



## Researching Non-Traditional Students in Spanish Universities through Written Narratives

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### Session Information

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### Contribution

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Literature on Higher Education in Spain has paid little attention to the importance of developing understanding of the experience of university students. Beyond basic socio-demographic profiles and specific aspects such as the needs of disabled students, or the factors related to drop-out, there is a huge lack of information about cultural and cognitive characteristics of students (Ariño et al., 2008).

According to Eurostudent (2008), 38 per cent of Spanish students are 25-years or older, in comparison with the EU average of 34 percent. This has been an ever-increasing trend during the last 10 years, as the age structure in graduate and postgraduate programs has significantly changed, and the number of people under 30 years has doubled while the percentage of students below 25 has dropped 10 points since 1999-00 (MEC, 2011). Thus, the number of 'traditional' students accessing Higher Education is decreasing and this trend will continue in coming years (Angoitia and Rahona, 2007).

Other relevant features of non-traditional students in Spain are the following (Eurostudent, 2008; MEC 2011):

- 1.9 of students feel impaired in their studies by disability.
- 4.1 per cent of students have dependent children.
- 4.1 of graduate students come from overseas. Most of them (45.6 per cent) come from Latin America and the

Caribes, but also from EU27 (30.7 per cent) and North Africa (7.4 per cent).

- The percentage of students from a disadvantaged social background, according to parents' educational level, is 28.37 (father) and 33.85 (mother), and 3.5 per cent of students have parents with low incomes.

According to this data, a significant percentage of Spanish university students are seen to be 'non-traditional'. Given that existing statistics are scarce and limited - for example, only accounting for students of other nationalities but not those from other ethnic groups -, they show a high percentage of university participation by non-traditional students, and more importantly, an upward trend in recent years.

A recent OECD report (Santiago et al., 2009) suggested that little emphasis is placed on student progression through tertiary studies, with little special support or follow-up measures to assist those students who experience more difficulties. There is little evidence that students' progress is closely followed by teachers and that students for whom a disadvantaged background has been identified receive any particular attention.

As a consequence, we lack detailed, in-depth information about how non-traditional students in Spain progress through university, what needs they present, what they demand from university institutions, or even, how they experience their daily lives on campus.

Our research aims to deepen our knowledge about the academic and social experiences of non-traditional students in the University of Seville. We are especially interested in describing the difficulties they experience in lectures and tutorials. Likewise, we want to analyze the needs they account for and their opinion about the services that the university provides, as well as their future plans and motivations.

## Method

As our interest is to attain a deeper knowledge of the students' experiences and needs by developing detailed explanations, a narrative approach was adopted. Narrative approach is known to be effective in providing insights into complex and contextualized student experiences (Benson et al., 2010).

Written narratives were collected from 23 participants who were studying different degrees and represented different groups of non-traditional students including 25 years-old or more, disabled, low socio-economic background, family commitments, first generation in university and other nationalities/ethnic groups.

Several topics to write about were suggested to the participants: family environment and background; school paths; access and adaptation to university; teaching and teachers; institutional environment and life outside lectures; personal and educational identity; future motivations; and suggestions to improve the situation of non-traditional students at the university. Respondents were encouraged to write as great detail as possible about their experiences, opinions and needs. From the analysis of the narratives, 8 students were later invited to participate in an in-depth interview to better explore their situation and opinions regarding their daily experiences at university.

This paper will only explore the accounts on some of these issues, leaving aside others (school paths, personal and educational identity, future motivations, suggestions for University services).

## Expected Outcomes

The data analysis is now in progress, especially regarding the interviews. However, some results from the analysis of the written narratives can be summarized as follows:

- Attending lectures is considered a key issue to learning. Taking notes, asking for concepts that are hard to understand, participating and giving their opinions help them to optimize their personal study. In contrast, tutorials are not considered as important as lectures and only a few students use this resource, and when they do, tutorials tend to be regarded as a "problem-solving" device and not as a mechanism for guiding their own learning.

- The general trend in teachers is giving theoretical, non-participative lectures, almost exclusively based on taking notes. In this context, non-traditional students have to adapt, and if they cannot attend lectures, they have to ask other students for the notes in order to pass the exams.

- Non-traditional students do not expect special treatment, so when their non-traditional status remains unnoticed, individuals describe feeling that their teachers connect 'well' with them as they receive a 'normal' treatment. However, when students do reveal their non-traditional status or this is directly observable, some teachers showed sympathy and provided more flexible models to help students meet the requirements of the course.

## References

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