University of Groningen (The Netherlands)
Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences
Department of Lifelong Learning
Mary Jet Amsing MSc.

Paper to be presented at the RANLHE Conference: The challenge of Access, Retention and Drop-out in Higher Education in Europe: the experiences of non-traditional students, 7 – 8 April 2011, University of Seville, Spain

Towards Investment in Non-Traditional Students through Lifelong Learning
The contribution of case study research in American higher education to the involvement of non-traditional students in Dutch higher education

1. Introduction

While change is a phenomenon of all times, the rapid rate of change today makes our lives more complex and rather unpredictable. To keep up with the rapid speed of our life-worlds, adjustment to this speed of change has become a necessity which is reflected by the current job market that demands flexible and self-directed workforces (Jarvis, 2007). Like most western countries, the Netherlands need to deal with the upcoming retirement of the Baby Boom Generation. Today, 15.3% of the Dutch population is 65 years or older, while in 2040 this percentage will have increased to 25.6% (CBS Statline, 2010). Third, the Dutch education system has to deal with a large amount of drop-outs at the secondary and tertiary levels of education. Not only do these drop-outs need to find there way back into the education system at a later point in time for their own sake. More especially, the Dutch government aims to be one of the leading 'knowledge economies' which requires a high percentage of the population to be higher educated.
As a result of this demand for investment in lifelong learning, the Dutch government said to be actively working together with other parties to develop better prospects for lifelong learning (MinOCW, 2008). However, the active investment in lifelong learning initiatives is to be questioned.
Various Dutch researchers already pointed out that past policy especially lacked investment in lifelong learning at the level of higher education (Glastra & Meijers, 2000; Hake, Van der Kamp & Slagter, 1999). Especially Max van der Kamp, the late professor of Andragogy at the University of Groningen, was critical of the lack of initiatives in Dutch higher education to open doors for non-traditional students (Hake et al., 1999; Van der Kamp & Slagter, 2003). Van der Kamp blamed Dutch colleges and universities for their "lack of willingness to adapt their degree programs to the needs of adult students who want to return to education" (Van der Veen, 2008, p. 33). This was more recently underlined by the OECD (2008) who pointed out that more than in many other countries, "in the Netherlands higher education is seen as the preserve of the young" (OECD, 2008, pp. 12-13). These findings are underlined by the thoughts and experiences of several students and faculty members at the Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences of the University of Groningen. Several non-traditional students mentioned their own sense of insecurity of not feeling at home at university, the many practical obstacles they had to overcome to start and continue studying at university and the way younger students and faculty regarded them. For instance, the group of students who take a non-traditional pathway to university consists of many different individuals, and HBO[1]-transfers are illustrative for one of these possible tracks. Regarding to this group,

---

[1] The Netherlands has a binary system of higher education, which consists of higher professional education (H*oger*

younger 'traditional' university students were cited saying "University students are just superior to HBO-students" (Vrieling & Notten, 2008, p.4). Sadly, the group of faculty viewing HBO-transfers as second-rate students seemed to be illustrative for the opinion of faculty in general at the university. In addition, the University of Groningen proved to be an example of the current culture that exists in the Netherlands regarding non-traditional learning.

At the time of writing, recent developments indicate the continuing relevance of the lack of commitment to lifelong learning in the Netherlands. Despite the demand for lifelong learning initiatives, the government decided not to invest in public funding while the public and private funding of higher education is below the OECD average. Student grants also continue to be only available to students who are "younger than 30 years at the point of enrollment and who enroll in full-time or dual education" (MinOCW, 2010). Third, the number of part-time students has declined at both levels of higher education. Students who want to transfer from higher professional education (HBO) to university education are frequently met with limited options to transfer and several barriers. Transferring is currently even more restricted as pursuing a second degree has become more expensive in the Netherlands (Onderwijsraad, 2009). And despite offering distance education for adults, the numbers of students studying at the Open University[2] declined by 50% from 27,200 in 1995, to 13,700 in 2008 (CBS, 2008). Right now, even the past emphasis on opportunities for secondary vocational education for adults is put under pressure as the Dutch government decided to decrease the funding from 150 million in 2010 to 115 million in 2011 (Tweede Kamer, 2010).

The current lack of investment by the government and the lack of willingness of opening up higher education for adult students has consequences. This mentality first of all puts pressure on the international position of the Netherlands as the demand for higher educated citizens partly depends on the availability of lifelong learning opportunities (RWI, 2005). Even worse is the consequences for non-traditional students in Dutch higher education. While private institutes try to fill the gap by providing options for non-traditional students, nothing is structurally offered and the available private education is not equally accessible for all students as it is much more expensive than initial education.

As Dutch higher education is getting more expensive and continues to lack flexibility, not only non-traditional but also traditional students are expected to experience barriers in gaining access to higher education. Without proper investment in lifelong learning, institutes for higher education are risking to head for higher education and lifelong learning as a privilege for the young and the rich *instead of for all* (O'Brien & Ó Fathaigh, 2007).

2. This study

In order to contribute to the involvement of non-traditional students in the Netherlands, it was decided to conduct a 'good practice' case study research. Due to several factors, the United States became the research setting for this study. First of all, the United States is known for it's rich tradition in theories and practices regarding lifelong learning and non-traditional students. In addition, despite the high cost of higher education, there is a large number of adult students involved in American higher education. Most American institutes for higher education offer a wide variety of alternative formats and services for non-traditional adults that allows participants to have a full-time job to pay for their evening/weekend classes. A more practical factor to choose the United States as a research setting was the existing collaboration between the Department of

---

Beroepsonderwijs – HBO), offered by HBO institutes and of university education, offered by universities. HBO institutes offer more practical oriented education while universities have significant involvement in internationally competitive research and offer master's and postmaster programs (Eurybase, 2007).

[2] The Open University was established in order to offer adults a means of pursuing higher education without admission requirements and at their own pace through distance education.

Lifelong Learning of the University of Groningen and Teachers College of Columbia University (New York).

The study aimed to explore the effective formats and services that are offered in American higher education as well as the influence of situational conditions. This case study research took place at two levels. First of all, for the first part of the research, the United States of America was chosen as the unit to provide a general picture of non-traditional education in the United States and consequently provided a general picture of formats and services for non-traditional students at higher education institutes in the United States. The second part of this research consisted of a multiple in-depth case study of three practices in American practice. The three selected cases were a 'weekend college format' at a public community college, a 'weekend college format' at a senior college, and a doctoral cohort program at a selective and elite university. The three cases were studied through desk research, document analysis, semi-structured in-depth interviews with both management as well as students, observations and a survey.

Even though the conclusions are based on just three cases and further research would need the inclusion of a larger number of cases all over the United States, these three cases do provide an illustrative picture of the various formats and services that are offered for non-traditional students in the United States.

3. Contribution of formats and services in American higher education

The main research question of this study was: *In what way can formats and services in American higher education contribute to the involvement of non-traditional students in Dutch higher education?* To develop a general picture on the formats and services that provided at higher education institutes in the United States for non-traditional students, a general exploration of American policy and practice was carried out as well as the in-depth exploration of the three good practices in the American setting. These two perspectives resulted in combined conclusions in terms of lessons that can be learned from the American practice. The following subsections provide the conclusions of the study in terms of access, recruitment and the retention of non-traditional students at the level of higher education as well as implementation strategies.

Accessibility and recruitment
As a consequence of the high competition, especially among sub-top universities, colleges and universities are actively recruiting students. Selective colleges and universities like the graduate school and university affiliated to the doctoral program in this study, could afford to limit the number of students and accept the best students rather than the largest number. Colleges and universities with less status need to actively compete to attract the best of the remaining students. This was illustrated by the cases, as the doctoral program regarded mouth-to-mouth advertising as most effective, while the colleges used advertisements and the internet as the main source of recruitment. In line with the literature (Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982) the community college in this study offered virtually everything for everyone and even students without an GED were able to attend the college.

As a result of the active recruitment, non-traditional students are identified as an interesting target-group. Although several methods were used to raise the interest of the non-traditional students, it is unknown in what way these methods actually make students enroll. Literature pointed out that adult students need a trigger event to take the actual step. Practices indicated that all these methods can trigger a student to return, depending on the type of person and the right timing. What the practices tried to do is to break down the barriers that prevent adults from returning:
- Time & distance: offering full-time, part-time, weekday, weekend, evening, summer, winter and online formats; distance learning; off-site education; mentoring and tutoring possibilities

(face-to-face, online or on the phone); provide additional services at non-traditional times.
- Financial: flexible formats so students can combine their study with work or other obligations; a diverse number of loans, grants and scholarships available for non-traditional students;
- Social: cohort that provides academic as well as emotional support; open offices to ask questions and mentor/tutor services.

All in all, for adult students to return to colleges and universities, there need to be: (i) facilities that can break down their barriers; (ii) extensive information about the program, especially regarding the possible solutions for the expected barriers; and (iii) these facilities need to be clearly visible to the right target audience through selected recruitment.

In line with literature, the colleges showed that not only non-traditional students require flexible formats, but that a large number of American students make use of the opportunities to balance flexible study formats with other obligations, regardless of their age. This led to the questioning of the profile of traditional students as '18-22 year full-time old living on campus student' as the group of flexible non-traditional students continues to grow. As a result, the formats and services offered by the practices make it easier for students of all ages to gain access to college and/or university.

Retention methods

In line with literature, the practices showed that many American students take a long time to graduate, and the longer it takes them to graduate, the more likely it becomes that they drop out. In addition, non-traditional students experience situational, institutional and dispositional barriers (Cross, 1981) while combining work and other responsibilities with studying. As their audiences differ, the practices had their own visions about the effective ways to retain these students.
- It was argued that when students start off with the wrong assumptions, it is more likely that they drop out. As a consequence, selection methods like admission interviews were pointed out as an option to find out whether a student has the right assumptions and whether a student is ready for the program.
- By adding additional classes at crucial moments, offering important classes at non-traditional times, or by using an intensive cohort, the practices kept the students on track. In line with the literature review, the practices proved that cohort learning has the ability to provide psychosocial and academic support. The cohort was mentioned several times by students to be the vital factor in continuing the balancing of the intensive program and other obligations. Peers in the cohort functioned as academical and emotional support, as they all experienced similar problems being a returning adult student. Loss of flexibility was apparently not regarded to be a concern, as students need structure to finish their degree. Although cohort learning has its advantages, the outcome of cohort learning is largely influenced by personalities and group dynamics. While selection interviews can be a first step, further research is necessary.
- In order to succeed, especially the colleges pointed out that non-traditional students require other facilities and services to be offered at non-traditional times as well. The practices aimed to offer weekend students the same services as during the week such as the office of academic advising, the registrar, mentoring and tutoring services, career development, a library, places to study, printing facilities, dining facilities, bookstores and child care.
- As money remains a barrier for the retention of students, the students either need (a) grants, loans or scholarships or (b) the flexible formats to continue working in order to pay for their education.
- As there is a high demand for online distance education, online technology is increasingly used at all practices to a certain extent. As not every student is cut out to take online classes because of the high demand for self-directedness and lacks the social aspect, hybrid

learning was pointed out by colleges as a promising option.

- Although he students in the cohort didn't express concern about disconnectedness to the larger college/university because the cohort functioned as their social environment, providing the non-traditional students at the colleges with social support was indicated by the practices to be an enormous challenge that had yet to be mastered. Although it was difficult, the practices acknowledged the importance of the social aspect and continued to create a community feeling for the non-traditional students with other obligations.

Implementation strategies

The three practices are placed within policies, structures and cultures of the global market, the United States, its educational system, the city, university and the affiliated institution. All these aspects influenced the way the practices exist and the way formats and services were adapted to the needs of non-traditional students.

The three practices are all embedded in their college or school in a different way, which influences the way others view the program as well as the facilities offered and the recruitment process. The practice at the community college is completely part of the college and is the only practice that doesn't have separate faculty or recruitment. The practice at the prestigious university is a very selective program itself and because of its exclusive and alternative manner, it is seen as completely separate from the graduate school. The practice at the senior college also has its own faculty, and although the program is growing, it exists more or less separately within the senior college.

The implementation of the three practices involved struggles. For two practices, the practice meant changing an existing culture. Convincing faculty and staff to work on weekends still remained a challenge, especially for full-time faculty. Although some people continue to prefer working during the week, others slowly begin to view flexible schedules as a convenient option. In short, several aspects were pointed out by the three cases to contribute to the success of the implementation:

- support from the top;
- financial resources from the top;
- a facilitator with status and supporters;
- a facilitator with perseverance;
- addressing the right people who are ready to collaborate.

4. The contribution of the lessons learned from American higher education to the involvement of non-traditional students in higher education

Having mentioned the various formats and services that have been implemented in the good practices, we return to the Netherlands thinking "what can we learn from the American practice?".

The importance of context

As the Netherlands is a small country, it continues to compare itself to big brother countries like the United States. This study showed that making comparisons between countries without paying attention to the context and influential factors can lead to wrong conclusions.

One of issues is that the Dutch aim of having 35% of the population higher educated, stems from the lopsided comparison between the American and the Dutch higher educational system as the level at some colleges in the United States are not considered 'higher educated' in the Netherlands. Second, despite being connected at a different level with a complete different intent and aimed at a complete different audience, the American associate's degree has recently been facilitated in the Netherlands. In addition, the bachelor's/master's structure was implemented to open up the structures, but it seems that some degrees and terminology are now laboring under

misapprehension. One of these is that the bachelor's degrees in the United States takes four years to finish while most Dutch bachelor degrees awarded by universities comprise of three years. Fourth, there are two types of bachelor's and two master's degrees and the distinction between these bachelor's and master's degrees are not as clear-cut as in the United States.

In short, to improve international comparability, critical reflection and research on the comparability of used terminology research outcomes is therefore highly suggested.

The availability of flexible formats and services and transfer options in the American system have to do with the influence of the market. In general, American colleges and universities compete actively to attract the best and/or the most students. Elite colleges and universities are able to be selective through their reputation and status while sub-top universities seem to attract large numbers of students. As pointed out before, competition leads to active recruitment which leads to the development of necessary programs and services for all kinds of students, such as non-traditional students. However, another side-effect of the strong competition in higher education is the strong varying cost of education and the variable quality of the offered education. Driven by the influences of the market and the increasing dependence of higher education on the demands of prospective students, efficiency and quantity have become the goals. As Bok (2003) warned before, "efficiency is not a very helpful guide for teaching and research" (p. 31).

Another side-effect of the strong competition in American higher education is the inequality of access for certain groups of people. Because of the high cost and the nature of selective elite universities, not all students have an equal chance of acceptance at a certain college or university. All over the nation, a large number of younger students drop out on key transition points in their educational career. Some of them find their way back into the system at a later point in time, but the chances for success are not equally distributed over the country, nor are they equally distributed over people. Certain groups of people are structurally left in the cold because they are excluded in terms of access, services and success by the educational system. The American system seems to be less able to retain younger students who drop out at a large scale during their educational career and second, especially students from lower classes are usually tracked into the lower tiers of the educational system without much perspective of upward mobility (Martin, 2010). The famous community colleges are seen as a secret path to a top university, but evidence on the number of students that actually gain acceptance to top universities like the University of Michigan, is hard to come across. Whether true or not so true, many Americans have been using this approach to fight, with the means they have, the inequality of their educational system (Hyland, 2010).

Bourdieu (1973) argued before that not all individuals have the same chances at climbing the social ladder by education because our current educational system contributes to the maintenance and reproduction of class inequalities. For education to improve social mobility, education has to cease reproducing existing social structures. Although education is booming business in the United States and there is a firm belief rooted in American culture that education is the key to improving one's social status, the actual social mobility in the United States has proved to have worsened over the past decades and is low compared to other Western countries (Kopczuk, Saez & Song, 2007). The United States seems to be illustrative for what O'Brien and Ó Fathaigh meant when they concluded "that we live more in an era of *lifelong learning for some*" (2007, p.74).

Practical recommendations

Although the Netherlands has not yet developed outstanding individual research universities comparable to those of the US and the UK, the quality of basic research at Dutch universities is very good overall (OECD, 2006). In addition, the quality of the education offered at Dutch universities is much more evenly distributed than the quality offered at the various American colleges and universities. Although the enormous influence of the United States on the global market will continue to influence smaller countries like the Netherlands, the Dutch should be very cautious not to head for the same educational system. Instead, the Dutch should invest in the

protection and improvement of their education by learning lessons from the American system instead of copying the American system indiscriminately.

The introduction indicated that the system needs improvement when it comes to the involvement of non-traditional students in higher education and investment in lifelong learning. In order to do so, the Dutch need active discussion and practical initiatives. The past Dutch academic discussion about higher education and lifelong learning was once referred to as "life-long talking" with little action and lots of words (Open Universiteit, 2008). This study therefore recommends that national attention to lifelong learning and further critical research on the topic is necessary in order to contribute to the involvement of non-traditional students in Dutch higher education.

It is by all means clear that the involvement of non-traditional students in Dutch higher education can't be improved by just promoting a message. In a practical sense the contribution of the American practice lies in the pragmatic solutions for providing support to non-traditional students in higher education by offering evening/weekend formats, distance education, off-site education, summer formats, part-time possibilities, mentoring and tutoring and additional faculties at non-traditional times. Especially the cohort format proved that it offers many possibilities for academic and social support in a traditional environment. The case study research explored the effectiveness and limitations of the various formats and services and aimed to place them in their own context. The overall cultural, educational, demographic background influences the practices in important ways and the differences and similarities of the context are therefore important for possible Dutch implementation to take into account.

As the Dutch aspire to compete internationally, competition is slowly taking hold of the Dutch system of higher education. An important lesson to acknowledgeee from the American practice is that although more competition may lead to more internationally competitive universities and the recruitment of non-traditional students, the downside can be that this economy-oriented perspective also leads to increased selectivity and the possible inequality of higher education in terms of tuition, the level of quality education and the exclusion of certain groups of people who are 'less desirable' (Bok, 2003; Van der Kamp, 2004). So instead of competing for a certain status in the academic world, the two types of universities in the Netherlands should work together to create collaborations that create a system for higher education in the Netherlands that supports lifelong learning for all. These collaborations should be aimed at improving access to higher education, improving the quality of higher education at a large and at fighting against the development of lifelong learning for some.

5. Critical function of universities

The suggested practical recommendations mentioned in this study might function as an inspiration for some or they might lead to criticism by others. Regardless of the function it will prove to serve, more important is the discussion that will take place and the initiatives that will be implemented in Dutch higher education to enable the involvement of non-traditional students in Dutch higher education and the actual facilitation of lifelong learning for all.

This study attributes Dutch universities the role as promotors and facilitators of *lifelong learning for all instead of for some* through discussion and the implementation of practical initiatives. This role is based on the perspectives of Van der Kamp, Zeelen and Castells on the function of universities in general. In order to enhance lifelong learning and to combat social exclusion, Van der Kamp (2004) attributed academic programs in lifelong learning the important role in achieving these aims. The Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells (2009) formulated six functions of a university from a historical perspective: a) the production of values and social legitimation; b) the selection of the elite; b) the training of the labor force; c) the production of scientific knowledge; d) the elevation of the level of education of the population at large; e) creating

a close interaction between the world of science and technology, and f) the business world by centering on innovation. In addition, Zeelen (2010) suggested to add an additional function to this list: "the role of the university as a place for independent and critical thinking, challenging the status quo of the specific society where it functions" (p.2). The efficiency-based model undermines a university's critical perspective and freedom, while the 'Ivory Tower'-model removes them from society altogether. Taking Castells' and Zeelen's functions into account, this study suggest that institutes for higher education reclaim their interesting and valuable position: right in the middle of society.

Word count: 4347

Literature

Bok, D. (2003). *Universities in the Marketplace: The Commercialization of Higher Education.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1973). Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction. In R. Brown (Ed.), *Knowledge, Education, and Social Change: Papers in the Sociology of Education* (pp. 71-112). London: Tavistock.

Castells, M. (2009, August). *Lecture on higher education, the University of the Western Cape* [Transcript]. Retrieved from http://chet.org.za/webfm_send/552

CBS. (2008). *Jaarboek Onderwijs in cijfers 2009.* CBS: Voorburg/Heerlen.

CBS Statline. (2010a). *Kerncijfers van de bevolkingsprognose, 2008-2050.* Retrieved from http://www.cbs.nl/

Cross, K.P. (1981). *Adults as learners.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Darkenwald, G.G. & Merriam, S.B. (1982). *Adult education: Foundations of practice.* New York: Harper Row.

Eurybase. (2007). *Eurybase. The information Database on educations systems in Europe. The Education System in the Netherlands 2007/2008.* Retrieved from www.eurydice.org/

Glastra, F. & Meijers, F. (Eds.) (2000). *Een leven lang leren? Competentieontwikkeling in de informatiesamenleving.* 's-Gravenhage: Elsevier.

Hake, B.J., Van der Kamp, M., & Slagter, M. (1999). *European Higher Education and Lifelong Learning. The Netherlands.* Amsterdam: Max Goote Kenniscentrum voor Beroepsonderwijs en Volwasseneducatie.

Hyland, R.S. (2010, April). Ccs: Secret Paths to top universities. *Community College Campus News*, 1-2.

Jarvis, P. (2007). *Globalisation, Lifelong Learning and the learning society. Sociological perspectives.* New York: Routledge.

Kopczuk, W., Saez, E. & Song, J. (2007). *Uncovering the American Dream: Inequality and Mobility in Social Security Earnings Data since 1937.* NBER Working Paper nº13345.

Martin, N.D. (2010). *Social Class and Elite University Education: A Bourdieusian Analysis.* PhD Dissertation. Department of Sociology, Duke University, Durham, NC.

Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. (MinOCW). (2008). *The Development of Education. National report of the Netherlands.* Paris: UNESCO.

Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. (MinOCW). (2010). *Vraag en antwoord.* Retrieved from www.rijksoverheid.nl/

O'Brien, S. & Ó Fathaigh, M. (2007). *Learning partnerships for social inclusion. Exploring lifelong learning contexts, issues and approaches.* Cork: Oak Tree Press.

OECD (2006). *Education at a Glance, OECD Indicators 2006.* Paris: OECD.

OECD (2008). *OECD Reviews of Tertiary Education: the Netherlands. Paris*: OECD.

Onderwijsraad. (2009). *Middelbaar en hoger onderwijs voor volwassenen*. Den Haag: Onderwijsraad.

Open Universiteit. (2008, June 18). *Initiatieven leven-lang-leren verzanden in leven lang leuteren*. Retrieved May 30, 2009 from http://www.ou.nl/eCache/DEF/1/98/725.html

Raad voor Werk en Inkomen. (RWI). (2005). *Arbeidsmarktanalyse 2005*. Den Haag: RWI.

Tweede Kamer. (2010). T*weede Kamer, vergaderjaar 2010–2011, 211*. Retrieved from https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/ah-tk-20102011-211.html

Van der Kamp, M. (2004). Lifelong Learning and North-South Co-operation. In P. Boele van Hensbroek & H. Schoenmakers (Eds.), *From Social Exclusion to Lifelong Learning in Southern Africa. CDS Research Report N° 21* (pp.7-18). Groningen: Centre for Development Studies, University of Groningen.

Van der Kamp, M. & Slagter, M. (2003). The Netherlands. In M. Osborne & A. Thomas (Eds.). *Lifelong learning in a changing environment: continuing education in the universities of Europe*. pp. 314-328. Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.

Van der Veen, R. (2008). A quarter century of adult education 1982-2007 from the persepctive of Max van der Kamp. In J.J.M. Zeelen, C. van Beilen & M. Slagter (Eds.), *Max van der Kamp remembered* (31-42). Amsterdam: Max Goote Kenniscentrum voor beroepsonderwijs en volwasseneneducatie.

Vrieling, D. & Notten, T. (2008, 20 November). Hbo'ers zijn gewoon minder. *Universiteitskrant Groningen*, 4-5.

Zeelen, J.J.M. (2010, November). *Universities in Africa: working on excellence for whom?* Keynote address at the HELSTASA conference in South Africa, Tzaneen.