

New Perspectives for Learning - Briefing Paper 8

University Access Policies for Adult Learners

Context of the Research

Economic and social changes across Europe, brought about by the transition to a knowledge society, have highlighted the need for the development of lifelong learning and promotion of social inclusion. This knowledge society has introduced a new form of inequality based on the acquisition, or not, of knowledge: 'the haves' and the 'have nots'. Universities have traditionally been the domain of younger, and on the whole, white, middle class students. If Europe is to compete economically on a global scale a wider range of people need to be given opportunities to access knowledge at university level.

There are signs that European universities are responding to these social and economic changes - expansion has generally been the pattern in many European universities moving the system as a whole to one of mass higher education. However, wider access to higher education is not an automatic outcome of this expansion. The widening access debate is concerned with who gets in and who is left out.

This project conducted in six European countries: Belgium, Germany, Ireland, Spain, Sweden and the UK, focuses on the effectiveness of access policies and practices for adults in universities and higher education institutions across the European Union. The project has paid particular attention to socially excluded groups and communities and identifies barriers to the participation of the excluded.

Key Conclusions

The following conclusions were reached: -

1. Access to university lifelong learning is not equal across Europe ranging from virtually impossible (Spain) to relatively open (UK).
2. The picture also varies within countries, as some institutions - the newer ones - are more open than traditional elite universities.
3. Non-traditional students are more likely to be found in the social sciences and humanities rather than the sciences, reflecting departmental attitudes as well as student choice.

4. The participation, or not, of non-traditional adult students in higher education is a complex issue. This complexity results from the interaction between national policies, institutional policies and practices, and student experiences.
5. For many non-traditional adult students returning to learn in higher education is a risk and at the point of entry many participants found entering a university campus daunting, not only because of the size and impersonal systems but also because the participants were unsure of themselves as learners. Many felt vulnerable particularly during the first few weeks and some had contemplated leaving due the challenges of adopting the student role, familiarising themselves with academic language and an underlying concern about the demands of working at degree level.
6. Some students (e.g. in the UK) stated that if there had not been an induction day for mature students before the academic year began, they would not have had the courage to enter campus on the first day of term. This points to the need for support structures, such as induction days, a common room for adult students, and supporting written materials to help them with the transition from non-learner to undergraduate student.
7. Financial issues, such as course fees, student loans or having to cope on social benefits, also made study a risk with no guarantee of obtaining employment at the end of study.
8. Many students wanted more contact time with personal and course tutors.
9. In relation to assessment, attitudes were contradictory. While many stated that they preferred assigned essays to examinations as the latter reminded them of school, and made them feel nervous they also felt that assigned essays were time-consuming.
10. Despite the difficulties, such as finance and finding time to study, the majority enjoyed learning as they felt it empowered them. Many non-traditional students said that they experienced personal change, were more informed by knowledge and viewed the world in a different way. Others hoped that their engagement in learning would encourage their children to study.

Key Recommendations

A number of policy recommendations at European, national and institutional levels have been highlighted by the research findings: -

1. There needs to be recognition by policy-makers that non-traditional adult students are heterogeneous by age, gender, ethnicity and mode of study. Different institutional and curriculum structures are required to meet the differing needs. This includes offering programmes taught in both the daytime and evening for full and part-time students and classes within the school day for others.

2. There is a need for more flexible systems at both the point of entry and during the course. For example, entrance examinations are a major barrier. Greater use of access qualifications and use of Accreditation of Prior Experience and Learning (APEL) and Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) would enhance access across all member states.
3. Funding should be available to facilitate the participation of all age groups so that there is no upper age limit as currently exists in some countries.
4. Crèche and/or nursery provision is a key enabler for many non-traditional students and should be made available free of charge or at subsidised rates.
5. Greater links between HE institutions and other adult education providers should be formed to promote routes for progression and mechanisms to aid transition.
6. Non-traditional students should be integrated with mainstream younger students. This has many implications for institutions such as the need to change the timing of classes across the whole institution to enable attendance. The development of improved support systems (tutor contact, study skill support etc.) and more feedback regarding students' work. At the heart of many of these issues is the need for training and staff development for lecturers to raise awareness of the learning needs of non-traditional students and to highlight best practice.
7. Induction sessions are needed for new students to familiarise them with the locality and use of facilities such as the library and ICT facilities.
8. There is a need to work towards a more common European framework for collecting institutional and national data on students.
9. There is a need for a more integrated European wide policy framework that recognises the importance, value, and economic and social gains for the EU of access, participation and social inclusion. There needs to be investment in the form of grants and subsidies to enable improved policy and practice.
10. There needs to be encouragement for employers to support their employees who participate in HE regardless of the subject area of study. This support could be in a number of forms such as financial assistance or time off to study.
11. The research also indicated the need for further study in the following areas: -
 - a) Tracking of non-traditional students after leaving university in terms of employment, further study, and their personal development as learners.
 - b) Identification of successful models of learning and teaching for non-traditional students.

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- c) The impact of financial policies and issues and their implications for student success and failure.
- d) University, Departmental and lecturer attitudes towards non-traditional students.
- e) The relationship between lifelong learning and social capital.

Further Information

Full title of Project - "University Adult Access Policies and Practices Across the European Union; and their Consequences for the Participation of non-traditional Adults" with the final report completed in June 2001

[Full report](#), [Abstract](#), [Summary](#) [Partner details](#)

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