

## **Social Networks and Benefits of Learning of Non-Traditional Adult Students.**

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### **Introduction**

Universities across Europe are communities which are largely elite and the preserve of middle class younger students. In recent years widening participation and access policies under the umbrella of lifelong learning have enabled some adults to enter higher education although more so in some European countries and institutions than others. For non-traditional adult students the hurdles and struggles of entering and learning in higher education can be hard and risky but the process of learning can also be beneficial to the self, family and community. The aim of this paper is to discuss the benefits of learning, the development of social networks and social participation of non-traditional adult students in higher education. This paper emerges from a European EC Lifelong Learning project (2008-2010) entitled ‘*Access and Retention: Experiences of Non-traditional Learners in Higher Education*’ (RANLHE)<sup>1</sup>. The project focuses on issues of widening participation and the provision of fair access to higher education to under-represented and excluded groups as well as looking at what keeps non-traditional adult students going on and completing or not (Thomas & Quinn, 2007; Crosling, Thomas & Heagney, 2008; Merrill, 1999; Merrill & González Monteagudo, 2010; West, 1996; Nizinska, 2009).

Seven countries and eight partners are involved in the project: Sweden, Germany, England, Scotland, Ireland, Poland and Spain. Our research approach centres on the use of biographical interviews in a framework which takes into account national, cultural and institutional contexts. In the context of our research non-traditional adult students refers to the following categories: first generation students; working class women and men; students on low incomes; single parents; minority ethnic groups; students with disabilities (Johnston, 2009). This paper will focus particularly on questions regarding the benefits of learning in relation to self, access to the labour market and social participation. One of the objectives of the RANLHE project consists in assessing the benefits for self, community and society of participating in learning in higher education.

Since the Dearing Report (1997) the value of widening participation in higher education has been stressed in relation to the social and economic benefits for individuals, communities and nations. Besides the instrumental benefits of earning more or getting a better job, participation in higher education can contribute to personal development,

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identity and social issues such as improvement of familial and community life (Archer, 2003). Research has largely focused on access and experiences of learning and it is only in the last few years that systematic research has been developed in order to gain “a clearer understanding of how learning affects people’s life, especially in the positive sense of generating individual and collective benefits” (Schuller, in Schuller, T.; Preston, J.; Hammond; Brassett-Grundy, A. & Binner: 2004, 4). This research is based on the concepts of human capital, identity capital and social capital (Schuller, Preston, Hammond, Brassett-Grundy & Bynner, 2004; Field, 2009).

### **A Changing Higher Education?**

Universities are changing, albeit slowly, as they respond to the impact of globalisation and the knowledge society. These processes have undermined their ivory tower image so that they are no longer the sole preserve of knowledge (Delanty, 2001). As Barnett (2003) asserts universities now have to engage and connect with the wider society which is opening up institutions to more humanistic value systems: ‘the spaces that are opening for the university to take on new value systems are also opening spaces for a leadership that deliberately attends to communicative and community values and for values in which individuals matter’ (Barnett, 2003: 129 -130). However, while universities may be opening up their doors to allow some adult students in the symbolic and intellectual cultures of universities remain significantly different to the culture and communities from which non-traditional adult students come from. Institutional, structural and cultural differences, and sometimes barriers, have to be overcome if they are to develop a learning identity and succeed in higher education as working class adult students arrive with different social and cultural capitals, in Bourdieu’s terms, than the university and younger middle class students.

Economic structural factors sometimes tend to be marginalized, emphasizing the role of institutional and cultural factors. Nevertheless it is necessary to pay more attention to economic factors which influence academic success, completion and dropout. The family income available, the national and regional economic structure, the labour market and the possibilities of employment are important traits. The current economic crisis seems to have a double and paradoxical influence on university studies. On the one hand, degrees are not considered as a necessary requirement to access to employment or to progress in the labour market. In the current context of high unemployment, degrees are not a guarantee to access to the labour market and to stay in it (Quinn, 2004, 68, for example, refers to the decline of traditional industries, the limitation of working opportunities and the lack of an apparent transition from the university degree to the local labour market). On the other hand, the increasing of unemployment and the decreasing of possibilities for accessing to a job by young people are raising the interest towards HE as a path to improve employability and a useful resource while the economic situation makes better.

The impact of social class in relation to university students (learning careers, identity, drop-out, specific difficulties, institutional habitus) remains in many occasions hidden. The social class is considered as an important dimension to analyze primary and secondary teaching. Nevertheless, in HE class tend to be ignored or marginalized as a perspective of analysis. Many academics do not perceive social class as an important issue. It is supposed that, after having accessed the university, there is equality among students, regardless their social or family backgrounds. In this case, there only seem have an interest towards the fact that students with less economic resources have

available grants and financial support. This issue seems to be very relevant for our project (on class and class debates, see: Crompton, 2008).

### **Stories From the UK**

Social class remains a dominant aspect of UK society despite the fact that with the influence of postmodernism some sociologists (Pahl, 1989) tried to lessen its importance. The tide is now turning and sociologists such as Skeggs, 1997, Savage, 2000, Devine et al, 2005, have brought it back onto the academic agenda. Beverly Skeggs in her research on working class women studying at a further education college (a post compulsory institution) stresses the reality of class in everyday lives: 'To abandon class as a theoretical tool does not mean that it does not exist any more; only that some theorists do not value it...Retreatists either ignore class or argue that class is 'an increasingly redundant issue'' (1997: 6-7). The participants in the RANLHE project interviewed at the University of Warwick all described themselves as working class. Many of them were women and some of them single parents. A small number came from minority ethnic backgrounds including asylum seekers from Afghanistan and Zimbabwe.

For the women issues of class intersected with issues of gender and so experiencing inequalities of both class and gender in society. Biographical research, as feminists such as Reinharz (1992) and others state is important for highlighting the lives and voices of women previously ignored by 'malestream' sociology. As Jane Thompson asserts stories are:

a way of exercising critical consciousness and of producing knowledge from the inside about gender, class and education, deriving from personal, particular and shared experience. Not in the pursuit of ultimate truth but in the search for greater, more nuanced, understanding (2000: 6).

Although life history research is often used to examine individual lives it can also provide a useful tool for identifying the collectivities in the lives of adult students:

Biographical research may at first sight appear to be too individualistic an approach for engaging with class and adult learning as biographies are largely analysed as an individualistic way of understanding the social world. Yet in constructing a biography a person relates to significant others and social contexts: a biography is, therefore, never fully individual (Merrill, 2007: 71).

The biographies of the non-traditional adult students in this study reveal the commonalities of class and gender, for example in their experiences of initial schooling, family life, the labour market and learning in higher education. Biographies also highlight the interaction between structure and agency in shaping a learner identity. While class and gender had shaped and continues to shape their lives they were also able to use their agency to change their lives in some way.

All participants are clear about the benefits of studying for a degree in relation to the self, their children, the labour market and social participation. However, sometimes the benefits also came at a cost in relation to relationships with family and friends as they

were seen as having distanced themselves from their class background. Other costs included financial ones while studying and stress and health issues.

### **Identifying Benefits to the Self**

Although some participants disliked initial schooling for various reasons others enjoyed it and had wanted to stay on at school after the compulsory leaving age but because of their class and gender they were expected to leave at the earliest possible age and work to bring in a wage. Studying for a degree was viewed by this group as an opportunity to 'complete their education' – something they had always wanted to do. Paula reflected on her school experiences in class terms:

...it wasn't until later that I felt quite resentful about the experience I had at school...I just feel there was a lot of potential that I had that was totally wasted because assumptions were made about me. Too young at the time to know but I do feel it came back to my background and my family and where I lived and that influenced how they treated me and that's why college never got mentioned...I think the system could have done more for me.

Engaging in education often involves the complex interaction of several factors. An important motive, especially for women returning to education, was the need for self-development, wanting something better in life and something more than being a mother, wife and carer. Education was also viewed as means of getting out of poverty and improving the lives of themselves, and in the case of single parents, their children. From time to time some stated that they nearly left the degree programme as they were struggling with coping with the different commitments in their lives and academic study in an elite middle class institution. However, the word determination was used by many as a means of keeping them going as they wanted a different life and did not want to go back to being what they were before they started the degree. Julie expressed her thoughts on this in the following way:

I never actually thought I'd make it to the end, so, each year that went by was quite a shock because I'd got through another year but I was determined to make things different for myself and for my son, so again this goes back to a personal side, that, I'd realised through all the reflective work that we'd done - I'd realised that I couldn't really make any changes in my personal life unless I really, really changed. What I was learning and how I was learning and what academic qualifications I was getting. It is determination that I wanted to change things and make a difference and be able to support us financially and move out of the neighbourhood that I was in too. I just thought I can't afford to drop out now because I'll have nothing to show for it but I will have lots of student debts.

All participants, women and men, stated that they had changed as a person as other studies have illustrated (West, 1996, Merrill, 1999). Gaining in confidence was the most common change mentioned even though many had not felt confident as an undergraduate student studying with confident young middle class students.

Yes definitely although I still question myself a lot, I still worry about lots of things and I sometimes don't feel as confident as I should, it's nowhere near how I was five years ago. I've gained tremendously in confidence, being able to talk to people and not worrying so much if I get something wrong and take part in meetings. I don't feel threatened or nervous to open my mouth. (Julie)

Sarah explained:

Yeah, I've changed for the better. I'm not as argumentative – you know the world's not out to get me. I'm not bitter and twisted any more. I listen more and I understand that you need facts to back up your argument. ...I can criticise the system because I know a lot of the shortfalls through my path – form filling for one of them, means testing. But I can challenge people who say 'ooh these people who sit around on benefits they're laughing – they don't want to work'. Well it's blooming hard to claim benefits let alone live off them so I do – it's made me challenge people. I've felt that before I didn't but I've actually gained the confidence. I know a bit more about it and speaking to people, speaking to strange people, being in strange places, coming out of my comfort zone I'm a lot better.

Some women became more aware of their gendered position in the family. This occasionally leads to divorce as in the case of Val whose husband left her because he thought she had changed:

Well I think I used to argue the point a bit and sort of stand up for myself. I think that's what he meant. Because I was under confident and I think I just became more assertive, perhaps not always outside but in my home. I was more assertive and had more of a say in what was going on and I could argue my point. Maybe he found that hard that I had always got something to say to him whereas before I might have accepted what he said you know. I've become more confident. I can think things through. I can think there's always a reason why something, you know why, there's always two sides to everything. I think that's what used to annoy my husband, because I could see both sides.

Becoming more knowledgeable and interested in social and political issues was also frequently cited as a benefit to the self.

### **Thinking About the Labour Market**

In the initial stages of their degree studies many of the working class women do not think about the benefits of studying in relation to the labour market as their prime motive is for self-development as described above. As they progress with their studies they realise that there is the potential to obtain a new and better job than they had previously or as they have now if they are part-time students. Those that do think about labour market benefits are often single parents living on deprived council (social housing estates) as they want to move out of poverty, live somewhere better and safe for their children so this means using a degree to get a better a job. But their motives are not solely economic as they are also interested in gaining knowledge and self-development.

Sometimes wanting to do a degree and get a 'better' job distances them from their working class background. As Michelle explains her mother, brothers and sisters said to

her: 'What's the point? What do you wanna do that for? Who do you think you are? That's not gonna get you a job...They can't understand why you'd go to university unless you wanted to be a teacher'.

Jane studied part-time while working for a Foundation Degree in Community Development (level 1 and 2 of a degree which combines academic and vocational learning) and then continued with her studies at honours level in Social Studies. She worked at a community centre which focuses on family learning. Like several adult students she did not change her job area but gained promotion as a result of doing a degree course. 'The course has taken me off into different areas. I've sort of come back to working with children again but you know that's working at a different level and sort of working now at the management level...more about helping other people to change their practice, to their working practice' (Jane). Paula wanted to become a teacher and work in a secondary school in a working class area to encourage working class pupils with their education.

### **The Higher Educational system in Spain**

Under the "Napoleonic" system of HE adopted by Spain in the nineteenth century, universities were completely regulated by laws and norms issued by the State. This strictly regulated higher system was also an elitist system. This situation began to change during the 1970s, when the system started to shift from an elite to a mass higher education system. After the restoration of democracy (Franco's dictatorship went by 1939 and 1975) and the promulgation of the new constitution in 1978, university transformation was one of the main objectives of both academics and political parties. There has been an important process of political and administrative decentralisation. At present Spain has 50 public universities (with 91% of registrations) and 27 non-state universities (9% of registrations; of these 27 private universities, one third is owned by the Catholic Church).

Student mobility is very low in Spain though the State government tries to enhance it through special programme. Most students do not move to another region to study (or to another city if they can study their desired degree in their own city). In 2004-2005 around 1.5 million students were enrolled in university education, which was 45% of the population of the cohorts between 18 and 25 years of age (in 1985 were enrolled in university education 22% of these same cohorts). Women students in Spanish HE are currently around 56% of students and 60% of graduate students.

Over the last three decades the number of students and universities has increased three-fold. Currently 30% of women and 22% of men between 24 and 34 years 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 an important rate of drop-out in the Spanish compulsory stage of the secondary level, one of the highest of the OECD. Around 30% (in Andalusia, around 40%) of Spanish students leave the compulsory secondary education without official certification. The proportion of young people taking a university course when their parents had no schooling was 9%, whereas this proportion was 65% (seven times greater) for young people whose parents had completed a university degree (the last three paragraphs are based on: Ministry of Education and Science –Spain: 2008). In 2009 the unemployment in Spain was 18.8%

for people between 25 and 64 years. But for those with high education (university degree or qualified vocational training) the rate of unemployment was 8.8% while in the case of people with low educational level (pre-primary, primary or secondary education) the unemployment was 21.7% (Tobarra, 2010). These data show clearly the added value of education, especially in the current situation of economic crisis.

### **Stories from Spain**

We will look now at a case study from one of the three Andalusian universities which have been participating in our research project. Laura was 45 years old at the moment of the interview. For approximately 20 years she has been working like nurse aide and carer. Nowadays she feels burnt out in this work. Her work consists of doing basic tasks in relation to food and hygiene of the elders, a hard task. This point has been very relevant to initiate and to continue her university studies. In 2004 Laura had started to think about the idea of doing the entrance examination to the university for people over 25 years old. Her sons were older and she had more free time. Another important factor has been the search of professional improvement. Laura, after approximately two decades like nurse's aide, feels burned out in her job. Laura wouldn't like to continue all her life doing the same activity:

I have some friends and I tell them that they study, that we should not to remain the whole life here. Mi job is nurse aide but what I do mainly is to wash the elders. And I use to say them: 'well, are we going to remain here all our life washing asses?'

Laura did not have a computer. When she has started to study, she did a course on computers and she bought a computer after the course. She says that, before, she had enough with the household appliances:

I had not knowledge about computers. I felt obliged to do a course on computers, and I felt obliged to buy a computer. This opened many things. I was a typical woman who was at home. I go to work, I go back home, but... I didn't have a computer, only my household appliances. I felt obliged to enter into a new world.

Laura feels deeply proud of her university itinerary (decision to do university studies, preparation to the entrance examination, overcoming of the entrance examination, beginning of her studies, successful progression along the three university years). Also she says that her family and neighbours feel very satisfied of her tenacity, dedication and academic success. It is a double process: she is recognized by herself and also the others recognize her:

I have to endure the jokes at work... 'well, she speaks in a different way'. The true is that I look at many things from another perspective... At the workplace I used to say: 'the social worker, why she is permitting this situation?'. I approach the questions in a different way... Knowledge is there. And when I speak, in many occasions I speak very well, using technical words.

For Laura, the main contribution of the university studies is to acquire knowledge and to know many persons, to be to the height in social, professional or labour situations where it's necessary to have a better and deeper knowledge:

One day we went to a seminar, it was nice. A lecturer sent us an email; there was a seminar on social exclusion and poverty that could be interesting for me... And we went together, three students. It was a nice day... To know people, they speak well, they communicate well, very interesting... And you don't already see yourself strange. You say: 'I am a professional, I understand these things, I can speak'. This is important. You can speak, you are going to a place and you say: 'well, but I'm also to the same high of other people. It has been an inner reinforcement, I have gained many knowledges, it's true. And also I have obtained friendship.

Laura raises with clarity her professional perspectives, as soon as she concludes Social Work studies: to obtain a job as a social worker, for internal promotion, in the regional Ministry of Equality and Welfare, where she is employed as a health care helper. This case shows us the relevance of doing a university degree as well as the challenges that it's necessary to deal with. This woman student left her studies when she was sixteen years old, after her family decided to return from France, where they lived many years as migrants. Now, in her forties, she has decided to do a degree in order to improve her work conditions and also to gain more autonomy. Her case represents the efforts of many men and women who in Andalusia are trying to overcome past experiences of inequalities, family difficulties and poor teaching conditions during the compulsory education.

### **Perspectives**

Different national contexts have general traits which influence upon HE. In our research project we are stressing these specific situations while at the same time developing a comparative approach (Thomas & Quinn, 2007: 13-15). Some of these traits are: recent history, political system, educational policy, family socialization, impact of parental education on access and success in HE, values, use of time, private economic sector, position of HE institutions in relation to the state and private sectors, funding of HE institutions and price of tuition fees.

Spain and the UK share important traits as States which are members of the European Union and key actors of economic development. In this sense both States need to respond to common challenges in a globalized economy. Nevertheless both have a specific landscape in relation to social policy, unemployment and HE system. In both contexts Higher Education continues to be a pathway to empowerment, autonomy and better jobs.

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