

Chapter 2

The risk of being "excluded": Non-traditional, Disadvantaged, and Underachieving students

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Introduction

The first problem in studying inclusion in the higher education setting concerns the difficulty in definition and identification of at-risk students. On the one hand, we need to clarify what exactly “progress”, “success” and “inclusion” in higher education means. Not only is a matter of definition but a question of how progression is measured and monitored.

On the other, we have an ever-increasing diversity in the student body that often leads to correlate socio-cultural factors with low performance and drop-out. Under such assumption, the so-called non-traditional students (NTS) have been considered as disadvantaged students (DS) that are more likely to underachieve or even drop-out. The NTS/DS often have poor performance though there is not always a clear relationship between all the characteristics commonly attributed to the NTS/DS and poor performance.

Hence, this chapter will try to characterize how higher education performance (“progression”) can be understood as well as to identify which group of students can be considered at-risk of exclusion so that the interventions in the field of HE can be more effective.

An overview on participation and progress in Higher Education

This section provides some statistical information on access and progress in higher education in Europe in order to delimit the extent to which underachievement and drop-out can affect the students’ population. Several international research reports (Eurostudent project being the most noticeable) thoroughly account for the ever increasing number of new publics entering higher education as well as for the socio-economic conditions under which they live and study.

According to the last Eurostudent report (Eurostudent V, 2012-2015), in 17 out of 29 participating countries, more than half of the students’ parents have attained higher education. Students without HE background are underrepresented in all Eurostudent countries except Norway. Last OECD report (2014), *Education at a glance*, showed that more than half of 20-34 year-olds in tertiary education have at least one parent with that level of education (56%), and slightly more than a third (36%) have at least one parent

with upper secondary education as highest level of attainment. In addition, the proportion of 20-34 year-old tertiary students whose parents have not completed an upper secondary education is small: about one tertiary student in ten has parents with below upper secondary education (9%).

It is worthy to note that, according to Eurostudent V, the students without HE background more often have a delayed entry into higher education, are older than students with HE background, favor non-universities over universities, tend to be better represented in Bachelor than in Master programmes, and tend to prefer engineering over humanities subjects.

As to age of new entrants in HE, on average across OECD countries, 82% of all first-time entrants into tertiary-type A programmes and 58% of first-time entrants into tertiary-type B programmes in 2012 were under 25 years of age. The share of older students, however, varies greatly between countries, being the Nordic countries the ones with large shares of students older than 25 (Eurostudent V).

Eurostudent V (2015) also provided information about access routes. According to it, most students entered HE through regular routes but alternative routes do exist: 8% students accessed by upper-secondary qualification-adult learning; 5% through special exams aiming at some student groups; 4% by accrediting prior learning; and 3% through special access courses. More students entering through these alternatives routes can be found among students without HE background, among older students, and among delayed transition students.

Additional information about other social, cultural and economic conditions of HE students at Europe can be found in Eurostudent V, which informs that:

- In two thirds of Eurostudent countries, about 10 % of students have children.

- In more than half of the Eurostudent countries, at least 40 % of students not living with parents engage in paid employment alongside their studies. The employment rate varies especially with students' educational background and age. Employment during term-time is more common among students without higher education background. Older students also engage in paid jobs more frequently than their younger peers.
- In two thirds of the Eurostudent countries, the share of second-generation migrants is around 10 %.
- In three quarters of the Eurostudent countries, 5 % of students report that any health impairments they may have present a big obstacle.

According to this information, it seems clear that the student body in European higher education has undergone significant changes leading to an increased diversification. Most of the existing widening participation data and research across countries relates to access to higher education rather than to completion of study (Quinn, 2013). Much more attention has been paid to open up higher education institutions to new publics than to ascertain to which extent these new entrants progress along their academic life and success.

Performance, progression and completion in higher education

The difficulty in definition and identification of disadvantaged, at-risk students always arises when dealing with issues of widening participation in HE. There are not universal terms to represent a heterogeneous group not always visibilised under a specific name or category. A first attempt to identify them consists on differentiating between:

- Underachieving students which in most cases can be characterized as those who do not finish the programme in the scheduled time and spend more semesters/years. They are “delayed” students (late graduates or inactive students as characterized in some higher education institutions) or students with marks under the average.
- Drop-out students, which refers to those students that do not finish their degrees, many of them might change the degree and not necessarily abandon university.

According to Siegle and McCoach (2009), most definitions of underachievement involve a discrepancy between ability or potential (expected performance) and achievement (actual performances). Hence, underachievement is commonly seen as a discrepancy between the level of student's performance and her academic potential (Reis and McCoach, 2000; Matthews and McBee, 2007). Reis and McCoach (2000: 157) proposed an operational definition of underachievement and they asserted that “underachievers are students who exhibit a severe discrepancy between expected achievement (as measured by standardized achievement test scores or cognitive or intellectual ability assessments) and actual achievement (as measured by class grades and teacher evaluations)”.

Most of the definitions of underachievement consider the underachievers as gifted students (e.g., Siegle, 2012) that fail to succeed in educational settings. However, in the context of this chapter, we refer to underachievers as those who have skills/competencies to achieve a good academic performance, but do not achieve as much as they could due to several factors.

Each student may under-achieve for a somewhat unique combination of reasons (Siegle and McCoach, 2009). The reasons underlying poor performance of the underachieving students have been traced to psychological, relational and social-community factors. There is some agreement in considering that there is no single cause that explains this

underachievement but there are numerous factors, both inside and outside of the formative setting that can contribute to it (Crosling, Heagney and Thomas, 2009). These include family and community dynamics, school/university curriculum and teaching methods and personality features.

As to drop-out, there is no generic and universally agreed definition of retention, drop-out and completion rates. The commonly held conception of retention is the extent to which learners remain within a higher education institution and complete their programme of study within a given time frame (Jones, 2008; Quinn, 2013). As a consequence, drop-out students are those who leave university early and do not complete their studies.

However, the term "drop-out" itself is complex (Quinn, 2004) and can be controversial as it implies failure. It does not necessarily reflect the reality that most students wish to or will return to education at a later stage. Some researchers (e.g., Field and Kurantowicz, 2014) refused to use the term 'drop-out' in a pejorative sense and rejected the idea that withdrawal from a programme is invariably wasteful, for the individual or for society. According to Merrill (2012), the term non-completion better addresses the experience of many early leavers who reported identifiable gains from their time at university and had left for positive reasons. The research conducted by Quinn et al., (2005) also found that some drop-out students did not consider leaving early higher education as a disaster, had sound reasons for withdrawing and recognized that they had gained skills, confidence and life experience in spite of not having completed higher education.

According to these preliminary considerations, this chapter deals with the identification of the students' groups that can be at risk of exclusion at higher education. Though drop out is not necessarily a negative process if it derives from positive reasoned decisions, we do consider that this phenomenon sometimes concurs with an individual sense of failure

and represents a setback in people's life plans. From the institutional perspective, withdrawal is a sensitive matter and raises questions about the efficiency and effectiveness of higher education institutions (HEI). Even more important is the social dimension of higher education and the need to fulfil the aspirations of the London Communiqué (2007:5) that "the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations". That implies for HEI to remove any obstacle, especially those related to social and economic background. If not, all widening participation policies and efforts are doomed to failure as HEI are opening their doors to new publics but neglecting the real progression (performance, completion, success, retention or achievement, whatever the term we prefer) of some students.

Non-traditional and disadvantaged students

During the last decade, the profile of the students entering higher education has changed, as their traits, their reasons, and their expectations also changed. This particular group cannot be seen as homogeneous, since the criteria used in defining or describing non-traditional learners are wide and various. For instance, to Correia and Mesquita (2006), non-traditional students are adult people who: dropped out school, may not have academic qualifications, have been apart from the formal academic system for quite a while, do not have previous experience in higher education, and have a low economic and social background. Many of those students enroll in low frequency courses, due to factors related to limited time for study or lack of flexibility concerning schedules. They are commonly financially independent (Crawford, 2004; Chao, DeRocco, and Flynn, 2007). Also referred to as re-entry students, returning students, mature-aged students or new students (Kenner and Weinerman, 2011), non-traditional students are usually described

as opposed to traditional or conventional ones. Taking into account the most common path, one can consider that, whereas a traditional student is defined as one that enrolls immediately after graduating from high school and completes the degree by the age of 24 (Philibert, Allen, and Elleven, 2008), the non-traditional one is an individual over the age of 24/25 (Kenner and Weinerman, 2011).

On the other side, the conventional student can be described as one who is 18-24 years old, resides on university grounds, and attends school full time as a product of the support afforded by the parents or relatives, economic assistance from grants and scholarships or both (Kimbrough and Weaver, 1999; Philibert et al., 2008). On the contrary, adult learners are identified by a number of specific characteristics, some of which include: age, employment, family (in many cases non-traditional students are parents and/or caregivers), and financial responsibilities associated with it (Kimbrough and Weaver, 1999). Concurrently, some studies have included in their definition of non-traditional students, characteristics such as: gender, race, ethnicity, national origin, education, religion, finances, language, and lack of information, disability, and socio-economic status (Schuetze and Slowey, 2002; Taylor and House, 2010).

In this chapter we have adopted the definition offered by Johnston (2011) whereby by ‘non-traditional’, we mean “students who are under-represented in higher education and whose participation in HE is constrained by structural factors. This would include, for example, students whose family has not been to university before, students from low-income families, students from minority ethnic groups, living in what have traditionally been ‘low participation areas’, as well as mature age students and students with disabilities“ (Johnston, 2011, p. 5). In this volume, we will refer to the categorization proposed by RANLHE Project¹ (Johnston, 2011, pp. 41-47) in which five groups of non-traditional students were identified:

- Students from low income backgrounds - For these students there are likely to be issues about their cultural capital and habitus, and how they interact with the field of higher education, as well as material constraints on HE access and completion. In this group, transition to HE is still seen by low-income groups as an uncertain process which involved considerable material 'risk' and cost. In fact, financial problems are clearly major influences on retention and drop out for low-income students.
- First generation students - Recent research has been interested on 'first generation students', normally defined as students with neither parent having previously completed a degree. In this group of students it is emphasized the importance of 'social capital' and the way it interacts with cultural capital and habitus.
- Students from minority ethnic groups, immigrants and refugees - These students have more difficult adaptation to HE, as well as more constraint factors about funding studies. Also they can expect little support from her family in choice-making or funding higher education. The language is an important factor when the studies are done in a language different from the native context.
- Mature age students (including part-timers and students with work and family responsibilities) - Again such students often come from low income backgrounds and experience some of the problems already identified for people from low income backgrounds, and indeed first generation students. These problems are often compounded by additional issues arising from work and family logistics and finance, as well as a lack of confidence in their overall academic, study and IT skills due to a prolonged absence from mainstream study.
- Students with disabilities - In response to student disability, some European universities are required to give students with a disability the same opportunities as students without

a disability, as well as specific support to increase retention and completion rates in this target group.

We agree with Field and Morgan-Klein (2012) who considered the term “non-traditional” as questionable. It must be understood in a simple description sense to denote those who are under-represented in HE and whose participation and progress along it is constrained by structural factors.

At-risk students? Factors influencing underachievement and drop-out

While all students entering HE could become a drop-out/underachieving student, some are more likely than others to do it. The so called non-traditional students seems to be the most vulnerable to become drop-out or underachievers, as previous research has shown the associations between those phenomena (drop-out and underachievement) and their social and personal characteristics.

As a result, an important percentage of university students can be at risk of abandoning or underachieving. Factors influencing drop-out or underachieving are not easy to delimitate but many of the studies that have dealt with these factors showed that the particular circumstances of non-traditional students might be at the core of poor academic performance. The review of research and statistical reports carried out by Quinn (2013) provided a very clear picture of drop out. Quinn’s conclusions pointed to several profiles of students who are more likely to withdraw:

- Students from a low socio-economic background are the most likely to drop out.
- Students with dependants, women in particular, who struggle to balance caring responsibilities with their studies.

- Men are more at risk of drop-out than women. They are more likely to study science and engineering, disciplines that have the highest dropout rates. Men from a working-class background and from poor provincial areas are particularly vulnerable.
- Minority ethnic students are more at risk of dropping-out as a result of factors such as racism or poverty. Here too, socio-economic background is a key factor: a refugee from a middle-class background is much more likely to graduate than one from a working-class background.
- Students with disabilities face physical problems of access and other barriers in terms of attitudes of staff and other students. Again, socio-economic status has a strong impact: a disabled student from a middle-class family is much more likely to graduate than a disabled student from a working-class background.

Hence, socio-economic status seems to have the most important impact on drop-out and to dominate all other factors such as ethnicity and gender (Thomas and Quinn, 2007). Students' financial issues have been identified as a barrier to retention, especially for those in the lower socio-economic groups (Dogson and Bolan, 2002). For Quinn (2004), clearly class does matter in drop-out because it constructs the material inequalities that make it more difficult to survive and prosper as a student.

As some authors have pointed out, not only is it a matter of family incomes, but also a question of social class. Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2011) offered a finely drawn analysis of working-class students in higher education which demonstrates the potential for working class students to perceive problems of 'fitting-in' in both academic and social terms. It was Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) who used the expression "like fish out of water" to describe the feelings of many low class students when compared with their peers, lecturers, and the institutional culture of some universities.

The family incomes are somehow related to the educational background which appears repeatedly associated to failure/success in university (Di Pietro, 2004; Roberts, 2011). Thus, those students whose parents have finished higher education are less likely to drop-out or underachieve. The higher the parents' education is, the more likely the students are to obtain a good academic performance. Being a first generation entrant where no-one in the family has had previous experience of higher education is linked to socio-economic status and also has a significant impact on drop-out. The research of Aina (2013) in Italy showed that undergraduates with fathers or both parents who only have compulsory schooling are more likely to drop-out.

The educational tracks and previous academic background (type of high school attended and marks) have also been linked to completion in HE (Jones, 2008; Gitto, Minervini and Monaco, 2011). In addition, traditional students finish school at the normal time, in the normal way and then go to university. Non-traditional students have a gap in their education, and may not go straight from school to university (Xuereb, 2014).

Some studies point to dissatisfaction with the degree or the lack of utility of it as another reason for drop-out or delay. Further, degree utility (the value or utility of the degree for the student), goal commitment and career decision-making self-efficacy were linked to non-traditional students' behaviour in terms of persistence decisions (Brown, 2002).

Another important barrier that non-traditional students might experience is the combining of study with work and/or care responsibilities. Higher education students have identified 'competing priorities' as causing difficulties during their studies (Moriarty et al., 2009; Wyatt, 2011; Xuereb, 2014). Additionally, Yorke and Longden (2004) found wider life responsibilities including paid work and family to contribute centrally to non-completion for many students. Multiple obligations may lead to difficulties with attendance, for example due to childcare problems (Wyatt, 2011). In sum, students who work and those

who have dependent children are possibly the group of non-traditional students who have greater difficulties in finishing their higher studies (Malnes, Viksanovi, and Simola, 2014).

Moreover, a special focus must be made on adult students as in this group many of the features usually associated with non-traditional come together. According to Eurostudent conclusions mentioned above, adult students usually work, have children, have delayed transitions, and are less likely to have higher education background. Some studies report that the drop-out rate in the case of adult learners is much higher than that of the traditional student population, as compared to the enrolment rates (Yorke and Longden, 2008; Doyle and Gorbunov, 2010; Jones, 2011). Data from Spain, also confirm that they have greater difficulties finishing their programmes. Their performance at university is relatively poorer than that of younger students, especially in the group of 40 to 45 year olds (MECD, 2015). In addition, non-traditional age students are less confident in the effectiveness of their study strategies and their abilities to succeed in college than traditional-age students (Klein, 1990).

Despite all the evidences presented so far suggesting that non-traditional students might be at risk of academic exclusion and drop-out, there is nevertheless some research findings that focused on resilience and suggested these students succeed even facing considerable problems. Padilla-Carmona (2012) worked with Spanish non-traditional students with a biographical approach and showed that about one in three of the narratives evidenced having gone through traumatic personal situations (family abuse, long periods of severe illness, extreme poverty ...). In spite of this, the students did not question their intention to continue their degrees, setting up many strategies to resist and overcome difficulties in order to achieve their goals. That is also the case of a study carried out in Ghana and Tanzania (Morley, 2012) that concluded that in spite of many unsatisfactory

experiences, the motivation for social mobility, status and employability drove students to enter, stay in and value HE to “become a somebody”. In addition, RANLHE project research, carried out in seven European countries, pointed very strongly to the centrality of students’ own resilience in staying the course and effecting generative personal transitions (Finnegan, Fleming and Thunborg, 2014). As shown in chapter 1, resilience is a central concern for inclusion that calls for the reinforcement of the individual skills to overcome risk factors.

Conclusions

Underachievement and drop out are concepts that need to be better addressed for widening participation in HE. In this chapter we have referred to underachievers as those who have skills to achieve a good academic performance, but do not achieve as much as they could due to several factors. We have also identified the students’ groups that can be at risk of underachievement and/or drop out in HE: students from low income backgrounds, first generation students, students from minority ethnic groups, immigrants and refugees, mature age students and students with disabilities.

The central point in this characterization is that these groups’ participation can be constrained by structural factors that to a certain extent affect progression in HE settings. Hence, many of the studies reviewed here showed that the particular circumstances of non-traditional students might be at the core of poor academic performance. For this reason, the INSTALL project was targeted to the five groups of students presented.

Again, we want to highlight the non-linear relation between disadvantage and underachievement/drop out. As shown in this chapter, as well as in chapter 1, many at-risk students stay in despite the adverse situations they experience, showing patterns of positive adaptation in contexts of significant risk.

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Footnotes

¹RANLHE (Access and Retention: Experiences of Non-Traditional Learners in Higher Education) was a European Lifelong Learning funded project developed from 2008 to 2011 in eight universities from seven countries: Ireland, Spain, Poland, Sweden, England, Scotland and Germany. More information at: <http://www.dsw.edu.pl/fileadmin/www-ranlhe/index.html>