

# *Participation in higher education: Barriers and opportunities for non-traditional students in higher education in Germany and Spain*

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores participation in higher education in Germany and Spain through two case studies from the RANLHE project. There is one case in each national context (Germany and Spain) based on biographical interviews undertaken between 2008 and 2010. Social, economic and cultural dimensions are explored in order to better understand the German and Spanish contexts. In addition, we look at the comparison of the two cultural and institutional contexts, searching for a more complex description of the processes related to access, retention, completion and learning in higher education from a European and transnational perspective. These issues are connected to social challenges regarding inequalities and social class.

## **Keywords**

Non-traditional students, retention, drop-out, institutional university contexts, Germany, Spain

## **Introduction**

This paper explores participation in higher education in Germany and Spain by presenting two case studies from the RANLHE project. The issue of equal opportunities in the educational systems in Germany and Spain has become part of public debate. The results of the last PISA (OECD Programme for International



Student Assessment) report revealed that the relationship between social background and participation in education is an important challenge in both Germany and Spain. We discuss the question of participation opportunities at the university level for non-traditional students – a term with which university staff in both countries are unfamiliar. The objective is to present, as an example, the kind of institutional circumstances and conditions that students entering into the university world have to deal with. The experiences of non-traditional students at universities in Germany and Spain in this research opens a window on what happens in the institutional context, exposing the opportunities offered to students today and also the barriers they face. This reveals – implicitly rather than explicitly – the relationship between discursive or education policy statements and specific institutional structural conditions. We ask the question: is it really possible to speak of a social opening at universities? What about putting the appropriate educational and socio-political requirements of university life in place? Can students develop personally through their studies and expand their horizons as they had imagined or as suggested to them by the universities' profiling and marketing strategies? Is it at all in the power of universities to see this target group of students through with their studies in an appropriate manner and/or to nurture them?

### **Germany and Spain: Educational inequalities and challenges in higher education**

In this section we offer some comments about the German and Spanish university contexts, educational inequalities and adult students. The issue of equal opportunities in the education system in Germany arising in the wake of the PISA 2000 study has become a public issue again, this time with even greater intensity. The PISA 2000 results revealed that the relationship between social background and participation in education in hardly any of the other countries studied is as closely linked as it is in Germany. In a 'knowledge society' that regards itself as progressive and consciously looks back on its humanistic-idealistic tradition of education, such a result was regarded as scandalous. In view of the rapidity with which 'PISA shock' became a commonplace word, one can indeed speak of a shock effect. In this process, the marked social selectivity of the German education system – now widely criticised – has been emerging from educational research since the 1960s. Reference is made here only to one interesting contribution by Hillmert and Jacob (2005) as being representative of a whole series of studies which have analysed the self-cumulative selection processes by means of successive transitions in the course of education in the German education system. They postulate 'an almost continuous increase in social inequality over time', which extends to the 'socially different perceptions of 'second-chance' education', i.e. up to the late or adult decisions to pursue further education (Hilmer and Jacob, 2005: 158). In relation to adult students, the figures about access via second- and third-chance are very low in Germany (2.8 per cent in universities, and 7.4 per cent in universities of applied sciences), according to data provided by Wolter (2008).

In Spain there has similarly been a growing concern about educational inequalities at all levels. Intergenerational educational inequality has been reduced in Spain, although it remains very high. Over the last three decades the number of students and universities has increased three-fold. Currently, 30 per cent of



women and 22 per cent of men between 24 and 34 years old have graduated from universities. In spite of the progress made in widening university access, data on the socioeconomic origin of university students show a marked orientation towards families with medium to high incomes, indicating that there is much room for improvement in the area of equity. It is important to stress that there is a high dropout rate in the Spanish compulsory stage of the secondary level, one of the highest of the OECD. Around 30 per cent (in Andalusia, around 40 per cent) of Spanish pupils left compulsory secondary education without official certification. The proportion of young people taking a university course whose parents had no schooling was 9 per cent, whereas this proportion was 65 per cent (seven times greater) for young people whose parents had completed a university degree (Ministry of Education and Science, Spain, 2008). The economic crisis has recently added more negative dimensions to this gloomy landscape. The rate of unemployment in Spain was 25.02 per cent (circa 35 per cent in Andalusia) in 2012. But for those with higher levels of education (a university degree or qualified vocational training) the rate of unemployment was approximately half in comparison to people with a low educational level (pre-primary, primary or secondary education). These data show the added value of education, especially in the current Spanish situation of economic crisis, massive evictions and a decrease of living standards. The situation is especially crucial for young people under 25 years old because in this age group the unemployment rate was 59 per cent in Andalusia in the summer of 2012 (*Instituto Nacional de Estadística*, second trimester 2012).

### Scope of the study and research design

The following theoretical considerations, empirical analyses and results have emerged within the framework of the EU research project 'Access and Retention: Experiences of Non-traditional Learners in Higher Education'. The target group of non-traditional students includes adults, but also first generation students, women in a situation of inequality, workers, people with immigrant origins, and generally students from educationally disadvantaged background conditions (Archer, Hutchings and Ross, 2003; Crosling, Thomas and Heagney, 2008; Johnston, 2009). In this paper we will concentrate on students participating in second-chance education as a study group. In this project we focused on three main sensitising concepts: cultural capital (Bourdieu), recognition (Honneth), and transitional space (Winnicott).

One of the main goals of the project was to compare different national contexts and to offer a European perspective on non-traditional students. The German and Spanish teams decided to work together, comparing our data regarding specific issues of the project. We thought that it would be fruitful to compare both contexts. Spain and Germany are quite different in terms of economy, society, history and education. Nevertheless we have found during the development of this research project that we are dealing in both countries with similar challenges relating to institutional university contexts as well as the profiles and itineraries of non-traditional students.

The two case studies selected (one from each country) are part of a comprehensive sample of approximately 160 non-traditional students, grouped into three main categories (first year, last year, and students who dropped out), who were

interviewed throughout the project period (around 80 students in each country). These students were selected through a questionnaire, email and informal contacts, identifying cases that met two or more criteria of the category 'non-traditional students' (first generation students, low educational and cultural family capital, limited or scarce economic resources, disability, migration and ethnic minorities, mature or adult students, workers, and women with situations of inequality) (Johnston, 2009). The interviews were distributed in roughly equal parts over three different universities in each country. In the German context, these universities, located in three different states, have very different profiles and self-images in terms of their institutional history, the socio-political impetus and their learning culture. In the Spanish setting, the three universities, located in the southern region of Andalusia, are public bodies with strong similarities in terms of institutional and academic dimensions.

We have identified, in the global context of our project, three main clusters regarding students' profiles. The decisive factor for the non-traditional students of the first cluster is the *cultural capital* that these students were endowed with as a biographical resource from their social background. This situation usually makes it easier for the student to be fine-tuned in advance to the university context. For the non-traditional students of the second cluster, *a certain distance or distancing from the home environment and at the same time a positive link to the new institutional and academic context* are deemed decisive factors. This supporting dimension enhances the possibilities of coping with the expectations and routines of university life and of conforming to the academic and institutional way of life. In the third cluster are students with *limited social capital and relatively low cultural capital*. These factors generally produce problematic trajectories in the social space. This third cluster reflects an 'ambivalent habitus', different from the exclusive habitus and the inclusive habitus.

The cases were systematically selected for this paper because they represent a cluster constitutive of a number of other case studies. The case studies within a cluster have certain similarities to each other which can be generalised as cluster-specific categorisations and, at the same time, allow the contrasting and differentiation of the various clusters within a comprehensive conceptual evaluation. The two cases selected for this paper belong to the third cluster and are representative of this profile of students. In both students we find an itinerary with difficult situations regarding family context as well as low cultural capital. Besides this trait, other criteria to select these cases have been as follows: adult students participating in second-chance education; women (although gender is not the focus of the paper); final year students; quantity and richness of narratives about educational and personal itineraries; and variety of social and family contexts.

We have worked with two cases because we can develop in-depth narratives, with the nuances and complexities related to the approach of the RANLHE project. One aspect of our method has been to understand students' perspectives about their university experiences from personal, educational and institutional dimensions. To do this, the case study approach is at the same time productive, pertinent and well-established. Based on the two case studies of non-traditional students presented, it has been possible to throw light on quite different motivations and habitual dispositions, as well as paths into the university and through the courses of study. The two students in the case studies presented below went through such

education paths; and it is just such alternative paths, which are among those that produce epistemologically interesting insights.

As part of our work, we addressed the subjects of access, retention and survival. In addition, the topic of dropout (the abandoning of the course of studies), which is a highly relevant topic for many reasons, has been worked on intensively. Another aspect that has been placed in the foreground because of the interview method selected is the 'pre-history' of the students, which goes as far back as possible – ideally up to their very early memories and, not infrequently, even further back to incidents experienced and communicated by preceding generations. As indicated above, one of the things we would like to show in this paper is how fruitful it can be to shift attention beyond the question of admission to the complex process of students entering into and completing degree programmes.

The interviews are biographical narrative interviews (Wengraf, 2001; Merrill and West, 2009), which are distinguished inter alia by the fact that they are structured largely by the interviewees themselves. After a brief narrative-generating request prompted by the interviewer, the interviewee develops to a large extent the active and independent formulation of his/her own history. Only after this narration, which ideally combines the biography and history of education, does the interviewer once again assume a more active role in the interview interaction and attempt to steer the interview in the direction of certain events or topics which can be explored in greater depth or supplemented, with the intention of generating further narrations by the interviewees. During the third and final part of the interview, the interviewer can then pose questions prepared in advance concerning the focal point of the research. The interviews included narratives on family and social background, school itineraries, access and adaptation to the university, perspectives on teaching and learning in higher education, institutional and social dimensions of university life, and educational and personal identities. The interviews were analysed according to the Grounded Theory method developed by Glaser and Strauss (1998) and the methods of giving and analysing interviews devised by Fritz Schütze (1983, 1984).

### **Experiences of Non-traditional Adult Students: two Case Studies.**

**German case study:** Rosa – *Dealing with the feeling of alienation – 'I've just sneaked into this university and should actually not be here after all'*

In Rosa's case, we obtain an insight into the humanities and social science subjects and the world of student experience. She succeeded in getting into the university via the second-chance route by taking the university entrance-level examination at an institute for advanced studies (*Kolleg*). Practically from the first sentence of her interview narrative, a very clear distancing of this non-traditional student from the milieu of her origins became recognisable. The distancing in Rosa's case was a constantly recurring gesture, which has significantly deeper-rooted emotional, and simultaneously reflexive, components of significance.

At some point in time, Rosa had been told by her mother that her own birth, unlike that of her older sister, was not 'planned', but was an 'accident'. The feeling of being unwanted with which she is confronted right at the beginning, is

discussed even more often later in the narrative in the nuances of the feeling of being not desired, the feeling of both being not recognised and the feeling of being alienated. Her parents only completed primary school and were unskilled workers. Both parents worked in factories, the father until early retirement. The 'cramped conditions' that Rosa speaks of relate to the various apartments in a rural environment in which the family lived on a tight budget, and particularly to the fact that she and her sister had to share a single room for a long period. The distancing, the desire to get away from home itself is underlined by the fact that, during her childhood, Rosa was a 'latch-key kid' who preferred to be with her grandmother, who cared for her and mothered her more than her own mother. At her grandmother's house she not only found emotional security, but also orderly and communicative social structures. Her grandmother took her along to church and she had a certain standing of her own in the village. The existence of the original family appeared in Rosa's presentation to be far beyond her concept of 'normalcy', as each family member ate alone. The relationship with her sister was often tense. The mother, after a day's work, was usually totally exhausted and absent-minded and sat 'with a tired-out look in front of the idiot box, like a zombie'. Neither parent had ever held a driver's licence, the family never went on a holiday; and did not even have a telephone – unlike the grandmother. The concept of 'normalcy' for Rosa arose primarily from the experience of differences in the context of institutional schooling.

The very first class excursion reveals the ambivalence of such experiences: 'It is really great to just get away sometimes, to come out of the corner' but, in the process, Rosa also notices her own otherness in comparison to her classmates, for example with regard to the clothes that she wears. With a Moroccan classmate – who is still her best friend – she got to know a very different culture of dispute. The parents of the Moroccan classmate might have yelled at each other, but their conflicts were at least dealt with openly and were usually ultimately resolved. When she was in the orientation stage (first two years of secondary education), Rosa occasionally became familiar with the relationships in other German families in her village. She concluded that there were significantly more relaxed and more loving relationships between the family members than she was accustomed to at home. In addition, she noticed that the children here 'were highly esteemed', while she herself seemed to be only 'exploited' by her parents (where the children are just 'a part of the game'; 'they must be fed and looked after, hopefully without stressing the parents out').

Her course of education was very multifaceted and a sort of 'sociologization' driven by scientific instrumentation was already detectable in large portions of her narrative. Her narrative crafted in this manner was a painful process of understanding and (self) objectification, which could only take place during her course of studies, in both a therapeutic and a university academic context. Even as a child, Rosa liked reading and writing (she was always well stocked with a lot of books from the mobile library) and liked to read aloud to her classmates at school. Based on the recommendation of a teacher, Rosa had to move after the 6th grade to the general secondary school that her sister was already attending. She herself wanted to go to the intermediate secondary school in the city. Due to her authoritarian thinking, her mother followed the recommendation. After a period of truancy, she was able to get back her interest in her lessons due to the personal

mentoring of a dedicated school teacher and, later, through additional courses, Rosa was able to obtain an intermediate secondary school diploma. With the sole objective of pleasing her mother, she took a training course for paralegals (her sister had already dropped out of six or seven vocational trainings). Rosa passed the final examination at her second attempt, but then did not want to continue working in that profession. After nearly a year of unemployment, she completed a six-month internship as a nurse at a hospital based on the advice of her best friend. Since her applications for an appropriate position were unsuccessful, she worked for a long time as a guard at the hospital; then, after a further two years of training, earned a very good degree in the field of home science and family care. A colleague helped her to come up with the idea that she should go back and get a university qualifying diploma at an institute for advanced studies (*Kolleg*). Now in her mid-twenties, she moved to a bigger city to enter an institute for advanced studies. She shared an apartment for the first time and, more importantly, lived with several students who all came from good homes. Unlike Rosa, who at that time was already receiving a student's grant under the German state aid for education scheme (*BAföG*), her roommates were financed by their parents.

As a rule, it can be stressed that the group constellation of students is particularly advantageous. The students in such an advanced studies group usually have structurally similar educational backgrounds (vocational training, alternative paths leading to the higher education institution, etc.) or even come from similar social backgrounds. Rosa described the institute for advanced studies as 'the best decision in the field of education, the first liberated schooling era'.

It is therefore no wonder that Rosa, after passing the university qualifying examination at the age of 29 moved to another large city to study for a Masters' degree at the university, majoring in a combination of humanities and social sciences. Rosa felt that her situation as a student was unreal, and she related these troubling feelings to her uneducated family. She experienced difficulties in remaining sitting down for ninety minutes in the classroom and finally had several panic attacks. In the latter part of the interview, Rosa related a very specific experience in this connection that took place in a lecture and how she initially tried to deal with the symptoms that had begun to occur. When pressed further for a response, Rosa then confirmed that it often happened that she actually ran out in the middle of a lecture. Not until her third term, as she managed to exchange views with some students (initially) about some technical topics, did she occasionally feel that she belonged to the world of the university. The important thing is that she could imagine these fellow students as individuals and not as an anonymous (and therefore threatening) mob. That way, it became easier for her to give presentations. She acquired such strategies as part of a therapy, which she continued from the second term up to the time of this interview. Friends had advised her to seek help at a psychological counselling centre located near the campus, where she was then referred for therapeutic treatment.

Rosa stressed that a hospital stay had been very helpful for her because there she could exchange views with people, including academics from fields outside of the university, who had overcome similar anxieties. The staging process that came to light here is very revealing, since her path to professional therapy initially proceeded through informal and semi-professional bodies. There are indications that even German students who do not come from traditional families with a

bourgeois approach to academic education have internalised such reservations to a greater extent. The subjective and the class-specific, milieu-specific or culture-specific approach to such support facilities turn out to be very crucial for their effectiveness.

In Rosa's story, such habitual dispositions occurred at various levels with respect to the subject. After all, she indicated that she had to cross a threshold to take advantage of the counselling offered. Thus, she then found – similarly supported by her therapy – an explanation for her recurrently expressed feeling of self-deprecation and her lack of self-esteem. She attributed this to a lack of support within the family, but also cited numerous examples where she did not experience any kind of appreciation from teachers at the different types of schools she had attended. It is striking that Rosa did not address this appreciation or recognition theme with regard to lecturers at the university. In the few situations where she could share her views on her psychological problems with them, they appeared more sympathetic. Her fear and feelings of inferiority had matured long before her studies, but still continued to have the effect of inherited baggage and internal barriers. The sense of alienation was already present during her youth due to the contact with classmates of the same age, who already wanted to go to university. At the university, this feeling set in right from day one. The other students, who appeared to know why they were studying something and who did not question the rules and rituals of the academic world, were alien to her. The spatial arrangements and time constraints made her afraid. But, it was in this institutional academic context that she also found a theoretical-sociological explanatory statement for her alleged personal difficulties. Then, in her fourth and fifth terms she got her first taste of social science research into inequality – a eureka effect, as she called it. In an assignment she succeeds in coming out as a working-class child. At the time of the interview she was busy writing a thesis on the topic of inequality. It should be noted in this regard that there are some non-traditional students in our sample who made research on inequality a significant focus of their studies.

**Spanish case study:** Lorena – *Going beyond the family background – 'It's very commendable to do a university degree'*

Lorena was born in 1963. She has two older sisters (one got her [redacted] and the other has an unspecified disability) and two younger sisters (the [redacted] left high school without finishing their studies). Lorena is married, has two children and lives in a flat in a city in western Andalusia with her younger child and her husband. Her elder son has already left home, although he is now unemployed and Lorena is helping him out financially. Lorena's husband is also out of work. Lorena's parents were born around 1930 and were from a family of humble origin. They lived through the difficult years of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and the post-war period. They had few educational opportunities and soon left school. Like so many other Andalusian families of their time, once some of their children had been born they decided to emigrate to France in the 1960s. The father worked in France as a painter for more than a decade. While the family was there, Lorena's parents had started to build a house in Andalusia. In 1978, Lorena's father left the French paint company where he worked and the family returned to Spain.



For a year, between 1978 and 1979, the whole family lived in the house of Lorena's grandparents, while her father laid the flooring of the new house and finished other work in the home. The severance pay and the aid from the Spanish government for returning emigrants helped the family to finish the house and settle down again in Spain. In 1979 all the family moved to the new house. Lorena's father began to work in Andalusia, doing different temporary jobs. Around 1979, Lorena left high school while she was studying in the second year of the post-compulsory secondary education (at that time there were three years of GCSE studies, after completing eight years of compulsory education). The transition from the French educational system to the Spanish one was an important factor in her dropping out. Lorena had trouble with Spanish spelling and pronunciation was also hard for her, particularly the 'r'. Lorena thinks that she lacked the support of her family when reintegrating into the Spanish educational system at a time when she felt very alone in a high school where she knew nobody. Although Lorena would have liked to study, she dropped out of high school. Lorena's main positive reference in connection with studies was the example of her elder sister, who was very responsible and studious during the GCSE period.

Two years later, in around 1981, Lorena began to go out with the man to whom she then got married. Not long after, she had her first child. This made her focus her efforts on her tasks as a housewife and a mother and, a little later, as a worker. Lorena's efforts were concentrated upon bringing up the children and survival. This prevented her from thinking about studies during the 1980s and 1990s. Her husband, who she has been married to for 28 years, has always worked in the fields – or in the building sector when there is no agricultural work available. He has never had a fixed job.

Lorena's first child was born in 1982 and her second one in 1990. In the 1980s she got a job as a nurses' aid. She has been in this job as an aid and a carer for about 20 years. She nowadays feels burnt out by this work, which mainly consists of washing the elderly and taking care of their basic needs. In the '80s and '90s she had been dedicated to the task of bringing up and taking care of her two children. Her roles as wife, mother, housewife and worker have been significant during these last 25 years. Lorena feels very attached to her family and enjoys spending time with her loved ones: her husband and her children, her parents, her sisters, her nephews and nieces; at times living together in the country plot of land where friends and family tend to come together. In 1998 Lorena's elder child got the high school diploma of compulsory secondary education but did not continue studying. He began as an apprentice in a company and continued working there. Later, he left home and bought a house. In contrast, Lorena's younger son decided to drop out of secondary school without having the compulsory secondary education diploma. Sometime later, the younger son went back to studying, influenced by the attitude of Lorena, who was at that time preparing for the university entrance exams.

In 2004, when she was 41 years old, Lorena began to think about doing the university exam for those over 25. As her children were older, she had more free time. Another important factor in the decision was her search for professional improvement. After about three decades as a carer and a nurses' aid (especially with the elderly), she felt burnt out in her job. One of the important motivations for starting and continuing university studies had to do with the tiredness that

she had experienced in her job and the likely professional promotion that she aspires to once she has finished her social work degree. Lorena prepared for the university entrance exam for the over 25s. In the spring of 2006 she took it and passed. In September 2006 she started the first year of her degree in social work in a public university in western Andalusia. She hesitated between nursing and social work, but finally decided on the latter, which is more compatible with her work as a nurses' aid and a carer of the elderly.

For Lorena, doing the degree meant looking for a bit more quality in her life. For many years she had been a housewife and had a low-qualified job. Now she wants to go beyond that. Starting university studies led to a series of changes in Lorena's life. She has little free time. The lack of time is one of her main difficulties. This has meant reducing her social life; she sees her parents, sisters and other relatives and friends less often and she spends less time with her husband and children. She has had to adapt the last two fortnights of work holidays to the September exam period. During the holidays she has had to cut out some trips with her husband and spend the summer holiday time preparing for the exams. Taking advantage of time is Lorena's university maxim.

Lorena didn't have any knowledge about university life. What Lorena knew about university was limited to what she had seen in films. For her, university was a place people that went to if they wanted to, stressing the ideas of freedom and voluntariness, so contrary to her experience of work obligations. This new academic life meant that she had to deal with important and unprecedented challenges, including ICT. Lorena did not have a computer. When she began to study, she did a short course in computer science and this led her to buying a computer. She felt, and partly still feels, she is not very well-educated from an intellectual and academic point of view. She was, and still is, 'very green', in the sense of lack of knowledge. Like many other students, she has had her biggest academic difficulties with the subject of epistemology, struggling with philosophical and abstract concepts.

During the academic year, Lorena worked on a fixed morning shift from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. in a home for the elderly in a city that is about 90 km from her home. On a working and class day, she spent seven hours working, three hours in classes in the university and three hours travelling by car (she covered about 200 km each working day). It was normal for her to do some tasks on the computer after ten at night. But, as she had to get up at 6 a.m., she often did not get as far with the task as she had planned to do.

Lorena values the classes positively because they help her to understand the subjects of her degree. However, she repeatedly criticises the group work. She considers it to be a waste of time and feels that she does not learn from it. She also criticises the reading of books and monographs because she thinks that in most cases they don't add anything to her professional training. Lorena says that, as she already has extensive professional experience, she knows the practice. Being so short of time, she considers that this reading is not worth much because she has come to get a degree and carry it out.

As Lorena was working in the morning and attending afternoon classes at the university which started at 3.30 p.m., she used to finish her work at 3 p.m. and then had to travel an hour back to her home, where she would have lunch and get ready to go the university. As a result, she tended to arrive an hour and a half

after the classes had started. Sometimes the timetable difficulties were greater. For example, when she did the social work practice workshops in the morning, she was forced to work the afternoon shift (between 3 p.m. and 10 p.m.). So, during the practice workshops she missed all the classes.

Lorena has received strong and sustained support through all her university plans. Her husband feels proud of Lorena's progress and he has adapted well to the changes that her university life has meant. Reciprocally, Lorena is proud of the support that she's receiving from her husband. She says that her husband knows how to let her be, and gives her the time and space that she needs in her period as a university student. At the same time, Lorena considers herself to be persistent, serious and responsible. Assessing herself in the current stage of her university studies, she says that, from one to ten, she's worth twenty at least. At different moments she insists on the importance of taking advantage of her time in the university. She says that she can't lie on the lawn watching the clouds go by, as it is supposed that her younger study colleagues do. In contrast to the young students of her university with whom she at times compares herself, Lorena says that she knows about life and has tools that the younger ones don't have. She also says that she knows the labour market very well, referring specifically to the sector in which she works.

Lorena feels 'very much a mother'; she's got 'the makings of a mother'. She also identifies positively with her role as a housewife. When she thinks of the consequences for her home of her prolonged absence over the last three years, she thinks, before anything else, of her children (she says that her husband knows how to resolve their needs). Here, Lorena includes her 27-year-old son who left home and who lives in his own house. Lorena says that there can be many hours in the day when he needs her and she's not there.

Lorena feels deeply proud of her university plan (the decision to commence university studies, preparing the entrance exam, passing it, starting her studies, the successful progression during the three university academic years). She says that her relatives and neighbours feel very satisfied with her tenacity, dedication and academic success. From Lorena's point of view, the greatest benefits of the university studies are acquiring knowledge; getting to know many people; and rising to the occasion in social, professional and work-related situations in which a better-than-ordinary knowledge is needed. Lorena has a clear idea about her professional perspectives once she has finished the social work degree; she wants to get a post as a social worker through internal promotion in the Ministry of Equality and Welfare in the Andalusian Regional Government where she currently works as a nurses' aid and a carer.

### **Between individual cases and social patterns: Exploring clusters of non-traditional students**

From the two case studies of non-traditional students presented, it is possible to throw light on motivations, habitual dispositions and paths into university and through the course of studies. In this context, attention has been paid to the structural and institutional conditions that open or close opportunities as well as to the great significance of personal trajectories. As indicated previously, the two individual case studies presented here are representative of a particular cluster

of non-traditional learners, namely the cluster characterised by limited or risky social capital and relatively low cultural capital. Specific core categories and factors generated by the analysis of the case studies are constitutive of the individual clusters. The resultant clustering in its turn reveals certain mechanisms and factors, which structure the social space of the possible and the impossible, decisively affecting the path of non-traditional students in and through university. The clusters work from a comparative perspective as they make it possible to establish typologies or shared common patterns beyond individual cases.

On a theoretical-conceptual level, the clustering exposes a 'figuration' (Elias, 1994) in which socially-structured commonalities become transparent and there are various subgroups among these student groups which at a first glance appear to be biographically and socio-culturally heterogeneous. Behind the individual trajectory (in terms of Bourdieu, 1997) in and through social space and into the field of academics and universities, there are – to a certain extent – hidden phenomena and patterns that can be generalised. It may seem to be a methodologically and theoretically dubious undertaking to aim to arrive at conclusions on institutional and structural factors using individual biographical source material on education decisions and paths. These trajectories are related to 'subjective factors' such as dispositions, motivations and interpretations but, at the same time, are influenced by social class, gender, culture, institutional contexts, and local environments. We consider our contribution as an attempt to create links between micro-, mezzo- and macro-sociological levels.

The narratives of the two cases presented in this paper include a broad range of themes such as school experiences, social class, gender, work and unemployment, migration, family networks, social change, personal crises and turning points, all against the backdrop of the trajectories as university students (González-Monteaudo, 2010). There are many points in common between the two narratives, as well as many questions that are different and even opposite. The richness of the narrative material provokes this peculiar situation: on the one hand, unity and shared perspectives about human social life; on the other hand, diversity, difference, idiosyncrasy. However, social and educational inequalities become apparent in the narratives of the two cases. Leaving school early, initiation into work, scarcity of economic resources and the difficulty of combining education and work are topics that illustrate the problems of families that are not part of the socially excluded sectors, but who find college access and the completion of studies difficult.

Lorena and Rosa have experienced a lack of backing, support and recognition, with regard to school and – with differences between the two cases – from their parents. In the two cases, what is always present is the feeling, based on personal and social experiences, of being different, inferior or simply not good enough to legitimately become part of the university institution. Despite all the barriers and difficulties, these two students have nevertheless managed to reconstruct their learning identities, overcoming the risks of dropping out at university level.

Based on the question raised about the chances of participation of non-traditional students in the cosmos of the university, some general considerations are cited here in conclusion. In the study procedure outlined, reference is made to the educational and life stories of these students, dating as far back as their first memories and, indeed, frequently even further back to their pre-histories. The

procedure is based on the information they were endowed with from their parents and grandparents and enables a deeper insight into the complex processes of development and education, and into the range of possibilities of these unconventional students. The biographical interview formed the basis for the insights acquired.

Biographical-narrative interviews are a useful resource for collecting the voices and perspectives of the social actors in different areas (González-Monteaudo, 2010) as these narratives illustrate. The interviews had an open approach and this allowed the collection of the evolution of students throughout their life cycle, from a subjective perspective as well as taking into account agency, structure, and history. We need to make these voices and testimonies from non-traditional students visible. This was one of the main objectives of the RANLHE project, which had implications both for research and in the proposal of educational policies that are more flexible and adapted to the plurality and diversity of different students' profiles. That said, the narratives derived from open interviews offer a perspective that goes beyond the factual, measurable, perspectives of statistics and quantitative research.

Although Rosa and Lorena have to bear a considerably heavier inherited social and biographical burden, they developed specific strategies which enabled them to enter into the sphere of the university – a sphere that was largely alien to them. The support of friends, acquaintances and sometimes even interested and committed teachers was essential for their progress. Conceptualised theoretically, such support can be called social capital (Field, 2009) that extends the resources from the original milieu, which is frequently present in a meagre or insignificant degree. Not infrequently, the integration into a specific social context of origin makes the range of possibilities initially appear limited. It is not only by ambitions that a symbolically highly-charged field like university can be penetrated – as the actors have been shown to feel again and again. The non-traditional students cannot be satisfied with the editing and processing methods supported by the institution, by means of which causalities are actually individualised or attributed to the individual. They feel, or know, that there are other structural reasons for the fact that their arrival at, and participation in, the university world will not succeed.

This discussion needs to be located in relation to the two countries mentioned here as, besides the specificity of the two cases, we also deal with the singularity of the two countries. Spain and Germany have quite different historic and institutional characteristics with regard to higher education. The German system has traditionally been more selective and this is more understandable when we look at the differences between Spain and Germany in terms of the structure of the secondary education and academic selection. Thus, in Germany what is important are the barriers shown in the university admission process, in the often-distinctive elitist habits of the institution representatives or in the more stringent rules established by the new degree programmes. Identifying their expression represents the final link in a chain of symbolic rejection signals. Right at this provisionally final stage of education (university), it is vitally important to reveal the sympathetic and nurturing characters that can be found. As gatekeepers, it is primarily the lecturers who are the decisive instances for the students and they in turn are attached to a structuring institutional whole, which transmits opening and closing signals for dealing with students (Ariño, Hernández, Llopis, Navarro and Tejerina, 2008).

If the institutional representatives and the educational policymakers deal with the contingencies of biographical development (i.e. the development in relation to family, school, vocation and university), this could be very helpful for the target group under review here, in order to provide new impetus for a social opening.

The narratives collected in the RANLHE project reflect clearly the personal, social and economic benefits of being a student and completing a university degree. In this context, the voices of non-traditional students may teach us a lot, on condition that we – researchers, lecturers, policy-makers, and so on – are able to listen, understand and communicate that which is to be said.

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