

RANLHE



Access and Retention: Experiences of Non-traditional Learners in Higher Education

**ACCESS AND RETENTION: EXPERIENCIES OF NON-
TRADITIONAL LEARNERS IN HE**

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**RANLHE PROJECT STUDENT EXPERIENCES COMPARATIVE
REPORT**

Report for Workpackage 6

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Introduction

This report sets out the findings of our research on the experiences and perspectives of non-traditional students (both younger and adult) in higher education. Specifically, our project set out to address this question: What are the factors that support and constrain the success or otherwise (including non-completion) of non-traditional students, from the point of view of the lived experience of being a student? This led us to consider why some non-traditional students 'keep on going on' despite, in some cases, enormous difficulties, while others from a similar background - in relation to class, gender, ethnicity, age and disability - drop-out. As with the rest of the RANLHE project, the research on student perspectives was undertaken with the aim of influencing policy and practice at both national and European levels, as well as contributing to knowledge and understanding in the fields of higher education participation and retention.

The project team consisted of eight partners from seven countries:

- Canterbury Christ Church University, England
- National University of Ireland, Maynooth, Ireland
- University of Goettingen, Germany
- University of Lower Silesia, Poland
- University of Seville, Spain
- University of Stirling, Scotland
- University of Stockholm, Sweden
- University of Warwick, England

We approached the research question through in-depth biographical narrative interviews with samples of students from the case study institutions. (Each partner chose three case study institutions to reflect the different types of universities in their country such as elite, reform or private). The sample comprised non-traditional students at different stages of their studies, those who left but later returned to study as well as people who had left before completing their planned course. The interviews were then analysed thematically, with respect to identifying what students saw as the key issues in relation to access, retention and drop-out, as well as exploring the impact of factors such as age, gender, ethnicity and social class.

This analysis is of course complex. Higher education has undergone significant changes due to social and economic factors, economic efficiency drives and social inclusion pressures, alongside globalisation (Barnett, 2003) and policy interventions such as the Bologna process. Since the 1970s, these changes have resulted in a move away from an elite system, towards what Martin Trow called mass higher education in many countries. There are important developments in developing common structures of study with comparable levels of certification. Towards the end of our present project European universities were beginning to

undergo further changes as a result of recession and reductions in public expenditure. Yet there are still obvious country differences, with each national higher education system reflecting its own histories and traditions. In some countries, for example, the UK and Germany the higher education system is highly stratified. Different countries offer a diverse range of pathways to degree level qualifications.

Amidst a spectrum of varying opportunity structures and differences in the meaning of non-traditional students, there are important similarities and agreements about the students who are seen as non-traditional. In general, our staff interviews suggested that the case study institutions understand the challenges and tasks of encouraging the access and progression of these important groups of students, albeit that they did so from within their own particular frame of reference or – in the terms that we drew on in this research project - from within their own institutional habitus, with more or less willingness to change in the light of new kinds of learner. This report summarises our analysis of the ways in which non-traditional students perceive and experience the learning journey.

The report follows the organisation of the research. After a discussion of our approaches to questions of definition, methodology and conceptual framing, it then presents, in turn, the findings of each national team. While the data were collected and analysed by each national team for the country concerned, the project members also worked together in ways that facilitated cross-national dialogue and comparison. The final section therefore presents reflections on the practical and policy implications of our work as a whole, in the light of this dialogue.

Clarifying Definitions and Terms

‘Non-traditional student’ is a contested concept. We use the term to mean students who are underrepresented in higher education and whose participation in HE is constrained by structural and or cultural factors. This would include, for example, students whose family has not been to university before, students from low-income families, students from (particular) minority ethnic groups, living in what have traditionally been ‘low participation areas’, as well as mature age students and students with disabilities.

Retention and drop-out are currently high on the policy agenda of national and European policy makers as these issues reflect the efficiency of both higher education institutions and the national system of HE. Policy-makers at national level regard dropping-out as essentially a negative process because of the economic loss on investment. For institutions drop-out is a sensitive issue as it has consequences for status and may also result in loss of finance, depending on funding formulae, both nationally and also at the level of institutions. For individual students dropping out may have stigma attached to it as well as personal and family implications. The reasons, however, why non-traditional students drop-out are complex but not always negative. Many, in our study, gain educationally and socially from participating in HE even if they do not complete their programmes. The question then to explore is what the decision to quit means in the lives of such students. In some cases, dropping-out may be the start of a new transition and stage in their biography, while in others it may indicate a difficult set-back in what they see as an evolving learning career and identity. These are particularly complex issues in the case of non-traditional learners.

In our original project proposal we used the term ‘drop-out’ as is commonly used in literature in this field and by many policy makers. During the course of our biographical narrative interviews with non-traditional students we began to conclude that drop-out was too negative

to describe the process. As stated above several students we engaged with felt that they had gained in many ways by participating in higher education, even if they did not complete. Others left the system, but returned later. As a result we came to use the term ‘non-completion’ instead but always in highly qualified ways.

Methodological Approaches

As stated in the introduction our main methodological approach was the use of biographical narratives. In recent years there has been a ‘turn’ to biographical methods in the social sciences (Chamberlayne et al 2000). Such an approach places participants and their ‘voice’ central to the research process. Biographical narrative interviews enabled us to capture in depth the dialectics of agency and structure in the learning experience of non-traditional learners in higher education. Biographical narratives also illustrate the dynamics and influence of past lives in initial schooling, family and work in constructing present and future identities as HE students (Merrill and West, 2009, West et al, 2007). Biographies, although individual, also illuminate the collectivities and shared experiences in people’s lives through issues such as gender, class and race (Merrill, 2007). Importantly, the biographical narrative can link the macro and micro worlds, because it:

...offers many examples of the wealth of biographical and life history research, and its unique potential to illuminate people’s lives and their interaction with the social world and the interplay of history and micro worlds, in struggles for agency and meaning in lives. And to illuminate the interplay of different experiences and forms of learning – from the most intimate to the most formal (West, Alheit, Andersen & Merrill, 2007:280).

On entering higher education non-traditional students, particularly those in elite institutions, may experience a clash of cultures. The habitus and cultural capital of working class students, for example, will be different to that of the university. Learning in higher education is a period of transition and self-negotiation for them: basic questions can be asked as to who a person is, has been and might be. They have to learn a new academic language and culture in order to develop a learner identity. As Bron states:

Biographies are useful and analytical material providing insights into how identities are shaped, changed and develop when facing a cultural transition. Life transitions (emigration, career changes) where a new culture, a new language, and symbols as well as meanings are involved, enrich and shape our lives again and again (Bron, 2007: 218).

Specifically we interviewed the following cohorts of non-traditional younger and adult students:

- those in their final year of study
- following a group through from first to final year.
- those who leave but return to study later
- those that do not complete their study

Importantly the student voices, in their diversity and complexity, informed and shaped our research products including the policy leaflet.

Sensitising Concepts as an Analytical Tool

Three key sensitising concepts (habitus, transitional space and recognition) were identified to provide a framework for analysing the student biographical narrative data. The concept of habitus draws on the sociological work of Pierre Bourdieu, while recognition, another sociological concept, is based on critical theory and the work of Axel Honneth who was a member of the Frankfurt School. Transitional space is a psychological concept used by Donald Winnicott but it was also developed as a sociological idea by some members of the team. It should be emphasised that the research team was interdisciplinary, and in the course of the project, there was a real effort made to build more psychosocial understanding of learners and learning, combining a focus on the most intimate dimensions of experiences, including of self, with an awareness of normalising processes in the university habitus; and the interplay between these different dimensions.

Habitus and cultural capital

Two of our sensitising concepts were drawn from the work of the French social scientist Pierre Bourdieu: the ideas of ‘habitus’ and ‘cultural capital’. Both notions have been widely used in educational research as ways of understanding the social and cultural processes and attributes that tend to ensure the reproduction of social hierarchies and inequalities. The idea of cultural capital is relatively widely used, following Bourdieu’s original studies, as a way of relating academic success to the uneven distribution of dispositions, capabilities and understandings that were usually transmitted through the family. For Bourdieu, families could promote these attributes by passing on their cultural capital, whether in an *embodied* state, as through particular postures or cultural tastes; in an *objectified* state, in the form of cultural goods such as books; or in an *institutionalised* form, as in educational qualifications (Bourdieu 1986). Conversely, those whose families enjoyed no access to these goods would not be able to develop the attributes that enabled academic success.

For the purposes of the research, we were particularly interested in the ways that cultural capital could serve as a resource for university students. We were also interested in ways that non-traditional students might find their academic progress hindered as a result of their cultural capital, as well as the ways in which people with a particular body of cultural capital adjust to new socio-cultural settings in which new capabilities are required, with which they are unfamiliar. We also broadened our understanding of capital to include familial and psychological and even imaginal dimensions: families could be important resources to draw on, while experiences of surviving and transcending experiences of divorce, bankruptcy or unemployment could increase individual’s resilience in keeping on keeping on. Imaginal capital refers to processes of identification with others – from the past as well as present – and from the world of literature, perhaps, who we may draw on as resource in managing the transitional processes of higher education (West, 1996; Quinn, 2011).

Bourdieu defined ‘habitus’ in terms of the socially learnt dispositions, competencies and ways of behaving, that are often taken for granted, and which are acquired through the activities and experiences of everyday life. These are not temporary but rather are lasting, acquired schemes of perception, thought and behaviour. Because they are learned through everyday life, particularly in childhood years, these behaviours and dispositions inevitably

reflect the social context in which they are acquired, including of course the cultural capital that dominates in that context. Bourdieu's thinking has been developed in a number of ways by Diane Reay, particularly through her work on institutional habitus. Reay (1998) understands institutional habitus in terms of the impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual's behaviour as it is mediated through an organisation, and utilised the concept to demonstrate how the organisational cultures of schools and colleges are linked to wider socio-economic cultures through processes in which schools and their catchments mutually shape and reshape each other.

So far as the RANLHE project was concerned, this notion of institutional habitus was important in drawing attention to the ways in which non-traditional students were entering unfamiliar terrain. From the staff interviews, it was clear to us that the institutional habitus – and often the disciplinary habitus - is crucial in setting the environment of learning. It not only influences the experience of students but it also impacts on those who teach. It is taken for granted that the rituals and entitlements of staff are an important part of that habitus, and in some of our case study institutions this served as a bulwark against change, while in others the habitus included the possibility of changing (or of being seen to change) in response to new challenges. The biographical narratives enabled us to identify the processes of structure and agency in peoples' lives and the dynamics between them.

Institutional habitus impinges on student life in a way that is often unquestioned. Bourdieu noted that "When habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it finds itself 'as a fish in water', it does not feel the weight of the water and takes the world about itself for granted" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1989). We anticipated that the non-traditional student was more likely to find themselves 'fish out of water', who could not take for granted the values, skills and attitudes that were needed for academic success. We anticipated that students from non-traditional backgrounds would be less likely than more traditional students to possess the desired linguistic competences (standard language, foreign languages) of academic study, broad historical competences (such as knowledge on the background of cultural practices), political competence (background in a voluntary organization, activity in student politics), or even a general knowledge of institutional procedures / rules of the kind they will encounter in university.

Recognition.

Our next sensitising concept straddles, in some ways, the concepts of habitus and transitional space. The concept of recognition derives from critical theory and the Frankfurt School and the work of Axel Honneth. In developing a critical theory of recognition Honneth focuses on the role of intersubjectivity in shaping a person's identity (1995a). Honneth argues that the individual strives for recognition through developing relationships of self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem in the family, civil society and the state. Axel Honneth argues that for humans to achieve a productive relationship with themselves (an identity) humans require an intersubjective recognition of their abilities and achievements (1995: 92). This is the foundation of moral consciousness and society as a whole and one develops a morality in the context of the reactions (positive and negative) one receives from another person in the struggle for recognition. He argues that the struggle for recognition, based on the need for self-esteem and the experience of disrespect, also explains social development:

It is by the way of the morally motivated struggles of social groups – their collective attempt to establish, institutionally and culturally, expanded forms of recognition – that the normatively directional change of societies proceeds (1995: 92).

Drawing on Hegel, Honneth argues that there are three differentiated recognition orders in modern society the development of which are crucial to understanding the dynamics and historical evolution of capitalism and modernity. Each social sphere is defined by the different forms of recognition needs and expectations. Recognition, a simultaneously individual and social need, requires love in the immediate interpersonal sphere for the ‘singular needy subject’ for the development of self-confidence; the recognition of the autonomous rights bearing person in law offers the basis self-respect; and the successful formation of a co-operative member of society whose efforts are socially valued is necessary to build self-esteem (Honneth in Fraser & Honneth, 2003, p 161).

The first of the three forms of relating to self is self-confidence, which according to Honneth, develops when a relationship is based on friendship and love as recognition is received from others. In this way a positive image of one’s abilities is developed. The second type of relationship to self involves self-respect, when a person in a community of rights is given recognition as a morally and legally mature person. When a person is recognised at this level one is accepted as an autonomous person who has both a right and an ability to participate in the discussions and debates of the institution concerned, i.e. state or organisations. Respect is shown to other people by relating toward them as having rights. Without rights there is no respect. For some, e.g. Kant, the formation of the autonomous person is the main goal of education. The absence of autonomy is price paid for the absence of this recognition. Again, this is clearly linked to the development and growth of discourses and practices that are specific to modernity and were articulated differently in feudal societies. It is clear that the securing and development of the rights of the individual is viewed by Honneth as an important social gain indicating that he holds a more optimistic conception of modernity than the first generation of critical theorists.

But this is not the highest form of recognition, according to Honneth. The missing part is the performance of autonomy through work and the dilemma for the person is whether the community will honour their contribution through work. The experience of being so honoured leads to a form of self-relation that Honneth calls self-esteem. People with high self-esteem will reciprocate a mutual acknowledgement of each others’ contribution to the community and loyalty and solidarity grow from this (Honneth, 2007, p. 139).

Only through self-directed and autonomous work can one perform one’s freedom of will. And only when one begins to work out one’s own free will for a common good can one become respected in a community (or the state in Hegelian terms). Self-esteem means that one sees one’s work being acknowledged and recognised. (Huttunen, 2007, p. 426)

In this way the individual becomes ‘recognised as a person whose capabilities are of constitutive value to a concrete community’ (Honneth, 1997, p. 20). This reciprocal and mutual recognition of each other’s work becomes a strong feeling of solidarity in the community and these well recognised people are capable of being, as a result, strongly motivated. People earn self-esteem from society if their activities are in tune with society and society provides the basis on which they can become worthy members of society.

It is not surprising to have three forms of disrespect, corresponding to the forms of respect. At an obvious level, if a child is neglected and humiliated they may lose self-confidence. If they are denied citizenship or denied rights their self-respect may suffer and finally if one's way of life is not recognised or respected then damage is done to one's self-esteem. For these reasons abuse, insults, ignoring people will not only be an injustice (it will harm people and deny their civil rights) but injuries are done to their understanding of themselves, their identity. In Mead's language there is a 'collapse of identity'. For instance, if one only receives feedback when a mistake is made, one's self esteem will not develop. Mudslinging or other forms of 'put down' are so often the result of low self-esteem from the source of the insult.

Honneth's work, while derived from critical theory, or what has also been called 'Western Marxism', can be related both to Bourdieu and Winnicott. His idea of recognition, while largely inspired by Hegel, is explicitly influenced by his reading of Winnicott's object-relation theory, which he sees as critical in understanding dependency on the mother, as the underlying form of 'being oneself in another', referring to Winnicott's idea of 'transitional objects' as part of the shift towards autonomy (Honneth 1995a: 99-103).

By contrast, Honneth has been openly critical of Bourdieu, whom he sees as a determinist or functionalist, and has criticised his theory of taste/distinction as ambiguous if not self-contradictory (Honneth 1995b: 190-201). Part of the problem for Honneth is that while those who have a particular type of social or cultural capital will recognise its value in others who have the same resources, they do not recognise other forms of cultural or social capital; its value therefore depends on one's position. Nevertheless, we can see such critical consequences of recognition as self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem in Bourdieu's terms as features of dispositions or habitus which can facilitate the participation and completion of non-traditional adults in HE. Without resolving the tension between Honneth and Bourdieu, we are able for the purposes of this study to locate these attributes in the cultural and social capital which individuals can access, and which both reflect and influence their relative positions.

Transitional space

Our aim, as stated, was to build more interdisciplinary 'psychosocial' understanding in which we connect the object relations school of psychoanalysis and ideas of transitional space, (especially developed by Donald Winnicott (1971)), with Bourdieu's ideas of habitus and capital, with their more sociological orientation (Bourdieu, 1977/2000). We have sought to chronicle and theorise the lived, embodied, and affective as well as cognitive experiences of students and how these may change in the transitional space of particular habitus. Within the debates of the research team, there was a view that Bourdieu fails sufficiently to engage with how some students, with apparently limited educational and social capital, survive and prosper – becoming fish in water, in fact - even in culturally exclusive habitus of particular elite institutions. It therefore was important to consider the kind of psychosocial 'capital' students bring with them and what happens to this as they encounter and react to the cultural capital of the university.

Winnicott suggested that good enough relationships – where the self feels sufficiently loved, secure and fundamentally accepted - provides a sense of the world as fundamentally satisfying, an object to be engaged with excessive anxiety; a space to be and, playfully, to

become. Earlier relationship patterns, he suggested, provide a template for later ones. Yet no relationships are perfect, and all of us experience separation difficulties, to various extents, which may be shaped by experiences of previous transitions, from the earliest separations from a prime care giver to going to school. At an extreme, a need to appease and or please may take over, and a psychological split develops between mind and body. We can become overly preoccupied with the other and a fear of not being good enough; and of a need, largely unconscious, to put on a show, to gain attention. False self- structures can emerge and the self can feel denuded of vitality as a result. (We are aware of the problematic nature of the self, under the influence of post-structuralist perspectives. We have in mind here a notion of self which is deeply contingent – in its reliance on others – as well as developmental, forged in interactions with the wider culture, mediated through our relationships with significant others (Hunt and West, 2009).

These ideas have been applied to adult learning, where students may, unconsciously, be overly preoccupied with powerful others, teachers and lecturers, and what they may say and think. Students may feed back to them what they, the learner, think they might want. Such processes can be largely unconscious (West, 1996). They have also been applied to storytelling, as itself a kind of transitional space, in which we may experiment, as learners, with the stories we tell to self and others. Such storytelling, in relationship, may be more or less productive of selfhood (Sclater, 2004). We can see in the stories of diverse learners, a renegotiation of the story people tell themselves, and others, including in a university seminar, where they may have learned how to play with new symbolic language, of the legal and teaching habitus. The ideas have been applied to research itself, too, where subjects may give answers that the researchers may want to hear, in largely unconscious ways but this can change over time, as interviewees become more confident in the process. There is a kind of self-negotiation in play in many of the accounts given below (West, 1996; Merrill and West, 2009).

We can imagine the university as a psychosocial space where the self, in such terms, is in constant negotiation, and where there are struggles around separation and individuation: which includes letting go of past ideas and relationships and forging new understanding and relationships. Being a working class student at university can highlight difference between self and others, in terms of class and culture, which brings fragments of the culture and its hierarchies into the intimacies of struggle. The capacity to play more wholeheartedly may depend, in part, on negotiating the dissonance. This in turn may rely on the sense of an emerging self in relationship with new and respected people. It may also rely on the subjective meaningfulness of new symbolic objects and languages through which to (re) interpret a life in new ways: objects brought alive through the study of literature or history, for instance. The dynamic interplay of outer and inner worlds, self and others, and different narrative possibilities, lies at the heart of object relations theory: selves and new stories can be seen to be forged in the shifting dynamics of self and other, of self and the symbolic world. The interplay involves different forms of capital – imaginal, familial and psychological – alongside the more familiar categories of educational, social and cultural capital. Students are not reducible to social or cultural entities alone: they belong to families, and can bring into transitional spaces a resilience borne of lifewide as well as lifelong struggles. They are also experiencing subjects, with stories to tell, and selves to forge in the process.

Transitional space, it should be noted, has also been theorised in more sociological terms (Merrill and West, 2011). The concept of 'transitional space' is more usually associated with object relations theory than sociology. The stories told by non-traditional students in our research have also led us to consider, explore and develop transitional space from a more sociological perspective. Although the term space (Urry, 1996) and social space (Bourdieu, 1989) are discussed, sociologically speaking, transitional space remains an under-developed concept. In recent years there has been a growing interest in the concept of 'learning transitions' (Field et al 2009) in adult education research in the UK and there are some links which can be made between transitional space and learning transitions. Both concepts refer and relate to notions of the potential for changing the self through learning. For Ecclestone transition:

...depicts change and shifts in identity and agency as people progress through the education system...transition is a change process but also a shift from one identity to another (2999: 11).

From a sociological perspective, transitional space can be understood as a process of reflecting on one's identity through learning. This process may lead to the re-working and changing of one's identity using agency within the boundaries of a particular, temporary space, place and time. In the RANLHE study, the space and place is the university campus and its culture and environment while time refers to the length of study undertaken. Implicit in this is the notion that 'being a student' or 'studenthood' is itself a transitional and temporary identity (Field, Merrill & Morgan-Klein, 2010). While acknowledging, as Ecclestone (2009) does, the role of agency in re-working identities we also take into account structure and structural factors. Working class adult students can find themselves located in a habitus which is different, in Bourdieu's terms, to what they bring with them to the campus. The differences between the student's habitus and that of the university can be more pronounced in elite universities. Identity formation and change becomes, in these terms a dialectical struggle between structuring processes and experiences of agency. The university can encourage, in informal as well as formal ways, reflection on past life experiences, such as in education and family, and how these impact on current learning experience at university. It can also nurture new thoughts about the future and who and what a student might become. Changes in identity can sometimes be complex and partial rather than absolute. In the transitional space of the university, particular adult students in both the Warwick and Canterbury samples defined themselves as being working class and, relatedly, could feel alienated by aspects of the middle classness of the institution and some younger students and lecturers. While all recognised, by the end of their degree, that they had changed, some profoundly, none wanted simply to let go of their working class identity. A transitional space, therefore, implies being in-between in terms of identity whereby an individual lets go of part or all of their 'old identity' and changes to assume more of a 'new or modified identity'.

The transitional space of a university can also be viewed as a safe albeit temporary space away from life, for instance, on a deprived public housing estate, living in poverty or struggling with family problems, as the stories in our research illustrate. The campus offers a space where they can leave behind the other life, even if it is only for a few hours a day, and immerse themselves in the other world of academia. Within the transitional space of the university the campus provides a particular type of social space which is different to the communities in which non-traditional students live. Social space in this context refers to the environment of a university campus such as places for learning, cafes, and bars where social

interaction with peers and lecturers takes place and where self and identity can be negotiated. For non-traditional adult students studying in higher education offers a new biographical set of possibilities and although the transitional space is temporary, it can still have profound effect on their future biographies. As some of the adult students remarked, and as is illustrated below, they will not or cannot go back to being who they were before entering university.

The Student Experiences: England

Barbara Merrill, Rennie Johnston & Paul Armstrong

Introduction

This report draws on biographical data from younger and adult non-traditional students from three higher education institutions: University of Warwick, Kingston University and Southampton Solent in the UK. The sample of universities was in part pragmatic, but also given the focus on ‘non-traditional students’, intended to ensure that in sampling students there was an opportunity to interview a range of non-traditional students in different parts of England, which would be added to the three universities that engaged with the researchers from Canterbury Christchurch University in Kent which has reported its student interview findings separately. The three institutions are different as one is an elite institution, one post 1992 and the third a new university. Key staff from these English universities were also interviewed over three years.

The students span a wide age range from 18 to one person in their late 60s. A small number came from diverse ethnic backgrounds and a small minority were asylum seekers. Most were women. All were the first generation in their family to enter higher education. The biographical stories yielded rich and in-depth data. They revealed both the joys and struggles of learning as well as illuminating the complex issues of why most non-traditional students manage to keep on going on while others either drop-out or take temporary withdrawal. Their experiences of access and learning also highlighted the interaction between macro, meso and micro processes. These processes include personal factors such as health problems, lack of confidence in learning, and lack of support from family /support from family. Institutional factors such as the ethos and culture of a department, flexibility of a programme, and the extent of support from lecturers and the university generally. Structural factors such as class, gender, income, and living environment also play a role. One issue which emerged strongly was class and related to this the interplay of class and gender. Class was an issue which was mentioned by both younger and adult students.

The interviews were guided by a conceptual framework derived from an understanding of what was already known about non-traditional students in English higher education, which has been summarised in the project’s literature review, which extended across the three-year project period, and was continuously updated and provides the changing contexts of these students interviews, as well as generating new theoretical and conceptual insights which are referred to as ‘sensitising concepts’, that helped informed the analysis of the student data in this report.

Attempting to undertake in-depth interviews with students over a three-year period was not without its methodological problems. It was obvious that through the first round of interviews the student experience of access would be available. The issue of retention would have an impact on some of the students, and although the project would have wanted to have discovered more about the decision to ‘drop-out’, it was inevitable that - given that one of the findings was virtually all students in the sample reported having considered leaving their programme or university at some point - more was discovered about *the decision to stay* beyond the first year, and then the second year. Not surprisingly, it was difficult, though not impossible to interview students once they had decided to leave their university studies, whether temporarily or permanently. The context of English higher education was also

changing significantly over the three-year duration of the project, and a change of government in the third and final year had a significant impact on higher education, particularly for the students. Government policies in existence at the beginning of the project suggested a number of strategies for improving retention, and data gathered not just from students but also staff provided advice on overcoming persistent barriers to access, as well as strategies for improving retention.

At the time of the end of this project, the English government had decided to change the arrangements for funding of students, and support for student fees and living costs during their studies, to a system of long-term student loans away from grants and bursaries. In theory, financial support should still be available for non-traditional students, encouraging widening participation, but this changing context needs to be considered when interpreting the data, and in concluding the outcomes of the in-depth, longitudinal interviews with the changing economic climate in England.

Conceptual Issues

Habitus

The concept of habitus and the work of Bourdieu is relevant and useful when analysing the biographical interviews of the students we interviewed. Class was central in many of the stories. All referred to themselves as being working class and being first generation students to go to university they had no family experience to draw on about which university to choose or what university would be like. They were aware of class difference between themselves and other students and some lecturers. Their level of cultural capital made many feel that they lacked confidence in their learning. Some described their first few weeks at Warwick as being a culture shock and some talked about being ‘fish out of water’. The majority learnt to cope with this and engaged with the symbolic and intellectual culture of university life as they had a thirst for knowledge. Determination was described as another strategy for coping with learning and developing a learner identity.

Transitional and safe space

We are looking at the concept of transitional space from a sociological perspective. In sociological terms transitional space can be viewed as a space for reflecting on past identities and working out new ones. In choosing to enter higher education adult students have used their agency and taken a conscious step towards changing their lives. For working class women this decision may reflect ‘wanting to do something for themselves’ and for both female and male working class students to improve their lives for both selves and family. For younger students it is a transitional space between their past family life as a child and then a teenager and moving into adulthood and their future world of work, further study, and for some their family. It is a space for working out identities with other peers and learning about who they are and what they want to become. For both younger and adult students university offers a transitional space and a learning environment which produces changes to the self, such as being more confident, more knowledgeable and more critical of the world.

Universities can also offer a safe transitional space, a haven whereby they can leave behind, temporarily, other aspects of their lives. The campus provides a different world to the world outside which enables non-traditional students to forget about problems and life in the outside world. As one young student explains:

I've enjoyed the course this year. I'd be quite happy to have a fourth year...I love my friends. I've had a great time and it's a nice haven away from the stresses of being at home with all this with mum and dad (a divorce). So I'm now applying madly for jobs so that I can move out again. (Paula, final year Psychology, younger student, Warwick)

Some adult students remarked that the campus offered a pleasant and safe environment and a temporary escape from living on deprived housing estates which are run-down with problems of crime and drugs. University life made some 'feel part of something' so that they 'felt included'

The Student Experience in context

Warwick: has a total of 21,598 students, undergraduate 12,510, postgraduate 9,088 (academic year 2009-2010). There are also adult students taking pre-degree programmes such as Open Studies as well as Foundation Degrees. There are four faculties: Arts, Medicine, Science and Social Sciences. In relation to gender the proportion at undergraduate level is almost equal with 49.3% female and 50.7% male. The majority of students as a whole come from London and the South East of England (39.2%) followed by 33% from the local Midlands area. Nearly 57% of the undergraduate population identified themselves as White British, other White 5.8% and 23.4% from a Black and Ethnic Minority background.

Kingston: currently has 21,300 students (18,034 undergraduate/foundation level and 3,266 postgraduate; 18,041 full-time and 3,259 part-time; 19,105 Home/EU and 2,195 Overseas/Islands from 143 different countries.) It has seven Faculties: Art, Design & Architecture; Arts & Social Sciences; Business & Law; Computing, Information Systems & Mathematics; Engineering, Health & Social Care Sciences; Science. It has a fairly evenly balanced gender mix. In 2007-8, the ratio was 48% male, 52% female; in its 2008 student profile, 47% of students were White, 26% Asian, 18% Black and 9% Other. Some 16% of students were aged 22-25 and a further 21% were 25 and over.

Southampton Solent has a total of 16,000 students following a range of courses from foundation 'level zero' years to degree courses, to master's degrees and PhDs, plus a variety of professional and short courses. Its three main faculties are Technology, Business and Media, Arts and Society. It has a higher proportion of male to female students (55.6% males compared to 44.4% females with 15.6% of these part-time students (more or less split evenly by gender). Nearly 32% of students come from the surrounding county of Hampshire, with just about 51% from the rest of the UK, 9.2% from the EU and 7.8% from other overseas. According to the *Good University Guide 2008*, some 96% of full-time undergraduate entrants are from state schools, 36% are lower socio-economic groups, and 17% are from ethnic minorities. A 2001 Solent University survey found that 64% of students came from families where neither parent had been to university (Lim, 2002).

Academic Strengths of Partner Institutions

Warwick is ranked as one of UK's leading research universities yet it also has a mission of developing strong links with the local community.

Kingston has strengths in the arts and in professional studies. It has a strong commitment to access, equality and diversity.

Solent has a strong emphasis on preparing students for modern professional practice with a history of strengths in the subject areas of art and design, technology and maritime studies. Its graduate employment in 2007-2008 was very nearly 90%.

Access and Retention Records

The Good University Guide 2010 ranked the three universities as follows:

	Qualifications on entry	Student satisfaction rate	Completion rate
Warwick	463 (6/113 in UK)	77% (34/113 in UK)	96% (7/113 in UK)
Kingston	236 (95/113 in UK)	73% (68/113 in UK)	79% (79/113 in UK)
Solent	211 (107/113 in UK)	70% (93/113 in UK)	75% (93/113 in UK)

Method of contacting students for interview

Warwick: young undergraduate non-traditional students were identified through the Students Records Office at Warwick from their database which categorises students by class, age, degree programme, and ethnicity. The adult students were identified from the student database kept by the Centre for Lifelong Learning and through direct links as the 2+2 Social Studies Academic Co-ordinator (a degree aimed at adults) from teaching adult students was also the RANLHE Project Director.

Kingston: initial contact through a longstanding personal link with the Deputy Vice-Chancellor who approved the research collaboration and involved members of the university Widening Participation team in helping make contacts with students and some support staff. Conducting interviews was always been difficult as Kingston is 2.5 hours away. A University Researcher arranged interviews initial interviews with first year students on the University Compact Scheme, a scheme set up specifically to help and finance students from non-traditional backgrounds. These have gone well. Interviews were also set up with key staff in the Academic Development Centre as well as the Deputy Vice Chancellor herself. But continuing problems in setting up interviews with ‘drop-outs’, final year students and teaching staff, partly because of distance from Kingston and the recent departure of Deputy Vice Chancellor. However, some follow-up interviews were possible even if not all the sample could be tracked.

Solent: it took several meetings, proposals and negotiations before Solent agreed to be a case study institution for the project. The original idea of identifying and contacting two subject areas, one with a high ‘drop-out’ rate and one with a low ‘drop-out’ rate did not work as the initial Solent contact could not find any departments prepared to participate. In the end, progress made through a personal contact, the University Community and Adult Learning Co-ordinator who is based in the Recruitment, Access and Partnerships office. She helped make contact with the first year students interviewed, the majority of whom were already well connected within the university through being Student Ambassadors or working part-time for the university. She also helped make contact with a range of staff, some teaching, some support. A member of the University Research and Monitoring unit who was about to retire helped with access to some ‘drop-outs’, more teaching and academic staff, as well as the Deputy Vice Chancellor, whilst additionally she undertook to interview five final year students herself.

Issues and Themes Arising from Student Interviews

In analysing the student experience data, the following themes and issues emerged:

- Class, gender, race, disability were significant factors that made the difference in determining access and retention.
- Impact of parents/family/ peers was influential on determining access considerations and especially whether to continue or to leave.
- Impact of initial education influenced the student disposition towards wanting to enter higher education.
- Students interviewed commonly confirmed higher education as a transitional and safe space, allowing speculative decisions to be made about the future that would not be deterministic but allowed changes of direction.
- However, a few students reported feeling like ‘fish out of water’, or what Diane Reay (date) called ‘contingent choosers’ for change. In one case, a student was anxious in her first year, because she was the only woman on her programme, and reported feeling like she was being monitored as a case study, and felt a burden of ‘representing all women’. Students from a minority ethnic background, were reassured when they discovered that they were not necessarily in the minority on their programmes.
- It would appear from the evidence that the construction of a learner identity was significant in influencing decisions about whether to stay or to leave. Interestingly, the construction of the student identity was not entirely based on academic identities, but the extra-curricular activities in which students engaged in their universities (for example, taking on the role of student ambassador was ‘doubled-edged’ in that it not only was a role that supported other students through difficult transitions, but confirmed the student identities of those undertaking the role, developing a sense of ‘belonging’ to the university. For some younger students it centred on being involved in sports for example.
- Strong vocational motivations influenced the choice of degree programme accessed, and the student determination to succeed, since for many their goal in participating in higher education was to progress to employment, and as their student debts increased over their stay in higher education, the more important was persistence in order to gain appropriate employment at the end of their degree. Only a few students in the sample, being interviewed towards the end of their final year were considering progression to postgraduate study.
- The notion of ‘significant others’ appeared regularly in the biographical accounts of students in the study. In terms of access, these were most often reported to be teachers and their peers at school. The relationships with their peers at university often formed around residential accommodation arrangements for younger students rather than the subjects being studied; there was evidence that close, intimate relationships with other students offered mutual support, although in at least one case, the breakdown of a close relationship created difficulties and led to considerations of leaving.
- Support from lecturers, departments, student services, and the university would appear to be vital. The distinction between academic lecturers who ‘taught’ the courses and the personal tutor support was often made. The latter were those that made the real difference as to whether students persisted or left. All three higher education institutions in the study recognised the significance of this personal tutor role, and had actively promoted the support systems they had put in place. Early on in

their academic career students expected support from their lecturers, but in the post 1992 universities realised with the high staff-student ratio – especially in the first year – that their teachers were not necessarily the most accessible source of support.

- Poverty and financial issues were common among the students interviewed. Whereas some students were able to get financial support from their parents, for non-traditional adult students, this was not always an option. All three universities covered by this report had strong centralised systems of student support that went beyond personal tutorials, to meet a whole range of needs that made a difference to students, ranging from academic skills support to – often of most significance – financial support. At least two of the universities were participating in ‘compact’ schemes, which if nothing else offered some financial support to non-traditional students during their time on their course. Some students reported being disappointed that there little more to the scheme than being given money, but for many it was the financial support that made a critical difference between staying and leaving.
- Most of the students in the study were supposedly studying full-time; yet, many of them referred to being in paid employment whilst studying, including one that appeared to be working full-time in the university in which he was also a student. He had a post that provided night-time university library support for students. He was positive about this commitment, stating that it gave him time to study whilst working since the number of students requiring library support during the night were fairly small. However, in his third year, he was moved to a day-time post that made studying more problematic, and was beginning to impact on his ability to demonstrate his academic potential, and whilst he remained confident that he would succeed in getting a degree, he was increasingly concerned about the class of the degree he would get at the end of his programme.
- However, financial considerations were second to the importance of determination to succeed. Many of the students’ stories talked in terms of ‘succeeding against all odds’. The factor that influenced their decision to persist when their lives felt hard, if not impossible, was ‘determination’. Determination appeared to increase from year to year. Successfully progressing from the first year to the second year, and the second year to the third year was a major contributory factor in their determination. However, the stories they told were rarely straightforward, and some needed the flexibility that their institutions offered in terms of late submission of work, variations to the specified assessment, and additional support. Added to this was the awareness of the support they had been given by families and friends, and the desire to ‘not let them down’ was significant. In their interviews, they rarely talked about letting themselves down.
- On entry, lack of confidence in learning was reported (mostly, but not exclusively by adults). However, achievements through the first and second years contributed to their determination to succeed. However, for some, the feedback through assessment was less than encouraging. In some cases, this led to a change of programme, or the decision to leave the programme, if not the university. Early on in higher education – particularly in their first year - there appears to be some flexibility for students to change direction as an alternative to leaving the university. Typically, first year assessment is formative rather than summative, and this does create flexibility and the possibility that academic success is not overly influenced by early work, and the achievement of a ‘good’ degree remains a possibility.

In relation to sensitizing concepts:

Habitus

All the Warwick students interviewed (younger and adults) were from a working class background and all described themselves as working class and were first generation students in higher education. For the women class was inter-related with gender issues. All were aware of class and cultural differences between themselves and the other students and gave examples of this. For example, younger students talked about having less money and not being able to afford many social activities such as restaurants, taxis to nightclubs in local towns which the richer students did. One woman also talked about 'disparity' between the types of food in the fridges in the halls of residences. Some felt that there were divides in terms of class between subjects with Sociology being seen as having more working class students than History, English and Law for example.

Adult students also noticed differences in class and wealth in terms of the language spoken and experiences in life. This was particularly noticed in seminar discussions. Both groups were aware that many other students have attended public or private schools and came from the wealthier parts of Britain. Although for many it did affect their confidence as a learner, and for adults 'feeling a fraud to be there' none felt to be completely 'fish out of water'.

Many of the female adult students had or were still experiencing hardship in their lives such as drug involvement, poverty, and living on deprived council estates where crime, racism and drugs were frequent problems. Some of the women had children when they were young and then separated to become single parents. Education was viewed as means of gaining a better life for themselves and their children (others also viewed education as a way of achieving a better standard of living). Being a student and juggling roles and life experiences was not easy but many stated that 'determination' kept them going as they felt that if they dropped out they would not get a qualification and wouldn't have anything to show for it and would end up where they were before.

Determination was also important for the asylum seeker from Afghanistan as he said: *I don't have anyone back home*. He left Afghanistan at the age of 17 without any money and little knowledge of English. Finance was a big issue while he was studying as he was not entitled to a student loan or grant because of his immigration status but the financial and other support he has received from Warwick has get him determined to get an education. In the long term he would like to work for the United Nations.

This attitude was mirrored by another (Ethiopian) asylum seeker at Kingston who said:

I can't give up now because I've lost everything, I can't go back home, I've lost my mum and dad, I don't have brothers and sisters, ...this... is my, er, my precious thing that I have to have and I have to achieve, you know, to succeed in life

She had previously survived a very difficult time at College when she was the only girl in an IT class of 20 boys:

it was for me...a bit of a struggle and it was hard for me because...I was, the only girl in the class...from twenty boys so it was, two years, I it's like I feel like I was in prison

Fortunately, she had strong support from her College lecturer at that time:

Honestly, in that College what kept me going is that, that, the teacher I had, he was very, very good, he was very helpful. Now, what kept me going to University with all the situation....I have is, I don't have anything, this is the only choice I have on my hands so I have to cope, this is a chance, you will never get in any country, free education, with the help a loan...I'm lucky to be here

A first year Sociology younger student at Warwick describes what is keeping her going in class and aspirational terms:

I'd say that's its partly because I am like the only one that's come to university, I just feel, I dunno, I feel proud to be here. I feel privileged to be here. I haven't really come up against any like major adversities...I just want a degree. I want to do well. I want a good job and a degree is what you need these days so it just keeps me going.

Another younger female student (final year History and Sociology) who nearly left towards the end of the second year after being physically attacked by one of her housemates who had mental health problems described what kept her going:

I just think by the end of that I thought, oh I've managed that and still done relatively alright at the end of the year,. You know it can't actually get any worse can it, so yeah I stayed cause I thought I've already spent ten grand or something, you know, I don't wanna have to be paying that back out of a dead end job cause I've got no qualification at the end of it, it just seemed like such a waste after being in education for like, sixteen years or something, to just drop out at the last minute. It'll be alright.

Several of the younger students talked about a critical incident during their university career which nearly made them leave Warwick. These were not always to do with learning and studying. For example one young female student (final year History and Sociology) nearly left towards the end of the second year after being physically attacked by one of her housemates who had mental health problems but she described what kept her going. Gemma's story illustrates how determination is also linked to other factors:

I just think by the end of that I thought, oh I've managed that and still done relatively alright at the end of the year,. You know it can't actually get any worse can it, so yeah I stayed cause I thought I've already spent ten grand or something, you know, I don't wanna have to be paying that back out of a dead end job cause I've got no qualification at the end of it, it just seemed like such a waste after being in education for like, sixteen years or something, to just drop out at the last minute. It'll be alright.

Others experienced accommodation problems, missed leaving boyfriends behind at home or found it difficult to live away from home.

A high proportion of students interviewed at Kingston were from Black and Ethnic Minority backgrounds. All of these students appeared to have followed a fairly conventional, almost automatic, relatively unthinking pathway from school to university etc. – there was little evidence that they saw university as special or in a mythological/symbolic way (in contrast to mature students). Most appeared well integrated into the university although there was one Black British student, Della, who appeared to be a 'fish out of water':

it's boring, it's just, I don't know... everyone makes out University is the best time of your life, that's rubbish

She was what Reay et al (2005) call 'a contingent chooser':

for a stupid reason because I didn't research Universities enough and I didn't want to go out of London...I don't know, I just don't think I've thought about University, I just went oh okay then like, I didn't think about College, I think, okay like, it's like the next conventional step in a way

She had to commute quite a long distance to University, "I just hated the journey every day" and appeared to have very few social connections at the university in the first semester, "I only started talking to people in the second semester really....I just, I hated it, I just didn't know what to do". Although she missed a lot of work through not attending classes, she survived the first year, because of her strong instrumental/vocational motivation, "I know that (staying on at university) it's gonna be more erm, wage effective yeah" and with the help of her mother - "she's quite encouraging at stuff like, not pressure", along with the and the staff of the University Skill Centre,

there was this Skill Centre which I only used in the second Semester because I thought that was for work that I didn't understand but you know, I kind of know how.

She has a very instrumental approach to university study, having chosen her subject for very clear vocational and pragmatic reasons, "when asked "what do you hope for in the future?" She replied: *to be successful and not poor and to have a Chloe bag* (a very expensive handbag). In her second year, she moved into a shared house which helped her university integration, "yeah, I talk, I talk to more people.....(last year) I was just there, I was, just, a number.....now I'm more of student" but her commitment to university study was still sporadic and she failed two courses, Macro Economics and Maths, "now, Maths, I didn't go to the lectures, it was nine o'clock in the morning and I just could never get up".

Della, like a number of British Minority Ethnic (BME) students, had had early parental support, especially in Maths, very often from parents who had been immigrants and whose own English language was limited. Kandy, whose parents came from Vietnam, and was studying Accounting and Finance at Kingston had always enjoyed Maths from an early age:

My mum always kind of, every week, every Sunday, she used to give me a few, long multiplication things....I'd have to crack on with it really, just like say about ten sums to do every Sunday

Her Mum had always been supportive but couldn't speak English:

I think she felt disappointed that she couldn't help me with English and other subjects

Eric was another Black British young man, studying Architecture at Kingston, who had an early love of Maths, arising out of encouragement by his father whose earlier job in Ghana had been as a Maths teacher. Eric was another contingent chooser who came to Kingston largely by default. He was initially very enthusiastic about University work and did well but in his second year began to suffer from a lack of personal organisation:

I wasn't organising my time properly.....I really struggled in Maths and I did not understand what she was talking about in Maths, cause I used to miss a lot of Maths lessons due to going to football games that were, say, far away and stuff like that

In his second year he had to re-submit three modules out of nine largely due his lack of organisation allied to lack of active tutorial support:

...sometimes I'd do half a piece of work, then I'll go on to something else and do half of that, then I'll go on to something else and do half of thatI was all over the place in second year, all over the place.....I'd go to tutorials, she would tell me 'OK do this, this, this, this' but then it's like, it's like I would be stuck, I don't know why.

In contrast, none of the Southampton Solent first year students interviewed appeared to be 'fish out of water' – because of the nature of the sample interviewed (well connected to the University), they appeared to be very much 'in the swim' and had few problems adjusting to the University institutional habitus, although some students (mature and BME) were partly put off by the conventional/boozy Freshers' Week and by 'time wasters' in their early classes. Both British Muslim students came from a relatively liberal Westernised background but nevertheless still did not relate to some aspects of university life e.g. drinking, clubbing etc.

The main problems of adjustment were logistical e.g. fitting childcare alongside timetables for one mature female student and getting lecturers (not the university as a whole) to respond to the particular needs and circumstances of being severely partially sighted

Transitional Space

University is seen, for some, as a safe space as it is a space and an environment where they can escape, temporarily, from their lives outside, such as living on run down council estates (social housing). It offers a brief respite but also a space to reflect and aim towards moving out of their present situation by getting a 'better life'. A university education is seen as a tool for self-development and a means for developing a different identity while still remaining rooted to their working class roots. University is viewed as a place for transition in both academic and personal ways.

A number of first year students at Southampton Solent clearly saw university as a space to continue to develop and adapt a vocational identity/route they had already chosen. Not one of the first year students interviewed had come to university via the conventional route (school, A levels etc.). Because they had had time out, they had strong motivation, a growing vocational identity and a clear idea of what they wanted to study and where they wanted to go after their studies. This was particularly true for those previously or currently (while at university) involved in work related to their subject area.

Some, particularly those with a background of chequered schooling/education prior to HE, saw university as a safe space in which to develop a new identity. Others welcomed the diverse cultural life at university. Hettie, the asylum seeker from Ethiopia welcomed her transition to university life:

I love the environment in universities, you get to know many different peoples from different races.....I love the freedom....at the end of the day, it depends on you ...it's

your mark...you have to work hard at the end, to get your good grading to pass, yeah I love it, I enjoy doing it, yeah, yeah

One Muslim young woman, Samira, also welcomed her transition to university as a way of escaping her family and schooling background. At one school she had been “too Asian for everyone else” and at the next “not Asian enough”, and later she got involved with a white English boyfriend, something her parents didn’t approve of at all. She welcomed the open and diverse culture of the University and the chance to create a new identity:

...it is amazing, I do love my course, it’s better than I thought it would be.....everything is perfect here, erm,....people are shocked that I’m not surrounding myself by Asians and Muslims.

Students: ‘non-completers’

The adult students who dropped out did so for different reasons. One was a part-time student who had retired but wanted to keep his brain active and learn for learning sake. His wife became seriously ill and he has had to become her constant carer. He would like to return to complete his studies in history but doesn’t feel that this will be possible. However, he has kept in contact with staff at Warwick. Another student, a woman, taking a ‘2+2 Social Studies degree’ dropped out at the beginning of the final term of her final year. Throughout her career as a student she had always had panic attacks during the exam period and felt that she would have been ok if there was all assessed work instead. Exams made her feel pressurised. She decided to leave because she thought that she would fail her exams and stated that she felt much happier once she had left but felt that she had still gained from studying and enjoyed doing it. She had also had to do paid work while studying for financial reasons and this had put another pressure on her and felt that she had had no free time for four years. She had been offered a postgraduate course in Careers Guidance at Coventry University. Another female part-time student studying English and Cultural Studies also left because she could not cope with doing exams:

I think it’s been really good here. I think the fact that I’m giving up, the formal degree course, is more about myself, than, really any fault with the system. I think it’s a shame that there aren’t higher level courses that an adult student could take without necessarily having to do exams.

The students who dropped out also stated that they had benefited from the learning. One woman who left in her third year because she could not face doing exams said that she had no negative feelings about doing the degree and added that she would have completed it if it had been fully assessed. She feels that the experience has changed her in terms of being more confident and she looks at ‘things’ in a different way and is able to discuss issues in more depth. Jenny explained and reflected:

I do feel knowledgeable. I feel very privileged to have actually done that. I’m pleased with myself that I did well in the first year. I’m not cross but sad that events took the course they did and in a way I know myself, I know very well that the confidence issue would have been awful, would have become a problem. I really don’t think I could have resolved that one. ...I’ve reflected a lot as you can appreciate. I think Open Studies (pre degree courses) was more my bag. Maybe trying to do a degree was a little bit too ambitious but then on the other hand I think no Jenny you did well in the first year. There’s no reason to think you wouldn’t, as time went on. I’ll never know.

Jenny's story illustrates the interplay of factors which can lead students to not complete. She was in her late fifties and studying a degree in Health and Social Studies part-time. Despite a 'brilliant first year' she then chose a module which she struggled with and as it was taught during the daytime she studied with younger students which she found difficult. She stressed that 'I was out of my depth'. The class and age differences undermined her confidence and she felt 'extremely marginalised'. She took temporary withdrawal and had intended to return but:

I started to get butterflies and cold feet. I was full of self- doubt. It's the confidence thing and having to take a seminar (presentation) would just fill me with dread. I knew that there was always going to be a problem and I think I talked myself out of it. I also fell ill that year. But I miss the learning very much but I don't miss the pressure.

She decided to withdraw from her degree despite encouragement from staff for her to return. She said: 'I was very sad to go. I still am. It's been a very difficult time in my personal life'. At home Jenny felt that her husband 'was very understanding but at the same time I think he would have preferred if I hadn't done it'.

Some of the younger students mentioned that one or two students had dropped out from their degree course. One Psychology student said that a few people dropped out because of the stress of work, including a student who achieved first class marks. She reported that his friends felt that he was a lot happier for dropping out. One of her friends left because of mental health problems and was sectioned after taking an overdose. Another Psychology student mentioned that one of her friends nearly dropped out at the end of the first year because she did not get on with the people in her halls of residence. She also missed her boyfriend but dealt with it by putting everything into her work and worked very hard. Other students mentioned that some students left because they struggled with the work, failed to hand assignments in or failed end of year exams. For others in the elite university it was a class issue as they left to enter a local university where there were more working class students.

Of those interviewed at Solent, two had left for personal/family reasons, one had become estranged from her family and so lost all financial support and one to find full-time work and enough income in order that her husband was able to come to the UK from Pakistan. She had felt at home in the University and expressed the desire to come back some time when her family and financial circumstances allowed. One 60 year old man dropped out because he was diagnosed with a life threatening illness and one young woman left because she felt "discouraged and insulted" by the "degrading" behaviour of one tutor whom she felt had written her off at an early stage and who had actually told her to "fuck off the course" when she had been late home during a study trip. She still owed the University over £500 in fees. She was thinking of making a formal complaint about him. Interestingly, another student referred to the same lecturer as:

a legend.....he completely, really cares about his students and you can tell that, and so by him caring and stuff, he sort of drags you through it or pushes you through it.

Students: ‘drop-outs’ who returned

Students who dropped out and then returned did so for personal or health reasons. One part-time student left for two years due to stress. She is not a confident adult learner and finds it difficult in seminars with younger students who are confident. She also had serious problems with noisy neighbours and this took a long time to resolve through the authorities. She couldn't cope with the stress of doing a degree, working and the housing problem. On returning she said that:

I felt ready to come back but then again I had all the problems of getting back into study so it's been a struggle. My whole degree from start to finish has been a big struggle. I've found it very difficult.

Another 2+2 Health and Welfare also took a year out because of health reasons and described how she felt on returning:

At first I was thinking maybe I won't be able to continue at all but as soon as I started to feel better I really missed the process. It's like somebody took a bit of me- your life away and you don't know what to fill it with. So the second six months of the year was spent looking forward to coming back. I was raring to go again by the time I came back but I think once you're back in it you're up and down all the time. You have good weeks and you have more difficult weeks...I think it's something about your own personal status. You've started it so you've got to finish it. If you don't finish it you're a failure. Not that anybody would say that to you but you personally would feel a failure.

She also had minimal support for her studies from her husband as she explained: ‘he allows me to continue ...as long as it doesn't interfere with his life’. Another who had become estranged from her family at a young age, eventually re-entered university after two years of working and continued to fund herself through working full-time.

In theory, as most universities now operate within modular credit curriculum frameworks, it should be possible to leave one university and go to another at a later date, taking their ‘credits’ with them. In practice, the modules making up the framework change quite rapidly, and even one year out can make a significant difference. Apart from having to study with a new cohort of students, the issues that led to temporary suspension of study may not have entirely gone away. More support might be necessary in making both the decision to leave temporarily as well as re-induction into the programme a year or so later. Often, there are restrictions on when a student can return, and even within semesterised and modular structures there are limitations on when students are able to return to study, and what they are then able to study on returning. The financial implications of taking temporary leave are often complex. In one case, the student was ready to return in a few weeks, but it was administratively inconvenient and the student was not permitted to return until the beginning of the following academic year. The flexibility of higher education for non-traditional students' needs to be enhanced to ensure that these students can achieve to their maximum potential, regardless of the disadvantages they bring with them into higher education.

Conclusion

Entering higher education for non-traditional students – both younger and adult – can be a daunting and risky business but also an important one in terms of self- development and

change. Despite the struggles such as health issues, finance and academic issues, most succeed through their determination. For some, particularly adult students, it is about not wanting to go back to who they were before they entered university and wanting to improve life for themselves and their family. Many, both younger and adult students, talked about how they had changed, for example, being more confident, more knowledgeable and viewing the world in a more critical way rather than taking it for granted. At the same time the adult students, while recognising that they had changed wanted to 'hang on' to their working class roots. Class was also an important issue for the younger students and, like the adult students, was a strong part of their identity, and for some, ethnicity as well. Institutional support at different levels was seen as being important in helping them to keep on going on and fitting in with the cultural and intellectual capitals of the university. While some departments and individual lecturers and personal tutors are good at offering support it is not coherent across whole institutions.

For all the students peer, institutional and family support was critical in helping them to develop their learner identity and keeping them going so that they completed.

The Student Experiences: Germany

Peter Alheit, Frank Schoemer & Kathrin Rheinlander

Introduction

The German analysis of the student interview data tries to explain the basic idea behind the conceptual model of the study careers of non-traditional students within a ‘transitional space’ of learning experiences by drawing on theoretical ideas taken from both Pierre Bourdieu and Norbert Elias (and – covertly – from Donald Winnicott). A further theoretical development will be connected to these considerations based on the interpretation of two biographical case studies presented as examples of a clustering strategy as far as our overall sample is concerned.

Conceptualisation

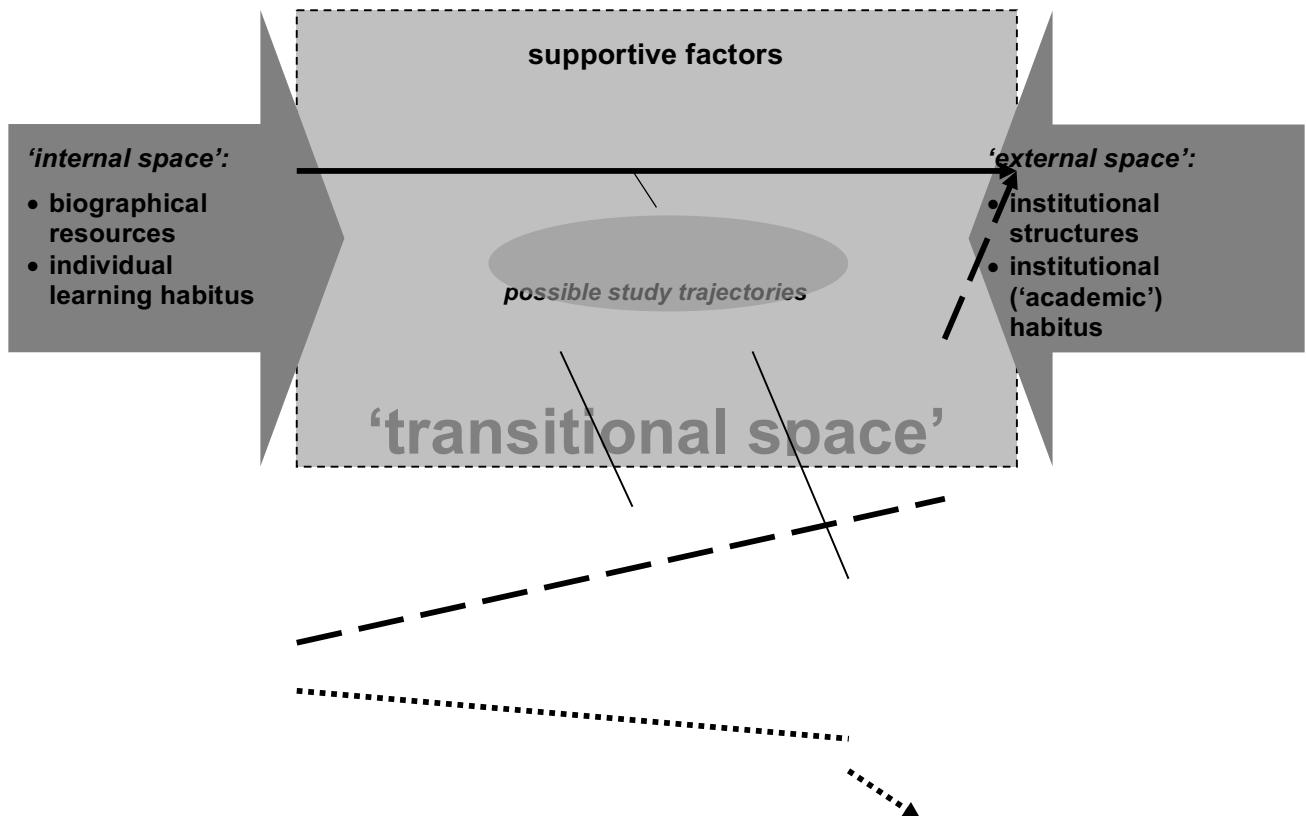
Since the beginning of the research process we have tried to answer the following question ‘*What is the basic constellation of non-traditional students’ study careers?*’ At a first glance the answer seemed to be rather simple: A non-traditional learner aims *to get access* to the institution of HE. He/she must *show certain retention potential* to accomplish the study period and to *verify a definable success* or – alternatively – a *drop-out career*. Obviously there are different factors influencing possible study/learning careers: such as *biographical resources* on one side and *institutional conditions* on the other. However, both constellations can operate with positive or negative effects – so that the ‘learning space’ which has to be crossed during the study period (the ‘*transitional space*’ according to Winnicott) could function as a supportive or a constrictive environment. More than this the space can be considered as a *field of tensions* where different study trajectories are thinkable and indeed possible. Depending on firstly, biographical resources which create a specific individual learning habitus and secondly, institutional structures characterised by a certain institutional/academic habitus so that different study trajectories can be identified. (We are talking about institutional structures and not just ‘academic structures’ because those influences could also be linked to other types of institutions such as educational institutions, institutions in the labour market or institutions of the health system etc.

As we are interested in the basic reasons for a successful or respectively ineffective study career, we argue that the ‘transitional space’ we are thinking of is ‘spanned’ vertically between *supportive* versus *risk factors* – just to identify the opposite poles. And since we adopt the concept of ‘transitional space’ (Winnicott), we are conscious about the fact that it is only a symbolic use. We share the idea of prior and later experiences of individuals creating a space of transitional learning, however, we concentrate on the learning of adults rather than going back to the early development of childhood. Our main interest lies in the fact that non-traditional students usually meet the university with a special learning habitus which often comes into conflict with the dominant ‘academic habitus’ of HE protagonists causing a certain feeling of otherness and strangeness.

For the development of a study career it is crucial how the ‘*internal space*’ of a single student meets the ‘*external space*’ of the academic institution. To put it more concretely: how the bargaining processes between the two ‘spaces’ actually proceed. This is the reason why we do not finish with the question of how the student matches into the institutional frames,

but rather how those bargaining processes influence the life course of the particular student. So it could even be possible that a decision to drop-out by a student is not necessarily a drastic defeat but possibly a new personal chance. The following figure tries to explain the dynamics and tensions in the described ‘transitional space’:

Fig. 1: Model of the ‘transitional space’



It is easy to reconstruct from the model presented here that it derives from Bourdieu’s theoretical thinking (especially from his concept of ‘*habitus*’ and his idea of the ‘*social space*’ or, even more precisely: the ‘*social field*’) with its conceptual basic idea of powerful dynamics and relational positioning. However, it is also linked to Elias’ idea of ‘*social figurations*’. In addition, the ‘Winnicott metaphor’ of transition is also relevant and allows the imagination of different and even astonishing and unexpected ‘*study trajectories*’. However, the open hypothesis of handling our case studies (and, of course, not just the two presented here) is to place them into a figurative structure which is supposed to be typical for a German HE framework. The configurations in other national cultures may dramatically differ from the German one, but they also form characteristic figurations.

Two case studies

To illustrate our analysis and the research results we selected two case studies which are specifically ‘significant’ as they represent contrasting characteristics and constitutive figurations of the German sample. Although both of the cases are taken from the traditional university sample does not touch the rationale of our selection. The preference of other cases from the two other types of HE institutions would have been possible.

First case study: ‘Paul’ – The benefits of a middle class background which allows detours

Paul’s family belongs to a left wing milieu (so-called ‘68rs’ in Germany) and who drifted to a risky radical left position in the late 1970s (‘German Herbst’). The ‘chaotic family conditions’ as Paul is defining them, seem to fit to the context of ‘free love’, ‘sexual revolution’ etc. Paul’s older sister is from a different father, and Paul is influenced heavily by the companion/partner (his stepfather, a physician) of his mother. The influence of his stepfather was stronger than the influence of his biological father (who was established in his own right as an inventor of small technical pieces of equipment and as a political activist. The political activism had an influence on Paul at an early age and this did not always lead to a positive outcome (particularly with the humanistic Gymnasium Paul attended). Not only did Paul have problems in Latin class, but he also had an “authority problem”. So he switched to a secondary school and embarked on a complex path to his university studies. After secondary school he attended a technical (vocational) school (which he dropped out of after one year). This was followed by an apprenticeship / vocational training for heating and ventilation engineers and then he went on to complete his civil service in a children’s hospital and after completed his high school credits at a technical vocational high school. This was then followed by an internship in Africa, including a job as a bartender before he completed a second training as an emergency medical technician (paramedic). Paul points out that when confronted with decisions, he sometimes chose the *more difficult* path. At 28 he then began his studies in medicine. But he had to wait, however, for three semesters because of his not so stellar high school grade point average of 2.6 (2.6/1.0) and because of the entrance interviews for the university.

The “defining experience” is at first sight, the Civil Service:

And um, I then got this civil service done, it was such a formative experience at the children’s ward. I would say that when you see the small children and the plight of the families and the diseases, then it is easy for one to reflect and to see one’s life and the lives of others from a totally different perspective. So, for me it really was, in a sense, an expansion of consciousness. And although I am not anymore, before (this experience) I was often very easily frustrated and annoyed and I know that I had such an aggression in me. I cannot tell you where it came from, but it was partially aggression against society and against everything [...] All of this somehow changed as a result of this experience in the civil service. I don’t know, maybe it changed as a result of getting older. After this experience I would wake up in the morning a little bit differently. I would see more sunshine (smile) and so this experience was very formative. And then it was clear to me...my decision was foolproof, okay, I am going to study medicine. That is what I am going to do. That is what makes me complete [...]

But it is also important to note that the civil service will be completed in a *particular context* and is also associated with something:

And there I stood with the decision before me: I either do my civil service with meals on wheels (in this I would have an easy job, a car and pocket money) or I could work with my stepfather in the pediatric intensive care unit at the University Hospital in some big city. Then I thought to myself: okay, don't take the easy way, go with the experience you will gain by working at the pediatric intensive care unit. [...]

[...] That is what makes me complete, where all of my political, oral and philosophical thoughts and intentions somehow come together. So, I always liked to read philosophical books about evolution or the Big Bang (Theory). I received books from my stepfather and books from my father and these somehow had a big influence on me. One also has to say that my father was a very politically engaged person as well as my stepfather. My stepfather was always a little extraordinary in that he graduated from high school (secondary school) with perfect marks (1.0/1.0), then studied at a humanities school in Z-city. He somehow did the elite thing and lived there for a short time but then he left because he did not want to do it anymore. And so it came to be that no matter what happens, I want to study medicine.

After an apparently botched beginning of his school career, Paul uses his second chance to start again. It was at this fortunate point for Paul that the entry into the medical field at the pediatric intensive care unit (via his civil service) came together with the beneficial influence of his stepfather. This is significant in that it acted not only as the *embodiment* of a socially prestigious profession, but (like his biological father) it opened up Paul's interest in the *world of books*. This *middle-educated atmosphere* interestingly combined the humanities and natural sciences with political components. A certain amount of resistance to the arrogance of humanistic education (which is reflected in the step-father), fits well with the practical and concrete objectives, the technical medical terms and content and the political engagement (of the university) that were so commonly characterised since the start of Paul's studies. By his second semester he had already started his doctoral thesis (in which he would bring together technical and medical aspects) and he was also a member of the faculty in his field.

Apart from the semantic content it is obvious that the somewhat *hereditary position* is of great importance for the successful fit of a person to the subject and to the institution of the university. His parents have given him *freedom* to follow his own path (an openness to different detours and areas of interest). They also have given him a basic message to remember as he follows his path. This is evident, for example, when Paul comes to speak about his method of learning. Unlike one of his roommates, who tries desperately to understand every possible technical term and so the reading and learning constantly block themselves in the process, Paul has found a more associative method to learning large quantities of material and facts. He has the secure feeling that to master medicine one must not force oneself to learn the facts. He never had to work hard to express himself. In principle, he has taken the most important message from his home environment and understood it: a kind of *upper-class habit*, which gave him the freedom to *selectively associate* and deal with the material. This *sovereignty*, which was supplemented by the concrete experiences as a paramedic enables him (Paul) to enjoy the study of medicine. Paul in fact made what many of classmates viewed as challenging (study of medicine) *look easy* and to the point that one could rapidly succeed even at the highest level (PhD, research).

His academic success is indeed influenced by the *bourgeois home background*. We know from a previous research project (Goettingen research team) that the number of non-

traditional students coming from the *upper middle class of society* is somewhat large compared to students from other socio-economic and socio-cultural backgrounds in Germany (this can be demonstrated particularly in the case of the distance-learning universities).

Second case study: ‘Ingrid’ – An assumed ‘drop-out’

The story of Ingrid is one that contrasts with Paul’s educational background in many ways. It proved very useful and revealing to note that interviews were carried out with her on three separate occasions over the course of nine months. This helps to show a very convoluted and telling *development* for Ingrid. The individual mental processes and social-structural mechanisms that are visible go beyond the individual case and thus provide information on the general structural principles of the German higher education system and in particular about *the new degree programs* (BA and MA studies). The starting point is more of a *social low* in a rural context, namely the *petty rural bourgeoisie*:

[...] because my family budget was more or less relatively low, there was much that I really just could not do [...]

Ingrid’s mother was a professional saleswoman and her father was a car mechanic (now working as a delivery driver).

It is striking, however – especially for how typical it is in the stories of (educational) climbers – that from the start Ingrid’s story focuses mainly on the *formal* education level (the informal/private aspects are mentioned only when requested by the interviewer). This kind of self-representation is also reflected in the following passage in which the *distance to education* (indifference towards education) in their home environment is to some extent addressed:

And, yes, then I went to J-city elementary school, then to the orientation stage and high school in R-city but then after the eleventh grade or the completion of the eleventh grade, I decided that I wanted to drop out of school and start a vocational training program. I wanted to do this because I thought that I would not study anyway. No one in my family had ever studied and this could lead to them talking bad about someone (because the person ends up only as an educated taxi driver, etc. – in their mind).

Even before the chosen educational path is *broken*, there are hints that it may happen. To understand the social context, some further information must be mentioned:

[...] Yes, so in a way I was raised to be a little more fearful of things with thoughts such as: “do not do that, it is much too dangerous” or “the world is bad”. This came more from my father’s side.[...]

The parents have been separated for about a year. In particular, through Ingrid’s remarks, the father is revealed again and again as *keeping a distance*. She contradicts him often “badly” and understands very well why her mother has separated from him. In the last interview Ingrid mentioned that her father has fallen short of *financially* supporting her, although he has had to fulfill certain obligations even in this respect. As can be seen here there are many details that seem to play with each other, creating a totally different structure of chances than was seen in Paul’s case. In essence, this difference can be summarised in the different early-mediated habitual disposition: the facilitation of open spaces (in Paul’s case) is an appeal

against caution (in Ingrid's case); or even better stated is the following: *Detours / experimentation versus Fear / need for security.*

It is quite amazing and extraordinary on Ingrid's part that in spite of the *complex structural barriers* in the German education system, Ingrid succeeded in plunging herself into a similar high-ranking and exclusive field of study like Paul. After her departure from high school (ie, with the middle school completed) she concluded a three-year course as a biological laboratory technician and was placed second in her state (which earns her a small stipend for training purposes) and then by repeating the technical college takes *the university entrance exam* – another feature of the education system here – and earns a place to study molecular medicine. Prior to her application to study she had hesitated a bit (caution / security needs), because to begin her studies she had to give up her “stable job” as a laboratory technician. Although the prospect of only 20 students (out of 500 applicants) receiving a place to study were rather slim, she managed (at the age of 23) to get into university. In spite of this success, Ingrid is still remarkably modest - even the happy moments are marked by cautious restraint. Structurally, this narrative may have something to do with the gesture of *disillusionment / disappointment* that is expressed in the very first sequence of the study:

Yes, then when the study began I was a little bit disappointed, I must say, because it was different than I had imagined it. This was because this field of study only existed since the year 2--- and its content is even now not that well structured. Every year there are new changes and no year has done the same thing as the year before and so there is quite a mess and there are always changes going on. Although I did know that it would not be easy, I did not imagine that one would be put under so much time pressure, mark pressure and everything else.

And I also thought that one would at least have a little free time (laughter), a little maybe on the weekend, at least one day somewhere...but you have none. And if you do nothing, then you have a guilty conscience because you do nothing and the other students (who are still in the non-bachelor/master-system) think that you are completely crazy for doing so much for the university. But there really is no other way and this and I have even noticed that this also affects my health a little, too.

[...] Even since last Easter, I noticed what I think might be Tinnitus on one side of me...at least that is how it looks. And it seems to not want to go away. It is stress-induced and (coughs) and because you really cannot get any peace (because you are always thinking, “I have to do something”). I cannot see my boyfriend (laughing) or even spend time with him even though we have lived together in the University City since January of 2---. He is doing his Magister (masters) in German and History and has a much easier time than I. Because of this he seems to not be able to quite understand why I always have so much to do. Actually, he understands that I have a lot to do, but he had hoped that I would also be able to make a little time for him and in general for other social activities. In principle one really only seems to know people they meet while studying. Of course a person goes out every now and again in the evening., but his is more or less the exception now.

[...] And, yes, I somehow hope that I can really take something with me and now I do have a little bit of everything, but I forget so much so quickly because I am already moving on to the next thing.

[...] And, now I have also noticed that a total of three (3) people have Tinnitus (laughter), which is kind of funny.[...] And there is another who is always back and forth and somehow never really seems to be healthy, I think (cough).

These passages provide a very vivid and quite authentic description of the many institutional changes and readjustments that result to the new courses (BA and MA studies). What seems at first sight like a subjective emotional state, as an expression of disappointment, is at second glance a surprise at the lack of structure and disorientation of the institutional designers. Ingrid compares her study experiences with the traditional form of study of a friend and the exchange of experiences with other students. By connecting structure-based considerations with everyday experiences or physical injury, she creates already in her second study term the question of whether it would be better to cancel the studies and to leave the academic world:

So I had originally thought about in the second half to stop, hm, also had made ready to go then back to work. But then it was, indeed, in the third term, but then people say, everything should become much more practical and much more interesting in the following terms.

The relevance of practical for many non-traditional students who have previously gained experience in a specific professional field is an essential reference point. Like them, Ingrid studied long in vain for these practical implications in the study. Through her involvement in the inner part of the academic field - ie, as a student assistant in a world-famous research institute and then in a department of the university hospital - she looks at the advanced students and teachers and realises that it is important to write essays (possibly in highly ranked journals). But she feels that to be the exact opposite of practice and her ideas of professional planning.

Laboratory work had always been what she was most interested in and what she enjoyed. So she plans to quit her studies by the end of the fourth term. First and foremost, the health-related considerations are also a reason ending her studies early. In another passage she tells of a beep in her ear, and a psychotherapist diagnosed a mental situation even close to burnout and depression. Ingrid considers these diagnoses wrong, but comes to the conclusion that studying is not healthy. From an analytical perspective, it is astonishing that she remains in a modest critical position in view of her body experiences and other disease symptoms, which accounts for a certain gallows humour:

And, now I have also noticed that a total of three (3) people have Tinnitus (laughter), which is kind of funny.[...] And there is another who is always back and forth and somehow never really seems to be healthy, I think (cough)

Common sense tells her that the current academic system is not 'healthy'. It seems to be quite remarkable in this context that she brings the concept of abandonment into play. In the first contact with our project, when we tried to find 'drop-outs', she defined herself as an 'abandoning student' although she would complete her BA. In her first interview she explained that in to the labour market the 'Bachelor in sciences' counts almost as nothing. In the second interview, she clarified again: *'With the Bachelor you are neither one thing nor the other.'*

To get a job as a molecular medical student, one must have the Masters, or even a doctorate. Although she suggested that the market has changed and that she knows from inquiries that

the 'combination of my education and the Bachelor' opens up opportunities for a position in the industry, she remains in her self-definition an 'abandoning student' which seems to be a sort of self-stigmatisation. If she entered into a company, she would work there again only as a laboratory technician. This explanation seems confusing, because she really wants to go back to laboratory work. Probably there is a hidden status reference problem behind this.

However, in the laboratory, she could have worked without this. Ingrid has quite an institutional knowledge: usually you do the PhD in her field, and she was among her fellow students the only one that planned to drop out so early. But what makes it suspicious, is still that she adds there could be a situation (particularly when she fails in getting a job in the industry) that she would apply for the master degree programme. Here we can see that despite everything she really wants to achieve more.

In the third interview, she then reports on her successful completion of the bachelor thesis and on her current master programme. She wrote the BA thesis in another field of research for a new boss and realised that the studying is actually fun. For her BA thesis she could also intensively work in the lab and the topic of her research was also much more interesting. Her grades improved as well. She had in the meantime applied for several positions in industry and was interviewed. And there is real chance of a position in Switzerland, but she was told this would improve with a master's degree..

In addition, a lecturer within the university advised her to continue. The crucial thing, however, is that the atmosphere and the circumstances in their field of work has improved significantly. Ingrid is now a research assistant. The Masters' programme which was stressful during the first seven weeks (at this stage she was deciding to stay or to leave), has improved. Ingrid now finds writing essays easier and she is no longer dissatisfied with her studies, In the first interview, she describes her learning organisation:

I need for such things then maybe even a little bit longer, just to keep things in the right way, because, actually, I'm more a person who makes notes of things I'm learning, even if I read a book, I'm writing down what I got (laughter), so it's important for me just to fix somehow what should rest in my brain (smile) and, hm, I mean, this doesn't work in the first round but it is so, a first preliminary work and then I learn even just with my notes [...] and not with the book [...] - I need some way to have a sort of personal preparation [...] and then of course still invested so much time and receive then still rather mediocre or even bad results, but by the end you have indeed passed the exam, perhaps with grade 3,7 or something like that, not good at all - and this is sometimes a bit discouraging but [...]

This shows that Ingrid initially found learning hard and this differs from Paul's learning experiences. While Paul seems to grasp things easily, Ingrid needs a lot of time and effort but had improved by the third interview. Even the health problems have now disappeared. The crucial fact is that the working atmosphere has dramatically changed so she feels good. A congenial atmosphere of this appears as a kind of internal equivalent of a functioning and balanced exterior. For Ingrid it is now possible to negotiate between the 'internal' and the 'external space'. She appears as a person having arrived at her particular place. The study forecast for Ingrid therefore is now positive, although there remain some uncertainties.

Conclusion

In essence, the two case stories show very different forms of accessing the academic world. Paul shows, despite or rather because of his detours, soon after the entry into the study a remarkable competence to navigate the system. The cultural capital he brings represents an important asset. He can move confidently in different areas of university life. His ‘cool-experimental’ and also ‘pragmatic’ and goal-oriented attitude guarantees space for the intellectual interests and will probably lead him successfully through the medical school.

In Ingrid’s case the way to university is interrupted several times and more and her family background hinder her. She has to find her own abilities and desires even in the face of unfavourable external conditions. Things are less available for her compared with Paul. Tools are missing. Ways are ‘narrower’ than for Paul. While Paul finds already early relatively open spaces in the academic field, Ingrid must actually create her own spaces first. For this reason she is forced to distance herself from her family background just to create spaces. And in her studies she has to find ways and strategies to overcome theoretical challenges and to create links to the academic universe.

Factors which promote or constrain the access, retention and non-completion of non-traditional students to higher education

This section briefly summaries the key findings from all the interviews.

Promoting factors:

- ambition
 - as a fundamental impulse to do something ‘meaningful’ (symptomatic is the often repeated expression: ‘no interest to do the same profession for 40 years’)
 - as strategic orientation (‘to climb up – personally or professionally’).
- support from friends, classmates, or peers, who can pass on instructions / knowledge about studying, the academic culture, on learning or crisis management, but also on leisure time and everyday life
- family support especially in emotional-motivational terms
- or in the absence of support of this type: the inner strength, just by distancing oneself from their non-educated family background in order to focus on studying
- support of the partner (common arrangement in matters of profession, finance, child care, budget, etc.)
- cultural capital of various kinds
 - linguistic competence (standard language, foreign languages)
 - mathematical competence (for certain subjects most important)
 - historical competence (such as knowledge on the background of cultural practices)

- religious competence (as knowledge and attitude: e.g. ‘protestant ethic’, a ‘pietistic staining’ or similar)
 - knowledge of institutional procedures / rules
 - political competence (integration in a political group / organization, activity in student politics)
 - physical / behavioral competence ([self-] civilization, self-discipline, sovereignty, etc.)
 - distancing competence / reflexivity (already in the way of speaking distance can be signaled, e.g. by means of irony, black humor, etc.)
 - learning experience (best precondition: having learned how to learn)
 - soft skills
- sponsorship / godparent structures (usually a teacher or mentor, but also a relative or other type of promoter)
 - support-systems (subject-oriented, psycho-therapeutic, medical, employment based, etc.)

Constraining factors:

- lack of cultural capital / educationally disadvantaged
- lack of self- confidence, inferiority feelings (often based on social background)
- bad advice offered by the university (especially related to the subject of study)
- high standards in the study curriculum (especially concerning mathematical competence in economics, sociology, engineering, biology – consequences are in the new bachelor degree programmes: psychological health problems such as stress or burnout, etc.)
- ongoing mediation between theory and practice or between work and study (usually strong preference for practical aspects)
- problems of compatibility of study - student jobs / work - family - leisure time
- partnership problems if the partner is active in a totally different professional area
- financial problems (student funding credits, child support, student jobs, student fees, borrowing, etc)
- other-directedness (often by relatives), also co-dependence (e.g. alcohol problem of close relatives).

What promotes or limits the construction of learner identity of non-traditional students to become effective learners and which enables or inhibits completion of higher education

Important factors:

- motivation for study (career, search for meaning, self-realization, self-transformation etc)
- parental advice (i.e. parents pass certain ‘messages’ / educational attitudes to their children, for example in the form of career advancement)
- previous experience in the education system – linked to the recognition issue (Honneth): important attachment figures: parents, teachers, classmates)
- emotional and thematic links to previous work experiences
- but also illusory or even utopian ideas about career opportunities / objectives
- handling of age difference to the other (usually younger) students
- ability to organise the learning / learning process (very different preferences: from single-learning at home to group learning in the library)
- handling of (biographical) crises (range: from defense to reflexive response)
- handling of personal conversions / transformations (with trajectory potential)
- academic institutional framing: spatial, institutional and campus architecture, cultural spaces (meeting places, cafes, bistros, etc.), flexibility of the teaching offers such as offering preparatory courses, tutor and mentoring systems, supportive or exclusive teacher habits, inclusive versus exclusive ‘habitus’ of the other institutional representatives (counselors, secretaries, etc.)
- opportunities / proficiency for employment as a student assistant / scientific employee – just to identify with the subject or to get a closer connection to the academic world
- opportunities for a limited ‘time-off’ (sickness, crisis), also offers to study abroad (as an expansion of the professional and personal horizon)

What kind of policy, cultural and institutional processes, including disciplinary subcultures can help or hinder completion

- *financing*: financial problems exist at different levels: tuition fees, long-term tuition fees, student finance loans, age-related receipt of child benefit (for the parents of students), student funding credits (strict time rules); recalcitrant parents; leaking reserves / savings (mostly from vocational training or military service) in crises or illness, etc.

- *institutional and academic barriers*: high curricular requirements starting with the first semester (especially in sciences and engineering), which are realised by non-traditional students without high school degree often as a sort of ‘cultural shock’; inflexible and overlapping courses, conflicting information from the various advisory bodies (general student counseling, course guidance, lecturers); the ‘symbolic world’ of the university (‘powerful’ architecture, hierarchically structured space and seating arrangements, linguistic behaviour, special dress codes, etc.), academic and scientific ‘habitus’ of the lecturers; bureaucratic habits at the administrative level (especially in the finance sector)
- *learning organisation / learning environment*: very different needs and expectations, how and where learning should take place (at home, in the library, alone, in different sized groups of learners in the virtual space (moodle), supported by tutors (mentors, etc.); individually different is the use of and the satisfaction with distance learning systems (those who are not satisfied might have less frequently reported for an interview)
- *combination of different areas of life*: the study has created a very different role for non-traditional students, e.g. for career-oriented it is the main area of life, for others familiar aspects are more in the foreground (i.e. older students with children or single parents); the study may also take a lower rank in the daily lives of non-traditional students when they are engaged in hobbies, politics or sport activities; the ability to combine the study with student jobs (in particular because of the recent increase of tuition fees) seems to be noticeably difficult, the ongoing preferring of the ‘normal’ student (young, full-time, self-directed) which is still the dominant notion of the institutional representatives at presence universities remains problematic because it prevents others required changes in supply (in terms of part-time studies, weekend courses, etc.)
- *vocational integration*: particularly the relationship between the workplace and the university may confront non-traditional students with considerable difficulties, for instance, many of them try to follow at weekends or during the holidays to the limits of their mental-physical capacity professional activities (including those from financial-economic need) and some non-traditional students in distance education conceal their study enrolment from their employers (they are concerned that employers and colleagues would suppose that this fact could negatively affect the motivation to work; the global financial crisis has led to restrictions with some non-traditional students who are self-employed - consequences are time-out periods in their studies.

What are the structural, cultural and personal dialectics of learning and agency in students’ lives?

- *biographical resources / experiences*: Higher Education research underestimates usually the importance of multi-layered experiences of non-traditional students before studying for the degree of success; the difference between the cultural capital of the milieu of origin and the anticipated knowledge / skills which have to be dealt with by

many of these students while other non-traditional students, however, are succeeding in using early-practiced skills for their studies.)

- *school experiences*: a majority of the students talked about negative experiences with teachers, here are mentioned personal as well as collective misconduct (insults, social prejudices, personal antipathies, etc.); the overwhelmingly negative experiences of these students with the German education system point to a complex problem situation, but also motivating and supporting teachers are addressed; interesting is the evaluation of the different types of schools: for example, the grammar schools are described predominantly negatively compared with the comprehensive schools; striking is the almost consistently positive assessment of the college schools and the evening schools (second chance to gain the 'Abitur'); a lot of non-traditional students have, for the first time, a positive learning experience, and often non-traditional students recommend an abolition of the tripartite school system in Germany.
- *vocational experiences*: professional training is a kind of life experience, an advantage over younger students without professional training; not seldom, however, a preference for the practice linked to this fact creates an emotional-cognitive obstacle in the confrontation with subject-related theory during the study.
- *life wisdom / 'life intelligence'*: in some cases, it seems to come to a more or less random accumulation of (dramatic) events / experiences that might lead to a certain reflexive processing by the non-traditional students and to a modified view – crises, diseases, detours, errors, drug experiences, etc., can in this sense certainly generate a kind of life wisdom, which has a useful impact on the study and the further life, whereat the treatment is usually stimulated just by studying.
- *learning / transformation*: especially in the first two semester terms non-traditional students often have difficulties to find a successful learning approach. They try out what is best for them (experimenting with forms of learning) and most non-traditional students prefer learning at home but equally important are fellow students or friends who support and accompany this learning (through literature tips, advise for courses and learning events, etc.). Occasionally strategically organised forms of learning are mentioned (language learning in tandem settings with native speakers , group learning on exams, etc.), often are important self-transformations described (positive and negative) for example the specialisation in specific areas of interest, the broadening of the own the horizon, a growing distance from partner / relatives because of a mental-intellectual development.

What are the benefits for self and society of participating in learning in HE, whether or not study is completed?

Individual benefits:

- development / correction / realisation of earlier life wishes
- discovery and forming of new wishes / plans / goals
- multifaceted personality extension (intellectual-cognitive broadening horizons, confidence / self- esteem)

- development of social skills (soft skills, independence, empathy, power, inter-subjective exchange)
- knowledge skills (practical and theoretical knowledge, scientific methods, expertise, intellect, reflexivity; in a few cases: immersion in academia - however, it is interesting that non-traditional students, even if they take good tests, do imagine only very rarely a career in the academic field)
- learning to learn skills (training of new forms of learning, creating an own organisation of learning, discovery of collective and interactive educational settings, self-discipline / self-objectification)
- biographical learning (integration of past and recent experiences, reworking of crisis experience, biographical reflexivity)
- new perspective and assessment of the immediate and wider social environment, a critical attitude to social conditions / structures
- job-related competences (options for senior or management positions, complex tasks, etc.)
- status-related skills (higher reputation in various areas of life, greater self-esteem, better access to socially recognised roles and positions (in political parties, trade unions, cultural areas, etc.)

Social benefits:

- non-traditionals sometimes modernise their partnership and / or family, which usually requires new arrangements and negotiation processes and involve as well the own children in study-related learning processes
- occasionally non-traditional students formulate actually messages which they want to pass to their own children, siblings, etc. (‘educational missions’)
- some lecturers express that their university life has become more interesting by working with non-traditional students

Non-traditional students often know very well that the German education system is socially little translucent compared with other national education systems. They express (especially in the finishing question of the interview) the consciousness that they have also recognized through the study experience what they could actually bring about through their particular experiences and perspectives for society (politically, innovatively, creatively, etc.).

The Student Experiences: Scotland

John Field & Natalie Morgan-Klein

Introduction

Scotland is a relatively small country, with a population estimated at 5,194,000. Population ageing represents a major challenge, and recent population growth has been largely due to net migration. There was a fall of 8 per cent between 1999 and 2009 in the under-16 age group, which is projected to lead to a particularly sharp fall in the number of 17-year olds between 2010 and 2019 (General Register Office for Scotland 2009, 7-9).

This report presents selected perspectives from the cluster of non-traditional students interviewed by the Stirling team. The sample of 83 came from undergraduates at three universities in Scotland: one specialist institution which is highly selective; one medium sized pre-1992 university; and one medium-large post-1992 university. The students cover a wide range of ages and socio-economic circumstances, and included mature students, single parents and students with disabilities; virtually all were the first generation of their family to enter higher education. Ethnically, however, most were white Europeans; among these, a number came from other European countries, including the Accession 8 nations, but the majority in our sample were Scots¹.

Higher education in Scotland has a very long history; the so-called ‘ancient universities’ are able to trace their roots back to the medieval period. As in many other countries, the system expanded rapidly between the 1960s and the 1990s, but in Scotland there is at least one highly distinctive feature. From the early 1990s, there was a particularly rapid growth in short cycle higher education, in the form of one or two year courses leading to a Higher National Certificate or Higher National Diploma; most short cycle higher education is provided in non-university institutions, and particularly by further education colleges (Gallacher 2009). Partly as a result of this rapid expansion, virtually all the students in our sample were first generation higher education entrants.

As in the other UK nations, access and participation have been widely debated in Scotland. Following the publication in 2005 of its policy review in wider participation, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) developed a programme of initiatives designed to strengthen prospects for students from deprived backgrounds, and identified a set of measures against which to judge progress. This included work on retention and achievement. Subsequently, SFC has monitored performance annually. The 2010 monitoring report noted that the proportion of pupils entering from schools in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods has continued to decline, and students from deprived areas are still most likely to discontinue their studies; it also noted that participation in higher education had declined steadily since 2001 (however, it has recovered recently, in the context of recession).

In 2010, the Scottish Government published a Green Paper on higher education, with a view to completing the consultation stage and announcing decisions after the outcome of the 2011 election. The Government stated that on the one hand ‘we have made steady progress to widen access’, and on the other it judged that widening access measures for the universities ‘have not produced the step change in participation that we would have liked’. Tuition fees

¹ We made particular efforts to recruit interviewees from minority ethnic groups; analysis of the 2001 census indicates that members of such groups comprised 2.1 per cent of Scotland’s population.

featured strongly in the 2011 Scottish Parliament elections, with all of the main parties but one affirming their support for the principle of free higher education for full-time undergraduates from Scotland.

The Importance of Higher Education for Non-traditional Students

Higher education has considerable importance for non-traditional students, and this is often reflected in high levels of commitment. As one mature student, also a first generation entrant put it:

if you're older you feel like you know, you've got more to prove. I don't know, like there's more pressure on you, you've gave up so much to be back in this position that you feel that you have to do really well.

Every time she got less than a strong first class grade, she

would go home and think, right, you know, I need to give this up, I'm not good enough.

Then she would pull herself together and focus on the next task. As another student – first generation, emphatically from a working class background, and hoping to become a teacher – put it,

I like uni. For all the negative stuff that we've been talking about, I enjoy it. It's given me a purpose.

Some have undertaken lengthy learning journeys before reaching this point. Maggie, a woman in her early thirties, was the first of her family to *do anything like this*. She had entered a primary education course, a subject that was highly competitive to enter; she came from an Access course, and brought experience as a mother and as a classroom assistant at her son's school; she had worked in, and mostly enjoyed, a number of jobs; and she had studied off and on since her early 20s, taking courses at her local college, as well as with a distance learning provider. In her second interview, she reported proudly that she had passed her first year with flying colours, then sighed:

I just wish that I'd done it ten years ago, and I wish I could just go out and shout to everybody now, you know, 'Don't be scared, just, you know, go and do it'.

University also matters to students' families. One reported of her husband that, despite tensions in the relationship, he was still highly supportive:

he'll like come home from work early on a Tuesday because I have a lecture at 5 so he'll come home from work early to be there for the kids too.

A first generation student said that, while he had less time with his children, he was inspired by them and also found that his studies were helping him as a father:

you know they do give you a wee sort of spur on, you know, and you feel that this is going to benefit them, you can see a change in them too . . . they can see me talking to them differently and spending more time explaining.

One woman was delighted to report a change in her own son's ambitions over her first year at university. Previously impatient to leave school at the first opportunity, he had suddenly started to take his Standard Grades seriously, and was about to enter S5 to study for five Highers, in the hope of studying music in a local university.

The variety of non-traditional students

Following the periods of expansion that took place in the 1970s and 1990s, it is commonplace for students in Scotland to be first-generation students. This is a temporary situation, of course, unless there is a further and similarly dramatic growth in the system in future. It does mean, though, that virtually every student in our sample was doing something that their parents had not done. In turn, this means that hardly anyone in our sample – apart from a handful of young first-generation students - met only one criterion for identification as non-traditional. Most met two criteria, but some met three and even four.

Factors that promote student success

Pre-entry

A variety of pre-entry factors matter to student success. For adults, the most important is the availability of local adult education provision. The adult students in our sample almost always described themselves as school failures; they attributed this to a range of different factors, from youthful rebelliousness to indifference, from poor teaching to competing family demands such as caring for an ill parent. As a result, they lacked the academic qualifications and study skills for successful university study; they had developed the confidence and capacities for study through participation in a range of different types of adult education. One of the universities ran its own access course, preparing adults for entry, but even among this group the students had already taken a variety of second chance courses.

Guidance also mattered. One young first generation student had relied heavily on advice and information from a guidance teacher:

I wasn't sure of where to go and what to do about it 'cos I had never had this experience before and leaving school into the big wide world and things like that, it was good to have somebody to sit down and talk to you about it, because my parents hadn't been to a university.

She also relied on school teachers to help her complete the detailed application forms.

Funding matters.

A number of students were working, to supplement their student loan. Budgets could still be tight. One, perhaps unusually, worked for 18 hours weekly with the local council; she was still getting into debt, and had thought hard about leaving, *but then you know that this is going to be a factor.* What she had not known at the start, but discovered during the year, was that she could apply for help to pay for child care. She now thought, having been awarded child care costs, that her family was as well off as if she had been working in a low-paid job.

Another, while balancing study with family commitments during term time, worked part-time over the summer in a local hospital. With a husband in work, she found that while

it's not enough to make up the full loan for the three months I'm off, it's enough that I have something there.

Some students benefited from financial support that was targeted on specific learning support. One student, though awarded a small grant to spend on dyslexia support, had decided not to use it; she could not, she said, *see how one hour's support a week could make a difference*. Nevertheless, the family were worse off now that she was a student, and she had explained to her children why they were making cutbacks. On a more positive note, she found that *I don't get time to go and spend money*.

Flexible study structures can support participation. All three universities offered possibilities for part-time study; though in one the possibilities of switching between full and part-time study were severely constrained, the other two allowed switching between different modes. There was also some curriculum flexibility in most disciplines. One fourth year student who had become disenchanted with his main subject – Education – had been able to switch at the start of his third year to English. Previously his second subject, English had become his first love – as he put it, *I just love English, I absolutely love the subject*. Education, by contrast, was taught largely in a constructivist manner, and while he did not dislike learning by reflection in experience, he found it unchallenging: *It's just taking the same set of principles and applying them to different circumstances*. The turning point came when he realised that if he spent a full semester on a teaching placement, he would not only miss the chance of taking English modules, but this in turn would prevent him from taking his preferred English courses in his final year.

Family support was particularly important. In almost all cases, students in our sample reported significant support from their family of origin. The stories were more mixed when it came to their own partnerships. Several of the mature students told us of other students who had split up with their life partner as a result of their studies. One, who was still with her partner at the start of her second year, said that they had needed to adjust:

I think we kind of grew apart for a wee bit because, I don't know if it's kind of, I was moving on and got like different friends and stuff but now he does anything he can to help.

Another described her husband as *really supportive*. She told us that when she was panicking over her first teaching placement,

he sat down - he'd got up early 'cos he didn't start work 'till one and I was up and down here for like half past eight, so he got up early to sit and go over it with me, and I mean there's no very many people that can say that about their husbands, eh?

Despite his enthusiasm for her studies, though, the fact that he was the sole earner made her feel guilty.

University staff – especially but not only the lecturers – can make a big difference. One student, who had been registered for the wrong course due to an administrative error, felt that

to registry staff 'you're a student number', while academic staff treated each student as *an individual and you feel like there's people there for you*. Another, who was studying Education, had taken Biology as an additional subject; while she quite enjoyed the subject, she found the office staff *rude . . . I wonder why are you doing that job*. Another, a student who suffered from a visible physical disability, had previously withdrawn from a degree partly because she could no longer *be bothered' to deal with lecturers* responses to her disability, and partly because she was finding it hard to cope with the demands of the course and was unable to reduce her workload. Although she had returned, she was still wary and maintaining a certain social distance between herself and the institution.

Mature students often acknowledged that their life experience gave them perspectives that were not easily available to younger students. Even so, they were capable of being surprised, not just by what they learned inside the university but also by what they encountered during work placements. One Education student was thrilled when she took her first placement among primary children: *their enthusiasm - I never comprehended just how enthusiastic young children can be*.

Mature students generally expressed satisfaction with their relative position among the student body. Maturity, they suggested, was a state of mind as well as an age. One went so far as to say that *this sounds a bit curt but I think education is wasted on 18 year olds*. He was frustrated by the lack of participation among younger students, telling the story of a team presentation task where *one guy lost his voice on the morning of the presentation, and two girls never appeared again until the exercise was over*. Another mature student complained about younger colleagues who made a noise in the Library, eating chocolates and talking on their mobiles.

Younger students, though, generally welcomed the presence of mature students. Any resentment was usually confined to minor niggles, as when one Education student with disability claimed that micro-teaching was easier for those who had children themselves: *a lot of the kids kicked off yesterday for the younger students but not so much for the older students*.

Finally, there are vocational programmes in all three of the universities in our study. These programmes are often constrained in respect of the curriculum and subsequent career, as well as in the entry requirements; but they are also open in that they require considerable interaction and movement between university and occupational placements. In these cases, different classes of non-traditional student may face different opportunities and constraints. Single parents, for example, may well be able to draw on their experience in order to underpin their studies in areas such as teaching, law or nursing; but equally their childcare commitments may clash with expectations for practice placements.

Constraining factors

Public perceptions of universities are often outdated or based on popular stereotypes. Those who have the least direct experience of universities are least likely to have their misconceptions challenged. As one mature student said;

I very much had the perception that university is all 17 year olds, and I think a lot of people have that kind of perception that, you know, that you're going to stick out like a sore thumb, and it's not till you come in here and you think, do you know what, I'm one of the younger ones. You know, it's so mixed.

Physical access – and inclusive attitudes – were also factors. One student, a wheelchair user, felt that she was effectively barred from some spaces and activities; she viewed lecturers' attempts to get round the problems by setting home-based tasks as trying to *shove me back in my house and make it like the Open University*. Ironically, from her perspective, when she had earlier taken an OU module, she had been provided with a personal assistant to help her cope with the demands of the summer school.

Anna told herself *I think well done, although I know it's happening, it's surreal, it's as if it's not happening*. We can see the interplay of her dispositions as a highly motivated learner, and the new habitus into which she had moved and felt herself an outsider. We can also see how this experience is connected to the discrepancy between her status as an outsider, who had not *surreal* pursued the normative route taken by most students:

I don't think younger, you know, students coming through from school, would be – 'cos it would just be next step for them.

At the same time, we can see that Anna understands university as a community, and she clearly aspires to membership. By the end of her first year, she felt more at ease with her new milieu:

We had our culture shock last year ... we had this big building, with thousands of students, and, you know, the library, to find your way about, and how everything worked ... we've done that now.

A number of other students mentioned the physical and mental challenges of navigating a university campus, and in two of our three case study universities, students specifically mentioned the library as an especially complex site. Suzie used the metaphor of walking into a party to convey her sense that people saw her as an outsider:

Once you kind of know where things are, you don't feel so conspicuous, and I mean that's what happens if you walk into somebody's party or, you know, it's the same sense of "Oh, goodness, everyone's looking at me". No, they're not – get on with it, you know.

For these students, a sense of being physically lost became a metaphor for their student identity more generally.

Some non-traditional students found themselves constrained or challenged by the expectations – often imagined rather than real - of their peers. This was particularly present in the stories of mature students, whose age made them visibly non-normative, or so they felt. Robert, another mature student in his fourth year in an environmental science degree, looked back on his younger self with a mixture of amusement over what he now saw as naivety and pride that he had thrived:

You felt that you know you had to do well and kind of prove to everybody – which is probably just in my own head, you know – but I felt like everybody – and I think that's just something, again, it's being older – I think everybody expects you to get fed up with it.

Again, several students spoke of feeling that they had to ‘prove’ that they had a right to be in this transitional space.

Some students used humour and ironic distancing as way of coping as a non-traditional student. Suzie, a first generation student in her first year of a degree in design, expressed her sense of distance from her fellow students:

When I came in here, they all looked like stockbrokers. I mean, the girls are so cute and the boys are so smart, I mean it's just so funny.

Mags, who was hoping to become a painter, said that she had not even applied to one of the major providers in this area because

they don't take the Individual Learning account, which is really important . . . so it's no riff raff - no paupers.

Finance was a major factor for many non-traditional students. Most of the students in our sample had a job. One first generation student, living at home with her parents, generally worked for twelve hours a week, but on occasions she was asked to stay on late. One student, who had considered withdrawal after failing a module, blamed the fact that he had been working part-time to design sets for the Fringe Festival, partly to supplement income from his parents, and partly to gain work experience. Another said that she had only been able to get by because her mortgage payments were so low, thanks to the recession. With a working husband, she was unable to apply for financial support, and the couple were making sacrifices:

you're having to not have nights out with your friends or not buy the takeaways or you know not have the lifestyle that you're used to, having to be stuck in the house all the time, not being able to do the house up.

In general, students managed to cope with financial hardship. Younger students were usually able to call on families for support, with parents providing accommodation, and at times transport, food, spending money and even study materials. Mature students drew on support from parents (grandmothers were a particularly important source of childcare), partners, siblings and friends. Even so, it took considerable commitment and resilience to study successfully while balancing precarious family finances.

Targeted finance could also serve as a constraint where its management was poor. Again, resilience proved critical. One disabled student found the process slow: ‘I applied for stuff at the start of semester and it took to about February to get it all’, but once the procedure was completed he was more than satisfied:

I can't complain one little bit, I've been supplied with a laptop, a proper chair to use at home and things like that, and recordin' facilities . . . I'm actually surprised that so much was there.

Poor or inadequate information was another issue. One student learned about a discretionary support fund only after his first interview. Having applied successfully for support, he reflected that

I think it's only if you're in the system or you're aware of these things that you know what they are, how they operate.

Rigid study systems could get in the way of completion. Most mature students expressed satisfaction with their relative position, and hardly any mentioned the opportunities for recognition of prior learning. However, one Law student said in interview at the start of his second year that he would have liked to have been given advanced standing for his experience:

I don't know if it's every university or this university but there isn't, doesn't seem to be any accreditation for any past non-academic experience you've got.

Admittedly, this reflection came after he had taken a module in marketing, and having worked as a sales manager, he *felt I knew more than the people teaching the course.*

Racial discrimination appears not to have been a constraint for our sample. The small number of minority ethnic students did not report any experience of racial discrimination. One, for instance, described his university as *a fairly international study community*. He found that while *people do tend to ask where I'm from, they usually presume I'm American* (in fact he was British). A second student, a Scottish-born Asian, also found that fellow-students assumed that she was an immigrant; while she did not suffer active discrimination, she felt frozen out socially, reporting that most of her fellow students *want to know why I came here, then when they find I'm from Glasgow they tend to lose interest*; as a result, most of her university-based friendships were with overseas students.

Generally, students are reluctant to make formal complaints. One wheelchair user, who had dropped out and then later entered another institution, identified a number of problems at her first university, but did not

want to be known as a campaigner or a moaning person. I don't want to get somebody in trouble - and I also don't want to be known as a disabled person who complained.

What promotes or limits the construction of learner identity of non- traditional students to become effective learners and which enables or inhibits completion of higher education

Preparatory programmes appear to promote the construction of a robust learner identity. One of our case study universities ran its own access programme, while another had well-developed links with a range of local colleges who ran similar preparatory programmes. In these cases, students had managed to demonstrate their capacity for university study (to themselves as much as to the accepting university), build a network of peers who then moved into university with them, familiarise themselves with the physical space and procedures of the institution, and adapt to the language and socio-cultural milieu of university life.

Most of those who had taken a second chance programme found the transition to university relatively easy. In one case, it seemed too easy:

It's three months on, three months off, three months on, three months off, so technically you're full time, [but] you're only here six months of the year.

As a disabled student, he lived on benefit during vacations, which he spent studying. But he was aware that the challenge of university study was more pressing for others, particularly mature students with families.

At the same time, the experience of a preparatory could serve to constrain choice. One student, who had taken a programme linked to the university where she was now studying, was aware of a more prestigious institution with a strong reputation in her discipline. Despite her academic ability, she imagined that she would meet rejection even if admitted to the more prestigious institution:

I never even tried [other university]. I don't know why I think...well, I do know why - 'cos I'd heard it was only people with money that got into [Other University], it was people that came from you know really posh arty creative families, and also they don't take the Individual Learning account, which is really important 'cos HEI A does, so it's no riff raff - no paupers [int 20, first generation/dyslexic].

Many found the autonomy of university study to be challenging. One mature student who had taken an Access course found that when she started university, *there's nobody telling me what to do there's nobody supporting me, there's no teacher on at me.* By contrast, as an adult learner in a further education environment some years previously, she had felt *mollycoddled*. Without a preparatory programme, she thought the transition into a university programme *would be an awful big jump*.

Lecturers in particular, and university staff in general, can make a massive difference to how students see their studies. One fourth year student, who had been considering abandoning his degree in his second year, had stayed because he was able to change his main subject. He spoke with enthusiasm about the department where he now did most of his modules, describing them as:

Fantastic. The girls in the office will bend over backwards to do anything they can for you. You can go and see the lecturers at any time, their doors are kind of - they've got office hours, but you know, I mean I've just went and chapped their door at times and if you can't get who you're looking for, just go along the corridor, chap the door till you find one that's in and they'll take you in and they'll speak to you, and they all seem to have that enthusiasm about their subject....they've got that real passion for what they're doing.

Other examples were less to do with the subject and more to do with knowledge of students' individual circumstances. One, who was going through a divorce at the time, told us that her lecturers

would say you're not, you are coming back tomorrow, if we have to come and drag you out of the house you're coming to the uni tomorrow.

Forming personal connections with lecturers, however fleeting, was particularly difficult during the first year of study. At two of the case study universities, some students referred to large first year groups as particularly alienating. During follow-up interviews, though, most reported that things changed once the course was more specialised. One second year wondered out loud how things appeared to the lecturers:

if you've got a group full of 250, how are you going to remember everybody? How are you going to get a chance to help everybody? You're not. . . . it's a much better dynamic now, so I think this semester we're going to benefit from that.

And of course the teachers are all middle class. But I heard, I was, I had this really wonderful, we had this wonderful lecturer last week. . . . she was awesome an' she's working class from Glasgow.

Others saw things differently. One fourth year student had switched away from Education to English. While his main reasons for doing so were simply that he found the latter far more interesting, he was also disturbed by the attitudes of school-teachers who had appointed by the University to help the students adjust to classroom realities. In his third year, he reported

these two teachers came in just for that one afternoon a week, the only time they came to the university was to see us for our tutorials, and you know they were giving you a lot of their own experiences and that. Some of it positive but there was a lot of it negative as well.

He had tried complaining to the department, but found it difficult to know who was responsible for his programme.

Assessment poses particular anxiety for non-traditional students. Timely, relevant and suitably focused feedback played an important role in reassuring students on the strengths in their performance, and signalling what they needed to work on in future. Generally, students reported overall satisfaction with feedback, but a number offered examples of feedback that had not been helpful. One student said that his department showed students the feedback, and then asked them to return it. How, he asked, *am I meant to use that as a learning exercise going forward?*

As well as the general challenges of university study, non-traditional students were differently situated in different disciplines. It is not necessarily the academic requirements that caused problems. In addition, there are the challenges of moving into a new socio-cultural milieu, with all the performative expectations that can be involved. Some disciplines require a degree of self-exposure, of public performance, and this exposure in turn carried the risk of embarrassment. One student in psychology had opted to take one module in French, and found herself in difficulty: it was, *she felt, a bit trying to pronounce something in their language, it's a wee bit daunting*, and she found herself making less progress than in her other subjects.

Similar, if less pronounced, experiences were also reported by students with respect to everyday language. Britain may be unusual in the variety of accents, dialects and variants of English that are used, but often these are class-based. One Education student explained how he had been struck by watching a recording of himself, taken as part of a micro-teaching exercise:

you see yourself on video, you never speak how you sound, and I seemed to develop into, whilst I'm speaking in front of children, I don't know if it's just children, I've been told it's not, a few friends have said that it's not just children, you do it when you're - when you're speaking to say other people as well, people you don't know well, people who are in a position of authority and should be in a position of

respect....and I seem to develop an accent and a way of speaking that is, is from the streets.

The convoluted sentence structure here conveys something of this person's sense of embarrassment that he *seemed to talk in quite a rough kind of accent for some reason*, and he worried that he might *come across as being someone who – who -who is maybe dumbing down*. He speculated *whether subconsciously I thought I would get more engagement from pupils by speaking like them*. Be that as it may, he worried that his accent might damage his career as a teacher.

The fact that a discipline has traditionally been perceived as an elite subject does not necessarily mean that it is a hostile environment for non-traditional students. The best examples in the sample come from students who studied law, often in the form of optional modules alongside another, main subject. One student of psychology, for example, had dreamt of being a lawyer, and decided to take it as a second subject. She enjoyed it:

in my law it's just a completely different way of teaching, it's not . . . I dunno, she just kind of asks an open question, she kind of tries to feed the information from the class, doesn't make anybody feel, it's just a different atmosphere ... it's actually enjoyable if you know what I mean. You know that you're learning.

So in law, the student felt herself involved in the subject by the constructivist way in which the lecturer taught the subject. Pedagogy matters.

Student integration is widely held to reinforce learner identity and promote successful study. The life stories reveal a number of ways in which people came to see themselves as members of the imagined community of the university. Some of these had to do with membership of a particular disciplinary or professional sub-community, which served to build a wider identity. Suzie told us how she initially found her glasswork class *surprisingly scary*, whereas she was more comfortable working with textiles or clay. Her ability to connect textiles with her experience of knitting, and pottery with modelling in other media, led her to persist with glass. In the interview, she reflected that

I think you have to draw on what you've got in your own background to where you're kind of going, but equally you know you can push yourself, and I mean with glass I began to feel comfortable when I discovered you could paint it and you could melt it and you could do other things with it.

So for Suzie this is a form of learning through experimenting, which is at the same time a process of biographical learning.

The same was true for Maggie, a mature student who had finished her first year as a nursing student, and was about to start her second year. She had thought hard about dropping out, finding that she simply did not enjoy the academic demands of university study. In interview, she attributed this to her primarily professional sense of self:

I suppose when I thought about applying to do nursing, I was thinking about being a nurse, I wasn't thinking about being a student really.

University study was something she endured, being a student was *just something I have to bear with*. By contrast, she enjoyed her clinical placements, describing them as *great fun*. Some other, younger nursing students told us that they found the clinical placements challenging, physically and emotionally, but for Maggie, they confirmed her identity as a nurse, and enabled her to endure her transitional status as a student.

Often, interviewees used humour and self-deprecation to describe their new networks. One mature returner said that she and her friends called themselves *the front-row students*, or the oldies. Younger students were often able to develop new networks through membership of student sporting, political or leisure associations.

Of course, such societies will never appeal to all students. As one mature student (whose mobility was impaired through a back injury) put it, *I don't want to be part of ultimate Frisbee or underwater hockey clubs*. Mature students were also far less likely to socialise with other students after classes were over. As one said, he preferred not to take an evening out to *drink pints of snake bite*. Another put it even more succinctly: *I've done my partying*. If mature students were less likely to form friendships through sports or evening activities, they were more likely to bond rapidly with other mature students. Those who had undertaken a preparatory access course often stayed together: one group of five who were taking the same degree programme reportedly formed a *support network and we've been friends since our Access course now*. Subsequently, they had expanded with two new members, one aged 20 and one of 18, but both – like the original group – female.

But many in our sample, and not only mature students, reported that they had experienced changes in their friendship networks during their time at university. One male student reported, for example, that;

My friends, the ones I have now, the closer friends I have now are more, how do you saythey understand what I'm goin' through now and because they're like most of my close friends are doing the same course as me and things as well and I can relate to them more and yeah, I just grew up since I was at school.

Another reflected that;

Obviously you've still got the same friends and stuff but you've got - different views, I suppose, and it's just kind of interested in different things, like things you wouldn't have thought about before, and now you see something and think, oh – oh, I know about that.

A third had undergone a more dramatic shift:

I don't think I've got any friends left at all now. People, so now a lot of people don't understand, "Why the hell are you doing, that it's a complete waste of time", you know or what, they look at your work and you can see they're shocked and stunned and they just don't understand, so gradually you end up with, you've got a circle of friends and people and acquaintances and things, and they're all actually college, either from [FE college] or here. You know, everybody that's not related to art gradually drifts off, you just don't have the time any more, you've certainly not got any money, it's a whole, yeah, it's a whole consuming passion.

For some students, university was part of a conscious strategy to escape existing contacts. One Law student, who was disabled, said that his main aim was *to get out of the town that I'm living in . . . my mates are there, my family are there, but I hate the place.*

Highly modular structures tend to produce highly individualised study paths. This can militate against integration. One Law student, who was taking Politics as a second subject, noted that the Politics students *were a bit more social the people*, whereas in law classes he found overseas students more forthcoming than the locals. He also noted that law was a popular second subject among Accountancy students, *and genetically accountants are not the most effervescent of people.*

Of course, being a student is a temporary status. The identity of student is therefore transient, and in some cases it was clear that students had started to take on the identity that they associated with their future career. This was particularly so in vocational areas, and especially among the nursing students, who saw themselves as a very distinctive group within their University. Surviving and thriving during practical placements was often a confirming experience. As one first generation student in Education put it, 'I think since I decided to come to university I've really been really motivated about it, and since I've had the experience of working with children and things, it's really pushed me to in two years call myself a teacher'.

What kind of policy, cultural and institutional processes, including disciplinary sub-cultures can help or hinder completion

Integration is clearly different in different disciplines. In professional fields, there is a relationship (and sometimes a tension) between academic integration and professional integration. Usually, this was simply a felt mis-match between initial student expectations of the profession and actual experiences during practice placements. Nursing students, for example, said that workplace colleagues tended to dismiss university teaching as excessively academic, while university lecturers sometimes disparaged the culture and practices of nurses. Professional students sometimes spoke of a particular challenge in dealing with academic requirements for 'critical analysis' that they saw as conflicting with more practical professional demands. One Education student told us that he simply couldn't understand why his lecturers criticised the Scottish Government's curriculum policies when what he wanted to know was how to implement it. Clearly, those responsible for organising learning and teaching in professional areas need to consider carefully their pedagogic approach when encouraging students to think critically and independently.

Sometimes, though, non-traditional students felt that they were at a relative advantage in that their experience added to their subject knowledge. Nursing students from mature age backgrounds were proud of their ability to integrate practical experience into clinical practice, and students from working class backgrounds felt themselves in a majority in this area. Comparable experiences were narrated by students in Education and Social Work, particularly by those with experiences of working with children and vulnerable adults as parents, volunteers or care workers. Equally, a number of lecturers in our sample recognised the value of such experience. Pedagogic strategies that draw on relevant experiences, and relate them to academic knowledge, are likely to enhance integration and promote completion.

Nevertheless, some students did feel that they ‘stuck out’ somehow. Age was the main factor in our sample. One woman at the end of her first year said that ‘the hardest thing with being an adult [student] is you’re always waiting on someone to kind of say you don’t belong here, and I’m hoping that’s something that’ll go - but I still have it’. While she accepted that this might be groundless (‘probably they won’t even give you a second look’), she still expressed anxiety that she was sitting beside ‘all these children that are just coming out with all their Highers²’. Two students, who came from an ethnic minority background, had not built a new network at university. While one had friends in London, as well as making new friends in the city where he was studying, friendships with fellow students tended to be temporary and superficial. He was untroubled by this, enjoying his life in the city and making regular trips back to London; most of his fellow students were, he thought, a little immature. The second had built networks with people from her own ethnic background, and maintained her pre-university friendships, after concluding that local students took no interest in her.

This raises complex challenges for universities. Mature students and young spaces – eg students union spaces

- Institutional differentiation is more important than academic tribes in Poland. Private colleges more responsive to student needs.
- Pedagogical implications of new types of students needs to be thought through
- Policy context changing in UK and new fees are on the way which will impact on non-traditional students.. Big impact on numbers, support services and staff working conditions.

What is the structural, cultural and personal dialectics of learning and agency in students' lives

An important structural feature of higher education in Scotland is that it is largely publicly funded, and for some types of student attendance is free of any tuition charge. Private sector institutions have very little presence in Scotland at present. And for those students who come from Scotland and study full time, there is no tuition fee. Fees are, though, charged to non-Scottish students and to postgraduates regardless of origin; and to undergraduates who study part-time (including notably the students of the Open University), which penalises those who seek to undertake recurrent education while working. There is also some financial support for individuals defined as being in hardship, including small bursaries provided by institutions.

Nevertheless, financial challenges were the most frequently mentioned issue in our sample. While many students struggle to fund themselves through study, the challenges were particularly acute for those who had no other sources of financial support. Single parents were often in difficulty, unless they could call on family to provide cost-free child care and other resources while working and studying. Some mature students from working class families also struggled to make ends meet, though most took this in their stride, seeing it as a price worth paying. Students with disabilities were eligible for dedicated financial support to meet the additional needs of study support, and most young first generation students enjoyed significant family support (including a large number who were still living at home and expecting parents to provide amenities such as transport, food and spending money).

² Higher Grades are the standard school-leaving

The second most frequently mentioned structural issues concerned previous educational experience. While Scotland's publicly funded schools are fully comprehensive in their intake, there is a de facto segregation process based on residence (and this is sometimes overlaid by the faith-based divisions in the schools system). In some schools, a clear majority of pupils go on to higher education; in others, a small minority do so. International survey data suggest that this pattern is associated with relatively high numbers of adults who have comparatively low levels of numeracy, literacy and understanding of science. In these circumstances, second chance learners will depend heavily on the adult education system to provide the skills and capabilities required for continuing study, while first-generation entrants may have limited experience of university approaches to study. In two of the case study universities, many non-traditional students faced difficulties with basic study skills; this was reported both by lecturers and by students in our sample. Both institutions provided specialist academic study skills support services, and a number of students had taken advantage of them, most of whom praised them highly.

However, the major structural faultline in Scottish higher education cuts along the grain of socio-economic divisions. Socio-economic stratification is highly visible in participation patterns, with Scottish universities conforming to wider UK patterns of unequal and selective participation. By contrast, further education colleges recruit their higher education students from a more socially inclusive part of the population (though of course this leaves many in the lowest social strata who are untouched by any form of higher education). This had led some to compare the college sector to a ghetto, in which the less privileged undertake a form of higher education that produces significantly lower prospects of upward mobility than if they had taken a university degree.

This means that many of the students in our sample, who came from working class backgrounds, had undertaken a non-normative route to enter university and remain there. One factor at work here was the existence of second chance pathways for people whose school experiences had not qualified them to enter university. But this was not the only factor at work. Personal qualities of resilience and determination were also visible among our sample, as were the presence of supportive social networks, attentive teachers in adult education, the reputations of particular universities for taking non-traditional students, and even sometimes the chance closure of other life options (for example, through serious injury, redundancy, or bereavement) which had required them to reflect on their biographical potential.

What are the benefits for self and society of participating in learning in HE, whether or not study is completed, (reassess the proposition that it may be worse to withdraw than not to begin)

All of the continuing students in our study were highly committed to their university studies. They had already made sacrifices, and often drawn upon significant levels of support from peers and family, in order to pursue their degrees. Among those who had dropped out, a number expressed their intention of returning at a later date, particularly where they had left in order to deal with immediate and pressing practical problems. This level of commitment suggests that students saw clear benefits to themselves, and sometimes their families, and this is confirmed by our interview data. There were relatively few references in interviews to the wider social benefits of higher education, though this may well have been because at this stage of their learning career, such wider benefits were simply not visible to this group of non-traditional undergraduates.

- Almost all of the continuing students saw higher education as directly benefitting them. They anticipated higher earnings, more secure employment, improvements in status and above all access to a desired career as a result of their studies.
- For many in vocational areas, entering the career itself was the single most prized goal of study. They wanted to be, and to see themselves as, a competent teacher, nurse or lawyer. University for them meant a transformation of identity and status, expressed through membership of the professional community.
- A number – mainly but by no means exclusively women – saw it also in terms of personal development, talking about their new sense of self-worth and confidence in themselves. They spoke about university as somehow helping them recover a lost self, who had been suppressed or marginalised in their earlier lives. In these cases, successful university study was also about building a new identity (even if it was often presented as the (re)discovery of a lost self).

Some of those who had dropped out were able to specify benefits from their period of study. Those who had left for practical reasons (usually funding or family crises) were particularly likely to say that they had proven that they were capable of study at university level, and see this as a positive reason for returning later on. However, in a system with high completion rates, drop-out carries a risk of stigma. Those who cited academic reasons for withdrawal shared negative views of the process, with two expressing a degree of bitterness against academics who they thought had failed them, and others expressing a strong sense of shame and loss; none in this group was thinking of returning later on.

- Our interview data did not shed new light on the question of whether non-traditional students or drop-outs were more likely to engage in lifelong learning as a result of their university experiences. Given what we have said already, it seems unlikely that those who dropped out for primarily academic reasons will have developed positive attitudes towards lifelong learning, but we have no evidence that explicitly confirms this hypothesis. Among continuing students, few seemed aware of the likelihood of undertaking continuing professional development in their new career.
- Adult students who are parents often reported that they found themselves acting as role models to their children. They reported that their children were interested in what they were doing, and sometimes took their own school work more seriously as a result. This in turn had encouraged the students to learn, and to persist with their learning.
- The presence of diverse groups of students was also making an impact on teaching. A number of university lecturers said how much they welcomed the seminar contributions of mature students in particular, as they could draw on their life experience, and also encourage younger students to engage with them. Some lecturers in areas such as social work, sociology and nursing spoke similarly about the importance of having single mothers and people with disability among their student body for similar pedagogic reasons.
- The extent of pedagogic and curricular change should not be overstated. In most cases, the lecturers saw the contribution of student diversity mainly in terms of

reinforcing their existing curriculum content. Some adapted their pedagogic tactics to draw out this contribution, but none spoke of a need for radical change in curriculum or pedagogy; all those whom we interviewed shared what might be seen as ‘common sense constructivism’ as the basis for their teaching, and where they made limited use of traditional techniques such as large scale lecturing, it was largely to deliver basic content in a cost-effective manner. They saw diversity simply as an additional resource, albeit as a very important one.

- Lecturers in professional areas expected non-traditional students to continue to contribute after graduation. They believed that workforce diversity was an asset in fields such as law, social work, teaching and nursing, and that professionals from minority ethnic groups, single parents and those with disability represented an important resource. Their expectations of mature students were more mixed; while they thought that their life experience would be an asset, this was tempered by the likelihood of a shorter working life, as well as the possibility that existing commitments would limit their geographical mobility.

Experiences of Non-traditional Learners in HE: Transitional spaces

Linden West and Mehri Holliday

Introduction

This report derives from an analysis of the narratives of a cluster of non-traditional students interviewed by the Canterbury team. Ninety students were interviewed, overall, across 3 types of institutions: an older 'elite' university, an ex-polytechnic located in an area of ethnic diversity interspersed with disparities of income and wealth; and a new, more specialised university with emphasis on the preparation and continuing education of teachers and health care professionals. In this paper, we have selected a small number of students whose material has been analysed in great depth and who represent, in illuminating ways, some key themes in our work overall. These include the importance of familial and psychological capital (alongside more familiar notions of educational and cultural capital) as well as the need to recognise students as agents who can exploit and even challenge the human and symbolic capital of the university. What people bring, psychosocially, and how they can make use of particular resources in universities, can be seen as a crucial in managing transitional processes within higher education. In Bourdieu's terms, if we think of students as either 'fish in or out of water', and we want to understand more of how subjective experiences of objective phenomena may develop, this requires more holistic interpretation of subtle interactional and change processes: including in the individual's relationship to the university habitus and in their own sense of identity. Our aim, in this paper, is to build more interdisciplinary 'psychosocial' understanding in which we connect the object relations school of psychoanalysis and ideas of transitional space, (especially developed by Donald Winnicott (1971)), with Bourdieu's ideas of habitus and capital, with their more sociological orientation (Bourdieu, 1977/2000). We have sought to chronicle and theorise the lived, embodied, and affective as well as cognitive experiences of students and how these may change in the transitional space of particular habitus.

Methodology

Like other teams in the study, we have used biographical narrative methods to chronicle and illuminate the dialectics of learning and agency. However, methodological and theoretical assumptions within the project team vary, despite common commitment to using biographical methods. The differences encompass biographical narrative interviewing itself and what is involved and meant by generating 'good' and 'valid' narratives, as well as how to interpret these and represent learner lives. There is, for example, a more 'scientific' approach, seeking to minimise the presence of the researcher, in the interests of building reliable and even objective data: the narrator is asked, at least initially, to tell his or her story and the researcher retreats into the background. The other approach tends to be more relational, acknowledging that the researcher's presence shapes the process, like it or not. Unconscious dynamics, for instance, alongside the workings of power, can be seen as part of the encounter, as students may give researchers answers they, the researchers, might want to hear. This may be born out of anxiety and or a need to impress (see West, 1996). The Canterbury team is nearer to the relational end of the interviewing spectrum, emphasising the importance of creating good enough research space for more open and exploratory forms of storytelling. To this end, a checklist of points to be covered is provided in each interview, in seeking to minimise anxiety, while great attention is paid to agreeing an ethical code as well as to the emotional dimensions of the work, at every stage. A proforma is used to identify themes but also to analyse the quality of the processes, including the transference and counter-transference

(another way of describing this is the auto/biographical dynamics). This has to do with the effect of the narrator on the interviewer as well as vice-versa, which can be a source of insight into the meanings and emotions being communicated (Merrill and West 2009). Each proforma develops over time, consisting of standard biographical data, emerging themes, reference to relevant literatures, but also reflection on process issues. There is a thorough immersion in recordings and transcripts, with an exploration of any potential gestalt or overall form in the material, which can help in making better sense of particular elements. The two members of the Canterbury team each completed a proforma separately and then compared and contrasted selected material.

Transitional space

Chapman Houlton (2009) has observed how Bourdieu fails sufficiently to engage with how some students, with apparently limited educational and social capital, survive and prosper – becoming fish in water, in effect - even in culturally exclusive habitus of particular institutional sub-cultures in elite institutions. Of course Bourdieu was aware of this phenomenon and argued, structurally, that such learners serve to mask systemic inequalities yet he fails to engage, in these terms, with ‘the subjective experience of objective possibilities’ (Houlton, 2009: 22). Part of our task has been to chronicle and theorise the quality of such experience; or to put it slightly differently, to consider the kind of psychosocial ‘capital’ students bring with them and what happens to this as they encounter the cultural capital of the university.

Donald Winnicott’s (1971) provides a sensitising frame to consider some of the processes that may be involved. Winnicott was a paediatrician who meticulously observed and theorised the qualities of relationship in which infants were embedded and the interplay of objective and subjective worlds, self and other. He was initially concerned with transitional processes in early experience, not least how a child psychologically separates from a prime caregiver, in healthy ways, moving towards greater individuation as well as psychological integration. He placed the capacity for play and creativity at the core of development, where the child was not unduly concerned with what prime caregivers may think or fear or to how they might respond. Winnicott argued that earliest relationships provided templates for life: good enough early relationships, in which the putative self feels sufficiently loved and secure, provide a means simply to be, and a sense of the world as fundamentally satisfying and where desires can be expressed and fulfilled, including in play. This, in Winnicott’s perspective, is the basis for fulsome, less anxiety ridden engagement of self in the world. Yet no relationships are perfect, and the infant, in processes of separation – all of us, in fact - experience separation anxiety, to greater or lesser extents. We may get preoccupied, at times, with concern for the prime caregiver and her well-being; and even with fear as to how s/he might respond. At one end of a spectrum, a need to appease or please takes over, and a psychological split may develop, in which play – with all its imaginative and symbolic possibilities for selfhood – loses some of its affective investment and consequent satisfaction. Mind and body get split, with shakier feelings of self the result. Such processes may, qualitatively, find expression in adult experience, with activities, and even the self, feeling false, dead, meaningless or denuded of energy as we become overly preoccupied with what others might say and the fear that we may never ever be good enough.

Winnicott (1971) thought, as suggested, that these ideas could be applied to adult development; and particular writers have used his approach when thinking, for instance, about story telling itself as a kind of transitional process, which may be more or less

productive of selfhood (Sclater, 2004). We can think of university, as a space where a self is in negotiation, and where a process of, or struggle around, separation and individuation - of letting go of past ideas and relationships - takes place. Like the child, an adult, or rather the infant and child in the adult, may be full of anxiety about her capacity to cope, and or whether s/he can be good enough in the eyes of significant others. S/he may cling to an existing identity, or be overly preoccupied with what others might think, or with getting it right for a teacher, which can denude learning and creativity of emotional vitality. Learning can be deadened in consequence. The stories people tell - including to researchers - may, on the other hand, become vehicles for a renegotiation of self, which may be more or less legitimised in the eyes and responses of important others. Unconscious 'memory in feeling', forged in previous transitional experience, may be evoked, for better but also worse. Successful transitions - involving, for instance, the capacity to play more wholeheartedly with symbolic capital - may depend, in part, on the relational histories people bring with them but also on the responses of significant people in new transitional spaces in the present. Others can help legitimate - and this works at a primitive emotional rather than overly rational of cognitive level - what is attempted and said, and the student can better manage the anxieties and threats to self of new forms of learning, in new transitional space.

Capital in all its Dimensions: Four Case Studies

We have selected 4 'telling' stories, as we term them; ones that are sufficient unto themselves yet are also representative of wider themes in our material. They illuminate particular processes in especially compelling ways (West, 1996). We include a student who dropped out, Keith (all names are of course pseudonyms). We begin with a first generation student at university called 'Nathan' from a mixed race/black background and materially poor part of London. He entered the specialist university as a trainee teacher. Nathan comes from an area of London with a reputation for violence and gang culture and race is a central issue in his narrative. But his material, at times, is riddled with other anxieties: about managing at university, especially his capacity to cope with academic assignments. These, he said, had always proved problematic for him, at school. Comments from tutors about being 'overly descriptive' and 'insufficiently critical' brought him to an edge in his first year at university. He struggled too over accommodation, sharing a house in difficult circumstances. Yet his material contains many good 'objects', in the language of psychoanalytical object relations, (new forms of potential capital might be another way of framing this), coming into play, including from family, which enable him to keep on keeping on. There is warmth and solidity in his family relationships, full of support yet also challenge. This finds expression in a story of how the family descended to help clean the house and make it habitable when he first arrived at university as well as an academically successful sister who constantly encouraged him with assignments. Every night, there was 'skype' communication between them when problems were most intense. There is, in these terms, rich family and emotional 'capital' to be drawn on in managing anxieties. Nathan, however, also possesses agency himself. He uses his 'race' to get on in the system by joining a number of committees. He ensures that he is often consulted on equal opportunities in the institution, where, as one of our staff interviewees described, there was uncertainty and lack of clarity over diversity and equal opportunities issues.

The dangers of reducing particular capital, and people, to the status of 'deficit', in relation to the university, became central in some of our interpretative work. We interrogated the qualities of the socio-cultural as well as psychological capital Nathan was bringing into the university habitus. There was questioning of our own assumptions in thinking about what quality of some of this capital. A spectre of deficit might have been lurking in Linden's initial

reading of Nathan's text, for example: of overcoming a difficult background, using a range of significant others as well as a strong religious faith. In a different socio-cultural reading, Mehri challenged this: Nathan's multi-cultural background could be seen as rich in capital, enabling him to deal with unempathic and even racist encounters. This was partly psychological but also cultural, in the sense of a learned capacity to engage with diversity, including in others, not least in school placements, which were important in his degree programme. Capital included strong religious faith, shared by the whole family. We noted, in thinking of our differing responses, of how Mehri's biography was implicated in her reading of the text: as an Iranian woman whose complex cultural heritage had, on occasions, been reduced to a one-dimensional, exotic otherness and deficit. Such auto/biographical sensibilities, alongside the interdisciplinary work, created more complex readings of Nathan's narratives.

In a first interview (2.12.09), Nathan spoke of his thoughts about becoming a primary-education teacher. He was just 19 and in his 1st year. His desire to teach was linked with ambitions to transform his own future path but also concerns about race and the need for him to serve as a role model for others, particularly young black men.

It's more important for me.... because of the lack of male role models within education, especially primary. Growing up in my primary school, there were no male teachers, they were all female, I think only the caretaker was male, everyone else was female. So I thought, I think it's more important for me to be able to inspire young males... it must have been late primary school because I knew throughout the whole of secondary school that I wanted to be a teacher...

Racism was no abstract entity in this townscape:

I also have this memory... I remember some boy saying something that was definitely derogatory towards us blacks and um we said oh that's a bit racist and so we got into a big argument and it all escalated out of control and then the teacher got involved and as a result of that, we had to miss our break time for about a week, yes for about a week we had to stand in the hall in separate areas, we wasn't allowed to talk to each other or anything and thinking about that at the interview, it really hit me and I thought, yeh, wow. Like I never want to make a child feel the way I felt at that time and I never want to....I think that the way that the teachers handled it was definitely wrong and they shouldn't have done that and like that was the first time that I really thought about it in that much detail and thought about how it affected me so I thought that's not going to happen when I'm a teacher.

Nathan has moved on and is now in his 3rd year. In a second interview (4.5.10), he talked of getting high marks for his teaching practice and a recent essay. He has managed the transition towards more of a learner identity rather well and the experience in teaching practice felt like a significant time: a pointer to a future as well as a link back to a past. Some of the students and teachers in his placements made him feel valuable and a significant resource. Nathan found it important to reflect with us on these processes, including on his sense of agency. His struggles over academic work had been important but his family and wider cultural capital, as subjectively experienced and negotiated, enabled him to swim and to overcome some of the feelings of being the fish out of water. We talked with him about some of these interpretations at a third interview in November 2010, and he found them meaningful.

Mark and dropping out

Mark was in his mid-twenties when we met. He was the first in his family to go to university. He considers himself a committed Christian and has been active in his church. He draws, in his story telling, on the support and understanding provided by his parents, of low income and minimal educational background, as well as on his wife and children. The church and family are significant others who, we suggest, provide Mark with some psychological capital to keep on, even after drop out. But there are pressures too: to prove himself as a man, a father as well as a student. He is preoccupied with what others might think and has often felt insecure.

Material pressures are part of the transitional equation, albeit with a particular familial and psychological twist. The material pressures faced by Mark, and other students, can drive them to leave fulltime university education. (In fact there are major issues, across our samples, about what ‘full-time study’ actually means, as a range of part- and even full-time jobs might be done, alongside ‘full-time’ study). Mark had left school at 16 with no qualification and income, and had always worked long hours with low pay. (This was shared with many of the female participants in the study, who returned to education to divert cycles of low paid work for long hours). Mark talked of working long hours in a local supermarket to ‘save, save, save’ whilst also continuing with GCSE and A Level classes. He has also taken care of the children in Church during Sunday School, which, in his story telling, inspired him to become a teacher. Continuing with his supermarket job, getting married, moving in with his wife, creating a ‘good’ home for his three stepchildren, and taking on a teaching degree programme, which demanded that he be ‘creative’, complicated and infected his transitional space. He was caught in a broader, even unsustainable struggle, and he abandoned his ambition to become a qualified teacher, at least for now. Self-doubt and anxiety were deeply embedded in his narrative:

I did drop out eventually um the course I found ok but it was more a life decision for me... although I pursued it for the last two years, it wasn't until I actually got in to the system, I was only doing like individual lesson classes, lesson planning and I just had this feeling, it's weird, I can't believe it because I've worked hard to get to this position and then all of a sudden it was something that um, you know I was just looking at the amount of work, I know it sounds, I'm not a lazy person, but I was looking at the amount of work load, I've got three children, a family... I suppose I was observing a lot of teachers and I know a few teachers and I know that all teachers are creative and one of my main problems is that I'm not a creative person and there was a lot of emphasis towards being creative and being exploring, you know, I know teaching isn't about getting up at the front of the class and just dishing out or reading from the sheet, its um...you know it's more than that but there seemed to be loyalties on the creativity side and that really was something that I was struggling with...I know it sounds terrible and I had worked so hard, yes I mean obviously I don't want my GCSEs and A levels to be a waste but obviously I'm still a bit raw at the moment and I'm just weighing up what the options are....

The pressures became too intense, reflecting patterns elsewhere in student narratives, especially among the London sample: of people feeling overwhelmed by childcare and related difficulties, of the weight of poverty and isolation. Of needing to combine work and university in ways that could feel impossible. In Mark's case, there was deep self-doubt too, over his abilities, expressed under the label 'creativity'. He felt he was insufficiently creative or unable to engage fully with aspects of teaching and we have a glimpse, if no more, of an anxious inner life and the difficulty of symbolic play. But there is resilience too, which cautions against overly one-dimensional understanding of capital (or even of the meaning of drop-out). Mark remains desperate to prove himself in diverse ways and he has, in fact, dropped-in again, by doing a one-year accountancy course, which can count towards a foundation degree. He wrote to us, in two emails, of a determination to continue with his education.

Mathew, and significant others

Mathew is a black refugee carer/student in his mid-thirties, who intrigued and concerned us. We noted his struggle with academic work primarily because of limited confidence with English, which is a third/fourth language. This cannot simply be read, however, as absence or cultural deficit. Mathew recognises the value of the languages he does know, viewing them as opportunities for better understanding of others' worlds. He is the son of a local African Chief and has managed to flee numerous war zones. He has worked as an hourly paid-minimum wage carer since arriving on British soil, seeking asylum. He made friends with an English couple gaining their support for applications for asylum status and to pursue a university education. He found a partner with her four sons, creating some psychological/psychosocial resources in his struggle for survival. Two lecturers in a further education college were crucial others in this struggle over status; like good parent figures, we concluded, in reflections with him. He created structures of belonging while these structures provided a psychological/emotional lifeline. Mathew, moreover, had been a drop out from university – from an elite institution – in a programme where he felt devoid of personal support. He worked hard to create support in the new institution in the multi-cultural world of South London. Finding a good personal tutor, and other sympathetic staff and students, was central to his first interview. He brought capital with him, from his background, but also felt vulnerable and uncertain.

A public healthcare degree appealed because of a shortage of, and demand for male carers in the NHS. In a second interview, (11.3.10), he looked back on his struggles and language issues were important:

It is difficult because when we started in the first year they said to us OK this first year we give you the opportunity and accept your assignment as is... that has been changed because of the stage of second year so you're now needing proof reading and that makes it difficult for people like me considering my background which I'm always constantly worried about how to translate my thoughts my ideas from one language to another, from Mende/Kissi/Creole languages, to African English, then to British English is something that makes it difficult for me....

But his narrative was far than one of deficit: his cultural diversity was seen to be an important resource in negotiating a new identity and managing anxieties:

Well from my languages from the various languages that I've gone through if you look at health for instance you cannot purely have a disease by itself. In that way you

look at the medical models instead of looking at the social... or psychosocial aspect of it for the patient...having got some ideas about the um psychosocial aspect of health, taking it back to my past cultures... without making the connection with the social aspect you cannot treat the patient... so I bring in this system where I realise or begin to understand how I can actually help the sick from different cultures.

Mathew, like a number of students, was in a world where boundaries between full and part-time study, work and university, family and student life, were confused:

I do work...I used to work for agency but agencies shifts are not constant so I joined BUPA as a healthcare assistant. The rate is £5.90 for an hour... my partner is a nurse works shifts... I would be looking after the kids I have four boys... I've given up sleep lost hours of sleep to attend to the family and then education sometimes. I go to bed by three o'clock I get up by four o'clock five o'clock... I get up... prepare whatever I've got to take into [my] school, eat and shower the boys and leave them to dress by themselves and then go pack their bags/ lunch and leave home by 8 o'clock they're supposed to start classes by 8.30 I mean 8.45 I'm supposed to start by 9... I have to drive to drop them to a neighbour who is very close to the school and who can just walk... so it's very much more difficult than people might think.

Yet, he coped. But at the end of a second interview, he talked of struggling with an assignment and Mehri responded with concern. The interview itself became, for a moment, an explicit transitional space, in which he thought about his options and looked to us for guidance:

I don't want it to be a sign of weakness if I ask somebody to help me [proof reading my essay], that might make me a weak person.. but there are a lot of resources which they call academic skills...I did it once, I've never done it again...but I have to change that because if I want to succeed I have to do that because the system is set up for that.

He asked what we thought and the boundaries between biographical narrative interviewing and educational counselling blurred. Mehri, especially, encouraged him to seek specific help and to overcome his reluctance to do so. He wanted to know what she thought. Admitting vulnerability and finding people who respond empathically to it was a dangerous business, he said, and he valued our meetings. He had made the decision to try again. By the time of the third interview, he had organised a new pressure group for multi-cultural sensitivities in health care, building on his work as a student advocate at university. Mathew had developed a political agency in the spaces represented by the university, exploiting aspects of his own biography and experiences. He also proudly talked of attending his British citizenship ceremony, where the two lecturers were also present.

Sue and the turmoil of class: juxtaposing class with race

Sue is a serious and passionate student of Law, based in an elite institution. Divorced with two children, she has been on benefits and was a carer for her father till his death. She had returned to a childhood ambition to practice law. Her biography embodies determination to overcome difficulties, which include poverty and emotional vulnerability. She perseveres with the challenges of learning in higher education. Whilst deeply disturbed by class and its manifestations in the academy, she is resilient. We noted with interest that the issue of gender was relatively unimportant to Sue; rather it was the class system that troubled her. She looked

for recognition in the academy, feeling awkward in lectures and in the world of the Inns of Court, but good when being an advocate in court, especially when representing marginalized people. In her first interview (10.8.2009), she said:

I mean it's getting used to...the gap with the education you know it's so different going back into that environment you know comparing with younger students, you know, but it's a natural progression for them and they're up to speed with everything...well I would need to complete my degree and do the bar...a year at bar school ... I don't doubt I will do it, I don't doubt myself, I really don't. I worry about how good I will be... sorry... (upset)

She talked of her relative 'lack of education' and constantly asked in seminars what words meant. She said she had learned 'the confidence to speak up and say oh what's that then....and I'll look it up later'. She talked of different types and styles of lecturers: some easy to listen to, others humorous and some very serious:

that's really a bit tricky, so I don't want to be spoon fed the information but the same times you've got to hit the ground running with it... But in a courtroom I've always felt more comfortable for some strange reason which goes against anything I'd normally feel....

Criminal Law

Sue talked at length about her background, in all the interviews: the law was 'just part of your everyday life'. She grew up in South London, where arrests and even murder, as she put it, were frequent companions. She also mentioned feeling an outsider in the community, at times, of 'not wanting to push buggies down the High Street':

You know I wanted to make something of my life and always believed that you could do whatever you wanted to do, and.... that that wasn't all there was you know there was a lot more to it than that and you could bring up children and have children and ideally you know in a situation where you've got a husband or stuff like that and if it doesn't work out like that then you just get up and get on with it but it was never going to stop me from doing what I wanted to do, be a success in my own business or you know to do this, what I wanted to do since I was about 11 years old .

Sue agonised about moving between the different habitus of the university and the street and over what others might think. Negotiating the space was hard:

I've really agonised over the way I speak and stuff I think you know I'm just not going to be able to speak how I would wish to speak and I've got to be comfortable with that and if make slips so be it I've got to say this is me and here we go.... and you know you do get I mean when I've been in many courts and listened to advocates and you get sort of international words of English together. So I think well never mind I can't speak English but neither can you (laughing).....

In the classroom, accent could be equated, she said painfully, with very negative qualities:

....to ignorance and bad manners and you know all of that and lack of intelligence...I've got to understand that it is natural and just think and overcome that with my own abilities. It's like an inner turmoil almost every walk of life comes with

prejudice and you know discrimination and I put it akin to racial discrimination, it's no different really from social discrimination you know but that's not recognised, it doesn't really.

She had been fearful of 'messaging it up and then you've humiliated yourself because you've pretended to be something you're not...' She was, she said, past trying to speak in a particular way; and if she changed, 'then I would have all my family ridicule me.' She had also subscribed to *The Times* newspaper for 2 years, and thought of the law as a 'kind of close knit community'. The space was difficult to enter. In a second interview, Sue talked more of her Dad and his heroic struggles against legal authorities, including the police. He was, she said, an important influence, inspiration even, whose struggle, she said, continued to inspire her against injustice. She had been a successful business woman too, underlining the danger of reducing Sue simply to deficit status. She was both vulnerable and tough, having survived in difficult circumstances, including a divorce. Her psychological capital was both strong and vulnerable. And her story telling could be vibrant and she felt we listened. She was no feminist or socialist, she said – values often promulgated by members of the law faculty, (which had a radical reputation) – but she felt deeply about injustice. She was managing the transition rather well and the resources drawn on included some of her teachers, her own biography as well as, however minimally, the opportunity to talk and reflect with us.

Helen

Helen, like Sue, was also a student in an elite institution. She had been sexually and physically abused as a child, and struggled with a range of psychological as well as financial difficulties. She had in fact progressed well, by a second interview, with her marks increasing 'from a 59 up to a 76 average'. She was now being encouraged to do a Master's degree in Anthropology and Palaeolithic Archaeology.

Helen came from what she termed 'a bit of a troubled family' as well as from a working class town in Kent, a place where numbers going to university, not least a university like hers, were small. But she had been a good student at school yet never went to university. At 18, 'I was living with a boy and I had a full time job and all of my friends were graduating and having fun and I was like I'm stuck in an office and you know playing grown up and I didn't really feel grown up.' Eventually, she looked at her friends graduating and wanted to be like them.

A father and stepfather had been abusive, and her mother seemed attracted to such men, as Helen later realised through counselling. Because of this, she felt better able to talk about her emotional life:

.... because nine times out of 10 I feel fine about everything and I don't know a hormonal period comes up and I just kind of crash a little bit and get a bit teary and feel a bit sorry for myself and I went to counselling and it's all fine again, I think it's just one of those things. I mean I was a bit worried about repeating my mum's mistakes with my boyfriends....

Her route to university was via an Access course, where she found substantial support, although struggled financially:

I had about two jobs on the run... I was quite shocked because the course fees wasn't too bad, it was about £500 per year but um trying to get financial help, the course was two hours a week too short for the adult learning grant, obviously no student loan, Barclays wouldn't give you a career development loan because you need to do a degree afterwards so basically it was my overdraft that got me through.

She had little idea of what she wanted to do for a degree but found 'anthropology and then I fell in love with the subject'. An English teacher was 'almost like a mother in some ways', she felt, while a sociology teacher 'made it fun, he made it concise, he made it easy to understand, he kind of, he made it clear what the university would be expecting when we moved on to that which helps a lot'. The child in the adult was sustained in this space, as we discussed with her. Yet the transition to university was nonetheless difficult:

My first year at uni was horrible, I hated it...it reminded me of being back at school, um except bigger and scarier. I made the decision not to live on campus during my first year because of living away from home for so many years which I kind of regret now because I found it a lot more difficult to make friends um, but I didn't like the course, I felt I had no support from any tutors, my personal tutor I introduced myself and that's the only time I have spoken to him... unfortunately people are nasty to other people so there is a little bit of that going on where I wasn't quite fitting in any of the social groups, it was unbearable. I think because I didn't have many friends because I didn't live on campus, that's what I think, I think maybe if I moved on to campus and made some friends maybe I wouldn't have stood out so much, I mean I don't mind standing out, it's just.

She applied to do an anthropology degree, but could not settle and her marks were 'terrible'. She almost gave up but a course on palaeoanthropology but a new group of people she engaged with, helped her claim some space.

I've really got into...fossil hominids and like where cultures first evolved from like language and dance and I've just found a passion for it and that's the one part of the degree that I'm getting 70s for, I just love it, I want to go to the rift valley in Africa and I just want to spend my life kind of figuring out the first cultures and the first civilisations and that's what I found a passion for... I find it interesting and absolutely fascinating and it's just the way, it's kind of like science stuff things like the legends, I personally think it's very black and white but with kind of human evolution it's like you know because we evolved from ape like creatures, where we always religious or was that something that kicked in when we became more human like and just things like that, yes its fascinating and I just love the fact that evidence suggests we all come from the same place but we are so diverse as well, I love that.

She played, joyfully as well as perceptively, with these ideas in her story telling, with us: storytelling, as suggested, can be a transitional space, productive of selfhood in its own right.

Conclusion

Being and becoming a student in the diverse spaces of an increasingly diverse university system requires different levels of understanding. This includes the psychological alongside the socio-cultural, to be understood in dynamic, not deterministic ways. There can be dissonance as different capitals meet – the working class world of South London and the middle class habitus of an elite university – and students may struggle to claim space. But

there is a danger of reducing people to deficits or failing to acknowledge the nuance of lives and what has been learned in them as well as the role of agency in the present as well as past. Family matters, and the capital this can nurture, which lies at the heart of some of these stories. Teachers too, looking after the child in the adult. Research itself can serve as transitional space, where there is an experiment with self and story. A feminist cultural anthropologist, Jennifer Crawford (2005), emphasises the importance of taking time with narrators and of being attentive to the other, as we might be in relation to music, art or poetry. Of the need to listen for the rhythms and poetics of the everyday and how transitional moments appear in surprising ways. How the struggle to become a learner may be highly idiosyncratic as well as representative of more general trends, at one and the same time. Of how a range of characters, from the past as well as the present, may enter transitional space – teachers, fathers, sisters and even researchers as well as particular symbolic languages – as part of the play of identity and selfhood; and of how they may enable more space to be claimed, for self and symbolic play, often in unconscious ways. A person can feel more alive, and, in this instance, more like a student, in the process. In object relations theory, the play of the inner world is, just that, like a drama, with distinct casts of characters, from the present as well as past, in interaction. But the role characters play may change and transitional space can involve new relationships, including with the past and its dramatis personae. New qualities in intersubjective experience may translate into a different dynamic and quality of internal life, however provisionally, and we may feel more of a subject, agent and university student in the process.

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Student Report: Sweden

Agnieszka Bron, Eva Edström & Camilla Thunborg

Introduction

Changes in higher education

There have been many changes in higher education in Sweden in the last decades as it went from elite to mass education. As a result participation increased as well as the number of institutions, programmes and courses. The system is considered open (Schuetze & Slowey, 2000) and relatively uniform as it comprises all types of post-secondary education including professional programmes such as nursing and teacher training. From 1990 to 2005 the number of students entering grew from 150,000 to 330,000 (Holzer, 2009). Several political reforms for widening access to HE have been undertaken since the 1950's (Bron & Agèlii, 2000). In the Swedish context, the term non-traditional students was used for underrepresented groups (Bron & Lönnheden, 2004).

From 2001, there has been a law stating that universities must have ten per cent non-traditional students. Universities have decreased the social distance to HE (see Holzer, 2009) where the local university college is seen as a possible alternative to entering the local labour market, especially for groups whose parents have upper secondary school as their highest educational level (ibid.). In the available statistics the number of younger students has increased and students having well educated parents are highly over represented while students from working class homes are underrepresented despite all the reforms for widening access. Amongst entrants under 35 years, 34 per cent had parents with at least three years in higher education, which represents 20 per cent of the population in total. 38 per cent of the men and 32 per cent of the women had parents with higher education (SCB, 2010). The number of ethnic minority students with is also increasing. During the academic year 2008-09, 18 per cent of the entrants in higher education come from a non-Swedish ethnic background, to be compared with 12 per cent during 1999-2000. There are however huge differences between different ethnic groups. The amount of students entering into HE is also varying in relation to the labour market. In a longer perspective, however, the percentage of a specific age group entering HE is quite stable. (Högskoleverket, 2010a).

Interesting in an international perspective is that Sweden has the highest drop-out rate from HE. The completion in higher education in an international comparison is very low in Sweden. Only 83 per cent during the year 2009 completed a course or an educational programme (Högskoleverket, 2010a). Quinn (2004) in her study of non-traditional students in higher education concludes that students dropping out are risking a double failure which means that they are worse off in relation to getting a job, a reasonable income and social status than if they never entered higher education at all.

In discussing the role of higher education the European Memorandum from 2000 is useful as Sweden has implemented it as a common policy for adult learning. There are mainly two important goals that are taken into account in this document: employability and active

citizenship. These two key words unite questions about working life and “bildning” (Bildung). The last includes people’s opportunities to exercise their rights and obligations as citizens and be able to influence their own situation. The other that people should gain employability in relation to the labour market (see EU Memorandum 2000).

The case studies

All three case study institutions (KI, KTH and SU) chosen are located in Stockholm the capital city, and all have a long tradition, and thus are regarded as old universities. SU has a tradition of research free disciplines (natural science and humanities: pure/hard, and pure/soft), while KI and KTH have tradition of applied sciences, which gradually became more research and theory oriented (applied/hard). However, the last two have a higher status in the Swedish society, while the first also introduced some soft and applied disciplines.

We have chosen these three institutions hoping to find different patterns of students’ identity formation, including learning identities. We realised that the institutions did not have a pure status or hierarchy of being the best. There is a paradox that status differs in relation to higher or lower prestige within the institutions, and not so much between them. To KTH and KI it is difficult to get a place, but easy to get good employment (civil engineering and industrial economy), while SU biological programme is easy to apply to, but difficult with getting a profession and find place at the labour market. The three institutions are:

Karolinska Institutet -KI (1)

Karolinska Institutet was founded in between 1810 and 1811, as a training centre for army surgeons. Since 1968 the name is 'Karolinska Institutet'. It is one of Europe's largest medical universities³. KI have tradition of applied sciences which gradually became more research and theory oriented (applied/hard). In 2006 there were 5,851 undergraduate and master students (77 percent were women and 23 percent men) and 2,801 doctoral students. Among the entrants 44 percent were under 25 years of age. 86 percent participated in programmes while 14 percent in freestanding courses. Among the entrants in undergraduate studies, 21 percent had a working class background, 32 percent had an immigrant background and 37 percent had parents with a high level of education (Högskoleverket, 2007).

The two programmes chosen for in-depth studies are biomedicine and physiotherapy. The first includes pure/hard disciplines and has an exclusive habitus. This is an academic programme. After medicine, biomedicine is the next most difficult to get into and it has an unclear description of a job profile. The second, physiotherapy, includes applied/hard disciplines and is characterised by a pragmatic habitus. Students are trained into a profession of which they have a very clear description of. It is rather difficult get into the programme, but work prospects are good even if one ends up in a medium level of care professions/occupations. It is a professional programme.

Stockholm University – SU (2)

In 1878, the Stockholm University College started its operations as a series of public lectures

³ According to the 2009 [Academic Ranking of World Universities](#) by Shanghai Jiao Tong University, KI is the highest ranked university in Clinical Medicine and Pharmacy in Europe, 8th in the world, and the Sweden's highest ranked university in all categories.

in natural sciences⁴. In 1904, the college became an official degree granting institution, and by 1960 received a university status, and became Sweden's fourth state university. Its status and reputation is mostly based on being a capital city university⁵. The student population statistics show more than 50,000, of whom: 31 per cent are within the Social Sciences, 22 per cent within the Humanities, 11 per cent within Law, 11 per cent within Science, 10 per cent within Teacher Training, 5 per cent within Technology, 2 per cent within Health Care, 1 per cent within Medicine, and 6 per cent others. In 2006, 60 per cent of the students were women and 40 per cent men. 43 per cent were under 25 years old while 57 per cent were 25 years old or more. 76 percent were enrolled in freestanding courses while 24 percent in two to five year study programmes.

We have chosen two programmes: Biology programme (including Chemistry) and Social Work. First is a hard/pure science; with an exclusive habitus to which is very easy to get in, but there is no clear job description, and it is a purely academic programme. The second – Social Work is based on soft/applied disciplines with an inclusive habitus. It is relative difficult to get in, but the job description is clear, and there are good job prospects. The programme has a professional character.

The Royal Institute of Technology - KTH (3)

The Royal Institute of Technology (*Kungliga Tekniska högskolan*, KTH) was founded in 1827 in Stockholm as Sweden's first polytechnic and is one of Scandinavia's largest institution of HE in technology, and one of the leading technical universities in Europe; highly respected worldwide, especially in the domains of technology and natural sciences. KTH has a tradition of applied sciences which gradually became more research and theory oriented (applied/hard). KTH offers about 70 different educational programmes. The largest programmes are within Architectural and Civil Engineering with more than 51 per cent of the students. In 2006 there were 12,093 undergraduate and master students and 1,444 doctoral students. In 2006, 27 per cent of the students were women and 73 per cent men. 83 per cent participated in programmes while 17 per cent in freestanding courses. Among the beginners in undergraduate studies, 17 per cent had a working-class background, 27 per cent had an immigrant background, and 41 per cent had parents with a high level of education (Högskoleverket, 2007).

We contacted students from civil engineering and teacher education programmes (main campus), and from Industrial Economy and Production, (campus Telge in Södertälje). These subjects include hard and applied disciplines with a pragmatic habitus. However, the second – Industrial Economy is a shorter HE programme, easier to get onto and for getting a job afterwards. Both programmes are professional.

1) Factors which promote or constrain the access, retention and non- completion of non-traditional students (working class, gender and ethnicity issues) to higher education

Promoting factors:

⁴ A tradition still supported by yearly publicly open lectures.

⁵ Stockholm University (SU) became one of the largest universities in Sweden the 1st of January 2008, with approximately 52.000 students, when Teacher Training College was integrated to the university.

- *High motivation to study.* In the Swedish cases there are at least five motives related to motivation to study (see our paper *Motives for entering, dropping out or continuing to study in higher education* Thunborg, Edström & Bron, 2010); an interest in studying in HE as a whole, an interest in a specific subject, an interest in a future profession (which seems to be the most important factor) and to have something to do while waiting for deciding or getting a job, and finally to prove to oneself that they are capable of studying.

For example - The students are referring to an interest in studying in HE in general, for testing it and to see what it is like to study:

I don't know how but I managed to order a brochure (laughter) from the university and I was looking at the courses available and everything was totally new and I had no idea what it was like to study at the university. So I found a course and that was Anthropology, and it looked interesting ... I applied just for fun and started to study. That was my first contact with this world. (Female student, 30 years old, studying Physiotherapy).

There are also students referring to taking a course for cultural purposes, and getting intellectual stimulation while working:

First, I studied in Uppsala, Swahili and that is really different, so to speak, and it was for my own interest, then I studied a few shorter courses at Stockholm University ... It was more for fun to combine work and study an evening once a week to get some stimulation to the mind (laughter).... As a postman, so it has kind of been my occupation in that way...But then I started to think that I wanted to study but the question was what? And it took a while for me to decide... Much of a coincidence that I fell over this biomedicine at KI, when I browsed the catalogue and such...as far as I can remember it was quite early that I kind of got the impression that this was really...it suited me, like that (Male student, 28 years old, studying Biomedicine).

Interest in a specific subject:

I have always been fascinated in maths and I don't understand why really. I think it has to do with, I like the structure, and in a way the logically inexorable and the search for truth in a way and as I see it, it is very beautiful and charming, the philosophy, to count has never been my cup of tea, but to ponder about causal relations, that I have been really fascinated about (Male student, 24 years old, studying the Civil Engineering and Teaching programme).

I have actually always liked animals and nature... since I was a kid, I thought it was groovy with excavations of Dinosaurs and nature programmes on TV that all the other kids thought boring. I watched flowers to see what would happen if I for example put a nail through a Dandelion, would it die, these things. So I have felt close to nature.... (Female student, 19 years old, studying Biology).

I love to know how the body works, when visiting the doctor I want to know a lot of things and ask a lot of questions... When I worked at the hospital I always asked to watch when something special occurred... Then I was at an exhibition in Hamburg once and in Amsterdam last autumn. An exhibition where they have human bodies, it is called bodyworlds, where they have plasticified bodies.. so it is fascinating. (Male student, 30 years old studying Physiotherapy).

- *Supportive learning environment in HE.* To be seen, acknowledged and respected as a learner from lecturers and in exams (for example in feed-back)
- *Peer support.* For non-traditional students it is especially important to find a study-group. For some students forming networks is an important strategy to be part of university life. This is a strategy mainly used at the Royal Institute of Technology where they have a lot of student activities and a developed student organisation. The networks are also related to their future life career.
- *Support from family and/or significant others.* They relate to a lot of different people giving support outside HE institutions.

My parents saw, out of their background, law studies as a good choice and they thought that I would make it because I have a potential if I just pulled myself together, but to become a teacher it was not that low, it was rather okay, acceptable. My grandfather was a teacher before he started to write and I have always had teacher as a favourite profession because it is relaxed...I still want to be an author but I realise that I have to be so good to become it, than teacher was an alternative (Male student, 19 yrs old studying combination of teaching social science and languages).

My mother has always been supportive but my father has been, he has been supportive but he has always wanted me to study but he has often driven me, governed me a bit, in my decisions .but in this I didn't allow him, with the Biology programme. He still thinks that I should study, he still regards this as some kind of temporary. ..He wants me to continue studying medicine...He often says that he supports us as long as we are studying. But if we quit we've got to manage on our own, thus he wants us to at least get an exam, me and my brother (Female student, 21 years old, studying Biology)

- *Positive attitude towards learning and good learning skills.* Especially feeling being a good learner.

Then a couple of years ago I said to daddy that now I'll study to become a physiotherapist, I've been accepted, I've been accepted to become a journalist. I've been accepted here and here and here, I've managed that. Somehow I could prove like 'Look here, your daughter isn't stupid' so he actually decided to help me out financial with my education. I

think he was impressed (Female student, 34 years old, studying Physiotherapy)

- *Ability to plan and combine study, family and work.* At Stockholm University this is a promoting factor that it is possible, at KI and KTH it is seen as much harder because of the daily schedule of teaching.

Finally! After nine semesters, now it's time to earn some money because I also have a family so I feel like it's time to produce a little. Studying costs both time and money, and experiences others have that we can't have because of lack of money (Female student, 35 years old, studying Social Work)

Constraining factors:

- *Lack of support from the institutions, teachers, family and peers.* The lack of knowledge and experience of HE amongst parents as well as very high expectations amongst parents are both seen as constraining. The competition between students is seen as a struggle.
- *Learning difficulties, struggling with academic curriculum.* To see oneself as a failure in learning. Writing essays is an obstacle for many students because they have to take responsibility for their own work and sometimes feel a lack of support from tutors.
- *Struggles with educational programmes not leading to a specific profession in what to become of it.*

I didn't know what a research student was, thus I had heard about doctors and researchers like that but I didn't know what...so it wasn't until I started to study here that I was aware of what it was, but no... I want to get out there and work (laughter). I like it within the industry. It's professional. It's not, but I like it. Not the world of research...with fuzzy professors (laughter). No (Female student, 24 years old, studying Chemistry)

I think I'm more attracted of the world of the academy, perhaps a little of this. I feel that I have got some of that drift. I sometimes feel. you've got to show your ambitious also in the academy but it's a slight difference in the attitudes I think in the private sector like that (Male student, 28 years old, studying Biomedicine)

2) What promotes or limits the construction of learner identity of non- traditional students to become effective learners and which enables or inhibits completion of higher education

Important factors:

- *Age, class, ethnicity and gender.* We found that mature students are not seeing themselves as students, but as learners, while younger students form student identities.

Younger students are changing more often to other educational programmes. Minority ethnic students struggle with expectations from parents of them to take the opportunities and gain status in the new society.

- *First generation in HE in a family.* Students experience a lack of help in their studies from parents, on the other hand however, there is a support in terms of being proud of what students are achieving, having a student's status.
- *Personal agenda behind the decision of engaging in HE.* More mature students start learning after the experience of difficult time, going through life changes and crisis.

...It's a long story before actually I've been working in restaurants for many years. It's heavy. You get warnings 'Don't lift like that...You'll get pain in your back' and you thought 'What a hell! I'm 19 years old' and I thought like that it will not happen to me, like that...But after a while I started to get pain in my back...Finally it was so bad I had to be sick-listed and got into this nursing by physiotherapists and rehabilitation and training and such and I got better but not cured and went back to work and so on...and then I couldn't work at all. I had to stay home. Was home for about one year and thought of what I wanted to do. When I went to the physiotherapists I started to study a little how they worked, like that and thought that this seemed nice, like the contact with people and I like that, and a rather independent job, or it is a rather independent job and at the same time teamwork. I like that. (Female student, 34 yrs old, studying Physiotherapy)

...I started studying at KTH and dropped out...I was registered as a drop-out and then CSN didn't allow me any study loans...So I became a nurse. And worked as a nurse, well for ten years. But when I was 29 years old and on the top of my career (laughter) or how you'll put it I felt I couldn't develop anymore...Then I thought that 'No, I'll try this!' Better to give it a try than to get old and bitter. And it has been really funny! (Female student, 34 yrs old, studying molecular biology)

I've only studied for two years in upper secondary school, in building and constructing thus that's far from this but. And I've studied for two years in a Folk High School. But I've never really dared. Thought that 'But no, I'm too stupid. I'm uncultivated' and such. But then I thought I have to try it any way. And I'm interested in working with people, or regard it as fun and then I dislike mathematics and such so, then it was a rather obvious choice. Still think that I, I still think I'm stupid sometimes (laughter) but it's got a little better now (laughter) (Female student, 35 yrs old, studying Social Work)

- *Experiences from the initial education* (previous experiences of being labelled as a 'bad student', conflicts with teachers and school authorities and/or bullying from peers do not contribute to go to HE, but the contrast is visible and gives motives to go on.
- *Students experience adaptation to a new situation and demand*, social, emotional and cognitive skills play a role.
- *Meeting and relationships with peers and lecturers.*
- *Self-esteem and perception of one's capability to manage* in a new, difficult situation (demanding curriculum, new social context, etc.)

But it was really very speedy and I know, because I remember that I had that maths and I asked the lecturer because I didn't understand and I almost got a telling-off. It was. it was much more. harsh at KTH than in SU like that. And I felt so bloody stupid! (Female student, 34 years old, studying Molecular Biology)

I studied two semesters, two and a half and dropped out, because I wasn't used to it and wasn't that motivated and hadn't got the discipline, discipline wasn't my strongest card and it was hard to be poor and I still lived at home. It was really hard to get an apartment (Female student, 32, former student in Anthropology, now in Physiotherapy).

- *Institutional barriers and lack of knowledge* about 'how the things work', a university norms and regulations; how to choose a programme/course, to apply, enroll, study – students experience too much expectations to be self-independent in their learning and lack the ability and experience of managing learning and exams.

3) What kind of policy, cultural and institutional processes, including disciplinary sub-cultures can help or hinder completion

- At the *Royal Institute of Technology* the first semester is experienced as harsh and speedy so that students with difficulties drop-out early.
- At the *Royal Institute of Technology* it is easy to get employment before completion which affects drop-out rates in the last semester.
- The high status at *Karolinska Institutet* makes students try very hard to complete. One of the drop-out students started another degree course at the same institution.
- At *Karolinska Institutet* the frequency in exams makes it difficult for some students to follow. If they don't pass a course the same semester, they are not allowed to continue.
- In the natural sciences at *Stockholm University* the tight time schedule seems to affect drop-out. As it is quite easy to start study, students sometimes think that they do not have the right knowledge to study. In Social Science it seems easier for students. However, students in Social Science think that they have to plan too much of their studies by themselves.
- *Single parents* seem to have difficulties with combining parenthood with studies and especially when having a full day schedule with homework afterwards. They seem to skip all social activities in student life.

4) What is the structural, cultural and personal dialectics of learning and agency in students' lives?

- *Being a first generation in HE* is quite common among non-traditional students. Their identities of learners and students have to be created. They experience a lack of social and cultural capital. They can experience a feeling of 'being inadequate', 'not belonging', especially after the first year not being acquainted with academic reading and writing.
- *Experiences* from *initial* education are important; they can create an attitude toward

studying and evokes an images from the past; school as a source of boredom, school as a source of violence (bullying), school as a source of positive feedback, strengthening individuals as a successful learners.

- *Peer learning and group support* is an important factor enabling completion, when students are travelling together for lectures, sharing notes and books, studying for the exams, working on the projects; “those learners who find themselves in a supportive group with positive feedback and good social relations find learning not only easier but also more rewarding and pleasant at many level as it appeals to their social needs”.
- *Combining studying with parenthood and working* can be experienced as a challenge, and still can become a source of strong motivation to change one's life, no matter that the motives are instrumental, social or personal.
- *Mature non-traditional students in Sweden tend to form a learning identity.* They start to study because of changes in their life situation, and the studies are therefore a situation for life changes as well. To become a good learner is a way of handling the previous changes in life and sometimes to search for a new occupation. They also seem to balance between studies and other aspects of life outside higher education and form a multiple integrated identity related to different life contexts. Younger non-traditional students form a student identity where learning is only one aspect, living a student life the other. They tend to be faced with more struggles during their studies because of their lack of inheritance and not knowing how it works. During their studies they find strategies, peers and adopt the curricula so that they become students.
- *Instrumental orientation vs. learning orientation*
There seems to be a difference in students’ attitude towards learning. Students who participate in a professional educational programme to a higher degree seem to be instrumentally oriented. They learn skills they think necessary for a future profession. Other students seem to be learning oriented. They view learning as something important in itself. They usually participate in general academic programmes or free courses without a clear professional indication.

The main reason for me wanting to study this programme is that I've been working as keeper before and you can't get any further than to be a keeper and while I've always received responsibility I thought it was the right time to add another education making it possible to climb a little bit higher and to be able to take some more responsibility and to get something more challenging (Female student, 35 years old, studying Social Work)

- *Becoming an active citizen*

I became a mental hospital nurse and started to work with people living at home suffering from mental illness. I got quite sulky because I didn't think it worked properly there. There are so much to do for people with mental illness...at the same time I started to work with politics and I think that to gain more power to change things you have to know more, to come higher to be able to change more (female mature student studying Social work)

This is an interesting motive that is related to seeing HE as a way of getting a voice and be able to use this voice for change. In this motive there is a strong embedded commitment and being in HE is a way of gaining legitimacy for changing society.

5) What are the benefits for self and society of participating in learning in HE, whether or not study is completed, (reassess the proposition that it may be worse to withdraw than not to begin)

Specific for the Swedish context is the openness concerning student access in forms of both freestanding courses and educational programmes and that it is free of charge. It is a place for lifelong learning, used both as a temporary parking lot where people move in and between educational programmes, out in working life, back in again. Students have the opportunity to try a free course or start on an educational programme, to change to another educational programme or course when they have decided what to become as a professional. Higher education is also used as a place for returners to change their life career or for further education and training within a specific occupation. Furthermore higher education is used as an arena for culturing. This makes higher education an arena for lifelong learning and a high level of skilled citizens in the Swedish society. On the negative side the status of higher education seems to be decreasing, the drop-out rate is high, and the ways of financing higher education is not in relation to the way it is used. It is also a problem that this is mainly used by middle class women and not by working class men, which affects equality aspects.

For the individual we see benefits in terms of the possibility to change life career and return to learning. This has consequences for job opportunities, social status and personal development and change. The meetings with other students, forming networks are also individual benefits. Finally in social sciences they talk about becoming a good learner, a critical reflector. Mature, non-traditional students want to become role models for their children and show them that everything is possible especially education.

Conclusions

Dropping in-dropping out – HE as a temporary parking lot

The completion rate in higher education is in terms of an international comparison very low in Sweden, only 83 per cent the year 2009 completed a course or an educational programme (Högskoleverket, 2010a). There are several reasons for this. First, there are differences between free courses, general and professional programmes. The completion of free courses is only about 60 percent and is decreasing. One reason for this, seems to be, that they are used as an individual lifelong learning strategy where students are dropping in, changing between courses, before deciding what to do in their lives, getting a degree from a general or professional programme, and then returning to higher education to continue to learn, and changing life course. As an example, amongst the 240,000 that were enrolled in new courses and programmes during autumn 2010, 177,000 had previously been enrolled in higher education, 17 per cent of these had been away from studies for two years or more and 26 per cent had a previous diploma from higher education (SCB, 2010). The completion rate in general

programmes are about 80 per cent and in professional programmes more than 90 per cent (Högskoleverket, 2010a). The completion rate is decreasing in general programmes and free courses, but is stable in professional programmes.

In a report from the National Board of Higher Education, drop-out from general and professional programmes is further analysed (Högskoleverket, 2010b). One of the conclusions drawn in this report is that professional programmes giving certificates needed for employment have the highest completion rate. Men within technical educational programmes are more likely to drop-out during their last year, and the reason for this is that they get employment before completion. For women, and in other fields, drop-out seems to take place during the first semester. Women are more likely to change educational programmes, and are therefore not dropping out of higher education while men, who are dropping out during their education, seem to leave higher education totally. Completion could also be related to the amount of diplomas required. In Sweden, students have to apply for a diploma after finishing a programme or the amount of ECTS-credits they need. A bachelor exam consists of 160 ECTS-credits and 120 credits for a master level. During the academic year 2008-09, 27,000 bachelor diplomas were administered, 20,000 of the students were women, and 24,000 on a master level, where 14,000 of the students were women. Even if the differences in gender became lower on the master level, there is still a big difference in gender. 25 per cent of the year group born 1974, has a diploma from higher education at the age of 35 years. This is an increase compared to the year group born in 1962, where 10.9 per cent had a diploma. Within the statistical reports there are no analyses concerning drop-out and/or completion of non-traditional students.

In our research on RANLHE in Sweden we found out, however, that **drop out is not really a drop-out**. Quinn (2004) has earlier pointed out that non-traditional students dropping out of higher education risk a double failure. They are worse off than if they never entered higher education and worked instead. This is not really the experience in most of the students' stories. As the system allows them to change education, the drop-outs seldom become drop-outs. They just change on their way during their life course. However, the students pointing to the motive of changing their life course, while enrolling into HE, have been putting in a lot of effort and sacrifices for entering higher education. For them a drop-out is really expressed as a failure. The knowledge about students' drop-out and the relation to non-traditional students therefore needs to be further discussed.

Differences between young and mature students

While taking into account two theories of learning – Transformative Learning Theory of Jack Mezirow and Floating theory of Agnieszka Bron, we compared our students' data (mature and young) and found a following connection between them (see, Bron, Thunborg & Edström, 2011).

Table 1. Comparison between TLT and FT in relation to young versus mature students

	Two theories	
	Transformative learning theory (TLT)	Theory of floating (FT)
Young students	Reflecting on life experiences in formal settings. Related to certain subjects. Intellectually	Related to struggles in life situations. Emotionally driven. HE as free zone for feeling

Comparison between non-traditional students

Mature students

driven. HE as a free zone

secure in handling struggles and as battle field, for new struggles.

Related to life experiences in informal and/or formal settings

Related to struggles and crises in life where higher education can be both free zone and battle field

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Student Experiences: Poland

Ewa Kurantowicz & Adrianna Nizinska

Conceptual issues

Our interviews with students indicate the necessity of combining various theoretical approaches in order to understand the importance of the ideas of ‘availability’ and the policy of ‘retention’ in Polish higher education institutions. The access to higher education in Poland is conditioned only (!) by passing a final examination of the secondary school. A well-passed final examination guarantees admission to free-of-charge stationary studies at public universities. If the examination is passed with a poorer result there is the possibility of paying for studies in public universities (extramural studies) or in private ones. Practices of retaining students in the higher education system vary and depend on the policy carried out by schools of higher education, which are often ruled by the logic of the market and economy or by the specifics of learning cultures (Biesta) in institutions of higher education in their departments or academic disciplines.

On the other hand, Polish academic circles have problems with accepting the postulate of widening access to higher education lamenting on its consequences, i.e. its mass character and the deterioration of the quality of education. Simultaneously, Polish academic circles are ones of the most difficult educational institutions to introduce changes in daily practices of educating students. This stems more from the internal mission (vocation) of these circles to ‘be critical’ towards external changes rather than from the routine in daily teaching practices.

Polish non-traditional students are mostly those who are the first generation in their family to participate in the higher education process, but also – they come from rural and small-town areas. We would argue that it increases the prestige of the local context for strengthening motivation to participate in higher education. This local context is a factor that clearly shapes or ‘contextualises the learning process’ of non-traditional students (Edwards 2009, p.3) both in the field of motivation as well as of the learning effects. The paradox pinpointed by Jocey Quinn (2004, p.59) between *retention* and *dropping out* of non-traditional students⁶ in Poland is reversed: *how is it possible that with such small support from the university the students are retained in the education process?* Our interviews show that it is the local context which reinforces their determination in studying through, for example, the offer of a job (under the condition of finishing the studies) and the change of attitudes and expectations (*habitus*) of residents of villages and small towns towards education and this encourages young and older students to participate in higher education, as well as a slow change of students’ attitudes towards academic knowledge.⁷

This change of attitude towards knowledge takes places, we argue, is also due to the increase of students’ self-esteem and obtaining this in what Honneth calls social recognition and respect (Fleming & Finnegan, 2010). How do non-traditional students make use of the increase of their self-esteem? In Polish research these are two areas: ostensible emancipation

⁶ “... the paradox that even in universities offering high levels of support, in localities where jobs are difficult to find, working-class students are still dropping out”.

⁷ However, still – among students – an attitude towards knowledge can be noticed, which we called in the previous project PRILHE as ‘non-traditional’, non-critical’ and conditioned by earlier school experiences. However, in results of RANLHE project there is revealed a change in students’ attitudes, in particular in time perspective (between the 1st and the 3rd year of studies).

that consists in meeting one's own ambitions and a good adjustment to the needs of the labour market and real emancipation that consists in cognitive disparity and the development of an individual's interpretative and critical competences (compare also Stanczyk, 2008, p.245).

What is also crucial is the perception (or sensation) of advantages of learning by non-traditional students. Using the concept of "three capitals" – conceptualisation of the wider benefits of learning – by Schuller (2004), it should be stated that the most visible in our student interviews was the increase of identity capital and the least visible one is social capital. The human capital (knowledge and skills) is always perceived as an advantage with reference to students' professional practice. The increase of identity capital surprises non-traditional students; for them it was/is an unexpected and unplanned 'profit' that results from studying. Human capital, which in many cases was the main motivation for undertaking studies, is collected and perceived as an advantage resulting from learning, but often in their utterances non-traditional students are 'disappointed' with its contents or quality.

Factors which promote or constrain the access, retention and non- completion of non-traditional students (working class, gender and ethnicity issues) to higher education

Promoting factors:

- high motivation to study due to both external factors (market/ employers demands) and internal factors (personal growth, individual interests, challenge, proving one's self).

One woman adult student (Irena) explained that she became fed- up of working as a nurse as she did not like the work environment. The attitudes of her work colleagues also made her determined to complete her degree. She had felt under-appreciated at work and wanted to prove to others and herself that she was capable of being a successful student:

I got so pissed off with the girls at work so I told myself 'I'll show you all, I'm going to study' and I applied without telling anyone at work. Three of my colleagues figured it out and started to comment in a very unpleasant way ...Once I heard – accidentally- one nurse asking the other 'what does she study anyway.?' and the other replied 'probably nothing, cause nobody would expect her to'. It wasn't nice. It was all about the atmosphere of jealousy at the hospital but I thought I'll show you and look at me now. I've got the BA degree in special pedagogy and I really enjoyed studying.

Dawid, a young student, became ill with leukemia when he started primary school. He spent the rest of his childhood fighting the illness and spent most of his time in hospital and watched some of his friends die. These experiences made him determined to study and get to university:

I remember it all very clearly. I was running through the hospital corridors with a chemotherapy bag because it had helped me with the pain...I started to weaken and could not even hold on to a spoon. They had to lock me in an isolation ward for two weeks. When I got better I came back to an open ward, met other kids with cancers – even my first 'puppy love' happened there, probably like healthy kids. The only difference was that I had to see my girl covered with a white sheet when she passed away. I believe it affected my choice to study pedagogy to help people.

- supportive learning environments at HE institutions (flexibility, access to the information and resources such as library, IT , helpful and patient teachers and administrations).

Irena experienced severe health problems while studying for her degree and her learning path became a rocky one. A tutor became a significant other to her, supporting her with her learning and kept her going;

When Dr K started guiding me to put me back on track with my thesis I found it easier. It was like she made me stronger. When I called her in one of my weak moments, whining that it is too difficult for me, it's too ambitious she said, 'Let me be the judge but now keep on working'. It was just what I needed. She taught me how to write and I'm almost done. I have two weeks and then I have to finalise it.

Another part-time female adult student experienced personal problems while studying and found support from her university:

It is really amazing how much help I've got here. I've had lots of issues. I still have with my ex-husband, mental health issues. The past still influences my present. I'm a rather open, friendly person but life was not kind to me – even now with my dad's cancer. All these things made me talk to one of the teachers and she sent me to a counselor and she gave me a lot of support. She was very warm and sympathetic. Not only did she make me feel better with myself, her advice helped me to get a new job! I'm really happy. I used all the guidance she gave me and jut yesterday they called me and let me know that they're hiring me. So help in this university is not an empty word. It's real. Now I feel I'm finally in the right place, studying pedagogy and counseling and I know that this is my thing.

- peer support (helping with the 'logistics' – sharing notes and books, travelling together, studying and working on shared projects but also learning from each other in socio – cultural ways – sharing experiences such as divorce, death and sickness in a family etc., providing emotional support and advices in personal matters).

For many of the adult students peer support was very important. As one woman stated:

My first experiences with the group were that everybody was sitting nice and quiet at their desks and watching the others. By the next day relationships have already been established, acquaintances have been made and we all 'clicked' together as a group. Today we are very supportive and helpful. The relationships are very strong. We call each other, help each other with tasks, borrow notes and books. We can really count on each other.

For Irena her peer group kept her going during a period of illness:

It really brought me down, the news about my health. It made me think about my whole life. Later on I decided to have surgery. I was nervous so all educational plans were off the horizon. But I also knew it gave me a reason not to work on my thesis. I'm not sure if it scared me or I just didn't want to do this anymore? But my classmates from the BA level started convincing me to move forward, to do the finals so I thought if people are asking me I should do it.

- family support, especially in relation to women studying to help with the overburden of family and work obligations
- positive attitude towards learning and good learning skills.

Constraining factors:

Both the polytechnic university and the University of Wrocław are large institutions, and both are managed in a rather old-fashioned way, so very often lack of information and miscommunication is seen as a serious constraint, although they both employ many clerks and administrators. When you are a non-traditional student and you are in a new and different situation and have specific needs it may take time to obtain proper information about how to deal with it and how to find a solution. There are a lot of procedures which are complicated and not always coherent with other procedures, and responsibility is diffused and fragmented between departments and positions. The situation is better at the University of Lower Silesia, maybe because of the smaller number of students, but a growth of administration over the past year is also observable

- struggles with combining learning with work, parenting, taking care of other people (parents, siblings), financial problems, health issues, personal crisis (divorce, conflict, unemployment)
- lack of support from the institutions, teachers, family and peers

For adult students returning to learn and learning the 'system' of a university is not always easy particularly when staff are not helpful:

At a public university there are so many more students so the administrative staff are less pleasant. I've been treated differently here than in a non-public university. You just simply cannot come and ask a question 'how should I fill in this form?'. You have to just bring the filled document and either they tell you 'wrong, do it again' or they take the form and it's over in 5 seconds. They won't hold your hand and be gentle with you because there is no time for that. The administration opens its doors for students for only two hours and every day and the queue is usually for at least three hours so some students will have to come back another time (male adult)

- learning difficulties, struggling with the academic curriculum.

What promotes or limits the construction of learner identity of non-traditional students to become effective learners and which enables or inhibits completion of higher education

Important factors:

- age and gender (mature students, both male and female are more determined, even when they struggle, while younger students tend to give up when they experience difficulties)
- first generation in HE in a family (lack of support, difficulties with getting help from parents, disapproval)

While Dawid received support from his mother and sisters he experienced opposition from his brother;

My brother was sort of scared or something when he found out about my decision. He never got higher than basic vocational training and he was probably jealous. He kept talking on and on to my parents and sisters saying that 'things got so easy for him, now he will have a white-collar job'. It was weird this whole talking and attitude.

- personal agenda behind the decision of engaging in HE (University as a transitional space for personal change, becoming a student as an important milestone after difficult experiences, life changing decisions, crisis)
- experiences from initial education (bad emotional experiences, being rejected by peers, being labeled as a ' bad student', conflicts with teachers and school authorities)

One woman adult student had negative experiences of school as a result of other pupils and this had prevented her from entering university straight from school:

When I started high school I was an A grade student and I was the only one in the class with such an attitude. The truth be told this did not make me a lot of friends. I stopped studying, stopped caring because I wanted to be liked, have friends so my grades went lower and lower. Other kids were teasing me, pushing. I was bullied. Once they locked me in a toilet. Hostile comments all the time. So I stopped being active in the classroom. I backed out. I barely graduated from high school. I believe that if I had gone to a different high school or got some help back then I would be an MA student today without a problem. This was like a domino effect..

- adaptiveness to a new situation and demand, both social and cognitive skills
- quality of the relations with peers and lecturers
- self -esteem and perception of one's capability to manage in a new, difficult situation (demanding curriculum, new social context, etc.)

Sometimes adult students have self-doubt about their ability to study, especially with younger students. Joanne initially felt that she may feel an outsider and that this would make her feel like 'fish out of water' but believed that the nature of their subject they were studying mitigated this. She felt, in Honneth's term, respect for who she was:

First of all I was anxious about being the oldest in a group and that I would not fit in with people ten years younger than I am. I'm in a mixed group in terms of age so I don't feel so different. Besides the group is very open and welcoming no matter what the age. Maybe it is because of the human science we're studying. We are ' people persons',

For many non-traditional students entering university and making sense of the academic culture and language can be daunting initially:

My first impression after a day in a lecture room was that I've never spent ten hours in any school. I had a headache because of all these theories, definitions etc. Then we had a seminar in smaller groups and I got a list of books and articles I should read for the semester. I've never read so many during my whole previous education. And that was just one course! I never thought I would be able to make it through the first exam session

(Dawid)

- institutional barriers and lack of knowledge on 'how things work' at the university (laws and regulation on taking a break, repeating exams, semesters and courses, negotiating with the lecturers)

What kind of policy, cultural and institutional processes, including disciplinary sub-cultures can help or hinder completion

- studying/learning: it looks easier in the social sciences, one can manage it if one is dedicated and work hard but the curriculum at the polytechnic university can also be too demanding for some of the students, so they drop out after the first semester more often than in the two other institutions. There has been a lot of stories about the administrative 'jungle' at the polytechnic university with confusing, incomplete and false information and unclear, hazy rules.
- flexibility of learning is also important factor: for those more independent and responsible learners who combine studying with other activities as it enables completion. Sometimes non- completion is being explained by students as a result of 'not enough pressure from the tutor' (i.e. To write down the final thesis necessary to graduate at B.A. Level). For those students taking responsibility for their own learning, and self- directed learning is perceived as a challenge.
- gender aspects are important: women are more involved in family duties (often combined with full time employment) so they tend to be overloaded but also they are more successful in juggling and multitasking. So this factor can both hinder (it makes finding time for studying more difficult) and help (once the decision is made and the tuition is paid, they know they **have to** make it, it's embedded in a more personal agenda). Providing temporary day care institutions for the children of non- traditional students would help – such a network should be provided not only in the HE institutions but also in the small towns and rural areas where they live.
- in some case's a *significant other* can be a factor, whether it is a sympathetic, understanding teacher, a supportive cheering friend or a child or spouse who could be let down by the learner's failure. These stories show the importance of hidden or open influence of personal networking and relations with others who are often presented as a motivation to re-engaging in education for those who initially dropped out.

What is the structural, cultural and personal dialectics of learning and agency in students' lives

- **being a first generation in HE** is very common, so the whole dialectics of learning and being student is rather built 'from scratch' than 'inherited' as a part of social and cultural capital; sometimes it causes a feeling of 'being inadequate', 'not belonging', especially after the first experience of reading academic books and writing an essay
- **initial experiences** in education from childhood are important as they can create an attitude towards studying and evoke an image from the past; school as a source of boredom, school as a source of violence (bullying), school as a source of positive feedback, strengthening the individual as a successful learner

- **peer learning and group support** is an important factor that enables completion (travelling together for classes, sharing notes and books, studying for the exams, working on the projects); those learners who find themselves in a supportive group with positive feedback and good social relations find learning not only easier but also more rewarding and pleasant at many level as it appeals to their social needs. These factors seemed to be more important than relations with the teachers when it comes to defining a 'positive learning experience'
- as already mentioned in a previous points, **combining studying with parenthood, jobs** and taking care of elderly parents, siblings etc, is challenging, but often it is a source of strong motivation to change one's life, no matter if the motives are instrumental (better job or promotion), social (changing one's image, social up -climbing) or personal growth related (self- awareness, self- respect, personal interests and development)
- many stories of non-traditional students introduce a factor of **important/ critical life event** resulting in a deep and sudden change in one's life. Becoming a student is often a consequence of dealing with this change, re-inventing one's self, challenging previous assumptions, beliefs and routines about one's capabilities, talents and abilities. For some learners this aspect is more important than the degree in itself, learning is about empowering, regaining a control over one's life, search for life improvement.
- **Instrumental orientation and attitude toward learning** is also quite common and many of young students are seeing an education as a way of spending productive time until the economic conditions change in Poland and the job market improves; this group is looking for clear instruction of what is minimum level requirement in order to complete

What are the benefits for self and society of participating in learning in HE, whether or not study is completed, (reassess the proposition that it may be worse to withdraw than not to begin)

What is specific for the Polish context and can be seen in the interviews is a changing social image of learning. This means that learning is currently perceived as potentially beneficial for the individual in general and this new trend is also present in the small towns and rural areas of the country, where education was not in such a high esteem in the past. What is also important, this change came along with the expanding access to HE, which opens the opportunity to study for all people, no matter what their social background is. All kinds of benefits from learning (in terms of Schuller – growth of human capital, identity capital and social capita) are more obvious in this particular area of the country, because of difficulties in the access to HE in the past and because of the mental barriers (that one is not capable of studying and being a successful learner).

Individual benefits:

- new self- image, new competences, not only cognitive but social
- perceiving other people's experiences and exchange of it as an important biographical learning resources (peer learning)
- growth of personal agency and ability to control one's life

- general personal development and growth of self esteem
- courage to take a stand in public and advocate for one's own interests and ideas
- changing attitude towards learning, recognition of informal and non-formal prior learning, lifelong – and -wide learning
- becoming more reflexive and critical, changing learning identity

Many non-traditional students experience educational and self-changes as a result of studying. For Dawid:

I believe that with formal knowledge I've got the ability to look for different explanations. I used to think in a very conventional way. Now I'm more an 'out of the box' person. I realise there is no black and white, true or false – things are relative.

A female adult student explains the effects learning has had on her:

I believe that this freedom of speech during the seminars, everybody can make a statement, nobody's interrupting, showing disrespect, people are open to a different opinion. It is kind of a trick to teach us, to give u knowledge but this way of thinking I really value that. It makes me feel very positive about this whole experience with learning. I feel like I can spread my wings now. I'm more brave.

Social benefits:

- Re-shaping families from the inside: changing everyday life culture by taking a role of student (especially for those mature students). Engaging in HE by parents and grandparents, women forces social cultural changes in a traditionally defined family roles and new model of sharing duties in a family
- setting up an example for younger generations, individual promotion of a learning culture, new social pathways in a family where there was no previous tradition of engaging in HE
- new 'social label' of '*the experts*' in a studied discipline for the students in their social environment, workplace, among family and friends, seeking for their advices, asking for opinion, new recognition
- Economic benefits: promotion, keeping the job, creating a SME, growth of entrepreneurial activities
- Mobility of the student body – inside the country and in the EU, as a result of the Bologna process and national law regulation regarding the process of study
- Ability to change the HE institutions by realizing and articulating student needs and requirements in a reflective, dialogical way. Such a dialogue can lead to transformation of the learning culture in the institutions and make HE institution more flexible, and open to negotiation with the students

Most of the described benefits are not strictly resulting from graduating/ completion of HE. Many of them come from the learning experience of HE, even if students will drop out later. Even when students declare a pure instrumental motivation, changes are present and even if incidental, they still alter students' perception, attitudes and social skills.

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Transitional Spaces: A report on students' experiences in Spain

José González Monteagudo & Miguel Ángel Ballesteros Moscosio

Introduction

This report stems from the analysis of qualitative data produced (biographical interviews with students) over three years within the context of the RANLHE Project, undertaken at the Universities of Seville, Pablo de Olavide and Huelva in Spain. The project focused on non-traditional undergraduate students at these three universities.

First, however, we will present a profile of Spanish universities as well as a profile of the universities mentioned before. 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 programmes. 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 it was 22% of 18 – 25 year olds enrolled in university education). Women students in Spanish HE are currently around 55% 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 a high 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 the 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 have being adapted from: Ministry of Education and Science –Spain: 2008).

In 2009 unemployment in Spain was around 18.8% for people between 25 and 65 years old. But for people with a high level of 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 rate was 21.7% (Tobarra, 2010). These data show clearly the added value of education, especially in the current situation of economic crisis. Unemployment for the working population had increased in February 2011 to 21.3%. It is important to stress that the black economy represents in Spain at least 15% of the national economy.

Description of the three institutions.

The three universities we studied are public bodies. There are four elements that differentiate and characterise them: their location, their age, the number of students and their area. The University of Seville (US) is 500 years old (founded in 1505). This means that it has established organisational structures. The US campus is, in the words of its rector “...*all the city of Seville...*”, in as much as it has a distribution of various campuses all over the city. The US has around 65,000 students and 4,500 lecturers. The US has developed a multitude of programmes some of which are aimed specifically at non-traditional students. Many of these programmes are managed via the University Community Help Service and are aimed at immigrants, women, the disabled, etc. Along with the University of Malaga, the US has recently received the title of Campus of International Excellence. Moreover, it has received awards as the Spanish University that best manages the Erasmus programme and for its Integrated Plan for the disabled.

The Pablo de Olavide (UPO) and Huelva (UHU) universities are noted for their youth and capture a much smaller area. The situation of the three universities being very close to each other means that there is a feeling of competitiveness to which we will refer to later on. The UPO is centred in Dos Hermanas, a large town neighbouring Seville. This University has good connections via various public transport networks (underground, bus, etc.). It has 959 lecturers and 10,526 students. The managers and lecturers interviewed consider that it is an institution that is concerned about social topics both within and outside the university institution.

The UHU, set up in 1993 from the University of Seville, is in the city of Huelva, though it has a periurban campus in la Rábida. It has various campuses in the city and is currently expanding in a model that is close to that of a single campus, like the UPO, in a new campus (El Carmen). It has circa 900 lecturers and researchers and 11,000 students and is 45 minutes from Seville. Its geographical location confers its students with special characteristics, mainly due to the rural origin of many of them. This conditions its expansion as the public aim is at times considered to be limited.

For the UPO and the UHU, to be a small university (165_UHU) is a characteristic that provides quality, closeness to the students, and knowledge of its people and their personal histories. It provides a greater accessibility to its centres and its various services and notably reduces the time spent in bureaucratic procedures. The same occurs with the use of ICT to help to avoid trips for carrying out procedures. This detail is highly valued when it is a matter of a single campus, such as is the case of the UPO.

The nearness of the UPO and the UHU, smaller and newer, to the US, older and larger, has repercussions. On the one hand, the small universities have to offer degrees that are new and attractive (for example Biotechnology) or joint degrees (an example: Law and the LADE – Company Management) to attract the students, especially in the case of the UPO. Many lecturers of the UHU and UPO come from the US (they studied or began their professional career in the US).

As a result of both traditional homogeneity of HE institutions in Spain and this process of recruitment of staff, the three universities have been very similar in terms of management, rules, institutional organisation, academic culture and study programmes. These similarities

have been changing over the last five years while new approaches to management have produced important transformations, aimed at increasing diversity, competition and accountability, within the context of the internationalisation of higher education, European policies and neo-liberal schemes.

Our goal consists in analysing the lived experiences of non-traditional students through their individual itineraries, documenting the processes of access to university and development of identities while undertaking a university degree (with special focus on retention, completion and drop-out, as well as factors which either promote or hinder retention and completion). It is very important to grasp the influence of the academic and institutional university contexts on students' lives (structure) as well as to stress the capacity of students in order to transform their own lives in interaction with university contexts and beyond (agency). Universities are important transitional spaces used by students to (re)construct a personal way of dealing with identity and learning.

The complexity of our task is related to the high number of students interviewed and the different profiles included under the umbrella category of “non-traditional students” (see the *Literature Review* of the project). This diversity of situations and profiles demands a plural and open approach in both theoretical and methodological dimensions.

Factors which promote or constrain the access, retention and non- completion of non-traditional students (working class, gender and ethnicity issues) to higher education

Promoting factors:

We can distinguish between internal and external factors which enhance the student decision to access university and keep going on.

- The first and perhaps most important question which facilitates a good performance as a student is to have a clear determination for learning. There are different motivations related to this: to gain economic and social mobility, to adhere to personal or family expectations. The determination by the student for accessing and completing a university degree is a crucial element. Also it is very important to have a clear idea of the degree and its subject area and to have collected some information about the degree and related issues. These elements increase the possibility of academic success for non-traditional students. It is also pertinent to consider past learning experiences of students.
- The hope of starting and managing a new stage in life is important. For young students who access university from upper secondary school or vocational training, starting university means to face an educational space characterised by freedom; it is a symbol of becoming an adult for the student, but also for society and the family. The new situation and status as a university student are even more meaningful to non-traditional adult students who access university in a vital moment in which to become a student constitutes an element to improve working conditions or simply for personal development for themselves or others. In many cases this has the meaning of accomplishing a deep wish or dream, long delayed, which is a way for recognition both in social and personal terms:

I'm proud of having come to university because this is something... in my family there aren't university degrees. So the fact of coming to university... pay attention to the fact that I'm coming from the working class, as it's usual to say, isn't?, from the working sector which has not had money in its miserable life. This satisfies very much, not only to me but also to my parents, they are proud of me, my family are proud of me. My soul is overjoyed with this (male student, Huelva).

- The role of other significant adults is also important. The students interviewed saw themselves as reflected in their parents. In some cases, in a negative way as they try to avoid following the life paths of parents who had been living in bad economic and social conditions. In other cases, the students have been inspired by the examples of effort and dedication of parents. Perhaps it is the mother, the more influential member of the family. In some occasions the students told us stories about the influences received from parents who were themselves studying. This has been decisive in order to access to university or to keep on at critical moments. In some cases, to do a degree was related with the wish of helping and supporting the children in their own studies:

I remember many times, when I was helping my son to do him homework. There were many questions I wasn't able to understand. I did not know how to do this... also there were many years... And I said: 'why not to try the access to university for adults older than 25 years?' (female adult student, Huelva).

Likewise to have a stable economic situation in the family is crucial to being successful at university. Family economic support is decisive, but also success and completion are linked to student determination. Students with a good academic background have also more possibilities of accessing and completing university studies.

Now we enumerate some specific situations lived by non-traditional students in which social and interpersonal support has been important:

- Economic and emotional support by the family is fundamental for non-traditional students, as well as support by friends, other students, lecturers and larger social networks. In the Andalusian context the intergenerational support is very important. In some cases the students told us about the collaboration between family members when there were important health problems in the family:

It's not only the illness of my mother; it's the situation at home. My mother cannot be alone at all, never. So someone must be with her... In fact, my grandmother comes home for this [to care the mother, who has a cancer]. My grandmother always says: 'you girl, go to your studies... if you need to leave home, I come here before than expected to be with your mother. But you go, finish off your studies'. My relatives consider very important this. As without a degree I would not be able... And they are right (female student, Huelva).

- In relation to disabled students, especially blind students, they told us that the support received from the *Organización Nacional de Ciegos de España-ONCE* (Spanish

National Organization of Blind People) had been and continued to be crucial in overcoming the difficulties they faced.

- Regarding adults who try to combine family life and studies, emotional support by members of the family was also very significant. This is particularly relevant for women as they usually dedicate more time to family and home. Many women appreciated the efforts by partner to share tasks and time:

Since I've been studying my husband collaborates more at home. He knows very well that I'm not able to work on this. If he wants to spend more time with me, he needs to help me. In the last months he uses to go on Sundays to visit a friend of us. So I remain alone and quiet. He knows that if he remains at home... so he gives me my time and my space (female mature student, Pablo de Olavide).

- In the case of adult workers, it is very positive if the student's company has a positive attitude towards the fact of having a worker who is studying, as well as good arrangements at university concerning administrative issues and requirements (like to attend compulsory courses). Sometimes lecturers have an initial negative attitude towards students who are working. This may affect negatively in relation to the retention and completion of non-traditional students. It is important to remember that Spanish public universities do not differentiate between full time study and part-time study. So always there is the potential conflict between lecturers who claim full compulsory attendance and students working full time. It is normal that some lecturers react to this potential conflict indicating that students with this special profile have the possibility of studying at the public Open University.
- To have institutional support is a factor which enhances university integration of non-traditional students. In the three universities of our project there has been an important progress on this issue. Over the last five years new offices and services have been established aimed to support migrants, women, workers, disabled people and adults. Also the university has recently strengthened its access policies and there are now greater opportunities for people older than 40 years old to enrol in Andalusian universities. However there is a lack of information for students and lecturers regarding these supports and its effective use. Lecturers in many cases do not know about this information. Many lecturers are accustomed to giving more importance to research and commitments related to professional networking and publications than their teaching role. As they usually have big groups of students (normally not less than 50 or 60 students per group), they prefer to concentrate their teaching efforts on the average of the group, without paying attention to special situations or specific profiles of students.
- Adaptation of lecturers to the characteristics of students (diversity of methods, to plan the teaching in advance, to offer practical cases or problems). It was very appreciated by students to undertake individual activities as they have a negative opinion of group work. The work in groups is time-consuming and non-traditional students (adults in general, especially those who are workers and/or parents) repeat again and again that they lack time. Working on an individual basis is also important for students who are doing at the same time courses of different years of their

programme or degree as they need to make compatible a complex and often overlapping schedule. Likewise it is crucial to promote a continuous assessment in order to favour more continuity in study tasks:

I think that continuous assessment helps more than exams in the final period of the semesters. I think people do more efforts if they have shots exams every month, and not only within three or four months. Because they tend to leave the things for the final moment, and when you realise this you have six or seven courses, and only one month behind you (male student, Seville).

- An important question regarding promotion of academic success refers to study techniques relevant for specific courses or degrees. In spite of a bigger interest in relation to academic skills (to search for and filter information, to write essays, to study for examinations), many non-traditional students have a lack of training in this area. They do not have good preparation for this in secondary schools. And also usually universities do not have specific programmes to improve academic skills during the first year or semester. This matches up with the results derived from the interviews carried out with lecturers (see our report: Cultural and Institutional Perspectives). Lecturers stressed the need of implementing short courses, seminars and other activities during the first and second semester to overcome deficiencies in this domain.

Constraining factors

A factor that seems to hinder good integration and performance at university for non-traditional students is related to the size of HE institutions. The University of Seville is the third Spanish university by its number of students (around 65,000 students in the academic year 2010-2011). On the other hand, as already stated, the universities Pablo de Olavide and Huelva are smaller, and also more recent. The students told us about the lack of motivation and additional difficulties derived from mass university systems as teaching is depersonalised. This makes communication between students, and between students and lecturers more difficult. The adaptation to the Bologna system has partially reduced this problem given that almost half of the teaching hours in each course are undertaken dividing the normal group in two subgroups. This has resulted in lecturers, in most cases for the first time, teaching almost half of the teaching hours with groups around 30 and even fewer than 30 students.

A second constraining factor recurrent in the students' discourses refers to the compulsory attendance to the courses, more important now with the Bologna system. Compulsory attendance hinders and limits access and retention of non-traditional students (like single mothers and other students with family responsibilities, workers both in formal and informal economy, and students doing at the same time courses of different years).

In general, students are not informed of available resources and supports, beyond the scholarships offered by the state and the regional government (grants of the Ministry of Education, in Madrid; and of the Junta de Andalucía –the regional government-, in Seville). In our interviews it seems that disabled students have a better knowledge about funding and academic support, and they use this knowledge to take advantage in order to improve their university trajectories.

The moment of entry into university is crucial. The risk of dropping-out may become greater for different reasons. Many students interviewed considered that at the moment of access to university there is a feeling of deep disorientation. It is assumed that to enter in this new university context requires maturity, but many students spoke about their lack of maturity for this. It is relevant to take into account that in Spain an important sector of non-traditional students start university when they are 18 or 19 years old. There is no doubt students in the first year do not make good use of institutional supports, mainly owing to ignorance. Likewise this group of students considers the origin of failure in their studies in the very first stages of the university is linked to the lack of a correct counselling in the secondary school and pre-entry stages. Usually students have family support even though this support decreases when they repeat the whole year or some parts of the syllabus. In some cases students feel they might disappoint hopes, efforts and expectations of the family, particularly in cases of families with low economic capital or when students are the first generation at university. This situation generates feelings of personal disappointment which often is linked to earlier experiences of disappointment and failure which feeds into a cycle of non-completion and in some cases causes drop-out.

Another constraining factor is the ignorance of the requirements of the degree or to be wrong regarding the profile of the student which matches up with the degree. In this case, failure is linked to an unrealistic view of the own intellectual and motivational capabilities. Many students do not have the responsibility and willingness to make the investment in time and effort demanded by university studies.

In the interviews with lecturers and policy-makers they generally considered that the economic situation is not an important factor in whether students start and complete a university degree. On the other hand, and in strong contrast with this viewpoint, non-traditional students have stated that to have low economic resources determine access and completion since it calls for an indispensable effort by family and the student. So in a weak economic situation, either in the individual or family level, there is a tendency to optimisation of available resources, focusing the economic investment on one or several selected members of the family. When the financial situation is very bad, students are forced to withdraw either temporarily or permanently. So the economic situation is considered by non-traditional students a possible cause of drop-out. This situation tends to be emphasised when students think university teaching is of poor quality.

Other issues which hinders good university itineraries is the distance between home and university. Students stated that there is lack of support for accommodation, although in some cases they need to stay away from family home during the course. An additional difficulty consists in the lack of a good network of public transports to get to university. Sometimes this is one of the reasons they feel forced to stay away from the family home.

What promotes or limits the construction of learner identity of non- traditional students to become effective learners and which enables or inhibits completion of higher education

- Age: Although in general mature students do not consider this factor as an obstacle for learning, they recognise that it is a bit more difficult to memorise teaching contents, when comparing with younger students (it is useful to stress here the central role of memory in educational systems of Southern Europe, in contrast with Germany, UK or the Scandinavian countries). In contrast adult mature students have more vital

experiences and skills than their younger companions. This favours an optimal development as university learners (capacity of abstraction, ability to establish priorities, knowledge about how to deal with information, long trajectory as readers).

- Maturity: It is an important aspect in relation to access to university. It helps to increase personal investment regarding tasks and demands from university life. Also maturity enhances students' ability to be focused on studies, above all in cases of new students who are living away from family home.
- To have previous positive experiences as a student favours integration into university culture. In some interviews the students paid homage to their teachers:

Even nowadays I use to kiss and hug my old teachers and I see them sometimes. They are already coming to the retirement or the preretirement. Very good memories, really very good. All my teachers had strong interest in us.

- To have a positive self-concept as learners.
- Management and distribution of time. The key point here is to balance dedication to university (attendance to courses, time devoted to individual study and readings, work in groups, visits to lecturers' offices, practical activities) and demands coming from family, working life and trips (this includes to cover big distances, but also dealing with traffic jams). Lack of time influences academic issues and other aspect of students' lives

The difficulty of combining studies and family is more acute for women. An adult woman student from Seville said:

My son, it's a pity... when I come back from the faculty at 10 pm, he hugs and kisses me. Also he asks me for his dinner. Well, why don't you say to your dad that he prepares the dinner?

Likewise students do not have time to share experiences with their classmates. Usually they only share time together in the lecture rooms.

The fact of living as a roommate increases the opportunities for students of becoming more autonomous, independent and mature as they need to be in charge of housework, very often for the first time in their lives. Sometimes students are living with roommates who are not students and come from very different backgrounds and profiles, and with interest and perspectives very different from academic contexts.

Students who are living away from the family home often feel disorientated. They do not fit into the new context. In several cases they said they had the body in the city where they are studying but the heart and the mind were in the city home and family home. For them it is problematic to take advantage of university life beyond classes as they usually were using free time to come back and spend time with friends and family:

I like very much Cordoba [150 km from the university], to be there with my family and friends and that. Well, the first year will be the most difficult, then already... I will travel a lot to visit my parents. The situation will be better little by little (male student, Pablo de Olavide).

Non-traditional students who stay away from the family home during teaching periods need to make many trips. This implies an additional difficulty, both personal and financial.

- Gender: It is evident that in the Andalusian and Spanish contexts, women dedicate more time than men to housework. So many women have less time for learning when compared with men.

At home there has been a situation of inequality. When my father came back from work he used to lie down on the armchair, and he used to remain there, doing nothing... He didn't tidy up his clothes after his shower, he did nothing. This situation also happens at home of my grandmother, for instance... the mother of my mother. Always the women get up, and the men remain sit down (female student, Huelva).

On the other side, to be a man and student living away from the family home has positive repercussions regarding gender equality. Living without parents, young male students have been forced to do housework by themselves. In many cases these young men have lived in an unequal gendered situation at the family home, with women – especially the mother- doing most of the daily homework. Therefore, in the new situation, these male students have been living an experience of greater personal autonomy.

- To establish positive relations with classmates and lecturers. To feel integrated with the class group, while fellow students become facilitator resources of learning in university contexts.
- Ignorance regarding institutional operation of universities and the possibilities of supports and help that are available.
- To have a clear idea about what studies to undertake and to collect information on this.
- Participation in university social life, beyond the attendance of courses or other compulsory events.
- Involvement in learning activities, to persevere and to be up to date with deadlines and academic tasks. To respond efficiently to the requirements of the institution and lecturers, to pass courses.
- To have emotional, social and financial resources, either coming from the family or from grants. Although non-traditional students receive scholarships and they assess this positively, also they consider these grants are insufficient.

- To have enough economic resources. Lack of financial resources limits the academic possibilities of non-traditional students. In these cases students are forced to depend on public support systems from the state, the region or HE institutions. In most cases these scholarships are not sufficient to cover students' needs.

Lack of financial resources conditions decisions to be taken in relation to university studies. For example, the use of opportunities offered by programmes of international mobility (like Erasmus and other). In many cases, students need to contribute some money in order to cover the full cost of the studies as they are funded partially by public bodies.

Lack of money influences also relations of students with companions and social life as students try to limit the possibilities of meeting other people if this implies spending money:

If my friends meet to have dinner or similar stuff, I had to limit or reduce my nights out because of lack of money (female student, Huelva).

When students have a precarious financial situation they need to search for a job, during the teaching periods, on holidays, or in both periods. In many occasions, the result of the effort was very poor:

The summer before my fifth year at university I worked to pay my fees. My disappointment was that the cost of the fees was €800, but I could only save €400. I worked in a cafeteria, but only in the afternoons, so earned not very much (male student, Huelva).

Financial and emotional support of the family is crucial for non-traditional students. Family values and the importance of having a member starting and completing university studies. In the case of first generation students to get a university degree becomes, in the context of many families, a way of facilitating social and economic upward mobility:

My family has always been behind me, always. Well, particularly when I failed in my studies. But always: 'You must study, you must study... you must be a good boy', the typical things that use to say the mothers. It's normal that the family say you need to do a university degree (male student, Seville).

In this respect, first generation students are taking advantage of current opportunities. And this is especially important because parents and in many occasions also older siblings did not have same or similar opportunities. On the one hand access to university –a dream accomplished- implies the recognition of a symbolic (and in some cases economic) debt with parents. But also this access may be a way of gratifying and being grateful to parents for their effort and support over the years.

- Students often considered the quality of teaching and a friendly role by lecturers as positive factors. In some cases poor quality of teaching and unfriendly lecturers may be considered, among other things, as influencing drop-out or at least they might decrease interest, participation or commitment to their studies. Some non-traditional

students considered their relations with lecturers cold and distant. The students demand more commitment from lecturers:

Basically a good lecturer should have into account the student. They should try to motivate the students. They should take interest for the students' needs, to question them and listen to them. This is crucial. To prepare the course, to promote participation by the students, to see the situation as the student see it...the distance between the lecturer and the student is so big that it seems we are in two different worlds (female student, Huelva).

Consequently, they demand greater closeness between students and lecturers. Sometimes there have been very clear and strong critiques of HE institution when those we interviewed referred to the inadequate responses they had been receiving regarding specific demands derived from different profiles and situations of non-traditional students.

What kind of policy, cultural and institutional processes, including disciplinary sub-cultures can help or hinder completion

- Students complain of lack of advice in the pre-entry stage to university. The improvement of academic guidance may help avoid many early drop-outs, which are often the consequence of either uninformed choice or ignorance by the student about his or her own capabilities.

The people get into university because a teacher encourages you. You come to the university in a moment in which you are maturing. At that moment you haven't idea of what you want (male student, Seville).

- Students perceive that degrees in Social and Human Sciences (Education, Psychology, Teacher Training, and Sociology) are easier than degrees in economics and technical fields. Nevertheless there is a high drop-out in Social and Human Sciences as the students choose these fields because it is possible to access easily (in other fields the students are required to have higher grades). The final consequence is that students start degrees they are not interested in. So motivation and determination are very low.
- In Social and Human Sciences students perceive more closeness between students and lecturers. This trait is very appreciated by non-traditional students as it reinforces trust to ask for advice and to propose or demand adaptations of the programme for specific situations.
- The second semester of the first year (after the examinations of the first semester) is a key moment. Students start to leave the lecture rooms and also they establish preferences between different courses, devoting more time and energies to the easiest courses. To reduce this partial or total early drop-out it would be essential to have specific programmes to support non-traditional students.
- The reasons for drop-out are different amongst students in the final university year: accumulation of courses not undertaken in the previous years, changes in personal or family life (contracting an illness; to find out a job). Consequently, we need more

flexibility in relation to attendance at university and more adaptation to the needs of workers, family carers and similar situations. It is necessary to specify (especially for readers from abroad) that in Spain there is not an official difference between part-time study and full-time study. This institutional characteristic explains this kind of difficulties. One of the mature students stressed the differences between young and adult students:

The interest centres for people in their fifties are radically different of those who have very young people... radically different. Consequently it seems to me that to homogenize this it's madness... from my viewpoint (male student, Pablo de Olavide).

- Non-traditional students appreciate flexibility related to learning processes, attendance to the courses, approachable lecturers who understand students' needs, and diversity of tools and ways of assessment. This favours the compatibility of studies with personal and professional life. The recent implementation of the Bologna process is perceived by many students as a menace to flexibility since compulsory attendance is a key feature of the new approaches.
- There is a positive opinion about different initiatives undertaken in different faculties in order to offer a pre-entry course aimed to reinforce the preparation in the more difficult subjects. This strategy should be widened. On the other hand there is a need for more activities related to cognitive and study skills, conceived and adapted for specific subjects and disciplinary fields.
- It is not possible to obviate the financial question. Students demand an increase in the number of scholarships as well as economic support to improve transport between the home town and university or, failing that, better funding for accommodation.
- A final element which is considered positive by non-traditional students refers to the co-ordination of lecturers who are teaching at the same students' group. This may help to avoid the repetition of similar activities, which is viewed as a waste of time and that attending classes is futile.

What is the structural, cultural and personal dialectics of learning and agency in students' lives.

- Family context has great important for non-traditional students. The mother seems to be the most significant family member. If the student has a partner, this figure also plays a key supporting role. In some cases, students who are mothers told us about the support received from the family, but also about the feeling of guilt as they had not been able to respond to the needs of other family members. Other crucial support comes from grandparents who take care of grandchildren while the parents are university students. To be at the same time student, worker, partner and parent produces crisis and stress in the broad family context, particularly in women.
- There are a high percentage of non-traditional students funded by public bodies. This in an indicator of widening participation at university by students from lower socio-economic groups.

- Lived experience as a learner before university determines attitudes and behaviours in the university context (the lack of study skills is evidence of this).
- Being a non-traditional student provides with, on different levels, critical consciousness before personal needs and demands coming from the studies. Sometimes the student interviewed has a high degree of awareness, blaming external factors for her or his failure. Especially in the case of young students who are not working, the narratives of the interviews show a strong discrepancy between the heavy requirements of the discipline studied and weak personal investment from the students.
- As we stated before, usually adult students are perceived by lecturers (and sometimes even by fellow students) as a learning resource.
- Students tend to form groups according to similar profiles (workers, students coming from the same area or school, students of similar ages). This does not mean they become isolated from the whole class group. However mature non-traditional students are also integrated in more heterogeneous groups, with younger students, above all in relation to academic activities. This statement is also the same for disabled people, migrants and ethnic minorities. In general there is a good integration of these groups and these students are supported by their companions (sharing teaching materials, academic assignments and even free time).
- The students interviewed perceive university studies as an opportunity to improve their knowledge and skills. They consider they have been receiving an adequate education for social life, social and economic improvement, opening of mind and social recognition. This process consolidates them as persons, particularly when they have experienced conflicts or suffered great hardship in previous educational or vital experiences. A mature student said she was tired of being alone, and she thought that university studies could be a good solution:

Yes, I need to give a change of direction to my life again. I'm always thinking about giving turns to my life. And I said: 'the only solution is to study'. The only solution is to finish my studies, and have another way, not only my job. I have had many dreams, and none became reality (female student, Seville).

- Amongst the students who had dropped-out, they had the feeling of having closed in an inappropriate way an important chapter of their lives. They had also the hope of returning to university. University experience had been gratifying, even taking into account demands and requirements from the academic context. They consider they needed to succumb to their social determinants or to take of family or to work full time. When they dropped-out temporarily and then came back to university, they started again with greater energy and motivation.

What are the benefits for self and society of participating in learning in HE, whether or not study is completed, (reassess the proposition that it may be worse to withdraw than not to begin)

The individual and social benefits are diverse, according to the plurality of profiles and contexts of non-traditional students. In cases of adult and disabled people, university studies

imply the overcoming of a challenge or the fulfilment of a wish that has been yearned for a long time. For first generation students, university represents a social and personal satisfaction (the family and the close context are happy and proud of this). For students who work, university opens a path for improvement in the labour market and for upgrading their socio-economic conditions. For adult women starting university represents the possibility of becoming more independent and autonomous. In general, learning is considered as a tool for social and personal transformation, even if students do not complete a university degree. To go to university is a turning point in the development of non-traditional students. This moment represents the end of a stage and the opening of a new phase, characterised by new possibilities (knowledge of new fellow students and contexts; new vital experiences) and better conditions to improve social networks, friendship and working life. One interviewee said about this:

The university atmosphere is a very positive atmosphere because you learn a lot of things. It's possible to learn about all because there is a great diversity of people, many ideologies, many different ways of thinking, and all respect you. And all people respect all people. And all the ways of thinking are respected, even if they are very strange... To get into university was for me to come true a dream (male student, Huelva).

Individual benefits include the following:

- Improvement of self-concept and self-esteem by students:

I feel I can speak with other people in an equal base, and I'm not afraid of this. Yes, I'm able to... In many occasions I don't agree with something, and I can to refute. I wasn't before able to do this. The university is giving me self-confidence as a person, and this is very important for me (female mature student, Seville).

- Acquisition of new competencies and knowledge both for life and for professional activity:

I consider myself more mature, also cleverer... more educated... The effort you're doing here also helps you in everyday life. I'm proud of finishing off my degree... The university helps you to think, to be yourself, to have your own ideology. You are more prepared and supposedly you will have a better job and better life in the future (male student, Seville).

- Positive attitude towards the processes of learning and teaching.

- There is a positive viewpoint by adult students regarding their integration in the courses and academic activities. Nevertheless adults are usually seen by their younger companions like alternative 'parents'. Adult students also feel that they are considered as a resource by lecturers, taking advantage of their lived experience. Adult students stress their own efforts as learners, and this is a source of satisfaction for them (to work, to study, to have family responsibilities, and so on). In contrast, adult students consider the efforts of young students who usually are not working and who have more free time as insufficient. Adult students sometimes told us in the interviews they are rejuvenated when they come to university.

Social benefits:

- Improvement of social recognition in contexts such as family, circle of friends, and community context.
- Better perspectives in relation to economic and working conditions (unemployment for graduate students is in Spain half in relation to people without a university degree).
- Changes in the dynamics of the family situation, with potential positive consequences (redistribution of time, search for better ways of dealing with relations between men and women, emotional destabilisation as an occasion for better and more equal interpersonal relations). In some cases, the family or the partners did not manage the new situation well, and as a result of this there was a divorce or separation of the couple.
- In adult students' case with children, the adult student –father or mother- had an inspiring role for the children who dropped out early, normally during the secondary school, before completing this educational level.
- Improvement regarding economic and working situations of the student and his or her family.

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Student Interviews: Findings from Ireland

Ted Fleming & Fergal Finnegan

Introduction

This report is based on 125 in-depth interviews with non-traditional students in three Irish Higher Education institutions each of which has their own distinct ethos and reputation. Trinity College Dublin is the oldest university in Ireland and the most elite of the three case study institutions. The National University of Ireland, Maynooth is a small university outside of Dublin with a reputation for catering for non-traditional students especially mature students but retains. The Institute of Technology Blanchardstown opened in 1999 in west Dublin and has very high numbers of non-traditional students. The interviewees were engaged in a wide variety of disciplines and subjects ranging from anthropology to genetics. A disproportionate number of the interviewees were studying either applied and pure social sciences or Arts and Humanities and very few were in training for high status professions (the significance of this is discussed below). The majority of the participants were female and a small majority of the sample was composed of mature students in their 30s and 40s (however the cohort included students who were as young as 18 years and some who were in their 60s and 70s). Nearly all of the interviewees were the first in their families to attend Higher Education and just under two thirds of all the interviewees came from working class families. Although the majority of students we spoke to were from Ireland we also interviewed migrants from Europe (mainly from the EU but also from non-EU countries in Eastern Europe), North America and Africa. A small number of students with disabilities and Irish citizens from a 'minority' ethnic background were also interviewed.

These students' stories offer invaluable insights into their experiences of education and how this related to the rest of their lives and their sense of themselves. This yielded rich data on pedagogy and learning, on social class, on migration, on gender, on the generational changes in Irish society, on the nature of agency and resilience and above all on the relation between education and the desire for recognition and respect.

The data gathered during the research strongly suggests that access policies and initiatives, especially targeted funding and the work of access offices, have been successful in supporting the relatively small numbers of non-traditional students enrolled in Irish tertiary education. The vast majority of these students strongly value their experience of higher education and in turn have brought new skills, experiences and ideas into third level colleges. However, the

numbers of 'non-traditional' participants remains quite small. The research also indicates that there is still a number of pedagogical, institutional and policy issues that need to be addressed in order to meaningfully support non-traditional students and to create fully inclusive and genuinely open third level institutions. As such the findings suggest that overcoming structural social inequalities through tertiary education requires much greater levels of investment, research and institutional change (Lynch, 2005).

Methodological and conceptual issues

The initial analysis relied on grounded empirical research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 1990; Bryant & Charmaz, 2010). In the first phase of research we employed two main 'sensitising concepts' - 'habitus' and 'transitional space'. Our conception of transitional space was based on a number of complementary psychosocial theories (most notably Bowlby and Winnicott). One of the most consistent findings in the initial data was the importance given by students to the university as a space in which aspects of their identity were explored, renegotiated and sometimes transformed. It also became clear that the way this transitional space is negotiated depends on both the social experience and personal resources at the disposal of students and the support structures offered by the institutions. Bourdieu's (1984; 1990) concept of habitus deployed alongside his theorisation of social, symbolic, cultural and economic capitals and the way they operate in specific fields also offered tools for understanding the enduring impact of social inequality on students' lives. This helped to illuminate how learners stories, especially the narratives about learner identity and educational expectations, were clearly shaped and informed by a lived experience of social power.

These concepts underpin the findings discussed below. However, several themes emerged in the data that were not fully addressed using these initial sensitising concepts. The emphasis on self-esteem, on recognition, on reflexivity and a modest but emphatic concern with personal agency in student narratives led us to supplement and problematise our initial sensitising concepts.

In trying to make sense of such data we turned to a range of theories dealing with self-esteem and respect. This particularly includes Axel Honneth's (1996) philosophically rich and ambitious work on recognition, which proved to be particularly fruitful for teasing out some of the most prominent themes that emerged from the data. Although these ideas do not by any means explain all aspects of the students experience they were key to grasping how the desire for social recognition might be linked to student motivation and student success.

As these ideas underpin many of the main findings it is worth exploring them in some detail here. According to Honneth, for people to achieve a productive relationship with themselves, that is a full sense of identity, requires an intersubjective recognition of their abilities and achievements (1996, p.92). Intersubjective recognition is the foundation of moral consciousness and one develops one's moral understanding of the world through the reactions, both positive and negative, that one receives from other persons in both the private and public spheres. This is part of what Honneth terms 'the struggle for recognition' through which we develop our ideas of what the necessary preconditions are for a flourishing life and our conceptions of justice.

In more concrete and empirical terms the struggle for recognition, based on the need for self-esteem and the experience of disrespect, explains social development. On a personal level it is tied to concepts of identity and worth. This personal struggle is linked to society wide

struggles by individuals and social movements for respect and validation. Honneth believes these 'morally motivated struggles of social groups - their collective attempt to establish, institutionally and culturally, expanded forms of recognition' (1995, p.92) can explain the dynamics of social change. The struggle for recognition is thus a complex and layered phenomenon right at the centre of life that is linked to both individual developmental needs and the social imagination.

Recognition does not denote a singular phenomenon. According to Honneth there are three differentiated recognition orders in modern society - the development of which are crucial to understanding the dynamics and history of capitalism and modernity. Each social sphere has developed and instituted its own recognition order which responds to different types of recognition needs. In the immediate interpersonal sphere, of family life, friendship and love relations, the 'singular needy subject' requires love for the development of self-confidence. The recognition by the state and society of the existence of autonomous rights in law offers the basis for self-respect as a citizen. Finally, work and civil society, including it will be argued tertiary education, are the arenas in which we build self-esteem through the knowledge that our efforts are socially valued (Honneth in Fraser & Honneth, 2003, p.161).

Self-confidence is the primary and earliest form of relating to self and is established and developed in relationships of friendship and love and is based on the right to exist. If one experiences love, an ability to love one's self and others develops. One is capable of forging an identity by receiving recognition from others. This is the process by which individuals individuate themselves from others. Without a special relationship with another person it is not possible to become aware of one's own uniqueness and special characteristics. A positive image of one's abilities may develop. This Hegelian model of intersubjective being was developed in new directions by both Dewey and Mead and overlaps with key ideas within Bowlby's Attachment Theory (Fleming, 2008) that maps the relationships of trust that build a secure base for identity and are key to expressing one's needs without fear of rejection. These are the relationships that create trust through being accepted and recognised and they support the expression of ones' needs without fear of abandonment. If this essential ingredient of development is not available, or a negative message about self-worth is given, then the outcome is a potential hiatus or missing piece in the personality that may seek and find 'expression through negative emotional reactions of shame or anger, offence or contempt' (Honneth 1995, p.257).

Self-respect is the second type of relationship to self and develops when a person in a community of rights is given recognition as a morally and legally mature person. Respect is shown to other people by relating to them as having rights. Without rights there is no respect. Securing the rights of the individual is viewed by Honneth as an important social gain that is achieved through 'morally motivated' collective struggles.

The experience of being honoured leads to a form of self-relation that Honneth calls self-esteem - the third form of recognition. The dilemma for the person is whether the community will honour their contribution through work. Work in this sense means both jobs and non-monetary productive activity in society (so it includes activity within civil society, e.g. voluntary work and non-compulsory education). People with high self-esteem will reciprocate a mutual acknowledgement of each other's contribution to the community and provide the basis for meaningful forms of social solidarity (Honneth 2007, p.139). This reciprocal and mutual recognition of each other's work and achievements is a key part of

social life. The following chart adapted from Honneth's (1996) *The struggle for recognition* gives an overview of the various elements of this theory.

The importance of respect and recognition also means that disrespect is of key importance to Honneth and he outlines three forms of disrespect that correspond to schema outlined above. At an obvious level, if a child is neglected and humiliated they may lose self-confidence. If they are denied citizenship or denied rights their self-respect may suffer and finally if one's way of life is not recognised or respected then damage is done to one's self-esteem. Abuse, insults, ignoring people, 'put downs' and mudslinging will not only be an injustice (harming people and denying civil rights) but injuries are done to their understanding of themselves, their identity. For Honneth these experiences of disrespect and social invisibility are vital to understanding social experience and need to be given due consideration and weight in any theory of social justice (Honneth, 2007).

Forms of relating self	of to	Forms of recognition	of	Forms of disrespect	Component of personality
Self Confidence		Parent secure attachment & love and care		Neglect, abuse, emotional Neglect	Physical integrity & psychological damage
Self-respect		Legal rights		Violation of legal rights, civil and human rights and employment rights	Social integrity And treated as an object
Self-esteem		Community of practice, respect & solidarity		Bullying, ignoring, excluding, constant negative feedback	Honour, dignity,

Table 1: Honneth's Forms of Relating to Self and Forms of Recognition

The dynamics of recognition and disrespect featured prominently in this research project. Repeatedly interviewees indicated that student success and failure have a complex and significant relationship with the question of social recognition in terms which are in many ways identical to Honneth's model. Intersubjective recognition emerged as a key theme in our data and has been central in students' accounts of their motivation for applying to college and their determination 'to stay the course'. The students we spoke to were clearly not seeking status or prestige alone but rather recognition, which touches on both one's 'private' sense of self and one's 'public' self.

We believe this ‘struggle for recognition’ helps to frame many of the empirical findings which are explored in the following section of this report. This does not of course, mean that the other sensitising concepts are irrelevant. In fact we suggest that the interplay of the original sensitising concepts of transitional space and habitus with a theory of recognition offers a useful framework for making sense of the data gathered on student experience in relation to broader questions about structure, agency and identity.

Factors which promote or constrain the access, retention and non- completion of non-traditional students in higher education

Key factors in promoting access and retention

Student resilience and high levels of determination to succeed in education. Asked what explained their persistence and success in education participants almost invariably said ‘*I want this*’ and ‘*I am going to do what it takes*’. The emphasis on personal resilience was one of the most common themes in the interviews and deserves careful consideration. Many of the students we interviewed had to overcome serious social, personal and financial obstacles to attend college. In fact a number of students drew on their ‘non-traditional’ status as a source of resilience. Some struggled right through their degree with financial and academic challenges, often with relatively little support, but stayed the course because getting a degree was seen as meaningful and significant.

All students offered multifactorial, complex explanations for their determination. It is possible to generalise though and for the majority it was mainly, although not exclusively, rooted in the desire for social recognition in similar terms to the model outlined above. It should be noted that this is not a simple phenomenon and takes various forms and includes a desire for greater social equality and ‘inclusion’, the meeting of perceived personal developmental needs and greater choice in the labour market. As such this cannot be understood simply as a ‘inherent’ personal characteristic but the outcome of complex interplay between structural demands and reflexive agency in search of ‘a good life’.

Credentialisation, Higher Education and Social Mobility

This sense of agency and determination only makes sense if tertiary education is seen as an important sphere of recognition both by students and by society as a whole. One of the clearest themes found in the student data concerns the changing role of Higher Education in Irish society. Most of the interviewees believe that a primary degree is a basic and necessary requirement in the Irish labour market. Academic credentials are increasingly seen as ‘normative’ especially among the young students we spoke to during the research. For a number of students their decision to attend HE was based in part on encountering barriers to promotion in the workplace without a degree. Others felt that without a degree they would remain confined to routine and unrewarding work for the rest of their lives. A number of students were also enrolled in courses (for example Social Care) which have only recently been professionalised and where previously a job could be secured without a degree. Unsurprisingly, the large majority of the students on such courses were non-traditional. Nearly all the interviewees (except those who had already retired or were ill) believed that a degree would afford them a greater degree of social mobility or at the very least copperfasten their current social position.

Students who have migrated to Ireland from elsewhere see HE as a way of ‘integrating’ themselves into Irish society. It was remarkable how often migrants framed this as wholly

their responsibility and as a way of proving their worth which may suggest that many migrants feel undervalued in Irish society. Credentials for this cohort were important not only to ensure future social mobility but as a mark of full citizenship which they believed would be important for the future integration of their family into Irish society. While the majority felt they had much to offer, most of them did not feel that this was necessarily obvious to people born in Ireland. In other words recognition in these cases was linked to a desire to be acknowledged as a valid member of society.

External Supports Despite the emphasis on personal agency students consistently stressed that they relied on a network of financial, institutional, family and peer supports to get into HE in the first place and to succeed in completing their course.

1. Financial support Provision by the state of grants and allowances to non-traditional students had a double significance for our interviewees. Firstly, in practical terms it made access to Higher Education possible and secondly, it was seen by many as evidence that Irish society and the state recognised and *wanted* non-traditional students in Higher Education. This is important as many had previously thought of HE as being ‘not for them’ for cultural and financial reasons. The two most significant sources of financial support were county council grants and the Back to Education scheme (a widening access initiative see the Institutional Report for more detail). Repeatedly students stressed that without such supports they could not have enrolled in tertiary education. However, a significant minority of mature students did not rely on state funding and used personal savings and family income to pay their way through college. It was noticeable that many within this particular cohort of self-funding students found the financial burden increasingly onerous as they progressed through college.

2. Institutional supports The students drew on a wide range of institutional supports within and outside HE. Most mature students went through access courses or attended community education projects before coming to college. Within these courses the encouragement from adult education tutors, other students and career guidance counsellors was a key part of many students access ‘story’. Again this was often couched in ‘recognition’ terms in which capabilities or potential capabilities were acknowledged. This was, for obvious reasons, less important for young non-traditional students but a significant number of this cohort came through access courses which link colleges to designated schools in working class areas. Once in HE most non-traditional students of all ages used student support services and had contact with access offices where staff was viewed very positively. One of the most consistent findings is that ‘access’ staff are performing an invaluable work for most non-traditional students. In all institutions the majority of the teaching staff were described as being supportive and helpful. However, there were some notable exceptions to this and the negative impact of this on access and retention will be explored in greater depth later in the report.

3. Family giving emotional and financial support This was fundamental to most students perseverance. Repeatedly, family members interventions were seen as the key to ‘success’. When this support was not available or was more rhetorical than real the extra pressure on the student was clearly discernible. The emotional and financial support offered by families and personal sacrifices and commitment of students was regularly described as a collective investment in the family’s ‘cultural capital’. Acquiring a degree was seen as useful

not just in personal terms but as an investment in the entire family's future. In particular, it was described as a good example to younger members of the family and as a contribution to the stock of family 'know-how' – i.e., a knowledge of how the system works, what the supports and obstacles are etc. Significantly, many mature students stressed that this lack of knowledge about how the system works had hampered them previously in making their way through the education system.

4. **Academic support** was less forthcoming from family members as most of those interviewed were the first in their family to attend Higher Education. However, in several cases the interviewees' partners were in a position to offer some intellectual support. Another indication of the changing profile of students tertiary education is that we encountered a number of families where parents along with their adult children were attending college at the same time and in some cases this led to parent and their son or daughter supporting each other as they went through college.
5. **Peer support**, both academically and emotionally, emerged as a very important factor in student success. Strong peer groups are particularly important for overcoming challenges, stress and periods of disillusionment and especially for working out the how to deal with the sometimes unclear demands of 'college knowledge'. Mature students were more likely to stress the academic nature of peer support and young non-traditional students were more likely to emphasise the social role of peer support but it is clear that for all students peer groups offer invaluable emotional, social and academic support.
6. **Personal development and a 'significant other.'** Many students also highlighted and discussed one particular friend, tutor and less commonly a HE staff member that had shown interest and/or faith in them as a learner. The relationship with the significant other was seen as particularly important even if the learner was no longer in regular contact with the person. The importance stems from the recognition of an unfulfilled capacity or desire which allowed the student to imagine themselves as something 'more' than what they were.

Summary: Understanding Access and Retention in Irish HE

It is impossible to isolate one single factor or a single support that helps explain student success but student resilience comes closest to the being 'the' retention factor. As explained earlier we believe that stories of determination and resilience are stories shaped by social experience rather than being a static, inherent individual quality. In this regard it is worth noting that some of the most determined students were those who had previously dropped out of a different institution and were now returning to complete what they viewed as an 'interrupted' learning journey.

Student access and retention is shaped by labour market demands, developmental needs and external supports. Non-traditional students rely on a complex and delicate ecosystem of formal and informal supports to get through college. There is a broad pattern that financial support and institutional measures allow people to access HE in the first place while personal resilience along with the right type of peer and family support are the key factors in staying the course over the medium term. Institutional support for students facing difficulties throughout the degree is indispensable but is usually accessed episodically. The notion that

there is a support structure and along with access officers were important, even for the students who did not use these services.

Retention needs to be thought through in terms of the increasingly credentialisation of Irish life and the availability of other viable life choices. For many non-traditional students a wide range of 'other' options do not always exist. Higher Education is seen as a vital part of a move away from limited options. Consequently, withdrawal is often not even entertained as an idea. The level of stress entailed in such a firm commitment to Higher Education is difficult to overstate and in a number of cases people have put themselves under considerable pressure (especially in terms of time, curtailing family activities, severing ties with the extended family and friends) to get through courses. It also appears that in a sizeable number of cases people have not been adequately prepared for the course upon which they have embarked. For these students staying the course involves very punishing routines in which they try to balance their various responsibilities.

It should also be noted that the disciplines and subjects 'chosen' by students do not on the whole include high income and high status professional degrees (e.g., medicine). The students in the sample are far more likely to choose Arts, Social Sciences and Applied and vocational degrees than other disciplines. This differentiation within HE has public policy implications in a State where professionals are particularly well paid. Moreover, it is noticeable that non-traditional students are choosing routes through education quite different from the public policy priorities that emphasise science and engineering as drivers of economic development as well as the education of skilled workers for a high-tech knowledge economy. Currently non-traditional students are choosing and being steered towards work and careers in areas that are open to Humanities and Social Science graduates (e.g., teaching) rather than managerial, higher professional or highly specialised technical jobs.

Factors that Constrain Retention

Finance For those who did not qualify for financial assistance and did not have financial support from family or spouse, getting through the degree was difficult. Financial problems was one of the three most commonly cited causes for non-completion (it should be noted however most students' explanations of their decisions to leave college were multifactorial - this will be discussed in greater detail below).

Caring duties place a considerable burden on students. In particular looking after ill family members and young children is very difficult to combine with third level study as it is currently structured. Family care is still very gendered and although most students saw their family as supportive a number of female students found combining study with family care work extremely onerous. These students schedules were incredibly busy with college work often completed while travelling home or at quiet moments at work. In some cases women were actively discouraged or faced with deteriorating family relations as a consequence of attending college. This was rarely the case for male students.

Significant life events. When asked what might lead them to leave college before completion the interviewees invariably replied sickness, bereavement or a very marked change in their financial circumstances. A significant number of students, mainly in their twenties, who left college without completing their course, did so after a break up with their partner. It should be noted that these transformative life events are not *always* negative and in a small number

of cases people left college because of new and previously unforeseen opportunities in their lives.

Mental health (and in particular depression) emerged as a highly significant factor in student non-completion. Most students faced with mental health problems did avail of institutional supports and felt that counsellors, access officers and teaching staff had been helpful. In most cases the mental health issue pre-existed college but in some cases it was exacerbated because of the demands and stresses of study and life at college. Moreover, not completing college left some students feeling more isolated than before beginning a degree.

Some students had very **limited information before embarking upon their studies**. This manifested itself in four ways. Firstly, unrealistic expectations about the workload and/or benefits of a course. Secondly, struggling with academic demands for which they were not prepared and thirdly, though this was not common, finding themselves on a course that was not sufficiently challenging academically. Fourthly, a small number of non-traditional students were unaware of institutional and state supports.

The three case study colleges have very different **institutional habituses** which has had a clear impact on student experience but, interestingly, no clear relation to the likelihood of retention. There is no doubt that for a large numbers of student from similar backgrounds on a given campus, that the orientation of the institution to non-traditional students affects students' sense of ownership of the institution. This sense of ownership creates a more positive and less stressful college experience. As might be expected a noticeable gap between student's social habitus and the institutional habitus will lead to a sense of cultural isolation and create problems and difficulties for students. However, an elite habitus either across a whole institution or within a specific discipline, while usually alienating, was not a key factor in non-completion amongst the students to whom we spoke. Nonetheless, there is some evidence that an elite habitus appears to militate against the development of effective peer support networks either because the atmosphere is very competitive or non-traditional students remain in very small numbers. Being seen as an anomaly or being invisible can be frustrating and discouraging but it does not seem to be a key factor affecting non-completion. However, it does seem to affect students subject choice in institutions in which, as they progress, they narrow their main focus of study. A small majority of students faced with these choices moved away from the department or discipline that was 'elite'.

Summary-understanding non-completion in Irish HE

Overall, the decision to leave is usually taken in the first term when academic preparedness or incorrect subject choice clearly becomes an issue (first or second assignment/exams) or students are faced with having to repeat a year. For those who leave later it is usually prompted by an acute personal crisis or significant life event. However, these events were usually the catalyst rather than the cause of non-completion. All the students who did not complete offered multifactorial explanations for leaving college. Those at most risk of 'non-completion' are students who begin a course with little sense of focus or sense of their own resilience, with low levels of family support and/or low levels of peer support and precarious finances. Social isolation, money worries, academic difficulties are often in the background before the crisis. Lack of preparation, isolation and a 'thin' network of supports are the best predictor of non-completion. Young men in particular seen to be more at risk and a disproportionate number of young men to whom we spoke entered college with low levels of support and with unrealistic expectations about the nature of the course.

Overall, non-completion was experienced in some sense as a *personal* failure even when leaving was seen as the best thing to do or even the only realistic option available to students. There were notable exceptions to this such as the case of a middle class student who entered college with other, arguably better, employment and training options available to him through the family business which he then chose to avail of and a woman who became pregnant during her studies and believed she would go back when the time is right. However, most non-completers accounts stressed their personal responsibility or their individual circumstances rather than institutional practices and structures. The impact of leaving college in several cases only served to heighten a sense of social isolation and several students discussed feeling trapped and frustrated. This sense of personal failure is compounded by the fact that grants cannot be held by students if they have to repeat a year making 'drop out' something irrevocable for many working class students. However, paradoxically most of the students interviewed who had not completed their degree still valued HE and many were considering returning to college in the future.

This is part of a broader pattern. The higher education system is viewed as very rigid both in terms of the manner in which a degree can be acquired (in terms of time commitments and the structure of courses etc) and in terms of the possibility of movement between institutions. The grant system does not support part-time students and this means many students, particularly mature students, have to take on a full-time courses even though other commitments in terms of paid work and care make it very difficult to participate properly in these degrees. Many students did not know how to transfer between courses or institutions and greater flexibility and clarity about this is required both in terms of best educational practice and in terms of retention. There are such institutional rigidities.

Despite some clear flaws and rigidities in Irish HE, and occasionally, bad and insensitive teaching the institutional dimension of dropout was downplayed by most students. This appears to be rooted in two things. Firstly, students see HE as pre-given and largely unalterable system to which *they* have to adapt and secondly access offices and the majority of staff were praised generously by the interviewees for the efforts taken to avoid them leaving or to encourage them to return in the future.

The only interview in which the failure of the system was foregrounded in terms of retention was with a migrant without full citizenship rights who due to immigration law was forced to drop out because of cost of fees. Fees for non EU students are very high (which reflects the fact that historically 'non-nationals' studying in Ireland were mainly wealthy foreign students). However, the application of these rules to migrants who are living long term in Ireland from HE means that they are excluded from HE and life is 'put on hold.'

What promotes or limits the construction of learner identity of non-traditional students to become effective learners and which enables or inhibits completion of higher education?

The longitudinal nature of the research offered rich insights into the development of learner identity. Most of the non-traditional students began college with an uncertain and tentative learner identity in the sense that they felt unsure of their ability to cope with the intellectual demands of a degree course. Over the three years of the study one of most striking findings is how successful most of the students have been in constructing a more positive learner identity.

This initial lack of confidence was often the legacy of negative experiences in compulsory education which led students at the very least to think of themselves as not the ‘type’ of person who should be in Higher Education or even in some cases to consider themselves ‘stupid’. Often this is where the social class dimensions of the participants’ learner identity was most clearly evident. Repeatedly working class interviewees linked the low expectations and disrespect they encountered in school to the fact they did not come from a privileged social background. This combined with economic pressure and a lack of detailed knowledge about how educational systems functioned in their family led many of them to finish studying prematurely (this is from the students’ perspective now rather than a normative judgement). The legacy of such experiences in terms of learner identity cannot be underestimated. As such, class inequality can affect people long after school even if they have experienced upward occupational mobility (primarily through expectations and learner identity). However, in the right circumstances this sense of being previously excluded can be a resource for student resilience in which students attempt to prove to themselves and others their capability.

It should be noted that younger students saw third level education as more ‘normal’ in a way that mature students did not. With few exceptions, they also view social background as less important in determining their life chances than older students and were also more likely to describe their time in schools in positive terms. However, this is a complicated phenomenon as the number of young working class students, particularly those who came from less financially secure families, felt there was a discernible gap between them and ‘traditional’ students in terms of resources and expectations.

For some of the female interviewees gender expectations in their birth family meant that they were discouraged from pursuing their studies. This is true of students from all socio-economic backgrounds and includes middle class families where Higher Education was the norm for the male members. In a minority of cases women also had partners or close family members who were very unsympathetic or actively discouraged their studies. Again this tendency was more pronounced in the mature student cohort.

Changing learner identity

Most people with whom we spoke nurtured a vague desire to return to education after school and in most cases a concrete plan to return to formal learning usually happened once it became 1) financially viable (usually through grants and access schemes); 2) they had a positive learning experience in which their sense of being a capable learner was validated (usually in informal peer learning groups, night courses, community education etc); 3) peers and/or a significant others offered encouragement and advice. This suggests that a positive learner identity was created gradually through an engagement with formal educational institutions that offer recognition and encouragement. Entering into Higher Education is often the culmination of this process and thus university was regularly described by mature students as offering opportunities that were systematically denied to them in schools.

The burden of recognition in pedagogy

On the other hand when lecturers or staff were offhand or treated students experience as irrelevant this caused students to deeply question their capacity and suitability for the course. The impact of careless words and deeds is always out of proportion to their intention. In a number of cases some students experienced very thoughtless and even condescending

treatment from staff. Nearly all the students who had such experiences considered leaving college.

Students' learning biographies and the forces that shape them, such as class and gender need to be acknowledged, understood and properly contextualised in Higher Education. In practical terms this requires pedagogy and curricula that speaks directly to the social and life experiences and needs of non-traditional students. It also requires time and space for learning relationships based on dialogue to develop. The schedules of both staff and students and the dependence on large scale teaching methods (i.e., large lectures) make such interactions quite unlikely. Learner identity is profoundly relational and contextual. This is part of the reason why recognition by peers and university staff in the early stages of a degree is so crucial. Many non-traditional students are looking for signs that they do or do not fit in at this point. Clear and comprehensive feedback as early as possible about the nature and form of academic knowledge is recommended. Approachable teaching staff are clearly an important support.

Fostering positive learner identity and retention

The first year and in particular the initial two months in the first year of study are crucial in terms of fostering a positive learner identity and encouraging retention. This depends on (1) the right subject choice (2) early and comprehensive feedback and support from the institution about the requirements, skills and assessment criteria in academic work. As students' progress this helps foster a positive learner identity (3) academic preparedness (4) healthy social dynamics and the formation of peer support networks (5) understanding of recognition needs by staff and expressed in pedagogy, curricula and approach. Fostering peer support networks and social fora is an important part of ensuring student success. Designing social and pedagogical spaces which support the development of such networks is a neglected aspect of access and retention policies.

What kind of policy, cultural and institutional processes, including disciplinary sub-cultures can help or hinder completion?

Access policies have had a large impact on tertiary education and designated access groups have undoubtedly benefitted. Nonetheless, recent research does alert us to the necessity of continually revisiting the way we define designated categories for access. For instance both policymakers (HEA,2008) and academic researchers (Fleming, Loxley, Kenny & Finnegan, 2010). have highlighted the declining numbers of students from non-manual socio-economic groups. Understanding of access on and retention requires up to date data (particularly data which looks at the relationship between these two things) which has historically been very piecemeal. The HEA (Mooney, Patterson, O'Connor & Chantler, 2010) report marks a significant improvement on this and further disaggregated data alongside in-depth qualitative research will be fundamental to informed policy in the future.

Retention has become a 'system' measure of success in Irish Higher Education and as a consequence there is an institutional sensitivity to this issue. This has resulted in a number of initiatives in the past decade including the establishment of inter university network. Initiatives like this and the practice of conducting exit interviews by colleges are to be welcomed. However, while institutions are rhetorically and organisationally orientated towards retaining students this is not always reflected in systems of evaluation, flexible progress routes or most significantly in pedagogy. These deserve consideration and require seminars and training for college staff.

On an institutional and cultural level as indicated already students highly value approachable staff, clear feedback and inclusive pedagogy. A sense of ownership is also fostered by a high level of visibility and the numbers of non-traditional students within an institution. It also helped if the institution designs its 'bureaucratic' and teaching spaces to be open, friendly and on as small scale as possible.

Given the findings on the importance of peer support, subject choice and developing a positive learner identity a more general modular semester along the lines of a 'taster menu' might be worth considering. This would emphasise a range of liberal arts and sciences along with collaborative and cooperative learning activities aimed at fostering peer networks.

What are the benefits for self and society of participating in learning in HE, whether or not study is completed?

Overall, a large majority of the students interviewed believe that they have benefitted from their time in college. College was almost unanimously seen as a positive transitional space for self-improvement and change. Most commonly it is seen as giving people greater levels of confidence and self-esteem. This confidence is in themselves as a person, as a learner and as a citizen and offers 'proof' of their social worth.

The experience of going to college undoubtedly strengthens students' sense of being competent and capable learners who are enthused by studying and learning. In other words getting through college, especially for mature students, encourages a learner identity orientated to lifelong learning.

Positive learner identity was described by some as an important part of developing a public self. The process of studying and exploring complex ideas has made them feel more capable in terms of critically understanding and contributing to public discourses. Often interviewees would discuss current events and issues and how some text or remark in class has made them view society differently. Over time this has fostered a sense of entitlement and capacity for intervention and participation in society. This was mainly discussed by mature students but a small number of students, all under 22 years of age, mentioned becoming student 'activists' and how this experience had given them tools for engaged citizenship.

For many, studying at college marked the end of educational exclusion that occurred earlier in life (usually classed and gendered exclusions) and typically overcoming this was seen as an integral part of overcoming the 'hidden injuries' of structural inequality.

It is commonly believed that going to college improves job prospects and employability and that having a degree is the *sine qua non* for rewarding work regardless of how one defines it (i.e., in term of status, monetary return or work which is itself seen as satisfying and interesting). In vocationally orientated courses studying is described as a process of formation and becoming a professional. In nearly every case people on vocational courses described one of the key benefits of studying as becoming a more socially valuable person.

For first generation college students one of the main benefits of attending college is that they see themselves as 'pathfinders'. The interviewees highly value the fact that by going to college they offer a credible example of achievement for other members of their family and friends. Most often this is described as changing the family story of education and that this means siblings or the students' own children are more likely to follow them to college. To a lesser extent people describe themselves as a positive example for their community. This is

particularly the case when students come from the least wealthy and most disadvantaged sections of Irish society and this is often seen as proof that people from similar background can achieve things, given the opportunity.

Studying at third level is simultaneously seen as an important act of personal agency, a contribution to their family's and community's cultural capital, the key to future social mobility and part of becoming a full and entitled citizen. As such the personal and social benefits are inextricably linked. This was clear even when interviewees, usually women who have been the primary caregivers in families, said that going to college was something they had decided to do 'for themselves' for personal developmental reasons. In further discussion it became clear that these 'personal' goals also involved complex social ambitions. What is striking about the way these various social and personal benefits are construed as recognition needs which are both deeply personal and profoundly intersubjective. Even the most instrumentally orientated students described study as a developmental process which could lead to a more developed self and increased social respect.

How and why third level education should occupy this function is open to speculation and the extent to which studying for a degree does "objectively" bring all these benefits is moot. In this regard it is worth noting that recent research has shown that several years after finishing a degree confidence and self-esteem are viewed as one of the main benefits of study by graduates even if the monetary returns on study have not been as high as they had anticipated (Fleming, Loxley, Kenny & Finnegan, 2010).

The structural, cultural and personal dialectics of learning and agency in students' lives
The following section offers two detailed accounts from individual students of their learning lives. This mode of presentation is in keeping with one of the key aims of the research - to foreground student experiences and student voices in analyses of Higher Education.

Every single student interview has its own nuances and emphases and neither of these narratives are being offered as a 'typical' narrative. We certainly do not want to reduce any student to an 'ideal type'. However, we believe both of these stories illustrate some of the empirical and theoretical findings that have emerged most prominently in this research. More importantly we believe that such narrative account best illustrates the structural, cultural and personal dialectics of learning and agency in a way that carries a sense of the lived experience of the students who have been at the core of this research project

Learner's Story 1: Katy: Recognition, Capability and Care

Katy is in her 30s. She is a bright, reflective and forthcoming person and proved to be a very fluent and engaging interviewee. Each time we met with Katy it was clear that she had thought through many of the things we discussed in the interview in great detail and in real depth beforehand. From early on in the research process she was very candid about her life and her learning experiences. She also analysed the institutional and pedagogical organisation of the course in which she was enrolled in a very sophisticated way. As we shall see her insights into her experience of Higher Education reflects her broader biography especially her experience of schooling, her passion for learning and her experience at work before taking the degree.

Katy grew up in Dublin with her two parents and 5 siblings. The family lived in a cottage with a lot of green space nearby and Katy reminisces fondly about playing near the house. Her mother worked in administrative job until her marriage and her father worked in

transport until he was made redundant in the Katy's late teens which left the family struggling financially. The family was a close but also 'hectic' and at times even 'turbulent'.

In the interviews with Katy it became clear just how important learning stories can be in personal biographies. She returned to the subject of schooling quite often in our discussions '*I always refer to myself as the person who fell through the cracks.....in school*'. Despite finishing her leaving certificate she did not feel supported or encouraged in school by teachers or guidance counsellors. In school she slowly internalised the idea that she '*was stupid*'. Although, she may have suspected that this was not completely true it subsequently became an important part of her internal conversation about herself as a learner and a person. Although she does not speak angrily about this this sense of being overlooked and misrecognised she does maintain a sense of it being unjust and linked to access to power and social class. Her story illustrates how institutions, the interventions of individual teachers and structural inequalities play out in learning stories. She says the school favoured the middle class students and remembers a teacher saying to her mother;

It doesn't matter if she doesn't pass the class she is just going to end up in a job anyway. She'll never get to college. So I felt then that was the perception of someone who was over me. He was a teacher and he was intelligent and powerful. He was telling my mum; 'don't worry if she doesn't get it she never will.....She is never going to progress to something else'. [She began to think that] maybe that is who I am. I am not meant to be in college. So from that moment on I didn't apply myself.

At home there was not much support either. Her father had left work young to go to work and although he had an '*amazing mechanical mind. He could fix anything*' he did not have the opportunity to develop his basic educational skills. Her mother had finished school and was very intellectually curious but according to Katy was '*held back*' by circumstances- the demands of rearing a family and the gendered expectations of her era. This includes both leaving work and ensuring that she behaved in a way that did not highlight the difference in educational attainment between her and her husband. As a consequence

My mum and dad didn't know how to fill out a CAO form [the Irish university application form] and I had no idea how to do it. I didn't even know what that meant.

As a result of institutional misrecognition linked to class expectations, gendered family power dynamics and low levels of cultural know-how about the workings of the educational system Katy left school unsure of her options and sense of being an underachiever.

It appears from other things she says that this negative learner identity was not the whole story and her estimation of herself was more complex and multilayered than the judgements made by teachers. Katy suspected that she had capabilities that were not being tapped but nonetheless the dominant story remained that she was '*stupid*'.

After school she worked in shops and service work and then applied for a Further Education course '*But it wasn't really college*' to her mind. She eventually got work in a transnational corporation. She worked her way up and became a capable and trusted member of staff. However, within a few years she had reached a point beyond which she could not have been promoted without a degree. Frustratingly she saw people with less experience than her and who had spent less time in the company get promoted ahead of her. She was '*respected*' at work but she was still concerned about her capability as a learner. She also maintained a

sense that there was more to life and that she had not fully developed her capacities and that she wanted work that matched her deeper concerns and interests. She decided

I wanted to go back [to education] for my own self-esteem to try to see can I do this.

Katy enrolled in part-time course and later an access courses. It is probably worth noting that at roughly the same time her mother and her partner started to consider enrolling in third level college. Three other things made her desire to return to learning a possibility. Firstly, Katy's company decided to relocate to Asia. 'I was made redundant' she says and in slightly surreal twist in how the movements of global capital impacts on lives Katy found herself taking part in this process. As part of her final project in the company she was flown thousands of kilometres to the new site to help prepare and train the new workers for their jobs. Secondly, the financial cost of returning to college was eased.

I looked up back to education and just that year in the budget they made it possible for people who had been made redundant to go back immediately without having to be unemployed for 12 months.

Along with the grant this meant it was possible to go to college albeit on a tight budget. Thirdly, her care responsibilities for other family members eased and some of the internal family dynamics that had held her educational ambitions in check changed.

In discussing her motivation for coming to college Katy is emphatic that her decision was not motivated by a desire for more money afterwards but greater choice in work and a job that was closer to her own interests and desires. Even more emphatically she links coming to college with self-esteem and proving her worth and undoing the impact of disrespect and low expectations. A sense of how she construes her choices can be gathered from the following exchange. Katy was discussing her future plans after her course and says

I would love the idea of helping and teaching.

Asked why she responds;

Because I wasn't helped. No one recognized any potential in me. You see these inspirational movies. Like a basketball coach comes in and inspires the kids to become scholars. I always had aspirations to do well, but at the time my family life wasn't built in such a way that I was getting that from my home life. My mom and dad weren't able for various reasons to support me in that way. But I would have loved a teacher or someone to recognize potential in me. To say this person is not performing, but it is not because they are stupid. It is not because they can't do it. But no one recognized the potential ever. I have aspirations of helping in such a way of recognizing in others the reasons they are not achieving.... That I would be someone who would recognize and realize there is a different way.

This is a key part of her motivation for attending college and for staying the course. As Katy has progressed through college she has become more critical of the course she is enrolled in for a number of reasons. Most significantly she experienced very thoughtless treatment from a small number of staff members. At one point she even considered leaving because of her treatment. She outlines a pattern of deeply inconsiderate and disrespectful actions by one staff member that left her feeling disenchanted and discouraged. Overcoming this has taken great

personal resilience and the support of her mother and partner. It is noteworthy that he has also drawn strength from being supportive of other students at the same time. Although she does not say this explicitly it appears that offering peer support and helping others has helped her to retain a sense of what is important in life and study in the face of challenges.

Despite these drawbacks college has been a transitional space for Katy. She has excelled at her academic studies and she is considering a postgraduate degree and her course has bolstered her desire for a different and in her view more socially valuable form of work.

In discussing her learning story and her life story it is clear that Katy's decision to come to college was informed by a desire for recognition of her capability as human being and developing her abilities in a way that can contribute to the flourishing of others. It is significant that this was she carried a sense of an undeveloped capability linked to the experience of disrespect and misrecognition in school and work. It is apparent in Katy's story how the structural inequalities of gender and class in families, institutions and society play a significant part in the formation of learner identity. Renegotiating her learner identity in college has been a very meaningful process which is underpinned by the logic of intersubjective recognition as it relates to both her private and public self

Katy has thrived in college mainly through her own resilience and by offering and benefitting from peer support. Her story also indicates, we thin, just how significant acknowledging or ignoring recognition needs might be for pedagogy and institutional practices.

Learner's Story 2: Laura

Consider Laura, a middle aged student in her final year of university. She told a story of significant disadvantage including periods of long-term institutionalization as an adult. Her childhood was a period of serious poverty. She volunteered that the concept of 'non-traditional' did not do justice to the life she had led nor did it capture the full colour, variety, range of events accidents, tragedies, successes, achievements, experiences with drugs, the medical profession, attempts to take her own life and abuse.

I always thought I was stupid...I could survive on the streets but I had no academic knowledge.

Her journey to university commenced in a workshop for adults. A supervisor encouraged her to return to education by recognising that she had '*something*.' The support though modest (a series of gifts that recognised her interests and her desire to learn) were experienced as recognition of her intelligence:

They were seeing something...I think my reaction to the books they gave me...I thought they were the mad ones. They could see me starting college, they told me this since. That's what they said anyway. You come across people who, no matter how stupid or unaware you are of your ability, they can see something and they point it out.

The phrase '*they can see something*' was repeated a number of times in her narrative and it gave her the experience that '*someone might take me seriously*.' Such stories tell of moments of recognition and these moments are profoundly developmental. But they are always, it seems, also unpredictable as one cannot tell in advance (or at the time) which moment or event of recognition will trigger the 'experience of being recognised' as Honneth expresses it.

In spite of thinking she was stupid she always *tried to fight the system* and when asked how she achieved her success so far she replied;

It was just my own will power you come across people who, no matter how stupid you are or how unaware you are of your ability and they find space for you...and it's people in education too...They were saying I had what it takes [to study at university].

She goes on to take up a common theme for many students and talks about noticing the difference in social class between her and other students. These obvious and felt differences form a barrier between students from non-traditional and those from more middle-class backgrounds. One student spoke about not being able to make any connection with students from a different background and these are part of the not so hidden injuries of class.

Students can be strategic about how they navigate the complex world of university and Laura know (in her words);

If I hit a hurdle and I can't get over it, I'm going to fail.

So the choice of programme, or subject or options within a subject choice are selected in order to enhance the chance of being successful and the probability of success is built into the choice of subjects;

Because it's what I want to do and not what someone else thinks I should do.

It could be argued that this partly explains why so many non-traditional students study humanities and social sciences as there is the perception at least that, in contrast to professional programmes, there is latitude for choice, opinion and meaning making within the discipline. And this connection with one's own personal learning agenda is confirmed by Laura who in the programme was able to conclude that;

I found the words. I found language acceptable to me and those I'm mixing with....

to express and articulate her experiences.

Conclusion

This is certainly not a simple or one-dimensional story of access, retention and non-completion. The narratives are complex, multi-layered and so too the policy and pedagogical responses need to be similarly multi-factorial. However, too often system interventions (though many seem to have worked well and are well received by students) have had modest impact on the final figures of retention. It is not clear what the system would accept as an appropriate level of completion (if it is not 100 per cent). One solution has not been tried. It is a simple one. Ask the students, involve them in the planning and decision making. They already have the motivation to succeed, they may just know what will work for them.

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Comparative Analysis and Conclusion

There is widespread support for the advancement of non-traditional students not only at a public policy level but throughout the higher education system. And even when progress toward more inclusive and broadly based engagement with higher education is slow there is a noticeable level of progress. However, it is clear that progress toward increased levels of retention has defied considerable interventions and changes in higher education. Reading these country reports we have been struck by one important finding concerning the stories that these students tell. They are determined people. This is a significant finding and everything else is coloured by the stories they tell of how, sometimes in the face of great difficulties and challenges, they continue to not only value what higher education offers but do so in a remarkable and determined way. Warwick and Ireland found this to be particularly true, and that students wanted to succeed for the sake of their families.

It may be opportune to remove from our comparative analysis at this stage the predictable importance of **finance**. Students are hugely concerned about their ability to fund and get funded for their studies. Finance matters. Their ability to succeed depends on finance and they are at one in their awareness of how even a small incremental reduction in their budgets has a great impact on their situation. In these challenging economic times, which have arisen in the time frame of this research project, everything has changed, and dramatically so for these students. In Britain for example, the impending introduction of fees will impact directly on students and the number who will want to progress to higher education and also on the level of specialist service provision (access and support staff). The journey to access and success is a long one and the impact of reducing funding is difficult to reverse at a later date. But there are more important findings than these more obvious financial ones.

In a number of the country studies the **stratified nature of higher education** is an important factor impacting on retention. The system of education is also stratified by access route, the way points are accumulated for qualification or entry to HE, by social class and socio-economic background. It is difficult to imagine the existing system without being aware of these stratifications that are particularly obvious in the retention rates (see Warwick on p. 7). It was also clear in a number of countries that the differences in ability, pre-access experiences and other factors would lead to the need to introduce a wide variety of pedagogical approaches depending on the previous experiences of this increasingly diverse student body. Those attending elite institutions continue to have a greater chance of remaining at university than those in less prestigious colleges and universities. Social class, gender, race and ethnicity were important indicators of the ability to access and also to stay the pace. Not only is advantage handed on through the educational system, so too is disadvantage handed on.

Though different countries expressed the importance of **family as a support for progression**, there is wide but not complete agreement across the project that parents, friends and family are an important support over the entire life of a student. First of all in early childhood the impact of family support, encouragement and recognition of a child's abilities (sometimes in contradiction of the messages coming from the schools) was perceived by the students in later life as fundamental. During their student days this support was perceived to be important supplying sometimes finance but more often emotional support and encouragement. The account of one family, arriving, en masse, to help in redecorating dilapidated student accommodation, and constant communication, using Skype, over essays, between siblings, is a particularly poignant example from the Canterbury report. In Spain both family and community support is important. Even in the few places where the family was not perceived to be as important the project was able to widely agree that the network of connections and relationships at the disposal of the student was of major significance. For instance in Germany a wider range of significant others assumed importance for students. This prompted partners in the project to identify a positive response from staff in the institutions as making a significant impact by respecting each student and enhancing recognition. It was this that led us to use the recognition/respect ideas so well developed by Honneth. Spain emphasised the importance of life partners in this support process. These ideas are capable of being translated in pedagogical theory and practice by emphasising the central role of collaborative learning in pedagogical practices. It is this connection that students seek and look for from each other, from staff and from the institutions. When it is flawed, they perceive it as putting them at risk of not completing.

It could be argued that the concept of higher education as providing **transitional spaces** has been the unanimous and constant finding as has the need to conceptualise the space in integrated psychosocial ways. The importance of this is well articulated in a number of the reports and needs to be only highlighted here. In addition the **habitus of the student and that of the institutions** were equally important and provided a 'true' conceptual framework for understanding the **lived experiences and identity of students**.

As the research project progressed it became clear that the concept of 'dropout' may have negative connotations and not just because it tended to label non-completion as a negative experience. In fact for students who did not complete the decision was ultimately seen in a positive fashion and was experienced as a solution rather than a problem or stigma. One of the important factors contributing to retention was found to be the level of pre-access study and support availed of by students. Poor advice was a serious constraining factor. However, irrespective of how well supported and planned the journey was, in many cases life intervened and placed the continued involvement in education at risk, at least for a time. The illness or sometimes death of a partner, parent or child were always a possibility for adult students and impacted seriously on the possibility of completing.

It is difficult to over emphasise the importance of making available to students **timely, accessible and accurate information** about university, the process, the options, the requirements of courses and programmes and indeed the life of the college. The absence of readily available information was a constraining factor and indeed this support is within the gift and control of colleges. Inflexibilities and institutional rigidities were important constraints. Good educational experiences at an early age in schools were always important. So too are accessibility and openness of the institutions to students with disabilities.

Staff have emerged from all these studies as having a key role, and very important factors in supporting retention and progression. They are generally experienced as helpful but any stories of those who were not helpful, dismissive of the ordinary queries of students had a negative impact out of proportion to the intention of the staff. Not having time to address the question and queries of students is a typical constraint; or a failure in helping decode the language of the university habitus – what being critical means, for instance, could be very disturbing and dispiriting. Students look for connection, interest, a recognition of their individuality (as distinct from the mass) and an answer that scaffolds their learning journey and identity. Electronic (email or computer based) access is important but never sufficient for students, yet Spain found electronic supports to be more important than most. Attempts by staff to understand the nuances of lives lived, the uniqueness of each inquiring mind and the support of their individual and joint agency as students is hugely appreciated and contributes to retention. The Ireland team discovered that students were largely not critical of staff, apart from being critical of staff who were not interested in them. In contrast a more autonomous experience as found among German students who might object to any attempt to be looked after in this way. In England, in the newer, reform institutions, students could be aware of poor morale and work intensification among staff, as well as of the pressure of ever increasing numbers of students alongside a diminishing unit of resource. Students were aware of some of this, in certain instances, and were anxious about the quality of the experiences available to them.

Staff matter a great deal as students do indeed struggle with the nature of academic learning and the requirements of various programmes. There is an onus on staff to adapt to the learning styles of students in practical ways while teaching. This will also help to address the depersonalization that is a characteristic of very large public universities.

Peer support and relationships are also important and when matched with staff support this is an important factor contributing to success. Peer support for learning, collaborative learning methods are both perceived to be key activities that need encouragement. Mature students in particular, and increasingly others too, are faced with a range of responsibilities that impact on their daily lives. Working while studying, taking care of children (especially when the children are unwell – which most children are occasionally) and other relationship stresses and tensions (e.g. divorce or other changing relationships) all impact on the ability to stay the course.

It is the nature of a non-traditional student to be among the first or even the **first of their family, community or ethnic group to study at university**. In contrast to large segments of society where such progression is taken for granted, these groups may struggle to achieve sufficient social, cultural and economic capital to sustain the journey. While the research team avoided the position that sees this as a deficit argument, it is important that institutions recognise the capital gaps that so many other traditional students take for granted. There is a useful function for higher education to assisting students develop the capitals they need to benefit and progress in higher education.

Mental health of students took on an increasingly important role as the research progressed and is most easily understood as the kinds of issues that students experience as stress and anxiety as they navigate the challenging process of moving into and through transitional spaces of the learning environment. It is important not to overstate the issue and important not see it as mental illness. But it was a finding that stress and anxieties when not addressed

can precipitate a more to exit the university. This is particularly important in the first year (or semester) as the student begins to identify a relational place (who are my friends, colleagues etc in this venture) in which they can feel grounded, secure and above all not lost. If they resolve this question and find people with whom they can identify, they enhance their potential to stay the pace. A many students leave home to attend college they may not easily bring the support structures they previously enjoyed with them and so their vulnerabilities increase. The Polish research found these informal support structures very important. All agree that students need networks of support, emotional, institutional, peer and family. This is a key finding. There was also evidence from the English studies, particularly in the newer universities, of mental health problems among some of the staff, as a result of increasing numbers of students, and a conflict between what staff aspired to do and be, and what in fact they were able to deliver.

States that support widening participation and increased access for non-traditional students look to benefit economically from better educated and higher skilled workers. Students themselves may perceive and **experience the benefits** in different ways. Even if students withdraw early they frequently experience benefits from that engagement with HE. Spain emphasised the benefits for the family and Sweden found that there were reforms in ethnic identity for some students. Warwick also found that worthwhile social and personal benefits followed even if studies were not completed. These students became important **role models for their children** and were in better position to encourage them to continue their education. The Ireland team was able to identify the impact non-traditional students made on teaching practices in colleges, though the students were less aware of this than the staff involved. In the UK the benefits included changes in self, in self-development and self-confidence as important benefits from the perspectives of the students. They also felt **more knowledgeable, more critical and better able to understand the world** around them.

While at the outset acknowledging the diversity of the European higher education system and indeed the European project it is clear from the interactions with students and their stories that there is a closer meeting of minds on the parts of students as to what they require, what they experience in our institutions and what they perceive to be detrimental to their continued involvements with higher education. As an unpredicted outcome these widely held agreements among the students of Europe may facilitate the development of a common European approach to access, progression and retention of non-traditional students in higher education.

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