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Educational trajectories of non-traditional students : stories behind numbers

EDUCATIONAL TRAJECTORIES OF NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS: STORIES BEHIND THE NUMBERS

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Abstract

This article aims to identify, measure, and deeply understand the educational trajectories of non-traditional students (students over the age of 26 who are enrolled following a break in their formal educational trajectory) studying for education degrees in the Czech Republic. To fulfill the aims, we adapted previously identified types of educational trajectories that are traveled by non-traditional students to the circumstances of the Czech higher education system. We measured the distribution of three types (deferrers, returners, and recurrent learners) in a sample of 713 non-traditional students. We found that the types were nearly evenly distributed, with a slight prevalence of deferrers. For a deeper understanding of these types, we analyzed 30 narrative interviews. Qualitative data revealed each group's specific features, including their attitudes toward higher education studies, their academic enculturation, and their academic skills. We suggest that the returner type should be split into two categories for more specific quantitative analysis. On the basis of our research, we offer tailored recommendations for supporting particular groups of non-traditional students.

Keywords

non-traditional students, educational trajectories, mixed methods research, survey, narrative interview

Introduction

Today's students in higher education (HE) have followed increasingly heterogeneous educational trajectories through postsecondary education. This heterogeneity is characterized by delays in the transition from high school to university, part time attendance, enrollment in multiple institutions (Denice, 2019; Milesi, 2010), interrupted enrollment, or repeated returns to university studies. In some countries, the trajectories have become so complicated and varied that the traditional straightforward path from secondary education to degree completion is traveled by a minority of students (Milesi, 2010). In light of these developments, HE institutions have been criticized for still being implicitly structured to harmonize with traditional educational trajectories (Denice, 2019; Monaghan, 2020).

The focus on non-traditional educational trajectories is crucial because these trajectories reflect the growing heterogeneity of the students themselves (Denice, 2019; Goldrick-Rab, 2006). Non-traditional educational trajectories are typically traveled by students who are somehow disadvantaged and who, for varied reasons, do not want or are not able to follow traditional enrollment trajectories. For example, England, which is currently facing a decline in part-time HE availability, has reported a significant decrease in students from disadvantaged backgrounds accessing HE (Butcher, 2020). There is clearly a great need to identify different groups of educational trajectories and determine each group's particular needs.

To describe these groups underrepresented in tertiary education, the concept of non-traditional students (NTSs) has been introduced (Bron & Lönnheden, 2004). Such students include older students (Bennett et al., 2007; Bourgeois et al., 2009; Chao & Good, 2004; Forbus et al., 2011; Hart, 2003; Kim, 2002; Rosário et al., 2014; Scott & Lewis, 2012; Tilley, 2014), those coming from disadvantaged socioeconomic conditions (lower socioeconomic statuses or minority ethnic groups; Thomas, 2002), those with broader previous educational and work experiences (Billett, 2014), and those with discontinuity in their studies (Kasworm, 2018; Souto-Otero & Whitworth, 2017). In the Czech Republic, where the current study took place, non-traditional educational trajectories and higher ages have already been used as criteria to distinguish NTSs in HE (Novotný et al., 2019). In this paper, we use the term NTSs to describe students over 26 years of age who had a break of at least one year in their formal educational trajectory somewhere between high school and university. The age of 26 is crucial because in the Czech Republic individuals lose their official status as students and all related economic benefits at this point. So far, no findings have been presented of the non-traditional educational trajectories that Czech NTSs follow, why they follow these trajectories, and how these trajectories are distributed.

To answer these questions, we assigned NTSs into groups according to their educational trajectories and measured the representation of the groups in a sample of 713 students. Afterward, we used data from 30 biographical interviews to determine what circumstances had led to a particular educational trajectory. These findings enabled us to distinguish NTSs according to their educational trajectories and offer recommendations for supporting each of the described groups. A better understanding and focused institutional support of the particular needs of the heterogeneous and complex populations of NTSs can increase program retention and improve the overall study experiences for NTSs.

Educational trajectories

The concept of trajectories describes the long-term paths or lines of development that characterize an individual's life course (Elder et al., 2003). It is based in life course theory, which highlights life changes over extended periods of time rather than just short-term status changes (Mayer, 2009). This approach recognizes that lives are influenced by ever-changing historical and biographical contexts (Elder et al., 2003). It emphasizes the multiplicity of paths an individual can take throughout their life span (Elder et al., 2003). The concept of educational trajectories refers to "how individuals proceed through different educational stages, how they combine them with other life spheres, how they cope with transitions and how they take decisions regarding their educational career" (Cuconato, 2016, p. 20). Multiple trajectories (life, work, education) that individuals can follow during their lives are always "determined both by their own goals and motivations and by the demands and opportunities afforded by the context" (Klaczynski & Reese, 1991, p. 441; see also Baltes et al., 1980).

Educational trajectories of NTSs

While individuals are making decisions about tertiary education, they are also transitioning into other adult social roles (Denice, 2019). As individuals prolong educational trajectories, the overlap with transitions into parenthood, marital or cohabiting partnerships, and the labor market increases (Mouw, 2005; Lee et al., 2018; Shanahan, 2000). The roles they hold, such as worker, parent, and spouse, may be incompatible with persistence in HE as the students encounter competing demands for their time, attention, and financial resources (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Scott-Clayton, 2012). Even when the students manage to persist in HE, non-normative trajectories increase their

time to degree and lower the likelihood of degree completion (Adelman, 2006; Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Goldrick-Rab, 2006; Roksa & Velez, 2012). Overall, students who experience these non-traditional trajectories are often disproportionately disadvantaged in their socioeconomic backgrounds and academic preparedness (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Goldrick-Rab, 2006).

Research suggests that participation in HE is difficult to negotiate successfully while managing adult roles and responsibilities (Milesi, 2010). Early entry into marriage and parenthood can limit educational attainment, particularly for women (Raley et al., 2012; Yavorsky et al., 2015). Caring for young children may lower the chances of degree completion (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005) or lengthen time to degree by necessitating part-time enrollment (Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Jacobs & King, 2002**)**. Balancing work responsibilities and multiple family obligations limits the amount of time students can allocate to learning (Kasworm, 2008) and developing relationships with professors and peers (Silverman et al., 2009), even though they appreciate these personal relationships with faculty members (Kasworm, 2010). The relationship between work and HE participation seems to be more complex: part-time enrollment is often associated with better study outcomes, whereas work above 30 hours per week appears to hinder completion (Darolia, 2014; Goldrick-Rab, 2016).

In contrast, Monaghan (2020) argued that for some students, an alternative educational trajectory may allow them to gain the motivation, work habits, skills, or financial resources necessary to achieve at university. Also, "mature students who come with life and work experience tend to exhibit high levels of motivation as a consequence of having clearer aspirations and of having made a conscious decision to study" (Murphy & Roopchand, 2003, p. 129). Results indicating higher internal motivation levels among NTSs have also been found in a sample of NTSs at a university in the Czech Republic (Novotný et al., 2019).

These contradictory findings about NTSs led to an attempt to distinguish the characteristics of all NTSs and determine whether there are any internal types of educational trajectories that are taken by NTSs. Slowey and Schuetze (2000) created a typology of lifelong learners in HE based on three aspects of participation in HE: the nature of the entry/admission qualifications, the access route, and the primary motivation for HE studies. The sub-categories identified according to these criteria were *second-chance learners* (without traditional formal entry qualifications), *equity groups* (from socioeconomic or other groups that are underrepresented in HE), *deferrers* (who deferred entry into HE), *recurrent learners* (who have a first degree and returned to HE for a further, usually higher, degree), *returners* (who drop into HE after having dropped out at an earlier stage), *refreshers* (professionals who enroll in continuing education programs to refresh their knowledge and skills), and

learners in later life (third-age learners who have enrolled in non-credit HE programs). Some of these types are rooted in a particular HE system. For example, there are no studies without formal entry requirements in the Czech Republic, and therefore no second-chance learners. Czech HE institutions rarely offer continuing education programs; accordingly, there are not very many refreshers. The equity groups category adds contextual influences on the educational trajectory and may therefore overlap with other categories. Learners in later life do not usually seek the formal education that is our focus. Therefore, in the Czech HE system we find it useful to distinguish deferrers, returners, and recurrent learners.

Monaghan (2020) offered another research-based typology of the enrollment trajectories of students who have entered HE. His clustering of sequence data revealed four latent groups of college students: marginal students, rapid completers, lifelong students, and delayed completers. The enrollment of marginal students is infrequent, and very few of them earn a degree. Rapid completers are "closest to normative participation, enrolling at high rates in young adulthood and rapidly converting attendance into attainment" (Monaghan, 2020, p. 413). The last two groups, lifelong students and delayed completers, are adult students in HE. The distinction is mainly based on degree attainment. Lifelong students rarely complete a bachelor's degree. In contrast, delayed completers have repeated enrollments and resemble lifelong students until age 30, after which point their degree attainment grows and becomes universal by age 39 (Monaghan, 2020). These findings bring focus not to a particular action that distinguishes types, but to a more general tendency to move through HE studies in a specific way.

Educational trajectories of NTSs studying for education degrees

In the Czech Republic, external influences leading to non-traditional trajectories can be seen particularly well in the education sector and, therefore, students studying for education degrees. These educational study programs can be divided into two groups. The first group is teacher training programs; the second is programs that lead to other educational professions. Teacher training programs require three years to attain the qualifications needed to teach at the ISCED 0 level and five years to attain the qualifications for ISCED 1. Specific master's degrees have to be obtained to teach at ICSED 2 or ISCED 3 schools. Graduates with bachelor's and master's degrees leading to other educational professions are allowed to work in social education, andragogy, penitentiaries, and resocialization education. They can also operate in school clubs, leisure time institutions, and adult education (Act No. 563/2004 Coll. on Pedagogical Staff and on the Amendment to

Some Other Acts). Legislation passed in 2015 (Act No. 197/2014 Coll., the New Act on Pedagogical Staff and on the Amendment to Some Other Acts) produced stricter qualification requirements than before. According to this regulation, no educational work may be done by individuals who are not formally qualified or who did not start their formal education toward a degree prior to January 2015.

Nevertheless, investigations into educational studies undertaken in the Czech Republic (e.g., Píšová et al., 2013; Urbánek, 2005) have not specifically looked into NTSs studying for education degrees. Therefore, it is unclear what educational trajectories NTSs studying for education degrees follow, why they follow them, under which circumstances, and how they interpret them. Therefore, in this study we adapted the typology of Slowey and Schuetze (2000) and conducted an online survey to measure the distribution of educational trajectory types. We followed this with a narrative inquiry to understand the stories behind these educational trajectories and identify specific features of particular NTS groups. These procedures enable us to distinguish meaningful types of NTSs according to their educational trajectories and offer focused recommendations for supporting each NTS type.

Methodology

The presented findings are part of a broader research project (2018–2020) aiming to describe the population of NTSs studying for education degrees in the Czech Republic. A three-phased sequential mixed method research design (Creswell & Clark, 2011) was employed. In this paper, data from the first (quantitative) and second (qualitative) phases are used.

The quantitative phase used an online survey to gain a detailed quantitative description of the studied population. The research tool was an online questionnaire. The survey consisted of demographic items (e.g., gender, marital status, occupation); multiple measurement scales such as the Academic Motivation Scale (Vallerand et al., 1992), the Approaches and Study Skills Inventory for Students (Tait et al., 1998), the Appropriate Workload Scale (Wilson et al., 1997), the Utrecht Work Engagement Student Scale (Schaufeli et al., 2002), and the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli et al., 2006); and several questions aiming to distinguish respondents' educational trajectories (for example: *Was there at least a 1-year period after your high school graduation exam during which you did not study at university or attend any other formal education?*, *Have you ever studied at university before?*, and *Were your previous university studies successful?*).

All universities with accredited educational specializations (n=19) according to the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (2018) were asked to cooperate and share a link to the questionnaire with all of their students over the age of 26 who were studying for education degrees. The online survey ran between January 15, 2019, and May 15, 2019, and was completed by 1,030 students from 11 Czech universities.

The online survey was completed by 1,030 students; the final selection of responses analyzed in this paper comprised 713 NTSs. The selected respondents were those whose age was above 26 and who responded in the questionnaire that they had experienced at least a 1-year break in their formal education studies. We present here only the results from respondents who met these criteria and who answered all the questions necessary to identify their educational trajectory (Table 1).

Table 1
Description of the quantitative sample

	n	*%*
Gender		
Male	118	16.6
Female	594	83.3
[missing]	1	0.001
Age		
26–40	360	50.5
41–55	332	46.6
55+	21	2.9
Field of study		
Teacher training	323	45.3
Educational sciences	360	50.5
Both (teacher training and educational sciences)	27	3.8
[missing]	3	0.004

The qualitative phase involved narrative interviews (Lieblich et al., 1998; Rosenthal, 2004) conducted by the authors with 30 NTSs studying for education degrees. The purpose of this phase was an in-depth understanding of participants' live and educational trajectories. The narrative interviews started with the following narrative introduction: *Imagine that you were going to write a book about your educational trajectory. What would this book be about; what would the main chapters, influential people, and stories be?* After this introduction, the respondents had time to write an outline and reflect on it as long as they wished. They then provided an undisturbed narration of their educational trajectory. The second part of the narrative interview was based on the

narration and aimed to clarify vague or unclear statements and periods. The concluding phase of the interviews covered any biographical data missing from the narration.

Informants meeting the criteria for an NTS were chosen first based on previous acquaintance with team members and then by the snowball method. The sample was built gradually, to gain saturation, when possible, in age, field of study, region, and, most importantly, educational trajectory type. The narratives showed that many NTSs had prior experience with successful university studies and with unsuccessful university studies. We count these cases as recurrent learners because they had at least one experience with successful university studies. For this reason, the sample seems unbalanced at first sight (Table 2).

Table 2
Description of the qualitative sample

	Number of respondents	Respondents
Gender		
Male	6	B, F, K, S, T, Ť
Female	24	A, B, C, D, E, G, H, CH, I, J, L, M, N, O, P, Q, R, S, Š, U, V, W, X, Y, Z, Ž
Age		
26–40	17	B, D, E, G, H, CH, I, J, K, N, O, P, Q, S, T, W, Y
41–55	11	A, C, L, M, R, Š, Ť, U, X, Z, Ž
55+	2	F, V
Field of study		
Teacher training	14	E, I, K, L, M, O, P, Q, S, Š, T, Ť, U, V
Educational sciences	16	A, B, C, D, F, G, H, CH, J, N, R, Š, W, X, Y, Z, Ž
Educational trajectory		
Deferrers	11	B, C, D, G, M, P, R, S, T, U, V
Recurrent learners	13	E, H, CH, K, N, O, Q, Š, Ť, W, Y, Z, Ž
Returners	6	A, F, I, J, L, X

The qualitative data analysis started with initial and focused coding (Charmaz, 2014) of each narrative interview to maintain a detailed connection with the data. The initial coding provided a list of codes grouped into categories, of which the most important for the present analysis were those related to trajectories (professional trajectory, educational trajectory, transitions, and influences) and study experiences (perceptions of previous studies, perception of present studies, previous study behavior, present study behavior, and reflected changes in attitudes toward studying). In accordance with the narrative inquiry methodology, each individual story was also analyzed and

interpreted as a holistic unit (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In this phase, narratives sorted by educational trajectory type were compared with each other, both within a single educational trajectory type and among educational trajectory types. The main findings from these procedures provided a basis for the subsequent description of the NTSs' educational trajectories.

Results

Educational trajectories of NTSs' in numbers

The NTSs studying for education degrees were mature students handling multiple life roles at one time. The average age (*Me*) of the respondents was 40 (maximum 73, minimum 26). Most of the NTSs were studying part time (90.32%), but some of them were studying full time (8.98%) and a few were enrolled in both forms of study (0.42%). Respondents from bachelor's (53.44%) and master's (45.30%) studies were more or less equally represented. A significant proportion (67.88%) of the respondents were parents. A very similar proportion (65.78%) worked full time. A smaller share (14.86%) had part-time jobs, and even fewer were entrepreneurs (4.63%). Some respondents were not working but did have to handle family responsibilities as they were on maternity leave (9.4%). Because of all these life roles, very few respondents declared that their sole occupation was that of student (1.4%).

Based on the answers to whether they had previous experience with HE and whether their previous studies were completed with a degree, the students in the selection were distributed into the three NTS categories shown in Table 3. Specifically, the three categories of NTS were constructed as follows:

- IF *Have you ever studied at university before?* = No THEN Deferrers
- IF *Have you ever studied at university before?* = Yes AND *Were your previous university studies successful?* = Yes THEN Recurrent learners
- IF *Have you ever studied at university before?* = Yes AND *Were your previous university studies successful?* = No THEN Returners.

Table 3
Number of respondents in the NTS categories

	n	*%*
Deferrers (no previous experience with HE)	267	37.45
Recurrent learners (previous successful experience with HE)	250	35.06
Returners (previous unsuccessful experience with HE)	196	27.49
Total	713	100.00

As Table 3 shows, the largest number of NTSs fell into the first category of educational trajectories, deferrers. However, the differences in the sizes of the individual categories were rather small and so all three types of educational trajectories were represented relatively evenly in the sample. We examined the stories behind the numbers more closely.

Stories behind the educational trajectories of NTSs

The qualitative narrative data reveal that being a deferrer, returner, or recurrent learner was a result of diverse stories influenced by both personal and historical contexts. Consistent with the life course theory, it is not possible perceive belonging to any of these groups as a persistent feature of a particular NTS. Previous attempts at HE can be understood as a source of experience that might be interpreted as important knowledge or be transformed into a new attempt to succeed. Therefore, more crucial than information about being a particular type is an understanding of how their previous educational trajectory was perceived by the NTSs and how it influenced their present studies.

Deferrers: Tertiary education as a temporarily unapproachable path
It is notable that the people included as deferrers often did not perceive their situation as deferring anything. Many of them had not even considered entering HE after secondary school, and many of them had perceived this as their final decision. For these individuals, a family background without tertiary education was significant. The background manifests as a lack of guidance toward the educational pathway, which is left to the young adults alone. Respondent O said, "And in grammar school, I totally lost any interest in school. I was focused on boys, not books (laughs)". Such an attitude might not occur during pubescence; it might be significant for all previous attitudes toward education. "I felt no urge to study at all! I was drifting through subjects, and they always told me, 'You're too lazy to study. If you weren't, you would succeed beautifully.' Well, I think they were right; I just didn't want to" (respondent D).

In some of the life stories of deferrers, the consideration of HE was overwhelmed by the pressure of emerging adult roles. As respondent B put it, "I had no support for thinking about going to university. When my parents got divorced, my father started to drink heavily; it was awful at home. I knew quite clearly that I needed to start earning and get away as soon as possible." Even when the family background was not as urgent, pregnancy was another reason for postponing entrance to HE: "Well, why didn't I start studying at university after high school? I was already pregnant while completing my high school graduation exam" (respondent C).

Other deferrers wanted to study at university, but their entrance was made impossible by macro-social circumstances. These include people who were, before 1989, not permitted to enter HE by the Communist Party. As respondent R explained, "Even before I applied for university, some member of some Communist Party committee brought me a paper, not even in an envelope, just a typewritten paper, stating that the Party does not permit people like me, undecided about religious questions, to continue in their education." Though this kind of restriction ended in the 1990s, entrance was still limited to a select few. Several rounds of examinations selected elite students; others had to reconsider their whole educational and life trajectories. Respondent I stated, "Grammar school ended and I did not succeed at the university entrance exam. It was a hard, hard blow. My dad was really disappointed and told me, 'Don't even think about trying next year. Nobody here will support you.' So, I started to work."

These stories reveal some barriers that emerged after the respondents finished high school. To become NTSs, deferrers had to overcome these barriers, and they did so in several ways. The most straightforward stories of deferrers are those in which the obstacle to studying vanishes. Respondent P said, "And afterward, when I had finished my parental leave with my third son, I began to study at university." When a negative attitude toward education is the cause of the delay, a more considerable change must occur. Respondent D declared, "I succeeded in the competition to be an administrative worker at the university, and it changed my life completely (...). I found myself among such interesting, educated people with no prejudices. They helped Roma achieve at university, and I met many decent, educated Roma and I began to lose my prejudices toward them. (...) It opened my eyes to a totally different world than my own. I recognized that there were so many topics that interested me. (...) So I found that I would like to study as well."

Some of the deferrers, mostly those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, had taken an even more indirect path to HE. They often succeeded at many jobs and built their expertise in bottom-up ways. At some point in their professional trajectory, however, their expertise had to be confirmed institutionally. This happened to respondent V, who became a well-known expert in senior education, and noted, "And the ministry asked me to work there, in a position that nobody without a university education does. (...) I told them during the hiring process that I had no tertiary education. 'Yes, I occasionally lecture at college, but I have no college education myself.' (laughs)" In such cases, the employer has to insist on qualification requirements, and the new employee therefore starts studies in parallel with the new job. Sometimes, the requirement does not come from a new or potential employer, but the individual discovers a personal inclination toward studying. Respondent B, a rescue worker who started teaching first-aid courses, said, "I realized

that I 'm not bad at teaching adults and I started to think about going in that direction. I started to look for some specialization or department, if anything like that existed: something to study part time, something about teaching adults. I had never heard the word andragogy, but I looked for something to move myself in that direction." Such processes are more prolonged than the decisions of traditional students, but they are also more developed. When they become students, such deferrers are experienced in the field and motivated to succeed in their studies. They also have high expectations about the quality of university education because they can compare their university studies with their professional expertise.

In sum, there are numerous reasons deferrers did not attend university immediately after finishing high school. To become NTSs, they had to overcome whatever internal or external obstacles prevented their initial attendance. In many cases, this had to be supported by implicit or explicit qualification requirements that led them to undertake the studies. When the deferrers finally came to university, they knew little about academic culture and might have needed support in orientation and adaptation. Nevertheless, their professional and life experiences might be enriching and valuable for others' learning processes and it is essential to proactively incorporate them into the classes.

Returners: Camping in the wrong area

Returners are NTSs who have already studied at university but did not complete their education. An essential element in the stories of returners is why they did not succeed and how they perceived their previous HE experience. It might seem remarkable that some returners did not perceive their unsuccessful experience as a failure. This is true for individuals who started to study due to parental pressure or started to study in a field or department that was not their first choice. Often, they found that they were studying in a field that did not interest them during the first year: "At the beginning, I was doing quite well in the general subjects, but when it came to the flexibility and strength of structural mechanics, I found that it wasn't my cup of tea. I had no problem studying, but I had a problem with the specialization" (respondent F). This recognition might come after several years of studying, especially when the fieldwork subjects are situated in the later years of the university curriculum. This was the case for respondent J: "I was there for 4 years, but after 3 years, I found that I didn't want to be a special education teacher. It is really hard work, working with kids who might not be moving anywhere." These returners characteristically perceive their decision to quit as natural and their experience did not disqualify them from HE in their view. Respondent A declared, "I had a try at university, but I totally moved away from the field of study, so I quit after one year. Then

I had my first child and I started to think about returning to university to try to finish." From their previous university experiences, this group of returners has the overall feeling that university education is worth another try if their life trajectory enables it.

Overall, students who had to quit their previous studies for personal reasons shared a similar attitude. This was true for respondent X: "I ended my studies nearly before the final exam. It was, well, for personal reasons. My father died and I had some issues with my second child, which was somehow too much." In such stories, it is often not one particular obstacle, but cumulative demands in several personal and professional areas that result in leaving university. In such stories, leaving university is overall perceived as the only possible decision, often a family-protecting one, and it does not exclude completing a degree at some better time.

In contrast, the second group of returners includes NTSs who tried hard to succeed but did not. The problem might have occurred even during the first year, as it did for respondent I: "It was an incredible shock during that first semester. I had no chance of passing. Not that I failed everything, but anyway, I was out. I didn't understand, I had no idea what was going on; everyone else did, but I didn't." It is more difficult is to be expelled after several years. That was the case for respondent D: "I quit because of English. I didn't pass the language exam, so I was kicked out. Then (...) I let it be for about 2 years, I blew off university; I believed I probably wasn't good enough."

The stories uncovered two types of unsuccessful students who, when deciding to return to HE, differed in their self-conceptions. Both groups gained some acquaintance with the academic culture, norms, and procedures that might be beneficial for further studies. Nevertheless, while some returners might have benefited from their previous experiences, the others might have found it hard to fight low self-esteem and overcome the stressful memories of their earlier studies. For some of those students, external motivation from their employer was often necessary to overcome such experiences.

Recurrent learners: Back to the already known

Recurrent learners are those who have already achieved. They might be learners who had completed their bachelor's degree at an older age (deferrers) and were now studying for a master's degree in the same field. Recurrent learners might also be students who had succeeded in different areas of study and were now coming to university for an education degree. There is also a third category: those who had already earned an education degree and were now studying another option within the field of educational sciences. For example, respondent N successfully achieved a master's degree in teacher training and was studying andragogy for another master's degree: "I realized that in my life I am fundamentally a teacher and the question is only at what

level. I have studied more or less all levels except for andragogy, which I haven't approached at all even though I was teaching adults. So, I told myself it would be interesting to understand this area as well."

Although we can distinguish these groups, the stories of recurrent learners from our sample are significant for one feature. The previous success at university gave these learners quite a precise notion about what it means to study at university and what is needed to succeed. Respondent Y said, "When you're going for your first master's degree, you don't know how it works. You have no experience with defending your thesis or how the final exam looks and whether you'll pass the subjects. When something is on the website, you think it will be like that; later on, you find out that it isn't always so. And these experiences give you some kind of peace." The knowledge of how things go at university brought recurrent learners a secure feeling about the experience.

Recurrent learners differed from other learners in more than just their attitude; they also had critical academic skills. Respondent Z stated, "My classmates were falling apart because they weren't able to find resources, read academic English, and organize their time. And I managed all this due to my previous studies." Their previous success enabled recurrent learners to succeed again with less effort, as respondent Y demonstrated: "I have a lot of experience so writing a paper or a reflection is no problem. I have it done within an hour and it will pass."

Moreover, previous experience prevented recurrent learners from enrolling at a department that would not fulfill their needs and so they were content with their studies overall. If their needs were not met, they would simply make less effort to achieve success. Therefore, recurrent learners can be viewed as students who were increasing the numbers of successful NTSs and who excelled at organizational skills, internal motivation, and learning effectiveness.

Discussion

To discuss our results, we have to state that most of the NTSs studying for education degrees in our sample group were part-time students, which is in accordance with the statement by Slowey and Schuetze (2000) that part-time study is particularly important to the notion of flexibility that enhances lifelong learning as well as diversity and equity in access to HE. The three defined NTS types were more or less equally distributed, meaning that each type's specific features should be taken into account when approaching NTSs.

Deferrers were the most common NTS type in our sample. Bozick and DeLuca (2005) stated that statistical analyses of institutional context and life

course contingencies do not entirely explain the negative relationship between delayed enrollment and degree completion. Nevertheless, in our qualitative sample the deferrers were a group with lower socioeconomic backgrounds, mostly the first generation of HE students in their family, and often under pressure in several adult roles in early adulthood. These were individuals who had to overcome various barriers to approach HE that might become more urgent again during their studies. Moreover, they had no experience with academic culture and quite a limited notion about what to expect from HE. These might all be reasons for this group to be at risk of leaving their HE studies. There is also evidence that those who delay their initial enrollment into HE or the ultimate completion of their degree accrue fewer economic and social benefits than those with a traditional pathway (Elman & O'Rand, 2004; Walsemann et al., 2018). Based on our data, we can explain this again as the result of the lower socioeconomic background that might have been in their primary family and that is reflected in the need to start working after finishing secondary education or with lower cultural capital and a low-status habitus (Walpole, 2003). Deferrers were already disadvantaged at the beginning of their adulthood. Therefore, the lower economic and social benefits are a function of this handicap, not the delay itself.

Returners were the most heterogeneous group. This type comprised those who perceived their previous study as just an attempt that helped them understand how things work in HE. There were also returners in line with the results of a study by Butcher (2020) that based its findings on qualitative interviews with part-time adult learners and concluded that "any study gap experienced by adults can amplify negative feelings of 'I will not be able to cope (...) I am not good enough (...) young students are brighter than me (...) I will be like a fish out of water, an imposter'" (p. 30). Therefore, the development of confidence in the ability to succeed and progress is of essential importance for NTSs. This task should not be on returners themselves; HE institutions should consider such low academic self-esteem and try to diminish it. Moreover, the returners' varied self-conceptions about HE should lead researchers to separate this type more finely to gain better results in quantitative analysis.

Recurrent learners seem to be the group who gained the most benefit from their life, work, and study experiences while studying at university because of their academic skills. We found that, in the interpretations of our respondents, graduating effaces any previous drop out. As Thunborg and Bron (2019) put it, "being in recurrent formation means returning to well-known paths in life and learning reactively by reflecting on experiences" (p. 36). Our findings confirm the secure feelings these students had when they decided to enroll for another university degree.

It would seem appropriate to attribute to recurrent learners the prioritization of learning itself before instrumental goal orientation (Jamieson, 2007; Reay, 2003). Nevertheless, Egetenmeyer (2017) stated that the recurrent learners' motivations range from the need for additional or different qualifications for their employment to a love for learning for its own sake (p. 106); this is consistent with our findings. We found such a range of motivations in all the other groups as well. Therefore, the types of motivation of NTSs (Novotný et al., 2019) cannot be used as a distinguishing criterion between NTS types.

Conclusions

Based on narrative data, we propose that NTSs' relationships with their university, understanding of academic culture and actual life, and work situations are vital characteristics for their studies. Higher internal motivation at the beginning of studies (Novotný et al., 2019) might not be crucial. Thunborg et al. (2013) revealed changes in motives for studying over time as different commitments of NTSs come and go. It would be a mistake to romanticize the situation of NTSs in terms of the higher internal motivations that have been measured in some studies (Fazey & Fazey, 2001; Shillingford & Karlin, 2013). The experiences of most of the NTSs in our sample, as in the study by Stone and O'Shea (2013), revealed the interrupted nature of their study progress and the impossibility of having dedicated, free, and uninterrupted time for regular study. The situation of NTSs in HE is fragile (Davies & Williams, 2001) because of their adult responsibilities and the unpredictable circumstances associated with them that made the students follow a non-traditional educational trajectory. Therefore, if we make any suggestions that would apply to all NTSs, it would be to lengthen the period for which NTSs can interrupt their studies. Such a measure might enable them to withdraw from studies during difficult times and return when their life or work trajectory enables it again.

Regarding the deferrers and returners, we assume that the most critical supportive measures should focus on their adaptation to HE culture. Guidance should be as free as possible from academic jargon and implicit expectations. These individuals might be under such pressure that they might be able to integrate only clear messages into their plans. Nevertheless, these groups have work and life experiences with great value, especially for HE preparing education professionals to deal with equity. Therefore, the most beneficial way to encourage the NTSs in these groups is by integrating their work and life experiences into classes as much as possible.

To conclude, we have proposed a way to adapt a previous typology of NTSs and showed that such types are useful and valid for a general division. For more precise analysis, we would recommend dividing returners according to their understanding of their previous HE experiences. We have shown that educational trajectories do not reflect a division of individuals according to their motivations to study. The attitudes of NTS toward HE studies, academic enculturation, and academic skills are the distinguishing features earned through the educational paths the NTS take.

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