

European Lifelong Learning Project 2008-10

Access and Retention: Experiences of Non-traditional Learners in HE

An overview of national statistics on retention and withdrawal

1) Introduction

This overview of the retention and withdrawal statistics in England, Germany, Ireland, Poland, Scotland, Spain and Sweden is part of the project 'Access and Retention: Experiences of Non-Traditional Learners in HE'. The project is funded by the European Commission Lifelong Learning Programme under Key Activity 1 "Policy Co-operation and Innovation" of the Transversal programme.

Participation in higher education has increased significantly over the past decade and it is now, for many countries, the norm to progress to higher education as a logical step after graduation from secondary school. However, access continues to be stratified according to socio-economic background with lower social classes poorly represented not only in particular (professional) disciplines but across third level institutions as a whole. When non-traditional students are offered places there is an imperative to support their continued participation as the provision of access alone will not ensure continuation to graduation with a degree. Accessibility (as distinct from access) is how Murphy and Fleming (2000) make this distinction in order to name the internal processes, both administrative and pedagogical, that must be addressed in order to enhance retention.

The overall aim of this project is to examine issues of access, retention and non-completion in relation to non-traditional undergraduate students in higher education on a comparative European basis. The research project is a longitudinal and mainly qualitative study. The rationale for this qualitative approach, both in theoretical and empirical terms, has been outlined in the methodological overview and the literature review (work package 3: Literature Review). In many cases research such as this may be usefully complemented by numeric data, although as Savage (1997) has argued such mixed method social science research requires careful and critical attention. As a way of framing the interview based findings, the national research teams have collated all the relevant statistical data available for their countries and the findings are presented below in a series of national statistical profiles.

In reviewing the data it has become apparent that the available data offers only a limited basis for comparative analysis. The reasons for this are outlined in section 2. The comparability of the OECD's data on survival is also briefly analysed. Although the various national data sets may not be analysing fully commensurable social phenomena the overview of national statistics on retention and withdrawal does nonetheless offer an insight into the way retention is viewed and approached in the various partner countries and thus is important in giving a full account of policy and research on retention and withdrawal in Europe.

2) Issues and problems in interpreting numeric data on retention and withdrawal

Currently it is difficult, if not impossible, to make a meaningful comparative analysis of retention statistics gathered in different EU countries for several reasons. Firstly, there are enormous differences in the various higher education systems across Europe.

The fact that the expected course duration, participation rates and models of progress and accreditation vary enormously across Europe means that often when we discuss retention within these different systems we are not necessarily comparing identical or even similar phenomena. Secondly, national agencies use diverse terms, (ie non-completion, non-continuation and survival) or even identical terms that are defined differently. There are detailed and well thought out definitions and formulae for reaching statistical measures, as for instance there are in the UK, but the usages, definitions across the partner countries are diverse and diverging. In addition, whether the initiatives implemented to address drop-out and retention are student centred or institution focussed will also give differing meanings to the terms used. Thirdly, this picture is further complicated by the fact that a wide range of methodologies is employed for gathering data and calculating retention rates in the various countries. Fourthly, the understanding of 'non-traditional' is also contested and some might say confused. Most frequently, it means students over a particular age (e.g. over 23) but in some places, with increasingly diverse populations and student cohorts 'non-traditional' has been expanded to include ethnic background, immigrants, social-class, disability, second chance as a result of leaving school early, etc.

The research partners are aware that there are no shared definitions of access, retention or drop-out and that one of the main obstacles to a meaningful comparative study is failing to identify shared terms and definitions by which comparisons might be usefully and validly made. One way of overcoming this is to give a clear explanation of the way a term is used and the context in which it is employed. This is currently more likely to provide an accurate understanding of the term 'drop-out' than relying on one single agreed definition that skirts around methodological problems.

The only international data set available for this comparative study on retention is the OECD's research on the tertiary 'survival rate'. According to the OECD's *Education at a Glance, 2007* the

survival rate at the tertiary level is defined as the proportion of new entrants to the specified level of education who successfully complete a first qualification.

It is calculated as the ratio of the number of students who are awarded an initial degree to the number of new entrants to the level n years before, n being the number of years of full-time study required to complete the degree.

(OECD, 2007, p. 65)

This indicator was introduced in 1997 at a meeting of the OECD's Indices of Educational Systems (INES) technical group. However, this data was calculated, and continues to be calculated in varying ways depending largely on how national agencies collect data (True Cohort method, Synthetic Cohort method or Cross-section Cohort method). The last time data was collected on survival rates by the OECD was in 2004. The INES technical group met in 2007 to refine the method of calculation and to plan for a new survey on student survival rates for inclusion in *Education at a Glance 2010*. It is hoped that the majority of countries submitting data for this report will be using the true cohort method which tracks students' progress individually as they go through college and will be a more accurate survey of completion rates.

Below is the data gathered in 2004 as reproduced in *Education at a Glance 2007* (OECD, 2007, p.72) which gives some idea of the survival rates in tertiary education across a range of OECD countries, including all the project partner countries. A key column is probably column (2) ‘Survival Rates in tertiary-type A education’, “ISCED 5A, programmes that are largely-theory-based and are designed to provide sufficient qualifications for entry to advanced research programmes and professions with high skills requirements” (OECD Glossary). That is the definition used by the UK National Audit Office (NAO, 2007, p. 17) in its recent study of retention of students in HE. In Appendix A, column (6) covers ‘Survival rates in tertiary-type B education’, “ISCED 5B programmes are typically shorter than (tertiary-type A) and focus on practical, technical or occupational skills for direct entry into the labour market” and this category would probably include, for example, 2 year full-time, 3 year part-time Foundation Degrees in England and similar shorter, more vocational-type degrees amongst partner countries. Overall across the OECD countries these Tertiary Education Type B programmes tend to have lower survival rates. However, three of the partner countries, Spain, Poland and Sweden appear to go against this trend. There appears to be a correlation between survival rates and the average length of Tertiary Education type A programmes (the survival rate is higher in countries with shorter programmes). If both these programmes are counted, the relevant column for overall comparison is (1) in Appendix A.

It has also been suggested (OECD, 2007) that countries with higher entry rates have lower survival rates. However, again whichever figures are used, we need to note that they probably do not necessarily compare in an accurate manner similar phenomena.

	<u>ISCED 5A</u>	<u>ISCED 5B</u>	<u>5A +</u>
<u>5BCombined</u>			
Germany	73%	79%	75%
Ireland	83%	69%	78%
Poland	66%	74%	66%
Spain	74%	79%	75%
Sweden	60%	68%	61%
UK ¹	78%	53%	71%
OECD average	71%	67%	70%
EU 19 average	71%	68%	69%

3) The national statistics: An introduction to the profiles

Each of the research partners has collected the relevant statistics available in their countries and these are presented below in a series of alphabetically ordered national profiles. Due to the issues outlined above in sections 2 and 3 it was decided by the partners that as well as presenting the available figures that the only way we can usefully make sense of these national figures on retention is by also paying close attention to (1) the terms used nationally (2) the methods of calculation employed (3) the historical context (4) the current use of figures on retention in policy and reports

¹ OECD do not disaggregate England and Scotland but the National Audit Report (2007, p.23) shows a 78.1 per cent HE course completion rate in England as against 73.8 per cent for Scotland. However once again direct comparisons are unreliable because there are differences in access rates, pre-entry qualifications, educational structures, finance and types of student.

(5) possible issues and pitfalls with existing statistics on a country by country basis and (6) the relationship of national statistics to the OECD's data on survival rates.

England

There is a large amount of systematic data collection about higher education in England. The two most commonly used terms with regard to retention are completion and continuation. Completion is defined as “the proportion of starters in a year who continue their studies with no more than one consecutive year out of higher education” (NAO, 2007, p. 5) and continuation as “the proportion of an institutions intake which is enrolled in higher education in the year following” (NAO, 2007, p. 5).

The overall non-continuation rate for young students in 2004/2005 is 7.1 per cent (HESA, 2007a). This can be compared with data on the non-continuation of some non-traditional student groups. For instance, the non-continuation rate for mature students without a previous third level qualification in 2004/2005 is 14.9 per cent (HESA, 2007b). The non-continuation rate for young students from low participation neighbourhoods is 9.3 per cent (HESA, 2007d). The overall projected percentage of the 2004/2006 cohort of students in England who will leave higher education without an award or transferring to another institution is 13.9 per cent (HESA, 2007c). (This compares favourably with the OECD figures on survival rate and both sets of figures indicate high levels of retention compared to other OECD countries. However, it does appear from these figures that some non-traditional students have significantly lower retention rates. The fact that these figures deal only with full-time students is important because non-traditional students are often in part-time courses which have historically had lower retention rates.

Germany

Within two years, between 2004 and 2006, the drop-out rate from German universities has declined from 24 per cent to 20 per cent (Heublein et al, 2008). This happened due to a number of changes in different faculties and can therefore not be interpreted as a general trend. In the different scientific disciplines available at the universities, the drop-out rates vary depending on the subject or discipline. In philology and cultural science the rates declined over 10 per cent but still remain above the average rate.

We can observe a similar phenomenon with the social science courses: the drop-out rate has decreased to only 10 per cent. These changes may be results of the newly implemented bachelor-system, which highly structures the course of studies and therefore simplifies and shortens it. The drop-out rates in the sciences did not decline, but remained almost stable in the past years. Engineering science has also kept a high drop-out rate.

Ireland

Historically, the Higher Education Authority, the statutory planning and development body for higher education and research in Ireland, has not compiled or included retention figures in its annual statistics and reports. Furthermore, to date no disaggregated data is available that might allow researchers to trace the retention rate of various groups of ‘non-traditional students’. Similarly, previously commissioned reports on this subject did not chose to explore retention in relation to non-traditional

groups but do include data related to previous academic achievements, subject choice, individual institution and gender (Kinsella & Roe, 2006; Morgan, Flanagan & Kellaghan, 2001). However, the introduction of a new system of data collection and storage in 2005 does make it possible to calculate accurately continuation and completion rates based on individual student records (ie using the True Cohort method) if the HEA chooses to do so at some point in the future.

According to the OECD Ireland has one of the highest rates of survival among the countries studied. The figures in the OECD report were produced by the Department of Education and Science statistician who works in liaison with the INES report group. The figures cited for the university sector by the OECD appear to be approximately correct for the universities which are broadly similar to the 83% completion rate cited in Morgan, Flanagan, & Kellaghan earlier report (2001). However, it should be noted that recent research by Kinsella and Roe (2006) on retention in Institute of Technology sector, estimated at 87%, appears to directly contradict the findings on survival in the 2004 OECD report and another earlier study (Eivers, Flanagan and Morgan, 2002) that cited a completion rate as low as 57 per cent. The only other apparent anomalies within the existing data are the striking differences in the performance of individual universities, including NUIM, in terms of retention between completion rates now and the mid 1990s. It is not clear why this is the case but it may be linked to the fact that in 2001 a retention network was established by the Irish University Authority to promote retention through information sharing and policy initiatives.

Generally, completion and non-completion are the favoured terms in Irish policy and research and this is sometimes conflated entirely with retention in the literature. Completion is defined in these studies as finishing a degree within the typical course duration plus half the duration again. It may help further contextualise these statistics by noting the standard course duration for an Honours degree is usually three or four years long with comparatively fixed and inflexible routes of progression and the entry rate to tertiary education of Irish school leavers is currently 55 per cent of the age cohort (O'Connell, Clancy & McCoy, 2006).

Poland

Key -terms

Dropouts are defined as students who leave the specified level without graduating from a first qualification at that level. The first qualification refers to any degree, regardless of the duration of study, obtained at the end of a programme that does not have a previous degree at the same level as a pre-requisite.

Completion rates count as “completing” students who enter a tertiary-type A programme and who graduate with either a tertiary-type A or a type B qualification or those who enter a tertiary-type B programme and who graduate with either a tertiary-type A or a tertiary-type B qualification.

Statistics

According to the OECD report (2007):

Percentage of students leaving without tertiary qualification	36% .
Completion rate for B level:	74%

Completion rate for A level

66 %

This puts Poland 5 per centage above the OECD average for Type B courses. However, there is no reliable data to track those students who may have dropped out at first but successfully re-enter later.

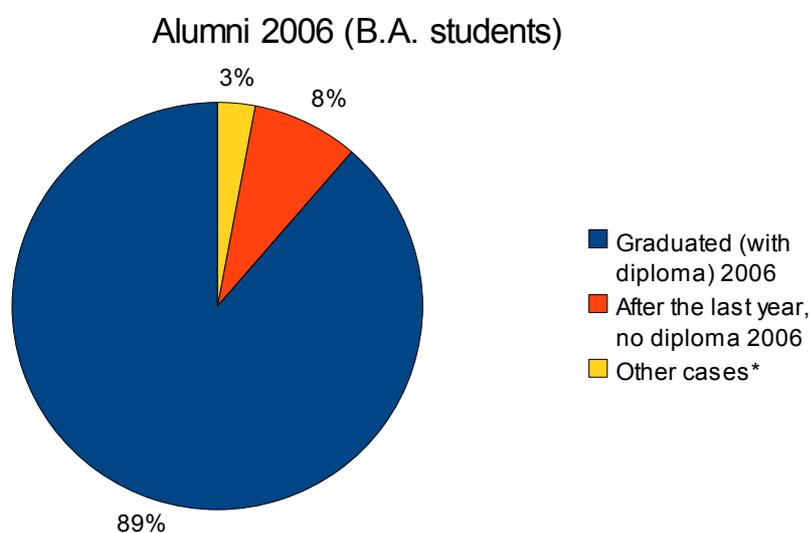
Formula (Methodology)

Polish data were gathered based on cross-section method. According to the OECD this estimation assumes constant student flows at the tertiary level, owing to the need for consistency between the graduate cohort in the reference year and the entrant cohort n years before. As it is pointed out in the report, this assumption may be an oversimplification.

Graph 1. (National Statistic Office) presents:

Rate of students who completed B.A. course with diploma:	89%
Rate of student who completed B.A. course without diploma:	8%
Other cases	3%

When we compare the numbers with total last year student number a year before the graduation 3 per cent are still unknown as whether they graduated or not. This missing number may represent students who dropped out and stopped out ('other cases' on the graph) or re-entered at another time, but there is no reliable data to confirm what happened to them.



Graduated (with diploma) 2006	144658
After the last year, no diploma 2006	13702
Other cases*	4809

* - drop-out, stop-out or re-orientation

Scotland

The retention figures for HE in Scotland are calculated separately and differently for Higher Education Institutions (HEI) and Further Education (FE) colleges. As in England, the figures for HEIs are available through HESA. HESA describes its procedures on its website (HESA, 2007b). The key data are those for non-continuation following the year of entry, and for Scotland in 2004/5 these are given as:

Percentage of all first degree entrants no longer in HE	10.7%
Percentage of mature first degree entrants no longer in HE	17.0%
Percentage of all other undergraduate entrants no longer in HE	21.8%
Percentage of mature other first degree entrants no longer in HE	18.6%

The figures for FE institutions are calculated on a different basis - they are weighted by SUMS (i.e. subject-based units of student FTE), and do not really compare easily with other published data. The reason for this is unclear but technical details can be found at the Scottish Funding Council website (SFC, 2009).

Two main indicators are relevant. First of all is the retention rate as a percentage of the total number of students who have stayed for one quarter of their programme; SFC measures retention as the percentage who are still present at the end of the programme. This figure does not take assessment results into account. The figures for 2005/6 given in the *Student and Staff Performance Indicators for Further Education Colleges in Scotland* (SFC, http://www.sfc.ac.uk/statistics/FE_student_staff_PIs.html) are:

Retention in part-time higher education courses	93%
Retention in full-time higher education courses	84%

Second, SFC also collects and publishes data on completion rates. These represent "the number of enrolments (weighted by SUMS), by student outcome, expressed as a percentage of all enrolments where students complete their studies for higher education qualifications". The resulting data for HE enrolments on programmes with a national qualification aim are, for 2005/6:

Percent who have completed programme (i.e. they have attended): 86%
Of those who completed the programme, 79 per cent either succeeded or were able to progress to the following year of study; and 20 per cent did not gain the award but may have gained partial success. It is not clear whether these two categories overlap.

Spain

At this time statistics related to retention in Spain are unavailable. A number of terms are used in describing retention issues in Spanish statistics these are explained below.

Retention or prolongation of the studies: This concept is linked to the concept of academic failure. It is defined as the difference between the time spent doing the university studies and the typical expected time of completion (Cabrera et al, 2006).

Drop-out of the studies or student desertion. This is defined as involuntary abandonment of a course of studies, or to initiate another study in another university course either in the same institution or in another institution, to leave university education and initiate other formative itineraries outside the university or joining the labour market, interrupting their training period and later to re-enter (Cabrera et al, 2006)

Rate of abandon: number of students who did not enrol in the last two years compared to the number of student enrolled in the year in which they began their studies (Hernández, 2006, p. 497)

Reentry: Re-entry of the pupil who leaves university studies temporarily (Cabrera et al, 2006).

Sweden

In Sweden degree courses in higher education are based on both educational programmes and 'free courses' that are put together by the individual according to certain criteria. A bachelor degree usually takes one and a half years of full time studies in one subject, one year in another and half a year in a third. The individual student is responsible for applying for a degree. From this point of view there is no set time period for finishing a degree. Statistics are based on exams taken in a certain year in relation to the average time it takes to finish them.

The terms 'drop-out' and 'retention' are not used. The Swedish higher educational system handle issues of drop-in rather than drop-out. Once a student is registered on a course or an educational programme, they are always registered, if the individual does not choose to withdrawn from the course by themselves. Retention is also a term that is not used. A student can always pick up their studies whenever they wish. The term used is completion and this is measured. Completion rates are calculated as an index of studies over a one-year period (HÅS) and on the other hand all students completing their courses calculated as an index over a one year period of time (HÅP). For example, if a student is registered on a course for half a semester, that is one fourth of a HÅS. When that student is passing, that is one fourth of a HÅP. The statistics is mostly based on these indexes. The financing system for higher education is based on student register and student completion. The year 2006/2007 the average student completion was 83 percent at universities, 77 percent for university colleges and 93 percent in special institutions. Vocational programmes have higher completion than other programmes (SCB, 2007). There are also differences between free courses (20 percent in seven years) and educational programmes (80 percent in seven years) Humanities programmes have the lowest retention rate 73 percent. Medical and Nursing schools have the highest completion rate (93 percent), social science and science have 80 percent each and technology 82 percent. The year 2006/2007 it took in average five years to get a bachelor degree and six years to get a magister degree (HSV, 2007).

Conclusion

In reviewing the various national statistics on retention and withdrawal for non-traditional students in England, Germany, Ireland, Poland, Scotland, Spain and Sweden it is clear that the data available offers a limited basis for comparative analysis. This is partially because data is collected and calculated differently in the various partner countries but even more significantly because the issue of the retention of non-traditional students is understood in diverse ways. Thus within Swedish Higher Education 'drop out', is not a term or an idea that has force or meaning while in England the retention of 'non-traditional' is clearly a public policy issue with targets. It is obvious, but nonetheless worth emphasising, that this is largely due to the specific traditions and cultures that have historically shaped the development of the institutions and educational planning bodies in each of the partner countries.

Moreover, the OECD, which is explicitly geared to offering comparable international data sets that have been gathered in a methodologically consistent manner, faces the same set of problems. Thus, the statistics on the survival rates in Higher Education in the OECD countries are useful only to a point. But ultimately the retention and withdrawal of students can only be understood within the cultural and institutional context in which it occurs. Without such complementary data the available statistical data on retention and withdrawal across the partner countries is presently of limited value. In methodological terms this points to the necessity for a mixed method approach to research that examines both qualitative and quantitative data in tandem in order to make sense of social phenomena. In broader theoretical terms it underlines the need to pay careful attention to the way statistics are used to describe social reality and the danger of treating indicators and indices as self evident 'facts'.

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