European Lifelong Learning Project 2008-10
Access and Retention: Experiences of Non-traditional Learners in HE

Literature Review: Final Extended Version (August 2011)

Foreword

This literature review is one of the outcomes of the project 'Access and Retention: Experiences of Non-Traditional Learners in HE' (**Work Package 3**).   The project has been funded by the European Commission Lifelong Learning Programme under Key Activity 1 "Policy Co-operation and Innovation" of the Transversal programme. It has eight partners from seven different countries: England, Germany, Ireland, Poland, Scotland, Spain and Sweden.

The overall aim of this project is to examine issues of access, retention and non-completion in relation to *non-traditional* undergraduate students (young and mature students across a wide age range) in higher education on a comparative European basis. Its objectives are:

- To identify the factors which promote or constrain the access, retention and non-completion of non-traditional students (working class, gender and ethnicity issues) to HE
- To increase knowledge and understanding through interdisciplinary research of what promotes or limits the construction of a learner identity of non-traditional students to become effective learners and which enables or inhibits completion of HE
- To identify the policy, cultural and institutional processes, including disciplinary sub-cultures, which help or hinder completion
- To illuminate and theorise, using in-depth biographical and collaborative methods, the structural, cultural and personal dialectics of learning and agency in student's lives
- To assess the benefits for self and society of participating in learning in HE, whether or not study is completed, and reassess the proposition that it may be worse to withdraw than not to begin
- To consider the implications of the study for the development of policy and practice across Europe in widening participation, promoting lifelong learning and enhancing the learning experiences of students from under-represented groups
- To disseminate the findings of the research through regional workshops, national and European conferences and a range of publications aimed at practitioners, policy-makers and academics.

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1.   Introduction and Methodology

Changing contexts, challenging times

Historically, the access and widening participation debate has been dominated largely by the issues and processes of access and recruitment. However, in recent years, there has been a greater realisation of the importance of outcomes, in particular student retention in higher education**.** In mass higher education systems, retention is an important and rising concern for policy-makers at national and European levels as it is considered as a measure of the *efficiency* of higher education, in terms of the needs of the economy and as a return on investment to individuals, society and the EU. As the project moved toward its final stages, the effects of the economic recession were becoming apparent in having a significant impact on the strategic recommendations that were intended to be implemented across the European partners. As a policy, the concept of widening participation in higher education was a strategic priority in all of the participating countries; however, by the end serious questions were being opened up for debate as to whether European governments could still afford to support a widened participation, as new sets of strategies for reducing costs are being completed across Europe. The project and its partners who chose to participate at the outset were committed to the further expansion of higher education. Even at the outset the rationale for the project was based on economic arguments as consideration of, for example, the non-completion or 'drop out' have negative connotations. As indicated in the project findings, sometimes 'drop out' is part of the learning experience, and although we can never be certain, the research in participation in higher education suggests that non-completion is often a temporary state of affairs. In the three years of the project, a significant students in the sample who 'dropped out' had returned to higher education, though not always to the same institution. One of the questions asked through the research was whether it was worse to withdraw than never to have entered higher education?

Leaving that discussion aside, for the moment, there are several reasons for this new emphasis on retention and 'drop-out'. At a national/European policy level this arises from: a significant growth of student numbers in HE; rising levels of public spending on HE; connected with the first two, a growing belief that HE makes a significant contribution to competitiveness/ innovation and equity/inclusion; and a general development of accountability systems in the public sector. At a macro level, student drop-out represents a poor economic and social return on national and international investment in higher education. If attempts to develop a more diverse, more equitable student body are compromised by poor retention for new, previously under-represented student groups, this will have a negative impact on aspirations for a fairer, more equal higher education system and society. At a meso-level, it has implications for HE institutions as student withdrawal can result in financial penalties, bad publicity and media coverage. At a micro level, student 'drop-out' also has personal implications for students and their families, not least because, increasingly, students are having to pay more for their higher education studies as well as balance their studies with other family and work responsibilities.

If this research can identify strategies that are being used successfully to support improved access arrangements to ensure that the right students are entering the right institutions to follow the right programmes of study, at the right time in their lives, and for the right reasons, *and* are effectively supported by the government, the higher education institutions, and by careers guidance services, then this research project will have contributed to making the process more efficient through making it more effective.

Background to the research

This literature review is intended to inform and complement the main project research and its reports which takes a *biographical* research approach to examine and understand the experiences of non-traditional students in relation to access and retention. It will focus primarily on the key factors which influence **retention and drop-out in higher education.** It will investigate access in relation to these key outcomes and how it affects **non-traditional students**. By 'non-traditional', we mean students who are under-represented in higher education and whose participation in HE is constrained by structural factors. This would include, for example, students whose family has not been to university before, students from low-income families, students from (particular) minority ethnic groups, living in what have traditionally been 'low participation areas', as well as mature age students and students with disabilities. This key concept of 'non-traditional' students is discussed in more depth in Section 4.

This literature review sets out to outline the wider policy context of access and retention from a global and European perspective. It seeks to identify and unpack international patterns of retention whilst also clarifying different understandings and contexts of access, retention and drop-out across Europe, more particularly project partner countries. It examines different theoretical approaches to investigating and understanding retention and drop-out with a view towards identifying key issues within and between these different approaches. This analysis also helps to locate the place and rationale for a biographical research approach in understanding and illuminating the experiences of a range of non traditional students in relation to retention and drop-out. The literature review then focuses on key factors that influence retention, success and drop-out and their impact on particular under-represented groups of non-traditional students. It concludes by outlining some different views from the literature as to how HEIs can improve their practice for the future in relation to student retention, success and 'drop-out'. In the research reports these fresh perspectives are referred to as 'sensitising concepts' that enable the research to make sense of those issues around access and retention in higher education. This analysis also helps to locate the place and rationale for a biographical research approach in understanding and illuminating the experiences of a range of 'non-traditional students' in relation to retention and 'drop-out'. The literature review then focuses on key factors that influence retention, success and 'drop-out', and their impact on particular under-represented groups of 'non-traditional students'. It concludes by outlining some different views from the literature as to how HEIs can improve their practice for the future in relation to developing strategies to improve student retention, and successful completion, and thereby reducing 'drop-out'.

The literature review was developed originally from mainly English language publications and OECD and national data sources, with a particular emphasis on the findings of recent comparative international and European studies. However, it is recognized that much research on these aspects of widening participation have been undertaken outside Europe, and – in particular – this third and final version of the literature review encompasses a greater proportion of research findings from North America, and Australia and New Zealand. In doing so, it brings official statistical data up to date, and adds reference to some xxx books and articles that have been published before, during and after the project. It arises from initial drafts developed by the University of Warwick which have been refined, extended and supplemented by further information and contributions from partner countries on specific identified topics, making use of relevant data and findings from each country as well as the specialist theoretical expertise of the different partner institutions.

2.   International Overview of Access and Retention

Current Policy Context
Tertiary Education is recognised across the world as making a major contribution to social and economic development. It has expanded considerably in the last decade. Globally in 2004, 132 million students were enrolled in tertiary education, up from 68 million in 1991. This growth has been accompanied by a diversification of provision and more heterogeneous student bodies. (OECD 2008a).

In many countries mass participation has been achieved although there are still clear inequalities in participation from all sections of the population. Many countries are now looking to improve both the quality and the equality of provision afforded by higher education to enable people from a wider range of backgrounds to benefit, in the interests of economic development, equity and social inclusion and social cohesion.

In reviewing the development of access policies across the OECD, Clancy and Goastellec (2007: 137) make the point that:

> *The overall trend is a movement from the priority given to what we term 'inherited merit' in the admission process through a commitment to formal equality, towards the application of some modes of affirmative action for selected under-represented groups.*

In this context, some of the targeted policy directions in terms of achieving equity identified in the OECD *Thematic Review of Tertiary Education* (2008a) are:
- consider positive discrimination policies for particular groups whose prior educational disadvantage is well identified
- provide incentives for TEIs (Tertiary Education Institutions) to widen participation and provide extra support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/20/4/40345176.pdf

This focus on equity and access is complemented by another targeted policy direction, geared more specifically to student retention:

- place more emphasis on equity of outcomes

and this is linked to a further targeted policy direction in terms of assuring and improving quality

- increase focus on student outcomes

In the same document, OECD also looks to the possibility of using completion rates within performance-based funding systems, as performance indicator..

European Policy
There appeared to be little available and recent European policy documentation on access and retention in Higher Education. However, by the end of the project there was identifiable substantially more published in a range of European languages other than English. This raises a number of issues relating to comparability and equivalence of key concepts across the range of European languages. In most part, this literature review focuses on English language publications – an issue which is discussed in section <mark>xx</mark> of this literature review. A project on *Access to Higher Education in Europe* was a part of the Council of Europe's regular work programme in education and culture, within the European Cultural Convention, from 1992 till 1996. The aim of the project was to stimulate action in favour of access to quality higher education in Europe. (www.coe.int/t/dg4/hig**he**reducation/CompletedActivities/**Access**_EN.asp)

In 1998, Recommendation R (98) 3 was adopted by the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers on Access to Higher Education. It made the following recommendations on *Access and Lifelong Learning*, to governments and higher education institutions:

6.1. The importance of the contribution that higher education can make towards providing lifelong learning for all sections of the community should be recognised.
6.2. Strategies to deliver opportunities to adults with no initial experience of higher education, as well as to provide additional opportunities for those who have already benefited, should be developed.
6.3. New technology should be exploited to encourage participation and to facilitate learning for students from nontraditional backgrounds, disabled students and those whose circumstances inhibit regular attendance, as well as virtual mobility for international students.
http://www.unhcr.bg/euro_docs/en/_21_coe13en.pdf

The European Commission sees educational policy as a national responsibility, and therefore it has no policy on HE participation *per se*. However, it does try to promote some forms of policy co-ordination, mostly involving the publication of benchmarking data: the benchmarking indicators for the HE sector do not refer specifically to retention data, but there is a clear emphasis on outputs (graduates in specified subject areas) rather than inputs. (Ertl 2006, 5-27). This emphasis is likely to be further reinforced as the Bologna process develops. This raises issues about comparative data across the European partners, but at no point undermines the validity of the research or its findings.

Recently, the EUROSTUDENT III research project (2005-2008) set out to generate and present internationally comparable indicators on the social and economic conditions of student life. This study produced useful data relating to the social dimensions of studying in the European higher education area. Data were collected from 23 European countries, covering a range of items including student demographic characteristics, access to higher education and structural characteristics of higher education studies, the social make-up of the student body, funding and state assistance and student employment and time budget. Reference will be made to these findings later in this literature review.

In relation to higher education access and changes to the student body, the EUROSTUDENT summary document (2008: 21) identifies the main challenge to be the improvement of participative equity, amongst which it stresses the need to encourage entry into higher education by alternative paths and an emphasis on student retention. Here it makes the specific point that:

> *This latter issue presents a particular challenge to higher education systems which accept a certain level of attrition through student drop-outs as a further filter of adequate student ability. This is wrong-headed in many cases as the phenomenon of dropping out is not singularly caused by inappropriate ability, but also by inappropriate study conditions. Furthermore, drop-outs cost the public purse money.*

It goes on to advocate policy directions which include*:*

> *Research on student retention has shown that the first year in higher education is formative regarding both academic and personal issues. Special support should be offered to all students in this first year, but especially focused on non-traditional students.*

3. Patterns of Access and Retention

a. Access to What? Growing HE Differentiation
A key development which relates directly to HE access and retention is the growing massification, along with differentiation, of HE systems across Europe. This differentiation, in response to both European/national government policy pressures and increased student demand, means greater opportunities for non-traditional students to access Higher Education. However it also raises questions about the standards and nature of higher education across Europe, as well as extent to which different student experiences of access to HE and HE study can accurately be compared. The RANLHE project has generated research that has been reported by each partner institution on 'the student experience'[1] which shows that widening partipcation has been effective, and there is now greater diversity in socio-economic status, ethnicity and those with disabilities. (2006a, 2006b). If we look briefly at the seven partner countries, we can see how changing socio-cultural contexts have impacted upon HE developments and the extent to which HE systems are becoming increasingly differentiated:

England
Historically the English higher education has always been characterised by differentiation and stratification. In 1992 as a way of developing a more extensive and comprehensive HE system, the binary system of polytechnics and universities was ended and former polytechnics became universities . They became known as 'new' universities and existing universities as 'old' universities. In recent years there has been a policy push by the New Labour government to expand higher education further and increase the percentage of the population achieving an HE education in the interests of greater equity and inclusion and as part of the agenda to increase the UK's economic competiveness globally. With the development of a mass HE system, the differentiation within HE has become more complex, more diverse and according to some analysts such as Ainley (1998) more hierarchical as a result of expansion, the development of new types of institutions, and the introduction of such market features as tuition fees.

Jones and Thomas (2005) argued that fair access and widening participation currently occupy a prominent position in the UK higher education agenda, but these terms remain ambiguous. In their paper they identify two prominent strands of policy in the government's approach to access and the widening of participation and contrast these with a third, more progressive perspective. The academic strand seeks to attract 'gifted and talented' young people into an unreformed higher education system. The second strand, which we term the utilitarian approach, posits a need for reform. However, this is undertaken largely to meet the requirements of employers and the economy. In contrast, a transformative approach values diversity and focuses on creating a system of higher education that does not place the burden of change upon potential entrants. This framework was used to explore some of the implications of the government's White

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[1] It should be noted that this Literature Review provides the background to what is known about access, retention and 'drop-out' that has informed the research within the project. It does not incorporate the findings of the research. Final reports for different aspects of widening participation, access and retention can be found on the RANLHE Project website:

Paper *The future of higher education*. First, the purpose of higher education is discussed, with particular reference to the distinction between economic and social objectives. Second, the government's view of the structure of the higher education sector is examined, by scrutinizing the notion of institutional differentiation and the role of the access regulator. They conclude that within a more differentiated higher education sector different aspects of the access discourse will become dominant in different types of institutions.

The system has indeed become not only differentiated but very hierarchical and league tables are used to rank universities. Oxford and Cambridge head the league table. The elite universities have formed a group called the Russell Group (Warwick is a member) and there are a number of other groups of universities with different emphases. An increasing amount of HE work is now being taught in further education colleges (post compulsory institutions) as a partnership or a franchise with, usually, a local university. This includes (two year, vocational and practice-oriented) foundation degrees and parts or whole degrees. The increasing involvement of further education colleges in recent years in higher education level work led Dearing (1997) to refer to the process as the new tripartism. There is a current policy debate about whether to give further education colleges the power to validate degrees. Mass higher education in England has resulted in a more diverse set of institutions, offering a diverse range of programmes to more diverse groups of students.

Germany
Germany has an extensive and diverse HE system. There are a wide range of universities, *Hochschulen* and *Fachhochschulen* (applied universities) which are both publicly and privately run. Initiated through university foundations of the 1970s, drastic modifications of the symbolic capitals in the field of universities had been established on the basis of the educational reforms in West Germany. Instead of traditional subjects, the social sciences became a sort of 'guiding culture'. During the 1980s and the 1990s and accompanied by the 'German turn', there was a neoliberal reframing procedure within the field of German universities. A rising orientation towards economic capital influences not only the "classic" university but also the whole landscape of HE.

The German HE system has expanded considerably in recent years as a result of pressure towards greater access and concern about internationally competitive research. However, the cost of reunification of East and West Germany has meant that the state has not been able to support fully this growing demand for higher education as the number of university students nearly doubled from 1980 to 2001 while higher education budgets only increased by 56% (Baker and Lenhardt, 2008). With the globalisation of the university budgets, an Americanisation of German HE has begun which changes the symbolic space of universities. The increasing importance of technical subjects, economics and industrially supported research will drastically influence the university space of the following years – accompanied by a totally new organisational management the result is a dramatic economisation of the field of universities. Times are now changing in the German higher education, with the recent introduction of tuition fees for

domestic and international students and the ongoing reform of undergraduate and graduate levels of education in line with the pan-European Bologna initiative.

Ireland

The Irish HE system is made up of long established universities and Institutes of Technology. Universities still offer largely traditional programmes and priorities, with progress being made attracting non-traditional students. Institutes of Technology were developed from the 1970s as an explicit attempt to provide HE in the regions for students to study (initially) sub-degree programmes in science, IT, business studies and engineering. This brought HE to larger numbers of young people. In the more recent 'Celtic Tiger' era, these systems have provided skilled and qualified technical workers for a fast growing knowledge economy. In the current economically more challenging times all the HE sector is being encouraged by government to address the learning needs of unemployed adults, many of whom have already graduated with HE qualifications.

The question of 'what is it to be a university?' is currently being discussed within Ireland at a time when there is a move towards competencies in the Irish binary system. At present, there are a total of seven universities – one is elite and two relatively new universities. All offer similar degrees. Four universities ((Maynooth, Dublin, Cork and Galway) form a federation of universities in Ireland called the National University of Ireland. Other universities are Trinity College Dublin (elite), Dublin City University and the University of Limerick. The two new universities, Dublin City and Limerick were formerly National Institutes of HE and traditionally technical in orientation, but have recently moved towards 'new' disciplines in nursing, education etc.

In response to the economic downturn the government is in the process of reviewing the number of HE institutions and has highlighted the possibility of structural changes including the reduction of the total number of institutions.

School leavers with higher points go to universities. Institutes of Technology want to be universities. This is leading to a vacuum which further education colleges are moving into. Private institutions exist which are small and teaching institutions but they are separate. Institutes of Technology traditionally teach technology but are now moving into arts and social sciences and are awarding degrees and higher degrees. Modularisation and funding costs (fees) means that many students also work full-time while studying. This has led to a blurring between what it means to be part-time and full-time.

Poland

Overall, HEIs are controlled by central government. To be an HEI you have to teach particular programmes by law. Permission has to be obtained from the national ministry to introduce a new degree as universities are not autonomous. They are strictly controlled. A student could get a diploma and the Ministry may decide that it is not valid. Under communism universities were elitist, but after the political changes in the 1990s, new non-state owned universities emerged. The change of the economic and political systems in Poland also included changes in the principles and structure of the entire system. Major trends, according to Dąbrowa-Szefler and Jabłecka-Prysłopska J (2006) included:

- extended autonomy of HEIs in practical terms
- a high rate of growth in student numbers
- commercialization: partial but increasing commercialization of both the tertiary education process and the operation of HEIs
- changes in the structure of tertiary education (ownership structure, types of HEIs, types of programmes and fields of study, diversification of education models)
- an increasingly obvious contradiction between quantitative expansion and the need to maintain quality standards

Before the transition there were about 112 HEIs whereas in 2008 there were 456, with the 325 bigger ones non-state run. Non-state institutions have to be run like an enterprise – they receive no funding from the state and so their students have to pay fees. There are also more Catholic universities now and they receive money from the state. They have more freedom and benefits. There are on-going national discussions in Poland about HE massification and commercialisation. In a recent reform, the Minister of HE wants to change the institutions and divide them into elite and teaching universities. Under this system, non-state ones would not become elite universities.

Lecturers are paid more in the non-state sector because, by law, non-state institutions have to have so many professors from the state sector. 50% of professors work half time in each type of university. Courses are similar across state and non-state HE institutions and tend to be very academic. For example, education is a popular degree programme both in state and non-state universities. Part-time and adult students have to pay fees in the state universities but younger students don't. Non-state university students tend to come from lower-socio economic groups and from smaller towns and rural areas. Many students in non-state universities study part-time and work to pay fees. Part-time study is 3 years and taught on Saturday/Sunday and also involves a lot of self study. Student motivation to study in HE is high.

Scotland
Scotland has a separate education system from England. In the past its universities were significantly less stratified and more open than in England, and since devolution the Scottish Government has sought to balance marketisation with continuing elements of statism; nevertheless, expansion and the marked extension of short cycle higher education in Scotland have also introduced new elements of complexity, diversity and indeed hierarchy. As in England, the political developments of the 1960s witnessed a steady expansion in the number of institutions as well as in their size, and the former central institutions were similarly granted university status in the early 1990s.

In Scotland, much of the expansion of the late 1980s and 1990s was focused on short cycle higher education, provided in colleges of further education. These courses have proven highly popular with students as well as appealing to employers. They tend to be more generalist and vocational in nature than university degrees; it takes one or two years of full-time study (longer if part time) to achieve a qualification; there are many more colleges than universities, and they are often situated in less socially advantaged areas; and they are significantly cheaper to provide than are university courses. They have

therefore opened up higher education to a new constituency, and have enabled greater growth than has been witnessed in England and Wales. Thus the initial higher education participation rate in Scotland for short and full cycle courses combined is around 45-47%, as against around 40% in England and Wales. The Scottish Government calculated the participation rate in 2007-8 at 43.5%; however, it uses a different measure of participation from that used by the other UK nations, so that direct comparisons are not possible. At the same time, while short cycle higher education recruits very successfully from new and non-traditional students, the universities in Scotland tend to recruit from a narrower social pool than elsewhere in the UK. There are formal possibilities of transferring from short cycle study into a university degree but in practice these are very limited. The result has therefore been an additional element of stratification within the system and so within the student body.

Spain
Until the 1970s the Spanish HE system was centralized, highly regulated, and elite. After the restoration of democracy in 1975 and the promulgation of the new constitution in 1978, university transformation was one of the main objectives of both academics and political parties, with the effect that HE has gradually become a mass system with legislative, administrative, budgetary and executive powers handed over to the autonomous regions. All Spanish universities have a strong regional dimension and student mobility between regions is low. Neo-liberal politics has led to strong challenges for universities, for example, financing in relation to projects and in demands that university lecturers are expected to increase their productivity.

At present Spain has 50 public universities (with 91% of registrations) and 27 non-state universities (9% of registrations, of these one third is owned by the Catholic Church). With the Bologna process, Spanish HE is beginning to develop greater differentiation amongst institutions, but at the present, universities are still very similar in terms of academic and research staff, degrees and procedures. Nevertheless the progressive internationalization and integration in the European Higher Education Area is helping gradually to promote differences among the different institutions.

Sweden
The Swedish system of higher education is considered open (Schuetze & Slowey, 2000) and relatively uniform as it comprises all types of post-secondary education including vocational programmes such as, for example, nursing and teaching schools. Within the Swedish higher education system, educational programmes from two to six years and single courses are available. Students have the ability to put together a bachelor degree or a masters degree by themselves in relation to certain criteria. In total, there are 60 institutions of higher education in Sweden, 14 state universities, and 22 state university colleges, three private universities and 24 small, special institutions within certain areas as for example theology, psychotherapy and art (HSV, 2008A). In terms of hierarchy, Technical High School universities have a high status, as has engineering as a discipline. Medical schools have elite students and programmes but they also have nursing programmes, so ensuring a more diverse overall student body in such institutions. One key trend in Sweden is the merging of several institutions into one. Thus, differentiation

is more within than across universities. In Stockholm, for example, the teaching school has been merged into Stockholm University (HSV, 2008A), several university colleges are discussing or are cooperating with each other with the idea of achieving economies of scale (HSV 2008B) .

Since the 1970s political reforms for widening access to HE have been undertaken (Bron & Agelii, 2000). There is a law stating that universities must have 10% non-traditional students but in practice some universities do not observe this. However, even in elite universities, there are shorter educational programmes with more non-traditional learners. There are however still differences between educational programmes and subjects concerning the participation of non-traditional students.

The above descriptions give some idea of the socio-cultural origins and increasing development of HE differentiation across all partner countries and their (potential) impact on access, especially for non-traditional students. This raises the question of exactly who are the non-traditional students

b. Access for whom – who are the non-traditional students?
In their 2008 international study, 'Improving Student Retention in Higher Education, Crosling, Thomas and Heagney identify the following groups of 'non-traditional' students as appearing regularly in international access and retention studies:

- low income or economic status groups
- people with disabilities
- students who are first in their family to participate in higher education
- mature age students
- people from minority groups and refugees

(Crosling et al, 2008: 18-19)

Crosling et al. make the point that there is considerable overlap amongst these groups which contributes to the wide range of formal and informal experiences which new students bring to higher education. Here Stuart (2006) identifies a confusion of terminology which can affect research comparisons where categories such as 'non-traditional', 'under-represented', 'working-class', 'widening participation students' and 'first-generation entrants' are often used interchangeably when each reflect a different, although some times overlapping group of people. Furthermore, previous European projects in HE have shown that definitions of social class, ethnicity and low income are very difficult to use in comparative international research (LIHE 2005, PRILHE 2007). Patterns of access to higher education has for a long time been associated with the costs of higher education. McCaig (2009) argues that the introduction of access agreements following the establishment in the UK of the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) has consolidated how English higher education institutions (HEIs) position themselves in the marketplace in relation to widening participation. However, the absence of a national bursary scheme has ed lto obfuscation rather than clarification from the perspective of the consumer. His paper analysed OFFA's 2008 monitoring report and a sample of twenty HEIs' original 2006 and revised or updated access agreements (2008) to draw

conclusions about the impact of these agreements on notions of 'fair access' and widening participation. The authors conclude that, unsurprisingly in an increasingly market-driven system, institutions use access agreements primarily to promote enrolment to their own programmes rather than to promote system-wide objectives. As a consequence of this marketing focus, previous differences between pre-1992 and post-1992 institutions in the UKI in relation to widening participation and fair access are perpetuated, leading to both confusion for consumers and an inequitable distribution of bursary and other support mechanisms.

In this context, it is worth noting the approach of a recent international research project conducted by Thomas and Quinn (2007). This research was drawn from ten countries, of whom four/five[2], Germany, Ireland, Sweden and the UK, are RANLHE project partner countries. Thomas and Quinn focus primarily on 'first generation entrants' but also note that this wide category cross-cuts other categories of 'non-traditional' students such as those identified above. An issue for potential first generational entrants is that they do not necessarily have role models that would influence their decision to participate in higher education (Cochrane, 2010). This could mean that they have unrealistic expectations of what to expepct in higher education. Chan et al (date) suggest that

> 'Widening participation policies are encouraging students from non-traditional backgrounds to enter higher education. Southampton Institute has found that many non-traditional students have had little preparation for academic life. These students often have unrealistic expectations of higher education, expectations that sometimes are at odds with a successful transition from secondary to higher education. In addition higher education institutions are often unaware of the way that higher education is perceived by non-traditional students. This situation cannot remain unchecked and requires some form of discourse. In this paper, a framework used to model a reflective discourse between stakeholders (student, institution) is introduced, and a case study demonstrating the behaviour of an automated negotiation mechanism is presented'.

International Overview of Retention Data
In the USA, the major issue around access and retention has persistently related to race and ethnicity. Tierney (1999) for example, maintained that Tinto's theory of college student retention misses the mark for minority students. With its implicit suggestions that such students must assimilate into the cultural mainstream and abandon their ethnic identities to succeed on predominantly White campuses, Tinto's framework is faulted not only for overlooking the history of ethnic oppression and discrimination in the U.S. but alsofor being theoretically flawed. Tierney proposed an alternative model based on cultural integrity and applied Bourdieu's notions of cultural capital and habitus to explain the disparities in participation and retnbetion. He described and analysed a programme that instills these qualities in inner-city Black and Hispanic adolescents as they prepare for college.

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[2] Thomas and Quinn do not consider Scotland and England separately

A longitudinal study on retention carried out in the USA (Beil et al. 1999) focused on the effects of academic and social integration and commitmenton retention, and examined factors associated with students' early commitment to an educational instititution and retention three years later. Tinto (1993) suggested that student departure is a direct outcome of students' lack of integration into the academic and social commtities of the college or university. Greater social and academic integration lead to greater commitment to educational goals and to institutions which in turn leads to lower attrition. Tinto (1993) defined academic integration as "the full range of individual experiences which occur in the forrnal and informal domains of . . . the academic systems of the universiy' (p. 118). Similarly, social integration referred to formal and informal social interactions that students experience at the university. As Tinto (1993) predicted. the majority of all institutional attrition occurs during the first year and prior to the beginning of the second year. Academic and social experiences during the first few weeks of college strongly influence students' integration into the academic and social communities. These experiences, whether positive or negative, ultimately affect student persistence. Noel (1985) speculated that by the first six weeks of the semester students have already decided whether or not they wfil leave the institution.

In Europe there has been less emphasis on race and ethnicity in considering patterns of participation and retention. In their project, Thomas and Quinn (2007, 42) identify some country-specific historical trends in relation to access for the four partner countries in this project. For example, in Germany, both social origin and family history have a decisive significance in the transition to HE, with only 12% of people from blue-collar households moving into HE. Three-quarters of the children of fathers who are HE graduates move on to HE in comparison with only one-third of children of fathers who only hold an intermediate (Mittlere Reife) qualification and only 1/6 of children from fathers with only a lower secondary certificate (Haupschulabschluss).

In Sweden, 26% of entrants have a working class background compared to the working-class representation of 35% in the population, while 25% of entrants are from the upper social classes compared to 18% in the population. In Sweden the representation of working-class entrants differs greatly (from 17% to 33%) according to HE institution and this pattern is replicated in the UK where an average of 25.5% of students in 'new' (post 1992) universities come from lower socio-economic groups while only 11.7% enter 'old' universities. Nationally 25% of entrants under 21 come from these socio-economic groups as opposed to their representation in 40% of the population as whole.

Until the mid-nineties the vast majority of students in the Irish Higher Education system were 'traditional' students –young people, usually Irish born citizens from privileged socio-economic groups who went straight from school to college and who chose to study full-time. While most students still fit this profile the steady expansion of higher education and the implementation of access policies over the past decade means that the student body is now more diverse. For example the number of mature students in HE has risen from 4.5 per cent in 1998 to 12.8 per cent (HEA, 2008) and the number of migrants and students with disabilities participating has increased. However, O'Connell, Clancy & McCoy (2006) have shown that despite the fact that greater numbers of people from lower socio-economic

groups attending third level institutions there continues to be an enormous disparity between the participation rates of the most wealthy and the least wealthy in Irish society.

A study by Fleming et al. (2010) explored how graduates who entered college as mature students, and 'disadvantaged' mature students, view and value Higher Education after graduating with a primary degree. The study highlighted the limited usefulness of the concept of disadvantaged mature student and the findings of the research were not significantly different whether one was a mature student or a disadvantaged mature student. The rationale given by the state for supporting mature students in Higher Education (HE) is that it will yield economic and social benefits for both the students and society. As a consequence a wide range of access policies has been developed to support the entry of 'non-traditional' students. However, to date there is very little research on what happens to such students while in HE and after graduation. The research gathered both quantitative and qualitative data from the graduates of NUI Maynooth, Trinity College Dublin and the Dublin Institute of Technology. The economic, social and personal benefits of participation in Higher Education were examined as were barriers to further career and career progression. Although most students valued their educational experience very highly the monetary benefits were more modest than expected. But the educational qualifications enabled many graduates to move away from routine work often with low levels of autonomy, status and pay. Overall, the research shows that for working-class mature students, students with disabilities and ethnic minorities HE is a highly valued 'transitional space' that affords a greater level of career choice and opportunities to renegotiate aspects of personal identities.

Further, in Ireland, the children of higher professionals had a participation rate of almost a hundred percent in 2004 compared to 33 per cent for people working in Semi-skilled and Unskilled jobs and 27 per cent for Non-manual workers (HEA, 2008). The low level of participation of people from a routine non-manual background is particularly noteworthy as this is the only socio-economic group whose participation has declined in the past decade an issue which has been highlighted in recent research (Fleming & Finnegan, 2010, McCoy et al, 2010).

The picture in Poland is also similar. According to a national survey on inequality in access to education, conducted among tertiary students at the request of the Ministry of National Education in 1999, most of those enrolled on full-time programmes were young people from families with the highest educational attainment (65% of the total population of full-time students). (E. Świerzbowska-Kowalik, H. Gulczyńska 2000). More recently, according to Białecki (2003) persons whose fathers have a tertiary education diploma have a nine-fold advantage in access to tertiary education over persons whose fathers have not completed primary education (as compared to chances increased by 4.9 times in Germany and only 4 times in Sweden). Apart from family background, other factors which create structural barriers to access to education include place of residence, economic background and disability. The place of residence is, to a large extent, related to the level of education attained by parents as well as the level of unemployment and poverty. According to the survey conducted by the MNE in January 2005, young people from rural areas accounted for 20.9% of the total population of full-time tertiary students in that year, as compared to 79.1% of students from urban areas, though most of them came from county-level and smaller towns (52.6% of the total). The breakdown of

students in the first year of evening, extramural and extension (part-time) programmes was similar .

In Spain, HE access has widened considerably - over the last three decades the number of students and universities has increases three-fold. Currently 30% of women and 22% of men between 24 and 34 years have graduated from universities. In spite of the progress made in widening university access, data on the socioeconomic origin of university students show a marked orientation towards families with medium to high incomes, indicating that there is much room for improvement in the area of equity. In Spain, a low percentage of students nationally achieve the qualification needed for university, particularly in Andalucía. It is important to stress that there is an important rate of drop-out in the Spanish compulsory stage of the secondary level, one of the highest of the OECD. Around 30% (in Andalucia, around 40%) of Spanish students leave compulsory secondary education without official certification. The proportion of young people taking a university course when their parents had no schooling was 9%, whereas this proportion was 65% (seven times greater) for young people whose parents had completed a university degree. One of the more important changes in Spain over the last few years has been the arrival of around five million immigrants, most of them coming from North and South-Saharan Africa, Eastern Europe and Latin America. This immigrant population is around 10% of the full Spanish population, but in the HE system foreigners students are only around 2%, most of them from Europe and Latin America, with insignificant presence of recent immigrants. (Ministry of Education and Science (2008): *OECD Thematic Review of Tertiary Education - Country Background Report for Spain.* May 2008b)

Data from the EUROSTUDENT project (2005-2008) indicates that with reference to the partner countries, in relation to occupational status and parents' education, Scotland is a country with one of the most open systems while Germany in one of the least open. Further to this both Spain and Ireland are identified as countries where the participation rate of students from a low-educated social background is relatively high (2008, 11).

c. Patterns of Retention
An influential research project in USA, identified confidence, academic goals, institutional commitment, social support, certain contextual influences (institutional selectivity and financial support), and social involvement all had a positive relationship to retention. The academic factors of high school grade point average (HSGPA) and ACT Assessment scores, and socioeconomic status (SES) had a positive relationship to college retention, the strongest being HSGPA, followed by SES and ACT Assessment scores. The overall relationship to college retention was strongest when SES, HSGPA, and ACT Assessment scores were combined with institutional commitment, academic goals, social support, academic self-confidence, and social involvement. In terms of performance, the findings indicate that of the non-academic factors, academic self-confidence and achievement motivation had the strongest relationship to college grade point average. Of the academic factors, both HSGPA and ACT Assessment scores had a stronger relationship to GPA than did SES, the strongest being HSGPA followed by ACT Assessment scores and SES. The overall relationship to college performance was

strongest when ACT Assessment scores, HSGPA, and SES were combined with academic self-confidence and achievement motivation. Their findings have significant implications for designing effective retention programmes. Although many programmes rely on traditional academic factors to identify students at risk of dropping out, our findings suggest that this approach may be limited and may miss students who are at risk due to other, non-academic factors. Students who master course content but fail to develop adequate academic self-confidence, academic goals, institutional commitment, and social support and involvement may still be at risk of dropping out. At the same time, of course, postsecondary institutions cannot and should not ignore the principal contribution that the academic factors make toward improvements in college retention and performance. Among the best precollege indicators of first-year college GPA is performance on standardised achievement tests (ACT Assessment) and high school GPA; and these indicators are readily available and, according to the authors of the report, easy to use. (Lotkowski, Robbins and Noeth, 2004).

Clearly further study of specific categories of non-traditional students is important for understanding and researching issues of retention and drop-out. This will be developed later, in section 5. The access indications above inevitably only give an approximate and unreliable basis for comparison of access between different partner countries. Unfortunately, the picture in terms of retention and success is even less clear cut. This is partly due to limited availability of reliable data. But this in turn is related to the different terms used to describe the broad area of retention. The terms (or translated terms) 'survival', 'completion', 'persistence', 'results' and 'continuation', all with different meanings, are used in different national contexts (and sometimes within the same national context). For instance, in a recent international comparative study of retention commissioned by the UK National Audit Office, Von Stolk, Tiessen, Clift & Levitt (2007) noted that in Ireland the various ways of calculating completion, graduation and survival rates often yields confusing and apparently contradictory evidence. Indeed, Longden (2002:9) identifies 13 different terms relating to retention which he has found in the literature. This problem of terminology is explored further in the section below on International Patterns of Retention.

What Thomas and Quinn (2007) do show (although using relatively old statistics related to 1993/4 entry) is that in Sweden there are differences in 'results' according to social background, but that these differences are small, much smaller than entry rates. The international data available on retention for different social groups appears patchy, certainly according to the 2007 work of Thomas and Quinn. What they do conclude, however, is:

> *It appears that irrespective of how students from lower-socio-economic groups are defined, they have lower rates of participation in higher education than students from higher socio-economic groups. Once in higher education however, rates of success are not necessarily lower for students from these groups. This suggests the need to further explore aspects of students' experience in higher education, how this relates to their access to social, cultural and financial capital,*

and how education systems and institutions can facilitate the success of students from non-traditional backgrounds (Thomas & Quinn 2007: 47)

There is some evidence that such non-traditional students tend to drop out more than traditional students (see section 5), although this may be connected as much to the practices of the institutions that tend to recruit them than reflect the characteristics of the students themselves. The recent UK National Audit report (2007: 19) shows that continuation rates (to the second year of study) vary considerably according to type of institution with the highest average belonging to the Russell group (like Warwick), then other pre 1992 universities (like Kent), then small and specialist universities (like Christchurch Canterbury) and lastly, post 1992 universities (like Greenwich, Kingston, and Southampton Solent). However significant differences in retention rates also occur between full-time and part-time students and according to area of study (NAO 2007: 18-22). Particular student groups which are less likely to continue their studies are: those with low initial qualifications, those taking particular subjects (science, technology, engineering, mathematics[3] and modern foreign languages (the last one is a particular UK problem!), men, students who enter at 20 rather than 18, those studying full-time in an FE College and those studying part-time in an HE institution (2007, 22).

A pattern of widely varying retention rates between individual institutions and between the Universities and Institutes of Technology has emerged from a number of studies examining completion and non-completion rate amongst third level students in Ireland. The most comprehensive research on the topic discovered a high completion rate in Universities of 83 per cent and a relatively low completion rate of 57 per cent in Institutes of Technology (Eivers, Flanagan and Morgan, 2002: Morgan, Flanagan, & Kellaghan, 2001). This may be significant as historically the IT sector has attracted a higher proportion of students from a working class background than the universities and is seen as being "on the front line in the widening participation agenda" (OECD, 2004:32). However, a more recent study suggests that there is now no significant difference in the completion rate for full-time courses of study in the Institutes of Technology when compared to Irish universities. Kinsella and Roe (2006) estimated that 87% of degree students and 70% of diploma students finished their course in 2004.

Researchers who have examined retention in relation to social class have disagreed on how important socio-economic background is to the likelihood of completion (Eivers, Flanagan and Morgan, 2002, Healy, Carpenter and Lynch, 1999, Hurley, 2004, Mathews & Mulkeen, 2002).

Little sustained attention has been given to other types of 'non-traditional' students in this body of research. Similarly, there is conflicting evidence on the importance of gender as a factor in student retention and withdrawal. However, there does appear to be more conclusive evidence that higher prior educational attainment has a positive impact on who 'stays the course'. Subject choice is also important and students studying Science, Mathematics and Computing are less likely to complete their course and those who enter

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[3] In Ireland too, the highest levels of non-completion in both Institutes of Technology and Universities are in subjects such as computer science, maths and engineering.

high status professional education such as medicine and dentistry are the most likely to finish their degree programme successfully.

d. International Overview of Retention Data
Appendix A gives some idea of the survival rates in tertiary education across a range of OECD countries, including all the project partner countries. Here 'survival' means survival to graduation. A key column is probably column (2) 'Survival Rates in tertiary-type A education ', "ISCED 5A, programmes that are largely-theory-based and are designed to provide sufficient qualifications for entry to advanced research programmes and professions with high skills requirements" (OECD Glossary). That is the definition used by the UK National Audit Office (2007: 17) in its recent study of retention of students in HE'. In Appendix A, column (6) covers 'Survival rates in 'tertiary-type B education, "ISCED 5B programmes are typically shorter than (tertiary-type A) and focus on practical, technical or occupational skills for direct entry into the labour market" and this category would probably include, for example, 2 year full-time, 3 year part-time Foundation Degrees in England and similar shorter, more vocational-type degrees amongst partner countries. If both these programmes are counted, the relevant column for overall comparison is (1) in Appendix A.

At a glance. according to the table in Appendix A, the different survival rates for partner countries are:

	ISCED 5A	ISCED 5B	5A + 5BCombined
Germany	73%	79%	75%
Ireland	83%	69%	78%
Poland	66%	74%	66%
Spain	74%	79%	75%
Sweden	60%	68%	61%
UK[4]	78%	53%	71%
OECD average	71%	67%	70%
EU 19 average	71%	68%	69%

Whichever figures are used, we need to note that they probably do not accurately compare like with like, because of the different ways they are compiled in different countries as well as the different higher education systems that operate. Different measures are used to track retention in different countries and very different understandings of 'drop-out' are used across the partner countries.[5] These issues are elaborated and explored in greater depth in the project's 'Overview of National Retention Statistics'.

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[4] OECD do not disaggregate England and Scotland but the National Audit Report of 2007 (p23) shows a 78.1% HE course completion rate in England as against 73.8% for Scotland. However once again direct comparisons are unreliable because there are differences in access rates, pre-entry qualifications, educational structures, finance and types of student

[5] For example, in a recent UK study, Yorke and Longden (2008: 43) posed the question: "drop-out or stop-out[5]". They found that 69.2% of full-time UK students classified as 'drop-outs' (that is those who had discontinued a programme of HE study), when questioned, had already transferred or intended to transfer to study at the same or another institution.
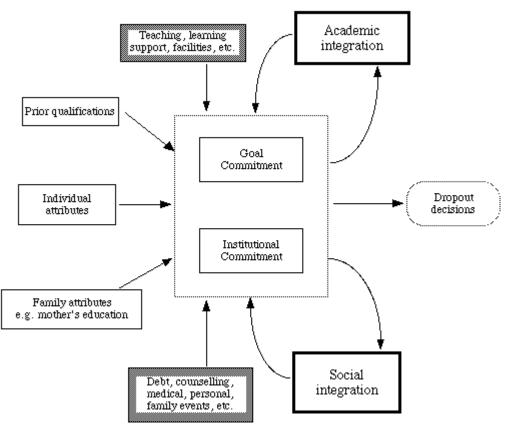
Spadey (1970) examined the dropout process from higher education from a variety of operational definitions and intellectual perspectives. A methodological analysis, critique, and synthesis of the empirical literature suggested that a more rigorous interdisciplinary approach must be attempted. He went on to use a model based on Durkheim's theory of suicide which provided a fruitful vehicle for summarising a large proportion of then current research, and focusing future attention on the interaction between student attributes (i.e., dispositions, interests, attitudes, and skills) and the influences, expectations, and demands imposed by various sources in the university environment. Both the academic and social systems of the university were regarded as important frameworks from which the dropout process – Spadey argued - must be examined..

From the above figures and discussion, it is clear that international (and inter-partner) comparisons on retention are highly problematic. Nevertheless, some of the above figures may give some approximate reference points for further exploration of issues around retention and drop-out.

4. Issues of Student Retention – different theoretical perspectives

a. Tinto's 'integrationist' model

Much of the early literature on retention and drop-out stems from the United States of America. A key writer here is Vincent Tinto. From 1975, when he first wrote "Dropout from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research" in the *Review of Educational Research,* Tinto has been a leading figure in examining issues of student retention. The most commonly referred to model in the student retention/dropout literature is Tinto's. Below is a version of the Tinto model adapted by Draper and available on the World Wide Web (2006). (http://www.psy.gla.ac.uk/~steve/XXXX.html)

Adapted by Draper from Tinto,V. (1975) "Dropout from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research" *Review of Educational Research* vol.45, pp.89-125.

Since 1975, Tinto's interactionist model, described by Longden (2004: 128) as having 'near paradigmatic' status, has been an important reference point for studying student retention in higher education. According to Longden (2004: 126-7), Tinto's longitudinal view of student retention embodies three consecutive periods:

- 'separation' where a student's individual entry characteristics directly influence departure decisions, commitment to the institution and to the shared goal of persisting to graduation;

- 'integration' where initial commitment to the institution and the objective of graduation affects the student's integration into the academic and social systems of HE:
- 'assimilation' which entails structural integration through the meeting of the explicit standards required by the HE institution

Key factors are the extent of congruency between the individual student and the social system of the HEI. The student's initial level of commitment, to the institution and the goal of graduation influence her/his level of subsequent commitments.

More recently, in a 2003 paper for the European Access Network, Tinto has identified five conditions for student retention: **expectations, support, feedback, involvement and learning.** First, students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that expect them to succeed. Students, especially those who have been historically excluded from higher education, are affected by the climate of expectations on campus and by their perceptions of the expectations faculty and staff hold for their individual performance.

Second, students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that provide academic, social, and personal support. Most students, especially those in their first year of college, require some form of support. Support may be provided in structured forms like summer bridging programmes, mentoring programmes, student clubs or it may arise in everyday student contact with faculty and staff advisors. Whatever its form, support needs to be readily available and connected to other parts of student experience at college, not separated from it.

Third, students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that provide frequent and early feedback about their performance as they are trying to learn and persist. The use of early warning systems, classroom assessment techniques, and frequent mini-exams can provide students with much needed information about their performance so that they can adjust their performance in order to persist.

Fourth, students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that involve them as valued members of the institution. The frequency and quality of contact with staff and other students is an important independent predictor of student persistence. It is true for women as well as men, 'students of color', and part-time as well as full-time students. Involvement matters particularly during the first year of study when student attachments are so tenuous and the pull of the institution so weak

Fifth, and most importantly, students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that foster learning. Learning has always been the key to student retention. Students who learn are students who stay. Institutions that are successful in building settings that educate their students are successful in retaining their students. Students who are actively involved in learning, that is who spend more time on task especially with others, are more likely to learn and, in turn, more likely to stay (Tinto 2003)

Tinto's model is based on the experiences and outcomes of a range of students in the USA and do not focus specifically on 'non-traditional' students. As such, the Tinto model has been criticised as being 'characterized by assumptions about student conformity and adaptation to the institution which may be culturally specific, and thus not transferable…' (Ozga & Sukhandan 1998). Laing et al (2003: 178-179) are also critical of how a focus on fixed variables ignores personal meanings and so has led researchers to concentrate on the descriptive properties of withdrawal rather than trying to identify explanatory properties.

However it is Tinto's interactionist approach to student integration which has come under the most recent and sustained critique. While it does take some account of external factors, it has been criticised for being '….rather self-contained in that it has relatively little to say about the impact of external factors in shaping students' perceptions, commitments and reactions' (Yorke 1999). In a subsequent paper, Yorke (2004: 25) goes on to cite evidence from a range of studies to the effect that 'factors extraneous to the students' experience in higher education exert more influence on older students than they do on younger students, and that these are not strongly represented in the (Tinto's) model.

b. Sociocultural Theories
This highlights a different theoretical approach which is concerned with social/cultural understandings and explanations of student performance in higher education. As such, it may have particular significance for 'non-traditional' students. In their 2005 book on *Degrees of Choice*, Reay, David and Ball draw heavily on Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital, habitus and field to understand and explain student choice in higher education. The following extract summarises several key points:

> *…, the concept of habitus emphasises the enduring influence of a range of contexts, familial, peer group, institutional and class culture, and their subtle, often indirect, but still pervasive influence on (HE) choices. It foregrounds the power of implicit and tacit expectations, affective responses and aspects of cultural capital such as confidence and entitlement, often marginalised in academic research.* (Reay et al. 2005, 27)

Reay et al's work highlights how previous social and cultural experience have an important impact on student access. They look at a range of higher education applicants with clear differences underpinned by class and ethnic habitus and greatly differing levels of cultural capital. They show how some 'traditional' entrants' are in Bourdieu's terms 'fish in water'. Their higher education choices and careers are a result of living out 'normal' biographies which are "linear, anticipated and predictable, unreflexive transitions, often gender and class specific, rooted in well-established lifeworlds". In contrast, students from working class and ethnic minority backgrounds encounter higher education as an unfamiliar field and are 'fish out of water.' Their higher education choices (and careers) are heavily influenced by external factors like financial and family circumstances, employment status and the apparent ethnic mix of different universities. As a consequence socio-cultural theorists argue that to account for such choices requires

a complex model of how class and culture function and how institutions, pedagogy and students' life experience interact (Lynch & Baker, 2005: Lynch & O'Riordan, 1998).

This emphasis on the impact of cultural capital and habitus in HE choice can be extended to interaction within higher education, and, by implication, issues of retention and drop-out. Reay et al (2005, 28-34) argue, in the context of HE, that when habitus encounters a field with which it is not familiar, the resulting disjunctures can generate change and transformation but also disquiet, ambivalence, insecurity and uncertainty.

With specific reference to retention, Berger (2000, 113ff) makes the following propositions:

- Institutions with the highest level of cultural capital will have the highest retention rates
- Students with higher levels of cultural capital are more likely to persist across all types of institution, than are students with less access to cultural capital
- Students with high levels of cultural capital are most likely to persist at institutions with correspondingly high levels of organisational cultural capital
- Students with access to lower levels of cultural capital are most likely to persist at institutions with correspondingly low levels of organisational cultural capital

These propositions may appear unduly deterministic, particularly in the light of more recent perspectives and developments on widening participation in HE but they remain a useful reference point for interventions to improve retention in higher education.

A sociocultural approach highlights the importance of 'institutional habitus' where organisational culture reproduces particular social and cultural capital, usually of benefit to the middle classes (Stuart 2006: 171). This situation is identified very starkly in a German context by Alheit, where as a result of his international comparative studies, he concludes that:

> *German universities…..are surrounded by an aura of exclusiveness, regardless of what one studies. People coming to the university from non-academic professional milieus are beset by feelings of inferiority when they attend courses. They feel stupid, too old, inflexible and somehow just not belonging. There does seem to be a 'university habitus', a symbolic power of knowledge surrounding the weird fuss about the excellence of German universities* (2010, 1)

In taking a more pro-active way approach in the interests of establishing a more equitable mass higher education system, Longden (2004, 133) suggests that:

> *If the habitus of underrepresented groups is understood then it is possible to provide compensatory experiences to bring the level of cultural capital nearer equity with those of dominant groups attending higher education.*

This analysis could be seen as over-simplistic in the weight it ascribes to, and the potential it identifies in, 'compensatory experiences' within HE. However, it does raise fundamental issues about whether, in tackling issues of student retention and drop-out, the emphasis should be on HE institutions and staff somehow filling a student cultural /academic deficit or whether the stress should be much more on the ways HE institutions need to change in order to facilitate student success. Recent work in the UK (HEFCE 2008; Cook , 2008; Yorke and Longden 2008) appears to favour a greater emphasis on student 'success' which is all together a wider and more positive focus and avoids unduly pointing up student academic and cultural deficits. This will be discussed further in section 5.

In this context, the developing work of Thomas is especially relevant. In her 2002 paper, 'Student Retention in Higher Education: the role of institutional habitus', she identifies and discusses, on the one hand, seven key factors, derived from the literature, which influence student retention in higher education:
- Academic preparedness
- Academic experience
- Institutional expectations and commitment
- Academic and Social Match
- Finance and Employment
- Family Support and commitments and
- University Support Services (Thomas 2002, 425-430)

This kind of analysis has prompted an emphasis in the UK on the 'student life cycle approach' within widening participation. This identifies different stages: aspiration raising, pre-entry activities, admissions, first term/semester, moving through the course and progression; at which university student support can be targeted.
http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/institutions/wp/lifecycle
While this approach offers some useful practical pointers for universities, and has been influential in UK policy and practice, a continuing concern is that the life cycle is defined primarily in institutional terms, and, as such, could be seen as an attempt to classify and control student behaviour rather than engage in institutional change. Moreover, the concept tends to marginalise socio-economic circumstances, and prioritises encounters within the HE system. This points to a complementary need for more biographical research approach which focuses attention on the ways in which people make sense of their lives through narratives about their life histories – narratives which often feature factors and experiences that are nothing to do with HE as such. This will be examined later in this section.

Thomas draws from the work of Bourdieu and Reay et al, in focusing on institutional habitus which "should be understood as more than the culture of educational institutions; it refers to relational issues and priorities, which are deeply embedded, and sub-consciously informing practice." (Thomas 2002: 431) In relation to student retention in HE she goes on to argue that:

> *..if an institutional habitus is inclusive and accepting of difference, and does not prioritize or valorise one set of characteristics, but rather celebrates and prizes diversity and difference....students from diverse backgrounds will find greater acceptance of and respect for their own practices and knowledge, and this in turn will promote higher levels of persistence in HE* (Thomas 2002, 431)

Thomas uses this analysis of institutional habitus to argue for a comprehensive and critical exploration, understanding and development of the different institutional practices that impact on student experience, retention, success and drop-out.

c. Sociocultural Explanations for Drop-out

Thomas also uses her exploration of the notions of habitus and institutional habitus to focus more specifically on drop-out:

> *If a student feels that they do not fit in, that their social and cultural practices are inappropriate and that their tacit knowledge is undervalued, they may be more inclined to withdraw earlier* (2002, 431)

However, she later combined with others (Quinn et al, 2005) to take this view of drop-out a stage further. Based on in-depth contact with young, first generation, working-class students through a participative 'research jury' method, Quinn et al argue that drop-out should be posed not just as an educational problem, but also as a manifestation of socio-cultural change:

> *Although drop-out is increasingly recognised as complex and multifaceted, it is still generally conceptualised as a path that can be traced, however winding, with problems that can be rectified through institutional change or better student support.* (2005, 63)

They go on to highlight the importance of understanding drop-out as a cultural narrative that has an element of self-fulfilling prophecy:

> *This narrative creates an expectation that in this (working-class) area and in these institutions (new universities) many students will drop out.* (ibid)

This argument as it relates to working-class students will be explored further in section 5. However in the context of this project, Quinn et al also make the important observation that:

> *To understand drop-out we need to look beyond student support needs or institutional barriers to cultural narratives and local contexts.* (2005, 57)

This focus on the socio-economic status and cultural background of prospective students adds a different dimension to other identified key factors like the importance of subject choice, route into study, geographical location and type of HE institution (NAO, 2007).

Importantly for this project, it also serves to highlight the usefulness of biographical research in exploring and illuminating student experience, prior to and within higher education. Using a more grounded biographical research, issues in retention, success and drop-out can be investigated in greater depth.

d. Biographical Research on Access, Retention and Drop-out in HE
There is a substantial body of biographical research on non-traditional learners in higher and adult education that has developed in recent years. This is part of a more general trend towards using biographical and or narrative methods in social and educational research more widely, across Europe, and beyond, including in the Francophone world (Merrill and Alheit 2004; Chamberlayne et al, 2000; West 1996; Merrill, 1999; Burke 2002; Johnston & Merrill, 2005a, 2005b; Merrill and West, in press; Biesta et al, 2008; Gonzalez Monteagudo, in press). This research has focused on the broader socio-cultural as well as what is termed the 'psychosocial' contexts of learners' lives, understood via the stories people tell of their experiences and interactions in higher education and what these represent in the context of whole lives. The research has enabled a more complex understanding of non-traditional learners to develop, in relation to the life course, to questions of identity, and how people negotiate uncertain social, economic as well as personal landscapes, or varying habituses.

Biographical perspectives, by their nature, encourage an eclectic, interdisciplinary and lifewide form of enquiry. Researchers are influenced by the Chicago School, C. Wright Mills (1959/70) and non-determinist sociology, feminism, oral history, literary studies as well as post-structuralist perspectives. Wright Mills, especially, insisted on an interdisciplinary imagination in which the biographical subject is conceptualized as a historical as well as social being: lives are structured by historical forces (of war and or economic imperatives) but also by class, gender, ethnicity and education. But subjects, in turn, can reflexively and agentically shape their biographies, however contingently, in new ways, not least by participation in educational processes.

The growth of biographical research on non-traditional learners is partly fuelled by a dissatisfaction with survey and other traditional research methods. These can be reductive and superficial, when, for instance, building typologies of learners and their motives. Woodley et al (1987), in a large-scale survey of mature students in higher education in the United Kingdom, distinguished between vocational and 'more personal reasons' in 'choosing to learn'. Linden West (1996), using a biographical approach, illustrated, in some depth, the shaky epistemological basis of the distinction: of how vocational motivation could be rooted in deeply personal concerns, even if people might initially provide a vocational rationale for their studies, influenced by the power of instrumental ideology in the wider culture. Given an opportunity to revisit their stories, in the context of longitudinal research, participants could become more aware of how much they might have rationalized their motivation in the terms dictated by powerful cultural narratives (getting a better job, for instance) to the neglect of more personal issues (a sense of educational failure, under-achievement or feelings of meaninglessness) (West, 1996). The nature of the stories people, and the interplay of ideology and personal narrative becomes a prime focus in work of this kind not least because the learner is conceived to

be the main character and potential author of a life and can find a more critical, confident and agentic voice in processes of story telling within educational settings (Fleming, 2003).

The development of biographical research has been especially strong in the German-speaking world including studies of mature students in higher education. There has been a desire to understand the everyday biographical practice of ordinary participants in the context of their particular worlds and taking a dynamic view of them as active agents in making these worlds (Fischer-Rosenthal, 1995). This has gone hand in hand with the development of systematic qualitative procedures for generating and analysing narrative material. In this connection, mention should be made of the concept of the narrative interview, developed by Fritz Schütze as well as his sociological work on biographical narratives (Schütze, 1983). This has been important in influencing other researchers in illuminating the complex and often contradictory educational careers of learners (e.g. Alheit and Dausien, 1985, 1996; Alheit and Glass 1986; Kokemohr and Marotzki 1989; Apitzsch 1990a; Nittel 1991, 1992; Nittel and Marotzki, 1997). What is termed 'objective' or 'structural hermeneutics' has shaped this research and has produced stimulating results in the identification of latent educational strategies and possibilities among adult learners (e.g. Kade 1985, 1989; Kade and Seitter 1996). The particular value of building comparable methods of case reconstruction lies in the fact that the relationship between "*first grade"* interpretations of reality, i.e. the interpretations by the interviewees themselves, and the "*second grade"* interpretations of the researchers, remains transparent (Alheit and Dausien 1996). Such a procedure can also create knowledge which is relevant to practice and can be used in educational institutions. It is also of value to participants themselves. This corpus of work also challenges the classical and supposedly 'hard' results of statistical research on learners, even when derived from carefully accumulated lifetime data (e.g. Becker 1993). Such studies provide no convincing base to interpret real educational processes and why learners may act and feel as they do in the symbolic spaces of the university (cf. Alheit 1993; Nittel 1996).

Peter Alheit has been an important contributor to this body of research. He uses Bourdieu's work on French universities to illuminate what can be a clash of lifeworlds when students enter the social and symbolic space of the University. Note is made of how students with a working class background, for example, may find it difficult to hide the influence of a particular lifeworld: 'the traditional working class milieu is characterized by a sense of cooperation and solidarity, while the social space of universities consists of hierarchies and status in relation to faculties and disciplines' (Merrill and Alheit, 2004: 155). Alheit considers two dimensions to be especially important in understanding the socio-cultural context or habitus of the university: first, the social capital that defines the prestige that a certain discipline has; second, intellectual capital marking the scientific standing of a particular discipline. These varying habituses will influence students in different ways.

What is critical for understanding student experience in the spaces of the university is that traditional faculties (such as law, medicine or natural sciences) can be distinct in their capital in comparison to more 'modern' disciplines (the social sciences and education, for

instance). The former rank higher in the symbolic space of the university. Non-traditional adult learners often enter lower status universities and disciplines (such as education and social science). However, both in Germany and the United Kingdom, in the newer universities (the post-1992 universities in the UK) the hierarchy of knowledge, and its associated symbolic power, may be less distinct and there are more and wider opportunities for entry and study for mature students; and potentially, at least, less of a clash of very different lifeworlds. However, a degree from a marginal university can decrease subsequent opportunities in the labour market (Merrill and Alheit, 2004).

Gender Issues
As noted feminism has been an important influence in biographical research on non-traditional learners, especially in the United Kingdom, both conceptually and methodologically. Biographies are understood by reference to a broader understanding of women's lives. Rosalind Edwards (1993) has chronicled and theorised women's experience in higher education, for instance, by relating these to a gendered culture, which includes universities themselves. She demonstrated how higher education could have a double-edged effect on women: policies and institutions can concern themselves with inputs and outputs and privilege disciplines over students, to the detriment of women learners and their experience. Moreover, the combination of education with family life is never easy for women, given what she sees to be the masculine cultural identity of universities with its lack of concern for the emotional dimensions of learning alongside a continuing maldistribution of emotional labour in families. Crucially feminism has also helped create more collaborative and dialogical approaches in researching lives (McClaren, 1985, Edwards, 1993, Merrill, 1999). This has involved a challenge to traditional power relationships between researchers and researched while the subjectivity of both interviewer and interviewee is acknowledged and the self of the researcher is recognised as being present in the research process (Merrill and West, in press).

There is increasing attention paid to male and ethic minority students as well as women (West, 1996, Archer et al, 2003). Rennie Johnston and Barbara Merrill (2005b) have used biographical methods to explore and theorise the experiences of both genders in higher education, especially people from working class backgrounds. They illuminate, in their work, how higher education can be a fragmenting experience – echoing other studies - as people struggle to straddle differing lifeworlds. But higher education can help people build stronger senses of agency too and more diverse forms of cultural capital. Bourdieu's concept of habitus as well the sociology of careers (in the broadest sense) are utilised to interrogate how particular people may integrate working class and ethnic cultural capital with that of the university, as they build more diverse identities. The rich capital that results – when working, later, as a teacher, for instance – can allow graduates to become translators for working class parents who may struggle with the norms and languages of educational institutions. This theme finds an echo in German biographical research in what Alheit labels 'integrators' (see below). These are people who are more able to combine and synthesise different social capital rather than experience fracture in straddling different worlds.

Psychosocial and narrative perspectives
Linden West has also developed what he terms a psychosocial perspective on learning and non-traditional learners. He is influenced by feminism and oral history and uses psychoanalytic perspectives in considering what enables learners to keep on keeping on in what can be conflict ridden and potentially fragmenting experience (West, 1996; West, 2001). Drawing on the work of Donald Winnicott (1971), he characterises higher education as a transitional space in which there is a negotiation and renegotiation of self in relationship to others and the cultural world of the university. Basic questions may be asked of who a person is, has been and might want to be, which can provoke intense anxiety about the capacity to cope with change or whether a person is good enough in the eyes of significant people, whether other students or tutors. New transitions, via 'unconscious memory in feeling', (an idea deriving from clinical practice), may evoke connections with earlier transitional moments, such as going to school or in adolescence. Past and present may elide at such times and transitions may be especially fraught, if past ones have been traumatic.

However, West also chronicles how transitional space can be claimed in higher education and stronger senses of self forged in the process, with the help of new relationships and significant others, such as the good teacher. These are people who may inspire the learner and with whom they can identify. The other may be experienced as understanding and valuing what the learner is struggling to do and be. Students can also draw on new discourses – such as feminism - and, in interaction with others, begin to compose alternative and less self-disparaging narratives, creating, in effect, new kinds of psychosocial capital. It is to be noted that 'stories constitute a frame of intelligibility…. it is the…self-narrative that determines which aspects of our lived experience get expressed, and it is…self narrative that determines the shape of our lived experiences…these stories actually shape…our lives…' (White, 1995: 13-14). Higher education provides potential space for creating new self-narratives.

However, it should be noted that West, and other theorists (see Sclater, 2004), challenge what they perceive as a tendency to reduce processes of restorying lives – as in higher education - to a matter, simply, of positioning or re-positioning in discourse, as in some poststructuralist readings. This fails, they insist, to do justice to the psychological complexities of how people, to an extent, dynamically if often unconsciously position themselves in particular discourses as well as find the resources to challenge and change their positioning. West uses psychoanalytic object relations theory to illuminate the ambivalence and ambiguity that can lie at the heart of educational participation and the generation of new self-narratives. The self, in this perspective, is conceived to be deeply contingent and dependent on others. Drawing on clinical insights, psyche works like a cast of characters in a play. There may be characters that stifle, abuse or discourage us and these intersubjective dynamics are translated into intrasubjective ones in which self-disparagement can be strong. Learners, even apparently very confident people, such as educators entering a new Masters course, can be riddled with anxiety when engaging with the uncertain space represented by a new programme or institution. These moments can, largely unconsciously, reconnect with earlier excursions into strange and unfamiliar territory, such as school or even birth itself where we are pitched out into a potentially

terrifying world and are utterly dependent on others for survival. People can feel, to greater and lesser degrees, anxious and defensive as a result and older narratives may be clung on to tenaciously as a way of trying to manage uncertainty and self-doubt (West, 2007).

Europe-wide research
Agnieszka Bron, in Sweden, has focused on access for non-traditional learners in different disciplines at the University of Stockholm. She has also engaged with a number of colleagues in a European Union TSER research on adult access policies and practices and their consequences for the participation of adults in Belgium, Germany, Ireland, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom. Bron has employed biographical interviews with lecturers as well as students to identify different experience and patterns of access. In Sweden students entering the social sciences and humanities tend to be female, more mature, and to come from non-academic homes while technology and natural science subjects attract younger male students. Her work indicates that Swedish students have more opportunity than others in different countries to gain access through adult education institutions and or work experience. They also have better financial support from the State. The students also enjoy learning in mixed groups – consisting of traditional and non-traditional learners - finding these provide more opportunities for the exchange of knowledge, experience and mutual learning. Lecturers were also happy to have mature students alongside younger ones because they enhanced the quality of the experience for everyone (Bron, 1995; 2000 and 2003).

Traditional learners have also been a focus for research in Sweden. Inga Elgqvist-Saltzman has used lifeline approaches in researching more traditional students, with reference to gender and different patterns of living and learning among female and male students (see Bjerén, Elgqvist-Saltzman 1994; Elgqvist-Saltzman 1993). Male students, she discovered, tended to have more 'typical' learning histories, learning and working full time while female students were often learning and working part-time, including taking maternity breaks. Swedish researchers have also participated, as noted, in trans European work on learners and learning in higher education, which includes a European Socrates-Grundtvig project on Learning in Higher Education: Improving practice for non-traditional students (2002-2004) and a study of Reflective Independent Learning in Higher Education (2005-2007). In the first of these studies the research team generated a typology of non-traditional students, across Europe: there were three 'types' of students, in the 'ideal' Weberian sense: hesitators, postponers and formalizers (see, Bron & Lönnheden, 2005). Hesitators tended to do well at school but did not aspire to higher education directly. They were often the first in their family to have the opportunity to go to university but hesitated in doing so. Postponers came from academic families yet did not proceed to higher education directly either but entered later, when more mature. Formalizers worked in the professions where there might be a requirement to undertake some higher education and gain certification as part of developing a professional portfolio.

Peter Alheit has also chronicled narratives of mature students in varying cultural milieux across German universities. He has similarly built learner typologies. Three categories, he

concludes, are common: patchworkers, educational climbers and integrators. The first two types, he suggests, are 'losers' while the last can be seen as 'winners' by reference to their life stories. A patchworker can come from a broken family background, have had an unsuccessful school career and may also have unrealistic aspirations for the future. A typical educational climber comes from a petty bourgeois background, one characterised by traditional gender roles. She may have been divorced while climbing up the educational ladder and can experience a gap between the university and petty bourgeois lifeworlds, with a potential severing of links between them in consequence. An integrator, on the other hand, straddles worlds more successfully and is able to integrate differing forms of social capital as well as widening a social network without excessive experiences of fragmentation. Moreover, patchworkers and climbers often enter more marginal universities and their educational journeys can be seen as more risky in these terms. The integrators, or 'winners', on the other hand are located in traditional universities and higher status disciplines such as biology or medicine. They appear to possess large amounts of social capital, making their trajectories potentially less risky (Merrill and Alheit, 2004). Peter Alheit's work raises many psychosocial questions about processes of integration or disintegration in negotiating lifeworlds: to do with the resources people draw on to manage transitional processes and integrate different kinds of social capital.

It should be noted that much of the biographical research on non-traditional students has focused on mature or older learners, yet biographical methods are also appropriate for understanding the experiences of non-traditional students of all ages, which includes the socio-cultural, psychosocial and narrative influences at work in creating success, retention and or drop-out of students and how these may be understood and theorized by the people concerned.

5. **Success, Retention and Drop-out for non-traditional students**

a. Changing conceptions of 'non-traditional' students

According to Ely writing in the USA in 1997, the non-traditional students are adult learners who were making up the new minajority of students in further and higher education: the 'typical non-traditional student' is an adult, aged 25 and older, who has returned to further or higher education, either full- or part-time. She was echoing Broomfield's earlier research (1993) on the importance of mature students for widening participation. The non-traditional student is having to balance studies with employment. Typically, students are either full-time in education, working part-time; or they are part-time students who ar ein full-time employment. This pattern of participation in higher education now characterises higher education students in Europe. Most are having to balance their working lives and their academic studies. If they are fortunate, they may have found sympathetic employers prepared to release them to studying for higher qualifications on a day release basis. Alternatively, these adult learners will be registered for full-time studies, but having to 'work their way through college' undertaking work roles on a part-time basis. And if these students are fortunate, their employment will be related to their studies. However, often their employment is a means to support their studies, and may be of little relevance to their anticip-ated future careers.

In the 1970s and 1980s, in the USA and across Europe, with a growing demand for vocationally-relevant training, increasing numbers of workers were undertaking training in the workplace, rather than spending time in further education or higher education. (Ely, 1997).   This was a reflection of the state of the world economy which was in recession. Within a decade, these adult learners were being offered new opportunities to access higher education, with new kidns of vocationally relevant degrees being offered, which had work experience and placements as essential features of their programme. Traditional students remained those making the transition directly from school to higher education. This was followed, however, by a trend towards taking a 'gap year', extending the transition from school to higher education, by gaining experience of work, often through voluntary work overseas. Heath (2007) argues that embarking upon a pre-university gap year is an increasingly popular option among British students. Drawing on Brown, Hesketh and Williams' (2002) work on positional conflict theory and the increased importance of the 'economy of experience', Heath explores the growing popularityof the gap year and argues that the gap year's enhanced profile raises important questions concerning the processes by which certain groups of young people are able to gain advantage over others during a period of educational expansion. Indeed, it is arguably no coincidence that the gap year's popularity has taken off in parallel with this expansion, as the gap year emerges as an important means of 'gaining the edge' over other students in the context of increased competition for entry to elite institutions.

An Australian study examined the determinants of taking a 'gap-year' (the decision to take a year off study between completing high school and commencing university) and the subsequent impact of this decision on marks at university. Birch and Miller (2007) found that the main factors influencing students' decisions on university deferment are their previous academic achievements, age and location. Students who defer university

are found to have higher marks than students who commence university directly after completing high school. This mark advantage, the authors argued, is more pronounced among low-performing students, particularly male students, who are in the lower-half of the university marks distribution.

b. Incorporating student success
Earlier sections of this literature review have focused on student retention and drop-out and have shown that there are problems of definition with both terms. In relation to these two key terms, it has also identified that an increasing number of writers and researchers are choosing to concentrate more on student 'success' which is all together a wider and more positive focus (HEFCE 2008, Cook 2008, Yorke and Longden 2008). In this context, Layer, Srivastava and Stuart (2002: 15) make an important distinction between enhancing retention and achieving student success. They stress that 'the latter is the prime focus of the HE student experience and seeks to recognise achievement rather than 'failure', whereas retention places limits on the nature of HE given the measures used and the assumptions of consecutive study'. Yorke (2004: 19) develops the argument further when he makes the point that retention is a 'supply-side' concept which, for obvious reasons, is important for institutional managers… and for government and its agencies (and for the European Commission). In contrast, student success is judged more from the student's perspective. As such it can be defined more flexibly, for example as the completion of a programme of study or of programme components which satisfy the student's personal ambitions, for example in part-time study or distance learning. This focus on success seems to be gaining increasing emphasis. As HEFCE (2008) put it recently 'success is more than retention; and retention isn't the only kind of success'.

This project has been set up and funded to look at issues of access and retention therefore this has to be its primary focus. However the inclusion of the term 'success' can widen the scope of this literature review and so allow a more productive approach to exploring students' subjective experiences of higher education. For that reason, this literature review will broaden out its remit to look from now at the three different but overlapping concepts of success, retention and drop-out. With this in mind, it is now time to examine in brief key factors which influence success, retention and drop-out, particularly as they impact on identified key groups of non-traditional students.

c. Key Factors
Different studies identify different key factors which influence student success, retention and drop-out. The contributions from Tinto (2003) (expectations, support, feedback, involvement and learning) and Thomas (2002) (academic preparedness, academic experience, institutional expectations and commitment, academic and social match, finance and employment, family support and commitments and university support services) have already been covered in earlier parts of this review.

One key question is the inter-relationship between academic and non-academic factors. In this context Robbins et al (2004, 2006) have tried to build on Tinto's interactionist model using path-analysis and meta analysis of 109 studies to examine the relationship between psychological and study skills factors in influencing academic performance and thus

retention. They use both college GPA (cumulative grade point average) and retention as performance criteria but link this to motivational theories and the function of academic self-efficacy and outcome expectations.

Through analysing a sample of 468 college students from 2- and 4-year institutions, their findings indicate that the non-academic factors of academic-related skills, academic self-confidence, academic goals, institutional commitment, social support, certain contextual influences (institutional selectivity and financial support), and social involvement all had a positive relationship to retention.

As a result of their extensive meta-analysis of why four year college students in the USA stay in higher education, their broad conclusion is that psychosocial factors supplement but do not replace traditional indicators. In more detail they conclude that:

- First-year GPA (colleage academic performance) has large effects on likelihood of retention and transfer
- Motivation (Academic Discipline) and pre-collegiate academic preparation have indirect effects on retention and transfer by working through 1st-year GPA
- Social connection has a direct effect on retention
- SES (Social Economic Status) is predictive of transfer behavior: Higher SES students transfer while poor students give up;
- African-American Students have high commitment but difficulty with classes resulting in higher drop-out rates

(Robbins et al.. 2006)

Their findings have significant implications for designing effective retention programs. Although many programs rely on traditional academic factors to identify students at risk of dropping out, the findings suggest that this approach may be limited and may miss students who are at risk due to other, non-academic factors. Students who master course content but fail to develop adequate academic self-confidence, academic goals, institutional commitment, and social support and involvement may still be at risk of dropping out.

Findings like these have influenced a recently instituted £1million HE retention grants programme in England, jointly funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and HEFCE (The Higher Education Funding Council for England). Seven funded projects are clustered in two key areas: **providing academic support to students**, and **promoting academic and social integration into the institution to promote a sense of belonging.** (http://www.phf.org.uk/landing.asp?id=367) Some of these projects will be referred to later in greater detail in section 7a of this literature review.

According to UK National Audit Office (2007: 25 & 46), the most common reasons for student withdrawal are in order of importance:
· personal reasons
· lack of integration
· dissatisfaction with course/institution

· lack of preparedness
· wrong choice of course
· financial reasons
· to take up a more attractive opportunity (work, travel, other courses)

Yorke (2000) identifies many of the same factors at NAO including the wrong course choice. Martinez & Munday (1998) who completed a large scale study of persistence in Further Education in the UK also found this to be an important issue and discovered that the location of the college, time taken to travel there were also important factors. This is supported by some Irish research Mathews and Mulkeen (2002) who also identified the size and scale of the campus as an issue for some students. This is perhaps linked to the quality of students' social experience amongst peers and staff which has surfaced as an important issue in persistence (Keane, 2009).

It is difficult to generalise as different factors are likely to come into to play amongst different age groups (Martinez & Munday,1998) in a large variety of social and institutional settings. This is also highly dependent on the national context. For instance compare the NAO list of factors which puts 'personal reasons' first and financial reasons second last with research from Spain. Álvarez, Cabrera and Gonzalez (2006) did a study of drop-out and retention of a sample of students from Pedagogy, Mathematics and Social Work studies in the Canary Islands shows a wide range of factors which influence drop-out and retention in university studies:

- economic and labour problems (41.4%);
- the nature/characteristics of university studies (structure, methodology, change of plan and incompatibilities, which result in the expectations of students not being fulfilled, etc.) (32.2%);
- lack of motivation for study and low expectations of access to the labour market (27.5%);
- the demands made on students and lecturers (26.3%);
- personal problems (22.5%);
- difficulties with teachers and the administration (incomprehension, lack of motivation) (21%);
- death or illness in the family (8.2%)

Corominas (2001) studied a sample of students from the University of Girona that did not register for the second year of studies following their first year. This sample was surveyed using a questionnaire to identify the main reasons that caused them to withdraw or change their concentration. Corominas distinguished four clusters: low quality of the education, low learning potential of the student, doubts about the right choice of what subject to study, and other circumstantial factors (financial, compatibility with labor occupation, etc...).

Another Spanish perspective, Danae (2007) focuses more on academic reasons for student drop-out. He shows that when the institutions in which the students are enrolled do not fulfil their academic expectations (infrastructure, quality of lecturers, curriculum

offered, etc), these students decide to change to other institutions, which they think have greater academic rigour. In this sense, Danae says that *"... universities are also responsible for student drop-out. This connects closely to issues of academic integrity and institutional prestige* (p.197).

While all these are factors are informative, there is no clear consensus and no particular focus on different types of 'non-traditional student'. For this reason, it is necessary to look in greater depth at the factors influencing the different groups of non-traditional students identified earlier in this literature review.

6. Success, Retention and Drop-out for specific groups of non-traditional students

This chapter will look in more detail at the five groups of non-traditional students identified in Section 3 (p 11)

a. Students from low income backgrounds

In their recent international study, Thomas and Quinn (2007, 26-36) identify four main factors which determine low economic status: income, occupation, geography and parental education. In the context of international comparison they also show the difficulties of definition of low income across different countries (2007: 37-38). For such students, as identified earlier, there are likely to be issues about their cultural capital and habitus and how they interact with the field of higher education. These are compounded by material constraints on HE choice so that, as Reay et al put it: (for UK working-class students):

> *Choice for a majority involved either a process of finding out what they cannot have, what is not open for negotiation and then looking at the few options left, or a process of self-exclusion* (2005, 85)

Indeed, this conclusion is supported by Jetten et al (2008). Their longitudinal research reported in the article 'When is individual mobility costly? The role of economic and social identity factors', shows that:

> *Expected identification as a university student and preparedness for university life was affected by economic factors (economic benefit of university attendance and status of the considered universities) but also negatively related to perceived incompatibility with one's social background.* (2008, 886)

Jetten et al (2008) found that working-class students at elite universities faced a number of dilemmas that their middle-class counterparts at elite universities and working-class students at new universities did not have to confront. This would appear to support the earlier argument by Archer and Leathwood (2003: 176) that the assumption always is that it is "the working-class individual who must adapt and change, in order to fit into and participate in, the (unchanged) higher education culture."

Another issue identified by Jetten et al was that of working-class social identity in relation to higher education, in particular, the key dilemma for working-class students of maintaining connections to one's social background, including family, friends and the wider community. However Reay et al' s work on 'Strangers in Paradise? Working-class Students in Elite Universities' (2009) challenges this orthodox view. In their study of nine working-class students at an elite English university, Reay et al identify the ability of these working-class students to move successfully across two very different fields, combining strong connections and loyalties to family and home friends with what are seen to be classically middle-class academic dispositions, a versatility that most had begun to develop in early schooling. They suggest that these students have already begun

to engage in a process of self-conscious reflexivity in which self-awareness and a propensity for self-improvement become incorporated into the habitus (2008:1105). In many ways, these working-class high flyers are able to fit into elite HE culture more readily than their earlier lives in large working-class state secondary schools where they were more 'fish out of water'. However their experience of fitting in successfully does not amount to a mere endorsement of the approach of elite universities, or indeed that they are 'the best'. As Reay et al report:

> *While on one level they recognize and are grateful for the 'value-added' they are gaining academically, and are fiercely loyal about Southern, the students all have a reflexive critique of the costs and losses, as well as the gains, in attending universities like Southern (the elite university in the research). And these critiques all hinge one way or another on homogeneity; for all the students there is too much sameness and not enough difference at universities like Southern.*
> (2008, 1116)

Nothwithstanding the HE success of the working-class students they have studied, Reay et al use their research to point to the failure of elite universities to combine academic excellence with a rich social diversity.

Apart from issues of social identity, transition to HE is still seen by low income groups as an uncertain process which involved considerable material 'risk' and cost. In fact, financial problems are clearly major influences on retention and drop out for low income students. Yorke's 1999 study showed that a lack of financial support was a real challenge for all students and that some of his respondents were so frightened about incurring higher education debt that they actually withdrew. Financial difficulties involved the cost of travel, accommodation and course materials and this problem was increased for mature students on low income when family and other costs were added. One key further aspect was the need to continue in some sort of paid work while studying. Here, in another recent international study, Crosling, Thomas and Heagney (2008, 21) identified that a high proportion of such students were involved in paid work at the same time as studying. This in turn impacted upon the time and energy they had available for study, in particular wider reading, and their time for and level of academic and social integration in higher education.

b. First generation students
It has already been noted that there can be a substantial overlap between categories like 'working-class' and 'low income' students and that international comparisons in this area are problematic. For this reason, recent research initiatives have often preferred to concentrate on 'first generation students', normally defined as students with neither parent having previously completed a degree (Thomas & Quinn 2007, 50). In discussing this group of students, Thomas and Quinn (2007, 58-59) emphasise the importance of 'social capital' in the way it interacts with cultural capital and habitus:

> *..first generation entrants are not simply the recipients or the markers of a family's social capital but active producers and catalysts in (potentially)*

changing the nature of family life and the patterns of family behaviour and the world in which the family lives.

They say it may be easy to think about the potentially positive role of 'bridging' social capital[6] in the way a first generation student can become more integrated into higher education life. However, Thomas and Quinn make the point that making bridges into higher education is not easy for first generation entrants and their research shows that they often feel 'stranded and isolated' at university. Furthermore, they quote research from the broad field of family studies which shows how the effect of 'bonding' social capital[7] in relation to higher education entry can produce fractures rather than glue, for example, in marital relationships, wider kinship ties and intergenerational bonds. 'Linking' social capital[8] also has its limitations in that very often the family of first generation students do not know how HE institutions work and are not confident in negotiating with them. Thomas and Quinn find the concept of 'imagined' social capital[9] more useful in thinking about first generation students because it does not ignore inequality and can be produced by shared 'outsider knowledge' of exclusion and hard times, as well as imagined links with mythological communities. Thus it can help first generation students be more positive and productive in their relations with HE and help guard against the adoption of a deficit model (by them and others) which sees them as somehow lacking. Moreover it is a concept which can be explored further through a biographical research approach.

More recently Quinn (2010) expands this analysis to explore in greater depth how imagined and symbolic networks can be more useful than formal sources of support in enabling students to stay in university.

c. Students from minority ethnic groups, immigrants and refugees

This is another difficult area for international comparison as minority ethnic groups are defined differently in different countries. (Crosling et al 2008, 19-20). Such students have considerable overlap with first generation students in relation to issues of social and cultural capital and habitus. Reay et al (2005, 113ff) identify 'contingent choosers' as being typically a first generation applicant to HE whose parents were educated outside the home country. The norm is that the student can expect little support from her/his family in choice-making or funding higher education. Although there can be strong emotional support, encouragement and expectation from families, expectations can often be generic, some times unrealistic and weakly linked to imagined futures. Different cultural backgrounds can also lead to different expectations about how HE works and different understandings about HE study, for example, the value of independent learning on the part of the student. Here Crosling et al (2008: 21-22) also point to the problems

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[6] Defined by Putnam as the trust and connection forged between different sorts of people in different walks of life and, as such, good for social cohesion
[7] The glue that ties families together and produces shared values
[8] The ability to access resources from formal institutions, for example, HE institutions
[9] This refers to the benefit produced by imagined and symbolic networks which people create to imagine themselves and their lives

some minority students have to face with a 'higher education culture that may be unfamiliar or even hostile to them, for example in the way it assumes and tries to tackle their 'cultural disadvantage'. Another factor here which can impinge on student retention, success and drop-out of minority ethnic groups is language.

Here again key issues of social identity and cultural capital arise. Stuart et al (2009??) developed a research project in response to studies indicating that students from minority ethnic groups (MEG) are less satisfied and less academically successful at university than their white peers, despite similar entry grades. Their project examined how a sense of belonging, social identity and cultural background affect the university experience and attainment levels of different student groups across the UK. http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/Plain_English_Summaries/social_st ability_exclusion/evidence_analysis/RES-000-22-2485.aspx They studied different students' educational, cultural and social experiences by conducting focus groups and longer, in-depth interviews, involving a total of 824 students at four institutions with contrasting student profiles.

Their findings are illuminative in the way students described and talked about their 'comfort zone' on campus, their feelings towards their institution, their teaching and learning preferences, and their academic progress. In general terms, two factors that are key to all students having a positive university experience are the extent to which students connect with their university and feel at ease around campus. These affect their academic self-esteem, peer support, well-being and marks. With greater specific reference to minority ethnic groups, the research also shows that, whereas white students described how their friendship networks indirectly benefited their studies by giving them the confidence and knowledge to collaborate with peers or seek out extra help and support, minority ethnic students saw university primarily as a place 'for study' rather than social life. However despite this greater direct focus on study, MEG (minority ethnic group) students (especially Black students) seemed to hold back from seeking extra academic help and support from peers, teaching staff and the university. Early educational experiences, which may have lowered their expectations, compounded this tendency. What was important for MEG student success was a sense of belonging and that having a strong 'comfort zone' around university campus is more important to MEG students than the sense of identifying with the institution itself. This raises issues about how universities can best support MEG students in their studies.

d. Mature Age Students (including part-timers and students with work and family responsibilities)

Again such students often come from low income backgrounds and experience some of the problems already identified for people from low income backgrounds, and indeed first generation students. These problems are often compounded by additional issues arising from work and family logistics and finance as well as a lack of confidence in their overall academic, study and IT skills due to a prolonged absence from mainstream study. (Crosling et al 2008, 23), Inglis & Murphy (1999). In Spain research by Balanza, Morales, López and Echeverría (2004) has found that those students who have other obligations (family, job, etc.) have a higher rate of failure and confess to have personal

problems that prevent them from focusing on their studies. Aguilar (2007) also stresses the importance of the resources that can be offered to the student by the family in a Spanish context, including an affective dimension of emotional support. University students with a high perception of family support, relate better to other students and teachers and are more resolute and motivated in pursuing their academic aims. She identifies key factors in student retention as being personal reasons, a feeling of academic autoefficiency, a low level of stress and a feeling of belonging to the institution, the academic environment and the university community.

Here Yorke (2004, 25) quotes evidence from his own and others' research which suggests that factors extraneous to the student's higher education experience exert more influence on older students than younger students. Normally the mature student is already embedded in a community and this raises fundamental issues about the appropriateness for them of a predominantly interactionist model like Tinto's.

Research from Scotland (Christie et al 2006) on adult students moving from Further Education to an 'elite' university shows that a key concern was balancing study and other commitments. This was particularly difficult for women with children and could put a strain on other relationships, especially where there were financial difficulties as well. These students had a high motivation in relation to learning more about their chosen subject, were less interested in opportunities for an active social life at university and much more concerned about maintaining support from their families as they entered new academic territory (2006, 364)
.

In the specific context of adults studying within research intensive universities, Kasworm's 2010 US study of 'Adult learners in a Research University: Negotiating Undergraduate Student Identity', shows how adults develop a multi-layered identity within research universities. Their student role is highly complex, based, on the one hand, on their individual biographies, their individual purposeful investment and their current life roles, but it is, at the same time, coconstructed in relation to the institutional subcultural ethos and actions as well as perceived societal influences regarding the role and impact of that institution on the individual's lifeworld (2010, 157). Their positional identity was cocconstructed through negotiating academic acceptance in meeting demanding academic challenges and through otherness as a mature adult in a youth-oriented competitive university culture while their relational identity was focused more on making specific connections within the classroom that recognised their adult status. Following on from her research, Kasworm suggests the need for further exploration of '*the facets of adult coconstruction of various life role identities and how these identities influence their engagement in learning and action, their sense of power, place and personhood.*' This study highlights the need to explore and unpack complex adult student identities within different types of European universities. It may also point to a greater need to locate issues of access and retention within a wider lifelong learning framework and exactly how this relates to other forms of transition in a person's life. (Field et al 2009) (Ecclestone et al (2009)).

The drop-out of *part-time students*, who are usually mature students, is particularly marked. The UK National Audit Office (2007) identified that of those starting part-time study in 2000/2001, after six years, 44.5% had left without qualifying (in comparison to 15.2% of full-time students after 4 years). Of course, these figures very much reflect the fact that they relate to the completion of a full degree. More recent figures from HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England) report (2009, 3) on 'Part-time degree study: Entry and Completion' show how completion rates differ among students according to their intensity of study. Completion rates among entrants studying at and above 30 per cent of the intensity of full-time study are substantially higher than those among entrants studying at lower intensities. Forty-four per cent of students commencing programmes at UK HEIs (other than the Open University) at 30 per cent or higher intensities go on to complete that programme within seven academic years (rising to 48 per cent within 11 academic years). For those studying at below 30 per cent intensity, 18 per cent have completed after seven academic years (rising to 22 per cent within 11 academic years).

Many, like Yorke (2004, 20) would dispute the relevance of this measure for part-time students who often engage with higher education temporarily and sporadically on a 'need to know' basis – he suggests that 'success per study unit' is a more relevant measure for part-time students. Yorke's research (2004, 21) shows that older part-time students emphasise the demands of employment while studying, allied to the needs of dependants, weight of workload, financial difficulty and organisational problems with the programme as being influential on their withdrawal from HE courses. Yorke also quotes Kember (1995), who focuses on the importance of 'social integration' for adult learners in *distance education*. 'Social integration', which in Kember's terms, means the student's capacity to integrate their studies with other aspects of their lives (employment, family and social life) rather than integration into the academic community, plays an important role in student success.

e. Students with disabilities
Once again there are difficulties of definition in international comparisons of students with disabilities. For example, Crosling et al (2008: 23) report that countries like the UK and Germany routinely collect data about disabled students while Sweden collects very little (only those who apply for special support and those who are given special support in relation to their disabilities). However, all Swedish colleges and universities give information about disability legislation and rights for disabled students on their web sites, **http://www.independentliving.org/studyworkabroad/SE/universities.html**.

Of the other project countries, Ireland and Spain collect data on disabled students and Poland has begun to. Here, one interesting statistical fact from the recent UK National Audit study is that students with a declared disability and receiving the Disabled Student's Allowance, both full-time and part-time, have a much better continuation rate (into second year study) than students with a declared disability but not in receipt of DSA **and** students without a known disability at all. This raises interesting questions about the

recognition, support and identity of disabled (and other) students in HE which can be explored further.

In institutional responses to student disability, the picture is even less complete. For example, in Sweden, universities are required to give students with a disability the same opportunities as students without a disability and UK and Ireland legislation requires support for students with disabilities. Until recently in Ireland the participation rates of students with disabilities was very low by international standards (1.1 per cent in 1998). It has risen to 3.2 per cent (HEA, 2008) but these students are still underrepresented in higher education.

As many as 81% of disabled tertiary students in Poland undertake full-time, and hence free-of-charge, education and all disabled students are eligible for state financial support. In Spain as a result of *Law of Dependence* or the *Organic Law of Universities* (L.O.U.), disabled student' presence in the public Andalusian universities has increased to the effect that in 2004 the number of registered students with a declared disability was 134, whereas in 2007 this number increased 1380 (Choza, 2008, 6). In Germany, special research on the needs and circumstances of disabled students in Germany is still at a low level, although additional counselling is used to help students with general impairment. According to Crosling et al (2008), physical access to university facilities appears to be improving but is still variable, as is the provision of support like alternative forms of assessment, note takers for students with hearing impairment, conversions into Braille for visually impaired students etc. One growing and significant practice which they identify is the adoption by universities of an 'Inclusive Practice' perspective where lecturers employ a range of specific strategies   (for example, use large fonts, all lecture notes on-line) to ensure a more inclusive HE environment.

7. Improving Student Retention and Success for non-traditional students – some ways forward

In the literature, there are a number of different approaches identified as ways to improve the retention and success of students, particularly non-traditional students in HE. This final section of the literature review will give an overview of a range of different recommended strategies, approaches and ideas for improving student retention and success.

Different sectoral interventions
A first step in identifying ways forward might be to make a distinction between *national* approaches, *institutional* approaches and more localised *faculty and departmental innovations*. The first might concentrate on targeting, data-collection, student finance structures, alternative admissions procedures backed up by broad-based evaluation and research. The second would also take account of and be involved in the above approaches but would supplement these by improving institutional management information, student monitoring and strategic approaches across the institution, for example, outreach initiatives, pre-entry work, greater institutional flexibility and student support and better student facilities. The third might be involved in additional curricular and pedagogical reforms allied to more localised forms of student engagement and support. (OECD, 2008a)

a. National Approaches
A systematic national approach to improving student success and retention is that of the UK. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) provided £246 million in 2007/2008 for improving retention in England. This includes providing and improving data on retention, calculating (through HESA, the Higher Education Statistics Agency) retention benchmarks for each institution supporting HEIs and students in general, providing regional teams to work with institutions where retention is relatively weak, allocating a small proportion of each institutional teaching grant for work with students from under-represented groups or with lower entry qualifications and conducting a review of the specific needs of disabled students. HEFCE has further suggested a particular focus for individual HEIs on preparation and prior qualifications; choice of programme and institution; academic and pastoral support; and understanding and responding better to the circumstances of non-traditional students. Significantly HEFCE makes the explicit point that: "we are not assuming the best practice is necessarily found where retention is high."

In 2008 HEFCE collaborated with the Paul Hamlyn Foundation to develop a special initiative focusing on the identification, evaluation and dissemination of good practice, specifically in relation to the retention of students within the HE sector. They jointly funded a new £1 million grants programme for Higher Education Institutions which sponsored number of projects that focused on two key areas: **providing academic support to students**, and **promoting academic and social integration into the institution to promote a sense of belonging**. The initiative encouraged collaborative

proposals that would enable comparative studies between institutions and a shared approach to the evaluation and dissemination of good practice.

> *Through engaging and supporting universities in better understanding their practice around retention and the interventions and approaches that are most successful in ensuring high retention and completion rates, we intend that this initiative will ultimately improve the quality of retention work in HE institutions, ensure more effective use of resources to support student retention and help to further raise retention and completion rates.*
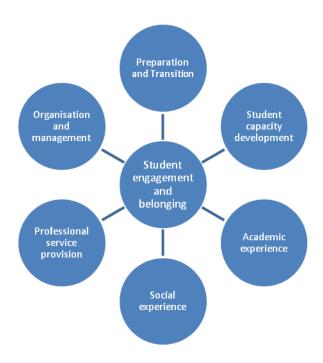> *http://www.phf.org.uk/landing.asp?id=367*

The specific projects within this programme explore different approaches to improving retention:

- 'Belonging' and 'Intimacy' Factors in the Retention of Students
- Dispositions to Stay: Using the Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory (ELLI);
- An Examination of the Effects of Student Integration on Non-Completion;
- Pathways to Success through Peer Mentoring;
- A Comparative Evaluation of the Roles of Student Adviser and Personal Tutor in Relation to Undergraduate Student Retention;
- Comparing and Evaluating the Impacts on Student Retention of Different Approaches to
- Supporting Students through Study Advice and Personal Development

http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/inclusion/retention/RetentionBriefing03Feb2010.doc

In developing their conceptual understanding and analytical framework, the programme places a strong emphasis on the centrality of **student engagement**.

> We therefore feel that it is essential to recognise the importance of relationships in enhancing retention. Thus there is a responsibility on institutions to provide a series of ongoing opportunities, both pre- and post-entry, for students to build meaningful relationships with peers and academic and professional staff. (p 9)

It particularly identifies the role of "professional services" in relation to student retention and success. These include student services; library and learning services; disability services; information, advice and guidance; marketing; admissions and widening participation departments. The figures below outlines how the programme is beginning to see the institutional systems relevant to improving student engagement and belonging:

b. Institutional Approaches

The UK National Audit Office (NAO) Report of 2007 makes specific recommendations to institutions as to how they might improve retention (pp. 29-36). This involves:

- Using management information to understand retention, for example, tracking and supporting vulnerable students
- Making a strategic contribution to retention, for example, building a central retention team in the University
- Securing commitment from students, for example, through a student charter
- Providing support through personal tutoring, for example developing a more comprehensive and routine personal tutor system
- Broadening the options for learning, for example using comprehensive modular systems and virtual learning approaches
- Providing specialist support, for example student services 'one-stop shops'
- Financial support, for example, extra bursaries and hardship funds for non-traditional students
- Extra support for students with disabilities, for example the provision and promotion of Disabled Students' Allowances

In Ireland an inter-university retention network has been established to exchange ideas on improving retention and has made similar recommendations to NAO (Moore, et al 2006). In addition it has promoted peer learning initiatives and uses exit interviews by Student Support Services staff with non-completers in some universities to develop a greater understanding of the issues involved.

c. Concentrating on the first year experience

A number of studies concern themselves with the first year student experience on the grounds that this is the time when students have to undergo the most sudden changes (Eivers, Flanagan & Morgan 2002, Healy, Carpenter & Lynch 1999, Yorke and Longden 2007, STAR 2008). Yorke and Longden (2008) make the following recommendations:

- Focus on student success rather than retention
- Assist students to make wise choices;
- Be clear about what is on offer;
- Make our expectations clear and support students to meet them
- Ensure adequacy of resources.

Cabrera and others (2006) in Spain identify that the first year is a crucial moment to develop a process of transition to higher education and integration into the university system amongst new students. This strategy can serve to combat student drop-out. It must show students a realistic vision of a university academic career. The role of lecturers is very important. They have to be sensitized to student drop-out, informed of the new challenges of the higher education, the demands and needs of the students, etc.

The STAR (Strategies for Student Transition and Retention), a project across a number of UK universities, identifies that 'Non continuance has two components: early leaving-characterised by poor decisions prior to entry; and academic failure - characterised by poor preparations and false expectations. It makes the important point that universities expect quite a lot from first year students, particularly non-traditional students. Amongst other things, they need to cope with the following dimensions of transition: social changes; work/study/student lifestyle balance; curriculum changes; assessment changes; and staff relationship changes

The STAR project's final 'take home messages' for universities are:
- Students have to change quickly and in many different ways
- Some of the problems are of *our* making
- Solutions can be applied before and after entry
- Early leaving is an institutional problem but a student's solution

All the above sectoral categories seem broadly relevant to this particular project. However, because the project is concerned primarily with student experience, the rest of this section will focus in a little more depth on evidence, findings and approaches of more direct relevance the student experience.

d. Action at faculty and departmental levels, including more student-centred strategies and ideas

Student conceptions of learning in higher education: There are research perspectives concerning how student´s conceptualise learning due to their previous experiences and in relation to specific educational contexts (Marton, Hounsell & Entwistle, 1997; Entwistle & Peterson, 2004). One point of departure within these perspectives is that students

conceptualise learning in different ways because of both of their previous learning and how they interpret the tasks that they are involved in. This also has an impact on the approach they use to learn and their learning outcomes (Marton & Booth, 1997; Dahlgren, 1997). Entwistle & Peterson (2004) summarises three different approaches, a deep approach, a surface approach and a strategic approach. In a *deep approach* there is an intention of understanding. Students are here focusing on the underlying meaning in a task or text, viewing their learning as a holistic process, and monitor an understanding as learning progresses. In a *surface approach*, students have the intention of coping with the course requirements, trying to reproduce the content by treating the course as unrelated bits of knowledge and therefore focusing on the minimum syllabus requirements. Finally, in the *strategic approach*, the intention is to do well in the course as well as personally, where self-regulation of studying and awareness of learning in its context are used as strategies (Entwistle & Peterson, 2004). The approaches used are related to approaches of teaching as well as different academic context (Ramsden, 1997; Scheja, 2006). There are studies that find relations between approaches to teach and study and forms of examining, having an impact on the learning strategies formed by students (Dahlgren, 1997; Entwistle & Peterson, 2004). These research perspectives could perhaps help us to understand the cognitive processes of drop-out. However they neglect different social aspects of being a learner in higher education and especially the experiences of being a non-traditional learner.

Ideas and examples from an international study:
In their suggestions for future action in their international study on improving student retention in HE, Crosling et al (2008) appear to follow many of the key pointers originally identified by Tinto. They focus on three specific areas: student-responsive curriculum development, academic and social engagement and active learning (pp 166-182) and, within these broad categories, identify ideas, examples and recommendations grounded in the practice of the different international case studies in their study.

In relation to *developing a student-responsive curriculum*, they recommend:
- the introduction of alternative learning, teaching and assessment approaches, for example, small group learning, problem-based assessment and formative feedback
- more relevant curricular contents and tasks, for example, linking learning to real life work contexts, critical analysis of practical, professional information and problems,
- more effective induction procedures, for example, early electronic information and inter-active processes in preparation for the transition into HE; an early focus on building student learner identities in relation to their specific subject
- integration of study skills, for example, subject-centred rather than generic study skills sessions; the curriculum built around students' self-reported study skills needs, building in language support where appropriate.

In terms of *academic and social engagement*, they also recommend:

- early academic engagement through induction and introductory modules, for example, pre-entry email contact with staff, the early submission of student writing for non-threatening diagnostic purposes
- developing social and academic engagement through collaborative learning activities, for example, reading, quizzes, active learning sets, group work specifically designed for part-timers, actively building inter-active, cross-cultural explorations and understandings into the curriculum
- new curricular contents that promote academic and social engagement, for example, the introduction of a new subject to all students in a course, like a new language, in order to facilitate co-operation from scratch; excursions to practical work contexts, the sharing of mature student perspectives on practical, professional problems
- using assessment to improve academic engagement, for example, weekly formative assessment sessions, building in peer and constructivist dialogue and feed-back
- improving academic skills to enhance engagement, for example, student focus groups on aspects of the curriculum
- increasing communication and understanding between students and staff, for example, through weekly assessments, trips, the encouragement of student self-reflection

Fostering *Active Learning*
- encouraging students to take responsibility for their learning, for example, preparatory, reflective exercises, reflecting on different, culturally specific, learning styles
- collaborative teaching methods to promote active learning, for example, workshops, games and projects where students work together, supporting student team presentations, developing peer learning opportunities
- learning from experience, for example, actively drawing out and studying key issues from the workplace, group-based research activities
- feed-forward and feedback, for example, students providing information to teachers on their learning processes and progress, peer formative approaches in looking at quantitative methods

While examples like these clearly need to be explored and grounded in specific teaching and learning contexts, they offer a range of ideas for engagement and development at faculty and departmental levels.

Crosling et al draw from the above emphases and examples to identify a range of reflective questions to assist more student-centred and active learning. These are copied in Appendix B. While Crosling et al possibly give the most comprehensive and international perspective on student-centred strategies and ideas that can be adopted and adapted at faculty and departmental levels, some of their approaches are also reflected and developed in other literature. Thus, for example, Thomas (2005)writes at greater length on using formative assessment to improve retention and success; Wilcox (2005) elaborates on the importance of *s*ocial interaction/support for non-traditional students;

Stuart has developed some illuminative work on the importance of student friendships (2006) and student engagement in extra-curricular activities (2007); while Paczuska (2004) draws from Engestrom's expansive learning theory to explore how mentoring and student ambassador relationships can be 'sites' for learning about HE.

8. Universities challenged? Re-thinking widening participation and Fair Access

One of the revelations that comes through doing a literature review is the space between policies, practices and research. There is little time for reflection on the research findings as urgent action is needed, without giving the necessary time for discussion and debate on the reported findings. Inevitably, it is the action implications that are subject to most scrutiny, often taken out of context and without being subject to critical analysis. As the project neared its completion, the contexts across Europe are already changing. In the UK at the time thje project was due to complete, the higher education institutions were being challenged to re-think widening participation. Alison Fuller et al. (Fuller, Heath and Johnston, 2010) argue that widening participation remains a priority internationally. Whilst most of the research has focused on why people choose to go to university, this book takes a different perspective, asking why do some people choose not to go into higher education, offering co0mplementary research data that supports the findings across the European project. Whilst it is acknowledged that initiatives such as *AimHigher* have made some difference, in widening access for those from low participation areas, for those from low incomes homes, there is still much to be done. The decisikons not to go into higher education are socially and structurally embedded, and should by no means be simply individualised. Decisions, as revealed through autobiographical data from across Europe, are created and reinforced through social networks ('network-based decision-making about participation'). This book also confirms the approach taken by the European project to consider and embed the narratives of 'ordinary people'.

In the current recession, equity is difficult and in spite of all the rhetoric as well as the research on widening participation, the signs are that those, for example, with disabilities, from certain minority ethnbic backgrounds, will continue to be poorly represented in higher education in the near future. It has become obvious to policymakers that the strategic objective of social mobility is faltering due to institutional conservatism, the persistence of differential patterns of participation and success in higher education, which will inevitably mean that there will continue to be underpresentation from low participation areas, and where our 'non-traditional' students do enter into higher education, it will not be into the most prestigious universities. Maybe it is time that took the research that lsitens to the voices of non-traditionals ntudents as carried out in this European project, seriously. Twelve years ago, Marion Bowl (2000) was pleading to policy-makers to listen to the voices of non-traditional students. We are still not listening now.

In the UK, during the final year of the project, the government set up the Browne Review (2010) that will offer a 'radical plan to transform higher education', to create a simpler, more flexible system that would offer students greater choice and better value. At this stage, it is very easy to dismiss the Guidance to the Director of Fair Access (February 2011) this is little more than political rhetoric; there is very little confidence in the sector that significant further progress can be made in widening participation during the current financial constraints. The UK coalition government has outlined this new framework to

encourage *fair* access. In short, this requires higher education institutions to offer 'access agreements' that will form part of the transitional arrangements for funding of higher education in the future as outlined in the government White Paper on on Higher Education that is currently being debated isndie and outside parliament.

Historically, however, government policies claiming to be 'fair', have been based on a liberal and meritocratic concept of equal opportunities, rather than addressing the complexities of equitable policies and strategies in an unequal society. Picking up the idea from Secada (1989), Armstrong (1999) challenged policy-makers to reconsider their commitment to equal opportunities, and instead set widening participation in the context of entitlement and equity. This debate was raised in a broader Euroepan context by Elizabeth Byrne (1985). However, even today, not only has that challenge been largely ignored, for it requires affirmative action which can, taken out of context, be perceived a as discriminatory, and – in contradiction – can lead to arguments about more, not less inequality. Byrne argued over 25 years ago that the failure of the UK and across most European countries to achieve educational equality programmes throughout each sector, including higher education, is due to the persistent refusal of what is meant by equality, and what exactly do we mean by 'fair access'. The UK government framework is suggesting that the focus shifts to the outcomes rather than the inputs and processes, and placing a greater responsibility on HEIs themselves. Commitment to having 'access agreements' that will outline details of how they can attract and retain more students from underrepresented groups, will not in itself assure fairness. The argument for more flexible routes, targeting outreach pathways for widening participation groups and greater partnership arrangements rather than simply providing more financial support for those in need through bursaries and scholarships is not convincing to those who have systematically researched widening participation over many years, and see the cotnradicitons that have never been addressed through government policies that have not systrematically been informed by the published research that this literature review has identified as important for critical reflections and informed actions in the future. One promising analysis has been offered by Downs (2010) written from a South African perspective, examining and evaluating the benefits of entering higher education through a Science Foundation Programme, which has contributed to an increase in both the quantity and the quality of graduates coming from non-traditional backgrounds. As Downs argues, increasing equity and compensating for disadvantage may need to be further considered, leading to a set of quite different interventions. Downs quite rightly recognises that there is a need to evaluate such interventions, which her research seeks to do. More of this kind of research is needed.

9.   Conclusion

In conclusion, it may be useful to reflect on the broad categories identified by Thomas and Quinn with reference to the place of and approach to non-traditional students in HE. Thomas and Quinn (2006: 100-106) identify three main approaches towards widening participation: *the academic, the utilitarian and the transformative*. Their 'academic' approach involves *fitting* non-traditional students *into* HE as it is. Its focus is on a narrow range of students who are seen to have the academic potential for HE success. These students are constructed as being 'deficient' in certain ways and the emphasis is on supporting these students to enter HE with little concern about their subsequent experience within HE. The academic approach addresses individual attitudinal issues rather than structural barriers to participation. The 'utilitarian approach is primarily concerned with universities and therefore students meeting the needs of the economy. As such it is concerned with ensuring that non-traditional students have the requisite qualifications and preparations for HE study. This approach, in contrast to the 'academic' approach recognises structural barriers to access and success in HE and embraces the need for curricular change but still requires students to 'fit into' a higher education that is being developed to meet labour market need. The 'transformative' approach embraces the idea that HE needs to change to meet the needs of students from under-represented groups and try to benefit from greater diversity. The emphasis here is on changing HE systems and practices rather than 'moulding' students into a traditional, and perhaps inappropriate form of HE. These changes would include curricular and pedagogical developments and a more flexible HE structure.

While these three broad approaches inevitably tend to oversimplify and overpolarise the responses of HE institutions to the challenge of engaging with non-traditional students, they give some indication of *different ideological positions* in respect of the integration, retention and success of these students and suggest a broad framework for analysing different strategies and practices.

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11. Other Sources of Information on Access and Retention

Action on Access Projects
http://www.actiononaccess.org/index.php?p=11_3_2

AimHigher's Practititoners' Website
http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/EducationAndLearning/UniversityAndHigherEducation/index.htm

British Education Index (BEI)
http://www.leeds.ac.uk/bei

ERIC (North America)
http://eric.ed.gov/

Higher Education Academy
http://www.hea.ac.uk

Teachers College Record
http://www.tcrecord.org

What works? Student Retention and success
http://www.phf.org.uk/news.asp?id=659

Table A3.6. Survival rates in tertiary education (2004)
Calculated separately for tertiary-type A and tertiary-type B programmes: Number of graduates from these programmes divided by the number of new entrants to these programmes in the typical year of entrance, by programme destination and duration of programme

	Survival rates in tertiary education[1]	Survival rates in tertiary-type A education[2]				Survival rates in tertiary-type B education[3]				Advanced research programmes
		All programmes	Duration of programmes			All programmes	Duration of programmes			
			3 to less than 5 years	5 to 6 years	More than 6 years		2 to less than 3 years	3 to less than 5 years	5 years or more	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
OECD countries										
Australia	m	67	x(2)	x(2)	x(2)	m	m	m	m	67
Austria	m	65	x(2)	x(2)	a	m	m	m	a	m
Belgium (Fl.)	80	74	75	71	82	85	a	85	a	m
Canada	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m
Czech Republic	63	65	74	60	a	61	66	60	a	44
Denmark	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m
Finland	71	71	x(2)	x(2)	x(2)	n	n	a	a	m
France4	79	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	a	m
Germany	75	73	92	65	a	79	87	72	a	m
Greece	56	79	78	83	a	35	a	35	a	34
Hungary	62	64	64	x(3)	x(3)	48	48	m	a	37
Iceland4	69	67	m	m	m	76	m	m	m	m
Ireland	78	83	x(2)	x(2)	x(2)	69	x(6)	x(6)	x(6)	m
Italy	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	88

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Japan	90	91	91	90	a	87	87	x(7)	a	89
Korea	m	83	83	100	a	m	m	m	a	76
Luxembourg	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m
Mexico	69	69	69	x(3)	x(3)	63	63	a	a	90
Netherlands	76	76	76	x(3)	a	a	a	a	a	m
New Zealand	50	54	55	m	m	42	42	x(7)	x(7)	66
Norway	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	m
Poland	66	66	65	66	a	74	a	74	a	m
Portugal	66	68	62	72	a	58	a	58	a	65
Slovak Republic	m	m	m	m	a	77	80	69	a	m
Spain	75	74	71	76	a	79	79	a	a	m
Sweden	61	60	x(2)	x(2)	a	68	x(6)	a	a	m
Switzerland4	m	69	72	68	m	m	m	m	m	m
Turkey	76	74	74	x(3)	a	79	79	a	a	75
United Kingdom	71	78	78	84	53	53	x(6)	x(6)	x(6)	70
United States	m	54	x(2)	m	a	m	m	m	m	m
OECD average	70	71	~	~	~	67	~	~	~	67
EU19 average	69	71	~	~	~	68	~	~	~	64

1 The survival rates in tertiary education represent the proportion of those who enter a tertiary-type A or a tertiary-type B programme, who go on to graduate from either a tertiary-type A or a tertiary-type B programme.

2. Survival rates in tertiary-type A education represent the proportion of those who enter a tertiary-type A programme, who go on to graduate from a tertiary-type A programme.

3. Survival rates in tertiary-type B education represent the proportion of those who enter a tertiary-type B programme, who go on to graduate from a tertiary-type B programme.

4.Survival rates based on panel data.

Source: OECD. See Annex 3 for notes *(www.oecd.org/edu/eag2007).*

  Please refer to the Reader's Guide for information concerning the symbols replacing missing data.

APPENDIX B

Reflective Questions in the interests of greater retention and success
(taken from Crosling, Thomas and Heagney (2008: 181)

- How aware are you of your students' backgrounds, previous educational experiences and other interests? What methods do you use within your teaching to find out about these issues?
- How do these aspects shape your students' expectations of their education?
- In what ways do you support students to be responsible for their own learning?
- Do you include sufficient collaborative and participative learning approaches in your teaching to enable students to get to know each other and become active learners?
- In what ways could you draw on students' own experiences more to help them engage in their learning and to become more active?
- Could you utilise problem-based or project-based learning activities rather than lectures to teach any more aspects of your course?
- Is your induction process engaging, participatory and focused on improving transparency of expectations and norms?
- Are academic skills built into your curriculum?
- How would you describe your relationship with your students? Are there ways in which you could develop more communication channels with them?
- What forms of assessment do you use? Is there scope for a wider range of methods, and to incorporate feed-forward as well as feedback to assist students in having a better understanding of their learning?