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# Increasing Access of Non-traditional Students to Higher Education

## 1. Opening and widening access to HE

Trow's (1974) conceptions of elite, mass and universal HE provide a helpful framework for understanding the changes in access for mature and non-traditional students over time. European HE remained elite for a long time, a privilege of birth granted to the children of most fortunate families. In the 1960's, the United States moved toward mass education where access was seen as a right for those with qualifications both meritocratic and "compensatory" with a goal of achieving equality of opportunity for non-traditional students. While many European countries currently are approaching mass levels of participation in HE (e.g. UK, Sweden, and recently Poland), the United States has pushed toward a universal model for HE. Much of the increased access in the US comes from open access at the community college level, focusing on the inclusion of students from lower socio-economic strata and recruiting non-traditional, mature students.

Currently, new types of HE institutions with different modes of delivery are providing places for the growing number of HE applicants generally. "Globally in 2004, 132 million students were enrolled in tertiary education, up from 68 million in 1991" (RANLHE 2011a, p. 6). The student population is increasingly heterogeneous with the inclusion of groups previously denied access and those who return to HE (OECD 2013, pp. 53–54). In most countries, the goal of HE is now to improve both the quality and equality of access.

Introducing and implementing of the Bologna structure and establishing a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) was meant to promote graduates' mobility and employability ([www.ehea.info](http://www.ehea.info)). While these policies have stressed widening participation (equal opportunities and requirements to under-represented groups) and quality of education, there is a shift in policy towards efficiency, where retention and "drop-out" has been framed as an important economic issue. While non-traditional students are increasingly participating in HE, the ability of these students to adapt to HE is not self-evident. Non-traditional students often lack cultural capital and socialization required to capitalise on education at this level resulting in lower completion and employment opportunities.

## 2. What is Higher Education for?

### 2.1 Employability versus lifelong learning

Current EU policy emphasises the goals of higher education focusing on employability and lifelong learning as equally important ([www.ehea.info](http://www.ehea.info)). However, these goals can be understood as contradictory, and it remains unclear if it is possible to achieve both. One can easily see from the data provided, that instrumental students are more visible today (see section 4.2). Elite HE traditionally contributed to students and graduates' employment at university and/or state administration. Another function was civic education. These served both public good (contributing to economic growth of a country) as well as individual good (building individual human capital/skills). However, by putting too much emphasis on employability, the aim of HE can easily shift towards narrow professionalism amongst students. Can such a dilemma be solved? What kind of priorities need to be discussed? These questions concern not only HE policy, but shape the practice of education and learning as well. If the emphasis is on employability, universities risk losing sight of their mission: educating people for the sake of democracy as well as contributing to the development of art and science. If, on the other hand, the stress is on civic education and lifelong learning, universities risk incurring economic losses as well as difficulties recruiting and retaining students.

Let me illustrate this dilemma by an example from Sweden (cf. Thunborg/Bron 2012). In Sweden, the HE system is part of a strategy for lifelong learning. Adults are allowed to come back several times during their lifetime to acquire additional education and continue the process of learning (Thunborg/Edström 2010, p. 77). Therefore, HE can be seen as a place for "Bildung". From the point of view of the state, people engaged in learning are more committed to a democratic society (see Bron/Lönnheden 2004, p. 181), contributing to a public good. From the individuals' perspective, they feel welcome in the system and can treat their learning, careers, and life in a flexible way which serves an individual good.

At the same time, there is more than ever a focus on employability in Sweden both as far as higher and vocational education is concerned.

For students choosing higher education, knowledge directly related to a future work becomes more important and aspects of "bildung" of less importance. This may create a more instrumental attitude towards learning (Bron-Wojciechowska 1995; HSV 2010; Thunborg/Bron 2012, p. 108).

The demand from the labour market is obvious: one wants to have graduates from university and university colleges (status) who are professionals and specialist and not necessarily socially engaged (democratic citizens) or interested in research or theory (intellectuals).

How does HE responds to these changes, i.e. labour market and state policy demands as well as students (instrumental students) demands? This is the question

for further research to explore. How do non-traditional students respond to these changes? This is still another issue I will come back to.

An unintended consequence of mass HE is that more students choose an educational path based on future employment. While this narrow focus contributes to both the economic production and growth in the labour market of a nation and the human capital held by the individual, it does not necessarily contribute to the goals of social engagement and the creation of new knowledge. HE institutions in this context benefit financially (high economic capital), but lose intellectually (low cultural capital), when they only focus on educating students for employment.

## 2.2 A new agenda: retention and dropout

Equality of education and building an educated labour force has dominated the agenda of educational policy of many European countries and the USA. While equity of access has become less of a concern, retention of students in HE has become an important issue for policy-makers at national and European levels. Especially when faced with an economic crisis, policy-makers must consider the return on investments and educational efficiencies (RANLHE 2011a).

How is European HE dealing with issues of completion, retention and dropout? Are retention and dropout rates a characteristics of new groups entering HE, or is this a matter of HE institutions to adapt to these new students? Furthermore, what kind of identity formation and transformation these students are facing can help us in understanding dropout/retention?

These are some questions that the project *European Access and Retention: Experiences of Non-traditional students in Higher Education* (RANLHE), run from 2008 to 2011, wanted to consider ([www.dsw.edu.pl/fileadmin/www-ranlhe/documents.html](http://www.dsw.edu.pl/fileadmin/www-ranlhe/documents.html)) (Ref. 135230-LLP-1-2007-1-UK-KA1 1SCR).

## 3. The RANLHE project

RANLHE was a European project involving seven countries with eight partners: Ireland, Germany, Poland, Scotland, Spain, Sweden and England (two partners), focusing on wider access to HE and improved rates of completion by non-traditional students (see Field/Kurantowicz 2014, p. 163). The EU policy concerning students' completion was exactly the subject evaluated by the countries involved in the project focusing on the question of how this policy was implemented. Another question of this study was the role identity formation and transformation plays in non-traditional students' access and retention.

By "non-traditional students", we referred to:

Students, who are under-represented in higher education and whose participation in HE is constrained by structural factors. This includes, for example, students

whose family members have not been to university before, students from low-income families, students from minority ethnic groups, students living in what have traditionally been “low participation areas” as well as mature-age students and students with disabilities (Finnegan/Merrill/Thunborg 2014, p. 3).

Seven countries representing a fair geographic spread, from east to west and north to south of Europe, were involved in this project. Although all of them had implemented the Bologna process, the implementation differed because of differences between HE systems, intellectual traditions, social, political and wider historical factors (*ibid.*, p. 2). Although cross-national comparison can be hindered by these differences, the results are revealing.

The project focused on biographical narratives of non-traditional students, including in-depth study into the social worlds (both inside and outside the university) of non-traditional students and the past, present and future struggles for agency and the meaning of life (see West/Bron/Merrill 2014, p. 25). Each partner identified three different types of institutions (reform, elite, public or private) for the case study. Within each institution, each research team interviewed about 100 students from various cohorts: those in the final year, returners, those who dropped-out, and some from the first to the final year. Thus, the results are unique on the European level, because it is both a longitudinal and an in-depth analysis of approximately 800 interviews. To get a whole picture and be able to see micro and macro dimensions of student interactions as well as institutional settings and culture, we also interviewed institutional policy-makers, lecturers, senior managements and support staff at three institutions by each team. Before interviewing students and staff, we collected secondary sources concerning both the existing findings on the topic (research literature, policy documents) as well as national and OECD (2008) statistics.

This process helped us to understand the interaction between the meso and micro levels and the influence of institutional and departmental cultures upon the learning experiences of non-traditional students (Finnegan/Merrill/Thunborg 2014, pp. 3–4).

The project’s research teams used different theoretical approaches drawn from sociological to psychological perspectives. Synthesizing concepts from sociology and psychology (Bourdieu, feminism, Americana Pragmatism, and critical theory) was “theoretically generative” and contributed to a new way of understanding data and theoretical explanations (*ibid.*, p. 4).

### 3.1 Students’ completion rates (the project partner countries)

The research team agreed that student attrition is an undesirable outcome for the students and the HE system. A student “dropping-out” has economic consequence both for the individual and society. For this reason, RANLHE “considered whether it was worse for a student to withdraw or to have never entered higher education”

(RANLHE 2011a, p. 3). It was clear from our findings that withdrawal did not have negative impact on non-traditional students.

Several students reported that they had gained in many ways by participating in higher education, even if they did not complete. Some of these students later returned to higher education. As a result we used the term ‘non-completion’ but always in highly qualified ways (ibid., p. 4).

To demonstrate the variation among the countries, in this study the completion rates in tertiary education and the average across all OECD countries is included below (OECD 2007, p. 72). The first column includes type A education i.e. *ISCED 5A, programmes that are largely-theory-based and are designed to provide sufficient qualifications for entry to advanced research programmes and professions with high skills requirements* (OECD Glossary). The second column covers type B education i.e. *ISCED 5B programmes are typically shorter than (tertiary-type A) and focus on practical, technical or occupational skills for direct entry into the labour market*. This category would probably include, e.g. 2 year full-time, 3 year part-time Foundation Degrees in England and similar shorter, more vocational-type degrees amongst partner countries. Interestingly, while these type B programmes tend to have lower completion rates overall across the OECD countries, three of the partner countries in this study (Spain, Poland and Sweden) break with this trend. There appears to be a correlation between survival rates (i.e. completion) and the average length of tertiary education type A programmes (the survival rate is higher in countries with shorter programmes). If both these programmes are counted, the third column for overall comparison shows the percentages below (RANLHE 2009, p. 3):

	ISCED 5A	ISCED 5B	5A + 5B combined
Germany	73	79	75
Ireland	83	69	78
Poland	66	74	66
Spain	74	79	75
Sweden	60	68	61
UK <sup>1</sup>	78	53	71
OECD average	71	67	70
EU 19 average	71	68	69

Table 1: Survival rate in tertiary education in 2004 in percent

1 “OECD do not disaggregate England and Scotland but the National Audit Report (2007, p. 23) shows a 78.1 percent HE course completion rate in England as against 73.8 percent for Scotland. However, once again direct comparisons are unreliable because there are differences in access rates, pre-entry qualifications, educational structures, finance and types of student” (RANLHE 2009, p. 3).

Although it is difficult to compare OECD data across nations, it generally holds that countries with higher rates of entry into HE have lower survival rates (OECD, 2007). This is true in the case of Sweden, which has the lowest completion rate among countries in the study. Does this mean that mass HE results in lower completion? Or can something else explain these attrition rates?

In Sweden, the method of data collection may inadvertently alter the picture of student dropout. Once a student is registered in a course or an educational programme in Sweden, they remain registered until the individual chooses to withdraw from the course. Moreover, one hardly uses a term “retention” or “dropout”. To drop-in would be more appropriate. Students may pick up their studies whenever they wish. Completion rates are calculated based on both registrations in a course of study over a one-year period (HÅS) and course completions over a one-year period of time (HÅP). For example, if a student is registered in a course for half a semester, that is one fourth of a HÅS. When that student passes the exam (completes the course), one fourth of a HÅP is added. The statistic is mostly based on these two calculations. The financing system for HE in Sweden is based on both student registration and student completion and institutions benefit from both.

The year 2006/07, the average student completion at universities was 83 percent, 77 percent for university colleges and 93 percent in special institutions. Vocational programmes (including shorter duration) have higher completion rates than other programmes (SCB 2007), which are also included in the OECD data above. While completion rates in single courses are quite low (20% completion in seven years), completion rates for educational programmes are considerably higher (80% in seven years). Because the OECD data is calculated using both programmes missing single courses, the completion rate appears lower than would be expected. In the National Statistic, however, both types of courses are counted (SCB 2007).

### 3.2 Some comparison of the RANLHE partners countries

In the RANLHE partner countries, profound changes in financing HE and in relation to the State, as well as in diversity of students’ recruitment and protecting “standards” were visible. Moreover, we could notice an expansion of the systems involving also a growth of institutions. One general conclusion can be made:

The higher education system across Europe has become a mass-based one (...) opening up opportunities for widening participation and access to groups who previously never entered higher education. (RANLHE 2011b, pp. 3–4)

Yet, according the RANLHE findings, some institutions are more open to non-traditional learners than others are, and even the whole systems are more or less open (ibid.). The following comparison could be made:

1. All of the partner countries increased student's body, and both mature and female students became more visible. With the exception of Germany and Ireland, the majority of undergraduate students are now female.
2. Widening access in almost all partner countries with the exception of Germany. Despite this, there are still some groups in all of the countries which are under-represented, not least in terms of class and ethnicity.
3. There are two different types of institutions (or differences within institutions in Sweden): those with professionally oriented programmes and those with generally/research oriented programmes. The UK and Germany higher education system is highly stratified. Different countries offer a diverse range of pathways to degree level qualifications.
4. HE is free of charge in Sweden and Germany, and partly in Poland. Fees are required for mature students in Germany and for part-time students in Poland and in Ireland. Private institutions charge fees for traditional students in Poland. England and Scotland traditionally charge fees, however, there will soon be a trebling of students' fees in English institutions (RANLHE 2011b, p. 11).
5. Towards the end of the project, European universities were beginning to undergo further changes because of recession and reductions in public expenditure. Yet, there were still obvious country differences, with each national HE system reflecting its own histories and traditions.

## **4. HE for whom? A non-traditional student perspective**

When HE in the USA opened up to non-traditional groups, some voices from the elite institutions questioned the ability of new applicants to be successful. Today, we have a better understanding about mature and non-traditional students and how they contribute to the learning environment of the university. They have no significant difficulties in learning and bring a diversity of experiences. Moreover, mixed groups contribute to better learning according to Swedish academic staff. In addition, lecturers appreciate groups of students with diversified background who are motivated, experienced and have genuine interest in the subject matter (RANLHE 2011b, p. 21). The RANLHE project gave us an opportunity to get a more comprehensive picture of non-traditional students' experiences and insight about how the development of a learning identity contributes to the successful completion of a degree (ibid., p. 2).

### **4.1 Example from Sweden**

The HE system in Sweden is considered open and relatively uniform, including all types of post-secondary education with professional programmes such as nursing and teacher training. There are 60 HE institutions in Sweden, 14 state universities, and 22 state university colleges, 3 private universities and 24 small, special institutions within certain which focus for example on theology, psychotherapy and art

(RANLHE 2011a, p. 13). From 1990 to 2005, enrolments grew from 150,000 to 330,000 (Holzer 2009, p. 13). Women, traditionally under-represented, are today highly over-represented in HE in all subjects in general, apart from technology. In the academic year 2007/08, 57 percent of all entrants (87,000) were women. 34 percent amongst the beginners in HE under aged 35 had parents with at least three years of HE, which represented 20 percent of the total population (SCB 2010, p. 1). The number of students with another ethnic background is also increasing, although still under-represented. In the academic year 2008/09, 18 percent of the beginners in higher education had another ethnic background, compared with 12 percent in 1999/2000 (HSV 2010, p. 28). There are however huge differences between different ethnic groups (Thunborg/Bron 2012, p. 103). In terms of social backgrounds, students from a working-class environment are still underrepresented.

Student groups in Sweden include both traditional and non-traditional students. Part-time and full-time students study together, which strengthens learning capabilities of both categories. A students' route through HE is motivated by a students' life narrative, not a university's timetable. A dropout may not be ending an academic career, the system allows dropping out and starting a professional carrier, or returning to studies later. Our hypothesis is that there are more problems with traditional students dropping out than with non-traditional. Widening and flexible access allows for testing the system, for choosing from a "smorgasbord" of academic opportunities. We see that students who test the system eventually commit themselves to HE. This is due to their life experience and biographical learning. Non-traditional students' learning pathways that we learn about by in-depth interviews are complicated, often confused and intricate. *Floating* (not being able to decide what one wants to do in life and study) and *anchoring* (finding a place in HE institution, to be committed) are two concepts that contribute to our understanding, how non-traditional students act when they struggle at university (Thunborg/Bron/Edström 2013, p. 25; Bron/Thunborg/Edström 2013, p. 8, 2014, p. 65).

Looking at the data above, the conclusion can still be made that completion rates in Sweden are low. This could be an artefact of mass HE, the flexibility of Sweden's HE system, a by-product of implementing the Bologna process, or a lack of commitment to HE by students. To answer this question and to be able to understand students' learning strategies, we investigated in-depth learning identities through students' perspective.

## 4.2 Typology of students' learning identities

One of the aims of our project was to investigate how students form and transform their identities (see Thunborg/Bron/Edström 2011, 2012). Students with lower socio-economic status, an ethnic background other than Swedish, disabilities and mature students were defined as "non-traditional" (RANLHE 2011b, p. 8). In-depth analysis of biographical interviews enabled us to identify different student typologies. To



group students, we placed non-traditional students' identity types on the horizontal continuum showing students continuation in the system (retention to dropping-out), and on the vertical continuum presenting a level of commitment to HE by students, from highly to weakly committed. Thus, we were able to establish a typology of students and identify eight ideal types based on identities' fluidity of being a student (continuation and commitment) (see Thunborg/Bron/Edström 2013, p. 190).

The fairly common category was "the instrumental student" characterised by *weak commitment to HE with a tendency to continue* but not having a genuine interest in studying. Such a student uses HE as a ticket for life, for gaining social status and obtaining a job. Another type of student weakly committed to HE was "the car-park student". These students had dropout and drop-in experiences, *waiting for a job or something more excited* to happen. The car-park students are the victims of both employment and educational policy where mass HE serves the labour market, not intellectual curiosity. The next was "the risk of failing student". Although highly committed, these students struggle with passing exams and the high demands of success. Dropping out from HE is an alternative to being seen as a failure, fear failure prevents these students from continuing to study. These students can dream of studying at the university and are committed, but unfortunately get neither support nor enough attention from the staff to achieve those dreams.

The next three types of students are very much appreciated by lecturers. First, "the life-long learner" has an authentic interest in knowledge, but does not see passing exams as important. Learning for these students provides an opportunity to socialise with other students, but they have a tendency to drop out and drop in depending on the current interest. The second type is "the one-track student" who is strongly committed to the specific study subject and continues learning. The third is "the self-realiser" with high commitment and a wish to continue, mostly a mature student who started HE after a radical change in life. *Study becomes an arena for personal development* and the student often makes personal sacrifices to be able to study.

The last two categories include firstly "the ambivalent student", who struggles with self-image of being a student and is neither sure about an interest in the subject matter nor committed. Second is "the altruistic student" who is highly committed to HE and wants to gain knowledge and academic skills in order to help others in his/her own country or abroad and contribute to changes within society (ibid., p. 190). The last type used to be more common within the elite system.

The typology of non-traditional students is not a static model, as a student may move from one identity type to another over time (which we also have noticed in students' biographical interviews).

Two types of non-traditional students warrant discussion as they can be seen as a result of HE policy in Europe and who were not as common before. The mass HE model has certainly contributed to the growth of instrumental students, because their success contributes positively to the labour market. These students are associated with

educational efficiency; they finish on time, bring higher revenues to the institution and are employable. Unfortunately, current HE policy in Europe is not conducive to classic college students typologies appreciated by the academic staff. However, instrumental students produce returns for both public and private good by contributing to economic growth and employment rates. Second, lifelong learning students can be seen as a product of the flexible Swedish HE system. These mature students do not bring economic returns for universities, as they do not care about taking exams (needed for financial support from the state). And because they are not likely to pursue academics in order to gain employment, their education cannot easily be tied to the health national then economy. Thus, they are neither seen as profitable for the HE institutions for society nor profitable for themselves in returns from labour market (individual good). However, they are “profitable” for democracy, and for themselves (own development), and contribute in a long run to society. Further, academic staff appreciates them, as they are interested in learning and contribute to a positive classroom environment though lack the commitment of the classical, traditional college students.

To sum up, it seems like the EU policy with the Bologna process has contributed to the drift towards instrumentalism of non-traditional students, at least in Sweden. Furthermore, it looks like that mass HE shaped to the division between these two types of students.

## 5. A Research/teaching divides within HE institutions

Mass HE is contributing to the division of research and teaching orientations between high and low status institutions. There are differences in this divide among European countries. The division of HE for research vs. more teaching oriented institution, like English polytechnics and research-elite institutions, affects mature students' access to higher education (see also Alheit 2014, p. 134). The allocation of resources to prestige and traditional universities is a common political strategy in most European countries. Mature and non-traditional students often access to HE through teaching institutions. Consequently, these funding policies unintentionally favour the needs and interests of traditional students over their mature and non-traditional peers. In the U.S., mature and non-traditional students typically enter community colleges where fees are lower and programmes shorter.

The European higher education system has also become more diverse. (...) Moreover, the professionalization/vocationisation of programmes is a new way of attracting more diverse students and widening access as well as of shifting, in some countries, the traditional research preoccupations of some universities (although in the United Kingdom, all universities have been anxious to position themselves as at least ‘research active’). The shift in profile is most visible in Sweden (RANLHE 2011b, p. 4).

While many European HE systems have become diverse by differentiating between research/elite and teaching/mass institution, Sweden has chosen another way. There is no real division into elite and mass HE in Sweden. The differences are linked to the status of educational programmes and disciplines, e.g. medicine and law (high status) having the lowest number working class students, and teacher education (low status) has the highest number of working-class students (HSV 2008; Thunborg/Bron 2012, p. 102 ). While they have different status, these programmes and disciplines are situated at the same institutions. The 2001 “Green Paper” in Sweden requires universities to recruit a minimum of ten percent of students from non-traditional backgrounds. Moreover, social distance in HE is decreasing as attending a university college is increasingly seen as an alternative to entering the local labour market, especially for groups whose parents have upper secondary school as their highest educational level (see Holzer 2009, p. 49). Despite the differences in status between new and old universities, there are no differences in the participation of non-traditional students, because even old universities offer shorter educational programmes. While these programmes attract non-traditional and mature students and are more teaching oriented, the professional/vocational content seems to contribute to instrumentalisation of students’ identities and their learning.

## 6. Conclusion

Most European countries have developed policies to increase access to HE for non-traditional students. However, opening up the gate to non-traditional students has contributed to labour market outcomes and local economies, but has also held some unintended consequences. Significant differences in representation of non-traditional students’ in disciplines with high status persist (Thunborg/Bron 2012, p. 102). Problems of educational efficiency, retention and dropouts continue. Drop-out and drop-in behaviours are common for non-traditional students, especially in flexible HE systems, which is a characteristic of the Swedish system.

Taking demographic trends into account, the future of HE will be shaped by increasing inclusion of both mature and non-traditional students. In order to support the learning of these students, it is necessary to look at their biographical perspective. Mature students’ commitment and their willingness to continue their studies are equally important in the HE policy. Thus, better accommodation of non-traditional students should be part of policy discussion about increasing access.

The European policy of mass HE emphasising employability and lifelong learning is pushing the system, at least in Sweden, towards student instrumentalism (high completion rate but not commitment to HE). At the same time, lifelong learning is marginalised by students who are neither profitable for the HE institutions nor for the labour market. Though perhaps unintended, these are important outcomes for the policy oriented towards equity of outcomes and quality of HE.

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