

## Type of contribution Paper or Poster or both

Paper

## Title of proposal

Dropout of non-traditional students – a matter of failed transition?

## Information on how the contribution is related to the conference theme (up to 50 words)

The paper aims to increase our knowledge about the obstacles non-traditional students face during the critical phase of transition to university

## Authors(s) of proposal including affiliations and email addresses

Erna Nairz-Wirth (presenter) is associate professor and head of the Educational Sciences Group at Vienna University of Economics and Business. She is specialized in the field of education and inequality. She has designed and conducted research on educational pathways, dropout in education; habitus and professionalism.

## 3 – 5 keywords:

Dropout; non-traditional students; transition; Bourdieu

## General description on research questions, objectives and theoretical framework

The aim of the presentation (article) is to offer a qualitative analysis of the phenomenon of dropping-out of university, based on the actual experiences of non-traditional students during their first year at university. The paper tries to bring underlying social structures to surface and shows that obstacles during first year of study (transition phase) are complex and cannot be captured by statistics alone. It will also be demonstrated that dropping out is a process that can be more fully understood from a Bourdieusian perspective because of its relational paradigm and the fruitful concepts of social, economic, cultural and symbolic capital, habitus, field for research on educational pathways.

Based on both the general findings and a detailed case study analysis, the presentation will end with some suggestions as to how to reduce the obstacles non-traditional students face when entering the field of university.

## Methods/methodology (up to 400 words)

The empirical study presented in the paper is based on problem-centred interviews with non-traditional students who dropped out of universities in Austria. The dropouts were selected using the qualitative methodology developed in constructivist grounded theory.

The 16 interviews, which were conducted in 2014 and 2017, provide insights into the hidden mechanisms that may activate the process of dropping-out, eg. when habitus discrepancies and unfavourable habitus-field relations for non-traditional students occur. The interpretation of the interviews was guided primarily by Bourdieusian theory, but sufficient care was also taken to ensure that the process was not only deductive but also inductive, thus avoiding any mono-theoretical reductionism.

Following a general overview of the wide variety of challenges facing non-traditional students

in the university field, a detailed analysis of selected cases will be presented around three principal themes, namely:

- differences between school habitus and university habitus;
- indirect influence of social/family background on final decision to leave university;
- lack of information, support and social capital.

### Expected outcomes/results (up to 300 words)

The analysis of the qualitative data allows to identify specific experiences, mechanisms and underlying social structures of dropout – and understanding these is a prerequisite for developing targeted countermeasures. The study thus seizes upon on a trend in dropout research that is already commonplace in the school sector and extends this trend to the field of higher education: a heightened recognition of the relevance of ‘soft’ factors, including relationships, pedagogy, trust, emotional security and sense of belonging.

In particular, the results show that the interplay and conflicts between central parts of a non-traditional student’s habitus and an ‘academic’ university habitus can lead to growing fears of failure, stronger feelings of not fitting in to the university field and, ultimately, an unsuccessful transition into higher education.

### Intent of publication

Maybe

### References

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