

Motives for entering, dropping out or continuing to study in higher education

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Introduction

There have been many changes in higher education in Sweden in last decades as it went from elite to mass education and participation increased as well as the number of institutions, programmes and courses. The system is considered open (Schuetze & Slowey, 2000) and relatively uniform as it comprises all types of post-secondary education including professional programmes such as nursing and teacher training. From 1990 to 2005 the body of entrance students in Sweden grew from 150.000 to 330.000 (Holzer, 2009). Several political reforms for widening access to HE have been undertaken since the 1950's (Bron & Agèlii, 2000). In the Swedish context, the term of non-traditional students could be used for underrepresented groups (Bron & Lönnheden, 2004).

From 2001, there is even a law stating that universities must have ten per cent non-traditional students. Universities have decreased the social distance to HE (see Holzer, 2009) where the local university college is seen as a possible alternative to entering the local labour market, especially for groups whose parents have upper secondary school as their highest educational level (ibid.). In the available statistics the number of younger students has increased and students having well educated parents are highly over represented while students from working class homes are underrepresented despite all the reforms for widening access. Amongst the beginners under 35 years, 34 per cent had parents with at least three years in higher education, which represents 20 per cent of the population in total. 38 per cent of the men and 32 per cent of the women had parents with higher education (SCB, 2010). The amount of students with another ethnical background than Swedish is also increasing. At the study year 2008/09, 18 per cent of the beginners in higher education have another ethnical back ground, to be compared with 12 per cent at the study year 1999/2000. There are however huge differences between different ethnical groups. The amount of students entering in HE is also varying in relation to the labour market. In a longer perspective, however, the percentage of a specific age group entering HE is quite stable. (Högskoleverket, 2010a).

Interesting in an international perspective is that Sweden has the highest drop-out rate from HE. The completion in higher education is in an international comparison very low in Sweden, only 83 per cent the year 2009 completed a course or an educational programme (Högskoleverket, 2010a). Quinn

(2004) that has been studied non-traditional students in higher education concludes that students dropping out are risking a double failure which means that they are worse off in relation to get a job, a reasonable income and social status than if they never entered higher education at all.

In discussing the role of higher education the European Memorandum from 2000 is useful as Sweden has implemented it as a common policy for adult learning. There are mainly two important goals that are taken into account in this document: employability and active citizenship. These two key words unite questions about working life and “bildning” (Bildung). The last includes people’s opportunities to exercise their rights and obligations as citizens and be able to influence their own situation. The other that people should gain employability in relation to the labour market (see EU Memorandum 2000).

This paper is based on results from a European research project with the aim to identify the factors promoting or constraining the access, retention and non-completion of non-traditional students in higher education¹. The aim of our contribution is to describe and discuss the role of HE in Sweden from a perspective of non-traditional students. More specifically we are focusing on what motives non-traditional students have for entering, continuing or dropping out of higher education.

A biographical approach to non-traditional students’ motives

Our view of non-traditional student’s motives to enter and stay in HE differs from traditional approaches, both from psychology as well as sociology (see West 1995). A point of departure that we take is the biographical one. We see students’ motives in connection to the life courses they experience. Thus, motives are a part of their lives and cannot be treated as static, they change in time, in the narratives we get from students, when they tell us why do they continue with learning at HE or why did they choose to drop out and come back later on in their lives. “Narratives, like experiences itself, are never complete” (ibid., p. 217)

In the stories, students tell, we see an attitude that makes students stay at HE and eventually finished it. However, the routes they encounter, when being at HE, are not straightforward. They are knotted and rigid. We see two groups of students, those who are committed to their studies whatever the reason is, and those who are not. The last just pass and often are directed by an instrumental motive, or they drop out for good. However, sometimes they come back when they are convinced that they want to. Commitment and non-commitment is closely related to the structure and subjectivity, to me and I that play a role when students talk about their studies. Here the tensions between expectations other have on them and their own intentionality interplay.

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Biographical Method

The results of our study are based on biographical interviews. Bron & West (2000) point out that the use of biographical methods gives an experience-rich material that can give insights into the intersection between structure and agency, culture and psyche and being ‘storied’ and ‘storying’ a life. The stories are reflecting and constituting culture that is manifest in the experiences, competing truths within the society and are also including processes of learning. The interplay of agency and structure can also be found (ibid). In the stories individuals are constructing their reality and reflect about their lives. While analysing biographical data similarities and differences as well as certain patterns can be found and theorised. In this paper we use the interviews while analysing different motives found in the stories for studying in HE.

Our results are based on interviews with 30 non-traditional students² studying different subjects at three institutions in higher education: twelve from Karolinska Institutet which is a medical university, five from the Royal Institute of Technology and 13 from Stockholm University (see appendix 1). Amongst the interviewed students 19 are women and eleven men, twelve have another ethnical background than Swedish, from 19-49 years of age. Thirteen of the interviewed students have experiences of dropping-out from Higher Education.

Motives for studying in higher education

In this section, we will firstly deal with the students’ motives that we uncover in their narratives while telling us about entering higher education. Then we will focus on the motives for dropping out and finally the motives for student completion. In their stories students mention six motives for entering higher education that to different extents show a commitment for continuing to study in higher education.

Motives for entering higher education

There are six motives in the students’ stories that are interesting for understanding the students’ commitment in their studies: to have something to do; interested in studying in HE in general including culturing, i.e. trying it out or experience what it is; interested in a specific subject; getting a profession and/or to be further educated; changing life course and to be an active citizen. Students with the first and second motive have low commitment for studying in HE while students with the other four motives refer to a high commitment for studying and completing their studies.

To have something to do

Some students have been using HE as a ‘parking lot’ while figuring out what to do with their lives:

² Non-traditional students are here seen as students that are the first in their family to enter HE, students with another ethnical background than Swedish and mature students.

Actually I was studying mostly instead of working (laughter). I've been working some as well. I've been working with unqualified jobs...The main reason was that I didn't know what to do. And it's still like that to some degree. and like that. Because, it's rather interesting because this are probably the first time that I've, if it, now when it's one year to go, it's the first time I've ever completed things I've decided to do (Female student, 28 years old, studying Biomedicine).

Some students are uncertain what to do in their lives, they experience work and study that they choose without really taking in seriously. HE is like a 'parking lot' before a student will commit herself/himself. This can be provisional anyhow and lead to a further interest to study.

Interested in studying in HE in general

The students are referring to an interest in studying in HE in general, for testing it and see how it is to study:

I don't know how but I managed to order a brochure (laughter) from the university and I was looking at the courses available and everything was totally new and I had no idea what it was like to study at the university. So I found o course and that was Anthropology, and it looked interesting ... I applied just for fun and started to study. That was my first contact with this world. (Female student, 30 years old, studying Physiotherapy).

There are also students referring to taking a course for culturing, getting intellectual stimulation while working:

First, I studied in Uppsala, Swahili and that is really different, so to speak, and it was for my own interest, then I studied a few shorter courses at Stockholm University ... It was more for fun to combine work and study an evening once a week to get some stimulation to the mind (laughter).... As a postman, so it has kind of been my occupation in that way...But then I started to think that I wanted to study but the question was what? And it took a while for me to decide... Much of a coincidence that I fell over this biomedicine at KI, when I browsed the catalogue and such...as far as I can remember it was quite early that I kind of got the impression that this was really...it suited me, like that (Male student, 28 years old, studying Biomedicine)

The motives given by the students seem to create a drop-in, drop out system, where people are dropping in for trying/testing the system, but also dropping out because of a lacking motivation and interest. It is also an arena for enculturation, for people to learn and get stimulated without a firm idea of an exam but it is also a place where the interest in a subject can be evoked eventually which makes them committed to continuing their studies.

Interested in a specific subject

Several of the students refer to a deep interest in a specific subject. Some of them have been interested in a specific subject since they where kids, while others the interest has grown when they started to study it, and after that they are caught in the subject for ever:

I have always been fascinated in maths and I don't understand why really. I think it has to do with, I like the structure, and in a way the logically inexorable and the search for truth in a way and as I see it, it is very beautiful

and charming, the philosophy, to count has never been my cup of tea, but to ponder about causal relations, that I have been really fascinated about (Male student, 24 years old, studying the Civil Engineering and Teaching programme).

I have actually always liked animals and nature... since I was a kid, I thought it was groovy with excavations of Dinosaurs and nature programmes on TV that all the other kids thought boring. I watched flowers to see what would happen if I for example put a nail through a Dandelion, would it die, these things. So I have felt close to nature.... (Female student, 19 years old, studying Biology).

I love to know how the body works, when visiting the doctor I want to know a lot of things and ask a lot of questions... When I worked at the hospital I always asked to watch when something special occurred... Then I was at an exhibition in Hamburg once and in Amsterdam last autumn. An exhibition where they have human bodies, it is called body worlds, where they have plasticised bodies...so it is fascinating. (Male student, 30 years old studying Physiotherapy).

There seems to be differences between subjects in this respect. For students interested in for example biology and maths they are nerds in the subjects in themselves as for example flowers or maths as a 'philosophy', as a beauty in itself, while students in social science seem to value it more generally as a way of understanding their own and others lives in society as a whole. Their interests are thereby broader than related to a specific subject:

We have been talking about this in the course that Criminology, is not an exact science it is a social science that combines a lot of other sciences so it's broad which makes it much more fun, instead of just studying chemistry because than it's just really molecular and atoms and all of this, but criminology is about everything, biology, psychology and sociology and all. So that's the reason for me to choose it (Female student, 19 years old studying Criminology).

These students show a truly committed to HE, they want to stay, and study in-depth subject of special interests to them.

Getting a profession and/or to be further educated

Of the 30 interviewed students, 21 studied in programmes relating to professions, social workers, physiotherapists, teachers and engineers. Most of these students are referring to their future professions rather than showing an interest to the subjects or higher education in itself. For both physiotherapists and social workers the motive for study is related to a future work in helping, supporting and working with people:

I thought that programme in social work seemed interesting thus it sounds like a cliché but we work with people. (Female student, 23 years old studying Social work)

To help people back to (...) they have a specific problem and to help people with that problem, often a physical injury and it is related to a lot of delight in the profession as physiotherapist to get a lot of positive feedback when you help people back to work or to sports or whatever they are coming back to (Male student, 26 years. Studying Physiotherapy)

I want to help people, I think that people are like a treasure coffer, you learn something new all the time.. the meeting with people is so interesting (Female student, 19 years, studying Social work).

The motive for becoming an engineer is related to a high social status. The motive for becoming a teacher is referred to teachers as role-models and a feeling of liking school that motivates students:

KTH has a good reputation and it makes you react without knowing why, but I think that it was a teacher I wanted to be. I have never thought of working in the business world, not even for money so to speak. (Male student, 24 years old, Engineering and Teaching Programme).

My parents saw, out of their background, law studies as a good choice and they thought that I would make it because I have a potential if I just pulled myself together, but to become a teacher it was not that low, it was rather okay, acceptable. My grandfather was a teacher before he started to write and I have always had teacher as a favourite profession because it is relaxed...I still want to be an author but I realise that I have to be so good to become it, than teacher was an alternative (Male student, 19 years old studying combination of teaching social science and languages).

First I had to decide if I was going to Stockholm University or KTH, and there was a pressure from outside that KTH was so much better... Unfortunately I didn't socialise with students from Stockholm University that much so they didn't have the same opportunity to pressure me....I have had this feeling that I want to become a teacher... Now I'm finally at the Engineering/teaching programme, and the first semester has been totally fantastic, I'm exceedingly motivated and have really thought it so unbelievable funny to study (Male student, 22 years old, studying Engineering/teaching programme).

Some of the mature students have been working for several years in an occupation and are referring to the studies in HE as a way to get further education.

The main reason for me wanting to study this programme is that I've been working as keeper before and you can't get any further than to be a keeper and while I've always received responsibility I thought it was the right time to add another education making it possible to climb a little bit higher and to be able to take some more responsibility and to get something more challenging (Female student, 35 years old, studying Social Work)

They are here as for advancement, not really committed to the programme, but just getting a little more to climb higher in the job hierarchy.

Changing life course

There are mature students referring to higher education as a way of changing life course:

...It's a long story before actually..I've been working in restaurants for many years. It's heavy. You get warnings 'Don't lift like that...You'll get pain in your back' and you thought 'What a hell! I'm 19 years old' and I thought like that it will not happen to me, like that...But after a while I started to get pain in my back...Finally it was so bad I had to be sick-listed and got into this nursing by physiotherapists and rehabilitation and training and such and I got better but not cured and went back to work and so on...and then I couldn't work at all. I had to stay home. Was home for about one year and thought of what I wanted to do. When I went to the physiotherapists I started to study a little how they worked, like that and thought that this seemed nice, like the contact with people and I like that, and a rather

independent job, or it is a rather independent job and at the same time teamwork. I like that. (Female student, 34 years old, studying Physiotherapy)

...I started studying at KTH and dropped out...I was registered as a drop-out and then CSN didn't allow me any study loans...So I became a nurse. And worked as a nurse, well for ten years..But when I was 29 years old and on the top of my career (laughter) or how you'll put it I felt I couldn't develop anymore...Then I thought that 'No, I'll try this!' Better to give it a try than to get old and bitter. And it has been really funny! (Female student, 34 years old, studying molecular biology)

I've only studied for two years in upper secondary school, in building and constructing thus that's far from this but...And I've studied for two years in a Folk High School. But I've never really dared. Thought that 'But no I'm too stupid. I'm uncultivated' and such. But then I thought I have to try it any way. And I'm interested in working with people, or regard it as fun and then I dislike mathematics and such so, then it was a rather obvious choice. Still think that I, I still think I'm stupid sometimes (laughter) but it's got a little better now (laughter) (Female student, 35 years old, studying Social Work)

This is an important motive, clearly situated in their lives and biographies. These students are committed to the study, and have chosen their path according to the life situation. They reflect over learning, life experiences, work and choices they have made before. We see here how biographical learning influences their decisions concerning HE.

To be an active citizen

In one of the stories the motive for entering into higher education is to become an active citizen:

I became a mental hospital nurse and started to work with people living at home suffering from mental illness. I got quite sulky because I didn't think it worked properly there. There are so much to do for people with mental illness...at the same time I started to work with politics and I think that to gain more power to change things you have to know more, to come higher to be able to change more (female mature student studying Social work)

This is an interesting motive that is related to seeing HE as a way of getting a voice and be able to use this voice for change. In this motive there is a strong embedded commitment and being in HE is a way of gaining legitimacy for changing society.

Motives for dropping out

In this section we focus on how the thirteen students of our sample of **thirty** students with experiences of dropping out from Higher Education. They drop out as they are not enough motivated; they struggle with the discipline or context of study.

Lack of motivation for studying

One reason for dropping out seems to be a lack in motivation for studying related to a subject and/or false expectations on a subject turning out to be something else. Another reason is related to the

motives for entering, when students want to get experiences of HE in general or entering for culturing instead of getting an exam, it is easy to drop-out. The students with this kind of motives do not see the drop out as a failure. The open system of HE in Sweden makes it possible to try and drop out, which is quite usual. Some of them also drop-in to another educational programme or course instead:

Philosophy...a lot of theories (laughter) about how it works, unfortunately not so much with any practical application (laughter) but it was kind of funny, so it was more to get study habits. And then psychology, I've always longed for in a distance to be able to get...so I wanted to see what it was like. Thus I didn't like the course at all..(Female student, 23 years old, studying Social Work)

Again, they are not yet committed but still testing themselves in different programmes and disciplines.

Struggle with discipline and self-discipline

The discipline and the struggles with the context of higher education is another reason for dropping out. Meeting harsh lecturers and demands and not knowing how to act or who to get support from is one reason for dropping out. From being regarded as good in school to being regarded as stupid this students see the drop out as a failure.

But it was really very speedy and I know, because I remember that I had that maths and I asked the lecturer because I didn't understand and I almost got a telling-off. It was..it was much more.. harsh at KTH than in SU like that. And I felt so bloody stupid! (Female student, 34 years old, studying Molecular Biology)

I studied two semesters, two and a half and dropped out, because I wasn't used to it and wasn't that motivated and hadn't got the discipline, discipline wasn't my strongest card and it was hard to be poor and I still lived at home. It was really hard to get an apartment (Female student, 32, former student in Anthropology, now in Physiotherapy).

In the first quote the student felt she was not fitting in, not clever enough, and had to drop out. This is interesting as here we have a female narrative from the technology study, where maths is a crucial test of continuing the education. The second quote is an example of lack of self-discipline in relation to essay writing.

Motives for continuing

When looking for reasons why students continue in HE we find different motives. One of them are expectations that they have from others and selves; they want to proof that they are able to study and maintain high profile; they want to become someone, and finally they focus on an academic career.

Expectations from self and others

The students with another ethnical background than Swedish describe a situation where their parents have high expectations that they will do well in their new country. For some of them, their parents are well educated from their home countries but have to work with lower qualified jobs in Sweden. From

this perspective, they want their children to regain their status by completing an exam in higher education:

My mother has always been supportive but my father has been, he has been supportive but he has always wanted me to study but he has often driven me, governed me a bit, in my decisions..but in this I didn't allow him, with the Biology programme. He still thinks that I should study, he still regards this as some kind of temporary. ..He wants me to continue studying medicine...He often says that he supports us as long as we are studying. But if we quit we've got to manage on our own, thus he wants us to at least get an exam, me and my brother (Female student, 21 years old, studying Biology)

Mature students have high demands on themselves because they have both invested and the studies have been an investment in themselves and that the sacrifices they make for studying must be worth it. For some of them it is important being role models for their children.

Finally! After nine semesters, now it's time to earn some money because I also have a family so I feel like it's time to produce a little. Studying costs both time and money, and experiences others have that we can't have because of lack of money (Female student, 35 years old, studying Social Work)

These are committed students, where the strong support from home is important both for themselves and for their children.

Showing ability to learn

For some of the students being first generation in higher education it seems important to show themselves and others that they are able to study in HE. They have never seen themselves or been seen as very capable to learn and have bad experiences from school. Starting studying in HE has been a challenge and revenge. If they drop out, they will never return to HE. To drop out would be a total failure for them.

Then a couple of years ago I said to daddy that now I'll study to become a physiotherapist, I've been accepted, I've been accepted to become a journalist. I've been accepted here and here and here, I've managed that. Somehow I could prove like 'Look here, your daughter isn't stupid' so he actually decided to help me out financial with my education. I think he was impressed (Female student, 34 years old, studying Physiotherapy)

To show oneself that one has capacity to study and not being stupid is a high motive for continuing to study in higher education.

To become something

The most obvious reason for most of the students in occupational programmes is that they want to get their exam and the profession. They want to become something; they want to get an occupation. They have no interest in the academy as such and are not interested in continuing within the academy. But this motive can also be found among students in more general programmes.

I didn't know what a research student was, thus I had heard about doctors and researchers like that but I didn't know what...so it wasn't until I started to study here that I was aware of what it was, but no..I want to get out there and work (laughter). I like it within the industry. It's professional. It's not, but I like it. Not the world of research...with fuzzy professors (laughter). No (Female student, 24 years old, studying Chemistry)

To form professional identity is important for students that want to become something. From this point of view the studies are seen as a pathway to something else, nothing in itself.

Wanting an academic career

Some students studying in more general programme have become so interested in the subject they want to start studying for a doctor's degree. There have been struggles and they don't know how to get their but they want to continue in the academy. Some of them has met lecturers that have been role models for them while treating the students in a good way and regarded them as capable. Others relate it to their interest in the subject and/or wanting to contribute to the society.

I think I'm more attracted of the world of the academy, perhaps a little of this..I feel that I have got some of that drift. I sometimes feel..you've got to show your ambitious also in the academy but it's a slight difference in the attitudes I think in the private sector like that (Male student, 28 years old, studying Biomedicine)

These students are both committed to their studies and to HE, appreciating the academy as an opportunity for a future career.

Our analyses shows that the students' commitment is crucial when discussing drop-out and retention in higher education and that the commitment is related to different motives.

Discussion

Higher education in Sweden is considered an open system and since the 1950's there have been reforms and decisions for widening access to HE. Even if the student entrance is increasing each year, there are still underrepresented groups such as working class men, people from rural areas and from some ethnic groups like Somali (Högskoleverket, 2010a; 2010b; 2010c). The aim of this paper was to describe and discuss the motives and reasons for non-traditional students to enter, continuing or dropping-out of higher education.

Returning to the EU policy for adult learning and the relation between employability and active citizenship, we will argue that motives for entering higher education to a large extent is related to both. The students are referring to being able to get a profession, further education related to being able to get employed. Some of them also refer to becoming an academic, one of the traditional roles of higher education. There is however also motives that relate in different ways to active citizenship. For the student being an active citizen it is clear that education matters for her in being politically active. The

motives related to changes of life course and interest in a specific subject could be connected both to the ideas of employability and active citizenship. There are however two motives from students that are more diffuse in relation to the policy of lifelong learning: to be interested in studying in higher education in general and to have something to do show that higher education has become something else in a student perspective. To try and see what higher education is all about is on the one hand a motive that is weak (not enough to stay in HE) with a high drop-out rate as a consequence. On the other hand, several of the students studying in higher education started out that way, it is a way of getting in and getting interested which connects to the motives of widening access to higher education. Finally, “to have something to do”, seems to be a problematic motive. Some students are really getting committed and continue to study but many of them are risking dropping-out because of a lack of motivation from the beginning.

There seems to be three motives relating to the labour market like, getting a profession, being further educated and to have something to do. The first two motives show a high commitment to enter and are also connected to aspects of employability. To getting a profession also seems to be related to differences in status concerning educational programmes. The Royal Institute of Technology is seen as an elite university which makes the students’ highly committed. The last one is connected to a low commitment to study but is also depended on the labour market. Despite the differences in committing, the students somehow seem to develop an instrumental attitude towards their studies (Thunborg, Edström, Bron, 2010). For the last group this is also related to dropping out of higher education without getting any further.

Finally, drop out is not really a drop-out. Quinn (2004) has earlier pointed out that non-traditional students dropping out of higher education risk a double failure. They are worse off than if they never entered higher education and worked instead. This is not really the experiences in most of the students’ stories. As the system allows them to change education, the drop-outs seldom become drop-outs. They just change on their way during their life course. However the students pointing to the motive of changing their life course have been putting in a lot of effort and sacrifices for entering higher education. For them a drop-out is really expressed as a failure. The knowledge about students’ drop-out and the relation to non-traditional students thereby needs to be further discussed.

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