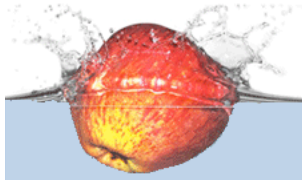

RANLHE

Access and Retention: Experiences of Non-traditional Learners in Higher Education

ACCESS AND RETENTION: EXPERIENCIES OF NON-TRADITIONAL LEARNERS IN HE

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FINAL COMPARATIVE REPORT (WP 8):

CULTURAL AND INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVES

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RANLHE. WP8 - Cultural and Institutional Perspectives

A Comparative Report on the Culture and Institutional Perspectives in Relation to the Access, Retention and Non-completion of Non-traditional Students

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Introduction

The aim of this research project, entitled *Access and Retention: Experiences of Non-Traditional Learners in Higher Education,* is to further knowledge and understanding of how and why some non-traditional adult students are able to develop a learning identity and successfully complete an undergraduate degree, and why others do not. Policy and structural analyses of access, retention and dropout of non-traditional students (younger and adults) will contribute to the promotion of excellence, effectiveness, efficiency and equity in higher education across Europe. By looking at the social dimensions of learning, the project will contribute to the Bologna process, and focus on those groups of learners which the Bologna process might otherwise overlook. This Work Package report draws on in-depth interviews with a diverse range of staff across all the sampled institutions in the study, from the elite to newer and reform institutions.

The general objective in regards to WP 8 is:

- to identify the **policy, cultural and institutional processes**, including disciplinary sub-cultures, which help or hinder completion

The specific questions to be addressed are:

1. What are **policies, cultural and institutional processes** at the institutional level, which help or hinder **completion** in each country?
2. What are the **factors** which promote or constrain **the access, retention and non-completion** of non-traditional students according to policy makers and staff at the institutions' level in each country?
3. What promotes or limits the construction of **a learner identity** of non-traditional students to become effective learners according to policy makers and staff at the institutions' level in each country?
4. What is the likely **impact of the global economic recession** on access, participation and completion?

This report is organised around these three key questions. There is a an introductory section which outlines the methodology used in gathering the data to address these questions, and in considering the first question, there is an opportunity to present a portrait of each of the partner HE institutions in Europe involved in this project which is necessary to help set the institutional context. As discussed in the first section on methodology, the data used in this report has been gathered through an analysis of institutional data as well as data gathered through staff interviews in each of the partner higher education institutions represented in the six countries.

1. Methodology

The outputs in relation to the institutional perspectives are based on in-depth interviews with a range of staff working in the higher education institutions participating as case studies in the project. The staff interviews included lecturers, student support staff, and different levels of management (including programme managers through to senior manages including at least one Vice-Chancellor), as well as policy-makers and those specifically employed to be responsible for widening access and participation in their institution. In many cases, their task has been to implement government policies on widening participation that higher education institutions are encouraged to respond to (in some cases though being offered additional funding). The institutional research looked at how both younger and adult non-traditional students were given the incentive to enter higher education, especially where they were the first in their family to so. The detail of their stories as to how they came to enter higher education is to be found in the national student reports, which have been aggregated in a comparative way as part of Work Package 8.

On a methodological note, many of the staff interviewed stated that the interview process itself helped them to reflect upon, and clarify, the issues of access, retention and drop-out or completion. The action research process also led those interviewed to consider the ways they or their colleagues teach, or organise programmes, in relation to a growing and more diverse student populations. Following the analysis of the interview data, which required the identification of, and an engagement with, a diverse range of policy, methodological and theoretical literature (for example, Alheit, 2010; Becher, 1987; Bourdieu, 1988). Each of the national partners produced their own report drawn from the data gathered through interviews with staff and documentary analysis in their three case study institutions. The national reports were then analysed in terms of similarities and differences across Europe in relation to institutional perspectives. In terms of the project objectives, the staff interviews helped us to identify the factors which promote and constrain the access, retention and non-completion of non-traditional students from these institutional perspectives. They also assisted in identifying the differing policies employed by a diverse range of higher education institutions, as well as highlighting new policy issues and challenging that emerged during the lifetime of the project. This research process enhanced the awareness of the need for new policy strategies (the development of policy and practice across Europe in widening participation, promoting lifelong learning and enhancing the learning experiences of students from under-represented groups). The interview data was very helpful in informing the construction of the institutional policy strategies outlined in the report for Work Package 14.

The reports on the institutional perspectives are available on the RANLHE website (www.http://ranlhe.dsw.pl). The national reports and this comparative reports meet the following project objectives: to identify the policy, cultural and institutional processes, including disciplinary sub-cultures which help or hinder completion; to consider the implications of the study for the development of policy and practice across Europe in widening participation, promoting lifelong learning and enhancing the learning experiences of students from under-represented groups; to identify the factors which promote or constrain the access, retention and non-completion. of non-traditional students (age, first member of family to enter HE, living in low participation areas, working class, gender, ethnicity, disability); and to increase knowledge and understanding through

interdisciplinary research of what promotes or limits the construction of a learner identity of non-traditional students to become effective learners and which enables or inhibits completion of HE.

2. **What are policies, cultural and institutional processes at the institutional level, which help or hinder completion in each country?**

Higher education systems in the partner countries studied across Europe have been experiencing processes of profound change, in financial matters, in relations with the State, and in pressures, not least from the latter to diversify student recruitment through what is commonly known as 'widening participation', whilst at the same time charged with preserving 'standards'. In recent years, there has been an expansion of HE systems in terms of policy focusing on an enlargement of institutions and re-designating institutions that have been proving both further and higher education programmes as higher education institutions (HEIs). This process is commonly referred to as the massification of higher education. The system however remains stratified from elite and traditional to reform institutions. The higher education system across Europe has become massified (Jongbloed and Vossensteyn, 2012; Scott, 1995, 1999, 2000), opening up opportunities for widening participation and giving access to groups who have previously never even considered entering higher education. One aspect of the definition of non-traditional students is the notion of them being the first in their family to go into higher education. However, some institutions are more open to non-traditional students than others (which reflects the stratification of higher education institutions), and some European country systems are more open than others. The European higher education system has also become more diverse. In some countries such as the UK some post-compulsory institutions have become university colleges, opening access to larger groups of both younger and mature students. Moreover, the professionalization/vocationalization 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 university profiles or programmes (although in the United Kingdom, universities have been anxious to position themselves as being 'research active'). The shift in profile is mostly visible in Sweden. Another phenomenon is the privatisation of institutions in Poland, and more recently the impact of the current economic recession on higher education today in all higher education institutions across the partner countries, with the exception of Sweden.

England

The English higher education system, like other European countries, is transforming as a result of changing state/university relationships, economic and social changes, globalisation and policy interventions. Since the 1970s, these changes have resulted in a move away from an elite system, to what Martin Trow (1989) calls 'mass higher education'. This period of sustained growth opened the doors of universities to more non-traditional students (both younger and adults), particularly in the post-1992 'new universities'.

Historically the English higher education system has been characterised by different types of institutions with the oldest and the most elite, Oxford and Cambridge, dating back to the 13th century. At the start of the 20th century other universities were established in some cities, for example, Manchester, Leeds, and Birmingham and later in Nottingham, Leicester etc. These are known as 'civic universities' as their purpose was to serve the needs of their locality. Following the Robbins Report, (1963) an expansion of higher education institutions began with the building of new

universities in the mid-1960s. Unlike the civic universities these universities were built as campus universities on the edge of cities and became known as 'green field universities' such as Warwick, Sussex, Essex, York, and Lancaster. In 1992 the Further and Higher Education Act ended the binary system when polytechnics and colleges of advanced technology (such as Cranfield) were granted university status. The 1992 Act has led to a broadly two tier system of dividing universities into either mainly research or teaching led institutions. The post 1992 institutions became known as the new universities. Most of the non-traditional students are found in the new universities. However, within this two-tier system there is a further strong hierarchical structure. The 20 elite universities have formed a strong group known as the Russell Group which includes Warwick. The Russell Group seeks to maintain the highest standards of research, teaching and learning and knowledge transfer.

Under Blair's New Labour government in 1997 there was a policy push to expand higher education further and increase the percentage of the population achieving an HE education as part of the agenda to increase the UK's economic competitiveness globally. One of the ways in which this was addressed was by some institutions changing from college to university status such as Canterbury Christ Church University, Leeds Trinity University College, York St. John, University of Gloucester and the development of new institutions such as the University of Lincoln. An increasing amount of HE work is now being taught in further education colleges as a partnership or a franchise with, usually, a local university. This includes foundation degrees (a degree which combines vocational and academic learning) and parts or whole degrees.

Since the 1990s there has been a policy push to widen access and promote lifelong learning. Access courses were introduced to enable adults without traditional university entrant qualifications a route into higher education. In recent years the *AimHigher* programme has funded widening participation strategies for both younger and older non-traditional students and each university has had to demonstrate that it is contributing to widening the access of its students. The Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA) in the United Kingdom now collects and monitors statistics on widening participation, using two main indicators: percentage of students who have come from state schools; and percentage of students from traditionally 'low participation neighbourhoods. The national average for students from state schools is 88.5%, and 10.2% from low participation neighbourhoods. The college having the highest percentage of students coming from state schools - 100% - is the College of St Mark and St John in Plymouth, followed by Anglia-Ruskin University with 97.3%. The English university with the highest percentage coming from low participation neighbourhoods is Teesside – 26.7%, closely followed by Sunderland - 25.7%.

The impact of recession and the change of national government are currently beginning to have a significant affect upon the future structure of the HE system. Under the current Conservative/Liberal coalition government a Comprehensive Spending Review has taken place (October, 2010), leading to massive spending cuts in relation to both teaching and research. At the same time a review of student fees and finance has taken place. Universities will now be allowed to charge up to a maximum of £9,000 per year for an undergraduate degree beginning in the new academic year 2011 (September/October). This will create a market situation with the elite institutions charging the largest fees to offset the reduction in Government funding. Higher fees will be off-putting to those from non-traditional backgrounds. Already many current students are increasingly concerned about the size of the debt that they will leave university with, and this is expected to increase significantly.

The Comprehensive Spending Review has cut public funding for teaching in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. This undermines the purpose and idea of the university in the UK. The spending cut will hit those institutions who receive most of their funding from the Government through the Higher Education Funding Council the hardest such as the teaching-led new universities. The elite universities are less reliant on Government funding.

Germany

In current university political debate in Germany there are four topics that play a central role: the development of the study demand in connection with the university pact 2020, the new requirements resulting from the internationalization of higher education by the Bologna Process, the discussion about demographic changes, the need for continuing education and Lifelong Learning because of a substantial lack of students from non-traditional backgrounds.

Universities have the status of a public-law corporation with the right of self-administration and they are public institutions under the authority of the Länder (regional authorities). The division between both symbolizes the ideal of autonomy and freedom of academic (independence from direct state influence) in terms of freedom of teaching and research i.e. choosing content matter and at the same time responsibility of the State for its institutions (e.g. by authorizing degree courses and degrees.). As stated elsewhere, the HE system is currently undergoing a period of a radical change from detailed state control to wider autonomy (e.g. financial autonomy). The need of the State to share the responsibility for financing HE with the establishments themselves underlines this shift. However, up to now, with a few exceptions, the Länder governments still decide on the allocation of the resources, remain the sole provider of the 'Chairs' and professorships and the main provider of funds. Members of the institutions engaged in research are also entitled, within the scope of their professional responsibilities, to carry out research projects sponsored by so called *Drittmittel*. As opposed to many other countries, private universities play a comparatively subordinate role. More than 90 percent of students attend public institutions that are subject to state supervision and control and are essentially open to anyone who has a high-school leaver's certificate (or a comparable certificate) that authorizes them to enter university. But an enterprising new sector of private institutions in higher education has developed over the last two decades.

Germany has 394 institutions of HE: of which 104 are universities, 6 colleges of education, 14 colleges of theology, 51 colleges of art, 189 universities of applied sciences and 30 colleges of public administration. According to figures from the Federal Statistical Office, there were over 1.996 million students in the 2008/2009 Winter Semester, approximately 48% of whom were women. Approximately two thirds of all students are registered at universities; just under 29 % attend a university of applied sciences. The first-year university student number rose from 2006 to 2009 around 23% to 422.700 and is clearly over the past highest level in 2003. The largest part is allotted to the colleges of further education/technical universities, whose first-year university student numbers increased since 2006 by approximately 48,200, while at universities about 29,600 first-year university student inside and - beginners were added. The rise is predominantly demographically conditioned. By increasing participation a higher portion of the population acquired a study authorization; from 2000 to 2008 the study rate rose around 8 percent.

Due to these developments the first-year university student rate in 2008 reached the politically aimed mark of 40%. In 2009 the rate was 43% and clearly over the target mark. As regards beginner rate Germany follows an international trend, although on a lower level. Also the computation method, that includes foreign students coming to study in Germany as a first-year university student, has an influence on the first-year university student rate. These beginners will not belong to the German job market after their studies. Related to first-year university students, who went through the German educational system, the first-year university student rate was only about 34% in 2008 (BMBF 2010).

Scotland

Scotland is a relatively small country, with a population estimated at 5,194,000. Currently, there are 20 publicly funded universities in Scotland and higher education is also provided through 43 colleges. At present there are no private HEIs in Scotland, though a small number of private overseas institutions – mostly US-based – have a marketing presence. This work package concentrates on the universities, which dominate provision.

Higher education in Scotland has moved from an elite system to a mass system over the last two and a half decades. Much of the subsequent growth took place in the period between 1990-91 and 1994-95, and was associated with the rapid expansion of higher education programmes within further education colleges (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education 1997, Annexe G). This is a distinctive feature of the Scottish system.

Scotland's system is highly stratified, socially as well as educationally. Student data show that disadvantaged students are heavily concentrated in the college sector. In the university sector, state school pupils form 86.7% of young full time first degree entrants, against 88.5% for the UK as a whole; and students from 'working class' family origins form 28.2% of young entrants in Scotland, against 32.3% for the UK as a whole. This overall pattern, though, conceals considerable institutional differentiation: state school pupils accounted for 98.7% of the young intake at the University of Western Scotland, but only 80.7% at St Andrews; and 'working class' students were 41.9% of the intake at the UHI, and 18.6% at Edinburgh[1].

In recent years, the main policy issue facing Scottish higher education has been the future model for funding the sector. The Scottish Government published in December 2010 a Green Paper on future funding options; while primarily concerned with funding, it also called for a greater contribution from higher education 'in support of Scotland's future success', as well as more efficiency in the use of resources and the maintenance of the sector's international competiveness. It concludes with recommendations not solely on financial issues, but also on a wide range of issues, ranging from advice and guidance to future arrangements for quality assurance and expanding the role of further education colleges in higher education. It also floats the possibility of encouraging more private providers to enter the Scottish system (Scottish Government 2010b).

[1]Figures in this paragraph come from HESA 2010b). As in most other European countries, the student body is increasingly dominated by women.

The broad nature of the Green Paper points to a number of continuing policy concerns, which are by no means solely Scottish in nature. These include growing demands for external scrutiny of quality, improved management and governance, greater transparency for those who are considering applications to university, increasing emphasis on employability and economic performance, and anxieties over Scotland's relative position in the global research hierarchy. There is also a continuing concern for equity and fairness in participation.

Sweden

Higher education in Sweden has changed from elite to mass education. The Swedish HE system went through many changes and reforms in the last sixty years. The policy was directed towards the opening of HE to new groups of students, so called non-traditional students. From 2001, the policy has been directed towards opening HE to more young students and gradually closing possibilities for mature students. There was an expansion of HE institutions; more occupational programmes than general education for degree study, and still, but not so many the freestanding courses, to which students can apply without being forced to take a degree. The Swedish student population has changed due to policy and reforms in HE (Bron & Lönnheden 2004). The opening of HE to more students resulted in feminization of HE; more than 60 percent of applicants are women. In the academic year 2007/08 57 percent of all entrants (87,000) were women. This pattern has remained since 1977/78, when post-secondary programmes moved into the HE sector as they had a predominance of women (Rapport 2009: 23). Although changes have also increased the number of female academic staff, the dynamic is not the same as with students. Generally there are fewer women and most are in lower positions with few in the natural sciences, medicine and technology.

Swedish HE includes mostly public institutions. There are 14 public universities and 21 public university colleges. In addition there are three university colleges which are private with the right to grant PhD namely Chalmers University of Technology, Stockholm School of Economics and Jönköping University.

There are also nine university colleges that are so-called 'private higher education providers' that have permission to award higher education degrees and some providers of education who have the authority to issue certificates on higher education level such as for psychotherapeutic training.

Poland

Under communism, universities were elitist, but after the political changes in the 1990s, new non-state owned universities emerged. The changes to the economic and political systems in Poland also included changes in the principles and structure of the entire higher education system.

The major trends, according to Dąbrowa-Szefler and Jabłecka-Prysłopska (2006) included an extended autonomy of HEIs in practical terms, with a high rate of growth in student numbers. At the same time, a much higher degree of commercialization was evident, alongside more partial but increasing commercialization of both the tertiary education process and the operation of HEIs. Overall, there were significant changes in the structure of tertiary education (ownership structure, types of HEIs, types of programmes and fields of study, diversification of education models). The challenge for Polish universities was the increasingly obvious contradiction between quantitative expansion and the need to maintain quality standards during the period of rapid expansion.

Before the transition in 1989, there were about 112 higher education institutions. Now there are more than 400, with the larger ones being non-state run. Non-state institutions have to be run like an enterprise as they receive no funding from the state and so their students have to pay full-cost fees. There are also more Catholic universities now, but they do receive money from the state. They also have more benefits and privileges than other non-state HE institutions. There are on-going national discussions in Poland at this time about HE being overgrown whilst at the same time, of necessity, becoming more commercialized. In a recent reform, the Minister of HE stated the aim to change the institutions and divide them into elite (research-based) and teaching universities. Under this system, non-state higher education institutions could not become elite universities. This differentiation will have an impact on which kind of HEI non-traditional students will be able to access, there are likely to be patterns of inequality emerge, with non-traditional students having limited Access to elite universities. It will be necessary not only to reflect on whether non-traditional students do gain access to higher education, but how they are distributed across a differentiated system based on social, cultural and economic factors.

Within the current legal framework the issues related to the higher education system are regulated under the Act of 27 July 2005 on Higher Education and the Act of 14 March 2003 on the Academic Degrees and Academic Title, as well as the Art Degrees and Title. The proposed legislative changes result from public consultations over nearly two years. The government have been inspired by the necessity to adjust the higher education system to the unprecedented growth of requirements faced by the Polish higher education, as well as the need to harmonize the domestic system with the solutions implemented within the European Higher Education Area. Projects such as this one will raise awareness not only of differences between Poland and other European countries but also the degree of convergence across Europe.

As a result of the nearly fivefold increase in the number of students within the last twenty years, is now imperative that the priority is to increase the quality of studies and efficiency of the higher education system. The suggested solutions, modifying the legal environment of operation of the university-level institutions in Poland in an evolutionary way, are to ensure that the Polish higher education and its academic teachers will qualify for a better position in the world. Polish universities aim to become a suitable environment for scholars and scientists from abroad to conduct research, as well be an attractive and affordable place for overseas students. This diversification needs to be balanced to ensure that the participation of indigenous non-traditional students is not restricted by focusing on new student cohorts from not only outside the country, but outside Europe.

In the academic year 2008-2009, there were 456 higher education institutions including 131 state universities. It is worth noting the gender distribution as females dominated over males (57 percent and 43 percent). More needs to be known about whether the gender imbalance is influencing perceptions as to who are the non-traditional students in Polish universities.

Spain

Under the “Napoleonic” system of HE adopted by Spain in the nineteenth century, universities were completely regulated by laws and norms specified by the State. This strictly regulated higher system was very much an elitist system. This situation began to change during the 1970s, when the system started to shift – as elsewhere in Europe - from an elite to a mass higher education system. After the

restoration of democracy following Franco's dictatorship between 1939 and 1975, the promulgation of the new constitution in 1978 stated that university transformation was one of the main objectives of both academics and political parties in Spain.

Since then, there has been an important process of political and administrative decentralisation. At present Spain has fifty public universities (taking up 91% of all student registrations) and 27 non-state universities (9% of registrations). Of these private universities, one third of them are owned by the Catholic Church.

Over the last three decades the number of students at Spanish universities has increased three-fold. Currently, in terms of gender and age, some 30% of women and 22% of men between 24 and 34 years have graduated from universities. In spite of the progress made in widening university access, data on the socio-economic origin of university students show a marked orientation towards families with medium to high incomes, indicating that there is still much room for improvement in the area of equity in terms of access to higher education. In considering strategieis for increasign equity and encouraring the access of more non-traditional students, it is important address the high rate of non-completion in the Spanish compulsory stage of the secondary level education system, one of the highest of the OECD. Until this is improved, thew progress on widening aprticipatiuon in higher education is likely to be restrcited, in spite of what the unviersities them selves can do to open up access. Early years and secondary schooling have an important fucntion of normalising the route to higher education, raising expectations for all school pupils that higher education is the route to employment. Around 30% (in Andalusia, around 40%) of Spanish students leave the compulsory secondary education without official certification. The proportion of young people taking a university course whose parents had no schooling was 9%, whereas this proportion was 65% (seven times greater) for young people whose parents had completed a university degree (the last three paragraphs have being adapted from: Ministry of Education and Science –Spain: 2008). Strategies need to be put in palce to break this cycle of deprivation. In 2004-2005 around 1.5 million students were enrolled in university education, which was 45% of the population of the cohorts between 18 and 25 years of age (in 1985 were enrolled in university education 22% of these same cohorts). Women students in Spanish HE are currently around 55% of undergraudate students and 60% of graduate students. Much more needs to be done.

Ireland

Ireland with a population of 4.5 million people has a state funded binary higher education system comprised of the university sector (seven universities and a number of teaching and art colleges) and the Institute of Technology sector (fourteen Institutes of Technology). Although there is a growing number of degree level courses being offered by private colleges the overall number of such students remains small.

The university sector is well established. Dublin University (better known as Trinity College Dublin) was founded in 1592; Maynooth University (now called the National University of Ireland Maynooth) was formed in 1795; University College Cork was established as Queens College in 1845; University College Galway was set up in 1845 and University College Dublin, now Ireland's largest university, was founded in 1854 by John Henry Newman as the Catholic University of Ireland.

Most Institutes of Technology (apart from the Dublin Institute of Technology and three new colleges founded in the 1990s) were created in the 1970s and run under the *Vocational Education Acts* from 1970 until 1992 as special subcommittees of the Vocational Education Committees – a body which provides second level and further education courses. It was placed on an independent basis thereafter under the *Regional Technical Colleges Acts* in 1993. In the late 1990s, these institutions were upgraded to Institute of Technology (IoT) status. They have been given delegated authority to confer their own awards up to Doctoral level (although a relatively small number of postgraduates 5,500 are enrolled in the IT sector compared to universities with 30,000). Colleges in Ireland were by 2010 catering for 188,000 undergraduate and graduate students which is an increase from 170,000 in 2004/2005. Just under two thirds of these students were enrolled in universities. In 2010, 77,000 applied for places in higher education, of which 15,000 were 'mature' applicants. In autumn 2010, 46,500 enrolled as first year students, an increase from 40,000 in two years. The Minister for Social Protection in reply to a Parliamentary Question in November 2010 stated that:

> *'The number of participants on the 'back to education scheme' (which supports low-income families to gain access to HE) in the 2009-10 academic year was 20,808, which represented a 79 percent increase on the previous year'.*

One of the most significant trends within HE in most of the project countries is that the gender balance has radically changed. This point is made strongly in many of the reports including that for Ireland, that states that one of the most significant trends within higher education is that the gender balance has 'radically changed'. In recent years more women than men have enrolled in Higher Education courses. In the past two years, statistics from the Irish Higher Education Authority shows that the gender gap has narrowed and the female/males ration is now 48:52 per cent of all students in higher education. The Irish report also makes the point that whilst there has been feminisation of higher education institutions, the gender balance remains discipline specific. In short, the curriculum remains differentiated along gender lines. There has been a steady increase in the number of students from skilled and semi-skilled occupational backgrounds (O'Connell, Clancy & McCoy, 2006). However, there has been a decline in participation of entrants from non-manual backgrounds. Despite these changes, mature students, according to the OECD, do not yet account for the targeted 15 percent of intake and this institutional barrier along with other financial barriers remain across the developmental path of the Irish economy and society. New entrants to university aged 23 and over account for 14.75 per cent of new entrants in 2009/10. The Government continues the unequal treatment of part-time adult students who in general must pay their own fees.

Having reviewed the significant developments in each of the partner countries, this section will conclude with a brief comparison between the higher education systems. First, we can note that in the country reports that there has been a feminisation of higher education. With the exception of Germany and Ireland, the majority of undergraduate students are now female. Of course patterns do vary according to subjects being studied, built broadly speaking women have been non-traditional students in higher education, but the gap has closed and gender may no longer be a critical determinant of widening participation. Certainly, in most of the country reports there is now little concern for putting in place strategies for increasing the numbers of women in higher education, as recent strategies used by higher education institutions within most, though not all,

partner countries have been successful in bringing about greater equality in terms of access and participation. This is not so say that there is yet equity in terms of patterns of completion, so there should not be complacency on gender issues.

Second, widening access in almost all countries with the exception again of Germany has been a significant success. But despite this there are still some groups which are under-represented, primarily in terms of class and ethnicity. Reading across the country reports we note that there are two different types of institutions and/or differences within institutions: professional and employment-based programmes and the more academic and research oriented programmes. We shall say a little more about finance toward the end of this report, but it is worth noting at this point that the financial commitment required from students and their families does make a difference. So, where there are no fees to be paid in public sector institutions such as in Sweden and Germany participation is enhanced, and in Germany unlike most of the other countries in the project; fees for part-time mature students are paid, as well as for part-time students in Poland. However, private institutions charge fees for traditional students. The costs of higher education of course go beyond paying for fees, and will continue to be a factor in determining who may be able to participate, and those for whom financial costs of higher education prove to be a barrier that institutions need to consider strategies in order to reduce the inequalities that emerge as a consequence of the costs of studying for the individual students.

3. **What are the factors which promote or constrain the access, retention and non-completion of non-traditional students according to policy makers and staff at the institutional level in the project partners**?

Rather than systematically reporting what is recorded in each partner country's report, this section will attempt to distil what are common and what are different policies and practices across the partners in the project. Some of the differences will be, of course, due to particular contextual factors in any particular country. The one theme that brought the project partners together was the awareness of the differentiation between students who participate in higher education in each of the countries and the range of individuals and communities who are significantly absent or under-represented. Regardless of age, cultural practices, social composition of the nations' populations, each participating country could demonstrate a strong awareness of the unequal access of some individuals, groups or communities to higher education. The basis for the differentiation is most often due to gender, social class and other more cultural differences, including religious beliefs and practices. The country reports include not only the statistical data that clearly demonstrate unequal access and completion, but through the qualitative interviews with institutional staff and students and the stories they tell. All countries are aware of the need of equal opportunities, but the actual practices do vary according to a range of factors that influence access to higher education. As well as cultural variations, social and political perspectives, the basic economic costs of going into higher education do inevitably create unequal access. In recent years, most European countries have recognised the economic as well as the non-economic benefits of higher education, and have implemented policies that not only facilitate access to higher education, but contribute to improvements in successful completion.

Ethnicity was an important matter of concern for some of the academics interviewed across a number of the European partners, in both reform and elite universities: there was especial concern among black academics working in institutions where the numbers of black and minority ethnic students were relatively small. There were criticisms from particular academic staff about failures to respond sufficiently to the needs of black and minority ethnic students (BMEs). One academic talked of unwillingness in the institution to develop more inclusive practices in relation to both ethnic minority staff and students. Research, we were told, was conducted to examine retention rates for BMEs within the Faculty of Education. There was evidence of high dropout rates for these students and of incidents of black students feeling ostracised by particular groups, in cultures that were not, it was said, 'very diverse'. Overseas students, we were also told, complained, in a series of focus groups, of feeling isolated at times.

Academics in another reform university, with a very large intake of black and ethnic minority students, talked of accommodating diversity as best as they could 'without jeopardising standards too much'. However, there were anxieties:

> *that is difficult yesterday in my office I had one of the…students who is a grandmother whose daughter has mental health issues and had twins a set of twins who the grandmother who studies here has had custody of those twins who are now two and she's a full time student as well and returner to study she completed an MA years ago…we decided yesterday to extend*

> *her time lines a little bit further because she came in with the situation on interview we understood the situation we thought yes we can work with you, you've got the academic ability you might not have the time all the time to do that however she's kept up her placements her responsibilities and requirements [but] her coursework's slipping behind so for her we'll provide time and extra support.*

In another report, one member of staff working in the field of widening participation initiatives was aware that ethnic minority groups were under-represented at the University:

> … *working with under-represented groups and at that time was looking at work-based training, and why there was low participation of – in particular- black ethnic minority groups in work-based learning. This was a two year project and it was through that project that I created lots of networks and links into the community*.

He explained that his role was to focus on those from lower socio-economic backgrounds but with a particular focus on 'Afro-Caribbean males and females form Bangladesh and Pakistan, women returners as well as those with disabilities'. The aim is to raise aspirations.

Tone of the post-1992 universities in the UK has a senior management team who are committed to widening participation and are well aware of the needs of different types of non-traditional students. However, the University felt that there was pressure from the Government 'to not take so many students with non-traditional, low qualifications, but at the same time the University has a civic mission to reach out to all communities'. This University, because of its geographical location in London has a high percentage of minority ethnic students. It has built a reputation for being innovative in widening access and developing new ways to encourage admission of non-traditional students into higher education. They have focused particularly on young people from black and minority ethnic communities.

In Germany, unlike in some of the other institutional reports in Ireland and the UK, students from other cultures or students with an immigrant background are difficult to identify because there are often only external features for classification (head scarf, dress, name, accent and so on). For written work there are of course very large differences in language proficiency, but as with the German students there are more socially conditioned disparities. The linguistic competence does not really constitute a problem if students are coming from educated families of origin or have been successfully socialized in German schools. In Goettingen, for example, the proportion of students with immigrant backgrounds is very small.

In the education sciences in Hagen, as reported by the lecturers there, the student population is by about 90% female. The majority of these women wanted – after family and child – once again to discover something new or go on to study in a professional area. A second group consists of women who seek a different profession or a higher professional position.

Students with a physical disability are addressed in detail by only two lecturers. An account is given in Hagen of a small group of detainees who can study for obvious reasons only at a distance university. They can receive learning materials and other information for study only in conventional ways, because they do not have Internet access. It might be noted that in discussing non-traditional

students, across the European partners, there has been very little attention to those students who come in with physical or learning disabilities. In the UK, legislation is in place to ensure that universities along with all other major public and private training organizations follow the requirements of the disabilities legislation. There is no clear evidence form the reports that student non-completion is due to the failure of an institution to meet the demands of disabilities legislation.

Some of the institutional policies go beyond governmental and legal requirements, and are based on the recognition that factors that influence the decision to enter higher education, not least the impact of prior educational experiences. In a number of the countries, initiatives have been introduced in schools that encourage children and their families to consider higher education as an expectation, not a privilege. In some countries, for several centuries higher education was considered as the privilege for the aristocracy and the ruling elites. By the turn of the twentieth century, many countries had recognised the value not only of compulsory schooling for the masses, but the need to open up higher education for their progression.

In German universities research is emphasized more than teaching. In recent years there has been better communication with students on new courses as a result of the Bologna process. Students come from both non-academic and academic families. Lecturers generally perceive students on an individual basis. They also employ egalitarian teaching methods. Lecturers also expect students to be autonomous and self –disciplined with their studies.

Meanwhile, in England, and in common with many other European countries, social class was the major determinant of an individual’s chances of accessing higher education. Such strategies needed to demonstrate that higher education was not only for the nations’ ruling elites, but for the newly emerging professional middle-classes. Later on in the twentieth century, educational policies recognised that higher education should be open to all who could benefit from participation in higher education. However, social and cultural values persisted as barriers to raising awareness that higher education should be for all. The strategies used were both ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors. Higher education had to be presented as relevant, if not essential, to people’s lives. This meant that higher education institutions needed to consider the curricula being offered to ensure that it met the needs of their students. This was often difficult because there was an expectation that education would prepare people for employment, whereas for others there was a broader, more classical remit, now often expressed in terms of transferable skills that could be helpful not just for employment but for life itself. As can be seen in some of the country reports this meant bringing about changes in the university curricula, which went beyond the simple distinction between knowledge-based and skills-based subjects. In England, for example, the perceptions of academic staff of non-traditional students – and of widening access, retention and drop out – made them aware of their need to address the needs of an increasingly diverse group of people. There were obvious differences between those in the elite and newer universities but also between different disciplinary departments with the same institution. But differences too at the ‘lower end’ where staff can all struggle to meet diverse needs. In the narratives of these academics, as well as managers, the student experience has to be understood by reference to material resources but also specific sub-cultures, with their own biographical histories and trajectories. It may also be important to add that - in some of these sub-cultures, like nursing – there were difficult questions about academic identity *per se*, which will be discussed in more detail in the fourth section of this report.

The general question posed was whether it was essential to have different kinds of higher education institutions to meet these needs. Arguments against this were that this would inevitably be selective and divisive and that universities need to be comprehensive. Traditionally it had been considered appropriate to distinguish between academic and vocational institutions. One difficulty with this is that from a fairly young age those intending to go to university would have to make decisions that were going to influence their life beyond higher education. A second difficulty is that the basis of the difference was also going to create and sustain the dubious status differences between the traditional 'classical' universities and the more modern 'polytechnics'. To begin with it was assumed that these two broad types of higher education institution would be distinguished by the curriculum offered. Yet, as the work of Bernstein (1971) on the 'classification and framing of educational knowledge' argued, this would enhance the differentiation between types of higher education institution on the basis of status of the subjects being taught, with academic knowledge being privileged over practical knowledge.

In the UK there was the creation of the polytechnic in the 1960s which had a different ethos as well as curriculum from the traditional 'classical' universities of Oxford, Cambridge and London. The new polytechnics were funded through, and managed by, local education authorities. However, in 1992, the government re-organised higher education, and the polytechnics and advanced colleges of technology became the 'new' universities, freeing them up to make choices as to what to teach. No longer were they there to serve the interests of local communities, but were to open their doors to both nation al and international students. The shift in sources of funding through the Higher Education Funding Council, meant that their funding included an expectation that the new universities would increase their commitment to research.

This is an important factor in considering widening participation, because many of the staff of the former polytechnics were able to give more time and commitment to teaching and supervision of students. What is observed in the country reports is how that critical responsibility for close supervision and nurturing of students is taken away from the academic role, and passed over to new specialist student support roles in the universities. The amount of time allocated to the academic role for supervision of students is rarely sufficient, and is often focused on students nearing completion of their studies, rather than new students, when they probably need it most. What does emerge from the research on access and retention is how important the direct and personal supervision between teaching staff and students proves to be in enhancing successful completion and preventing early 'drop-out'. Even decisions about access, it would appear from interviews in the institutions, are now often centralised in universities and no longer made at departmental or faculty level. This is confirmed in the companion report on the student experience of higher education (Work Package 6).

In the Polish institutional report, the rapid growth of student numbers is at least in part seen to have contributed to non-completion, where the ethos is more like an enterprise, experiencing both massification and commercialisation. Universities have a wider remit now. Previously, academic staff were responsible for teaching and research. Now, administrative roles seem to be a large part of their role, having to manage programmes and their quality assurance. Moreover, there is a new role – that of 'knowledge transfer' – which is not only doing research, but following though the implementation of the findings of research to develop new products, or new processes, and sell

them to industry to market. The growth in the significance of student support has been an important factor across European universities. The range of support services necessary for enabling access, progression and completion has been changing significantly. In terms of access, there have been notable projects and initiatives put in place to encourage a smooth transition between schools and the further education sector through to higher education. This inevitably benefits all students, but has particular relevance for non-traditional students, who may have left school some years' earlier and need to find access routes into higher education at a later time in their life, rather than moving straight from school. Some examples of this were evident in the institutional reports across the European partners. For example, in the Irish report, there is a reference to a study by Eivers et al. (2002, p. 3) that states

> 'Of the various changes suggested by students, the most frequently suggested, in the case of teaching staff concerned greater approachability as well as improving lecturing skills and techniques, More than a quarter of students suggested that there was a need for either more tutorials or setting up tutorials in areas where they were not presently available'.

The necessity for improving the quality of teaching in higher education institutions can be seen in a wide range of project reports from institutions across Europe.

At the same time, the lecturing staff in one Irish higher education institution countered this statement by referring to the students' lack of preparedness on entry, inability to work autonomously and take responsibility for their own studies, and the appropriateness of the course they had chosen to study. In other words, there needed to be an improvement in the balance and accuracy in details about higher education. This is particularly important for non-traditional students. Traditional students would almost certainly know more about higher education through family, friends and significant others in their social networks. There are very few part-time students in Ireland. Apart from the access and support staff the disciplinary and institutional demands outlined means that retention and access are largely understood as a system demands rather than a response to clear and valid needs of students.

The experience of students is hardly visible in such accounts. Students are 'consulted' particularly through their representatives who sit on most university and college bodies (Faculties, Academic Council, etc.). Eivers et al. listed some of the areas of concern in the process of transition into higher education including, according to Eivers et al. (2002, p. 4):

- Independent study and learning
- Lack of motivation
- Poor attendance at classes
- Lack of background knowledge in chosen subject
- Excessive demands placed on them by their need to do part-time work alongside full-time study

Whilst 'working their way through college' is a common experience in the United States, in European countries, this would be considered as 'part-time study'. As in the United States, there is now a blurring between the boundaries between work and study in higher education. Many students on vocational or professional programmes find themselves in work placements, which they may or may not be paid for. In the UK, a recent development has been the introduction of a new kind of degree

which is aimed specifically at those who are non-traditional entrants into higher education – the foundation degree, a two-year full-time or four-year part-time vocational programme that can lead to a degree being awarded in a shorter space of time. However, students can then opt for a further two years of part-time study to 'top-up' for an honours degree. One advantage of this is that students can complete with a Foundation Degree, and would not be considered to have failed or 'dropped out' if they did not complete the three-year honours degree. Work experience or placements are usually an essential ingredient of a vocational programme and is as much subject to assessment as classroom-based learning. In the Canterbury UK report, there is reference to the primary education programme which has high retention rates in spite of students having to cope with the demands of employment combined with 'all the complexities of having to study to degree level theoretical study in three years' whilst also meeting the requirements of the professional body.

In the student experience reports, there are many stories told by non-traditional students whose work-life balance is very precarious due to engaging in activities that are often competing for students' time and attention. To balance this however, some institutions talk about the use of work placements as a helpful factor in supporting retention, as this often provides the necessary experience they need, alongside qualifications, for gaining relevant employment at the end of their university studies. However, it comes through quite strongly that much of the 'work experience' is simply to get money, not to support studies, and indeed – as one might expect – the need to work detracts from the student experience. As a general point, where work experience or placements were integral to a study programme students were less likely to drop out and led to a more mature attitude to their studies. In the reverses situation where students are in full-time employment and study part-time with the support of their employer, these students are more likely to stay on the course because not only would leaving mean they do not get a qualification, but they will probably lose their job as well.

An interesting development related to financial support, is that some universities across Europe have picked up on the provision in the United States of modules on financial management in the early part of students' programmes, in order to help them avoid building up too much debt, and having to take on work that conflicts with their studies. One initiative in England offered means-tested financial support which enabled students to study in term-time without the need to take on part-time employment.

It is argued in the project that the issues of access, retention and non-completion have to be understood in relation to the transition from an elite to a mass system. It is also important to go beyond the rhetoric of government education ministers who talk about undertaking degree studies as an 'investment, and part of the policies on the 'knowledge economy'. It should be stated strongly, however, that whilst focusing on issues of retention and non-completion, that the phrase 'dropout' might be unduly negative. There were examples cited in the student experience reports, where 'dropout' was not seen as a 'problem', but rather the 'solution to a problem'. The knowledge, skills and experience gained from studying at a university even it does not lead to a qualification can always add value to people's lives. To be sure, there is evidence in the institutional report where more could have been done to assist students towards completion of their studies. As it states in the Irish report, 'it is clear that the institutional and disciplinary habitus is crucial to setting the environment of learning. It not only influences the experience of students but it also impacts on those who teach'.

In the one of the UK reports, a university lecturer considered that many non-traditional students can be made to

'feel like fish out of water' and they're very conscious of their differences and sometimes that can be in negative ways but that sometimes that difference can give them a place to speak from – certainly in Sociology'.

Furthermore, an English lecturer felt that the University had changed to make it less welcoming for non-traditional students:

'*The cultural spaces here are off--putting for those students who fall into the widening participation category. I think the way in which we are giving campus a make-over is making this feel more and more a comfortable place for those confident, middle class, privileged, cosmopolitan students. I think it's all of that which makes it like an incredibly daunting place for local people from working class areas.*

The new university is situated in a city which also has a traditional university but in contrast to that university it sees itself as the 'local' university. To achieve this it has worked with local schools and communities to encourage people to study for a degree and as part of this initiative it offers a lot of part-time learning opportunities'.

Lecturers in new and reform universities often saw a lack of time to give to all non-traditional students to be a major problem. One academic said:

I don't think that we've actually got the time to do that adequately for them. I think it means a lot of students we see failing at the first hurdle when it comes to that first year we seem to have quite large numbers who fail... now in part that can be a healthy thing that it's better they leave then rather than three years in, in terms of how much time they've dedicated to this but I do feel there's a percentage of those who with additional support earlier on could actually get those skills in place and could do much better

Academics here constantly mentioned a need to give students time, yet this had to be achieved within 'a tight structure of academic and examination boards'. They made decisions, as one academic put it, 'that don't fit one person's life so again it happened this morning someone wanted to she's got extenuating circumstances. We accommodate all we can…and if not we'll just try and soften the blow of the news of fails failures marks being capped or those grades that mightn't be achieved'.

In UK universities, awareness varies, although there is strong evidence of academics in an institution whose mission was devoted to diversity, being committed to understanding students and their experiences. Academics talked of their commitment to non-traditional students:

We do our best actually many Friday nights um through term time I've been here until 6.30 or 7pm talking to people on things and I see them during the week some people do come in after work or another day and see me we're always available if anyone emails or makes a time all of the tutors are available

Emphasis was being given to offering extra academic support classes. The intention here was to take new cohorts, step by step, through essay writing, for instance. Not everyone attended these, and

'not everyone thought they needed to once the assignments go in they don't pass those people got quite a shock and therefore it's led to a bad taste I suppose of their learning experience'.

There is in principle a broad level of awareness of differentiation. Applicants routinely provide information in their application forms on such factors as age, ethnicity, and whether they are a first-generation entrant; those who are leaving local authority care – a particularly vulnerable and under-represented group – are also asked to declare their status. Disability, as well as being covered during the applications stage, can also be declared during the period of study, and this can entitle the student and university to additional resources as a result.

This general awareness at institutional and system levels was often reflected among the lecturers in the sample. However, awareness of the specific groups in our study was extremely uneven. First generation students were not a particularly visible group. When it came to identification of working class students, staff could find themselves on uncertain ground. Whilst ethnic minority students were more visible, the lecturers believed that most were recruited from non-EU countries. Many lecturers commented that the ethnic minority community in Scotland was relatively small, particularly in comparison with England, and believed that it was not really 'on the radar', as one lecturer from one of the partner institutions put it.

Our interviewees mostly saw disability as unproblematic, in that even invisible disabilities were usually declared by the student. But some interviewees saw this as simplistic. One lecturer in a Scottish university pointed out that some students with disabilities have come through very traditional access to education, while

> *'their parents often are used to advocating for them through the school system, so you'll get students who come and say I know under the disability discrimination act that I have to have certain accommodations and support and I'm entitled to this that and the other, and they're great 'cos you don't need to worry about those'*.

For her, the major challenges facing students with disability are those who also come from other non-traditional backgrounds. The largest category in the experience of this lecturer were disabled single parent students with disabilities and having child care responsibilities.

In another Scottish university, one lecturer described the majority of students as 'all from relatively similar backgrounds'. But throughout Europe there are fundamental differences between the universities and between the departments/subjects. In the social sciences, for example, there is a certain consciousness and a sensitivity towards non-traditional students in particular. In the humanities in German universities, for example awareness is generally less pronounced. It is striking that lecturers who come from lower educated families, could express a greater understanding of the specific conditions and problems of non-traditional students. It was observed that whereas institutional representatives who themselves come from academic or educated families tend to focus on good and/or self-directed students.

Generally, lecturers were positive about adjustments in relation to most types of non-traditional students. Some non-traditional groups, though, are more visible than others. Minority ethnic

students in the Scottish HEIs were usually thought of as international students; first generation entrants were not normally distinguished at all.

In some disciplines, age diversity can be a positive resource. Some lecturers also thought that mature students were likely to be more resilient than younger entrants. Disability was universally mentioned. Lecturers in all three Scottish universities saw it as reasonable and indeed necessary to make adjustments for students with disabilities. Experiences of such students varied; virtually all lecturers mentioned dyslexia as a common problem, and most believed that it was increasing; but others had experience of teaching students with a range of extreme disabilities. Some lecturers, while generally favourable towards central support services, thought that they sometimes provided inadequate support. Two of the three universities in our sample make central provision for development of study skills. This was seen by several of the academics as particularly necessary for students who did not come from backgrounds where higher education was standard. As well as centralised support, a number of lecturers said that they gave individual support to students who were not accustomed to academic writing.

Finance was another problem that lecturers saw as common to several groups that they thought of as non-traditional. Again, there were central services in all three universities, where students could seek advice on financial matters. This included the possibility of small grants and loans to help students overcome particularly difficult periods, though in two of the universities these funds were more or less exhausted before the year was over.

Most lecturers said they were aware of central support services, and referred students to these if they had financial problems. Others went beyond this. One lecturer in University B engaged in what he called 'advocacy', challenging public bodies who tried to deny access to benefits to student applicants; apparently he enjoyed some success in this. Some saw placements and internships as helpful in building social capital.

Institutional representatives are generally better informed about the relationship between part-time and full time students. In Germany, in Hagen most are part time students. Goettingen now only now offers part-time study. In Kassel very few study part time. Differences also exist with regard to the catchment area.

Some lecturers also talked about students who arrive at university without a diploma. In Hagen, this refers to the so-called academy students, who can achieve the status of a 'normal' student through an oral examination after two semesters. In Kassel it relates to those students who have 'only' a restricted university entry qualification. In Goettingen a few lecturers mentioned students who have passed the so-called 'Immaturen test' and thus gained access to a specific department of the university. Some expressed appreciation for the unconventional pathways but in a patronizing way.

The representatives of the German institutions would appear to have little insight into the everyday life and living environment of students. On the contrary, the concept of 'normal students' seem to restrain many from these thoughts. There are, however, social scientists who are trying to capture the problems of students. The question of access is constant in the aforementioned 'Immaturen tests' and it also affects representatives from other university departments directly. But the number

of students who go this route is very low. There is a structural-institutional pressure on lecturers to gain insight into the progression of this. Other alternative study routes do not really exist.

Most lecturers are aware that the relatively high loss and drop-out from German universities is receiving a growing attention, but in concrete ways, they do not address this problem yet. In this respect, questions remain for causes and issues. Knowledge about access, retention and non-completion amongst higher education staff is doubtlessly diffuse.

Elsewhere in Europe, such as Poland and Sweden, it seems that lecturers are meeting both traditional and non-traditional students in all disciplines. In Sweden it would appear that lecturers are not especially aware of access, retention and non-completion if there are no problems with recruitment with professional programmes but with general research programmes there is an acute awareness of what measures to take to recruit and keep students on the courses. Students who are dropping in after they took a break are welcome. There is support at the institutional level. Smaller institutions – KI – are better equipped with strategies on how to help students at the institutional level. The largest universities such as the University of Stockholm are not doing well in this aspect according to lecturers and students. There is no differentiation of treatment by lecturers when it comes to traditional and non-traditional students. Only in the Royal Institute of Technology staff were not aware of non-traditional students and treat all of the students as if they are traditional.

Students groups consists of all categories of students, thus there is no differentiation for e.g. mature and young. In staff evaluation younger students are perceived as those who are the worse prepared to do academic work. Also having few less mature students in a student group is perceived as not being good for the learning process in some of the disciplines of study.

The following changes within the students' body has occurred and reported from Poland: (1) growth of all student numbers generally in relation to part time students and non-traditional students especially among full time students; (2) a growing number of young people among part-time students who for economic reasons decide not to take full time courses. They are working during the week days and studying at the weekends. They value an education, but they want to be first in the labour market to get a vocational professional careers (computer sciences students) and compete with those educated but without work experiences; to keep and secure the employment they have by fulfilling employers demand for a diploma (pedagogy students often start from practice and then decide to get a degree and continue a career in the field).

In the mass HE system in Poland groups of students are quite big (30 and more persons in seminar groups, between 150 and 300 people per lecturer). These numbers make individual ways of working with students difficult, but with research seminars the work is more personalized. However there are examples of individual, innovative work with students in individual cases, but they are not strictly connected with institutional/ discipline culture, they are rooted in professional identity of the individual lecturers. Lecturers are claiming that there are differences between different types of students (traditional, non- traditional, part time, full time, hard soft/ sciences).

In general, rapid growth of student numbers has led to a differentiation of the student body in territorial, social class, family education aspects, etc. Compared with some other European countries, Polish society is rather homogeneous when it comes to ethnicity and religion, so the

issues of multiculturalism in HE are not present. However, there are differences in social and cultural capital of new, massive student body, which is a phenomenon, lecturers and researchers are trying to understand. This type of students (referred to earlier in this report as '*fish out of water'*) requires more careful facilitation not only in terms of knowledge, but institutional, organizational culture, and how to function and 'survive' at the university. For the lecturers and their teaching practices it involves a lot of challenges. A typical academic teacher in Poland does not - it is reported - have a general awareness of access, retention and non-completion. There is nothing in academic practice that may require this kind of knowledge. Individual lecturers may only be aware of retention levels for the course he/ she is teaching, but students' action and decision are perceived as their own choices as to be at an higher education institution means to be a self- directed learner. There were no personalized views on this issue in the empirical data collected.

The RANLHE project literature review (Work Package 2), the term 'non-traditional student' has been subjected to considerable discussion. It would appear, for example, in Spain '*disabled students* remain very few'. In the past ten years, encouraged by European legislation promoting the equalities of those with disabilities, this non-traditional group has been increasing its presence in university. However, it is still slight (1% of the total), mainly due to the lack of adaptation in the previous stages of the educational system and a certain attitude of resignation and not demanding much is frequent among disabled students, although this is also changing. The goodwill of the lecturers or the institution is a key for the adaptation to their needs. Access to studies and the continuance of the disabled students is also decisive and if disabled students drop out, they do so in their first years of study, as has been pointed out by our interviewees.

Immigrant students are not very frequently found either in Spanish universities, except in Third cycle studies or within the Erasmus programme. The immigrant population has only been participating in higher education recently, since the 1990s. This is perceived in a generalized way among the lecturers and managers interviewed. This is the case of the children of immigrant families who make up a second generation settled in our country. The first generation immigrant students are children of families with a good economic level middle – upper class, from the North of Africa, mainly Morocco Latin America and China.

The difficulties faced by this group in developing as university students is associated either with their personal characteristics, or with their level of linguistic skills for the non-Spanish speakers, it is suggested in the report from Spain, more than with where they are from. This is especially the case of those who are second generation. Other needs are associated with this group are scarce economic resources, and the need to combine work and study, which has been discussed earlier in this report. The number of students over 25 in Spanish universities are also few, although more frequent than for example, those with disabilities, situating themselves in specific undergraduate degrees such as humanities and social sciences). First generation university students are merged into the university student group, and are not clearly observable. Nor do they represent a homogeneous view in what they express. These students come from humble families or a working-class origin and their main interest is to finish their university studies. In the report from Spain, it would appear that the majority of Andalusian university students are typically characterized as having low economic

resources. It is argued that it is necessary to develop compensation strategies that allow non-traditional students access to university studies.

It is stated in the Spanish institutional report that students appear to be increasingly apathetic toward their studies, with a lower quantity of basic knowledge. This is why when they enter university they experience difficulties in their academic performance. This analysis not only refers to scientific skills, but also to questions of values, such as respecting the lecturers, class behaviour, and key social skills. There appears to be a poor level of traditional knowledge but on the other hand, skills connected with the use of technology or knowledge of languages are present.

When the lecturers and managers try to describe the socio-economic level of the students, they use terms such as 'normal'. Those interviewed consider that students are a very homogeneous group in what they express externally (clothes, cars, etc.). The lecturers and managers interviewed consider that the students who are studying subjects that require a high mark have been good students, supported by their families, and have a high cultural level.

To be a non-traditional student in Spain -does not imply bad academic results. Often, in spite of the difficulties that they have faced, they get better results than their companions who are traditional students.

> *'…sometimes they're people who come from Morocco, so their language is Arabic and if you want a second language , it's French…Yes , it's true that they make an effort and even stand out among their classmates, right?…'* (Male, lecturer)

In general, the perception of the lecturers and managers with respect to the non-traditional students is quite positive.

A small number of disciplines and a number of staff take an instrumental approach to teaching and learning. Many staff have a communicative rather than an instrumental approach to the study of their own discipline but this does not always get carried over into the understanding of learning or the practice of teaching. The teaching of large numbers of students contributes to the difficulty of getting to know more than a small number of students and militates against paying attention to the individual needs of any student.

4. ***What promotes or limits the construction of the learner identity of non-traditional students to become effective learners according to policy makers and staff at the institutions' level in each country?***

England

The following reasons for dropping out were cited by staff interviewed:

1) a sudden, critical event in a student's life

2) learning difficulties, disappointment with the chosen discipline, decreasing motivation are common reasons for dropping out at the early stages

3) non-completion is often explained in the context of not getting the required competences and abilities to write the final thesis which at B.A level is a condition to graduate.

Drop-out at any level may be caused also by institutional barriers and an unfriendly administration (non- academic staff). This trend (based on students' interviews) is stronger at the state HEIs, where the more traditional type of work culture is sustained. It is connected with economic aspects – both state and non-state institutions are depending on money that comes from students (directly – as a fee, indirectly – support from the state budget) but the level of security for the institution in case of low numbers of students is radically different at the state and non- state institutions.

4) Lecturers can offer individual tutoring and support if the institution provides an administrative, legal framework for returnees (flexibility of learning paths)

5) There is no separate system for supporting drop out groups, but each student is allowed to take advantage of existing system of support such as:

- advice from the dean of students' affairs
- flexibility of learning and re- trials of the exams
- formal re-engaging in the education
- psychological and vocational counselling
- scholarship systems for the students.

Staff in both elite and reform institutions could be committed to students, and supportive of them, but this ran up against other pressures, to do research and of work intensification more broadly. Pressure could be considerable in the face of extensive educational needs and of university league tables. There was solid evidence of an inclusive habitus, in certain universities and disciplinary sub-cultures, like education – with professors, for instance, giving freely of their time – as part of an ethic of social and educational commitment to diversity, but the demands on academics were considerable.

Yet, in certain elite institutions, the perspectives of what might be termed mainstream academics, diversity issues were considered to be peripheral within the main academic structures. One academic director of a part-time course, mostly of mature women, expressed frustration at the lack of acceptance and respect for part-time learners, for instance, among more 'elitist' colleagues in the full time programmes. Yet this academic also referred to an older tradition of accepting mature learners, reaching back to the ideals of university adult education. Yet this collided with another more pervasive discourse:

> *….it is an academically rigorous place….The culture… is a culture of expectation; the student is expected to work very hard indeed. There is the danger that part-time mature students might fail so they need to be taught by someone who knows what it's like to be a mature part-time student.*

Staff in the Sociology Department at an elite university were more aware of the needs of non-traditional students than other departments and were sympathetic towards them. Some of the lecturers themselves came from working class backgrounds. In talking about the adult students taking a part-time or '2+2' social studies degree course (programmes aimed at local adults) a sociology lecturer commented:

> *It's really good to see some of these people coming through from having an impoverished educational background, if not social backgrounds but certainly educationally have achieved nothing at school come in and get high 2:1s and 1st class degrees – people who have turned their lives around.*

Lack of academic preparation and insufficient resources to support particular learners were frequently mentioned as issues to be addressed. Academics in a reform institution, constantly emphasised that students, in some programmes, for instance, early years provision, were very non-traditional: 'they were usually early years or child care workers and 'so studying at a university is a real thrill and a real bonus for many of the students and I pick up on that and I really like that sense of they want to be here they want to learn'. There were specific attempts made by academics to 'demystify what academia is that's what I really enjoy doing is saying that here's what academic and research does'. However this was not always easy and students could struggle to understand the university culture and its rituals.

It was also the case, across our sample, that many students had to balance diverse roles and that material pressure was considerable. Some students were working full-time, while also studying, in theory at least, more than what might be called part-time. Institutions could adapt by arranging lectures and seminars on particular days, but problems of tiredness through having to work for pay and undertake academic studies at the same time, led to an inability to meet deadlines were perpetual causes of drop-out.

The elite institution has a low drop-out rate. Staff did not know many younger students who had dropped-out but several speculated that the reason for non-completion is not always due to one single factor but several inter-related ones. The Senior Tutor interviewed had more first-hand knowledge of why students leave. For him the critical point is the first term of the first year. Students come to see him saying that they have chosen the wrong degree subject as they feel that it

is too theoretical and abstract. Often they ask to be transferred to another degree programme but if they are full this is not possible. Finance is also a big issue and sometimes financial support on offer such as the Student Hardship Fund is not enough to enable them to stay. Second year students live off campus and the Senior Tutor explained that students leave because they do not get on with the other students they are sharing the house with or because of the poor standard of accommodation. One rising factor in non-completion which he and other lecturers had noticed was the increase of students with mental health problems. Some students with mental health problems opt to take temporary withdrawal although he feels that many stay as there is a good infrastructure of support. A history lecturer felt that the reason students leave history is due to personal and psychological reasons rather than an academic one. He explained that they do not try 'to hang on to anybody if they feel that they've made the wrong decision'. A sociology lecturer talked about students having more pressures on them in terms of deadlines and workloads and this 'exposes students who find that a struggle'. In relation to working class non-traditional adult students have problems with fitting in with cultural capital of the university.

Staff (senior managers and lecturers) felt that the wide range of support systems available at the elite institution play a key role in maintaining a low drop-out rate. As one Senior Tutor explained:

> *I think the level of support a student gets, or at least is available to them, can make a difference to retention… I think having an effective and an efficient and reasonably well organised student support system can make a difference And I would certainly say that there have been cases where I've been involved, not necessarily as the prime mover, but maybe just a first point of contact, where that support has made a difference between somebody staying or going.*

At the 'new university' staff would not admit that their university has a high drop-out rate although one Admissions Tutor did explain that it was because they like to give people a chance. The university has undertaken work locally to raise the aspirations of non-traditional students and have taken in students with lower qualifying grades but as a result they have been able to cope academically when they arrive. Other reasons given for non-completion by staff were inappropriate choice of course, poor student advice and support systems at the institution. During the period of this research the institution began to develop strategies to improve on these issues. Like the elite institution lecturers were aware that the first few weeks of a degree course were vital in terms of whether a student stays or leaves and that it is difficult to dissuade them from leaving as they made their mind up to go. One lecturer felt that it reflected the fact that some staff are not enthusiastic and remarked that 'motivated lecturers help motivate students'. Staff did not necessarily view drop-out as a failure. One lecturer noted that nearly all students consider dropping out at some point:

> *I wouldn't say that all of them but very few don't go through a crisis point where they want to give up and it's at that point where you tend to lose contact with them. You might send them an email because you notice they haven't handed in work, they may not turn up at a session and that's when they get to crisis point where you really must try to get them to talk to you.*

The post-1992 university was aware that widening access to higher education does not solve the problem of educational inequalities. Staff did not feel that non-traditional students are more likely

to drop-out than traditional students and that 'it was just an assumption that's made'. Financial issues were perceived to be a big problem which cause people to leave university. False expectations by students were also considered to be a key reason for drop-out:

> *it wasn't what the students thought it was going to be; they envisaged the course was going to be about one thing, and it turned out to be something else. That really needs to be addressed by Admissions to ensure that students get realistic information, and not be given the wrong idea as to what a particular course is offering. I think through the Compact Scheme we have been able to address that now, to some extent.*

Germany

In Germany, is reported that a successful student has a certain curiosity and thirst for knowledge; motivation; abstraction, reflection and transfer capability. Students are expected to be committed to acquiring the culture and methods of their discipline.

In general, the majority of teachers in the study reported having huge problems in dealing with 'theory' in their subject and in particular with non-traditional students. Most lecturers were pessimistic about this issue. Some teachers, however, express their frustration in an open way about the impossibility to organize an interest-oriented study in the new programmes. The credit oriented, time-saving and largely pragmatic new type of student has become unfortunately more common.

In considering 'dropout', it would appear that the knowledge of the lecturers of the reasons for discontinuation is low. Usually individual reasons are known if a student tells them, so that they can make some limited if unwarranted speculative assumptions.

Teaching staff mentioned the following reasons for dropping out from what students have told them:

a) *family aspects:* often single mothers who do not manage to coordinate family duties with study schemes
b) *professional aspects:* many students, but particularly non-traditional students must finance their studies through student jobs;
c) *temporal aspects:* the compatibility of different areas of life (education - family - work - leisure) requires a very strict time-management, which students often underestimate before and especially during the early period of study;
d) *social aspects:* these strict requirements of the organizational skills and self-management often lead to confusion with relatives, friends and acquaintances, or even to conflicts; in Hagen, there is still a specific status problem, if friends qualify the distance studies as folk-high school like courses;
e) *financial aspects:* student fees and additional fees for long-time students downgrade particularly for non-traditional students, who often come from low-appointed economical conditions, the material situation;
f) *academic, and institutional aspects:* in Goettingen and Kassel there is still no viable offer for a part-time course; in view of tight economic resources, universities are not able to provide a curriculum that goes significantly beyond the core hours weekdays from 10 am and 4 pm; and the widespread abolition of the junior lecturers is part of this misery; didactic impulses

are only very limited at German universities, technical colleges of higher education offer far more advanced learning environments and teaching methods to their students

g) *biographical aspects:* a diffusely defined problem relates to the setting, attitude and practice of non-traditional students: they have a much higher threshold to come for their papers in the office hours than traditional students; the self-understanding of the non-traditional students often appears contradictory. They have on the one hand a high demand on their own performance, on the other hand they get in difficulties with the multiple demands of the university world (the academic habit, the so-called 'academic freedom', their own deficit of limited cultural resources).

Sweden

Generally, it is reported, that lecturers prefer academic skills and abilities, only in some cases they talk about social skills; very seldom, they relate good students to practical tasks important for their job. In occupational programmes, there is more emphasis on working together and in Physiotherapy on ethical issues.

On the *Biomedicine programme*, KI, staff see good students as being dependent on the process of their learning or their results. Good students are these who understand, think, are active and reflective, taking imitative in own learning, and take care of themselves, are self responsible, interested, goal oriented and think critically. As far as results are concerned, good students are these who are successful and cope with exams. The ideal is to achieve good academic work. Thus, a good student is an academic student. At the Physiotherapy programme, KI, good students possessed a good prior knowledge; they are communicative, taking initiative, self-responsible, ambitious, curios, functioning in group and ethical. Staff want to support their learning environment by creating conditions, providing good premises, and taking a teacher role seriously. The ideal student is one who is able to combine well their academic studies as well as their professional work. Thus, there are two characteristics which combine both an academic and a professional approach to learning.

Lecturers in the Social Work department in the Swedish university perceive good students as being curious, serious and cooperative who bring with them different competencies, are motivated, interested, critical and open, ambitious, flexible and work hard. They also need to be good in writing and academically stringent, clear, searching for knowledge and reading, responsible, questioning lecturers, and finding new ways of thinking. One of the lecturers thinks that it is wrong to stress the formal occupation to which the programme leads. Research is also a possible way for students. In other words, he is against vocationalisation of the programme. Interestingly the lecturer is not involved in research himself, and has experience from the occupation. Thus, there is an academic attitude towards students even if education leads to profession. Chemistry lecturers at SU look at good students as those who can learn, are motivated, committed and interested; also those who have a good prior knowledge (mathematics), are questioning and challenging, are curious and mature (ask why questions), treat studies as an intellectual challenge, are laborious and giving time to study, are social and active in class, work independently, develop and show progress. For both programmes an ideal is a good academic student.

Civil engineers at KTH see good students as being self- independent, interested and wanting to learn, but also as super stars, good, who question themselves, ask questions to others, being independent learners and using their own initiative; using full time for study; learn in-depth and are motivated, are goal oriented, but also social to peers, and have a personality that contributes to group work and come in with good/expected prior knowledge. Those who are successful are well organised and disciplined. The only female lecturer stated that students under the age of 27 have a better potential to learn. Staff in Industrial economy and production at KTH sees good students as motivated, who work with tasks, are good planners and listen to instruction; can discuss in groups; they are goal oriented, work hard to get through examination, and take time for practical tasks and exercise. They should also cope well with their studies, take a risk, be questioning, work with peers, be clever with social skills, and become future leaders for industry. There is a slight difference between these two ideals – the latter is much more related to characteristics important for the labour market.

There would appear to be limited awareness among lecturers of students who drop-out. Students are welcomed if they come back again, and sometimes they need to do some of the tasks again to continue. There are no statistics about those who drop-out. They usually stay in the system, which is characterized by flexibility. If students drop-out it is often the result of being disinterested in the subject matter, lacking motivation, or temporarily experiencing a difficult personal situation (family, economy, getting a job).

Poland

A concept of a good student according to the lecturers in Polish universities means being:

a) reflective, critical, self aware

b) engaged in study (working hard)

c) understanding the nature of the discipline studied

The concept of 'successful learner' in HE was seen by interviewees as very subjective and depending mostly on the personal contexts of their expectations. They were more able to indicate the factors of non–completing and dropping out. These definitions can be usefully applied across the European countries, though there might be added another dimension – that through reflective practice a deeper understanding is gained.

The following reasons for dropping out were cited by staff:

2) a sudden, critical event in a student's life

2) learning difficulties, disappointment with the chosen discipline, decreasing motivation are common reasons for dropping out at the early stages

3) non-completion is often explained in the context of not getting the required competences and abilities to write the final thesis which at B.A level is a condition to graduate.

Drop-out at any level may be caused also by institutional barriers and an unfriendly administration (non- academic staff). This trend (based on students' interviews) is stronger at

the state HEIs, where the more traditional type of work culture is sustained. It is connected with economic aspects – both state and non-state institutions are depending on money that comes from students (directly – as a fee, indirectly – support from the state budget) but the level of security for the institution in case of low numbers of students is radically different at the state and non- state institutions.

4) Lecturers can offer individual tutoring and support if the institution provides an administrative, legal framework for returnees (flexibility of learning paths)

5) There is no separate system for supporting drop out groups, but each student is allowed to take advantage of existing system of support such as:

- advice from the dean of students' affairs
- flexibility of learning and re- trials of the exams
- formal re-engaging in the education
- psychological and vocational counselling
- scholarship systems for the students.

Spain

Academic success is due more to the personal, family or close-environment factors than those that are institutional. The institution has to take advantage of the initial motivations and conserve them and take advantage of the students' experience. Thus, students increase their predisposition towards studying the subject. It is also the case that learning is important and that it is connected with their professional future. The majority of the lecturers interviewed think that passing is connected with attendance. However, attending provides the student with knowledge beyond that which is merely curricular, especially with a view to future professional practice. The connection between passing and attendance is less to gain theoretical knowledge; nevertheless it is necessary to attend class to get particular, specific skills.

To be perceived as a good student is a subjective perception. It depends on what a lecturer in a particular subject thinks. However, there are certain general characteristics: to attend classes and participate in them, to carry out the set tasks, to study systematically and regularly, to behave in class, and to enjoy learning. It is also about who feels that her or his effort is rewarded in academic terms and who looks for the meaning of the contents that she or he learns. Involvement in the policy and management of the university institution, being in delegations or a student representative raises them to an ideal level.

> *"…he's a student who attends class, who takes part in them, who has his subjects up-to-date (…) who works, who participates when he's asked to…and little more (…) who works, who has the classes up-to-date and who isn't a bother…"* (Lecturer, male).
>
> *"…he's the one who's involved actively in classes, studies the subject with regularity, has the subject up-to-date. That's to say, the subject we give is a core one, annual, has ten and a half*

> *credits, with great material and then…he tries to stick out the mess of the final studies and…it's practically impossible then to pass the subject, isn't it? Systematically and methodically he carries out…a continuous process of the subject…"* (Lecturer, male).

Ireland

Most staff are very supportive of non-traditional students (NTS) and are for a number of professional reasons anxious to see students progress through courses. A small number of staff actively resist ease of access by students to them but only rarely did staff have attitudes to students that were explicitly dismissive or completely thoughtless.

England

The notion of being an academic – with its connotations of scholarship and research – raised awkward questions for those preoccupied with managing complex sets of professional demands, expectations and relationships far beyond more traditional understanding of *homo academicus*. Resource issues – ratios of staff to students, time to give to students, the pressures of increasingly audit cultures – were important as were the pressures, in both new and reform institutions, to increase research outputs.

There were many examples of specific support programmes, for particular groups: in a reform institution, for instance, a new induction week had been developed with academics providing more information about different aspects of the university. There was a new system of personal tutors that students would see before beginning particular modules. Different kinds of staff worked together on this. In another institution, there were a number of steps being taken to respond to such criticisms: there was a new society for black and overseas students; and a mentoring scheme. This was being piloted as we ended our study. The students were asked to write about why they wanted mentors and in what ways they thought a mentor might help. Something similar was done for the would–be mentors: they were asked as to what skills were required to make a good mentor and what had they done in the past that might help to do well in the role.

In one of our elite institutions, there were specific staff in a number of academic units having responsibilities for student support, including for non-traditional learners. Some worked, for instance, on a 'Value Added Programme' which was designed to give particular students additional support in their academic study. There was also a range of widening participation strategies in the University designed to engage with a number of secondary schools, with participation by particular academic departments (these included departments, including in the sciences, that were struggling to recruit sufficient numbers of traditional learners). There was also a student ambassador scheme whereby the ambassadors related to particular schools, helping to build bridges, as it was stated, between different cultural worlds:

> *….bearing in mind that often we're talking about schools that have had one, two or no students go onto university, to have undergraduates who are doing well here, who are from their own school who are one or two years ahead of them going back and talking to them about University life and there's no doubt that, that is crucial in terms of people really managing to see themselves as going onto HE.*

A number of initiatives to help support non-traditional students with their learning were identified by staff at all three case study institutions. Support was seen as being essential for helping students to keep going with their studies. The Sociology lecturers recognised the value of involving students in the department through their learning and collaboration. The Department has set up a Centre where students and staff engage in research together. She feels that such approaches mean that 'they're less likely to drift and it gives them a sense of belonging here'. They also valued the fact that students are able to bring their life experiences into the curriculum. An English lecturer also explained that she tries and relates literature to students' experiences:

> *For me the challenge is always to make people do deep learning and I'll try anything and I'll shift tactic within a seminar or week on week until I feel that people are achieving that. So every year it's a challenge all over again.*

Staff at the new university stressed that teaching and learning approaches had been changed to encourage non-traditional students to perform more effectively and thereby improve retention. Some staff employ group-work to try and motivate students and others felt that although learning is hard work retention could be improved by making learning fun. One lecturer said that he was trying to be more interactive and interesting in the way he teaches. Another lecturer (economic) feels that learning has to be relevant:

> '*There is no point in telling them all about the theory unless they can see how it all fits in, so for the first five minutes of every lesson,, is always taken up with a review of what has been in the news that is relevant to economics. I hand out an A4 sheet with same examples of recent clippings from newspapers. I start in the real world'.*

A centre for improving learning and teaching had just been set up at the post-1992 university. Staff were discussing how to increase retention rates by the use of blended learning and using knowledge about learning styles.

Germany

Some teachers point to ways to endorse non-traditional students in this or that respect. These support efforts, as already indicated, are led by a more personal and individual interest and an ethical attitude rather than framed by institutional initiatives.

The most important form of an introductory orientation in the subject are input and orientation sessions at the beginning of the course. The fact that these events are not mentioned by almost all of the lecturers in their interviews could be interpreted as a sign of their largely accomplished establishment and self-evidence or negativity – which is much more probable – as a sign of a lack of teachers' commitment for these events.

In terms of final exams or finishing events things are quite similar. The ceremonial aspect of such events is particularly emphasized in Hagen, where it might have greater relevance, because only a limited number of students have the opportunity to come into face-to-face contact on campus seminars. A certain contrast to this seems to represent the Kassel campus. A professor in social work argues that with ceremonial events 'alternative dressing' is no more accepted, as such events should be 'spectacular' especially for the parents. It seems to her, however, that the alternative scene in

Kassel has decreased significantly. It is interesting that she mentions almost casually that even now in her university also a new professor generation is represented who has a new 'habitus'.

A type of course that provides for students an identification and identity creating character is used by a historian in Hagen: a so-called history week, during which all teachers and many students are present.

As a further supporting factors for students different systems of tutorships are employed. However, the remarks of the lecturers on this are again very sparse.

Occasionally lecturers tell about their own innovations in teaching: a participatory habit includes common experiences and particularly a certain self-reflectivity at different levels: students should learn first to make themselves an object, then the course as a place of learning, etc.; an innovative method called 'service-learning' (a development from the U.S.), where students reflect back to the 'service' in the seminars. They conduct a small research project in an organization and feed the results back later to the organization (the support).

There is still one aspect that is addressed by the majority of lecturers in all three universities: the shared learning. The last-mentioned representatives of gender studies in Goettingen underlines just how important the introduction of courses are in this regard. Such an approach opens the opportunity for first-year students to find learning partners and to form study groups. Even if these students do not meet further during the semesters, useful contacts can be developed. A physicist in Goettingen emphasises the relevance of peers especially for the final phase of the study. And from an interview with a 'virtual tutor' in Hagen we can gain the importance of 'interpersonal exchange' particularly for students at a distance university.

An economist noted that Hagen offers in this respect more freedom, because a different pace of study is possible – one could, for example, allow 10 years time for the Bachelor. In principle, everything is even free: when, where and how one plans to study. For a professor of social sciences in Kassel it is almost a truism that the most pernicious is the isolation of students.

Finally, the testimony of a historian in Goettingen may be mentioned who approaches the possibilities for promoting students from disadvantaged backgrounds in a 'general' way. It is clear that this group can be considered in the context of self-responsibility, which is applied not only in Germany to various underprivileged groups, just to pretend that the decision-making and development opportunities between the powerful and less powerful, between the rulers and the ruled (Bourdieu) in everyday practice are more or less the same. The fact that such views usually do not amuse (non-traditional) students is not surprising.

Scotland

Two of the three universities in our sample make central provision for development of study skills. This was seen by several of the academics as particularly necessary for students who did not come from backgrounds where higher education was standard.

As well as centralised support, a number of lecturers said that they gave individual support to students who were not accustomed to academic writing. One lecturer offered to look at draft

essays, particularly in the early stages of study, though she accepted that this would not be formally acknowledged in her departmental workload plan. One lecturer, noting the risks of plagiarism among some non-traditional students, said that staff in her department 'focus an awful lot in years one and two on teaching people how to use appropriate sources and how to cite things'

Some saw placements and internships as helpful in building social capital. As one lecturer put it, placements are particularly helpful for students "who might not have a social worker or a teacher or a lawyer in their family who has modelled this for them and so to have it modelled through formal education is actually quite important".

Several of the lecturers noted that many students needed support during the transition into higher education. Managers and lecturers both saw the annual induction process as adequate for most students, but some lecturers thought that non-traditional learners needed more.
Both University A and University B had developed summer school programmes with local schools, designed both to help entrants improve their entry qualifications and to offer familiarisation with the campus. Understanding of language and units was one thing; familiarity with a wide range of practical information was another.

One university in our study had experimented with an intervention called 'Thinking about leaving university', offering a central contact where students could discuss concerns in confidence and consider a range of alternatives, including transfer to another institution. An internal evaluation suggested that this initiative had cost around £15,000 a year and led to savings of £200,000. Even if these figures are on the optimistic side, the experience could easily be repeated and tested elsewhere.

A number of interviewees at University B and University C identified support for study skills as particularly critical for non-traditional students. Both universities had support services for students concerned with study skills, while one lecturer described the Access Course at University C as helping students 'to think and work in quite different ways'.

Sweden

Lecturers' expectations and constructions of students' identities to a great extent dependent on the culture to which lecturers belong. This culture is shaped by the tradition of institutions (inner culture) and by new trends coming from outside, both nationally as well as globally (outer culture). In the data we could see two tendencies in lecturers' way of approaching their disciplines[2]. In traditional disciplines, there is a solid research orientation without any dramatic changes. These are established disciplines with a clear identity affiliation of lecturers: programmes at SU – Biology, KI – Biomedicine, KTH – Civil engineering. Among lecturers and predominately professors their main task is to do more research. In new disciplines, SU – Social work, KTH - Industrial economy and production, KI – Physiotherapy, we could see the clashes between occupational/professional and academic traditions. These are mostly junior lecturers. Some lecturers have experience of working outside the university, thus teaching makes their identity ambivalent. Most do not teach undergraduates, and only some of them have a PhD. Many are not involved in any research at all (lack of time), but their aspiration of belonging to the academy is high. On the one hand this is the

result of higher education policy to make different disciplines more research oriented (academic), on the other the same policy (expressed by state and the labour market), that education has to lead to profession and occupation.

Both approaches show the struggles that lecturers' experience. On the one hand, the traditional academic milieu does not prepare students for jobs outside university and there is frustration amongst students, and in some programmes (biology) students drop-out. Lecturers have difficulties in keeping students, but they try to do it by creating new courses and approaches (e.g. chemistry). On the other hand, the new programmes connected to professional disciplines struggle with their aspiration to make programmes more research oriented. For students, who are instrumentally driven, research orientation does not make any sense. Thus, from the students' perspective traditional approach (inner discipline habitus) has difficulties to attract them. They do not want to become researchers, and have constant worries to find an occupation (biology, biomedicine). Only civil engineers do not have this problem. A new approach, which is an occupational orientation, is perfect for students, but even here, lecturers have difficulties to make students think in a way that is more academic. Moreover, there is a problem how to connect theory and practice, and academic thinking with occupational logic.

Poland

There is no official, recognized system of support for non–traditional students at the institutional levels but there are individual attempts to make a difference. One of the examples can be an individual curriculum of study designed to meet individual needs.

Lecturers are supporting students' socialization into an academic career by:

- providing scientific clubs and societies for students
- providing students bulletins
- providing workshops, fieldtrips, seminars, open lectures
- engaging students in national and international research projects
- engaging students in actions for the benefit of local communities and knowledge popularization

England

As stated above one of the elite institutions saw their departmental and institutional support systems as being vital in maintaining a high retention rate. Support is offered centrally through the Senior Tutors' Office, Counselling Services, Residential Support Tutors, the Students' Union, Student Financial Support Office, Disability Services and the Personal Tutor system. Adult students can also access support from the Centre for Lifelong Learning. Each student is also allocated a lecturer as a personal tutor. The role of a personal tutor is to act as a first port of call and help with academic and personal issues. The Sociology staff also feel that support is important:

> *In Sociology we do really try quite hard to welcome students at the beginning and I think we go out of our way to have a really positive induction where they meet everybody and they meet their Personal Tutor. They have contacts with real people who they know care about them and we do that straight away so that when they do have a problem they've got someone to go and talk to. I think that is really important.*

However, one Sociology lecturer thinks that not all lecturers are supportive and that students receive varying amounts of support from tutors as some '*don't want to be bothered by students*'. He feels that a student is more likely to get through if they have a supportive tutor. His philosophy is to *'…try and raise a person's esteem and keep people going' by focusing on short term goals'*. He feels that '*just a little bit of support of that kind can make an enormous amount of difference as it takes the pressure off people as they know that someone's taking care of it…and there's someone in the system who believes in them*'. Departmental cultures differ and some staff felt that the culture in some departments is less supportive of non-traditional students.

At one of the post-1992 institutions there are specific committees which looks at Admission and Recruitment, Retention and Completion and action plans are drawn up for each faculty. The university also has a Compact Scheme which offers financial support while studying to those who need it.

Scotland

Overall, there appears to be a broad consensus of support for the access of non-traditional students in Scottish higher education. There is also considerable support for the idea of adjustment to the needs of non-traditional students. At system level, there is some dissatisfaction with data on access, and more dissatisfaction with data on retention. Nevertheless, there is general acknowledgement that both are important, and no one questioned the need for measurement and published data. The concerns were largely over data quality. Interviewees pointed out that non-traditional students were not always characterised by relative weakness. Mature students in particular were seen as possessing a potential resource in that they had rich life experience to draw upon.

In so far as non-traditional students are at risk of drop-out, interviewees identified a number of specific interventions that they saw as important in sustaining access and retention. These included pre-entry preparation, ongoing study support, financial support, tolerance of unfamiliarity with academic procedures and expectations, and a willingness sometimes to act in ways that went beyond the university's expectations (and sometimes its regulations) in order to support promising but disadvantaged students. One university had an institution-wide programme of interventions designed to trigger 'early warnings' of drop-out, allowing support to be put in place.

Sweden

Non-traditional students over the years are treated as a normal picture of the academy. Institutions are keen to find strategies on how to help completion of students as the economy of the institutions depends on registration and completion. However, there is a difference between academic and professional programmes in evaluation of students. Moreover, the overall view of students' opportunities to individually navigate their study plans is a hinder for institutions to follow up students. At the same time flexibility gives students the opportunity to find solutions for the best educational choices. Students from non-academic families are however disadvantaged in their navigation, and often become adapted to the system.

Spain

The lecturers and managers interviewed consider that the setting up of the Bologna Plan increases the danger of students leaving programmes. It requires a profile of a student who is 100% involved in her/his studies, clearly showing the need for specific skills that the students do not bring from their previous educational periods. This logically has more serious repercussions on the non-traditional student. It heightens the conflictive situations that non-traditional students face. One example is that of students who study and work and have to obligatorily attend on-site practice, without taking into account their lack of time.

The students consider that the subjects are much more difficult. They have put more pressure on the student, even causing delays at times, due to having to change from the old plan to the degree studies or dropping out in the face of the innumerable skills required. The Bologna Plan opens up a new debate about the attention that can be given to non-traditional students, to whom no other way out is offered except to be in distance universities.

> *"…the degree is going to demand an 80% participation and presence in class. And I'm not saying "good and then all these students…all the access of the over-25 with family responsibilities…? We're leaving these people completely out of it", and people say "OK, that's the reason for Distance learning Universities", but Distance learning Universities aren't the same and I feel really sorry for these people who are very interested, who have things to offer, what's more, when there are classes they provide their experience, "well, this, whatever", they're the ones who take part most and now we get rid of these people. I don't agree with that…"* (Senior manager, female).

Ireland

What was abundantly clear is that there are high levels of loyalty and committment among staff to their institutions. Broadly speaking staff were also very positive about non-traditional students and widening access regardless of their role in the HEI or the nature of the institution in which they worked.

However, it is clear from meetings with staff at all levels in all these institutions that there is a strong belief that significant changes have been made to address the problem of student retention and make the university a more inclusive place for an increasingly diverse student population. Retention has become a 'system' measure of success in Irish HE and as a consequence there is a marked institutional sensitivity to this issue. However, while institutions are rhetorically and organisationally orientated towards retaining students this is not always reflected in systems of evaluation, flexible progress routes or most significantly in pedagogy.

In the conversations with the staff for this research project, it is clear that the institutional habitus is crucial in setting the environment of learning. It not only influences the experience of students but it also impacts on those who teach. It is taken for granted that the rituals and entitlements of staff are an important part of that habitus and in one of the colleges studied the staff and students on scholarship (Scholars) continue to have the privilege of a commons. Such elements contribute to the habitus and this is the most significant factor as it acts in its rigidities as a bulwark against change.

However, in more informal and open institutions (open that is to the changing needs of increasingly diverse populations) the habitus includes the possibility of changing in response to new challenges).

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Work pressures and contract issues have a bearing on pedagogy and retention but this is not seen very clearly by teaching staff we interviewed. There is a strong tendency to foreground disciplinary criteria and career interests in describing work as a teacher. Belief in the self-evident value of a discipline is often combined with a deficit model of non-traditional students. Staff with a background in applied soft sciences with a broader political interest in equality were less likely to approch non-traditional students in this way.

5. What is the impact of the global economic recession on access, participation and completion ?

This report has referred in several places of the current economic crisis that is not only impacting on European countries, but it is a global phenomenon. From both a student and an institutional perspective economic considerations will influence decisions about access, retention, the balance between study and work, and – ultimately – drop-out. In the latter stages of the RANLHE project it became evident that Europe was facing a serious and possibly long-term economic recession that was creating monetary difficulties across the European partners in the project.

At this early stage, we can only speculate on the consequences of the recession on non-traditional students accessing higher education and staying on to complete their qualifications. In 2009 Poland was the only EU member state to register economic growth. The negative impact of the global crisis on the Polish macroeconomic situation was weaker than most other European countries, and nowhere as serious as that being experienced in Greece. We can predict that many countries will be cutting their budgets for education, including higher education. Being global, it is not sensible to expect that students from other parts of the world, particularly the Far East will be recruited to study in European universities in larger numbers in order to raise income for the universities. This strategy is shifting the responsibility for university funding back on the institutions, raising its income from fees, as well as research grants and the profits from knowledge transfer. That will almost inevitably lead to reduce grants to higher education, leading to reduction in staffing, reduction in learning resources, reduction in learning support staff. In the UK the impact is variable due to the different funding arrangements in England from Wales and Scotland. Scottish students studying in Scotland will continue to pay no fees, and in Wales, Welsh students will have their fees paid both in Wales and in other parts of the UK. In England the proposal is to change the sources of funding to reduce public funding. In England, higher Education Institutions have been able to set their own fees, up to an agreed ceiling which needs government approval. Previous governments have already put in place a system of student loans that can be used to pay fees and for living expenses.

Inevitably there was considerable unrest and protest among current and future students, and their parents who will inevitably need to continue to contribute to the support of their children whilst studying. The level of protest has been exacerbated by the fact that in the period leading up to the 2010 general election, the Liberal Democrats were promising to reduce student fees and introducing grants to facilitate participation in higher education. However, with no outright majority, the Conservative Party formed a coalition with the Liberal Democrats. Their policies on education and other public services were almost diametrically opposed. Being the junior partners in the coalition, the Liberal Democrats gave up many of their policies with which the Conservatives disagreed. For many university students this was their first opportunity to vote in a general election, and this has raised their level of political literacy, and encouraged activism, but the government still succeeded in passing its bill on the financing of higher education. Although it can only be speculation at this point, the higher fees and system of loans are most likely to differentially impact on those students who are non-traditional. They may not be persuaded by the arguments that this is a loan, not a debt, and the fact that is only repayable once the graduate is earning above a minimum threshold. The

government have stressed that students will need no money up front, and therefore this is more likely to enhance participation. The threat of starting off their adult life with serious debts is likely to dissuade some potential students from applying. Instead, they will get a job if they are able to find one. However, when jobs are in short supply this is an opportunity for young people to undertake further education and training. There are alternative routes such as through employer-based higher education, or through part-time study. There is also an impetus for distance learning using e-learning. Already the impact of technology has had a transformational impact on teaching and learning.

In other parts of Europe such as Poland efficiency saving s will be made, whilst reforming the financing of universities. A culture of competition will be encouraged, along with allowing more autonomy and less direct control by central government. This is what happened in the United Kingdom under Margaret Thatcher's government which resulted in a host of Youth and Employment Training Schemes that basically provided a source of 'cheap labour' for employers. Treating education as a business is not necessarily the best way to fund higher education. However, if the profits are distributed on the basis of equity then may be some higher education institutions will benefit. But there is more likely to be a series of institutional mergers and cost reduction exercises. One possibility is that the costs of 'drop out' may need to be reconsidered with more positive impact on participation. If young people cannot get employment, then may be accessing higher education is their only option. If they can find suitable employers, they may support students through higher education. In Spain, the economic crisis is reported in the Spanish report on institutional and cultural perspectives on access, retention and completion.to be doubled-edged, and as having a paradoxical influence on university studies: 'On the one hand, degrees are not considered as a necessary requirement to access employment or to progress to the labour market. In the current context of high unemployment, degrees do not guarantee access to the labour market nor to stay in it. …. On the other hand, the increase in unemployment and the decreasing possibilities for accessing a job by young people are raising the interest towards higher education as path to improve employability and a useful resource while the economic situation recovers'.

A study by Berggren (2006) argues that the hypothesis that an economic recession in society leads to class equalisation in the recruitment of new students to higher education is tested, using data from Sweden. The 1990s is a period considered suitable for these analyses, as the recession started in 1991, reached the highest unemployment level in 1993; finally, at the end of the decade the labour market recovered. Multivariate, binary logistic regressions of entry into higher education were performed with gender divided analyses. Register data from Sweden comprising the total population in the age range 18-21 years from six cohorts were analysed. When the labour market was the most difficult, more young students from lower classes entered higher education. When the labour market recovered, men from lower classes tended to abandon higher education. However, women from lower classes continued to increase their involvement. The results indicate that the Swedish Scholastic Assessment Test, works in favour of men from higher classes through repeated test taking. The hypothesis about the influence from the labour market was supported for the group of men, while results were less clear for women.

6. Conclusions

Overall, the study has produced a number of findings based on the perspectives of university staff. Some of these are of course specific to the institution, and even the discipline, but many of them have a wider significance. In particular, the study suggests a number of areas where university staff believe that current practices make an important contribution to access and retention for non-traditional students, or where current practices require improvement in order to support greater access and retention.

Among other issues, we found considerable support for the following:

- As with our student interviews, our study confirms that higher education has considerable significance for the lives of non-traditional students. Academics were often aware of this, and spoke of the commitment and determination of non traditional students in their institution. Particularly in some vocational areas, they saw non-traditional students as making a strong positive difference to the learning experience of all students. They also, of course, believed that more can and should be done to support access and retention.
- One factor that can promote retention is, of course, the presence of suitable support. This includes appropriate support prior to entry, including the availability of information and guidance, the provision of preparatory programmes, and the organisation of opportunities to visit the university before arriving. It is also clear that effective induction programmes can play a valuable role in helping to integrate new entrants. These pre-entry and early-entry programmes should take account of the importance of peer group support among students, as well as the vital contribution of staff and service workers to student integration.
- Some institutions offer targeted practical support. This can include financial support, counselling, child care, and specialist study support, including help for those who are less accustomed to using information technologies, libraries and other learning resources. In some countries, targeted financial support – for example, to purchase additional learning support for disabled students – has helped students stay the course. Staff were generally aware of these services and encouraged students to use them.
- Academic staff in some institutions and countries believed that current reforms had reduced their ability to engage with students in meaningful ways. Our student interviews showed that individual lecturers' attitudes and behaviour could make a significant difference to their studies; and while the actions of individual lecturers can make a considerable difference to how students see themselves and their studies at any stage of their course, first year students particularly benefit from such personal contact. Informally, being able to approach and speak to lecturers really matters to many students. More formally, student progression can be supported by prompt and effective feedback on performance. Some academics, though, believed that such support was increasingly difficult to provide in a mass system that is seeking cost effective ways of teaching.
- Staff believed that flexible study systems were also important. Administrative systems sometimes hinder successful progression. Some successful students in our study had been able to move from one programme to another, rather than withdrawing altogether. In other cases, people had dropped out because of inflexible study arrangements, such as a barrier to moving between full-time and part-time study. Some staff believed that where it exists already, this flexibility may be at risk in some countries from aspects of the Bologna process, or at any rate from the way in which modularity and the Bachelor/Master's system are being implemented.

- Some universities have developed wide-ranging strategies to promote retention and progression. This can include such measures as early identification of at-risk individuals, improved co-ordination between academics and administrators, and reviewing the content and delivery of the curriculum. They have also provided staff development to enable lecturers and others to adjust to the demands of new students. To be effective, such strategies require a balance of clear leadership from above and full involvement from all staff who support student learning.

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