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Accessing HE for non traditional students: ‘Outside of my position’

Widening participation within Higher Education (Bowl 2003) and increasing social mobility (Cabinet Office 2011) have been high on the former and current government agendas. This paper examines the admissions procedure of a Foundation degree in Early Years programme using Bourdieu’s concept of capital as a vehicle for analysis. During the process of an admissions interview, the interviewer is required to make decisions regarding a student’s suitability to fit into the existing field of the programme as often they feel it is outside of their position. The stories of three non traditional students are explored to highlight existing capital and dispositions that they bring to the programme. Research findings showed that there are many variables that impact on a student’s ability to gain entry and be successful on a HE programme including accumulation of capital, emotional drivers and potential to acquire capital throughout the programme.

Keywords: Non traditional students; HE admissions; widening participation; social mobility; positioning, capital.

Introduction

Widening participation was a direct response to the Labour government’s drive to raise workplace skills, restructure and transform vocational education and increase access to Higher Education (HE) (Leitch 2006). This was founded on the premise that by raising skills, educational achievement and personal aspirations: economic competitiveness within an aggressive global market place would be inflated (Ball 2008). In light of this Foundation degrees were established (Beaney 2006) to encourage non traditional students to participate in Higher Education, entry qualifications were then lowered with the presumption that this would make HE more accessible to students.

Since the introduction of these measures, the government has changed and the Current Coalition Government also recognise widening participation as a key priority but have focused on the concept of social mobility (as defined by Giddens 2001) in order to improve life chances and one’s position within society (Cabinet Office 2011).

Yet what is noticeable within both governments’ strategies, is that there is a lack

of understanding that institutions might need to change to accommodate this. This ignores the fact that non traditional students may need increased pastoral, study skills or emotional support once they begin a programme (see Minter 2001 and Baker et al. 2006) as they often struggle with fitting into the university environment. This is due to issues of lack of 'fit' with the institution (Grayson 2011), lack of guidance (Reay et al. 2010) or difficulties with maintaining an effective work/study life balance (Moreau and Leathwood 2006; Reay 2003; Marandet and Wainwright 2010). It is these issues which have led me to my current research, focusing on HE admissions procedures, with particular reference to the experiences of non traditional students. For the purpose of this paper, I will use Baker et al's (2006) definition of non traditional students as those who are over 21 or from a socio economic group who have been under-represented within HE.

Context

As a Foundation degree Coordinator in a Further Education (FE) college it is my role to select appropriate HE students for the Foundation degree in Early Years programme. There are two main issues that impact on this. Firstly the management-led discourse places emphasis on maintaining high levels of retention and achievement. This is in contrast with the second issue, the underlying principles of equity and fairness, targeted through the promotion of widening participation for all. The conflict then comes between these two opposing pressures, as consequently there is a notion of risk when taking students with lower entry qualifications and non traditional backgrounds, as essentially these students often struggle to adapt to HE (Thomas 2011). Hence, they often need additional support within their first year, in order to develop study skills needed to be successful on a HE programme.

Therefore, as programme manager, I created an unwritten policy that non traditional students must have an interview to ascertain their academic suitability for the programme, in order to reduce early drop out and non achievement. Often, in my experience, it is apparent that non traditional students are more likely to withdraw from the programme compared to traditional HE students. This is supported by current research (Reay 2003; Moreau and Leathwood 2006; Grayson 2011; Marandet and Wainwright 2010). As a result, I may have unconsciously adopted a deficit discourse, negatively positioning these students as likely to fail on the programme. The unwitting purpose of the interview was then for them to prove to me otherwise.

Theoretical tools

Capital, field and habitus

On reflection the real crux of the decision making was initially unconsciously based around Bourdieu's notions of capital, habitus and field (Bourdieu 1991; Jenkins 2002) in terms of can a student fit into the existing field (Watson et al. 2009) of university life?

Bourdieu's metaphors of capital, fields, habitus, positioning and dispositions are useful 'thinking' tools (Jenkins 2002) to unpick what happens within an interview and to enable me to rationalise the 'fit' that I am looking for between a student and the university institution. For the purpose of this paper, capital is used to confirm positions within the social field and is carved into three key areas: cultural, social and economic (Bourdieu 1991). It is useful to see capital as a concept for analysis which enabled the researcher to highlight areas of inequality or advantage based on cultural, social or economic resources (Jenkins 2002). It is these aspects I wish to unpick further in this section.

Winkle-Wagner (2010) recognises cultural capital as skills, abilities,

mannerisms and knowledge of educational systems as habitual ways of behaving that can give advantages to those fitting into the habitus of university life. It can also be defined by knowledge and acquisition of the right cultural resources that are appropriate to HE such as the possession of text books or qualifications (Bowl 2003).

Fitting into university life is also made easier through the possession of social capital. Social capital defines membership and belonging to certain groups (Ball 2003) and is relevant to HE as it can be utilised to elevate one's social position (Bourdieu 1991; Ball 2003) and standing through the deployment of contacts. These social contacts can be useful in helping to understanding the HE milieu.

Those with greater economic resources also have increased chances of success at HE level. A family's possession of economic capital can 'have significant impact on educational resources' (Webb et al. 2002, 114); this can result in a consequential effect in terms of educational achievement.

Within an admissions interview these forms of capital can then be traded to demonstrate that the students have acquired adequate stocks in order for them to be successful within the field of HE. In order to be successful and 'fit in' to the HE field, then students need to verbally demonstrate that they have acquired social dispositions through awareness of the practices that are appropriate and common within the field of HE. In my role as an HE admissions interviewer, I am looking for evidence of acquired dispositions that will aid success at HE level e.g. having a good work ethic, being able to multi task and having good time management and organisational skills.

Consequently, my assumption was that the more capital students had acquired, the more likely they would be to achieve success within HE. This aligns with Ball's (2003) observations of the advantages of the middle classes when entering education. Ball (2003) emphasises that capital can be deployed at critical times within education to

advantage those with economic, cultural and social resources that align with educational practices. There is strength in this argument, as those with traditional middle class A level qualifications were advantaged by being accepted onto the programme without having to go through the process of a interview. However, it could be argued that students with non traditional educational backgrounds were at least given an opportunity to access a place on the course through the interview process. Without this opportunity, their non traditional, or unconventional, applications might have been rejected when compared to the A level applicants.

Although Winkle-Wagner (2010) argues that capital can be used as a deficit term, revealing that students are blamed if they do not have the appropriate assets, Bourdieu (cited by Webb et al. 2002) maintains that it can enable inequalities to be seen within the education system and encourages policy makers to rectify these disparities. For that reason, this paper presents an opportunity to analyse my Foundation degree admissions procedures and unpick the underlying discourse of entry interviews. Although initially Bourdieu was used as vehicle of analysis, during the process of the research other social constructionist themes began to emerge. These key themes will be explored further on within the paper.

Methods

I argue from a social constructionist point of view, focusing on how meaning is constructed through social situations (Giddens 2001). Thus, this study was based on practice and was intended to increase a deeper understanding of the admissions procedure. Therefore, as with research studies by Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2004) and Clandinin and Connelly (1990), it was reasonable to use narratives to illuminate student perspectives in order to explore how the admissions interview experience shapes and moulds the resulting discourse (Jorgenson and Phillips 2002). As the women were

telling rich stories of their own interview experiences the narrative inquiry approach resonated with my thinking as narratives also allow meaning to be conveyed through individual emotions, beliefs and values (Dodge 2007). Thus narratives were a convincing way of building detailed, individual stories of the experiences of mature women students (see also Bowl 2003, Biesta et al. 2011) and will be analysed, within this piece of research, as a specific version in time within a specific context (Edwards and Potter 1992).

Interviews were conducted with each participant using a set of semi-structured questions, with a view to ascertain their experiences of the admissions interview. Each participant was interviewed during their first term of study and their responses were written up in the form of case studies using pseudonyms names.

Although the initial research was based around seven non traditional students I focused on the narratives of three participants to explore in rich detail as they illustrated the key themes and the diverse range of students from non traditional backgrounds. Their varied stories and experiences also highlight the complexity of the task of selecting students for the programme. Kat and Sarah were selected to represent typical non traditional students who were juggling work, family and study commitments with limited capital to be traded at interview. However, Chelsea was different as, although she fitted the age bracket of a non traditional student, she had an A level and vocational background and had accumulated resources of capital to draw upon. Although it could be argued that Kat and Chelsea were of a similar age their experiences and perspectives were very different due to Kat being a mother and having limited capital to trade.

Initially a thematic approach (Jorgenson and Phillips 2002) was developed by highlighting commonalties and key themes between the data looking at capital as a channel of analysis. As described by Riessman (2008), I focused exclusively on the

content of 'what' was said as opposed to 'how' something was said. Through discourse analysis, naturally occurring text was analysed with a focus on the social and emotional implications as well as resulting actions (Edwards and Potter 1992). Within this discourse, other key themes emerged (see Potter and Wetherall 1987).

Ethical protocol was adhered to in the form of consent, anonymity and transparency of the research aims. However, a limitation of the case study approach was that the participants were known to the researcher, presenting a potential for bias, through assumed knowledge and resulting interpretation. I also needed to acknowledge that as researcher I also held the position of programme manager and creator of the admissions procedures, so therefore, this had potential to influence my interpretation of the data. To overcome the limitation of allowing my own pre judgements to impact on my ability to be critical (see Drake 2010), I began a research journal. This enabled me to reflexively put my own perspectives within my research journal (Drake 2010) and constantly reposition myself so that I could limit my own assumptions surfacing and overwhelming the study (see Farnsworth 1997).

Constraints with this methodology were centred on the small scale nature of the research. It cannot be used as a generalisation of all non traditional students' experiences; nonetheless, it does claim to provide an account of the practices and experiences of one group of non traditional students, studying HE within an FE environment. Its purpose was to highlight and illuminate in-depth stories in order to achieve a contextual picture or snapshot in time. Although other studies on widening participation (see Bowl 2003; Pascall and Cox 1993) use large samples of participants, they do also draw attention to smaller case studies of only 3 students to illustrate key points. Likewise, this study also has similarities with Waller's (2012, 119) research on mature learner's experiences as it is '... a small enough number to generate a

manageable quantity of data, yet large enough to illustrate the key arguments'. It enables the researcher to focus on individual stories in order to map them into the wider institutional context (Waller 2012). Therefore this sample of students gave sufficient varied data to investigate the findings with authority.

Findings

Kat's story

At the age of 26, Kat decided to apply for the Foundation degree in Early Years Programme. Although she gained GCSEs in English and Maths she left school and became a teenage wife and mother. She later returned to education and gained a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ), at level 3, in Early Years. She was a first generation student with dependent children and worked part time as a Preschool Assistant. Kat did not expect to embark on an HE course and was persuaded by her manager to apply for the course:

The minute I had children I thought I couldn't do it, it would be too late. It's something that costs you lots of money and I thought it would be not for me.

She found many barriers when applying for the course such as finding information, approaching the interview written task and accessing resources. She used words such as 'intimidating' and 'scary' to describe her initial attempts at writing and finding information:

I went onto the college website; it was like double Dutch to me as it didn't make sense. It put me off. I never thought I'd get a place but when you emailed me you made it sound straight forward... It was intimidating as it was all new... it was scary...

Kat appeared anxious to gain a place and cried during the admissions interview. She explained that this was due to the emotional strain of the interview, as well as the

process of recounting her educational and professional journey to date. She strongly felt that she had to ‘fight’ for a place on the course and believed she had to distinguish herself from the other candidates. She expressed surprise that although initially she felt confident, she soon ‘fell to pieces’ during the interview:

I was confident when I came to the interview as I knew it was what I wanted and I would go in and kick ass but I so didn't! I thought I would have to really, really fight for it. I went in and thought I would absolutely win this place, I thought I need the place, and thought it rested upon whether you thought I was good enough in your opinion...

Although she initially described herself as capable, Kat also had mixed emotions about whether the degree was feasible for her, and within her reach:

I wanted it so much but felt I was at a disadvantage as my previous education was not the best.

Her emotions also changed again at interview as she swung back to feeling confident again with the realisation that she could cope with the level of work required:

As I saw the work examples at interview I thought I can really do this.

Kat also felt that as she had triumphed over adversity at work, it had given her valuable transferable skills:

I thought that if I could cope with that I could cope with anything.

Despite having limited cultural, social or economic capital, reflecting on her progress whilst on the course, Kat felt that she had excelled:

I was worried about books but can access other resources now... I feel like I have gone from 0-80 mph in eight weeks. I can't believe I have learnt so much in that time, I am surprised my brain can take it!

Chelsea's story

Chelsea was a 21 year old pre-school assistant with both an A level and NVQ, at level 3, in an Early Years background. Although she was also a first generation HE student, she had the added advantage of observing her partner go through an HE programme, so she had accumulated some social and cultural capital. This was evident in her knowledge of funding systems, course choice and knowledge of course application procedures:

My boyfriend has done a Foundation degree in Business. I knew it would be home study and knew that if I left it to the last minute I would go crazy. I knew about student finance beforehand and knew I would get everything. I kind of felt pressurised into working but that was more me and I did not want to end up out of pocket, it can affect study.

This knowledge also gave her a certain amount of confidence within the interview. This confidence was perceived to be in her ability to cope with the academic demands of the course:

The interview pushed me into thinking, 'I can do this' ...I left the interview feeling confident, really feeling I could bash assignment work out....I looked at the folder and honestly thought I did that at A level and thought I could do that again and I have not been proved wrong yet!

However, despite this confidence, there was one barrier that was in Chelsea's way and this was the induction assignment. This is a task that all students are asked to complete to assess their academic writing potential before they start the course. Unfortunately, despite Chelsea's accumulation of capital, her first attempt was not written at the required standard and she was asked to re-submit it:

It baffled me initially, the wording threw me. I wasn't used to not having an essay question. It went over my head and on the second instance of doing it I

realised what was wanted, it helped. After failing the first attempt it knocked me back.

On a final note Chelsea commented:

I really, really, want to do this and in 5 years being in a position I want to be.

Sarah's story

Sarah was a 45 year old, first generation student, with dependent children. She was employed part time as a Teaching Assistant. At secondary school, she had achieved 1 O level but re-took her GCSE English, AS English Literature and also NVQ, at level 3, in Early Years as a mature student. Sarah did not expect to gain a place on the course as she did not see it was within reach of someone like herself:

I came from a poor family. It was outside of my position and where you should be. I think everyone should have the opportunity but adult education is being cut which is a shame, as people like me who did not try at school or were not pushed, and families like mine wouldn't have any opportunities.

Nevertheless, in terms of the interview Sarah did not divulge any feelings of lack of confidence or hesitancy:

I thought the interview was fine. I remember you said I write well... The interview was not negative, I think the reality at interview that you gave was that it is hard work but it didn't put me off.... I felt it enabled me to shine and showed me that I was capable.

Although Sarah, like Kat, had limited resources of cultural, social and economic capital she felt that she had developed many HE appropriate skills since being on the course:

I didn't mind doing the essay but I wasn't sure what I was doing as I had never referenced before. I didn't know your system so was all over the place. Now we've handed work in I can see how I have improved from the first one. I can

see the progress...I have developed a cultural tool kit – the reading is a necessity, I have to have my books with me at all times ... my post-its are there so I am organised. A book, a pen, a post it are now an extension of me!

Although Sarah felt that she had developed capital since being on the course, and could clearly see her progress, unfortunately she withdrew from the course, during her first term. This was due to the complex difficulties of balancing family and academic life:

It seems to have taken over my life, home life has become a strain, and even work time is limited.

Themes emerging

Although the two main themes that have emerged from this study are emotions and positioning, it is clear that Bourdieu's metaphor of capital can be used to help us understand all of these interactions. It is the correlation of these themes that I wish to explore in this next section.

Emotions

Expression of emotions and the emotional force in which students have expressed their feelings during and after the interview has been somewhat surprising. Although psychoanalysts would believe that emotional states are innate (Evans 2001), from a social constructionist perspective it would be argued that emotions are concepts, assigned to enable us to construct meaning and make sense of our behaviours (Burr 2003). Kat used language to construct meaning of her admissions experience and to justify her position of being upset at interview. Using words such as, 'scary' and 'intimidated' showed how initially, she lacked confidence in her ability to do the course, or even felt that it was something beyond her reach. This justified her position of feeling that she had to '... really, really fight' for a place (Kat 2011). This led her to express

herself through tears, as she felt that she did not perform as she wanted to when her initial confidence dissolved through the realisation of how much she wanted the place; she felt a fight was ahead of her:

I flunked it as I was an emotional wreck, I came out and 100% thought if that was me I would interview in the same way, but I wouldn't give me a place. (Kat, 2011)

Burr (2003) discusses how social forces can constrain us to act in certain ways and implies that we are not totally agentic. In the case of Kat, this could be argued, as she felt out of control within this new situation, and located within a deficit position. This led to her feeling a need to prove that she was 'good enough'. Her social construction of how she felt she ought to behave within the field of an admissions interview may also have fed into these emotions.

Schutz and Zembylas (2009) discuss the 'emotional labour' of teaching but this phrase is also useful within the context of this research. Embarking on an HE programme for non traditional students poses potential risks. Students feel quite exposed and open to criticism, therefore seeing it as both labour intensive and emotionally challenging. As previously discussed, capital, as defined by Bourdieu, often focuses on the cultural, social and economic but this research brings an additional focus to emotional capital. Nowotyn (1981 cited by Reay 2004) sees emotional capital as an extension of social capital that is generally contained within the boundaries of familial or friend relationships. In this way, emotional capital can be regarded as a resource used by women that is private, utilised within families and has limited use and value within the public sphere (Nowotyn 1981 cited by Reay 2004). However, I propose that Nowotyn's analysis can be extended to encompass the public face of emotional capital as it is an important aspect within this research.

To illustrate this, the participants all referred to their emotions in terms of decision making and confidence levels. Having a high emotional capital can translate into the capacity to discuss and work through feelings and this seems to have had a positive effect on the participants. After failing the induction essay, Chelsea relied on this emotional capital to discuss her feeling of inadequacy; this ability to draw on emotional feelings enabled her to think clearly and view the problem with greater perspective. Similarly, Sarah drew on her emotional capacity of resilience. This meant that, although she felt university was beyond her position, at interview she also recognised that it could give her an opportunity to develop and succeed. Resilience led to a sense of positivity about the course ahead. Having praise given to her at interview also fuelled this sense of achievement and enabled her to calculate that this was within her capabilities. According to Frenzel et al (2009), being able to feel success and enjoy the learning process is conducive to removing obstacles and promoting achievement. Therefore, I assert that having high emotional capital, which allows a student to recognise and deal with feelings, is a crucial element of success when crossing the borders (Walkerdine 2006) into HE. Emotional capital, like the other forms of capital, does not need to be viewed in isolation as it can link in with other forms of capital. Through having confidence and realising achievement, financial resources and social contacts may be increased, thus enhancing other forms of capital. Likewise emotional capital can be as a result of cultural contexts or social contacts.

Positioning

Having high stocks of emotional capital can help students to feel worthy of a place and believe that the course is the right opportunity for them as they feel that they belong. Kat illustrates this further as she felt that she needed to prove that she was ‘good enough’ for the course (see studies by Atkin 2000; Grayson 2011, Leathwood and

O'Connell 2003 and Reay et al. 2010). This was linked to her feeling disadvantaged educationally and financially, as she did not believe the course was for someone like her. This was also replicated in Sarah's story, as she felt that the course was 'outside of her position'; as she came from a 'poor family', she had therefore not accumulated stocks of economic capital or felt culturally that it was a choice for someone like herself. Both students had placed themselves, prior to the admissions interview, in a position of unsuitability.

One could argue that positioning enables us to account for why we do things and the meanings attached to this (Brinkmann 2007). Hence, once a certain position or 'vantage point' (Davies and Harré 1999, 53) is claimed then our subsequent interactions and viewpoint are also influenced by this. This was clearly evident in both Kat and Sarah's stories. Different positions that are offered can then be claimed or rejected thus affecting our position and self awareness. Initially, Kat accepted the position of not being good enough, however this changed as the admissions interview progressed and she realised that the examples of work matched her perceived ability. Nevertheless, such shifting between positions can cause instability, as social mobility is enacted.

Although the Coalition government endorses widening access to HE, as it encourages social mobility (Cabinet Office, 2011), there are studies that highlight a feeling of disequilibrium for individuals who move between class positions (Giddens 2001). Research by Lucey et al (2003) and Walkerdine (2006) also highlight the complexities involved when students try to cross borders of class, and show the anxiety that students experience when they shift into borders or territories that are unfamiliar. This anxiety could also be used to define Kat's emotional state during the admissions interview.

Gergen (2001) maintains that our emotions are socially driven and our displays

of emotion are culturally bound and fashioned. Harré and van Langenhove (1999, 5) state that ‘... the assumptions people make as to the character of the episode in which they are engaged can have a profound influence on what people say and do’. Therefore, how we position ourselves, for instance as shy or confident, will affect subsequent interactions and how others ‘locate themselves’, (Moghaddam 1999, 83). This could also explain Kat’s distress and embarrassment of her tears as she may have felt that it was not culturally appropriate for the field of an HE interview and that she had not positioned herself in the positive way that she had envisaged.

Positioning is also relevant here, in terms of how others position the students and the assumptions that they have as to their capability to fit into HE. Kat felt positioned by her mother as not being capable, this can have a colossal impact on how she may have viewed her capabilities:

Mum thought it was ridiculous, I started doubting myself but knew I wanted to do it. (Kat 2011)

Kat also perceived my role as interviewer in terms of an unequal power relationship. Moreover, she accurately felt that she had to convince me that she was ‘good enough’ as she felt the younger students would hold higher qualifications than her and thus be advantaged. This, in her opinion, placed her in a deficit position compared to the A level students interviewed, who all felt that they were entitled to secure a place on the course. Bowl (2003) notes that that the framework of HE is set up to advantage those with A levels, as they have already acquired cultural capital. This enables them to have some advantages as they have already been exposed to the academic discourse of university language (see Webb et al. 2002), have gained the familiarity of study patterns and the mastery of academic writing. For many non traditional students, therefore, it is the lack of exposure to this learned academic discourse that creates a chasm for non traditional

students to cross, emphasising the complexities of negotiating access to the university field from this position. Those non traditional students who have had a study gap, or come from vocational backgrounds, are therefore less likely to adapt to HE. Moreover, this highlights a real distance between lecturer and student (Webb et al. 2002) which may affect the resulting interchange at interview. Whereas prior cultural capital could give traditional A level students confidence and elevate them to a position of entitlement within the interview exchange, Bowl (2003, 140) recognises that non traditional students often feel unequal power relations between the lecturer and themselves as student. In effect, this could limit their aspirations and potential and can ‘...intensify their feelings of inadequacy as students...’. As the admissions interviewer, if I had positioned the students subconsciously, or even consciously, as likely to fail, this may have affected the interview process and my subsequent decisions:

At enrolment I knew I would be with really serious people that wanted a place on the course as I knew they wouldn't get past her (interviewer)! (Kat 2011)

Changing positions

How we are positioned is not necessarily fixed as we can have a ‘... multiplicity of personas that are dependent on the social context’, (Harré and van Langenhove 1999, 5). What was interesting in the case of Kat was that although initially she lacked confidence in herself at interview, during the process of the interview she gained self confidence. This was through the realisation, when she discussed her working practices, that she had developed many transferable skills and dispositions that would be appropriate for HE such as time management and organisational skills. Also through seeing the examples of students work she felt that perhaps she was capable of this:

As I saw the work examples at interview I thought I can really do this. (Kat 2011)

This was also echoed in Chelsea's story, as she left the interview feeling that she could cope with the academic demands of the course. Sarah also felt it gave her an opportunity to 'shine', as well as show her that she was capable. Since, initially, the interview was planned to assess academic ability, to help reduce early drop out and non achievement, it could be viewed as putting the student in a deficit position. However, this paper suggests that, in some ways, it was inspiring for the students. This was an unintended outcome of the admissions interview procedure. Giddens (2010) proposes that the structures that make up society establish how we do things, however the unintended consequences of our actions, and those of others, can derange this completely. This has parallels with Bourdieu's notion of reflexive sociology (cited by Webb et al. 2002), which highlights how the social positions we occupy within a field affects, and influences, the outcomes and possible discourses available within that field. However, this is not always under our jurisdiction. Certainly, this was the case with the interview procedure, as the intention of the structure was to seek out inappropriate students for the programme; the questions and use of sample student work were designed as a tool to demonstrate the academic demands of the course. However, as identified through each of the case studies, this had an opposite effect and became a motivating factor that enthused the students and positioned them as competent, confident and able. This unintended outcome brought about change (see Kaspersen 2000). Reay et al. (2010) recognises that a university's habitus, methods and aspirations for a student affects their level of work commitment and achievement. This is also reflected in the Browne Review (2010) as the HE system can play an important part in raising aspirations for students. This seems to be evident in the admissions interview as, when shown the expectations for the academic demands of the course, the students felt empowered, thus raising their aspirations.

It is interesting to note that this confidence was then, at least initially, deflated when faced with the induction essay, as they struggled to know where to start and how to complete it. The non traditional students used words such as ‘intimidating’, ‘worried’, ‘baffled’, as initially it made them doubt the wisdom of their decision to embark on a programme of study at HE level. However, once they had completed this, they felt pleased with their achievement and it even changed how they undertook their study:

It has helped me with my focus and it changed how I approached it as it showed me how much I wanted to do this. I thought, ‘Get your arse in gear Chelsea!’

(Chelsea 2011)

The interview then allows those who have not got the expected accumulation of capital a better opportunity to demonstrate their skills. In terms of capital each student had varying forms.

Accumulating capital

This leads me to ask whether capital can be accumulated and acquired through the duration of the course? All students cited the acquisition of study skills, whilst on the course, as an immense factor of success in subsequent assessments. Kat (2011) discussed feeling like she had ‘...gone from 0-80 mph in eight weeks. I can’t believe I have learnt so much in that time...’, thus signifying how much she had developed in HE-related skills since starting the course. Sarah (2011) described the accumulation of a ‘cultural tool kit’ whilst on the course and felt that ‘a book, a pen, a post-it are now an extension of me!’ Through giving the students sufficient time and support, it could be argued that they were then in a more able position to accumulate capital and overcome any disadvantages once the programme had commenced. Research by Yorke and Longden (2010) shows that 50% of part time students felt that they had gained in

confidence as a consequence of taking the course; thus this potential for shift in confidence, during the duration of the course, needs to be acknowledged at interview.

However, despite this accumulation of cultural capital, Sarah (2011) withdrew from the course within the first term due to struggling with juggling commitments. This is supported by Yorke and Longden's research (2010), which found that 56% of students experienced difficulties in trying to strike a balance between academic work and other responsibilities. It could be claimed that the lack of initial capital proved too difficult for Sarah to fit in with the existing field of HE. Within this journal, research studies by Greenbank (2011) highlight the importance of students accessing peer support to assist with undergraduate decision-making. At interview it was suggested that Sarah spoke to her colleague who had withdrawn early from a Foundation degree course, in order to ascertain her reasons for doing so, yet Sarah refused. Perhaps if she had entered into this discourse, and utilised this social capital, she may have envisaged some of the pitfalls and difficulties of completing a programme such as this.

Conclusion

Although this account does not try to generalise student experiences, lessons can be learnt from the case studies presented, in order to make a difference after non traditional students apply for a place on a HE course. Notably, it is evident that there is no clear recipe to success, in terms of selecting non traditional students who are most likely to triumph on a HE course. Each case study presented demonstrates a different story and experience. However, there are clear parallels to be drawn. Therefore, there are three points of note here.

Individuality - Recognising life experience and transferable skills

Firstly, although it has been acknowledged that accumulating capital, prior to

interview, can be advantageous, it is not the only variable to be considered at admissions interview. In fact, acquiring capital, as seen through Chelsea's story, does not always give an advantage when the course commences. Of course, this could be equally disputed in Sarah's story, where utilising social capital resources may have been beneficial. This leads me to conclude that many factors need to be considered when selecting students for a programme and looking at each student as an isolated case is vital. Therefore it is imperative that the individuality of each non traditional student needs to be considered (as noted within the Schwartz Report 2004), as well as a recognition that they are different to A level students (see Jarvis 2010) with different experiences to offer. It has been confirmed, through the case studies presented, that some non traditional students have a feeling of inferiority and, therefore, position themselves as not being 'good enough', since they feel that they do not 'fit' the traditional HE student 'mould'. This can lead to high levels of emotion and depth of feeling at induction interview, as well as throughout the duration of the course. Although students may feel in a deficit position in social, cultural or economic terms, there are other aspects of their lives that they can draw on to demonstrate their suitability to aid success at HE level; this meritocratic approach needs to be encouraged by the interviewer.

Therefore, having a high level of emotional capital, translated into the ability to discuss and rationalise intensive emotional feelings, is also a crucial success factor when crossing the unknown territory into HE. Although it is appropriate to ascertain at interview what levels of social, cultural and economic support they have acquired, or can readily access, these should not be the only aspects considered. Through the appreciation and value of a non traditional student's life experience, the recognised

potential to transfer those skills to the HE field and accumulate useful capital along the way, then this deficit position could be avoided.

Locating the problem with the institution, not the student

The second point, as argued by Bowl (2003), focuses on establishing an understanding that the problem fundamentally lies with the institution, not the student. Although widening participation has opened the door for many non traditional students, they still feel disadvantaged and out of place once they enter university. The HE environment can be intimidating for non traditional students, as they struggle to understand assessment requirements and grasp how to write in the required academic style. Therefore, expecting them to have these skills from their first day is unrealistic and unfair and can add additional emotional pressure. Therefore, academic institutions need to take appropriate action to provide support for non traditional students. One area of support could be increased guidance at interview, as recognised by Reay et al (2010). In addition, ongoing support is required to (see Bamber and Tett 2000) enable students to bridge the academic gap. By taking this approach, the ‘internal doors’ of academia may be opened (Bowl 2003, 139). This will help to develop equity and give increased equal opportunities.

Power of the interview

Finally, of course, there will always be non traditional students who will not be successful at HE, in terms of the management discourse of retention and achievement. However, through the process of the admissions interview and looking at examples of work, these students can be better equipped to make this decision themselves. In terms of the research presented, the interview was designed to locate students in a position where they questioned whether they could cope with the academic demands of the course, in terms of organisation, time management or balancing family commitments.

Nevertheless, the interview appeared to have the opposite effect for the interviewees as it gave them a sense of empowerment and confidence. For Chelsea, the interview process and induction essay provided her with opportunities to self-assess and set in place a foundation of good study skills and skills of time management. For Sarah, it gave her confidence that someone in her position could actually achieve on this course. For Kat, it made her appreciate her work achievements and realise that she had developed valid transferable skills that could be utilised at HE level. This shows the hidden power and importance of the admissions interview.

Consequently, equality could be better addressed and social mobility increased through a change of the expected habitus of the learner (see Atkin 2000), as well as through recognising other areas where they have shown transferable skills appropriate to the HE field, and a change in the assumption that students will be independent from their first day (Leathwood et al 2003).

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