

EXPLORING THE NEEDS AND EXPERIENCES OF NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS IN THE UNIVERSITY OF SEVILLE

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INTRODUCTION

Higher education is subject to a lot of change and reform at present, and recent debates highlight the importance of the social dimension of Higher Education. The London Communiqué (2007) stated that the role of the social dimension was linked to the general role of Higher Education, giving the clearest idea as to the overall aim of social dimension policies: ‘the student body entering, participating in and completing Higher Education at all levels should reflect the diversity of populations’. It appears, therefore, that debates on non-traditional students and improving students’ study conditions have now entered the mainstream discussion, instead of largely being seen as a social democratic argument (Odds, 2010).

There is an increasing number of students whose age, educational background and life circumstances do not fit the stereotypical profile, and the term non-traditional has been used to refer these heterogeneous groups. Students 25-years or older, from other ethnic groups, with some disability, from a low social background and/or with dependent relatives are likely to present a different profile than those of their more “conventional” mates, and might raise new challenges for the Higher Education institutions. However, they have remained hard to recognise as there were not detailed survey data on their social and economic conditions. Therefore, it might be argued that the characterisation of this group as “an invisible majority” (McNair, 1998) still held true in most policy settings in Europe until recently. In the framework of the Bologna process, the Eurostudent project represents a long due effort to collect comparable data on the socio-economic dimensions of students.

Drawing on the Eurostudent report (2008), as well as another national (MEC, 2011) and other local reports (the University of Seville Yearbooks), we want to make a first approach to non-traditional students in Spanish universities and, specifically, Seville’s-: Who are they? What percentage do they represent? What study conditions do they have

to deal with? As there are not previous studies on these groups, we consider this information will provide an initial assessment of their number and characteristics from which we could make a more in-depth approach to their experiences and needs.

According to Eurostudent (2008), 38% of Spanish students are 25-years or older, in comparison with the EU average of 34%. This has been an ever-increasing trend during the last 10 years, as the age structure in the first and second cycle has significantly changed, and the number of people under 30 years has doubled while the percentage of students below 25 has dropped 10 points since 1999-2000 (MEC, 2011).

It is important to note that, in Spain, applicants without admission qualifications can enter Higher Education via a special entrance examination. This entrance examination is only open to those 25 years old or older. The examination is regulated nationally, but it is organized by the institutions for Higher Education. A further initiative has just been introduced for people 40 and 45 years old or older. These initiatives will lead to a greater percentage of older students entering university. In fact, Camilleri and Mühleck (2010) suggested that there might be some relation between the development of recognition of prior learning and equity.

Other relevant features about “non-traditional” students in Spain are the following (Eurostudent, 2008; MEC 2011):

- There is a percentage of 1.9% of disabled students who feel impaired in their studies.
- 4.1% of the students have children.
- The percentage of students from abroad in the classrooms is 4.1% in the first and second cycle and much higher in masters (18.4%) and doctorates (34.6%). The growth rate in the last three academic years has been 34.6%, which might be due to the increase of the immigrant population.
- The percentage of students with a low social background, measured by their father’s and mother’s education, is 28.37% (father) and 33.85% (mother), and 3.5% of the students have parents with low incomes.

With regards to the University of Seville, it is hard to make an accurate estimation of the number of possible non-traditional students, as statistics only show information of their age and nationality. The rest of the groups cannot be identified by the institution

and their condition of “non-traditional” remains invisible. In any case, if we go by the data collected in the Yearbooks of the university, the percentage of 25-years or older students has increased by nearly 3 points since 2002/2003, currently being 29.82% in the first and second cycle. That means that almost 1 out of 3 students are “non-traditional” according to their age. Likewise, the percentage of students from abroad has remained relatively stable since 2002/2003, having nowadays reached 2.27%. These students mainly come from Africa, Latin America and the EU countries.

In conclusion, the university should make greater efforts to identify the non-traditional students who take courses there, and to know their circumstances and characteristics better. Furthermore, it is important to go beyond the information that statistics can provide, adopting a more in-depth approach to the students' reality and daily experiences, in order to determine what Higher Education institutions can do to promote equity more.

THE PRESENT STUDY

We aim to deepen our knowledge about the family, academic and social experiences of non-traditional students in the University of Seville. We are especially interested in knowing the goals they pursue and the reasons that made them access to the university, and describing the first moments at the university and the difficulties they experience in lectures and tutorials. Likewise, we want to analyze the needs they account for and their opinion about the services that the university provides, as well as their future plans and motivations.

As our interest is to attain a deeper knowledge of the students' experiences and needs by developing detailed explanations, we aim to provide insights into this topic rather than generalized conclusions for a wider context. In this sense, we hope our findings will be illustrative of the students' life and academic processes.

Participants

A purposive sample of a minimum of 20 was considered to be suitable to collect information regarding our goals. Several criteria were taken into account in order to select/invite the respondents: representation of different groups of non-traditional

students (25 year-old or more, disabled, low economical background, with dependent relatives, first generation in university and other nationalities/ethnic groups), representation of students from different degrees, and easy access.

It must be noted that the request was highly welcomed and most of the subjects accepted and even expressed their great interest in taking part in the study. As their participation implies much time devoted to writing about their own life and circumstances, this willingness to participate was surprising for the researchers and, in our opinion, shows the students' enthusiasm for having been given voice to communicate their own stories and concerns.

Table 1 shows a brief description of each of the 22 students that finally participated in the data-collection process. Nearly all the students carried out a written narrative about several topics. Only one of them was interviewed (Nasser) due to his lack of time to do the written report and the high interest of his response for the study's goals.

Data collection procedures

Written narratives were collected from the 22 participants. Several topics to write about were suggested to the participants: family environment and background; school paths; access and adaptation to university; teaching and teachers; institutional environment and life outside lectures; personal and educational identity; future motivations; and suggestions to improve the situation of non-traditional students at the university. Each topic presented a guide of possible questions to consider, but only as suggestions to foster inspiration. Respondents were encouraged to write as great detail as possible about their experiences, opinions and needs.

This paper will only explore the accounts on some of these issues, leaving aside others (school paths, personal and educational identity, future motivations, suggestions for University services).

Table 1. Participants in the research

PSEUDO-NYM	CATEGORY	DEGREE	PSEUDO-NYM	CATEGORY	DEGREE
Hernán	25 or older, first generation	Journalism	Mª José	25 or older, dependent relatives	Spanish Language, Literature and Linguistics
Man	25 or older	Pedagogy	Cristi	dependent relatives, first generation	Pedagogy
Jesús	25 or older	Journalism	MJ	25 or older	Nursery Education
Magister	first generation, low economical background	Special needs Education	Utopía	disability	Pedagogy
Anónima 24	disability, first generation	Special needs Education	Yria	dissability	Psychology
NOA	first generation, low economical background	Special needs Education	Lidia	first generation	Pedagogy
Ananda	other ethnic/national group	Law	Laura	first generation	Biology
AlvarittoCrack	disability	Business	Salvador	first generation	Nursery Education
Carlos	disability	Physics	Emma	dependent relatives, first generation	Nursery Education
Nasser	25 or older, other ethnic/national group	Building engineering	Paola	first generation	Nursery Education
Isabel	25 or older	Pedagogy	María	first generation generación, low economical background	Nursery Education

RESULTS

The analysis of the stories has been a complex process, as they show a wide range of life experiences, and it became difficult to identify common patterns. What follows is only a first attempt to explore these experiences and further analysis should be done.

With regards to the family context, we found that for many participants, the family has been a key support, providing the emotional, economical and motivational aid the

students needed to access to university and remaining there. In contrast, for others, family has been a constant source of trouble that prevented them from attaining a higher achievement.

“On a personal level, the troubles I had at this stage in the university were all the times my mother has been in the hospital... And also my father's death and the consequences this has had on my life (several problems due to debts he had when he died)”(Magister).

There seem to exist several trends in the family environment and support which are very related to the economical and social background. In working-class families, in which no other member has received Higher Education, the idea of training as a key issue for social mobility prevails. The kind of support these families tend to offer is motivational, passing the importance to going to university on to their children “to be someone with a future”, and it is at times done in an authoritarian manner, like an obligation. When their offspring reach University, the family feels highly proud and satisfied with their achievements.

“Since my brother and I were young, our parents have instilled us with the significance of studies, and they have shown us they were working hard so that we could study and have a good future... Moreover, sometimes my father was very authoritarian on this topic” (Cristi).

However, in middle-class families, the importance of going to university is not something parents have to instill, as they themselves have Higher Education diplomas and they do not even question that their children will do the same. In these families, the support is more “active”: introducing them to culture, providing help with homework, buying books, etc. And, when children access to university they do not feel especially proud, as they tend to “normalize” their success.

“My parents have influenced my learning, my father is an educated man and he likes talking about interesting topics, my mother helps me with my studies and she tries to motivate me and my brothers” (Carlos).

And, in a few cases, a lack of concern about the children's education is the general trend, and consequently, they do not provide support and show an absolute ignorance about what the students do in university. Sometimes, this lack of support and concern are continuous obstacles to the students' development.

“My mother hardly asks me anything about it, because I think that she doesn’t know what to ask about and she also has her mind on other, more important things... My father hardly ever knows what I’m studying” (Noa).

The first moments at university are frequently described as “frightening” as the students were afraid of finding a hostile environment, in which teachers were too strict and subjects too difficult. It was a chaotic period, as they were unaware of almost everything: the vocabulary (“credit”, “core-subject”, and so on), how to manage the brand-new autonomy in their learning, the lack of direct supervision...

“I thought... that university would be hard, teachers would be strict people, and also I thought I wouldn’t be able to pass my degree, I even thought that if I didn’t pass my first exams, I would give up my degree” (Magister).

“My first year at the university was sort of chaotic, I didn’t know how to do the university registration, I didn’t know what the difference between annual and core subjects was... I didn’t know anyone, or the faculty...” (Cristi).

The older students also mentioned their initial disconcertion about being older than the rest. In any case, pride about their success prevailed over their fears, as they had achieved what they had been working for.

“That first day, I met people who were around 5 to 6 years younger than me, I felt a little out of place. Anyway, being where I wanted to be, I didn’t care about the rest, I didn’t need anything else, I was where I wanted to be... in a place I had worked hard to get to” (Hernán).

A change in their perspective is mentioned by some respondents. Taking things more seriously, accepting their new responsibilities, living on their own are part of the challenges they assumed from the very first moment in the university, and, consequently, they attained higher achievements than in previous educational stages.

“When becoming a university student, the way I thought about life completely changed, I became really aware of handling my money, about the cost of my education, and about my parents’ efforts for giving me this education. Learning to be responsible with the studies, to value the knowledge...” (Ananda).

In contrast, others discovered the “social life” associated with living on their own and the fact that lectures are not obligatory. This led them to a low achievement in the first year.

“I took the first months in a more relaxed way, without getting anxious... This gave me an odd feeling when the exams were coming up, in a hurry, with unforeseen work, etc. I was messing around in class with my classmates. I learned the lesson well and, in the second year, I started to work hard” (AlvaritoCrack).

Students who had family burdens told of their the lack of time (to attend lectures, to study, to move from home to campus, etc.) and their difficulties in planning and managing their time during the first year that made them go through a longer adaptation period.

“I had a crisis early on in the university; I was really overwhelmed because of the lack of time and I saw no need to feel so bad balancing a job and a degree” (Emma).

Regarding the management of their curriculum through the different years, the core and yearly subjects are the basis for their plans. Some of the criteria under which they chose their annual curriculum were: getting the best timetable to optimize the study time; ruling out which one not to choose (because they were too difficult or need too much time); the teacher; and, sometimes, the cost.

“... I spent a lot of time choosing the subjects so that I had a good timetable with free time to study” (Carlos).

“... I've learned to choose the subjects according to the teacher who taught them...” (Cristi).

“I can't choose all the subjects in each course, because I don't want to burden my parents with the money required to do a degree” (Cristi).

Attending lectures is one of their most common patterns and it is considered a key issue to learning. Taking notes, asking for concepts that are hard to understand, participating and giving their opinions help them to optimize their personal study.

“I need to attend lectures to understand the subject, if I don't attend, I feel I'm missing something” (Magister).

“I always attend 99.99% of the lectures; if I miss one, it is really due to something serious” (Ananda).

However, tutorials are not considered as important as lectures and only a few students use this resource, and when they do, tutorials tend to be regarded as a “problem-solving” device and not as a mechanism for guiding their own learning.

“I haven’t made much use of tutorials, I haven’t had doubts to resolve through them” (Emma).

The use of tutorials is important to establish different kinds of relationships with teachers and only one student seems to perceive the real usefulness of tutorials.

“But it’s different, attend lectures means explaining the lesson, making comments about what has been explained, doing activities... but going to tutorials is more direct... the relation between student and teacher..., one tutorial where you can talk about all the areas within certain limits, the tutor can help you, he can advice you, he can guide you...” (Lidia).

From what is told, it is easy to perceive that the general trend in teachers is giving theoretical, non-participative lectures, almost exclusively based on taking notes. In this context, non-traditional students have to adapt, and if they cannot attend lectures, they have to ask other students for the notes in order to pass the exams.

“A typical day at the campus is ... attending lectures, taking notes and listening to the teachers; only two or three teachers use a different dynamic in class, in which we are the ones who talk most of the time, students, but overall we are still in school, where it is the teacher who gives the lesson” (Lidia).

However, when attending tutorials, teachers become more aware of their special circumstances and might provide more flexible ways to fulfill the requirements, showing a certain “complicity” towards non-traditional students.

“As for the teachers, most of them understand and value my situation, but, obviously, they can’t ask me for less than they ask the other students for. So, though I receive more flexibility, sometimes I’m pushed to finish my tasks on time, to do the obligatory reading, etc. [...] I notice that teachers value

my academic work above many of my mates', not for its content, but for its "form", its language, its maturity "(MJosé).

A good time-planning is very important for students to be successful. They spend many hours in lectures, but they also have to dedicate daily time to study and to do the practical tasks teachers usually set, many of which requiring teamwork. Taking into account that many of them need one hour or more to reach the campus, and some others have children and/or work responsibilities, they have long working days and need to plan and manage their time as best as possible.

"I wake up around six in the morning everyday, and I end my working day at the campus about 9 p.m" (Isabel).

"I often make schedules to organize my time" (María).

They cannot leave exams until the last week. They prepare them from the very first moments and only leave memorizing for the last days. In any case, many of them live in a continuous search for the space and time to study.

"In the morning, the campus and, sometimes, devoting some hours to my job. In the afternoon, my daughters, their homework and extracurriculars, doing the meal for the next day, baths, dinners, tales, and so on. Among such a bustle, I have to find the time to study, to do my work and to do everything teachers ask for" (Emma).

In such a hectic daily experience, supports is very important. This support is usually given by the partners and the classmates and takes different forms: providing motivation, helping economically, and, in a more specific sense, facilitating all those abilities and the knowledge necessary to complete certain tasks (concept-maps, powerpoints, and so forth).

"The relationship with my classmates... is very important to me. We have become a family" (Yria).

Government grants and occasional jobs, linked to a good administration of money are central for those with low incomes. That means they are impelled to attain good marks because, if not, they lose the right to grants.

“So, I'm waiting for the grant to come this year to save and to pay at least the first university registration fees, then I will have to work to continue paying for them by myself” (Noa).

Although stories present very interesting points on other issues, we are more concerned with describing the strategies and mechanisms by means of which non-traditional students “survive” in the institution. Many stories told of terrible situations some of these students (7 out of 22) have gone through (mistreatment in the family; long periods of severe illness; really poor economic conditions; discovery of their real sexual condition, and so on) that we cannot deal with due to the lack of space. But in all of the 22, a general attitude of resilience seems to be deeply rooted. Thus, in spite of going through really complex situations, the students have never questioned their intention to continue their degrees and they set up many strategies to resist and overcome difficulties in order to achieve their goals.

“There are many factors that help or have an adverse effect on your studies, although the main factor to consider is your own willpower to continue with our thoughts and wishes [...] Sometimes I get up discouraged because this path has been very hard for me ... and I take it out on my degree, and it shouldn't be like that, but that's what I do. I just hope not to lose my enthusiasm and to carry on as happy as I was when I started” (Salvador).

“One of the severest crises I have experienced at university was in the second year, when I didn't pass any subjects; this brought about a drop in my motivation, for a long time, I thought about giving up the degree. But I have always considered myself to be a girl who has fought very hard for what she wanted and I decided to keep trying, and that was right, the next year I passed everything (Yria).

All respondents show a high motivation to study at university despite all the setbacks they come across, and all of them seem to be clear about their tenacity being the most important factor for them to continue on. They might experience daily difficulties, they might have severe physical impairments, they might go through a critical stage, but, in the end, they are aware of success because they will not give up and do everything they have to to fulfill their goals.

“I’ve tried to not let these problems affect my degree, and I think I managed it, because I have passed all the subjects of 1st and 2nd year with good marks, but it is very hard studying in a hospital or at the door of the ICU; trying to keep your mind clear to study, having so many family and health problems, it’s difficult and very complicated to also do well in the university” (Magister).

“Difficulties? Architectonic barriers. I have been asking for the adaptation of the building for four years at university but they haven't done it (...). I've been asking for a reform for years but I am not being listened to. One time out of many, I went to “complain” about the lifts, the help they gave me was: “we can give you a stick to press the buttons” [...] I am not going to stop until I get the building adapted, maybe I'll do so for the last year of my degree, but, at least, this will remain for more people in similar situations to mine” (Yria).

Achieving their goals is not easy, and as we noted before, it implies a delicate balance between multiple tensions (lack of time, lack of economical resources, illness, family troubles, etc.). But the daily effort, linked to family, partner and peer support, and the skill to use adversities to their advantages achieves great results in some cases.

“Since I’ve been back at the university, my academic results have been outstanding, and I think that's due to the high motivation and joy I feel being able to complete my studies, and it's also due to the wonderful group of people I've met in my class” (Man).

DISCUSSION

Though the results highlight interesting processes and experiences, we are aware that the analysis is still in its first stage, and only allows for a general exploration of the students’ situations and conditions, trying to identify some patterns or generalities. A further approach to individual stories should be carried out to give meaning to individual actions and decisions in the specific context of each participant.

In any case, the results show that there are many non-traditional students at university and they remain unnoticed. In most cases, they live and study under very special conditions that are completely unknown by teachers. The latter cannot make a real

assessment of the results and achievements of these students. Some of the participants are our students this year and, in this sense, the research has meant a surprise for us: a change in the ways we consider them and an awareness of the conditions in which they “survive” in the institution.

In addition, the results suggest many topics upon which we should reflect from the point of view of the university institution. For instance, they question if attending lectures should be obligatory, and they also lead us to think that tutorials should be more effectively promoted in order for students to perceive them (and for the teachers to carry them out) as a real guidance and advising device. Shifting the ways in which the lectures are given towards more participative approaches would also be a good strategy to attract non-traditional students and allow them to share and widening their experience.

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