivity at home** and a **lack of confidence to be capable of success** during the first semesters. Contrary to what has been identified in the literature about the feelings of isolation, Mateo suggests:

It has completely changed my perception of online HE. (...) People think that in online education, you are alone in front of a computer, but there are thousands of people eager to get in touch with you online and discuss the different topics you are studying. Thus, you are not alone. This barrier doesn't exist. (Mateo)

Additionally, Zumrat and Aksil stressed that they had to cope with a **different learning culture and instructions in a new language and academic vocabulary**. Zumrat identified how being non-native provoked a lack of confidence in her and made her feel at a disadvantage:

[readings] were very scientific (...) and the vocabulary was difficult. (...) I thought: 'Maybe I don't have the level required' (...) 'I will never be at their same level; as natives'. (Zumrat)

Aksil remarked that he felt **discriminated from peers** in group work:

At first, I felt even discriminated (...) Not by tutors. Never by tutors (...) When we were asked to set up groups, it was hard. Mainly at the beginning. It took maybe two years (...) people didn't [invite me to be part of their groups] (...) Maybe because of my name. We didn't see each other's faces, but we knew the names which were posted into the virtual forum... (Aksil)

Zumrat and Aksil also pointed out a **lack of diversity recognition in the curricula**. Additionally, from Aksil's point of view, the lack of recognition is related to a **lack of people with diverse migratory backgrounds represented in academia** as tutors and researchers.

Stage 4: After-graduation

In Mateo's case, education was a good way to validate his previous experience and re-enter his previous field of work. Furthermore, by studying online, he managed to immediately incorporate what he was learning in the virtual classrooms into his workplace, which allowed him for a **job promotion**. Thus, his experiences contradict previous studies suggesting that migrants engaged in HE cannot focus on paid employment since they are spending time and energy on educational activity and would suffer from financial loss, which may be noticeable several years after the education activity. In Zumrat's and Aksil's case, education was a means of **changing occupations and starting over**. For all of them, the BD led to income increase, a more secure and comfortable lifestyle, and social mobility:

I now consider myself from the middle-class... because I can support my family and... I can afford plenty of things [in Ecuador] ... it would be more difficult (...) Education has brought me here. Without education, I couldn't have achieved all that. (Mateo)

Graduation also gave the participants a **sense of achieving the respect of their families and community**. In Zumrat's case, this recognition was especially important. She was widowed a few years before graduating and became the only reference point for her 19-year-old teen daughter. Achieving the BD allowed her not only to feel economically secure but to accomplish her objective of not being seen as a failure by her daughter. Contrary to what has previously been said by literature, being a mother was not a blocker but a motivation to pursue post-migration education:

The most important, I believe, is that I have been a good example to my daughter. (...) I didn't want my daughter to see me as a cleaner. It is not that I do not respect cleaners. No. But because I had other aspiration, I was always frustrated (...) I was depressed. And I didn't want my daughter to see me that way. Now, she can see that I'm happy. (...) She has also realised that it is possible to study even being 45 years old. (...) I've taught my daughter that despite challenges and obstacles (Zumrat).

Notwithstanding, participants stressed that there is still room to improve the Spanish labour market, both private and public, **to recognise migrants as equally professional**:

Often, when I say I am a Marketing Professional ... I get a 'Are you really?' Like if [migrants] couldn't be ... I believe it is still stigmatised [that migrants at most have a Vocational Training Degree] (...) because we come from *there* ... we come wearing loincloths, spears, and feathers. (Mateo)

The City Hall is very discriminatory. Some time ago there was a vacancy for a Social Educator. I wasn't allowed to apply for it as I was a non-national, even though I have lived here for 20 years

(...) As a foreigner, I should demonstrate everything? Accepted, I can demonstrate (...) However, I wasn't even allowed to send the application. (...) We should, at least, have the opportunity. (Zumrat)

How many migrants are working in the public sector? In fact, we, the people with a migratory background, are already working with migrants and unaccompanied minors (...). This is segregation. It is not by chance, but because... you know... this has racist roots, there is a lack of equity rights. (Aksil)

CONCLUSION

In this qualitative study, we illustrated the journey of obtaining a BD at UOC of three alumni, each with migratory backgrounds from a different continent and previous university experience. Biographical narratives showed how participants had to navigate in the host country, in the hybrid space of being both migrants and adult learners in an online environment. Narratives corroborate the multiple barriers people with migratory backgrounds must confront to enter HE. Full-time participation in traditional campus-based HE was not accessible; instead, OE appeared as *potentially authentically accessible* for them. Their experiences show that this profile of students can succeed when the opportunity is provided.

However, based on participants' narratives, online HE providers, to make learning authentically accessible, should take significant steps to recognise this increasing profile of currently underserved students and better understand their prior situations and needs. Special attention should be paid to the discrimination they felt in the different stages of online HE engagement, including their lack of representation at universities. Overall, people with migratory backgrounds and previous HE experiences could (and should) perfectly be integrated as a quality workforce and as representative 'voices' into the academic environment and, broadly, into our diverse contemporary societies.

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