Just facilitating access or dealing with diversity? Non-traditional students' demands at a Spanish university

María Teresa Padilla-Carmona
Universidad de Sevilla, Spain (tpadilla@us.es)

Inmaculada Martínez-García
Universidad de Sevilla, Spain (inmamartinez@us.es)

David Herrera-Pastor
Universidad de Málaga, Spain (dvherrera@uma.es)

Abstract

More and more the university institutions welcome a heterogeneous student population. In this article we analyse the main characteristics and needs of the so-called 'Non-Traditional Students' in order to contribute to the development of more equitable conditions and improve their participation and holistic development. To this end, a qualitative study has been carried out at a Spanish university, which explored the experience of a diverse group of this type of student body. The results pointed out to a high level of motivation, determination and greater effort on the part of the group, in comparison with their mates. However, the traditional pedagogy was not suited to their characteristics and created difficulties for them. Few teachers were truly flexible with these students, since an egalitarian (rather than equitable) conception of pedagogical action prevailed. Among other things, we conclude by claiming a comprehensive and personalised education, adapted to their needs.

Keywords: Attention to diversity; higher education; inclusive education; non-traditional students; qualitative research

Introduction

Higher education is undergoing a process of openness. The increase in the number of students at this level requires the adaptation of university lessons to a plurality of students from different backgrounds and profiles (culture, age, previous experience, etc.) (Martínez & Viader, 2008).

The London Communiqué (2007) stated that higher education should promote social cohesion and the reduction of inequalities by providing adequate services to all students and creating more flexible pathways. The improvement of access and retention conditions has come at the forefront of the international debate on universities (Orr, 2010). International studies have also been promoted, such as the Eurostudent project, which allows a characterisation of the different "audiences" that carry out university studies and provide comparable statistical data from European countries. However, it is necessary to adopt a more exhaustive perspective that allows us to know in depth the daily reality of the students, attending to their diversity.

In this study we examine the characteristics and needs of non-traditional university students from a qualitative perspective. The objective is to understand their situation and contribute to their participation in the university in conditions of equity. To this end, a review is carried out on the concept of Non-Traditional Student and the research on the subject. We then described the qualitative methodological approach based on semi-structured interviews with twenty-three students at the University of Seville. Finally, the results of the study are presented based on three ideas: the specific characteristics of non-traditional students, their daily development in academic life, and the adaptation to the needs of non-traditional students. As a conclusion, we can highlight the need of an inclusive university pedagogical model based on personalized pedagogy and an equitable approach in which the unique needs of each individual are met.

Non-Traditional students in Spanish universities

Although rarely used so far in the Latin American context, the term non-traditional student is commonly used in European and North American universities to refer to the increasing number of students with characteristics different from the majority profile entering higher education. The term refers to a heterogeneous group of students that, depending on the context, includes mature students (over 25 years old[1]), from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, with specific educational support needs, with family responsibilities and/or belonging to ethnicities, cultures and nationalities other than the majority (Crosling, Heagney & Thomas, 2009).

Research in Spain on these students is scarce, so at this point it can be said that there is a gap in information on the cultural and cognitive characteristics of non-traditional students at the university (Ariño et al., 2008).

Terms such as "disadvantaged students" or "non-traditional students" are hardly used in the Spanish context to refer to the population of students with minority characteristics who may experience some difficulty in adapting to the university environment. Other terms have occasionally been used to identify non-traditional learners, such as "over 25" or also "student with specific educational support needs". We agree with Field and Morgan-Klein (2012) and Johnston's (2011) conceptualization of non-traditional students and those who are under-represented in Higher Education and whose participation is constrained by structural factors.

The importance of identifying these students becomes evident if we look at previous statistical studies (Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deportes, 2016; Orr, Gwosc & Netz, 2011) which show that more than a third of Spanish students present characteristics different from the usual pattern, which may constitute what McNair (1998) understands as an invisible mass for legislators, managers and researchers in the field. The student population has changed and it is increasingly heterogeneous, which demands the implementation of measures that attend to all student's needs.

The normative scenario that contemplates the situation of non-traditional students in the Spanish context has the aim of regulating the situations derived from the access of minority groups. The first measures were taken in 1971 where a special access path was provided for students over 25 years old who could not meet the usual access requirements.

Recently, important advances have been made in this sense: improving the access of some groups that until now have had little presence in higher education and ensuring their participation and progress in academic life. To this end, Royal Decrees 1892/2008, 558/2010 and 412/2014 were created, which established positive discrimination measures to favor the inclusion of disadvantaged groups in the university. They are also committed to reinforcing the tutorial action through the creation of the tutor of students with disabilities; the integration of guidance activities into coordinated tutorial systems; and the facilitation of the compatibility of study with work.

In addition to these measures, two new access routes were created: one for people over 40 years of age who can demonstrate professional experience related to the degree to be studied, and another for people over 45 years of age who pass an adapted test. Also, the University Student Statute (RD 1791/2010) is committed to improving services offered to these students aimed at promoting their integration and participation.

National and international research on non-traditional students

In the Spanish context research has focused on adult and/or mature students and those with disabilities, ignoring the needs of other groups. In the case of mature students, the analysis of the Spanish university system included in Mnisterio de Educación, Cultura y Deportes (2016) shows that they have greater difficulties in completing their higher education. The work of Bermejo, Camacho, Fernández-Batanero and García-Lázaro (2011) shows that matures students are frequently enrolled in social science degrees, and have an abandonment rate close to 22%. They point out as difficulties in their academic progress the combination of work and studies, the lack of habit and the perception of a lower level of competences compared to their younger colleagues. In general, they seem to have a more responsible attitude towards study, and they know better what they want and how to achieve it.

With regard to the particular needs of students with disabilities, some research (Moriña, 2017; Sánchez-Palomino, 2011) has found that teachers are perceived as the main barrier to their academic progress, mainly due to the inflexibility and lack of inclusion of the methodologies used in the classroom, which highlights their lack of training to work with this student body.

Other aspects, such as the socio-economic background, have been poorly studied. The common assumption is that, once students have entered university, there is equality among them, despite the diversity of their cultural and family backgrounds, and mere support through a scholarship system would reduce such differences (González-Monteagudo & Ballesteros, 2011a).

Studies focused on immigrant students or from other ethnic groups are even more scarce. Here, the work of Pérez-Serrano and Sarrate (2013) provides information on the profile and the elements that favour and hinder the social inclusion of immigrant university students. In turn, Padilla-Carmona, González-Monteagudo and Soria-Vilchez (2017) investigate the factors associated with the academic success of Roma students at the university.

On the other hand, some international studies show that the particular circumstances of non-traditional students can function as risk factors for abandonment, desertion or low performance. The review of Quinn (2013) showed that students that drop-out are those

with low socio-economic status; with dependants; belonging to minority ethnic groups; with disabilities or facing physical access problems and other barriers in terms of personal and social attitudes.

When low socio-economic status is added to these profiles, there is a greater impact on abandonment (Thomas & Quinn, 2007). Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2011) found that working class students perceived problems of 'adaptation' in both academic and social terms. In this sense, it was Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) who used the expression 'like a fish out of water' to describe the feelings of lower-class students compared to their peers. In addition, the educational background of the family appears repeatedly associated with failure/success at university (e.g. Aina, 2013). Likewise, while traditional students finish school and then go on to university, many non-traditional students have a gap in their education (Xuereb, 2014). The combination of study with work and/or care responsibilities is another very relevant factor in academic dropout (Wyatt, 2011; Xuereb, 2014), which sometimes translates into difficulty in attending classes and keeping assignments up to date. In this sense, it is important to focus especially on mature students. According to Eurostudent's findings, adult learners generally work, have children, have delayed transitions and are less likely to have parents with a high level of education. Some studies report that the dropout rate among these students is much higher than that of the traditional student population (Doyle & Gorbunov, 2010; Jones, 2011). In addition to completion of undergraduate studies, more recent studies (Budd, 2017; Crew, 2015) show that non-traditional students do not persist as long as their colleagues at the university in post-graduate studies.

Towards an inclusive pedagogical model in the university adapted to the non-traditional student body

The existing teaching models are normally based on the idea of a pedagogy for all. However, the current student plurality obliges us to offer a change to the traditional curriculum that until now had been confronted with individualised curricular adaptations. The very fact of creating an alternative route for those who present differences does not participate in the philosophy that underpins the culture of diversity (López-Melero, 2012).

The education system must be equitable, especially with people who have some kind of handicap in order not to aggravate their situation. For this reason, some authors such as Muntaner (2017) suggest that the idea of having a single curriculum of uniform proposal (same tasks, resources, methodology, etc.) ends up reducing the possibilities of those who present differences with respect to the pattern for which it is intended.

Starting from this conception, the answer can be found in changing homogenising proposals for inclusive heterogeneous procedures based on a comprehensive and diversified curriculum (Gavira & Moriña, 2015). This consists of adapting the curriculum of each subject to accommodate personal singularities through flexible and open learning experiences. For this, it is necessary to break with the classical teaching concept, with the teacher being the key figure in inclusive practices (Booth & Ainscow, 2015).

This way of acting based on attention to diversity has demonstrated not only to favour the minority group, but also to improve learning for all (Herrera, Pérez & Echeita, 2016). However, it is necessary to have a university teaching staff with pedagogical skills related to the subject. Some researchers point out that there is still a long way to go in this direction (Más & Olmos, 2012) and that initial and continuous training is necessary to develop the appropriate skills and modify practices (Paz Maldonado, 2018). That is the key to the true democratisation of higher education.

However, we still lack information on the variables related to the difficulties experienced by non-traditional students in their day-to-day life and which impede their successful integration and performance. In this way, the main objective that guides this research is to identify the main characteristics and needs of these students based on their perceptions and experiences. We try to answer questions such as the following: what are their needs, what are their singularities, how is their relations with teachers? what do they demand from university? Responding to them will allow us to assess the extent to which university favours an inclusive pedagogical model as well as to identify the difficulties they experience in their passage through that institution.

Method

The research focused on the characteristics and main needs of non-traditional students at university, identifying both the difficulties they experience and the strengths that help them to cope with the experience. We were interested in their own interpretation of their reality, so we adopted a qualitative approach to make a comprehensive, complex and contextualized analysis (Benson et al., 2010) of their situation.

Participants were selected in two phases according to the following criteria: 1) To be part of at least one of the different groups usually considered as non-traditional students and 2) to represent students from the five main fields of knowledge in the Spanish university sphere (Sciences, Engineering and Architecture, Social and Legal Sciences, Art and Humanities and Health Sciences). The aim was to make the sample diverse according to those two criteria.

A first round of contacts was initiated at the University of Seville (which was the university where the study was conducted), resulting in a compendium of 23 candidates, distributed as follows: According to the first criterion, 6 were mature students, 5 had some kind of disability, 2 had dependents, 7 were from a disadvantaged social environment and 3 were from other ethnic and/or cultural groups. Following the second criterion, most of the participants (15) studied various degrees related to the Social Sciences, but there were two students for each of the other major fields of knowledge.

All of them were provided with an open-ended protocol of questions designed to stimulate the narration of their experiences at the university. The protocol dealt with the following issues: Background and personal experience in their educational process, access to university and first experiences, motivations about the degree, development of academic life, learning and development strategies in the university context, teaching and teaching staff, expectations, future motivations and decision making.

The initial reading and analysis of this material allowed us to visualise the elements in which the information was of interest to the study and was beginning to become saturated. Based on it, the selection of the eight participants who were ultimately the informants who were interviewed in depth (second phase of the sample selection process) was defined. The choice of these eight people was based on the development of their writings, fundamentally on the uniqueness of their stories and the richness they showed for research from a substantive point of view.

Hence, an in-depth and open interview was conducted with each of these eight informants. These interviews allowed us to delve into all those aspects of the stories that had proved particularly significant, and also into others that emerged throughout the conversation. The formulation of the different questions was carried out in a flexible manner and within the framework of an informal conversation format with the participants. The most relevant aspects addressed in the interviews were: Motivations to study at the university,

overcoming problems and difficulties, support in their academic progress, relations with teachers and the capacity of the university as an institution to respond to its needs.

In order to maintain the anonymity of the informants, pseudonyms (chosen by the participants themselves) are used to present the results.

Results

Although different results were developed, we will focus on the three most outstanding ones, as they are particularly relevant for a thorough understanding of the daily experience of non-traditional students at university: their specific characteristics, the daily development in academic life and the adaptation of the institution to their needs.

Choice, motivation and grit. Working double to get the same

In spite of the diversity of situations that appeared in the different information gathered, several common elements stood out in almost all the informants: a high level of motivation regarding university studies, the awareness that academic progress requires greater effort, determination to achieve their aims and attitude to face the adversities.

In terms of motivation, the idea that these students might be particularly excited about studying at the university emerged. In fact, for many of them, the university is a choice, not the stage to be faced, necessarily, when they finish secondary school.

> Of course, the interest that you put in and the interest that you have in it influence your grades, of course (...) now I am not obliged to do it, I do it because I want to do it and... and I want to show that I am capable of doing it, so that, it has a stimulus that... supports you... to get good grades, to work, to emphasise many things that before I had to do with them (Isabel, a mature female student).

Only a high level of motivation explains the effort and the high costs that some people faced: stressful situations occurred and daily planning was required to conciliate academic and family life, which sometimes led these students to question whether this effort and costs were worthwhile.

> Because I had to organize a lot...., I had to hire a person to take the girls to school, to do the housework... And I was thinking do I really need this? (...) I'm neglecting everything because I'm here and I was wondering, is it worth it? Because the girls also blame me that I spend all day on the computer.... then of course, it hurts and you say, is it worth it? (Emma, a mature female student with dependent children).

As it can be seen, there was an awareness of having to make a greater effort than their peers to carry out their studies. Many used the expression "it costs me twice as much" to refer to it.

> Being a little sensible, you have to contribute more to get to the same thing, that is, you have to do double, to get the same thing. That's my conclusion as a non-traditional student, for me to do the same as someone else, I have to do twice as much (Man, mature student).

For many of them, a university degree was a clear objective and they showed a firm determination to pursue it. It could be said, therefore, that clear aims and a firm attitude towards achieving it can be considered characteristics of this type of students.

> It's what I've wanted for many years. I got it a little late, but I got it and now I'm not going to give up! This is what I have been pursuing for a long time (Hernán, a mature male student and first generation student).

On the other hand, there also was an attitude of struggle towards the institution, to try to transform certain aspects that affected them or were an obstacle to their academic development.

> Because now they've changed the elevator buttons, but they've put them back up, too high for me. After what I complained about it, they didn't take my needs into account, since they were as difficult as before (...). The only thing I have always been told is: "We can give you a stick... and that's how you get to hit the button" (...). I felt angry. I have passed 4th grade and everything continues as it was since I started the degree (Yria, a female student with mobility difficulties, who uses a wheelchair).

> More than once I said it in the information office (....) to suggest that they at least renew the microphone listening equipment (...), being always demanding the same to the same people tires me a lot, it is with one person and with another,... I became a little radical, I've managed well on my own, when I can't hear in a class and I get fed up with the teacher, I go to the library, I get the book and I study on my own, and so I sort it out (Alvaritocrack, male student with hearing difficulties).

Sometimes this struggle was not reciprocated, neither by the institution nor by the teaching staff, and caused frustration, anger, tiredness, etc., which led them to look for other strategies to get ahead. This situation deserves some reflection because on one hand, it highlights the inadequacy of the university in facing the challenge of diversity. It is not sufficiently prepared to meet and satisfy the needs of non-traditional learners in an appropriate manner. On the other hand, it seems that their actions are palliative and punctual, which shows that much work remains to be done to create an inclusive university that can adequately accommodate and care for any student, regardless of their characteristics. And finally, it should be understood that improving these conditions from an integrated perspective implies the improvement of the university as a whole, which would prevent the problem from reproducing again in the future and, therefore, would improve the university as an institution and as a social agent.

Struggling with academic life: challenging traditional practices

Although it was sometimes difficult for them to attend lectures, they considered them very important. Taking their own notes, asking for more detailed explanations when they did not understand a concept or the possibility of sharing their own opinions were key elements that helped them to optimise the process of personal learning.

> I always attend 99.99% of the classes, if I miss one it is really due to force majeure (Ananda, a female student of another nationality).

The information suggested that, with a few exceptions, the general tendency of teachers is to give master classes of a theoretical nature, based on the teacher's presentation and the students' taking notes. Non-traditional students criticised the fact that teaching models were, in general terms, so traditional, since they were not appropriate to this academic stage or to the characteristics and demands of these students.

> A typical day at the university is attending classes, taking notes and listening to the teacher, only 2 or 3 teachers use a different dynamic of classes where we talk, but in general we are still like in a school..., the teacher giving the lesson (Lidia, first generation female student).

Although it was infrequent, methodological alternatives were sometimes considered. However, some of them generated new dilemmas for non-traditional students, given their circumstances. For example, teamwork, which is increasingly common among the work strategies implemented by teachers, posed new complications because it requires more time of dedication (which is lacking in this type of student).

> Personally, it usually takes me a lot longer to do my homework than to study, not because I don't have to study, but because these projects take up a lot of my time (MJ, a female mature student with dependent children).

A large proportion of participants had significant time constraints due to the fact that they were making their studies compatible with other obligations. Therefore, although their level of motivation for the classes was high and they were willing to take time to attend them, they also evaluated the situation and if the classes did not provide anything, sometimes they decided to attend other obligations.

> Many times I also decide not to go to class just because of the fact that the classes are boring and don't give me anything, the truth is that I would rather stay taking care of my daughter, honestly... (Cristi, a female student with dependent children).

This type of case again shows that teaching is not adapted to the characteristics of the whole student body, but is designed and proposed for a specific group (the traditional student) that has homogeneous characteristics and, therefore, generates a problem for the rest. The university must try to break this pattern and present heterogeneous, flexible proposals adapted to the needs of all students, not just the majority group.

The inflexible options sometimes made the student choose a modality that did not satisfy him/her personally or respond to his/her needs. For example, when classes could not be attended on a regular basis, a different assessment system was generally developed (for non-attendant students), which was often more complicated and less interesting from a didactic point of view. Some of them considered that this rigidity should be broken and that intermediate options should be considered when taking the subjects, which would be motivating and powerful from a pedagogical perspective.

> I have had a lot of problems with these classes, because after explaining my situation to them they have not given me a good alternative, but the only thing they offer me is the non-attendance plan which is truly not the same at all.... and maybe I cannot attend 100% of the classes, since it is not that I never go... I mean that there should be a middle option between the 100% attendance programmes and the non-attendants' (Cristi, a female student with dependent children).

It is also interesting to note the issue of tutoring which, within university education, should be an important resource of support. As stated in the theoretical framework, it could be thought that tutoring is a particularly useful strategy for this type of student, as it could contribute to the personalisation of the learning process. This would make it possible to establish a closer relationship with the teaching staff, who would meet the demands that non-traditional students find difficult to meet (for example, attendance at classes). However, students' perceptions of tutoring –probably reflecting teachers' view-differed significantly from this conception. Tutorials were considered as a last resort, as a problem or doubt solving device when all other elements or options have failed.

> Yes (I attended tutorials), to get explained the subject in an extreme situation.... when I was overwhelmed on all sides, that is, in the library I didn't get anything, my colleagues didn't understand anything either,… I went to tutoring. Tutoring as a last resort... (Alvaritocrack, male student with hearing difficulties).

Only few participants perceived tutoring beyond the resolution of specific doubts, that is, as a way of establishing a closer and more direct relationship with the teacher in order to, when appropriate, seek the necessary support. Tutorials, in such cases, were perceived as closer and more open than lectures, allowing the tutor to get to know the student's needs and, consequently, to attend them in a more personalised way.

> It is different, attending classes consists of listening to the lesson, commenting on what has been explained, doing activities... but going to the tutorials is more direct... the relationship between student and teacher..., a tutorial where you can talk about all areas within certain limits, the tutor can help, he/she (...) can give you advice, he/she can guide you... (Lidia, first generation female student).

However, after tutorials some teachers met the needs of students in a specific, but not definitive, way.

> And when I took advantage of the tutoring, "look, I didn't know because I have such a disability", he says "yes, yes, I will take it into account"... He remembers, you know, the first few weeks and when several weeks have passed he doesn't remember... (Alvaritocrack, male student with hearing difficulties).

Is equality a fair treatment for non-traditional students?

The relationship of the participants with the teachers was limited to general aspects related to the subject. They did not expect special treatment, so when their non-traditional status went unnoticed, they described the feeling of connecting "well" with teachers, as they received "normal" treatment.

> I don't need special support or special treatment because this is a difficult circumstance, I prefer to leave it out of the classroom (...). I don't need that kind of help, although … if an essay has to be handed in, imagine on Monday, I'm going to have it even if I have to spend the night in the hospital. I've studied in the hospital at the door of the ICU (Magister, first generation female student with special needs from an underprivileged environment).

Despite the demand for equal treatment of students, we could see that there were different situations that would require some flexibility on the part of the teaching staff.

When the condition of non-traditional students was revealed or their characteristics were directly observable, we found two tendencies among the teaching staff: empathic or egalitarian. In relation to the first one, some teachers showed empathy and even valued the non-traditional condition: either because in some cases it meant greater maturity in the student, or because it tended to be a more participative student body, which, in certain situations, was an advantage in the teaching process.

> Especially young teachers, what they are looking for is the intervention (...) then I have noticed that to a certain extent they are looking for the intervention, because they know that if nobody is going to intervene, you... more or less successfully can break the ice (Man, male mature student).

In relation to the second trend, there were teachers who rejected any special treatment that could generate differences with the rest of the students. The lack of alternatives or the maladjustment to the unique characteristics of these students implied an unfair treatment. However, it is interesting that most participants understood that the action must be translated into identical conditions for everyone, regardless of their circumstances.

> Most of them understand and value my situation, but logically they can't demand less from me than they demand to the other students (MJ, a female mature student with dependent children).

It is quite possible that this point of view was a consequence of the common assumptions in academic culture, often conveyed by the faculty, which have a bearing on the idea that the requirements should be the same for everyone. There was no difference between equality and equity, nor, therefore, a personalised curricular adaptation, which is a nonsense from an inclusive vision of education. Even more so when it is still maintained that it is the student body that must adapt to the institution and not the institution to the student body.

> They, of course, are aware of my disability, because it's obvious, but none of them usually come to ask me if I need anything special or anything else. They treat me the way they treat the rest of the students and that has two aspects: the positive, which is because I feel the same way as the others and do not need anything special, and the negative, which is that maybe I would like them to worry about me a little bit (...). In certain aspects, sometimes, being treated normally in your situation is a disadvantage and you feel a little discriminated against (Yria, a female student with mobility difficulties, who uses a wheelchair).

> So the teacher is still immature, he is talking about justice, he thinks that if he is flexible with me so that I can pass, or not pass, he is doing bad justice. He is comparing me at 59 to an 18-year-old boy... (Nasser, a male mature student of another nationality who does not speak a fluent Spanish).

Why should all students be treated in the same way if each student has a particular set of needs? Should not be attended in an inclusive manner the cases of disadvantaged students?

On the other hand, the aspects that were generally attended to non-traditional students were usually scarce and peripferal. In other words, they focused on specific elements that did not include substantial axes of the learning process. Curiously, this was a type of demand that was not considered a change in requirements by study participants. This is because most of the aspects that were adapted were not central to the didactic structure of the subject.

> In these cases there are some occasions in which teachers put all their effort, everything in their hands to be able to change some tutorials hours, and things like that, although not all of them, in order to be as flexible as possible for this type of students who have already told them (...) But in general, they are usually flexible on tutoring and more informal issues, so to speak. When they are talking about other issues such as practice, exams..., they are not flexible (Hernán, male mature student and first generation student).

As can be seen, not all teachers exercised this flexibility or met the demands of these students.

The discourses on flexibility and adaptation to the unique characteristics of the student body ended up by posing two interesting themes: 1) the responsibility of the student as a necessary condition for the teacher to be more flexible in his/her demands and 2) the obligation that the student felt towards the teacher who attended to their needs.

Thus, some of these students felt that they cannot fail the teachers who adapted to their needs and therefore had to perform to the best of their ability.

> What I've done is not half of the work, maybe in other circumstances I say, "Well, I'll hand in the assignment any way I can and that's it". But I know that today I am going to finish late…even if I go to work with 3 hours of sleep, that this work is going to be perfect...because I am not going to fail that person (Man, male mature student).

Discussion

The results showed that non-traditional students are highly motivated to study at university, which is in line with previous studies finding about their higher levels of intrinsic motivation for learning (Bye, Pushker & Cornway, 2007; Finnegan, Merrill & Thunborg, 2014; Morley, 2012). For them, access to a university degree was a mature decision that, in many cases, involved a significant cost in terms of time of dedication, family and work organization and efforts to overcome obstacles. Some of these factors have been identified as success indicators in higher education (Cabrera et al., 2006; González-Monteagudo & Ballesteros, 2011b).

Until now, university teaching has been planned taking into account only full-time students. However, with the entry of new audiences into higher education we also need to adopt strategies for an increasing number of part-time students who combine study with other obligations. This difference between full-time and part-time students is already included in the Student Statute (RD 1791/2010), which is the legal framework necessary to make the curriculum more flexible.

Likewise, the obligation to attend to class in order to be eligible for continuous assessment systems is an example of a common requirement that must be adapted to facilitate access for all students. Participants in this study preferred to attend and participate in class, rather than the non-attendant assessment system. It is therefore necessary to look for new options that fit all possible situations. This circumstance should lead to a rethinking of the pedagogical framework in which university teaching takes place and, therefore, to challenge the agents most directly involved in this activity (González-Sanmamed & Raposo-Rivas, 2009). In view of this, it would be important that we begin to see the growing diversification of students in our classrooms as a possibility of enrichment and learning (García-Rodríguez et al., 2014). A more plural, diverse and heterogeneous university means a fairer and more inclusive higher education, which also provides opportunities for a larger population.

Another strategic aspect for promoting a more diversified university education is tutoring, whose function of personalising the student experience should contribute to the development of many of the aspirations included in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The study by Méndez and Trillo (2010) reinforces the relevance of the tutorial action. However, in one assessment of the development of the methodological renewal, sponsored by the Bologna Plan, tutorial is the aspect that receives the lowest rating from students (MEC, 2006). Our study highlight that for many students tutoring does not go beyond the resolution of a single doubt or issue. Therefore, it seems necessary to change the conceptions of teachers and learners about this function, in order to make optimal use of its possibilities.

In view of the results of this and similar studies (González-Monteagudo & Ballesteros, 2011b), it seems appropriate to state that the characteristics and experiences of non-traditional university students is a growing line of research that can provide a

valuable information for the future of higher education. As the general tendency is that this type of student is becoming more numerous, it is necessary to look more closely at their specific needs. In this way, services and activities that facilitate a greater inclusion of non-traditional students in the university should be offered, enhancing the social dimension of higher education, which is in line with what was advocated in the London Communiqué (2007).

Conclusion

Non-traditional students seem to have unique characteristics in common: they tend to have a clear academic aim and a personal motivation to undertake their university studies. This will take a thoughtful decision that requires more effort than conventional students, but they tend to overcome it by showing enormous determination in this regard.

Until few years ago, Spanish university student population showed fairly homogeneous characteristics. The arrival of a more diverse population in higher education is an achievement of the system (in which it is necessary to continue working to reach the highest levels of inclusion). However this fact poses a new need, it requires adaptation to a more plural and heterogeneous reality, since there are more students with unequal situations.

It seems that the predominant teaching model is traditional (mostly theoretical lessons), so it is not adapted to the needs of non-traditional students. Currently, the adaptation of programmes and teaching practice to the characteristics of the student population in order to compensate the different starting points should be imperative. This model must evolve and make difference, flexibility and inclusion one of its identifying features. In this sense, it is not only necessary to adapt the less relevant aspects of the teaching-learning process, but also to be able to adapt those central elements that are key to learning (as long as the purpose of the subject is not distorted).

As a consequence of its historical evolution, both the teaching staff and the students seem to have a very internalised egalitarian pedagogical philosophy, in which there is hardly any room for equity. In fact, while it is clear that a lack of attention to their differences may lead to some grievance, participants expressed a preference for 'equal treatment'. Inclusive education has not yet made its mark in higher education; it is beginning to make inroads. That is why a personalised attention for every student through approaches in which no one is pointed out is demanded.

Notes

[1] The age at which a student is considered mature differs depending on the country and the university. In Spanish higher education there are different ways to access. One of these is known as the "over 25 test", which includes an access system adapted to the characteristics of the target population.

References

Aina, C. (2013). Parental background and university dropout in Italy. *Higher Education*, 65, 437-456.

Álvarez, V., García, E., Gil, J., López, I., & Romero, S. (2002). Evaluación del curso de orientación e iniciación a los estudios universitarios. *Revista de Investigación Educativa, 20*(2), 411-429.

Ariño, A., Hernández, M., Llopis, R., Navarro, P., & Tejerina, B. (2008). *El oficio de estudiar en la Universidad: compromisos flexibles.* Valencia: Universitat de València.

Ariño, A., Llopis, R., & Soler, I. (2014). *Desigualdad y universidad. Encuesta de condiciones de vida y de participación de los estudiantes universitarios en España.* Madrid: Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte.

Benson, R., Hewitt, L., Heagney, M., Devos, A., & Crosling, G. (2010). Diverse pathways into higher education: Using students' stories to identify transformative experiences. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 50, 26-53.

Bermejo, B., Camacho, L. M., Fernández-Batanero, J.M., & García-Lázaro, I. (2011, month). *The academic study of non-traditional students at the University of Seville.* Paper presented at the Conference *RANLHE*. Access and Retention: Experiences of non-traditional learners in Higher Education. University of Seville, Spain.

Booth, T., & Ainscow, M. (2015). *Guía para la educación inclusiva. Desarrollando el aprendizaje y la participación en los centros escolares.* Madrid: OEI, FUHEM.

Bourdieu, P., & Wacquant, L. (1992) *An introduction to reflexive sociology*. Cambridge: Polity.

Budd, R. (2017). Disadvantaged by degrees? How widening participation students are not only hindered in accessing HE, but also during – and after – university. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education, 21*(2-3), 111-116.

Bye, D., Pushkar, D., & Conway, M. (2007). Motivation, interest, and positive affect in traditional and non-traditional undergraduate students. *Adult Education Quarterly, 57*(2) 141-158.

Cabrera, L., Bethencourt, J. T., Álvarez-Pérez, P., & González-Alfonso, M. (2006). El problema del abandono de los estudios universitarios" *RELIEVE, Revista Electrónica de Investigación y Evaluación Educativa, 12*(2), 171-203.

Castellana, M., & Salas, I. (2005). *Estudiantes con discapacidad en aulas universitarias.* Paper presented at the I National Conference *I Universidad y Discapacidad*, University of Salamanca, Spain.

Crew, T. (2015). Beyond graduation: The trajectories of graduates in North Wales. *People, Place and Policy, 9*(1), 29-47.

Crosling, G., Heagney, M. y Thomas, L. (2009). Improving student retention in higher education: improving teaching and learning. *Australian Universities Review, 51* (2), 9-18.

Doyle, W. R., & Gorbunov, A. V. (2010). ´Getting through´ change. *The Magazine Of Higher Learning, 42*(6), 58-60.

Field, J., & Morgan-Klein, N. (2012). The importance of social support structures for retention and success. In T. Hinton-Smith (Ed.), *Widening participation in higher education. Casting the net wide?* (pp. 178-193). Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

Finnegan, F., Merrill, B., & Thunborg, C. (Eds.) (2014). *Student voices on inequalities in European higher education.* London: Routledge.

García-Rodríguez, M. P., Meseguer-Martínez, L., González-Losada, S., & Barrera-Torrejón, A. R. (2014). Aprendizaje a lo largo de la vida: éxito y futuro del sistema de acceso a la Universidad para Mayores de 40 y 45 años en Andalucía. *Revista de Educación, 363*, 101-127.

Gavira, R., & Moriña, A. (2015). Hidden voices in higher education: inclusive policies and practices in social science and law classrooms. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 19*(4), 365-378.

Gobierno de España-Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia (MEC) (2006). *Propuestas para la renovación de las metodologías docentes.* Madrid: Subdirección General de Informes y Publicaciones.

Gobierno de España-Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte (MECD) (2015). *Datos básicos del sistema universitario español. Curso 2014-15.* Madrid: Secretaría General Técnica del MECD.

Gobierno de España (2008). Real Decreto 1892/2008, de 14 de noviembre, por el que se regulan las condiciones para el acceso a las enseñanzas universitarias oficiales de grado y los procedimientos de admisión a las universidades públicas españolas (BOE núm 283 de 25/11/2008): Madrid: Ministerio de la Presidencia.

Gobierno de España (2010). Real Decreto 558/2010, de 7 de mayo, por el que se modifica el Real Decreto 1892/2008, de 14 de noviembre, por el que se regulan las condiciones para el acceso a las enseñanzas universitarias oficiales de grado y los procedimientos de admisión a las universidades públicas españolas (BOE núm. 113 de 08/05/2010). Madrid: Ministerio de Educación.

Gobierno de España (2010). Real Decreto 1791/2010, de 30 de diciembre, por el que se aprueba el Estatuto del Estudiante Universitario. (BOE núm. 318, de 31 de diciembre de 2010). Madrid: Ministerio de Educación.

Gobierno de España (2014). Real Decreto 412/2014, de 6 de junio, por el que se establece la normativa básica de los procedimientos de admisión a las enseñanzas universitarias oficiales de Grado. (BOE núm. 138, de 7 de diciembre de 2014). Madrid: Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte.

González-Monteagudo, J., & Ballesteros, M. A. (2011a). *Social and cultural dimensions of higher education as context to understand non-traditional students*. Paper presented at the Conference RANLHE. Access and Retention: Experiences of non-traditional learners in Higher Education, University of Seville, Spain.

González-Monteagudo, J., & Ballesteros, M. A. (2011b). *Seville final report: Transitional space, a report on students' experiences.* Paper presented at the Conference RANLHE. Access and Retention: Experiences of non-traditional learners in Higher Education. University of Seville, Spain.

González-Sanmamed, M., & Raposo-Rivas, M. (2009). Valoraciones del profesorado universitario sobre las acciones que pueden favorecer el proceso de convergencia europea. *Revista de Educación, 349,* 361-390.

Herrera, C. M., Pérez, C. P., & Echeita, G. (2016). Teorías Implícitas y Prácticas de Enseñanza que Promueven la Inclusión Educativa en la Universidad. Instrumentos y Antecedentes para la Reflexión y Discusión. *Formación Universitaria, 9*(5), 49-64.

Johnston, R. (2011). *Access and retention: experiences of non-traditional learners in higher education literature review. Final extended version.* Retrieved June 18, 2018, from http://www.dsw.edu.pl/fileadmin/www-ranlhe/files/Literature_Review_upd.pdf.

Jones, A. (2011). *The rising price of inequality.* Retrieved from http://www.ACFSA@ed.gov

London Communiqué (2007). *Towards the European Higher Education Area: responding to* challenges *in a globalised world.* Retrieved June 21, 2018, from http://www.ehea.info/Upload/document/ministerial_declarations/2007_London_Communique_English_588697.pdf

López-Melero, M. (2012). La escuela inclusiva: una oportunidad para humanizarnos. *Revista Interuniversitaria de Formación del Profesorado, 26*(2), 131-160.

Martínez, M., & Viader, M. (2008). Reflexiones sobre aprendizaje y docencia en el actual contexto universitario. La promoción de equipos docentes. *Revista de Educación, número extraordinario 2008,* 213-234.

Mas, O., & Olmos, P. (2012). La atención a la diversidad en la educación superior: Una perspectiva desde las competencias docentes. *Revista Educación Inclusiva, 5*(1), 159-174.

McNair, S. (1998). The invisible majority: Adult learners in English higher education, *Higher Education Quarterly, 52,* 162-178.

Méndez, R. M., & Trillo, F. (2010). El papel de la información universitaria en el proceso de formación de actitudes de los estudiantes hacia la universidad. *Revista de Educación, 353,* 329-360.

Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte (2016) *Datos y cifras del sistema universitario español. Curso 2015-16.* Retrieved from https://www.mecd.gob.es/dms/mecd/servicios-al-ciudadano-mecd/estadisticas/educacion/universitaria/datos-cifras/datos-y-cifras-SUE-2015-16-web-.pdf

Moriña, A. B. (2011). Barriers and aids in the university: a study from the perspective of students with disabilities. Paper presented at the Conference *RANLHE. Access and Retention: Experiences of non-traditional learners in Higher Education.* University of Sevilla, Spain.

Moriña, A. B. (2017). `We aren´t heroes, we´re survivors´: Higher education as an opportunity for students with disabilities to reinvent an identity. *Journal of Further and Higher Education, 41*(2), 215-226.

Morley, L. (2012). Experiencing higher education in Ghana and Tanzania: the symbolic power of being a student?. In T. Hinton-Smith (Ed.), *Widening participation in higher education. Casting the net wide?* (pp. 245-262) Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

Muntaner, J.J. (2017). Prácticas inclusivas en el aula ordinaria. *Revista de Educación Inclusiva, 7*(1), 63-79.

Orr, D. (2010). Integrating an aging student population into higher education. Challenges for evidence-based policy in Europe. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education, 40*(3), 25–42.

Orr, D., Gwosc, C. & Netz, N. (2011). *Social and Economic Conditions of Student Life in Europe. Synopsis of indicators. Final report. Eurostudent IV 2008–2011.* Retrieved June 5, 2018, from http://www.eurostudent.eu/download_files/documents/EIV_Synopsis_of_Indicators.pdf

Padilla-Carmona, T., González-Monteagudo, J., & Soria-Vilches, A. (2017). Gitanos en la universidad: Un estudio de caso de trayectorias de éxito en la Universidad de Sevilla. *Revista de Educación, 377,* 187-211.

Paz Maldonado, E. J. (2018). La formación del profesorado universitario para la atención a la diversidad en la educación superior. *Revista de Investigación Educativa de la REDIECH, 9(*16).

Pérez-Serrano, G., & Sarrate, L. M. (2013). Diversidad cultural y ciudadanía. Hacia una educación superior inclusiva. *Educación XX1, 16*(1), 85-104.

Quinn, J. (2013). Drop-out and completion in higher education in Europe. Retrieved from http://www.nesetweb.eu/sites/default/files/HE%20Drop%20out%20AR%20Final.pdf

Reay, D., Crozier, G., & Clayton, J. (2010). 'Fitting in' or 'standing out': Working-class students in UK higher education. *British Educational Research Journal, 36*(1), 107–124.

Sánchez-Palomino, A. (2011). La Universidad de Almería ante la integración educativa y social de los estudiantes con discapacidad: ideas y actitudes del personal docente e investigador. *Revista de Educación, 354*, 575-603.

Santiago, P., Brunner, J. J., Haug, G., Malo, S., & Di Pietrogiacomo, P. (2009). *Review of tertiary education in Spain*. París: OECD.

Solano, J. C., Frutos, L., & Cárceles, G. (2004). Hacia una metodología para el análisis de las trayectorias académicas del alumnado universitario. El caso de las carreras de ciclo largo de la Universidad de Murcia. *Revista Española de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 105*, 217-235.

Thomas, L., & Quinn, J. (2007). *First generation entry into higher education: An international study*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Wyatt, L. G. (2011). Non-traditional student engagement: increasing adult student success and retention. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education, 59,* 10-11.

Xuereb, S. (2014). Why students consider terminating their studies and what convinces them to stay. *Active Learning in Higher Education, 15*(2), 145–156.