

Nontraditional Students in Higher Education: Methodologies and Approaches

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Introduction

Traditionally, higher education was for the elite, with little access for people from the lower socio-economic strata of society. Women, minority groups and those who wanted to continue education after a break were largely under-represented in higher education institutions. Beginning in the 1980s, higher education saw a dramatic ‘massification’ in the OECD countries (MacDonald & Stratta, 2001; Schuetze & Slowey, 2002): ‘more students, more academic staff, more types of institutions, more programmes’ (Schuetze & Slowey, 2000, p.7). Before this massification, nontraditional students were defined in negative terms: not directly from secondary school; not from dominant social groups; not studying in conventional mode; and those not between 18-24 years of age (ibid). With the massification of higher education in the OECD countries beginning in the late 1980s, the profile of the student body has changed dramatically (Schuetze & Slowey, 2000). In the UK, for example, over 40% of the students are over the age of 24 years (MacDonald & Stratta, 2001) blurring the distinction between traditionally-defined, younger and older students. In the US, 46% of the college student population is aged 25 or over and 50% of ‘African-American, Native-American and Hispanic college students are enrolled at a community college’ (Kim 2002, p.75). In Canada, 52% of students enrolled in programs at Masters level and 44% in PhD programs are women (King, Eisl-Culkin, & Desjardin, 2005) and most students work part-time.

Purpose

On the surface therefore, it seems that the massification of higher education has provided access to the previously underrepresented students and hence equity of access and

participation is no longer a problem. However, ‘both policy and practice still focus on the stereotypical students within a certain age bracket, of a certain educational background, and with certain interests’ (Miclea, 2008 as cited in Orr, 2010, p.26). A closer look at country data indicate that a large number of students are still underrepresented (Schuetze & Slowey, 2000): in Canada, these are Aboriginal students, students with disabilities and those from low-income backgrounds; in the US, these are students with dependents other than spouse, students without High School Diplomas and those who did not enter higher education immediately after high school (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). Overall, these are also students with families, single parents, those from remote or rural areas, people from working class backgrounds and older people without traditional qualifications (Schuetze & Slowey, 2000).

This paper therefore reviews how nontraditional students are defined and represented in selected studies in order to understand how different approaches influence the effectiveness of institutional policies. I selected two review articles (both qualitative) on nontraditional students in order to develop an understanding of different approaches in the literature (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Kim, 2002). Two sources were cross-country studies; one article used a quantitative approach using European datasets (Orr, 2010) and the other, an edited book, compiled country studies that used a mixed-methods approach (Schuetze & Slowey, 2000) to provide profiles of nontraditional students in OECD countries. Both the cross-country studies not only provide detailed profiles of these students but also set these profiles in the institutional and policy contexts of each country. Three micro-level studies focused on specific characteristics of particular subsets of nontraditional women. One was a correlational, predictive study on the motivation of mature women students with children in higher education (Scott, Burns, & Cooney, 1998); one was a qualitative study on

higher education choice of students from working class backgrounds (Reay, 2002); and one was a qualitative study on faculty attitudes towards nontraditional students in the context of national policies for increasing access (MacDonald & Stratta, 2001).

Review articles

In selecting articles for their review of the discourse related to adult students in higher education journals, Donaldson and Townsend (2007) focused on students aged at or above age 22 years in undergraduate programs in the US and contrasted them to traditional students (below the age of 22 years). They found that adult students were treated as a homogenous group that faced 'constraints of time and location' (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007, p.27) and were 'marginalized' (ibid. p.28) in higher education. They selected a list of 41 articles from seven peer-reviewed journals (1979-2000), that had the terms 'adult(s), mature, older, mized-age or nontraditional age or nontraditional' and focused on adult undergraduates (age 22 or above) in the US. Although they selected articles related to adult students, they were looking for more inclusive approaches that 'embraced' specific circumstances of students. They found that the articles portrayed adult students in limited and often, in negative ways. Either students were devalued or just 'accepted' (studied in comparison to traditional age students and not seen as problematic). Very few articles 'embraced' adult students for adding value to their institutions, and treated them as a heterogeneous group. Some articles accepted adult students as a constituency in undergraduate classrooms but did not extend traditional ways of understanding students in higher education (e.g. some authors used engagement theories developed for younger students to study adult student engagement). The authors conclude that there is limited discourse on adult students in journals of higher education; the discourse

is inconsistent and often devaluing; and more research on understanding adult students as a heterogeneous group is needed.

In her review of articles related to nontraditional students in community colleges in the US, Kim (2002) finds three criteria for defining students as nontraditional students: age criterion (aged 25 or older); student background characteristics (students who work part-time, are single parents, who didn't complete high school and those who are independent from their parents); and at-risk behaviors (delaying entry to HE after high school or not completing high school, being independent of parents, enrolling part-time, working full-time, having dependents and being a single parent). In the review, (Kim, 2002) provides examples of institutional programs designed to assist nontraditional students and finds that programs that categorize students very broadly as nontraditional, are less likely to meet the needs of students with 'particular personal or logistical challenges' (Kim 2002, p.78). She therefore concludes that in designing programs that meet students' specific needs, researchers should 'focus on the unique qualities' of a particular (homogenous) group. She suggests that it would be more useful to identify groups that share characteristics such as employment (part-time or full-time), education of parents or classification as a 'minority' rather than broadly categorizing students as nontraditional.

Cross-country studies

Although nontraditional students can be characterized as an 'invisible majority', Orr (2010, p.26), argues that without adequate survey data on socioeconomic backgrounds and educational biographies, it is hard to identify this group. He argues (quite convincingly), that age is a 'useful proxy' for identifying nontraditional students on a national scale, because the data on age is easily available and is 'naturally a proxy for both events in a person's life, in

general, and in their educational career, specifically' (ibid). Citing previous research, he shows that age combined with part-time study can serve as proxies for nontraditional students because older students are most likely to have nontraditional routes of entry to education (e.g. without completing high school), to have dependents and to study part-time.

Using statistics from Eurostat (European agency for official statistics) and Eurostudent (one of the official data collectors for the Bologna Process), Orr (2010) shows that in the UK, 33% of the students are aged 25 or over and 3% of the students have entered higher education through nontraditional routes. This is because the UK has a highly differentiated system of higher education, with several vocational and technical colleges (including the University of the Third Age¹ specifically geared towards older students who are no longer in fulltime work). This range of higher education institutions allows for more flexibility in entry requirements whilst providing differential college cultures to suit a wide range of students (Orr, 2010, p.34). In Sweden, 56% of the student body is aged 25 and over and Orr attributes this to specific access schemes by the government that cater for nontraditional entry. Providing evidence for his theory that adult students are a good proxy for nontraditional students, Orr (2010, p.35) shows that the difference between hours worked per week between older (age 28 and over) and younger (age 21-24) students is 1.4 hours per week in England, 1.7 in Sweden and 3.4 in Slovakia. He attributes this difference to differential needs of adult students including possibly lack of parental support, limited state funding and existence of dependents.

¹ <http://www.u3a.org.uk/>

Similarly, (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002) argue for a three-pronged definition of nontraditional students, based on:

- Educational biography (winding path to higher education and significance of motivation)
- Entry routes (Secondary School Certificate or alternative)
- Mode of Study

In their compilation of 10 comparative country studies of nontraditional learners and lifelong learners in the OECD (Schuetze & Slowey, 2000) they found that 13 years after an initial, similar study focusing on the same countries, the profile of under-represented students differed and had changed in each country, as had the profile of higher education institutions. With the emphasis on lifelong learning in most OECD countries, governments have to provide ‘opportunities for higher learning and for learning throughout life, giving to learners an optimal range of choice and a flexibility of entry and exit points within the system’ (OECD 1996, as cited in Schuetze & Slowey, 2000). They define lifelong learning as being lifelong (from age 0 to death), life-wide (within and outside formal institutions) and motivation to learn (enabling the capacity and the motivation to learn beyond compulsory education e.g. through development of social and cultural capital). However, although the participation rates in higher education had increased overall in each country, representation by under-represented groups had not necessarily increased significantly (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002).

Schuetze and Slowey (2002) identify a range of policies and institutional factors that increased access for underrepresented students: independence of higher education institutions; availability of part-time and distance modes of study; targeted financial and other support (e.g. childcare); and alternative routes of entry. Despite the focus on lifelong learning however, not all countries adequately increased access for underrepresented groups. The question remains

therefore, as to how lifelong learning can be implemented so that it provides increased access to underrepresented students in higher education. A micro-level lens provides a closer look at implementation of national and institutional policies.

Micro-level studies

Micro-level studies can be useful in understanding the effect of macro-level policies on institutional and personal levels. In trying to understand why a further education college in the UK had failed to provide an inclusive and welcome environment for students from nonstandard routes of entry, MacDonald and Stratta (2001) found that whilst national policy standards broadly supported faculty in meeting students' learning needs, these standards were framed in the 'rational, neutral position' (p.255) of academia without specifically accounting for differentiated learning needs. Like Donaldson and Townsend (2007), they found that nontraditional students were either treated negatively by faculty or were accepted without adequate learning or other support. The authors conclude that despite the existence of equity policies, higher education institutions (and their faculty) had more incentive to stick to status quo rather than to change the system or attitudes towards nontraditional students.

Similarly, based on interviews with mature as well as traditional age students in a further education college in the UK, Reay (2002) finds that for mature students, class, mediated by gender and ethnicity, plays an important role in the transition to higher education. In her study of higher education choice, Reay (2002) interviewed 23 nontraditional and 97 traditional students in an inner-city London Further Education college, along with four tutors. She compared responses from students from working class and middle class backgrounds and found that mature students from working class backgrounds had different motivations than mature students from middle

class backgrounds. Those from working class backgrounds chose higher education either to find themselves or 'become somebody'. Some chose higher education as a means of breaking out from their working class backgrounds. Students struggled with a desire to maintain a sense of authenticity with the longing to fit in. She found that mature students from working class backgrounds are positioned as the 'other' and as a result, struggle with tensions around 'authenticity, shame and belonging' (Reay, 2002, p.413). In contrast, younger, 'traditional' students in the study saw higher education as 'part of the normal life course', to be 'got through' (p.402) rather than as an end in itself. The author found that social class is a key mediator of mature student experiences in higher education. This is further mediated by ethnicity and gender. Reay concludes that despite policy initiatives to increase access for mature age students, 'class inequalities of access to universities endure'; working class students struggle between remaining true to themselves and abandoning their previous identities in order to fit into the higher education institution. She therefore suggests that policy initiatives will have to deal with these perspectives in trying to address class differentiation in access to higher education for mature students.

While Reay (2002) focused on higher education choice in relation to students from working class backgrounds, Scott, Burns and Cooney (1998) focused on mature women students with children. In their correlational, predictive research study, they sought to understand whether motivation for return to study of mature women students with children was a significant predictor of completion of study. The authors surveyed 117 mature women students and compared those who completed and those who dropped out from 3 Australian universities. They found that motivation levels of these two sets of participants was not different; however, after controlling for personal circumstances (e.g. support from families) and demographic variables

such as age and marital status, motivation was higher for women who had dropped out. Women with more difficult personal circumstances needed greater motivation to enroll in higher education but it is those same circumstances that also forced them to drop out. Whilst acknowledging that a small number of cases were used in factor analysis, Scott et al. (1998) suggest that higher education programs that are more flexible and where faculty and staff are more sympathetic to the different life circumstances of these women, may have better completion rates than those that don't. Although I had some concerns about the methodological soundness of the study (e.g. the questionnaire administered to the two groups of women was different and the authors do not adjust for the possibility of regression to the mean for participants who had previously completed the questionnaire), it demonstrates the importance of a more careful analysis of different groups of adult students when designing programs to meet their needs.

Conclusion

The studies reviewed in this paper point out that as a result of the massification of higher education, the group of students previously categorized as nontraditional, is now participating in increasing numbers in higher education. However, there are still significant groups of students that are underrepresented. The authors in this review point to the importance of understanding who the underrepresented groups are in order to develop effective programs for their participation, retention and completion of higher education.

The label nontraditional may no longer be a useful one and micro-level as well as macro-level lenses are needed in order to understand who is underrepresented in the context of changing higher education policies. As the studies show, institutions that focus on lifelong learning

approaches provide more flexibility in modes of study and put into place programs targeting specific groups of students, are more inclusive than others. Countries where higher education institutions are more diversified (e.g. the UK) are more likely to provide greater access to underrepresented students.

Institutions could also focus more on fostering diversity within the student body than on simply identifying needs of a particular group. More interesting, and less researched questions could include: how can higher education institutions draw on the strengths of younger and older students to enhance learning and engagement? What kind of programs foster diversity of student body? How can higher education institutions become places that diverse, underrepresented groups can access and engage with? Such questions would shift the focus from viewing students from a deficit model to enhancing the flexibility and diversity of traditionally elitist and rigid institutions.

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