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**Abstract**

The dramatic growth in student numbers associated with the shift from elite to mass systems across virtually all developed countries is central to current transformations in terms of structure, purpose, social and economic role of higher education. As a part of this process of expansion and heterogenization, new groups of students who, for a complex range of social, economic and cultural reasons were traditionally excluded from or under-represented in higher education, might be expected to participate in increasing numbers. The paper develops the concept of non-traditional learners and demonstrates how an examination of ways in which higher education systems respond to such learners can provide a fruitful basis for a comparative analysis of change in higher education across

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ten countries ? Austria, Australia, Canada, Germany, Ireland, Japan, New Zealand, Sweden, United Kingdom, and the United States. The primary emphasis in the study was on the institutional and policy issues which appeared to either inhibit or support participation by non-traditional learners. On this basis six factors were identified which seemed to be particularly influential with regard to the participation of non-traditional students and the associated moves towards a lifelong learning mode of higher education. The evidence suggests that, while progress can be reported on a number of dimensions in comparison with a similar analysis of participation by adults students in the same countries undertaken just over a decade earlier, high participation rates do not automatically imply that the functions of higher education in social selection and reproduction are obsolete, or that issues of access and equity can be regarded as features of the past. (HRK / Abstract übernommen)