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'NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS' AT EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES.
A SPECIAL PROBLEM OF SOCIAL INEQUALITY

ABSTRACT: The following contribution is based on the qualitative data of a seven-country comparative study on the situation of 'non-traditional students' at European universities. It focuses on two key findings of an extensive analysis: (1) deeper theoretical insights that emerge from the wealth of data and that are condensed into Axel Honneth's 'theory of recognition'; (2) a revealing comparison of the 'university cultures' of the seven countries studied. A brief conclusion for future university policies in Europe closes the contribution.

KEYWORDS: Micro-macro approach, seven-country comparative study, theory of recognition, Axel Honneth, university culture, mental space, university policy.

The following contribution is based on the comparative international RANLHE-study[1] of the situation of so-called 'non-traditional students'[2] at universities in England, Scotland, Ireland, Spain, Germany, Poland and Sweden. It was funded by the European Commission's Lifelong Learning Programme which took place in several project sequences from 2007 to 2012[3]. The results – accessible to the international public in selected parts (Finnegan, Merrill & Thunborg 2014) – are also of interest for current educational policies because they provide information about what the foreword of the study identifies as:

- 'the contemporary nature of inequality and how the various forms of inequality intersect and overlap in HE[4] and society;
- the formation and transformation of learner identities;
- the structural barriers faced by non-traditional students;
- the sources of student resilience and agency;

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[1] The exact title: *Access and Retention: Experiences of Non-traditional Learners in Higher Education.*

[2] The label 'non-traditional' stud*ent* has different connotations internationally. While it primarily focuses on the target group of representatives of 'second' or 'third educational pathways' in German-speaking countries, it associates internationally all student groups with unusual characteristics (age variation, ethnic minority, non-educated social background, mental and physical impairment, etc.; cf detailed Alheit, Rheinländer & Watermann 2008).

[3] Since the completion of the active surveys, almost all participating country teams have continued to work on the rich qualitative data material. New and advanced discoveries have been made and interesting publications are still being released to this day. The article presented here includes more recent publications, but refers to older works as well. The comparison of national 'figurations' with the presented country images (albeit with different comments) has already been published in an article in (Alheit 2013).

[4] HE = Higher Education (in the German context: the 'tertiary' education sector).

- comparison of patterns of inequality, access, and retention in various European countries;
- the implications of these findings for practice and policy' (Finnegan, Merrill & Thunborg 2014, pp. 1f.).

The focus of the analysis was undoubtedly the collection of biographical-narrative inter-views on the study reality of 'non-traditional students', because this methodical approach, as described very convincingly in a project-accompanying contribution,

'has a unique potential to illuminate people's lives and their interaction with the social world and the interplay of history and micro worlds, in struggles for agency and meaning in lives. And to illuminate the interplay of different experiences and forms of learning – from the most intimate to the most formal' (West et al. 2007, p. 280).

Each national research team identified three institutional case studies that represented the different types of universities in their country (e.g., reform universities, elite universities, distance universities, or private universities). Different student cohorts were interviewed – such as first-year students, students in their last year, those who had left and returned to the university, as well as real 'dropouts'. Each partner team in the international network conducted almost 100 (around 700 in total) interviews with students[5]. In order to complete the institutional picture, expert interviews with institutional representatives, teachers or student advisors (so-called 'gatekeepers') were also evaluated (see Alheit 2014a). This process helped to understand the interplay of the institutional *'meso level'* with the *'micro level'* of the learners. In addition, the educational statistics of the respective countries were used to compare the results of the qualitative analyses with the collected framework data, to a certain extent to the *'macro level'*.

In the following section, I will concentrate my considerations on two aspects of the complex overall study: (1) on the question of the *deeper theoretical insights* offered by the rich qualitative data material; (2) a careful but interesting *comparison of the different mental cultures in the 'university landscapes'* of the countries examined. Finally, I briefly discuss the *consequences for specific university policies* in Europe.

The importance of 'recognition' for the transformation of the 'self' in (non-traditional) tertiary education processes

The diverse results of the overall study initially show the unusual diversity of the university systems in Europe. Every national system of tertiary education is obviously shaped

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[5] For the methodological framework and the specific methodological approach cf. West, Bron & Merrill, 2014, pp. 25-36. Incidentally, the clear reference to qualitative *mass data* seems to be necessary because – particularly with quantitative-oriented researchers – the prejudice still remains that qualitative research generally relates to *individual case studies*.

by very distinct historical patterns of institutional transformation and reform (Archer 1984). The change from elite education to mass universities in a two-generation range (Trow 1973) has complicated simple comparison options rather than simplified them. Social and labour market constraints have made the expanded forms of higher education into a kind of independent cultural and symbolic space in our societies (Finnegan, Fleming & Thunborg 2014, p. 151); however, this 'space' looks completely different in each of the countries participating in the study[6].

And yet looking at the group of 'non-traditional students' pointed to highly ambivalent trends that seem to be converging internationally: a slow but steady growth in the proportion of older students, a clear change towards gender equality at universities, barriers of unequal access conditions for students with disabilities or for ethnic minorities as well as the continuing subtle exclusion mechanisms for students from the working class (Alheit 2014b). From the perspective of 'non-traditional students', five complex experiences can be highlighted that do not relativise the dominant feeling of the inequality that still exists, but rather reinforce it:

(a) Social inequality continues to have an impact on non-traditional learning experiences, but the way in which social (self-)attribution is staged has changed both among those affected and among institutions. The stigmatisation no longer takes place on the 'open stage'. It has taken a back seat and works subtly through *'performative diversification'* (Field & Morgan-Klein 2014), i.e. through a hidden standardisation of how one should (actually) appear in a university context. However, this is exactly what irritates the 'expectations' of the target group: *You don't understand what they really want from you. You feel stupid and wrong*[7], is an extremely frequently heard quotation from those affected.

(b) The inequality experience is usually *multidimensional* and often refers to an impenetrable mix of age, class, impairment, ethnicity and gender ('*intersectionality*', as it were). This experience also has irritating effects: *You no longer know whether they reject you as a woman or as a black person, or simply because you come from the lower class.*

(c) Despite the persistence of experienced inequality, those affected show a remarkable potential for *resilience*, actively defend themselves against structural inequality and struggle for freedom in their training institutions: *At some point it was clear to me that studying was important for me and will help me move forward – despite the resistance. I resisted and experienced myself in a completely new way.*

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[6] See the comparison of the 'pedagogical styles' and 'cultures' of European universities in the second section of this article.

[7] The interview sequences cited in the following are translations from the (anglicised) data material and are selected so that they represent *'typical'* statements on the corresponding subject area of the findings. This means: the selected quotes are always examples from a wide range of similar votes.

(d) Such resistance is often supported by family, social 'godparents', peers and friends and frames (Nestor 2015): *Sure, I only managed it because my family was behind me, colleagues, friends, and because they were proud that I could do it. I needed it.*

(e) The study time is not interpreted by many concerned as a superficial career path, but as a kind of *'transitional space'* for the formation and transformation of their own social and professional identity (Finnegan, Fleming & Thunborg 2014, p. 153ff.): *My studies brought me something – not just professionally, as I thought. Yes, that too. But much more for myself. I have become a different person, I see things new, I meddle in where I was too cowardly before. Somehow, I now experience the world differently and myself too.*

In fact, being tied to contexts such as family support, recognition of social proximity for the services provided, and help from partners and friends to deal with organisational problems in 'non-traditional' study situations is a basic prerequisite for overcoming the *feeling of strangeness* when encountering the university (Nestor 2015). Contact with the *'university habitus'* (Alheit 2009) often gives the impression of intellectual inferiority and of not fitting the chosen subject.

The social practice of successful studying relies on feelings of growing 'belonging' and of 'being familiar'. Such feelings are by no means evenly distributed. They are at least more natural for children of academic parents than for children from the working class or even from other cultures. Axel Honneth's socio-philosophical concept of *recognition* (1992, 1995), which includes personal attachment (*love*), a guaranteed naturalness of one's own option for education (*law*) and the vital experience of shaping society (*social economy*), is of central importance especially for social groups that have to fight for such recognition. Due to, for example, the experience of appreciative 'love' not being a matter of fact in childhood and youth because a 'right' to education existed formally, but this right was not applied in practice since active participation in professional and social life was blocked or at least not supported. The associated withdrawal of 'self-confidence', 'self-respect' and 'self-esteem' must block or significantly limit the experience of successful 'self-education' (see Fleming & Finnegan 2014, pp. 54-56).

Honneth's concept is based on a fascinating interpretation of the early Hegelian writings on the development of *'selfconsciousness'* (Hegel [1809] 1986), the identity theory of George Herbert Mead (1934) and the social psychology of Donald Winnicott (1971). He works out how social relationships and intersubjective experiences shape the individual. Without a special relationship with another person, it is not possible to become aware of one's own uniqueness. Authentic recognition is an essential human need – important for child development but just as important in the workplace, in the community, in civil society and certainly in all educational processes. The way European universities deal with 'non-traditional students' and their courageous and

surprisingly successful *'struggle for recognition'* are a confirmation of Axel Honneth's socio-philosophical considerations.

The diversity of European 'university cultures'

Honneth's concept is predestined for understanding the micro-social processes that can be observed when 'non-traditional students' meet with the 'university': experiencng both the subtle exclusion and the discovery of one's own resilience. However, it does not guarantee an insight into the character of *institutional 'meso-structures'* and *'mental framework conditions'*, as they are quite different in the examined countries England, Scotland, Ireland, Spain, Germany, Poland and Sweden. Moreover, it is not enough to identify distinct variables that influence such differences. Rather, it is about *cultural patterns*, about *'figurations'* as Norbert Elias (1989) describes them which can capture such subtle differences (see also Alheit 2009).

These configurations may have developed over longer historical periods. And one has quite spontaneous ideas about such mental patterns: for example the tendency towards highly formalised, distinctive strategies of classification, such as those prevailing in the education system in France and in some other southern European countries; the egalitarian and comparatively informal structures of the Scandinavian university systems; the selection strategies of Central European countries (such as Germany, Austria, etc.), which are often unreflectedly oriented towards the 'middle class habitus'; and the pragmatic, economically operating higher education structures in England's and Scotland's mental cultural areas.

The RANLHE study examined the university systems of the seven countries mentioned. The very meaningful object of comparison was how the institutions dealt with the target group of 'non-traditional students'. Ordinary distinction variables such as *'access vs. exclusion'* with regard to the universities was obviously insufficient because legal developments that should facilitate access (for instance in the German 'Länder' after 1970) did not automatically lead to the elimination of previous exclusion strategies, but rather to the invention of *'secret sub-strategies'* (see Alheit 2014a, pp. 137ff.). Or the opposite, objective access restrictions due to tough tests (as in Spain) did not in any way preclude the factual integration of 'non-traditional students' if they recieved access. In the course itself there was an inclusive and not an exclusive climate (see below). What was important was percieving 'tensions' and suggestive 'drifts', which condensed certain influencing factors into a specific (national) 'pattern' that could be related to the university social arena.

For this it seemed necessary to find a kind of 'tool' that could act as a classic *tertium comparationis* for all national university systems. The contrast between *'culture'* and

'economy', familiar from the field metaphor of Bourdieu (1987), on which European university development over the past 50 years had to be based, seemed to be supportive. A transverse contrast between *'social responsibility'* and *'functional effectiveness'*, which had to come into play particularly when confronting 'non-traditional students' with the university arena, also appeared suitable.

The following figure shows ideal-typical constellations, as they are at least conceivable. It is immediately apparent that such 'ideal types' will never appear *'purely'* in reality, so to speak. Yet, the idea of a convincing differentiation between national educational 'cultures' or 'styles' seems plausible. We then have to deal with (semantic) 'clusters'[8] whose relative inaccuracy (*'fuzziness'*) is not a disadvantage, but rather an advantage, because social reality also has to deal with interpretive 'gray areas'. The 'tool' of the RANLHE comparison then looked like the following figure:
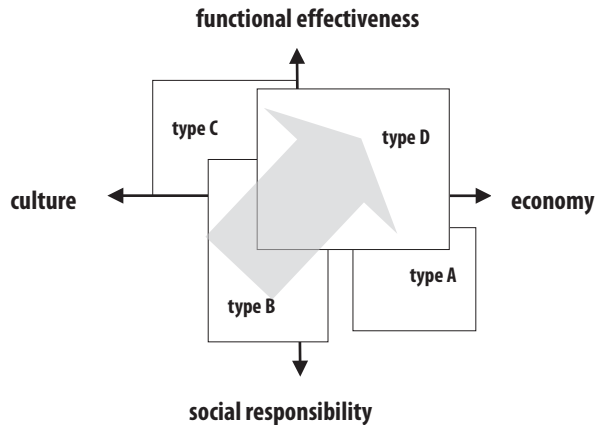

Fig. 1. The space of 'educational cultures/styles' of European universities
Source: Alheit 2013.

The typology created here reveals a reciprocal dependency of the types: universities whose educational style is primarily based on efficiency parameters and economic success becomes the dominant neoliberal type in 'post-modern' societies. Even if this exposed *type D* does not occur in pure form in any of the examined national HE systems, its influence on all other types is noticeable. However, as already indicated, the reconstructed style clusters are *'mixed forms'* – but clearly distinguishable from each other[9].

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[8] *'Semantic clusters'* are patterns of argumentation taken from the (national) interview material, possibly also 'discourse formations' with mostly 'fraying' horizons of interpretation, which can be meaningfully placed in the constructed *'mental space'* (for the methodological background of such semantic clustering (cf. detailed Alheit et al. 2020).

[9] In addition, it must of course be emphasised that the institutional level can also be very heterogeneous *within* a country. The milieu of elite universities is of course different from that of small

The same applies in the following case, which is most similar to the likeable *type B*, namely the example of a Scandinavian university system (here: Sweden)[10]. Social arguments play a major role in the selection of students. Therefore, there is a great willingness to accept 'non-traditional students'. The Swedish communication culture, the flat hierarchies and the informal learning atmosphere also have a very positive effect. This result is not only covered by the statements of the university officials, but also by the interviews with the students. The mental focus of the 'educational style' lies between the poles *culture* and *social responsibility*. A cautiously growing orientation towards economic constraints cannot be overlooked. *'Performance'* and effectiveness are becoming increasingly important in the course of the Europeanisation of higher education[11].

functional effectiveness

culture   **economy**
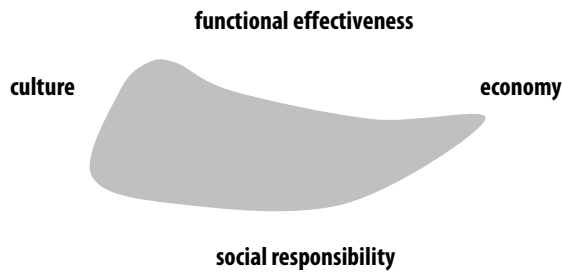
social responsibility

Fig 2. The 'educational style' of Scandinavian universities
Source: Alheit 2013.

The current Polish university system represents a certain contrast to the Swedish one. After a drastic privatisation following the social upheaval after 1990 (more than 300 universities in Poland are private companies now), the focus of university policies has shifted to the upper right sector of the 'mental space', close to the poles *functional effectiveness* and *economy*. The conscious relationship to Polish culture and tradition, as well as to the Catholic Church, continues to play a certain role. In contrast, the orientation towards the *social responsibility* pole has weakened significantly. This observation has noticeable consequences for 'non-traditional students': for them, studying is associated with drastic economic risks and with experiences of exclusion. Both can be shown convincingly in the educational statistics and in the critical answers of the interviewed students.

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colleges. The educational policies of different 'states' (such as in Germany) also show differences. Overall, despite everything, *'mental patterns'* can be identified that have a *national type*.

[10] The following characterisations of the country profiles are, so to speak, *'portraits'*, which mainly relate to data from expert interviews or case studies and can, of course, not be cited *in extenso* in this context.

[11] The term higher education is a bit of a misnomer here because a significant part of HE practice, especially in England and Scotland, has its institutional center outside the university.
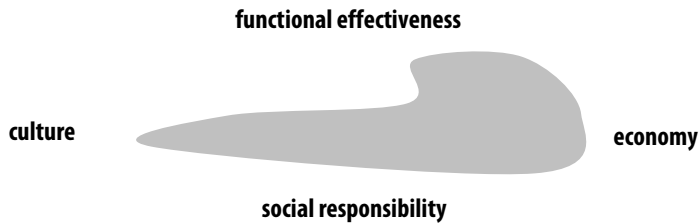
Fig. 3. The 'educational style' of Polish universities
Source: Alheit 2013.

The classic English university has a different educational profile. Excluding the elite universities of *Oxford* and *Cambridge*, the focus should be between the three poles; *functional effectiveness*, *economy* and *social responsibility*. In contrast to other European universities, English universities have been *companies* for some time, but they have always assumed social responsibility for the *community* and in principle keep access open to all students.

The tradition of *open access courses* is an outstanding example of this. That is why English universities are predictable institutions for 'non-traditional students'. Special offers for migrants, disabled people, single mothers etc. are a matter of course. Studying has its price, but here too the universities show socially committed practices through scholarships.

Incidentally, this tendency is much more pronounced in *Scotland* than in England. The traditional social democratic orientation may be responsible for this. In principle, however, the pragmatic-utilitarian 'tone' of the educational mentality is also evident in Scotland. This tendency is clearly reflected in our research material.
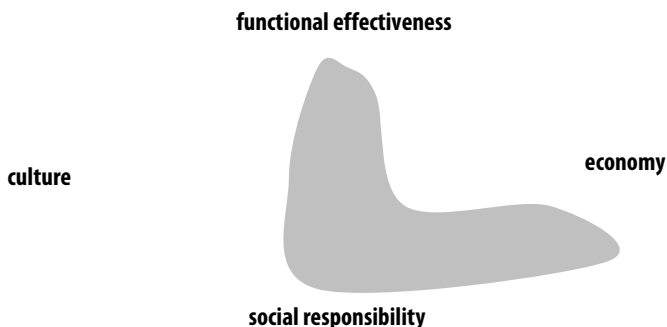

Fig. 4. The 'educational style' of English (Scottish) universities
Source: Alheit 2013.

It seems remarkable that the Irish higher education system does not follow the English/Scottish standard just presented, but rather resembles the Scandinavian model.

In fact, here too the mental focus lies between the poles *culture* and *social responsibility*. What separates the Irish university system from the Scandinavian one (which has comparatively high respect for people with disabilities) is the close connection to *national-religious traditions*, i.e. a certain 'lack of modernity'. Both the clear social tendencies and an academic culture based on *Catholic ethics* are strongly confirmed by our qualitative data.
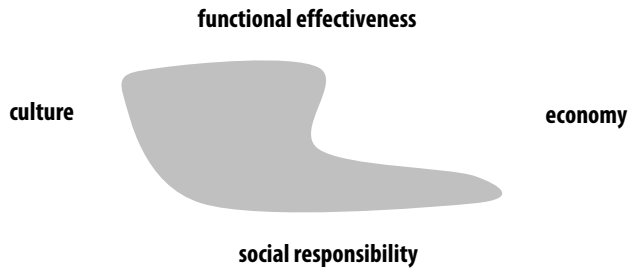

Fig. 5. The 'educational style' of Irish universities
Source: Alheit 2013.

The modern German university system has moved away from the traditional tendencies towards segregation of outdated German educational institutions in the tertiary sector. However, apart from a short period at the so-called *'reform universities'* of the 1970s and 1980s, the university system has returned to a movement between *culture* and *functional effectiveness*. The growing economisation of the 'internal policies' of universities over the past two decades has reinforced concealed tendencies towards exclusion and made it difficult for groups such as 'non-traditional students' to implement their study plans. The data not only prove this succinctly through the student interviews, but even more than that through interviews with so-called *'gatekeepers'* (i.e. study advisors) (see Alheit 2014a).
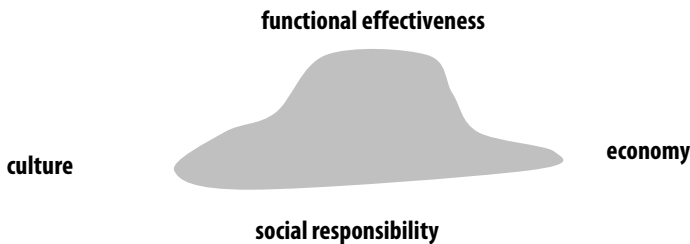

Fig. 6. The 'educational style' of German universities
Source: Alheit 2013.

The Spanish model looks very different. The fictional German 'hat' is reversed. The mental focus of the *'Spanish style'* lies between the three poles *culture*, *social responsibility*

and *economy*. In contrast to the Scandinavian example, 'social responsibility' is not part of the organisational task of the university, but rather an ethical-pedagogical challenge for academic staff. That becomes evident in the qualitative material of the RANLHE study. The formal requirements for admission to the university (i.e. *sharp exams*) are part of a selection strategy of the university. However, an integrative and communicative study atmosphere dominates the training process within the classes.
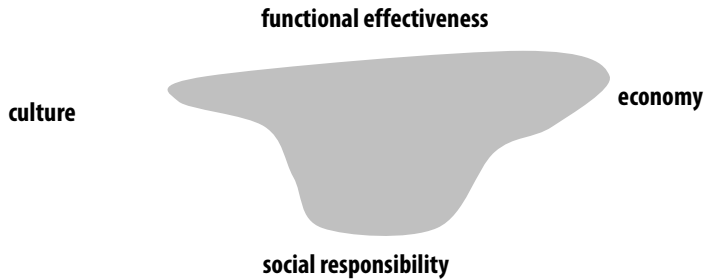
functional effectiveness

culture   **economy**

social responsibility

Fig. 7. The 'educational style' of Spanish universities
Source: Alheit 2013.

The European comparison shows subtle differences in the (national) *educational styles*' of universities (Alheit 2014b). This very distinct and individual mix of certain influences and tendencies mostly has to do with complex historical constellations and requires further systematic analyses. Nevertheless, the findings give an impression of *'specific configurations'* (i.e. an in-depth 'logic' of the relationship between certain characteristics), which reveal the opening and closing tendencies of university systems.

Perspectives of a democratic 'university landscape' in Europe

At the end there are two questions that arise after gaining an insight into the *micro-social* development processes of the learning of 'non-traditional students' and the *macro-social* framework of national educational cultures and styles in European higher education. These are: What do we know from the research presented, that we didn't know before? And what practical-political consequences result from what we may have learned?

We have undoubtedly gained a deeper understanding of the micro-social bargaining processes that are demanded of students who do not correspond to the normal picture of students at the university. Addiontally, we were particularly able to expose the subtle exclusion strategies that have survived university reform processes in the past 50 years.

The implications of what we have learned, however, hit the *'heart' of Europe's educational idea*. Consequences for European higher education policy are urgently required, and reforms are also pending for the organisation of teaching at the individual

universities of the EU countries. The concern for *'affective equality'*, as Lynch et al. (2009) point out, requires a change in the learning atmosphere in many of the countries examined. Students – and not just 'non-traditional students' – have the right to a university culture that respects and recognises them as a *person*. That means building university learning spaces that enable cooperative practices and *creative discoveries of the self and the world* and that oppose learning environments that are predominantly technical, mechanical, functional, impersonal and instrumental. The conclusion of the RANLHE study is therefore in its *'original tone'*:

'This goes beyond the traditional mantra of "student centred" approaches and making a case for an egalitarian and relational approach where respect for student voices and concerns informs all contacts, communications and pedagogies. This also means developing a greater awareness of the limits and uses of categorical definitions and research in relation to non-traditional students. Anything else, we can now say, is not best practice' (Finnegan, Fleming & Thunborg 2014, p. 160).

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