

# Chapter 11

## Back to School: Mid–Life Adult Perspectives About Their Graduate Education

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter aims to gain in-depth knowledge of the doctoral experience of older graduate students. For this purpose, a phenomenological study was conducted. Ten students aged 40 and older who are studying in graduate education were interviewed. Collected data were analyzed using descriptive and content analysis techniques. Findings revealed that being a doctoral student aged 40 and over has both advantages and disadvantages. Almost all of the participants try to complete their education simultaneously with their profession. In addition, they have heavier family responsibilities than the younger doctorants. This factor leads to a distraction and division in their motivation. However, it is clear that being in the university environment, acquiring new perspectives, and producing something new gives satisfaction to the participants despite the existing difficulties. On the other hand, young doctorants' insufficient professional experience makes older PhDs advantageous in terms of integrating their professional experience with doctoral education.*

### INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, education has become a vital component in many older adults' lives. Although the role of education largely focuses on investing the youth, education is a lifelong process and that is a

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worthwhile investment for all ages (Burdett, 2008). Universities and graduate education are seen as part of lifelong learning and as a result, the average age of graduate students is increasing (Lauzon, 2011). In line with the aging trend of the world, The United Nations stated that the number of people over 60 will triple from 2010 to 2050. As a result of this increase, it is expected that there will be a 300% growth in the number of older adults between 2000 and 2050 (Findsen & Formosa, 2011). For this reason, the aging population has become an important research topic that attracts the attention of researchers. Diverse needs of both aging adults and the job market directs the growing aging population to more learning opportunities and higher levels of education. Today, doctoral education is one of these opportunities that attracts the older workforce than in the past. Recently, As Poulter (2017) indicated, new ways to achieve doctoral qualification have multiplied, and with this growth and diversification, the learning identities of participants participating in doctoral programs have also expanded and diversified (Poulter, 2017). If older adults can be supported to develop their competencies, their status may turn from a burden to an opportunity (Kanter, 2006).

The median age at entry to doctoral programs is 29 on average across The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, with 60% of entrants aged between 26 and 37 (OECD, 2019). Therefore, it can be stated that entry to doctoral programs is generally under the age of 40 among OECD countries. However, there is an undeniable participation in doctoral programs outside these age ranges. The average age at entry to doctoral programs in Turkey is 29, which is the OECD average (OECD, 2019). According to the data of the Turkish the Council of Higher Education (CoHE), 18876 students were enrolled in doctoral programs in the 2020-2021 academic year in Turkey, and 11.13% of them are 40 years old and over (CoHE, 2021). When the statistics for 2013-2014 are analyzed, it is noteworthy that the rate of new students aged 40 and over enrolled in doctoral programs is 3.98% (CoHE, 2013). Therefore, there has been a significant increase in enrollment of adults aged 40 and over in doctoral programs in Turkey over a seven-year period. At this point, older adult learners are seen as an important human resource that needs to be encouraged, empowered, and valued (Freedman, 2011). As the doctoral students of the future will not be just young adults, graduate adults expect more from the universities. Revealing the educational expectations of older adults in graduate education will guide universities in understanding and developing supportive initiatives to meet the needs of this experienced growing population in the workforce. In Turkey, 106148 doctoral students are studying in the 2020-2021 academic year, and 19.3% of these students are 40 years old and above (CoHE, 2021). The fact that Turkey's elderly population has increased by 22.5% in the last five years (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2020), it makes worth empirically researching the phenomenon of aging workforce and graduate studentship experiences within Turkish context.

## **BACKGROUND**

Although graduate students have a lot in common with undergraduate students, they have differentiating characteristics (Kerns, 2006). Therefore, historically, graduate students have been defined as individuals who need different attention and support from undergraduate students (Schroeder & Terras, 2015). The definition of adult learner in higher education is mostly used to cover all university students aged 18 and over. Although non-traditional older student is generally used to describe individuals who are 25 years or older, there is no common definition of older graduate student (Barker et al., 1997). The educational opportunities and support needs needed for youth and adult students coexisting in higher education

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