

“The challenge of Access, Retention and Drop-out in Higher Education in Europe: the experiences of non-traditional students”

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Access and Success – European Models for Lifelong Learning

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Abstract

Access to higher education (HE) for non-traditional students has been a common policy objective across the Western world since the tremendous reforms in the HE sectors in the late 90s and is usually closely linked to government objectives to develop a skilled and competent workforce for the global economy. Lifelong learning (LLL) has emerged as a key theme in this context and in many countries in Western Europe a variety of initiatives have been launched and evaluated. The European Universities Charter on Lifelong Learning set out, in 2008, what universities and governments should commit to in this respect but as yet much of the content is still aspirational.

In many European countries, attempts to open up access more broadly, in particular to vocational learners, is further compromised by difficulties in effecting transition between vocational and academic routes. In response to these problems, the German federally funded project OPULL - Opening Universities for Lifelong Learning - is seeking to develop models for Europe-wide lifelong learning schemes through an initial collaboration between universities in Germany, Denmark, Finland and the UK.

The first stage of the project has mapped the educational systems of each of the participating countries, focusing especially on what good-practice models exist in each country for opening access to non-traditional students. This paper presents a thematic classification of these models, explores the extent/commonality of structural factors which limit access across the four countries and argues that policy makers should focus on ways of ensuring that successful mechanisms and offers are not at risk from political short-termism and ideological change.

As a best practice example and partner within the OPULL project, the Open University (OU) in the UK is internationally renowned for its flexible approach to the delivery of high quality learning opportunities, especially for non-traditional students, providing an effective and efficient model for lifelong learning. However, completion to graduation is statistically low and drop-out between modules considerably higher than in the campus-based part of the higher education (HE) sector. There are many possible reasons for this phenomenon but research has tended to focus on an assumption that drop-out is negative and ignores the

possibility and positive effects which students may have achieved their study goals with a single module or may be using their acquired credit to move into the campus-based sector.

This is not just a problem for the OU, but a reality for various European higher education institutions (HEIs) and is fundamentally the result of a perception that higher education can only be pursued through qualifications. This very perception informs funding models, quality assurance measures, student support, curriculum content and teaching and learning strategies in most HE systems in Europe and thus mainly caters for traditional students. In short, retention is seen as a problem because the access models we currently have are predicated on modes of study which are not appropriate for lifelong learning. Through the identification of good-practice in access, funding, recognition and support structures, we argue that retention could be de-problematized if moving in and out of study or between institutions were measured as progression rather than drop-out.

Introduction

The basic idea of lifelong learning as a social task in Europe calls for an improved integration of different educational pathways. The European scientific community is coalescing, careers and educational paths are becoming increasingly non-linear, demographic change is aggravating skilled labour shortages in the economy, and all these factors call for less barriers between the educational systems and for the equal treatment of competencies acquired in academic and vocational education.

While all of society favours the idea of opening and integrating educational systems in general, this requires especially of higher education institutions to adapt and acquire characteristics of an 'open' university which can deal with the varying levels of prior learning in new, non-traditional target groups. Furthermore, this calls for a new culture, a culture of lifelong learning in universities if they are to succeed in opening and making new, non-traditional target groups feel in good hands. A university of lifelong learning must know its target groups very closely and adapt to their specific needs. It must create an educational community which collectively meets the various needs of the different target groups.

In its European Universities' Charter on Lifelong Learning, the European University Association (EUA, 2008) formulated benchmarks which give European universities direct support on how to position themselves systematically as institutions of lifelong learning and how to develop continually in this direction. For example the Charter suggests that universities include in their strategy plans to widen access and participation, and thereby bringing a heterogeneous student population to higher education. For non-traditional target groups in particular, universities must offer guidance and counselling, and they must also support the recognition of non-formally or informally acquired competencies.

A look at the European university landscape to compare how far concepts of LLL have been implemented shows individual universities at widely different developmental stages (Davies & Feutrie, 2008). In particular there is a large difference between EU member countries in

relation to creating new entrance regulations for non-traditional students. In spite of progress in EU integration and the Bologna Process, the legal, political and cultural conditions, as well as the institutional architecture of the higher educational systems still diverge considerably. In addition there are large differences in how and how often non-formally or informally acquired competencies are recognised towards higher education courses, and therefore permeability between vocational and university education remains limited in many countries.

This is precisely where the research project OPULL - Opening Universities for Lifelong Learning - is working. Its goal is a systematic analysis of the different models of opening universities in Germany, Finland, the United Kingdom and Denmark in order to derive good practice recommendations and to develop a vision for an open university model for Europe. The participating institutions are the Leuphana University of Lüneburg in Germany, the Open University at the University of Helsinki in Finland, the Open University in the UK and the University of Southern Denmark. During three research phases the project is analysing different mechanisms and their success in enabling lifelong learning for non-traditional students. Firstly in 2009 and 2010, extensive desk research was conducted to map out the educational systems in the four participating countries focusing on issues of access and permeability for non-traditional students. The second project phase which is taking place in 2011, investigates the implementation of open university models in the four countries through quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews with non-traditional students and university staff. During the third and last project phase in 2012, these results will be drawn together to identify critical success factors for building open universities for Europe.

The data gathering for the four national mapping reports of phase one of the OPULL project, “Mapping Educational Systems and Analysing General Frameworks”, focused on issues of access and permeability within the educational systems of the participating countries and was conducted similarly in all four countries according to a jointly developed comparative report manual. Research data from previous, mainly educational, sociological and psychological studies was gathered. This work was supplemented by a minimum of three qualitative interviews with HE professionals from various backgrounds in all four countries (see Table 1).

Table 1: interviews with experts

representatives from	Number of experts interviewed per country			
	Germany	Denmark	Finland	United Kingdom
employer organisation	1	1	0	1
employees organisation / union	1	1	0	1
educational ministry	2	1	1	0
other educational government organisation	3	0	0	1
HE research	2	2	0	2
HE management	0	1	2	0
total	9	6	3	6

The interviews were conducted with experts from higher education institutions, in higher education policy, and from employer as well as employee organisations, but the selection procedure of experts within the countries was not pre-defined; it was only suggested to target one expert from each background to include different perspectives and the opinion of influential people or organisations within the HE debate. Thus, the reader should note that the interview samples remain highly selective and therefore possibilities for generalisation of the results are limited. As a special focus of the national mapping reports, the structures of and barriers to university lifelong learning and academic continuing education were analysed.

In this paper, interim results of the first project phase are presented, highlighting findings from the national mapping reports and interviews. Comparing the four national mapping reports showed that barriers and good-practice examples on access and permeability which are common to the four participating countries fit into six clusters. These will be presented and linked to the question of success of non-traditional learners. For this, individual country participants from the project team have been asked to reflect on what constitutes 'success' for lifelong learners in higher education. Additionally, this issue will also be part of the empirical research during the next project phase in 2011.

Barriers and Good-Practice Examples from OPULL

In the following, the main issues concerning access and permeability into and within HE which were found in all four participating countries will be presented according to the six identified clusters:

Cluster 1: General Mindset and Society

Attitudes towards open access (or the lack thereof) have been found to be a major issue in the four participating countries, largely influenced by a prevailing belief that education is the realm of young people. In Germany and England, a number of attitudinal issues impact on the potential for progression for part-time and vocational learners. Despite attempts by the English government to create a level playing field through the development of new curricula, new kinds of schools, new qualifications and revised funding models, parity of esteem between vocational and academic qualifications is still an aspiration rather than a reality. Furthermore, widening participation to higher education has been a funded government policy for over ten years in all four nations of the UK but an education system which has been so deeply rooted in social class divides for centuries might easily be re-imagined (Beer & Marr, 2007), but not so easily re-constituted. Similarly, this is the case for the German educational system, where recent changes of national and regional higher education laws have been aimed at opening HE access especially to vocational learners, but so far no significant increase in the participation of vocational learners has occurred (Isserstedt et al. 2007; Isserstedt et al. 2010). Some German respondents also referred to a conceptual divide between vocational education and training (VET) and HE as being prevalent in people's minds and embedded in educational structures (see also Buhr et al. 2008). Even in Finland, where the educational system is said to leave no dead ends and opportunities to study are equitable, the children of academically

educated parents are eight times more likely to pursue university studies than are children of non-academic parents (Kivinen, Hedman & Kaipainen 2007, p. 245).

In Finland, well-known as a country with an advanced LLL orientation in all educational sectors, interviewees were critical of persistent beliefs that HE is only for the young and called for fostering a better understanding of LLL. Nevertheless, Finland may serve as a best-practice model with its long history of LLL and uniting its citizens in a common understanding of the value and features of a well-functioning educational system with LLL as its core. This is also because in Finland students' opportunities to progress from one level of education to the next are safeguarded by legislation.

Cluster 2: National Decisions and Influences

The second cluster of issues deriving from the comparative mapping exercise can be summarised as national decisions and (government) influences. The mapping reports have shown that educational systems are more permeable in theory (existence of pathways) than in practice (frequency of their use). This is especially true for Germany when considering the lack of actual permeability between the VET and the HE system, but interviewees in England also pointed this out. However, national, transparent and clear policies, e.g. for widening participation (WP) or the recognition of prior learning (RPL), can have a strong influence. Despite social barriers to WP and vocational progression, there have been some effective national initiatives in England as in Denmark, which have identified clear routes and pathways. The use of such pathways was strongly fostered where national decisions had been made, initiatives had run and policies were firmly in place. *Aimhigher* and *Lifelong Learning Networks* (LLNs) for example, were cited by a number of respondents in the English mapping report as instances of good practice. Both initiatives were established to encourage schools, local authorities, further education colleges and higher education institutions to work together in sub-regional consortia, the former to support progression for young people from under-represented groups and the latter to identify and develop new routes for vocational progression to higher education. Even though they have only been operational for a relatively short time span (*Aimhigher* since 2003 and LLNs since 2005), they are considered to be very successful (HEFCE, 2010; Little and Williams, 2008).

As these examples suggest, national decisions and influences have significant impact on opportunities for and the realisation of LLL provided by, or in partnership with, the HE sector. As one English respondent pointed out, national policies and structures of vocational education need to be stable in order to allow the development of alternative pathways to and from general upper secondary education. Here, Germany with its long history in, and very strong established structures of, the VET system may serve as a good example.

One other major structural issue stressed in all four national mapping reports was the (lack of) recognition of prior learning towards HE degrees. It is clear that higher education institutions are in need of *feasible* models of recognition of prior learning (assessment procedures, recognition process, information and transparency) towards traditional higher education degrees, for undergraduate as well as postgraduate studies. In Finland, Germany and England,

RPL was rather the exception than a mainstream phenomenon. Some individual HEIs have been experimenting with recognition-based access and credit transfer models but these schemes are not being widely adopted across the HE sector. German HEIs have only started to develop schemes for the recognition of prior learning through the national series of *ANKOM* projects (Freitag, 2009; Buhr et al. 2008; Stamm-Riemer 2008, 2011)¹. However, the recognition of competencies towards HE degrees also only focuses on specific qualifications, i.e. those acquired within the formal VET system. Nevertheless, interview data from the German mapping report clearly identified the federal initiative *ANKOM* as a good-practice example. Some industry branches in Germany and England have also developed individual solutions, as RPL is more common in rather vocationally oriented HE subjects. In Finland, there is only a system of recognising studies which are at an equal level, but work experience and training excluded from this. In Denmark, RPL has been successfully implemented and has opened pathways for non-traditional learners, but has always been restricted to all educational sectors excepting universities. Here, Denmark may provide a good-practice model if RPL schemes could be successfully adapted and transferred between educational sectors.

Despite emerging efforts to find ways of recognising non-formal and informal learning towards HE degrees, large research gaps were found to still exist concerning the frequency and effect of RPL provisioning in all countries but Denmark. Furthermore it seems that even if access restrictions are loosened on a policy level, higher education institutions are hesitant to implement open access policies or to experiment with admission procedures, as examples from Germany have shown. In all the countries it was pointed out that HEIs, especially traditional universities, fear for their reputation and academic quality which hinders their openness to widening participation and recognising prior learning. This might also be due to the lack of research proving the (possibly very positive) effects of RPL, as seen in Denmark: There, students who accessed higher education through admission interviews were found to be more likely to have higher motivation and to complete the course. Both the National Knowledge Centre for Validation of Prior Learning (NVR) and the National Research Centre of Competence Development are successful national bodies which promote the topic and ensure a nationally transparent approach.

Access and permeability vary strongly between institutions due to the firmly established, inherent autonomy of HEIs. Furthermore, in England especially, a strong reputational hierarchy between higher education institutions hinders equal access. In general, Finnish respondents have indicated that less dualism between universities and other polytechnics/universities of applied sciences needs to be achieved to foster permeability. However, the introduction of clear, transparent and nationwide LLL policies can have a significant impact of opening access for non-traditional students, as the good practice example from Finland shows, where lifelong learning was defined as one of the guiding principles in its educational policy. Similarly, all HEIs in England have had a specific agenda to widen participation since 1999.

¹ Between 2005 and 2008 the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) funded 11 regional projects to foster learning pathways from VET to HE. The work of the project monitoring and supporting the federal initiative *ANKOM* has been prolonged until June 2011.

Cluster 3: Progression from Secondary Education

The third cluster of barriers for HE access and success was identified as transfer from secondary education. Access to HE appears, in England and Germany at least, to be linked to the early streaming of young people into either academic or vocational routes. In Germany, the duration of compulsory schooling or training differs from state to state due to the regulatory independence of the federal states (*Länder*). The streaming of young people in compulsory schooling takes place already after the fourth or sixth year of school, depending on the state. Although the country analysis for Germany confirmed the success of the highly reputable dual vocational education and training system and the success of its students, one of the respondents pointed out that a highly reputable vocational education and/or apprenticeship system does not necessarily increase progression to higher education.

In England, the streaming of young people into academic or vocational routes also takes place relatively early and is a major influence on their educational aspirations and achievements. The Minister for Further Education has expressed a desire to create parity of esteem for young people following apprenticeship routes into and through higher education primarily by the introduction of graduation ceremonies (Hayes, 2011). The establishment of University Technology Colleges has been mooted as a way of providing a kind of halfway house between schools and colleges for 14-19 year olds, with a strong focus on vocational education and work-based learning.

In Finland, the educational system provides a successful role model for transition between secondary education and HE with almost all school leavers and equally 83% of HE students possessing the general HE entrance certificate (*ylöppilastutkinto*). This is due to the fact that in Finland, the education system forms a coherent learning pathway that supports children's growth, development and well-being. Both general and vocational upper secondary certificates provide eligibility for further studies in universities and polytechnics. A student completing one level is thus always eligible for study at the next level. The qualifications at each level are governed by a separate Act of Parliament. This assures harmonised qualifications and their quality, and guarantees students' rights.

Cluster 4: Links with Employers and Adult Education

As one focus point of the mapping reports, interconnections between the educational sectors, especially between HE and adult education, as well as links with employers were researched. These were identified as the fourth cluster of issues related to access for non-traditional students and LLL in HE. There were clear variations between the four participating countries.

The Geldermann reports argued that universities should play a key role in cooperation with adult/further education and vocational education and training, but that more in-depth research is needed as the existing structures seriously lack transparency. This is not, however an issue in the Finnish system, as participation in adult and continuing education is relatively high. Here, cooperation between adult/further education institutions and universities are either not necessary due to the well functioning adult education system or institutionalised, such as in the nationwide Finnish Open University system (see cluster 6: Models of Open Universities).

In England, too, strong links can be found in consortia between higher and further education institutions as well as through franchised provision of higher education at adult/further education institutions.

Reasons to engage employers with HEIs, especially for professionally oriented academic continuing education programmes or part-time HE studies are often discussed. While traditional universities in countries like Germany only recently began engaging with employers English HEIs already hold a considerable amount of experience and expertise in the area and the aforementioned Lifelong Learning Networks were a major element in strengthening relationships between them, colleges, employers and other learning providers.

Cluster 5: Structural Aspects of Tertiary and Academic Continuing Education

Frameworks and concrete matters of implementing tertiary structures suitable for LLL within the HEIs were found to be big issues despite all political and cross-sectoral issues. As the mapping reports showed, higher education is still heavily weighted towards young full-time students, especially in England and Germany. A number of reasons and barriers were identified in the participating countries:

Good practice examples in England, Denmark and Finland have shown that specific groups can be targeted through widening participation policies and tailored HE offers. These typically include people from low socio-economic backgrounds, mature students, people in work (especially in low-paid employment), vocationally qualified applicants, children brought up in public care systems, disabled learners, students with migration background, with non-traditional access qualifications, from rural areas and/or from non-academic backgrounds.

But at the same time, reports from all four participating countries confirmed that part-time, evening, weekend and blended learning offers are much sought after but in short supply. Apart from the Open University UK, opportunities for distance, online and blended learning are few and far between and part-time study at weekends and evenings is insufficiently available in England. It was found in Denmark and England that in general, distance and blended learning are appropriate means to increase participation. For vocationally qualified students in traditional degrees, transparent information and special support should be in place to specifically enhance their learning. As practices from Finland have proven, personal development plans are a good means to support students' development, regardless of their background and type of institution. Personal development plans are implemented for students both in polytechnics and in universities.

Financial support is another major issue for non-traditional students and in both Germany and England the support systems need to be simplified. There is a general trend towards the view that responsibility for funding of academic continuing education should be shared between employers, individuals and government. Recent research in England revealed that part-time studies are still poorly funded (Callender and Heller, 2009). Interviews in Germany also showed that financial barriers have a significant impact especially for non-traditional students.

Concerning academic continuing education, the mapping research has found that it often comes with high tuition fees which are again viewed as an important barrier for non-traditional learners to (re)enter HE in the field of continuing education. University lifelong learning offering single modules or subjects is highly sought after by professionals and those already in employment and insufficiently offered by traditional HEIs, especially in Germany. As in some countries, e.g. Germany, private higher education institutions have a long history of offering tailored academic continuing education for professionals, and these institutions present strong competition for public higher education institutions in the field. Most successful academic continuing education departments in all four countries were found to have a focus on widening participation, to have long-term, well established partnerships with adult/further education institutions and to offer flexible delivery as well as recognition of prior learning schemes.

Cluster 6: Models of “Open Universities”

As a sixth cluster, issues in the national mapping reports have evolved around the term “Open University” as such. Comparing the understanding in the national reports, this term represented different concepts in all four countries. While most open universities are said to have modelled themselves on The Open University (UK), open university concepts as well as characteristic features of what makes a university “open” are yet to be clarified. Given the different demands and structural barriers discussed above, the characteristics of an open university comprise (but are not limited to or require all of) the following aspects: Open university students should be able to transfer to and get recognition towards traditional degree courses – but there is no consensus on the question of whether or not all open universities should offer full degree courses or “only” modules, certificates or “open” courses, e.g. like the OUs in Finland. Flexible delivery modes such as part-time, blended and distance or e-learning options were included in OU concepts to varying extents, ranging from the UK models of entirely online courses to weekend-taught full-time courses at Leuphana University of Lüneburg. The recognition of prior learning as well as the integration of work-based learning are other major features which seem to be expected of an open university, but are not yet implemented to a sufficient extent.

For institutional best practice models, the Open University in the UK and the Open University system in Finland were identified. For just over 40 years, the Open University (OU) in the UK has been offering genuine part-time distance learning opportunities. Its mission, to be open to people, places, methods and ideas permeates its strategic planning and all policy decisions. There are currently no admission requirements and, although students are guided towards the most appropriate starting point, they are not obliged to follow such recommendations. OU awards have parity with all other qualifications in national frameworks across the four UK nations and the institution also supports informal learning through a range of free resources such as Open Learn and iTunes U. In Finland, open university studies are not offered by a single, coherent organisation, such as in the UK. Open university education is offered by almost all Finnish universities. Finnish universities provide open university education to promote educational and regional equality and the state supports the system. Open university students may complete various modules, but open universities cannot award degrees.

However, credits are transferable and can be incorporated into a university degree. Open university education is open to all regardless of age or educational background. The studies are organised especially to meet the needs of adult students in working life, who want to update and improve their general or vocational knowledge and know-how, to upgrade their basic education, to study parts of degrees to later complete a degree, or to work towards their self-development.

Alternative Understandings of Success

As outlined above, national mapping reports have shown that non-traditional learners seek other study modes and environments and HEIs which are open to LLL might be characterised by features which are distinct from what traditionally makes a university successful. As the 10 focus points of the EUA Charter imply, lifelong learning at HEIs can be successful according to a number of premises. However, as the issue of success is being discussed at the moment, it is not mainly one brought up by the non-traditional learners themselves but one which informs policy and institutional practices, especially if HE funding is made dependent on “success” variables such as student graduation numbers and quotas.

In Germany, the successful completion of studies is *the* central goal of tertiary education (Heublein, Spangenberg, Sommer 2003, p. 141) and hence drop out is seen as something negative, regardless of the reasons. In society success can only be measured if there is a tangible outcome. However, from the learner’s perspective it would seem reasonable to assume that the measure of success is related to whether they have achieved their own objectives, for example, passing a module, being awarded a diploma or obtaining a first class honours degree. In England, study success is defined largely by funding mechanisms and in terms of satisfactory completion (whether the student passes or fails). This is measured by the student attending for assessment or submitting the final piece of assessment for the qualification they are working towards. Should the student fail to submit or attend the final assessment, the funding council contribution for that student will be reclaimed. Ironically, this casts the measure of success for universities as completion rather than achievement or attainment and depends on the study intention of the individual. As the experience from the Open University UK shows, institutional success is indicated in part by the number of awards and level of achievement but also by retention and progression. Thus, if a student decides to leave one institution before they have completed their course, they are deemed to have officially ‘failed’ even if they subsequently go to register at another institution.

The same problem occurs in Germany. When talking about failure and drop-out, it has to be taken into account that non-traditional students, who temporarily stop and may still have a successful university experience later as well as students who change their subject of study, appear as drop-out students in the German statistics. This problem remains, if they re-enter the same or another university after having e.g. a family break. Empirical data show that around 20% of all students in Germany who start a study programme at a higher education institution change their study programme. Also 20% of all students that start studying each semester change their university. Moreover, more than 10% of those who start studying stop

studying temporarily (“stop out”) and have a successful university experience later (Teichler 2009, p. 431). Since there is no empirical data or statistics for the study success of the very heterogeneous group of non-traditional students in Germany, one can only assume that changing a course, a pausing or changing university is also not unusual for non-traditional students and new measures should be found.

Despite being one of the very successful institutions, a major challenge for the OU UK is that graduation rates are considerably lower than in campus-based universities. For many OU learners, the study goal may not be a qualification – it might only be to learn something specific for their employment, to satisfy an interest in a particular subject or to try out study at HE level before accessing a traditional institution. Because students are not required to indicate a study goal at registration, success is difficult to measure. For Finland, Kivilehto (2007) analyzed 460 Finnish open university students and divided them into three groups: occupational developers, young degree hunters, and adult learners. The primary motivation for the “occupational developers” and “adult learners” was to get more and deeper knowledge of the subject.

If European HEIs want to open up to LLL, this thus requires developing a new understanding of what student success means. Especially for non-traditional students, the notion of study success has to be carefully reconsidered. The criteria for success for universities should not be the number of qualifications they bestow, but rather that they make it their primary aim to offer education to people who do not have a qualification.

Conclusion

Our paper outlined important findings from the first phase of project OPULL which showed that barriers and good-practice examples on access and permeability for non-traditional learners in the four participating countries can be summarised into six clusters. These range from issues of the general mindset and society (1) to national decisions and influences (2), progression from secondary education (3), links with employers and adult education (4), structural aspects of tertiary and academic continuing education (5), and models of open universities (6). The findings indicate that although barriers restricting access to lifelong learning in HE are manifold, a great extent of commonality between the four participating project countries Germany, Finland, England and Denmark exists. Thus, mutual learning from good-practice examples should be expanded to foster access and success for lifelong learners in all countries. As many successful initiatives and models to solve the barriers of each cluster may already have been implemented in other countries, learning from each other provides a rich pool of ideas and insights to tackle prevailing barriers for non-traditional learners in HE in Europe. However, many good practice examples in the participating countries suffer from funding cuts, so policy makers and HE responsables should especially focus on ways of ensuring that successful mechanisms for lifelong learning are not threatened or cut off by political short-termism and ideological change.

On the issue of success, the findings furthermore revealed that from non-traditional learners’ perspectives, HE does not necessarily only work by pursuing qualifications, but rather by

fulfilling individual objectives and personal “measures” of success. Thus, drop-out should not always be considered negative, but might even be an indicator for the learner to have successfully achieved his/her goals in lifelong learning. This marks the important difference in whether study success is seen from the individual or the institutional perspective. From the individual perspective success can also be something not necessary linked to the successful completion of a course or study programme. For higher institutions it is necessary to be able to compare the development and the outcome of the programmes. Therefore, it is not possible to limit comparison of success rates to the completion of institution-specific requirements. Rather, learner-centred approaches should be in the focus of interest. The shift to LLL should be seen as a chance to rethink not only the ways we measure success, but that success is something complex, especially when working with non-traditional learners in HE.

A shift of focus is needed here in order to consider moving in and out of study or between institutions as progression, rather than drop out. Naturally, this poses challenges especially for the (statistical) measurement of HE figures, for which innovative solutions informed by the idea of lifelong learning are yet to be developed. Overall, a change of mindsets seems to be the most important precondition in the context of access and success if we want to move towards an European lifelong learning model in HE.

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