RANLHE
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Student Report (Analysis of Student Data)

I. Conceptual issues

Interviews with students indicate the necessity of combining various theoretical approaches in order to understand the importance of the ideas of 'availability' and the policy of 'retention' in the Polish higher education institutions. The access to higher education in Poland is conditioned only (!) by passing a final examination of the secondary school. The well-passed final examination guarantees admission to free-of-charge stationary studies at public universities. If the examination is passed with a poorer result what is available are payable studies in public universities (extramural studies) or in private ones. Practices of retaining students in the system of higher education vary and depend on the policy carried out by schools of higher education, often ruled by the logic of market and economy or by the specifics of learning cultures (Biesta) preferable in institutions of higher education, in their departments or academic disciplines.

On the other hand, Polish academic circles have problems with accepting the postulate of wide access to higher education lamenting on its consequences, i.e. its mass character and the deterioration of the education quality. Simultaneously, Polish academic circles are ones of the most difficult to introduce changes in daily practices of educating students, which results more from the internal mission (vocation) of these cricles to 'be critical' towards external changes than from the routine in daily teaching practices.

Polish non-traditional students are these, who in majority are the first generation that participates in education process, but also – they come from rural and small-town areas. In our opinion it increases the prestige of the local context for strengthening motivation to participate in higher education. This local context is a factor that clearly shapes or 'contextualises the learning process' of non-traditional students (Edwards 2009, p.3) both in the field of motivation as well as of the learning effects. The paradox pinpointed by Joicy Quin (2004, p.59) between *retention* and *dropping out* of non-traditional students[1] in Poland is reversed: *how is it possible that with such small support on school's side the students are retained in the education process?* Our interviews show that it is the local context which reinforces their determination in studying through e.g. offering a job (under the condition of finishing the studies) and the change of attitudes and expectations (habitus) of residents of villages and small towns towards education, which makes young and older students participate in higher education, as well as a slow change of students' attitudes towards academic knowledge[2].

This change of the attitude towards knowledge takes places – as we think – also due to the increase of students' self-esteem and obtaining this what Honneth calls social recognition and respect (Fleming, Finnegan 2010). How do non-traditional students make use of the increase of their self-esteem? In Polish research these are two areas: ostensible emancipation that consists in meeting one's own ambitions and a good adjustment to the needs of labour market and real emancipation that consists in cognitive disparity and the development of an individual's interpretative and critical competences (compare also Stanczyk 2008, p.245).

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[1] „... the paradox that even in universities offering high levels of support, in localities where jobs are difficult to find, working-class students are still dropping out".

[2] However, still – among students – an attitude towards knowledge can be noticed, which we called in the previous project PRILHE as 'non-traditional', non-critical' and conditioned by earlier school experiences. However, in results of RANLHE project there is revealed a change in students' attitudes, in particular in time perspective (between the 1st and the 3rd year of studies).

What is also crucial is the perception (or sensation) of advantages of learning by non-traditional students. Using the concept of „three capitals” – conceptualisation of the wider benefits of learning – by T. Schuller (2004), it should be stated that the most visible in interviews is the increase of identity capital and the least visible one is social capital. The human capital (knowledge and skills) is perceived as an advantage always with reference to students' professional practice. The increase of identity capital surprises non-traditional students; for them it was/is an unexpected and unplanned 'profit' that results from studying. Human capital, which in many cases was the main motivation for undertaking studies is collected and perceived as an advantage resulting from learning, but often in their utterances non-traditional students are 'disappointed' with its contents or quality.

II. RANLHE research questions

1) Factors which promote or constrain the access, retention and non- completion of non-traditional students (working class, gender and ethnicity issues) to higher education

Promoting factors:

- high motivation to study, however, both external (market/ employers demands) and internal (personal growth, individual interests, challenge, proving oneselves)
- supportive learning environments at HE institutions (flexibility, access to the information and resources such as library, IT , helpfull and patient teachers and administrations)
- peer support (helping with 'logistics' – sharing notes and books, traveling together, studying and working on shared projects but also learning from eachother in a socio – cultural ways – sharing experiences such as divorce, death and sickness in a family etc., providing emotional support and advices in a personall matters,)
- family support, specially in relation to the studying women, overburden with family and work obligations
- positive attitude toward learning and good learning skills

Constraining factors:

both politechnical university and university of Wroclaw are huge institutions, both managed in a rather oldfashioned way, so very often lack of information and miscommunication is seen as a serious constrain, although they both employing many clerks and administrators; when you are non -traditional student and your in unusual situation, have specific needs it may take time to get a proper information how to deal with it, how to find a solution. There is a lot of procedures, they're complicated and not always coherent with other procedure, resposibility is diffused and fragmented between departments and position. It looks better at ULS, maybe because of the smaller number of students, but overgrowth of administration over past year is also observable
- struggle with combining learning with work, parenting, taking care of other people (parents, siblings), financial problems, health issues, personal crisis (divorse, conflict, unemployement)
- lack of support from the institutions, teachers, family and peers
- learning difficulties, struggling with academic curriculum

2) What promotes or limits the construction of learner identity of non- traditional students to become effective learners and which enables or inhibits completion of higher education

Important factors:

- age and gender (mature students, both male and female are more determined, even when they struggle, younger are more tend to give up when experience difficulties)
- first generation in HE in a family (lack of support, diffculties with getting help from parents, dissaproval)
- personal agenda behind the decision of engaging in HE (University as a transitional space for personal change, becoming a student as an important milestone after difficult experiences, life changing decisions, crisis)
- experiences from the initial education (bad emotional experiences, being rejected by peers, being labeled as a ' bad student', conflicts with teachers and school authorities)
- adaptiveness to a new situation and demand, both social and cognitive skills
- quality of the relations with peers and lecturers
- self -esteem and perception of one's capability to manage in a new, difficult situations (demanding curriculum, new social context, etc.)
- institutional barriers and lack of knowledge on 'how things work' at the uiversity (laws and regulation on taking a break, repeating exams, semesters and courses, negotiating with the lecturers)

3) What kind of policy, cultural and institutional processes, including disciplinary sub-cultures can help or hinder completion

- studying/learning: it looks easier at the social sciences, one can manage if is dedicated and work hard but curriculum at the politechnical university can be too demanding for some of the students, so they drop out after the first semester more often than in two other institutions. There 's been a lot of stories about the'administrative jungle' at the politechnical university with confusing, incomplete and false information and unclear, hazey rules.
- flexibility of learning is also important factor: for those more independent and responsible learner who combines studying with other activities it enables completion, sometimes non- complition is being explained by the students as a result of 'not enough pressure from the tutor' (i.e. To write down the final thesis neccessary to graduate at B.A. Level). For those students taking responsibility for their own learning, self directed learning is perceiving as a challenge.
- gender aspects are important: woman are more involved in family duties (often combined with full time employment) so their tend to be overload but also they're more successfull in joggling and multitasking. So this factor can both hinder (it makes finding time for studying more difficult)– and help (once the decision is made and the tuition is paide, they know they **have to** make it, it's embedded in more personal agenda). Providing a temporary day care institutions for the children of non- traditional students would help – such network should be provided not only in the HE institutions but also in a samll town and rural area where they live.
- In some case's a *significant other* can be a factor, wheather it is a sympathetic, understanding teacher, a supportive cheering friend or a child or spouse who could be let down by learner's failure. This stories showing an importance of hidden or open influence of personal networking and relations with others are often presented as a motivation to reengaging in education for those who initialy droped out.

4) What is the structural, cultural and personal dialectics of learning and agency in students' lives

- **being a first generation in HE** is very common, so the whole dialectics of learning and being student is rather build 'from the scratch' than 'inherited' as a part of social and cultural capital; sometimes it causes a feeling of 'being inadequate', 'not belonging', specially after the first experience of reading academic books and writing an essays
- **initial experiences** in education from childhood are important, they can create an attitude toward studying and evokes an images from the past; school as a source of boredom, school as a source of violence (bullying), school as a source of positive feedback, strenthening individual as a successful learners
- **peer learning and group support** is an important factor that enables completion (travelling together for classes, sharing notes and books, studying for the exams, working on the projects); those learners who find themselves in a supportive group with positive feedback and good social relations find learning not only easier but also more rewarding and pleasant at many level as it appeals to their social needs. This factors seemed to be more important than relation with the teachers when it comes to defining a 'positive learning experience'
- as already mentioned in a previous points, **combining studying with parenthood, jobs** and taking care of elderly parents, siblings etc, is challenging, but often it is a source of strong motivation to change one's life, no matter the motives are instrumental (better job or promotion), social (changing one's image, social up -climbing) or personal growth related (self awareness, self respect, personal interests and development)
- many stories of non-traditional students introduce a factor of **important/ criticall life event** resulting in a deep and sudden change in one's life. Becoming a student is often a consequence of dealing with this change, re-inventing oneselfe's, challenging previous assumptions, beliefs and routines about one's capabilities, talents and abilities. For some learners this aspect is more important than the degree in itselfs, learning is about empowering, regaining a control over one's life, search for life improvement.
- **Instrumental orientation and atitude toward learning** is also quite common and lots of young students is seeing an education as a way of productive time spending while the economic conditions will change in Poland and job market will improve; this group is looking for clear instruction of what is minimum level requirement in order to complete

5) what are the benefits for self and society of participating in learning in HE, whether or not study is completed, (reassess the proposition that it may be worse to withdraw than not to begin)

What is a specific for Polish context and can be seen in the interviews is a changing social image of learning. This means that learning is currently perceived as a potantially beneficial for the individual in general and this new trend is also present in a small town and rural area of country, where education was not in such a high esteem in the past. What is also important, this change came along with the expanding access to HE, which opens the opportunity to study for all people, no matter the social background.

All kinds of benefits from learning (in terms of T, Shuller – growth of human capital, identity capital and social capita) are more obvious in this particular area of the country, because of difficulties in the access to HE in the past and because of the mental barriers (that one is not capable of studying and being a successful learner).

Individual benefits:

- new self image, new competences, not only cognitive but social
- perceiving other people experiences and exchange of it as a important biographical learning resources (peer learning)
- growth of personal agency and ability to control one's life
- general personal development and growth of self esteem
- courage to take a stand in public and advocate for one's own interests and ideas
- changing attitude towards learning, recognition of informal and non formal prior learning, lifelong – and -wide learning
- becoming more reflexive and critical, changing learning identity

Social benefits:

- Re-shaping families from the inside: changing everyday life culture by taking a role of student (specially for those mature students). Engaging in HE by parents and grandparents, women forces social cultural changes in a traditionally defined family roles and new model of sharing duties in a family\
- setting up an example for younger generations, indiviudal promotion of learning culture, new social pathways in a family where there was no previous tradition of engaging in HE
- new 'social label' of *'the experts'* in a studied disciplin for the students in their social environment, work place, among family and friends, seeking for their advices, asking for opinion, new recognition
- Economical benefits: promotion, keeping the job, creating a SME , growth of enterpreneurial activities
- Mobility of the student body – inside the country and in EU, as a results of Bologna process and national law regulation regardin the process of study
- Ability to change the HE institutions by realizing and articulating students needs and requirements in a reflective, dialogical way. Such dialog can lead to transformation of learning culture in the institutions and make the HE institution more flexible, open to the negotations with the students

Most of the described benefits are not strictly resulting from graduating/ completion of HE. Many of them comes from experiencing the HE, even if students will drop out later. Even when students declares the pure instrumental motiviation, changes are present and , even if incidental, still altering students' perception, attitudes and social skills.