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Editorial

EDITORIAL

The topic of this thematic issue of *Studia paedagogica* is Non-Traditional Students in Tertiary Education[1].

The number of students who do not adhere to the 'standard' student profile in tertiary education has been steadily increasing in many countries. These students are often referred to as 'non-traditional' students. For purposes of international comparison, Schuetze and Slowey (2002) identify three distinguishing criteria: educational biography, mode of study, and entry routes.

However, there are other criteria that may not be connected exclusively with the educational system, but with the life and career of the individual. Within this context, an interrupted or discontinued educational biography can be a key issue. Some people may have acquired knowledge and skills from important 'out of class' experiences prior to deciding to return to the tertiary educational system on a part-time or full-time basis (for example from parenthood, employment, volunteer work, or travel). The notion of 'postponed studies' offers a conceptual approach to interpreting this type of discontinuation of the educational biography (Souto-Otero & Whitworth, 2017).

The term 'non-traditional students' can have other meanings. It can refer to groups of students who come to universities from disadvantaged socio-economic conditions (lower socioeconomic status, ethnic minority) or to those who experience long-term health issues or who were threatened by study failure for some reason (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Read, Archer, & Leathwood, 2003; Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003). Women in traditionally male fields and vice versa (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003) are often mentioned in connection with non-traditional studies, as well.

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[1] Tertiary education is based on the OECD definition of tertiary-type A programmes (ISCED 5A) and tertiary-type B programmes (ISCED 5B).

Non-traditional students can also be determined by age – those, for instance, who are older than 25 years of age when they enter tertiary education (see for example Jinkens, 2009). Their age is, of course, also connected with other socioeconomic factors, such as financial independence, employment, care for dependent family members, and a variety of other social roles (Daiva, 2017). Other denotations of non-traditional students are *mature students* and *life-long learners* (Schuetze, 2014).

As Schuetze (2014) further states, non-traditional students no longer represent a marginal group; on the contrary, we can speak of an 'adultification' of tertiary education[2]. Within this meaning, non-traditional students are perceived as having experienced changes in life and educational biographies that tend to loosen the traditional form, characterized by the linearity of transfers between the phases of education, work and family, and retirement. For these reasons, tertiary education institutions are challenged to become more responsive to the needs of increasingly diverse groups of learners.

The uniqueness of this group of students in the tertiary education system is clear, and their potential to affect this system has important implications for research, policy, and practice. Their position can be viewed from the perspective of their individual biographies as well as from the institutional and social level of tertiary education. This thematic issue is focused on these and related topics.

This issue contains a total of nine contributions from authors from various European countries: Germany, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the Czech Republic. This indicates that the topic of non-traditional students in tertiary education is topical across Europe. The authors have approached the topic both quantitatively (making use of the statistical analysis of large datasets) and qualitatively.

The article by Nicole Tieben, *Ready to Study? Academic Readiness of Traditional and Non-Traditional Students in Germany* opens the set of contributions. In Germany, as the author states, the term 'non-traditional student' primarily means a student who has entered higher education without a higher education entrance certificate. In response to the comparably low higher education graduation rates, admission was opened for students without this certificate if certain conditions were met. About one-fifth of such students are in the system. The author asks several questions: Do students from varied pathways also differ in terms of their sociodemographic composition, field of study,

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2   The term 'adultification' was first used by Abrahamsson (1987).

and type of institution? Do these students differ in their academic readiness? Do they differ with respect to their academic readiness when sociodemographic characteristics, field of study, and type of institution are taken into account? The answers are based on analyses of data from the German National Educational Panel Study (NEPS). The results themselves are interesting for readers, and the description of the different pathways into higher education in Germany is also very informative.

The next article, by Tobias Brändle and Jessica Ordemann, is again situated in Germany and is called *Same Same but Different? Non-Traditional Students and Alumni in Germany*. Non-traditional students are defined here more narrowly as those who do not hold a traditional higher education entry certificate but entered university through their occupational qualification. This group makes up about 3% of the total number of university students. The authors focus on comparing the motivation to study, the study performance, and the labour market success (status and income) of these students with traditional students. Their analysis is based, among other things, on NEPS data, like the contribution by Nicole Tieben. The authors conclude that even if there are differences between the non-traditional and traditional students during studies and after graduation, these differences are relatively small. Greater differences are found in motivations to study. Their warning that non-traditional students have unique competencies as well as requirements that need to be discovered and met by institutions of higher education is undoubtedly interesting. In this respect, the non-traditional students act as agents of change, that 'awaken institutions for higher education from a deep slumber'.

The observation about non-traditional students posing a challenge for higher education institutions and universities is followed and developed in the article by Albert Sánchez-Gelabert. Entitled *Non-Traditional Students, University Trajectories, and Higher Education Institutions: A Comparative Analysis of Face-to-Face and Online Universities,* it compares two different types of Spanish (Catalan) universities and their non-traditional students. The aim of this article is to explore how student university trajectories differ according to age, gender, and type of university at three Catalan universities. For this purpose, the author carried out a sequence analysis to identify university trajectories and then compared them according to the modality of study (face-to-face/online) and the student profile (traditional/non-traditional). The author defines non-traditional students as those over 25 years of age at the time of entering university. The results show differences in university progression trajectories among non-traditional students according to the type of university. As Sánchez-Gelabert shows, there is a higher incidence of dropout at face-to-face universities among non-traditional students. By contrast, in online universities, dropout is not a phenomenon exclusive to non-traditional students. There are similar dropout rates among all students,

regardless of their profile. It seems, therefore, that non-traditional students do better at online universities. Both online and face-to-face universities are faced with the challenges of increasing the heterogeneity of students and their social and living conditions.

The next article also focuses on dropout rates and on a comparison of how this phenomenon manifests itself in non-traditional versus traditional students in Portugal. In this case, the students are defined and marked as 'mature working students' and 'young working students'. The authors Pedro Carreira and Ana Sofia Lopes entitled their contribution *Mature vs Young Working Students: Similarities, Differences, and Drivers of Graduation and Dropout.* Using an extensive longitudinal database of personal, course, and employment variables of 1,561 working students from a Portuguese higher education institution, the authors perform a duration analysis to identify and compare the factors that drive the dropout and graduation risks for mature and young working students in higher education. The conclusions include that both mature and young working students have abnormally high dropout rates, which is explained not only by their higher time constraints, as they dedicate a significant amount of time to their jobs, thus reducing the time available for school activities, but also by the lack of specific educational policies directed towards them, as current policies are generally designed for traditional students. However, the causes of dropout in the two groups of students are different.

The next set of articles is based on data that the authors collected themselves, using various techniques: questionnaires, interviews, biographical interviews, and an assessment tool/scale. The article by Karla Brücknerová et al., *Educational Trajectories of Non-Traditional Students: Stories Behind Numbers*, uses both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Their figures are based on a questionnaire survey among non-traditional university students in the Czech Republic. They show that the distribution of three types of education trajectories (deferrers, returners, and recurrent learners) are nearly evenly distributed, with a slight prevalence of deferrers. In the qualitative section, the authors identify what is behind these numbers using qualitative interviews (narrative data). They conclude that this typology needs to be modified with respect to student attitudes towards higher education studies, their academic enculturation, and academic skills.

Leanete Thomas Dotta, Carlinda Leite, and Amélia Lopes entitled their article *Entering Higher Education After 30: What Can Be Learned from Biographical Narratives of Non-Traditional Students*. The article is based on two biographical narratives. The authors state that the biographical-narrative approach has increasingly been used in the field of social and human sciences, and this trend has been followed in studies involving non-traditional students. They describe, analyse, and interpret the interesting life stories of André and

Julia, two university students over 30 years of age. The authors try to understand their reasons for joining higher education, the challenges that are faced, and the strategies they use to complete their academic paths in higher education in Portugal. The authors present the narratives and conclude that the reasons that lead non-traditional students to higher education are multiple, multifaceted, and different for each individual.

The research by Josef Malach, Dana Vicherková, and Tomáš Barot takes place at a Czech university preparing students for pedagogical professions. In their article, *Locus of Control Analysed with Regards to Non-Traditional Tertiary Students of Education*, the authors aim to find the relative frequencies of representation of non-traditional students in the categories of students with a predominant internal locus of control (ILC as Major) and students with a predominant external locus of control (ELC as Major) in comparison with traditional students. They also verify whether this division among non-traditional students (i.e. part-time students) is influenced by gender, type of study, year of study, phase of the study, or age.

The next contribution to the issue is entitled *Struggles in Becoming Employable: Non-Traditional Student Narratives of the Transition from Higher Education to Working Life in Sweden,* and is written by Agnieszka Bron and Camilla Thunborg. This article is based on an analysis of biographical interviews with five female students who were 25 years of age or older, with a non-Swedish background, studying full time. In the students' stories, four transition pathways from higher education to working life were identified: linear, parallel, further education, and changing career. These non-traditional students struggled with becoming employable and seemed to be anxious about not being good enough at Swedish; being an outsider as a student; being overqualified; and facing discrimination in the labour market. These employability struggles arise mainly because of the assumption that all graduates are young, Swedish, without children or disabilities, and competing within an equal labour market. Thus, as the authors conclude, the notion of employability still gives little attention to non-traditional students and has negative consequences for them.

The final article, *Identity Struggles of Adult Returners* by Katarína Rozvadská, is in the Emerging Researchers section. The research is based on the same data source as the article by Karla Brucknerová et al., i.e. on research of non-traditional students of pedagogical disciplines in the Czech Republic. In this article, the data from eight students with dropout experience, chosen from an initial corpus of thirty non-traditional students, are analysed. The results indicate that adult learners have to deal with three central identities: student identity, work identity, and familial identity. The author shows that the outcome of such interactions can be either the integration or the disintegration of identities. One possible consequence of identity disintegration is the drop out from higher education.

Summing up, if we were to define what makes non-traditional students specific to the individual authors, it would be their age, their previous study career, their life experiences, work career, educational trajectories, self-control, and transition from study to employment. These are often characteristics formulated in the background/opposition of 'traditional' students.

What unites all the various approaches to the topic of non-traditional students collected in this thematic issue? All of them consider the topic to be important and worthy of attention in the current tertiary education situation in which students entering university are no longer a more or less homogenous group of people, but a heterogeneous body of different individuals. Part of this group are the non-traditional students; although still a minority, they are not a marginal one at all. Moreover, as the authors emphasize, the non-traditional students are a challenge to the current organization of higher education institutions, which should reflect the new conditions resulting from the diversity of the student body.

We believe the readers will register such challenges as well.

We wish you an inspiring read.

Milada Rabušicová
On behalf of the editors