LISTENING TO THE STUDENT VOICE – STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN PROFESSIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

The practical orientated education and training of professional higher education institutions attract a very diverse student body and more and more non-traditional students are finding their way to higher education institutions in Europe. In order to sufficiently address the different needs of this group, non-traditional students must be given opportunities for student engagement in student organisations and extracurricular activities outside of lectures. Furthermore, the diversity characteristics of non-traditional students within professional higher education institutions need to be analysed, as well as the barriers and challenges to student engagement. With the help of qualitative expert interviews and focus groups, five problem areas were defined and an outlook on possible improvements was given in order to sharpen the view of an inclusive university environment outside of the lecture hall.

Introduction

For years, more and more students have been entering universities and colleges, and the diversity of the student body has increased along with the number of students (Ehlers 2020). Since the academic landscape is very broad, this paper will take a closer look on the so-called Professional Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs). PHEIs focus more on practical experience and can be defined as a "form of higher education that offers a particularly intense integration with the world of work in all its aspects, including teaching, learning, research and governance" (Camilleri et al., 2014; p.24). The PHEI attract a very heterogeneous and non-traditional group of students which are both academically versed and practically interested. For example, adult students, lifelong learners, parent students, students from a migrant background, students with a disability, etc. are enrolled in these institutions (Kramer et al., 2011). In order to respond proactively to this increasing diversity, student engagement is an important tool for PHEIs to create an inclusive higher education institution for non-traditional students and engage them in all aspects of their studies. Student engagement is a multi-layered concept, which in the

current debates on inclusion is mainly discussed in the teaching context. When talking about inclusion in the field of student engagement, student engagement in extracurricular student organisations is often overlooked. Yet, student organisations, such as student representation, are increasingly involved in structural decision-making processes within the PHEI and enable a shared creation process of the institution between PHEI leaders and students. If non-traditional students are not sufficiently represented in these student organisations, it is likely that also their opinions will not be represented and their needs will not be reflected in the structures of the PHEIs.

Therefore, non-traditional students 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. To achieve this goal, the barriers and challenges regarding student engagement of non-traditional students need to be identified. In this context, this paper addresses two questions:

- What are characteristics of non-traditional students in PHE?
- What barriers and challenges do non-traditional students face particularly in the area of engagement within student organisations?

Non-traditional students and diversity management

Universities are increasingly confronted with growing societal challenges; for example, the demographic change is reflected in a more diverse composition of the student body. In addition, higher education institutions, as socio-political actors, cannot escape current trends and must therefore also react to numerous demands, whether it be the increasing demand for performance, growing international mobility or the desire to be able to reconcile family and education (Nibuhr et al., 2012). With the Bologna Process, the general wish of the EU countries was expressed that "(t)he student body entering and graduating from higher education institutions should reflect the diversity of Europe's populations" (Bologna Process 2018). This new group of diverse students, who are increasingly entering higher education institutions, are also called non-traditional students.

The term non-traditional student can be used to describe all students who, for social, economic, physical or cultural reasons, did not have or have only very limited access to higher education in comparison to other students, the so-called traditional students. Basically, the term non-traditional student refers to groups of students who form a minority in the student body. And as the student body changes, so does the interpretation of the definition of non-traditional students. 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 et al., 2002).

In order for higher education institutions to embrace this change and meet the complex needs of the growing and increasingly diverse student body, both structural and cultural adjustments need to be made. The keyword for facing these changes is diversity management. In this understanding, diversity management is a well-founded socio-political demand for social participation of all individuals and an economic necessity to utilize the diverse potentials available in society. When managing diversity, the different diversity characteristics must be considered, for example person-related aspects such as age, gender, ethnicity, etc., behaviour-related aspects such as attitudes to thinking, communication and working styles or learning behaviour and strategies. Behavioural aspects differ between individuals and do not automatically derive from certain personal characteristics (Nibuhr et al., 2012).

The Diversity Wheel (see Figure 1) by Lee Gardenswartz and Anita Rowe, based on the work of Marilyn Loden and Judy Rosener provides a good overview of different diversity characteristics. The characteristics are divided into four dimensions. Firstly, personality, which describes the general behaviour of a person and their way of interaction with others. Secondly, the internal dimension with characteristics such as age, gender or mental and physical abilities or social background. The individual cannot self-select or control these characteristics. Thirdly the external dimension includes characteristics such as place of residence, marital status or education; these characteristics are therefore not innate, but rather the results of life events and decisions made. And lastly, the organizational dimension, it includes elements that are dependent on positioning in the world of work (Loden et al., 1991; Gardenswartz et al., 2003). This paper focuses on the internal and external dimensions of diversity.
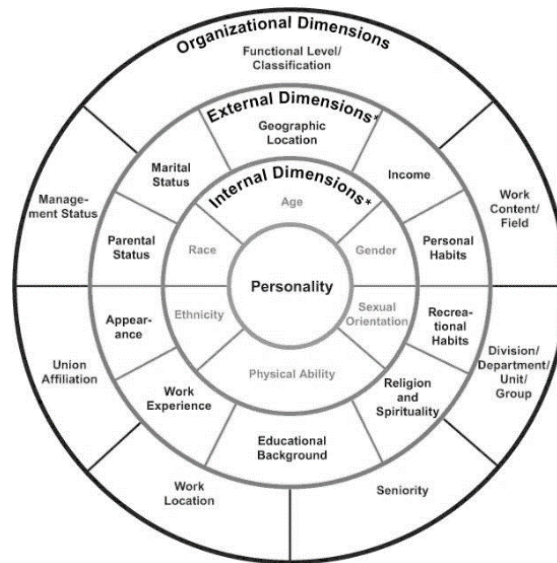
Figure 1. Diversity Wheel (Loden et al., 1991; Gardenswartz et al., 2003)

Student engagement

A diverse student body holds the challenge for PHEIs to create opportunities to include all students in the structural and cultural development and design of the institution and to represent their opinions and needs. This involvement can be strengthened by supporting inclusive access to engagement opportunities to ensure a perspective-rich development and design processes between higher education institutions and students. (National Student Engagement Programme, 2020)

So far, the topic of student engagement has mainly gained attention in teaching, but this official form of student engagement is only one part of the student experience. Ashwin et al. defines student engagement in terms of what is "formed" by students, distinguishing between "formation of understanding" which refers to the individual engagement of students in lectures to produce learning outcomes, "formation of curricula" which focuses more on changing course content, and "formation of communities" which concentrates on the opportunities for students to build networks e.g. in form of student organisations, to change the institution and its structures in a sustainable way (Ashwin et al., 2015). This paper refers to the last form of student engagement.

Student organisations are thematic or political associations of students who come together in groups outside their lectures. Student engagement is hereby linked to participation and means the involvement of students in activities that shape processes within their environment. Participation within organisations such as the PHEI means that students can express their opinions and get involved for example in university committees (Ditzel et al., 2013). Especially through the Bologna Process, these organisations have gained importance and contribute to quality assurance within the institutions. (Higher Education Authority, 2016; p.VIII) Student organisations not only give participants a sense of

thematic belonging, but can also provide a social support network for students and thus strengthen the bond with the institution. Furthermore, as Rosch et al. explain, student organisations give students the opportunity to increase self-awareness and develop leadership qualities, as these organisations often represent different roles and structures that can also be found in the professional working world (Rosch et al., 2017). Hence, student organisations also offer good preparation for the professional world it is even more important for non-traditional students to have the opportunity to participate in these extracurricular activities.

Research Methodology

In order to identify the different characteristics of non-traditional students and to expose barriers in relation to the student engagement opportunity, a qualitative expert survey was conducted. In a further step the results were complemented by the results of four focus groups.

Six institutes from Germany, Croatia, Belgium, Spain and Malta participated in the research process. Four of the six institutes are PHEIs and the other 2 are research institutes with a research focus on higher education. All these countries are members of the EU and can therefore be regarded as a relatively homogeneous group, although country-specific differences are to be expected. Nevertheless, the results should not be regarded as a global standard. The qualitative expert survey contained questions on 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 institute or from broader society.

The following results are based on a qualitative expert survey conducted in written form between 24.02.21 and 29.03.21. 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 were conducted by the PHEIs in Malta, Spain, Belgium and Germany. As part of the research project, the opinions of 28 experts, student representatives and non-traditional students were collected and analysed through semi-structured focus groups. Similar to the expert surveys, the online focus groups had the four topic areas: Dimensions and characteristics of non-traditional students, student engagement opportunities, participation barriers and good practices. In order to be able to compare the results more effectively, a semi-structured focus group guideline was provided, which contained a variety of questions on the individual topic areas. 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 organisation or have a professional background as a student-support staff or PHE institutional leader. Table 1 provides an overview of the interview partners (IP), their position and area of experience and their countries.

Table 1:   Overview of focus group participants

IP	Position / Area of experience	Country
	1. Focus group	
1	Non-traditional student	Malta
2	Non-traditional student	Malta
3	Non-traditional student	Malta
4	Non-traditional student	Malta
5	Student Support Coordinator	Malta
6	Social Worker and Chaplain	Malta
7	Student Mentor and Part-time Lecturer	Malta
8	Director Outreach Services and Students' Affairs	Malta
	2. Focus group	
9	Student representative	Spain
10	Non-traditional student	Spain
11	Academic Coordinator	Spain
12	Coordinator of University-Business Relations	Spain
13	Member of the Student Council	Spain
14	Dean of the School of Engineering	Spain
15	Non-traditional student	Spain
	3. Focus group	
16	Head of Education and Students Affairs	Belgium
17	Student Support Staff	Belgium
18	Student representative	Belgium
19	Non-traditional students	Belgium
20	Non-traditional students	Belgium
21	Non-traditional students	Belgium
	4. Focus group	
22	Head of Student Counselling and University Communication	Germany
23	Head of the Psychotherapeutic Student Counselling Centre	Germany
24	Representative for students with disabilities and chronic illnesses	Germany
25	Management of the research project on the course of studies	Germany
26	Researcher in the research project on the course of studies	Germany
27	Chairman of the General Students' Committee	Germany
28	Student representative	Germany

Finally, the written expert surveys and focus group reports were analysed and different characteristics for non-traditional students were collected, clustered and then assigned to the different diversity dimensions. Furthermore, the various barriers for non-traditional students with a focus on student engagement were identified and grouped into overarching problem areas.

Diversity characteristics and barriers of non-traditional students

Broken down by internal and external diversity characteristics (see Figure 2), the following student groups were primarily mentioned with characteristics of internal diversity dimension: Students with physical, mental impairments or learning difficulties, gender identity and sexuality, adult students, students with a migrant/multicultural background, women in STEM degree programmes.

External diversity characteristics of non-traditional students could be found in the following groups: first-generation students and the socio-economic background of the parental home, working students, non-traditional previous education, re-entry students, students with caring responsibilities or family burden and international students.

A student may possess several of these characteristics and some additional challenges also arise from the mix of several diversity characteristics.
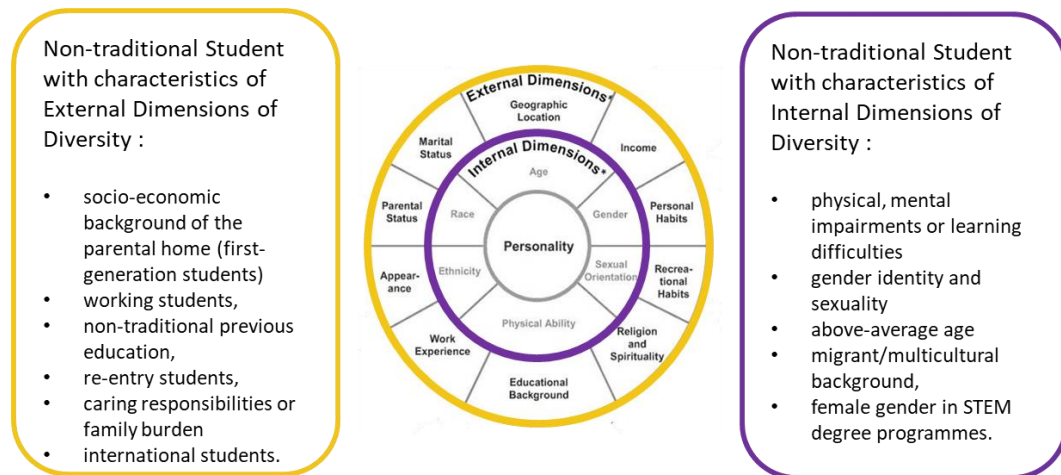

Figure 2. Characteristics of external and internal diversity dimensions of non-traditional students

During the course of the analysis, it became apparent that many of the non-traditional students are confronted with similar problems when it comes to student engagement within student organisations. Five overarching problem areas could be identified: Time problem, visibility problem, identification problem, image problem, accessibility problem.

The *time problem* is common to all groups of students, but is greatest for students who have less time due to the characteristics of the external dimension, such as other part-time jobs or caretaking responsibilities. Especially students who finance their studies themselves already have to balance time and financial resources. As involvement in study organisations often implies a certain time commitment, they are often unable to dedicate additional time resources beyond their study and work commitments. Another concern of students is that the time spend for the engagement student organisations is not compatible with the workload of their studies and thus leads to poorer academic performance. Such a

development is particularly harmful for students who finance their studies with a scholarship or foreign students whose visa validity is linked to the completion of their studies. Typical PHEI characteristics, such as the many practical phases and the shorter and limited time on campus, are also cited by some students as reasons discouraging involvement in student organisations.

The *visibility problem* describes the lack of information about student organisations. This mainly revolves around uncertainty regarding the roles and processes within student organisations. Some students do not know what tasks are expected of them and whether they are up to the challenge. Another problem is that some students do not know what the various student organisations at their institution are actually doing, because the results, especially of political initiatives, are often not directly visible.

This also leads to the next problem area, the *identification problem.* Some students, especially those who are not sufficiently represented in student organisations, cannot easily identify with the mission of these groups. Some miss the connection to their own lives and challenges. Furthermore, stereotypes of traditional students are often still used in advertising materials and convey a false message of what kind of members are welcome.

The *image problem* describes a cultural problem that student organisations face. They are partly perceived by other students as popularity contests and as exclusive clubs with special election and selection processes. Furthermore, student organisations are still associated with a strong drinking culture. If the assumption is that the cohesion in these groups can only be strengthened through drinking and partying, for some students this cannot be reconciled with their responsibilities or their cultural background.

The last problem especially concerns students with characteristics from the internal dimension. This pertains to the *accessibility problem*, which mainly affects students with language barriers or mobility difficulties due to disabilities. They have problems physically participating in the activities of student organisations.

Outlook and Conclusion

In addition to the barriers and challenges, the experts also provided existing solutions from their institutes or countries, as well as other potential ideas. The different best practice approaches can be categorised according to the previously identified problem areas. Although target group-specific measures are necessary in some cases, they also bear the danger of assigning students to rigid categories and drawing conclusions about supposed deficits that have no evidence in detail (Nibuhr et al., 2012). The following potential solutions have been briefly listed, but will not be elaborated on as they are not the focus of this research.

Time problem: To solve the time commitment problem, there are possibilities to offer short-term engagement, which refers to short-term thematic projects that students can participate in, but which do not involve a regular time commitment. Furthermore, some universities offer the possibility to include student engagement as an elective module in the course of studies, so that students receive ECTs for their work in student organisations and do not have to decide between study effort and engagement. Another form of compensation would be through financial support for students, which also blurs the line between members in student organisations and student assistants in the university. For students with children, the model of university-owned day-care centres or childcare can also be a great time-saver and thus an opportunity to participate in student organisations.

Visibility problem: Another problem mentioned was the lack of visibility of results and information about tasks, roles and processes within student organisations. PHEI have introduced various measures to give more visibility and recognition to student organisations through student engagement awards or by publishing more success stories of student organisations within the institution but also externally, such as through press releases. In addition, it is important for student organisations to directly contact and target non-traditional students.

Identification problem: In order to counteract the identification problem of non-traditional students, attempts are being made to systematically create more space and visibility for diversity topics within universities. This is done, for example, through awareness-raising campaigns with regard to domestic violence, usage of gender-neutral language, questioning norms of who is represented on PR material and quotas in committees (e.g. for women) to enable a more diverse representation of the student body. Buddy programmes within student organisations can also provide non-traditional students with a sense of belonging.

Image problem: Another problem affecting the student organisations themselves is that student organisations are still perceived as exclusive clubs or associated with a strong drinking or hazing culture. On the one hand, some PHEI have already established initiatives within student organisations to address these issues, such as anti-discrimination and equality chapters in student organisations in order to monitor and consult. On the other hand, external committees of non-traditional students have been formed to write inclusion guidelines for student organisations.

Accessibility problem: Some institutes see emerging opportunities in digital access for students, which has also seen an upsurge due to the Corona pandemic. Digital participation opportunities can give students with limited mobility a more flexible option to participate in student organisations.

A central aspect with regard to the limitations of this research work is the size of the present sample. In order to make a representative analysis of the characteristics and barriers for non-traditional students in PHEI, multiple institutions from several countries need to participate in the expert survey and in the focus groups. Another point to consider in this context is that the knowledge gained about barriers to student engagement is also influenced by the current Corona pandemic. In the present research findings, barriers to student engagement activities that normally take place in presence were investigated. Student engagement opportunities have had to be severely curtailed in the last 18 months and therefore play a minor role in the everyday life of the students. First-year students in particular are less aware of the various extracurricular activities available than they would have been in non-Corona times. As a result, the perception of participation options and barriers e.g. the visibility and accessibility can be biased.

In summary, it can be said that the higher education landscape in Europe is becoming more diverse, but the institutions themselves have not yet sufficiently addressed the needs of non-traditional students. Student organisations provide a good social network for non-traditional students but are still often left out of conversations about inclusion. Studying needs to be seen as a holistic experience in students' lives rather than just a preparation for the world of work. To accommodate its more diverse student body, institutes and student organisations need to make structural and cultural changes to truly represent the needs of all students. This is not about fitting non-traditional students into an existing system, but creating a new system together with all students.

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Acknowledgement