Original Article

From Their Experience: A Thread of Participation Uncertainties Amongst Adult Returnees at a University in a Developing Context

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ABSTRACT

Learning in adulthood offers prospects for (re)defining and strengthening our self-worth for sustainable personal survival, growth, and development. The rate at which adults enroll in university studies upholds the longstanding belief that education is an enabler for social participation, progress, and transformation. An adult, who chooses to stop learning chooses to stagnate in adulthood. However, sometimes, their decision to return to class is submerged in circles of uncertainties that impede their social integration and participation in a system that was not originally designed for them. This article uses the principle of inclusion of the social justice perspective to explore the nature of adult returnees' participation uncertainties and their implications on the teaching and learning processes. We draw our findings from narratives of adult returnees and academic staff at a public university in Uganda. This study acknowledges that adult returnees experience multiple issues that humiliate, obstruct, and hinder their participation and learning aspirations. However, this should not be grounds for underrating what they can do and achieve during a learning encounter. We suggest learner support systems and instruction practices that restore these learners' confidence and stimulate and guide their participation in the teaching and learning process.

365 |

INTRODUCTION

The quest to acquire higher-order knowledge and skills echoes a task to eliminate stagnation in life. The current changes in social realities mean that knowledge today seems insufficient to address the current and future demands. Reflections from several scholarships present adult learning as a means for updating our mental processes and strengthening our relevancy and survival in contemporary society. This explains why many adults are returning to pursue higher studies (Tomlinson, & Basit, 2024). Across contexts, a growing proportion of adults (herein referred to as adult returnees), at different stages, are participating in activities geared at (re)constructing new knowledge and meaning. Therefore, learning in adulthood has become an everyday practice (Macdonald, 2018; Turcotte, 2015), particularly in those encounters that lead to acquiring a formal qualification (Daniel, & Bisaso, 2023; Shan, 2020). Globally, the analysis of higher education (HE) research and literature shows that adult returnees form a significant fraction of HE participants and graduates (Kasworm, 2018) whose mission is to expand and strengthen their knowledge, skills, careers, and life prospects in a contemporary world (Sakamoto, & Sung, 2018; Wong, 2018). Consequently, this has continuously changed the demographic characteristics of HE participants (Kasozi, 2016), thereby distributing opportunities for upward social mobility (Aganyira et al., 2024).

Several scholars subjectively define and label a section of HE participants as adult returnees (Trowler, 2015). These participants are mostly identified with the sense that they had delayed university enrolment after high school, whose traits differ from those who progressively transition from high school (Tumuheki et al., 2016). Besides, they use alternatives other than a traditional entry scheme to enroll in university education (Tumuheki et al., 2023). These are widely labelled as adult/mature students, second-chance learners, wave students, non-traditional students, and learners in later life, among other names (Owusu-Agyema, 2016; Chen, 2017). In the context of this research, we defined adult returnees as learners who enrolled for university studies using alternative entry schemes such as the mature age and diploma holder entry schemes. Research highlights that the enrolment of this category of learners is expected to keep growing (Tomlinson, & Basit, 2024), and that their enrolment in HE reflects distributive justice (Aganyira et al., 2024) that nurtures social participation and inclusion (Kohmann et al., 2019). However, integrating them into a historically conquered learning terrain (whose main emphasis is on direct entrants who are always the majority) is a source of participation uncertainties and anxiety for many adult returnees (Kasworm, 2018). This threatens their confidence, social participation, integration, and survival prospects in a new context (Young et al., 2019), where they are barely understood (Tumuheki et al., 2023).

As their enrolment continues to grow (Tomlinson, & Basit, 2024), universities are invited to explore avenues for enhancing their participation and learning experience so that they can transform into the type of citizens that our contemporary society aims to build (Bohl et al., 2017; Mergner et al., 2019; Young et al., 2019). Providing enrolment and participation opportunities to adult returnees propels the achievement of the global 2030 education agenda from the lifelong learning perspective that holds the conception of leaving no one behind (English, & Carlsen, 2019). This offers prospects for (re)defining our self-worth for sustainable personal growth and development (Shan, 2020). With such a background, we believe that adult returnees' participation uncertainties can be examined to reflect on strategies that educators can adopt to restore their confidence and transform their participation and learning experiences at university. From a social justice perspective, we explored these uncertainties and their implications on teaching and learning processes. Lessons from such examinations can be used to shape a future for enhancing an inclusive learning environment and promoting instruction practices that, generations of adult educators can benchmark, preserve, and replicate as good practices. In this article, we refer to participation uncertainties as issues that result in fears, worries, and doubts that adult returnees experience during a teaching and learning encounter when they enroll for university education, affecting their participation and learning outcomes.

Conceptualization of Adult Returnees' Participation Uncertainties

Multiple theoretical explorations and reflections especially from the humanistic paradigm validate the possibility of learning in adulthood (Merriam, 2017; Merriam et al., 2007). Therefore, any university that admits adults and their successful completion confirms these theoretical positions. This invites adult/university educators to envision and embrace learner diversity in a classroom (Chen, 2017), reflect on their instructional styles, and anticipate how to engage and offer distributive learner support (Aganyira et al., 2024). Several studies indicate that university education worries adult returnees, especially during their first year of study (Young et al., 2019). As a result, many of them find it hard to fit into the dominant lifestyles of traditional students (Bohl et al., 2017). During classroom instruction, for instance, many feel nervous and hesitant to ask for support and feedback especially those who enroll with a record of previous experiences of academic hardships (Wong, 2018). For survival, many resort to try-and-error tactics which interfere with their learning. This is sometimes worsened by an enormous generational gap between them and their traditional counterparts (Kasworm, 2018). Sadly, this results in a feeling of being academically and socially strange and isolated in a youth-dominated system despite an enabling policy environment (McCall et al., 2020).

Despite adult returnees' increasing enrolment, many university educators are still stuck with the mentality of conventional classes (Kasworm, 2018) and the use of non-empowering (conventional) teaching and learning approaches (Crisol-Moya et al., 2020). This is attributed to minimal attention to what transpires in the classroom during and after an instruction process (Tomlinson, & Basit, 2024). This affects the educators' abilities to reflect and adapt instruction styles that enhance learners' confidence and participation in a teaching and learning process (Biwer et al., 2020; Tumuheki et al., 2023). Otherwise, estimating a universal approach to tap into the different learners' experiences and needs can be a grave mistake (Moriña, 2017). The difference in university students' characters, abilities and intentions invites educators to adopt instruction styles and practices that accommodate and support this diversity (Dahlberg et al., 2021). Neglecting such can culminate in low participation and poor performance that eventually can result in retarded progress and non-completion (Thomas, 2020). This, from a social justice perspective, can perpetuate participation disparities among the different categories of learners and extended exclusion (Aganyira et al., 2024).

By enrolling adult returnees, the HE sector is exercising its ability and commitment to resolve their historical rejection and exclusion (Tumuheki et al., 2023). Implicitly, their enrolment has transformed the learning needs of university students (Daniel, & Bisaso, 2023). Thus, this provides space for engineering prospects for social participation, contact and distributive benefits. We believe that university educators should reflect on how to engage, embrace diversity and deal with individual learners' differences during and after instruction. This is critical for reducing participation uncertainties and enhancing social survival across diversity (Tomlinson, & Basit, 2024).

However, research on the inclusion and integration of adult returnees in HE shows that many of these students are nervous about anticipated academic failure in a traditionally organized school environment (Kasworm, 2018; Young et al., 2019). Besides, there are gaps in how adult returnees are supported while undertaking their studies (Chen, 2017). Partly, this results from the failure to recognize learners' diversity and individual differences (Tumuheki et al., 2023). This poses enormous hardships in choosing instruction approaches that appeal to such differences (Thomas, 2020). Yet, attending to such issues in the classroom can create meaningful links between content on topical discussions and prior knowledge (Biwer et al., 2020). This restores confidence and inspires learner participation and academic excellence (Dahlberg et al., 2021). However, it is unfortunate that, once adult returnees are admitted, there is a diminutive focus on their experiences and anticipations, what teaching and learning are offered and how they and their teachers perceive their participation experiences (Tomlinson, & Basit, 2024). Recent research invites university educators to use collaborative instruction practices to support

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the different learners to confidently participate in the learning process (Bananuka, 2023) and progress beyond their first year of enrolment (McCall et al., 2020).

Analysis of scholarships on institutional organization indicates that in many contexts an institution's culture and practices can stimulate or hinder adult returnees' opportunities to fully integrate and receive the deserving reception and support (Dahlberg et al., 2021). Advocates of social justice in HE acknowledge that since adult returnees are integrated into a system that was not meant for them, by practice, they are sometimes bound to be neglected, isolated and excluded from several engagements (Chen, 2017; English, 2016). Unless they are supported, enrolling in a culturally dominated environment challenges their social participation and survival (Zajda et al., 2006) and yet many of them enroll with multiple levels of participation anxieties some of which arise from the unsuitable instruction styles and evaluation processes (Young et al., 2019). Previous research underscores the role of an instruction process in facilitating and encouraging genuine interaction and participation in a learning encounter (Zabeli et al., 2021). This increases adult returnees' social strengths, quality of life and career prospects (Morina, 2017). From a social justice perspective, considering their differences in learning abilities, styles and aspirations; all learners should be equitably supported to benefit from learning activities (Aganyira et al., 2024). Consequently, with the increase in the number of adults seeking to acquire their first-degree qualifications (Tomlinson, & Basit, 2024), we believe social justice is not against any institutional arrangements. It is rather an opening geared at exploring learner differences to create opportunities for restoring their confidence and enhancing distributive support for better learning experiences and outcomes. This elucidates why at a global level, the search for avenues that can contribute to social justice and inclusion constitutes a big portion of the core debates in the HE sector (Engström, & Mustaniemi-Laakso, 2024).

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative case study research was carried out at a public university in Uganda and reflected on the

adult returnees' lived classroom experiences to break anxiety/barriers of learning before, during and after instruction. Data was drawn from a sample of 20 participants, who included 7 enrolled and 7 graduate adult returnees, 5 university educators and 1 mature age coach; using interviews and focus group discussions. Data was thematically organized, analyzed and presented to narrate the participants' points of view as a basis for nurturing and strengthening adult returnees' self-esteem and social participation in learning (Chilisa, & Precee, 2005; Kothari, 2004). In using a mix of participants, we targeted exploring and benefiting from wide-ranging and quality information sources that demonstrated an adult returnee's perceived classroom-based uncertainties (Morse, 2015). We aimed to appreciate the variations in interpretation of experiences and sentiments relating to adult returnees' felt and anticipated participation fears during a classroom learning encounter and their implications to the instruction design and process (Lune, & Berg, 2017). Knowing that learners' participation fears should be grounds for estimating their aim, we contribute to the ongoing discourses on learner support and how educators can rethink their instructional practices to utilize and strengthen adult returnees' faith and confidence and stimulate their participation and learning. Considering ethical issues and their implications, all names that we used in this article are pseudonyms.

FINDINGS

The findings are grouped into two major themes namely; adult returnees' participation uncertainties and their implications for instruction design and practice. We position our findings into the broader theoretical positions on social justice as explored under the conceptualization of adult returnees' participation uncertainties section.

Adult Returnees' Participation Uncertainties

Before Joining the University

As lifelong learners, adults live in a world of dreams that compel them to pursue particular decisions. For those who envision acquiring HE qualifications, obtaining a university admission marks their first step towards achieving their long-standing dreams. However, this study's findings revealed that, before

enrolment, many adult returnees face various uncertainties that interfere with their decision to return to class. While some of these uncertainties stemmed from their past participation experiences, learning outcomes, and anticipated program duration; others resulted from contemplating how they would socially fit and survive in a somewhat new environment dominated by young-in-age students.

> *While running my business, I made many mistakes that resulted in gross losses. My peers attributed the losses to my education level. I honored their analysis and registered for mature age entry exams. But, when I was admitted, I started to doubt if my enrolment was the solution. (Bennie, Graduate Adult Returnee)*

Although obtaining an admission raised adult returnees' participation confidence, there were doubts regarding the potential to learn in adulthood. Some adult returnees reported having been doubted and never believed and therefore attracted negative commentary from some family members, relatives, and peers. This tampered with their self-belief as competent and competitive learners. Consequently, findings showed that at the initial stages of their (adult returnees) studies, many had reservations and did not trust their participation and learning abilities.

> *I failed mature age exams 3 times and passed on the fourth time. To my children, this meant that I was a weak student and advised me to drop the idea of enrolling for university education. With this in mind, I started to worry that I would fail university exams. (Fiona, Continuing Adult Returnee)*

From the above expression, we observed how negative commentary can humiliate, distract and disorient potential adult returnees from pursuing their lifelong dreams. For those adults who succumbed to commentary, it meant their failure to attempt to live in the shadows of their lifelong aspirations. However, this study also showed that those adults who insisted and pursued university studies wanted to prove a point to their bullies as expressed by one of the adult returnees in an interview:

> *Many friends laughed saying that it was not ideal for me to enroll at a time when I was near retirement. They claimed that I would waste money that I would not earn before retirement. However, my inner being pushed me to prove I could enroll and graduate on time. (John, Continuing Adult Returnee)*

Besides, adult returnees acknowledged that other people's opinions towards their decision to register for university education raised a series of scary concerns, the leading being 'if their enrolment would not revive their previous frustrations'. However, the findings of this study indicate that the belief in the self was a critical factor in accelerating adult returnees' preparation for participation and learning. In an interview, for instance, Barbie, one of the continuing adult returnees noted that *'even though I was not sure of how I would cope with life as a university student, my point of reference was, if I managed to secure an admission, I would still manage to take on and complete my studies.'*

While in the Classroom

Being an inclusive teaching and learning environment, adult returnees reported sharing classrooms with peers admitted (through a direct entry scheme) to similar programs. As expected, this was acknowledged to have inspired intergenerational participation leading to the blending of knowledge and experiences. However, being the minority (and where in some cases, they found themselves as the only ones), at many times, adult returnees' participation in classroom activities was compromised by a series of factors arising from a) the teaching and learning procedures and practice activities, b) individual learners' self-esteem, and c) prolonged difficulties in adjusting to a new lifestyle in a dominated environment.

Findings indicated that drawing from their previous experiences, adult returnees hoped to witness a successful integration and participation in classroom activities. However, on meeting their peers who they acknowledged were characteristically different from them; nervousness engulfed their minds resulting in fears if they would match such students' qualities and pace to participate and accomplish teaching and learning activities. It was further noted that the mix in the classroom came with some kind of distraction

by young students' way of life. This required a high level of patience and adjustment in what they (adult returnees) (dis)liked for an effective flow of engagement.

> *When I reached the lecture room, I realized I was different from the rest of the learners. This worried me. In the first semester, whenever there was a group activity to attempt, I feared to speak. Besides, I was challenged by my classmates' dress code and language. Seeing many of them frequently moving out of a lecture sounded weird. But I also appreciated that they were bright and I always admired their presentation skills. This changed my attention from their dress code to focus on what they do in class. (John, Continuing Adult Returnee)*

Whereas it might not have been the intention of their classmates, adult returnees noted how embarrassing and stigmatizing the behaviors of their classmates were. What would have been seen as jokes had far-reaching psychological impacts. One of the graduate adult returnees shared:

> *One day, I negotiated a discussion with a classmate and he accepted. But, when we had just started, his colleagues took him away. You cannot estimate how sad and embarrassed I was at that time. (Ketra, Graduate Adult Returnee)*

There was a consensus among adult returnees that the above resulted in a feeling characterized by fear, humiliation, rejection, isolation, domination, psychological unrest and to some extent a wake-up call for mending their way of life to fit and survive in a new context.

> *In my class, we were two adult returnees but after a few weeks, the other dropped out because students laughed at her shaking voice during class presentations. I remained alone and decided to copy the ways of life as lived by my classmates. I found no struggles in finding a group. I knew that I was qualified and rightfully placed. Besides, I always felt that we were all academically deficient and that we all lacked and needed something (knowledge). (Silver, Graduate Adult Returnee)*

On the other hand, even though teaming up with other students increased their opportunities for social recognition and participation in the teaching and learning sessions, adult returnees acknowledged having faced difficulties in making allies. Securing a practice group, for instance, was a typical struggle and a time-consuming activity and sometimes turned into a gamble. While some students were receptive, others proved to be bullies who never bothered about those they felt did not conform to their way of life.

> *In my first semester, I landed in a group, where members did not care and could give a lot of excuses. One day, we missed a deadline and the lecturer rejected our work but instead gave us a new group activity. Getting members' attention was a challenge and this affected my performance (John, Continuing Adult Returnee)*

These findings were upheld by university educators who mentioned having received several complaints regarding how groups were organized and what transpired during group activities. While adult returnees made several attempts requesting for individual assignments, their educators declined to grant such requests, mentioning that working in groups was meant to unite the class and resolve any differences that come with a variance in abilities, interests and social status:

> *Some adult returnees could come and privately ask for individual assignments claiming that their group mates were complicated. I always insisted and asked them to keep working with their peers. However, after a semester or two, the same students would come and appreciate me for having helped them learn how to resolve their issues with peers. (Richman, Educator)*

Despite their nervousness in engaging with their lecturers during the teaching and learning, adult returnees acknowledged the crucial role of lecturers in creating moments that enable(d) their successful integration, participation and contribution to classroom and practice activities. This enhanced their sense of belonging, classroom engagement and overall survival at the university.

> *Even when other students did not want to assimilate you into their groups, the lecturer would force it to be. And it worked for many of us. (Barbie, Continuing Adult Returnee)*

Notwithstanding a few attitudinal issues (arising from how other students would interpret the information shared), using them as examples in a teaching and learning process brought joy to adult returnees and some satisfaction that their participation and contribution during teaching and learning were noticed and appreciated.

> *For instance, in one of the counselling and guidance lectures, the lecturer's and students' examples were referring to me. I felt recognized. I felt I had done something to change other students' lives and mindsets. (Fiona, Continuing Adult Returnee)*

However, some adult returnees expressed their concerns about some of their educators' code of conduct during and after the instruction process (and practice) who they claimed to have humiliated their social participation and learning efforts in one way or the other. This added to the voluminous physical and mental unrest that these adults faced as they juggled multiple responsibilities proceeding from work, family, community and school demands.

> *On top of using some exposing and embarrassing phrases before classmates, some lecturers acted on rumours and made hard decisions about the victims yet some of the stuff would not be true. And yet, you can't always go to their offices to report or clarify the lies. (Charlie, Continuing Adult Returnee)*

In addition to Charlie's expressions, while narrating how educators' practices affected their participation in classroom activities, another adult returnee shared a similar scenario:

> *Some lecturers did not recognize the other roles that adults had outside class. To balance these roles, sometimes I could come a little late. Whenever this happened, I was stopped from entering the classroom. Yet, I never received any tuition discounts for missed lectures. Such a person could not even appreciate that I had to escape from work to come and study. (Sandie, Graduate Adult Returnee)*

While the motivation for enrolment was high, time spent as a partial dropout created room for doubting their confidence and competence. On returning to class, many adult returnees mentioned that almost everything seemed new, which tampered with their classroom participation. However, after one or two semesters of participation, adult returnees expressed having mastered survival tricks and became resilient; whose mission was to accomplish their studies, and be crowned and celebrated as university graduates.

> *The first semester was scary since I had taken many years out of school. Many concepts and practices looked new to me. I made young ones my friends and they helped me to catch up. (Silver, Graduate Adult Returnee).*

The students' expressions were corroborated by their educators who reflectively confirmed and expressed cases of uncertainties that adult returnees face as students at university:

> *Those students have many issues that affect their participation in the classroom. Some come to us and confess/complain about the complexity of the language used in lecture rooms. Others find it challenging to understand the content provided in handouts. I proved this through the questions they could ask at the end of the lecture. (Richman, Educator)*

Nevertheless, it was reported that issues that might have contributed to their partial dropout seem to have developed a sense of resilience in adult returnees. Findings showed that, despite facing numerous uncertainties before and during their university studies, adult returnees had learnt from their past and remained hopeful in handling participation and learning issues that crossed their way.

> *I suffered emotional stress when I dropped out of school before university. Eventually, I got married, although the marriage also shortly ended. I had no one to rely on. After a few years, I decided to trust myself. I developed a belief that I could handle my challenges and indeed I succeeded. Throughout my tenure as a university student, I considered any challenge as human and an opportunity to redirect myself. (Jussy, Graduate Adult Returnee)*

Implications to Instruction Theory and Practice

The presence and participation of adult returnees in classroom activities symbolized learners' diversity and represented co-existence in the environment in which we learn, live and work. Having drawn its clients from several social groupings in the country and beyond; university classrooms are accommodating students of various learning backgrounds, abilities, needs and aspirations; which the instruction and learner support practices must harmonize for all to benefit. No matter their differences in status and background, the classroom needs to be organized in a way that benefits from individual differences. In this case, every participant should be valued and supported to accomplish his or her mission.

> *The lecture room mirrors the society in which we live and work, where you find people of different interests and abilities that you cannot ignore or segregate. When an instructor discriminates against any participant, it becomes difficult for the discriminated to transform their dreams into reality. (Kean, Educator)*

To strengthen the above expression, while characterizing the nature of participants he receives for mature age exam coaching, a mature age coach noted that:

> *My classes are diverse with participants of a mixed status. However, what unites them is the feeling of helplessness and anxiety. They are always doubtful if they can be helped – are we associating with the right coach? (Sala)*

This study's findings suggested learner assessment at the beginning, during and after the course could define and inform the different learner support and participation needs that can guide the choice and design of instruction and practice activities. Such assessments are critical in unveiling learners' unique differences (in [dis]abilities, interests, aspirations, instructional preferences, etc.). With such results, learners can be categorized and provided with appropriate support based on their needs and experience. One of the adult returnees noted:

> *I appreciate the university for allowing us to join, but it has not done enough to support us as adult learners. The support offered ends at an application level. After admissions, we are all regarded as the same which is not good. Whereas, one can boast of admissions, is there a follow-up to know how they are progressing, their challenges and how they can be supported? I wish the university would follow us and estimate how to support us. I believe there is a lot that this university can do to support adult learners. (Sandie, Graduate Adult Returnee)*

The enrolment of adult returnees creates diversity in learners' needs and qualities which educators ought to benchmark and explore alternative ways to engage and support every student. The common goal for learners regardless of their backgrounds and status is to learn. This study invited educators/facilitators to explore innovative instruction approaches to serve the unique challenges and needs of each category of learners. As a result, this meant that educators should have some level of awareness about the composition of their learners, assess their learning and support needs and be in a position to support and apply instruction practices that allow every learner to participate in and benefit from the classroom proceedings. This awareness is critical in addressing learners' needs and any uncertainties that may hinder their participation in the teaching and learning processes.

> *As a facilitator, you must know who your learners are and what kind of support services they require. You must be creative in engaging them. Knowing that learning happens through engagement, I give them action-based assignments. As learners engage with materials, peers and you as their facilitator, learner participation is enabled and learning happens. (Ferguson, Educator)*

The above is what Felix (one of the university educators) described as: *"Learner-centered instruction that gives learners an open opportunity to take charge of their learning and pursue their interests. As facilitators, we don't need to get stuck on giving knowledge"*. This builds the learners' sense of self-confidence to participate in classroom activities and where possible to declare areas in which they require extra support. As a result, this reflects learner intentional support and engagement strategies.

To achieve the above, this research suggested that the educator's role is to create spaces to champion the participation of the different learners in the teaching and learning process. In addition, the facilitator should mobilize, guide and create a sense in learners that each has the capacity and a role to play. Besides, the facilitator should be in a position to find alternative ways of leading a teaching and learning process for all learners to benefit. This is important in re-aligning learners' thought processes and ascertaining cohesion during and after instruction.

> *As educators, we need to find space and develop a learner-centered mindset in the learners, to show them that they are responsible for their learning. I have come to realize that, the more learners participate in the teaching and learning process, the more they confidently explore, invent and share new knowledge and meanings (Kean, Educator)*

However, due to poor customer relations, many adult returnees fear to consult their lecturers. Findings attribute this to a lack of respect among educators. As a result, this hinders their participation especially during classroom instruction due to fear of embarrassment.

> *Although some can confidently seek clarity, many fear. Many university educators are arrogant; they do not take the university image seriously and damage how they relate to some of those learners (Felix, Educator).*

DISCUSSION

Enabling adult returnees' enrolment and participation rebrand the image of a university and demonstrates its direct benefit to an adult community. When a community's mindset changes and with increased literacy, many people's self-esteem and aspirations keep growing. The findings of this research show that many adults seem to be socialized to look for academic qualifications as a trending requirement. Those who succeed in enrolling and completing their programs, create an impression of how today's universities are inclusive and user-friendly. This study invites university educators to explore innovative instruction approaches to serve the unique learners' challenges and needs. The study also acknowledged that

sometimes, the educators' instruction styles may humiliate and hinder adult returnees' participation during and after an instruction process. This threatens their overall survival and social integration. However, this study underscores the role of facilitators in creating spaces for guiding and stimulating learner integration and participation in the teaching and learning process.

When learners are engaged in a teaching and learning process, their confidence rises. This strengthens their self-belief to critique, and contribute to topical debates rather than accepting anything as gospel truth. However, this requires navigating a variety of instruction styles and techniques to appeal to the different learners' (dis)abilities and preferences. Considering the multiple layers of worries surrounding adult returnees' tenure as university students, this research reflects an effort to rethink our (facilitators') instruction designs and practices, and how to utilize diversity as an avenue for raising learners' confidence and participation during and after instruction. Previous studies have indicated that fair and flexible instruction processes facilitate and encourage genuine learner participation (Engström, & Mustaniemi-Laakso, 2024)

Learning does not happen in isolation. Working with others, for example, enables the different generations of learners (particularly adult returnees) to learn the dynamics of dealing with varying characters, sensibility and emotional levels. This defines the social nature of learning and how it enhances social intelligence. From a social justice point of view, the differences in learners' experiences, needs, abilities and aspirations appeal to facilitators to design appropriate learner support mechanisms that stimulate, encourage and strengthen learners' participation in activities dedicated to creating and using knowledge (Aganyira et al., 2024). This creates avenues for breaking participation and learning barriers before, during and after instruction. As a result, the adult returnees' participation fears should not be grounds for underrating what they can do and achieve during a learning encounter.

There are challenges and opportunities in mixing the different generations of learners. Whereas this

study's findings highlighted panic amongst adult returnees arising from whether they could match the abilities of their counterparts, the mix of learners created spaces for recognition of individual differences, strengthening co-existence, intergenerational participation and learning. When the different learner groups make alliances, they support each other. This research, for instance, shows that many adult returnees benefited from consulting their peers and group mates on classroom matters. This raised their confidence and strengthened their participation, resilience, retention and progression. Regardless of the dissimilarities in learners' social status, background and aspirations, the common goal is learning. While the influence of facilitators in choosing practice partners is visible, this study established how and when adult returnees make allies during their studies is significantly an individual learner's undertaking. Nonetheless, the organization of these alliances raises three critical issues that require our attention as researchers, scholars and educators: a) whose ideas/opinions count, b) how long do these alliances last, c) the extent to which the different alliances' members believe and trust in what transpires from their alliance engagements.

The increasing enrolment of adult returnees in HE means that HEIs need to rethink their learning settings and cultures to enable every participant to engage with their abilities, learn and develop their competencies. Knowing that adult returnees come with anticipated participation fears raises two fundamental questions: a) how does the instruction process address or escalate these fears? and b) how often should an educator seek adult returnees' opinions on their experience of the instruction processes and procedures? Therefore, it is paramount that we reflect on learners' diversity and individual differences to tailor our instructional practices as a way of creating a leveled ground for adult learners' participation during and after an instruction session. This is what Aganyira et al. (2024) express as distributive justice. In this study's context, we shed light on adult returnees' expressed participation fears and difficulties and what these mean for instruction design and practice. The findings contribute to the scholarship and discourses on enhancing social justice in an expanded HE landscape, where learners of different abilities, needs, and aspirations are drawn together to create, validate and share new knowledge and meanings. This encourages further debates on what instructional practices university educators should adopt to restore these learners' confidence and stimulate their participation in teaching and learning activities.

We conclude that choosing to stop learning is choosing to take pride in stagnation. The increasing rate at which adults enroll for university studies upholds the longstanding belief that education is an enabler for social participation, progress and transformation. As adults are continuously exploring the odds of enriching their potential, their (adult returnees) enrolment and participation in HE: a) demonstrates what resilience can achieve but does not erode participation fears that come with a long, b) upholds the longstanding belief that education is an enabler for social participation, progress and transformation, and d) invites facilitators to explore and create a culture of instruction and support systems that strengthens their faith and confidence as participants and stimulate their participation during and after an instruction process. We, therefore, suggest further analysis on whether their enrolment and participation have led to an increase in higher-order knowledge and skills and how their view of the benefits of education has changed over time.

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The authors declared no conflict of interest

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