Building an Inclusive Academic Environment: Challenges and Needs of Non-traditional Students and Potentials to Address Them

Marina Brunner[✉] and Ulf-Daniel Ehlers

Baden-Württemberg Cooperative State University, Karlsruhe, Germany
marina.brunner@dhbw-karlsruhe.de

Abstract. Higher Education Institutions in Europe are experiencing a steady growth of an increasingly diverse student body and are attracting a large number of new student groups, the so-called non-traditional students (NTS). Especially the Professional Higher Education (PHE) Institutions, with their rather strong combination of academic and work-based learning have special study conditions that can come with challenges for NTS. In order to embrace this increasing diversity, higher education institutions need to adapt structurally and culturally to the needs of these students and to enable inclusion in all parts of the institutional experience. One way of doing this is in partnership with the existing student quality assurance and representation structures within the universities, the student organisations. But even here, non-traditional students are not sufficiently represented to put their needs on the agenda. Our research has identified barriers and needs of non-traditional students and potentials to address them.

Keywords: Inclusivity · Professional Higher Education · Student engagement · Non-traditional students

1 Introduction

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are becoming more diverse with a new and more heterogeneous student body in terms of previous education, social and family background, gender, age, life-situation, motivation to study, current and future occupational profiles (Ehlers 2020). This is related to an ongoing process of expanding higher education, of opening access and of new labour market requirements asking for highly qualified graduates (Schuetze and Slowey 2002), asking for new strategies in order to do justice to the different facets of cultural and social background, the individual educational and experiential background and the living circumstances of the students (Nibuhr and Diehn 2012).

This also holds true for Professional Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) because of the structure of PHEI, the target groups which they attract are different from purely academic universities. PHE curricula have specific characteristics that influence student engagement which is often overlooked in European and national higher education policy

discussions, such as shorter times spent in the institution due to many students studying at shorter courses and considerable time spent on practical placements outside the institution (Camilleri et al. 2014).

For a Professional Higher Education Institution to be truly inclusive, it needs to reflect its diverse range of students. To achieve this, a PHEI should not just consider its study programmes and teaching and learning processes, but also aim for fully inclusive student engagement. Student engagement not only relates to student activism and student involvement in decision-making bodies, but also to the structures and practices of students' organisations themselves. All of these elements of student engagement do not fully reflect the diverse student community in a PHEI and can be difficult to access for non-traditional students and underrepresented student groups.

Therefore, non-traditional students (NTS) must be able to participate in student organisations in order to include them holistically in their university education and ensure that their voices are heard. This is the goal of the international InclusiPHE initiative[1]. To achieve this objective, the barriers and challenges regarding student engagement of non-traditional students need to be identified and adequate measurements should be defined to address them. In this context, this paper addresses two questions:

(i) What challenges and needs do non-traditional students have with regard to their involvement in student organisations?
(ii) What are the potentials to support the inclusion of non-traditional students?

2 Non-traditional Students and Student Engagement

The term non-traditional student is broadly used in the context of higher education (Brändle and Ordemann 2021). Hall (1997) provides a definition of diversity which can be applied to non-traditional students where he includes differences in age, ethnicity, gender, skin colour, national origin, physical, mental and emotional ability, religion, language, race, sexual orientation and socio-economic status (Hall 1997). In addition to speaking of non-traditional students, some refer to this type of students as underrepresented groups (Zinkiewicz and Trapp 2004). The definition of a non-traditional student is therefore also context-dependent and can have different connotations depending on the country, institute or field of study. In addition, the boundaries between traditional and non-traditional students are blurred, so a student can be traditional in some aspects and non-traditional in others at the same time (Schuetze and Slowey 2002). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) categorize a student as non-traditional if he or she inherits one of the following seven characteristics: Delays enrolment in college,

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attends part time, works full time (35 h or more per week) while enrolled, financial independence, caretaking responsibilities, single parent, no high school diploma (Choy 2002). The problem with the imprecise definitions of non-traditional students is that if they cannot be identified, it is difficult to address their individual challenges and needs.

The 'Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimensions of Higher Education in the EHEA' report refers to a broad classification of student groups which can be applied to better understand the concept of non-traditional students. The first group mentioned are the **underrepresented students**. They are described as "underrepresented in relation to certain characteristics (e.g. gender, age, nationality, geographic origin, socioeconomic background, ethnic minorities) if its share among the students is lower than the share of a comparable group in the total population" (EHEA 2020). Students often have combinations of several of these characteristics and the classification as underrepresented can also depend on the context and levels of higher education. The second group are the **disadvantaged students**, facing "specific challenges compared to their peers in higher education. This can take many forms (e.g. Impairment, low family income, little or no family support, orphan, many school moves, mental health, pregnancy, having less time to study because one has to earn one's living by working or having caring duties)" (EHEA 2020). The temporal dimension must be considered as disadvantages can be partly permanent and partly appear and disappear. A disadvantaged student can, but does not necessarily have to be an underrepresented student as well. The last group are the **vulnerable students**. As well as the disadvantaged students, they face specific challenges but have in addition a specific need for protection. This is the case for students with a risk for discrimination, who suffer from an illness or Impairment or whose residence permit depends on the success of their studies. This group are not always able to ensure their own well-being and need additional support and are therefore categorized as vulnerable students (EHEA 2020).

In this research context, every student who does not feel like an integral part of the student and institutional community and/or who, due to their specific circumstances, does not have the opportunity to get involved in student engagement during their studies is a nontraditional student, even if only to a small extent.

Student Engagement can be described as a process of collaboration between the higher education institute and the students to shape decision-making, structures and cultures in higher education. It is also often expressed in phrases like 'student voice' and 'students as partners' (Finn and Zimmer 2012). Healey, Flint and Harrington (2014) state that "[a]ll partnership is student engagement, but not all student engagement is partnership" (Healey et al. 2014). This suggests that when talking about student engagement and the development and optimisation of processes and structures, students should already be engaged in this process.

The National Student Engagement Programme (2020) defines four domains of student engagement. In the **'Governance and Management'** domain, student engagement is primarily understood as participation in committees in which they influence the development, implementation and evaluation of policies. The second domain is **'Teaching and Learning'** and refers to student engagement of students in their own learning and in the process of enhancing that learning experience. Third, **'Quality Assurance and**

Enhancement' means participation in all processes of quality assurance and enhancement. The last domain of student engagement is **'Student representation and organisation'**, giving students the opportunity to come together in self-organised groups, to participate in democratic processes, to elect representatives and to proactively start discussions about student-centred change within higher education institutions (National Student Engagement Programme 2020).

Student engagement can operate on various levels with different goals. It can be classified in seven levels. At the international level, the European Students' Union (ESU) is an example of an umbrella organisation of 45 National Unions of Students (NUS) from 40 countries, aiming to represent and promote the educational, social, economic and cultural interests of students at the European level towards all relevant bodies and, in particular, the European Union, Bologna Follow Up Group, Council of Europe and UNESCO. These unions or organisations can also be found on a national or regional level, often with a thematic, political or study programme-related agenda. On an institutional level, student-led organisations are given an active role in board discussions, policy making and general changes which affect all students at the institution. On Campus/Faculty level, student engagement includes students from the same campus or faculty who focus mostly on catering, facilities, mobility, etc. Student engagement on the Programme/Department level or the class level often takes place for students who enroll in the same programme, sometimes represented by class representatives, mostly focused on improving their learning experience and solving specific challenges in their programme together with their teaching staff. Student engagement on the individual level is about students engaging in their own learning process (Higher Education Authority 2016).

3 Research Methodology

The research initiative started in the end of 2020. In the first phase of the research process the research team set out for an iterative multiapproach research design in order to identify different characteristics of non-traditional students as well as barriers and needs related to their study experience and inclusive student engagement in Professional Higher Education.

In order to answer the research questions "What challenges and needs do non-traditional students have with regard to their involvement in student organisations?" the research team decided to employ a qualitative research methodology by focusing on expert opinions in written from February till March 2021.The experts drew their answers from internal studies, their own assessments and conversations with student support staff. In addition to the information derived from the qualitative expert surveys, four focus groups on national level with a length of two hours each, were conducted by the PHEIs in Malta, Spain, Belgium and Germany. As part of the research process, the opinions of 28 experts including student representatives and non-traditional students were collected and analyzed. To participate in the focus group, the individuals had to either belong to the group of non-traditional students, be a representative of a student-led organisation or have a professional background as a student-support staff or PHE institutional leader. The qualitative research contained questions to the following topics:

- Dimensions and characteristics of non-traditional students at PHEI.
- Student engagement opportunities at the individual institutes.
- Participation barriers for non-traditional students with a focus on extracurricular activities and student associations.
- Good practices at own institution or from broader society

Drawing from the European Students' Union/ESU's network, an international focus group was set up with representatives from four national student unions. Beforehand and based on the results of the internal research and the internal focus groups, a digital written survey was conducted, addressing specific research gaps from the previous research steps, complemented by the International Focus Group. The international focus group was recorded for internal documentation and the results were documented in forms prepared by the research team.

Due to the subsequent structure of the research process, the research steps could always be built upon the results and information gathered in the former research step, thus qualitatively building a set of contextualized data on inclusive student engagement of non-traditional students in PHEIs. The subsequent steps had been based on the previous ones in order to (1) validate research results from these steps, (2) close research gaps identified in these steps and (3) gain a deeper understanding of issues and challenges identified in these steps.

4   Results of the Empirical Study

4.1   Challenges and Needs of Non-traditional Students Regarding the Involvement in Student Organisations

Overall, the challenges and barriers for inclusive student engagement can be clustered into five main categories, namely time challenges, visibility challenges, identification challenges, image challenges and accessibility challenges. While some of these categories are set on a more cultural level (image and identification), others can be described as more structural challenges (time, visibility, accessibility) and taking place on different levels such as course level, institutional level, national level. During the COVID-19 shutdown, there is evidence that inclusive student engagement has undergone severe changes on the structural level but less so on a cultural level.

Time and finance challenges are closely related and can be described in different dimensions: students might have to work in order to finance their studies and thus have less time available for student engagement activities. Moreover, they might be reluctant to commit to a long-term engagement due to other activities and interests, international mobility, internships etc. Finally, a significant study workload might make student engagement seem to collide with one's own study goals and objectives.

Visibility challenges can be described as a lack of visibility of results of student engagement and participation, meaning decisions and changes made thanks to student engagement and participation, proving that it can make a difference and have a positive impact on the student situation. Furthermore, the actual engagement and participation opportunities as well as activities offered by student-led organisations must be visible and accessible to students - participation might be more difficult and selective if they are not. In order to participate, students need to know the possibilities to do so and understand the mechanisms of student participation. Motivation for student engagement might result from a concrete case of dissatisfaction and the concrete will for change (Ditzel and Bergt 2013). For students with less concrete cases, it might be harder to see why they should participate in student-led organisations. For example, students might not know any success stories or results of student engagement and participation.

Identification challenges can also be described in different dimensions: it might be harder for students to identify with student-led organisations if they do not relate to one's own interests, identity, everyday life and challenges. Moreover, students might be intimidated when they feel they do not have the right skills for joining an organisation and face insecurities of being welcome. The way students are depicted and portrayed in course and PR materials on an institutional, course or organisational level might also lead to identification challenges if the material paints a stereotyped picture of the student body and does not reflect its diversity.

Closely related to identification challenges, student-led organisations might face image challenges making it less attractive for some students to join. Student-led organisations might have an image of a place where political games take place and where many things are about students' popularity - students might feel that they do not fit in or not have enough confidence to join. Specific roles and positions are attributed through a selection and election process which might seem intimidating for some less extrovert students. The image of some student-led organisations related to heavy drinking and partying might put participation in contrast with academic achievement. In the UK, the term 'lad culture' has been coined in relation to this challenge, placing it firmly in a gender inequality perspective.

Finally, accessibility challenges might make it harder for some students to engage and participate in different activities on different levels. This might be related to language barriers, e.g. for international students, students with hearing impairments, or mobility barriers, e.g. for students with limited mobility, who live in another place than they study, who have caretaking responsibilities or physical impairments etc.

Based on the barriers mentioned in the internal research and the focus groups, different needs could be derived that relate to the various barriers and challenges of non-traditional students in relation to student engagement. Furthermore, the focus groups were also specifically asked for potentials and solutions that could help to shape student engagement in a more inclusive way. Table 1 shows an overview of possible potentials mentioned within the focus group and which challenge areas they address, which institutional level they target and which stakeholders should take responsibility for them.

Table 1. Potentials for inclusive student engagement of NTS

Potential	Related challenge area	Level	Responsibility	Structural or cultural
Different participation opportunities	Identification time and finance accessibility	All levels	Institutions student-led organisations	Structural
Visibility of diversity	Identification	All levels	Institutions student-led organisations	Structural cultural
Support system	Time and finance	Institutional	Institutions	Structural cultural
Contact points between SO & NTS	Visibility identification	Institutional	Student-led organisations institutions	Structural
Network between different levels of student organisations	Identification	All levels	Student-led organisations	Structural
Inform and professionalize teachers for different student needs	Identification	Institutional	Institutions	Cultural
Guidelines and policies for and from non-traditional students	Image identification	All levels	Student-led organisations institutions	Cultural structural
Paying students/include student engagement in the curricula	Time and finance	Institutional	Institutions	Structural

5   Conclusion

The InclusiPHE initiative aims at making Professional Higher Education more inclusive and student engagement more open to all students. In a first step, a broad research has been conducted in order to better understand the characteristics of non-traditional students and the barriers and challenges they face in higher education. Some potentials and good practices have already been identified. In cooperation with experts two self-evaluation measurements, both for institutions and student organisations will be developed.

The research undertaken has included many stakeholder perspectives and also included the voices of (non-traditional) students themselves in semi-structured internal

research conducted and several focus groups and interviews. This has left the research team with a deeper understanding of the challenges and barriers NTS are facing in PHEIs, and measurements to address them.

The research undertaken has taken place during the COVID-19 shutdown. All research and coordination activities have taken place digitally, thus influencing the research process. The digital format of, for example, focus groups, could be a barrier for some students to participate and it might be harder to reach non-traditional students. On the other hand, the digital format might make it easier for other stakeholders, e.g. with heavy schedules, to join and hence make it possible to have many different persons participate in the focus groups and the research process. Concerning the participation of non-traditional students, it has been stated before that their voices should be crucial in the research process by having them participate in focus groups, with the related challenges of reaching them and knowing exactly who they are - this being a research gap itself. One approach has thus been not to invite representatives of all types of NTS (this holding the risk of tokenizing or stigmatizing students and of 'missing' some of them) but to create a diverse focus group participant setup in order to gain a broad range of perspectives on inclusive student engagement of non-traditional students. However, it can be assumed that not all the necessary perspectives have been reflected during the research process.

Getting to know our students and the challenges they are struggling with is crucial - and so are solutions for getting in touch with them, of getting to know them, of receiving feedback from them - and of making them engage. This also means to rethink ways of engaging – and of showing what engagement is and means.

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