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## **Widening participation, student identity and agentic capital in coastal, rural and isolated communities in south-west England**

### **Abstract**

This contribution arises from a qualitative case study of mainly part-time mature women students on a Foundation degree in Teaching and Learning developed through a partnership between a not-for-profit college and a university. The educational provision was designed to address under-participation in HE in one of the most isolated regions of the country. The focus of this study is firmly upon the lived experience of the students, as revealed in qualitative semi-structured interviews carried out over a fifteen-month period. The data reveal an array of ways in which the students' experience of HE participation is pivotal in their lives. The paper draws upon Bourdieu's idea of human capital to help to understand the interaction between the fields of higher education, the home and the workplace in the lives of the students, and the contribution of their particular personal human and social resources as agentic capital as revealed in the participants' own accounts; a perspective which recognises that people are producers as well as products of social systems, where the subject brings elements of their growing knowledge, experience and confidence to their work and wider life.

### **Key Words**

Widening participation, Foundation degree, capital, part-time mature women students, private provider, higher education

### **Introduction**

This article arises from a qualitative case study of participants on a Foundation degree in Teaching and Learning developed through a partnership between Westshire Institute<sup>1</sup>, a private provider not-for-profit college in the south-west region of England, and City Walls U, a 'new'

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<sup>1</sup> The names of institutions have been anonymised

university having gained university status in the middle of the last decade. This partnership has spawned a distinctive type of collaborative provision that is explicitly designed to build social and economic capital in people, institutions and the wider society. The development of this approach to access and widening participation (WP) can be conceived as an anchor institution model of higher education, here defined as involving higher education providers who have an identity, presence, reputation and investment in the local area, and are reliable, secure and enduring.

Many studies of university outreach focus on government funded targeting of specific cohorts, such as the National Scholarship Programme, to raise the attainment level of intakes or to meet recruitment shortfalls (McCaig 2014), or projects designed to increase recruitment in shortage subjects, such as the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) programme. Such projects have been characterised as inhabiting a ‘fragile outreach landscape, highly diverse, operating in a perpetual “start–stop” model and mostly lacking institutional ownership’ (Eilam et al 2016).

There are few studies that examine university - private partnerships that aim to widen higher education participation through collaborative provision. Of these, most focus upon college based higher education (CBHE) which is mainly in the form of sub-degree programmes (eg Walker et al 2018), and in which there is usually seen to be an unequal power relationship with the university owning and directing the resources (Elliott 2017). There appear to be no studies of the student experience within an English university and not-for-profit (private) partnership, even though globally one in three higher education students is in the private sector (one in seven in Europe) (The Economist 2016). Insights and potential themes for analysis were therefore garnered from the wider partnership and widening participation literature, especially student confidence and professionalism (understanding and becoming a professional) (Gray 2015), aspirations (Walker 2016), resilience (Cotton et al 2017), and the student parent learning experience (Hinton-Smith 2012). Due to the nature of the cohort targeted and recruited for the Foundation degree, who were predominantly women with children, the study will help to fill a gap in WP research in which ‘there is far less research on student-mothers’ experiences of and reactions to vocationally related higher education’ (Smith 2017: 107).

This article attempts to answer the question: What is the cultural / agentic capital of the students and how should higher education respond? This question is at the heart of the WP debate in higher education, and draws upon Bernstein's theoretical work on the instrumental (organisational/institutional) and expressive (personal / familial) domains to insist 'that the HE system itself, as opposed to the groups it serves, needs to change' (Donnelly and Evans 2019: 102).

The policy context of the study is one in which total part-time entrants to higher education have fallen dramatically. Estimates of the overall rate of decline since 2010 have been put as high as 61% (Goodchild 2017) which presents - as Angela Shaw's (2014:848) study of mature part-time students has demonstrated - "a worrying picture - for government, for higher education providers and for the future of mature part-time learning opportunities". The impact of this trend on social justice have been highlighted by OFFA (the Office for Fair Access in Higher Education): 'As part-time students are more likely to be from disadvantaged and under-represented groups, this continuing decline should be a profound concern to all those involved in widening participation.' (Ebdon 2018:1). The shocking aspect of this decline is that it has, to a significant degree, happened as a consequence of coalition government policies and continued under the current government. The trebling of student tuition fees impacted disproportionately on mature and part-time students, and only one third of part-time students were eligible to take out student loans (Hillman 2015).

Around 10% (ETF 2016) of students study for their diplomas and degrees through CBHE, including private providers, so such partnerships are a highly significant feature of the current English higher education landscape. Foundation degrees, that are specifically linked to local skills and employment needs, have formed an important part of the efforts of universities and colleges to widen participation, often appealing to non-traditional students including those from social groups under-represented in HE, including mature students, women, and those without formal qualifications (Lillis 2001, QAA 2015, Mason 2018). The award was introduced in England in 2001 specifically to meet the needs of students wishing to combine academic and vocational higher education courses,

with the curriculum often tailored to a single profession or occupational area. It is equivalent to two-thirds of an honours degree, and is often studied part-time to enable students to combine earning and learning.

Initial interactions with students following this Foundation degree course strongly indicated that the influences and drivers of their motivation to participate and do well academically extended far beyond those factors typically identified in previous theoretical literature. In this literature, the predominant drivers of student motivation are held to be personal (specific to the individual) and professional (specific to their current or future employment) (Parry et al 2012, King et al 2013). However, the students in this study confided a more complex network of factors that appeared to strongly influence their educational choices. After a short account of the study's research methodology, these are unpacked and illustrated with indicative and compelling examples drawn from the interview data. The article closes with a consideration of the identities that students bring with them and develop during their studies, and some implications for future research in the field.

## **Methodology**

The focus of this study is firmly upon the experience of the students of Westshire, studying on a professional education Foundation degree, gained through qualitative semi-structured interviews carried out over a fifteen-month period, to fit around the timetable schedules of the students. They are mainly, but not exclusively, female, and nearly all are employed in an education support role, so are following their HE programme in part-time mode. In age, all are mature, and most are between 25-45 years of age. Most are parents, helping this study to fill an important gap since 'one group has remained relatively absent from this (WP) agenda: student parents and other students with caring responsibilities' (Moreau and Kerner 2013: 215). For 2017-18, the retention rate was 90% and the achievement rate was 88%; the proportion of the student cohort on the Foundation degree from lower participation households (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Polar quintiles, OfS 2019) was 58%, compelling evidence that the model and the courses developed through it are making a dramatic impact on access and outreach to hard to reach students.

The course is taught across a number of sites in the south-west, which can be a school or a community centre. Classes are held one day per week during school term times; this ensures that students can study around family and work commitments. The tutors arrange individual tutorials to feedback to students how they have done in their written assignments, and to pick up on any on-going literacy or study skills difficulties, and to offer personal guidance and advice on wider issues such as finance that may be impacting upon their studies. The students enjoy personal social interaction both during study time and outside of it.

The study presented here was part of a wider research project on academic partnerships, involving seven academic tutors, professional support staff and myself as lead researcher. This phase of the project involved one-to-one hour-long interviews conducted by myself with 17 female and 2 male students in the second or third year of their Foundation degree course in Teaching and Learning, comprising around 15% of the overall student population. As first year students had already taken part in a different study they were not sampled on this occasion. The students were offered the opportunity to participate by their classroom tutor and advised that if they did not wish to do so there would be no disadvantage to them of any kind. All the students interviewed gave their full informed consent to participate and were advised that they were free to withdraw from the study at any point if they so wished. The research was approved by the author's university ethics committee and followed the ethical guidelines developed by the British Educational Research Association (BERA 2011).

The interviews were semi-structured, and followed themes identified through learning and teaching interactions with the students, professional knowledge and experience, and the theoretical literature relating to WP in HE. The thematic areas thus explored during the interviews were wide-ranging and included: aspirations, motivation, resilience and perseverance, different ways of learning, professionalism, time management, barriers to HE access, online resources, learning experience, peer learning and online peer communities and tutor support. The questions asked were open-ended, with supplementary questions ready where a response was limited. Without exception the students were extremely forthcoming in their answers, and happy to share personal details in answering questions such

as: What was the biggest influence on you going to university? When did you first become aware of HE as a possibility for you? How important has peer group support been for you (Can you give me an example)? What keeps you going if the studying gets on top of you (Can you give me an example)? Do you feel your degree will affect your confidence and self-esteem at work? Has HE helped you become a professional? The interviews were recorded on a digital voice recorder, and videotaped, for later analysis.

The data was subjected to a thematic analysis (Lincoln and Guba 1985) using themes and categories emerging from reading and re-reading the interview transcripts. This allowed an in-depth multi-faceted exploration of the key concerns and priorities shared by the students during the interviews. Particular attention was paid to recurring themes and telling details, and, recognising that research is no longer viewed as a linear model but as a social process (Burgess 1984), the researcher made every effort to avoid over-emphasising his own pre-conceived ideas, assumptions and researcher biases. This study makes no claims beyond analysis and interpretation of the evidence gathered from the research site itself. However, to the extent that it supports, builds on and challenges the existing theoretical literature, its application and influence may extend outwards to other contexts both in this country and beyond. Ultimately though, it will be for practitioners and researchers to judge to what extent the student voices and researcher interpretations underpinning the study and reported here chime with their own experience.

### **Student opportunity and capital**

The realisation that access to HE in the UK is not evenly distributed has given rise to the notion of 'hard to reach' students, that is, those whom previous attempts to widen participation have failed to include. We should, however, resist too easily resorting to a deficit model of HE participation that suggests that students are somehow hard to reach due to their low aspiration or cultural provenance or lack of social mobility (Gorard et al 2016, Loveday 2015), as opposed to structural constraints that remain downplayed in the theoretical literature (Reay 2013)

The social class composition of the HE population has been the slowest indicator to show progress, despite the well-intentioned efforts of many in the sector to address this. They have not been helped by the severely reduced opportunities for part-time students as a result of continually declining funding support (Hillman 2015). The impact was that between 2008 and 2012 the number of entrants to part-time HE courses in England fell by 37 per cent (Oxford Economics 2014), and the number of part-time undergraduate students in 2013–2014 was half of what it had been in 2010–2011 (HEFCE 2014).

These demographic changes have had a major impact on social mobility and social justice (Avis and Orr 2016). They have particularly disadvantaged women who left school before the upper participation age so that they could start earning a wage, and in many cases also raise a family and needing to continue working. Studying in HE can be an alienating and intimidating experience for women (Burke 2000) who might be perceived as distancing themselves from their current social groups and even from their families (Merrill 2015).

The importance of confidence in student progression, retention and achievement is highlighted by Shafi and Rose (2014: 220), whose case study of women returners to HE found that 'Lacking the confidence or feeling uncertain of the path to take became a restriction where believing that something was not possible became a reason not to do it.' Further, they may find their particular needs unmet having been attracted to 'universities (that) can recognise a lucrative, gendered market but then ignore the particular gendered needs of that group' (Evans, 1995: 74). Notwithstanding that women now comprise over half of UK undergraduates, and despite a long-term commitment to WP in many national contexts, nevertheless, as Burke and Carolissen have argued, 'the complex dynamics of pedagogical relations and experiences in relation to gendered practices and subjectivities has been largely absent from research on teaching and learning in higher education' (Burke and Carolissen 2018: 544).



Particularly relevant to the current study, access to HE is also restricted due to the uneven geographical spread of HEIs, particularly in rural and isolated areas (Gibney 2013). Further, a number of studies utilising interpretivist, feminist, or Bourdieusian perspectives have convincingly shown how important social and cultural influences are in shaping individual choices whether or not to enter HE (Allan et al 2009, Crozier and Reay 2011). The central theme, then, of this research is to explore, against the specific background of time, place and social context, why these students choose to enter HE, what professional and personal advantage they hope to accrue, and the nature of the hindrances and affordances experienced by them throughout their learning journey.

The analysis of the student experience that follows draws from Karl Marx (1981 [1894]) and Pierre Bourdieu (1986) the ideas of human, cultural and social capital (or knowledge); in particular, how these forms of capital are the basis of social life and influence human participation and position within society. The permeating influence of capital is best understood by borrowing one of Bourdieu's (1992) sporting metaphors: many students in our study reported in one way or another that at school they lacked a "feel for the game" in relation to university application processes and opportunities, and their teachers at school did not expect them to progress academically.

However, it is important to note that cultural capital relates to having a feel for the game in *all* relevant spheres, not only those linked to upward social mobility. It is therefore important to avoid a deficit model of capital, which so many studies and WP practices have taken on board either explicitly, or more commonly, implicitly, taking for granted the contestable view that 'non-traditional learners have lower resources of cultural capital' (Fenge 2011: 384). Instead, this study shows how, for this student cohort, their life and especially their family experiences, inspire and support their HE aspirations and performance, in a finely balanced mosaic of challenge, labour, expectation and achievement.

This student experience is now illustrated with some telling examples drawn from a much wider data set that illustrate the depth and significance of what the students in this study bring with them to their HE work.

### **The student voice**

Ralph<sup>2</sup>, in common with several other students in the study, was unemployed and began volunteering to comply with the requirements of the course that students must have at least 10 hours a week contact with children in a professional educational setting. Like many of the students, he has a working-class background and left school as soon as he could:

I left school at 16. I went to a very good school but I failed dismally at school. It was just I hated every minute of it. I hated teachers. I hated everything about education.... My mum just wanted me to go to work, she said, 'Get a job, pay your stamp and you'll be alright. As long as you pay your stamp and pay your tax you'll get your benefits, you'll be fine when you retire.' She was one like that.

Many of the students are first generation higher education students and this seems to carry with it a keen determination to succeed, motivation, and sometimes resilience:

Studying for a degree is a big thing, not many of my family members have degrees, so it's quite a huge thing and probably only me and my cousin are the only ones that have done any kind of degree (Ursy).

Charlotte left school after A levels for a well-paid job in the clothing industry. Tempted out of full-time education by the draw of good money, she prevaricated for over ten years before deciding to return to study on the flexible part-time Foundation degree available locally. Key to her decision was the thought that 'I need to do something for me, to make me

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<sup>2</sup> The names of students have been anonymised

happy and this is the route I've chosen to take.' In the absence of a local university (the nearest university campus is located over 30 miles away) and like most of her peers, Charlotte chose not to go away to university 'because I didn't want to move away, I knew that. I enjoy living in (County) so I thought, I'll stay here and I'll study something that's local.' Equally important to her was to study a degree that she could apply in her career: 'I looked, and I looked at Westshire and I looked at other degrees and I thought, 'why would I do a degree in something else when I could do it in something that's going to make me more knowledgeable for when I've completed it?'

Jon, a teaching assistant in an infant school, articulates a key duality of localness; that it is not only about being close at hand, but that local can also be associated with cognitive accessibility:

I wouldn't be doing it if it wasn't here. If I had to go to university. I wouldn't do it. I see that as – I think initially the word 'university' was above my level. I think that was too scary. Too much of a big word. But coming to somewhere local, and being able to tie it into my work commitments, has made it accessible to me. I couldn't do it without.

Central to the attractiveness of the Foundation degree in Teaching and Learning for these students is its relevance and applicability to their chosen work – in most cases as education support workers. Lucy (a nursery assistant in a school) and Ursy (a pre-school nursery nurse) highlight this well:

Certainly when I'm doing the assignments I can, more so now, link the theory to the practice and identify – almost like looking back and it makes you reflect and you think, 'oh that's an example, that happened the other day'.

We've done a range of them (topics) now like safeguarding, special educational needs, and everything that you learn you always have to reference your practice anyway in your assignments. So, it's quite good to be able to connect the two

and you can see where you do well or things that your setting doesn't do that you could do so much better. It's really good to give you loads of ideas at work of how to improve practice.

These excerpts also highlight how the work-based degree programme opens up spaces for students to ask questions and reflect upon their practice in a way that can be difficult or given lower priority as they progress in their careers. In this way, the course can be seen as providing theory scaffolding and opportunities for reflection to trainee education professionals, that can help them to contextualise and make sense of their practice. This aspect emerges strongly in the account offered by Kim, a Deputy Manager in a pre-school nursery:

It's been really good to put the theory into practice, and it's just made my job so much more rewarding. I do feel that I'm offering more to the children now than I was 18 months ago before I did the course, absolutely, with their learning and behaviour. Yes, it really has made a big impact ... because the more I've learnt and liaised with my manager, and the more she's given me that responsibility, the more I've put it in place and it makes sense. When you see it working, it does, and you think, 'Actually, I can do this, it makes sense and I can make it better.'

It is this theory scaffolding that can help to build confidence and self-esteem, both of which are so vital in enhancing student retention and performance outcomes (Pearce 2017), and the benefits of which extend beyond the course itself. Student self-confidence, alongside 'belongingness' and engagement, have been shown to be key ingredients towards undergraduate achievement (Yorke 2016) and performance (Newton 2016).

Lucy and Jon explain:

When I started off nearly three years ago I wouldn't have dreamt of getting the grades I'm getting now. So, it's obviously worked for me and it's sunk in. There's so much to it that we've been learning as well. I think I'm more confident, I feel more confident

with the extra knowledge I have now, and understanding of the teachers and what their role is really and what it amounts to.

... it's given me more confidence. Now that we've had a couple of assignments returned, it's given me a lot more confidence in what I've been doing. Also, in my home life, so away from being the student, it's given me a broader look at the world.

Ursy and Dianne's experience of workplace support for their higher education journey is shared by many of our sample:

A lot of the girls on the course say that they've managed, like they feel a bit more respected and that their opinions are really valued at work ... I feel like I know what I'm talking about a bit more now. So, I feel like I can pitch in on a debate and actually stand and know that what I'm saying is right.

I feel a lot more confident going into school because I am doing the degree. I've got the support of the school. So I do small teaching slots.

Charlotte reveals a growing perception that the higher education experience is a two-way street with the student contributing as much as receiving. In his study of non-traditional university students, Markle found that 'Confidence is an important intrapersonal factor in student success' (Markle 2015: 270). We might think of this as 'agentic capital' (Plotica 2015: 94), drawing upon social cognition theory perspective in which people are producers as well as products of social systems, where the subject brings elements of their growing knowledge, experience and confidence to their work and wider life.

You're not just somebody there learning from others, you're bringing knowledge to the table as well. You're learning from literature, you're learning from your peers and from your tutor. I feel like it bridges that gap between a TA (Teaching Assistant) and a teacher, where you could make a suggestion and you have got

a bit of knowledge to give to it. You're not coming to the table with an empty pack of cards, sort of thing.

For Jon, it was necessary to build a bridge between the agentic capital he brought from his life experience and the new capital he was accessing through the course:

I think for me, because I've been out of the education for myself for so long, I'm really struggling to find the right route to the information I need to get to. I've got the experiences from life, but it's then proving what you think using somebody else. That's the bit I find really tricky. I guess it's because I haven't done anything like this for so long, and never thought I would.

One of the affordances that was repeatedly raised by students in the interviews was the role of peer group support in helping them through the ups and downs of learning, teaching and assessment. Dianne shared the group's term for this social capital:

We call it 'Uni AA'. We have low days, especially when there are assignments pending, when we have our low days, you can ping a message to the group and you feel the love. Everybody comments back, and they tell you, 'No, you are doing it right. You do know this. Try this.'

Alongside peer group support, the students were very clear that the tutors provided a vital help line both in and out of the classroom:

The tutors have done a really great job. As well as supporting you in the lessons, trying to answer all the questions that you've got, and via email. It's the support all the time really.... and they'll get back to you quite soon, which is good (Charlotte).

When I've always gone back and said, 'Look, how can I get better and achieve?', the feedback has been really useful on the assignments. Yes, just really good. Really good rapport with the tutors as well, they're really approachable and really nice (Kim).

All of the student group pointed to the close tutor support that they received during their learning journey, which often extended to individual emotional support as well as academic advice and guidance:

That's definitely a big thing. (Tutor) has been my tutor for this module and she's been really helpful because I've just been a bit overwhelmed at the moment and she's been really helpful. Emailing me a lot and checking that I'm doing okay and asking me if there's other things that she can do and it's just really nice (Ursy).

Equally important is the support of family and friends which represent influential forms of family and social capital respectively. As Charlotte, Jon, Dianne, and Nikki recall:

The encouragement from my family and friends has been amazing, everyone's been really supportive, offering to proofread and talk about what I'm studying and feed back ideas, things like that, it's been really good.

Oh, again, my wife has been outstanding, and the rest of my family. It was a big part of the decision to do this. We had a big discussion about how it would affect home life, and needing the time to do it properly, and I've had nothing but support from everybody.

Yes, it was tricky to start with. I'm kind of getting into the flow of it now, but that's down to the family support. That actually they do know that, 'Mum is upstairs. She's doing her work. So don't go and disturb her. Go and bother Dad.'

I think the praise from others has more of an effect on you. So, my family will turn around and be, 'Oh wow, well done, that's amazing.' Which makes you feel better. Now, if I was just stood there thinking, 'Well done [Nikki], you've done really well.' It wouldn't give me that drive to do better, but it does when other people say you've done a good job.

The support appreciated is practical as well as emotional, as Lucy and Ursy explain:

Working and having a family as well, it's a lot to deal with and yes, my house isn't in the right state I like it to be but we're sort of getting by, you know, and my husband helps a lot and family have helped sort of with childcare.

I couldn't write assignments if I didn't have my family's support because they've just taken my children so I can have quiet.

Perhaps because the students in this study are all mature, many in their twenties or thirties when they begin the course, the sense that they have of being a role model for the next generation comes through more strongly than in studies involving younger cohorts. So, when Lucy is asked by the interviewer, 'What's your aspiration now?', she replies:

Thinking about it, the one thing that has come out of this is my daughter is 11 and she went to the graduation last year with me and put the hat on and said, 'I want to do this one day.'

This theme is equally well expressed by Kim, Carla, Evie, and Ursy:

I think one of the best things of the course is that I've got a thirteen-year-old son, where, obviously, the time isn't great for him, studying when you're a thirteen-year-old, but it's been really good for him to see me studying and doing well.

My children, it's important to them that I've signed up to do something, you've got to go through with it. You can't give up because if I give up that gives them the green light for the rest of their life that they can give up and I'm not going to give them that.

I suppose, I'm a single parent of two young children who are six and eight, and I wanted my girls to see that their mum could go and do something.



My oldest is four and he's starting to have more conversations with you. So, I can tell him that, 'Mummy's doing some writing and mummy's trying to do her teaching.' And he understands now because he goes to school and he knows that one day I will be a teacher like his teacher hopefully.

Many of the students looking back on their own school experience believed that their own educational and career aspirations and ambitions were blunted at that early stage, and this may well have influenced their desire to be a more positive role model for their own children. As Karen reflected, 'you didn't get the options that you get now, you were either a hairdresser or a secretary, or if you were really clever, you might be a teacher.... They never said to me, "you must go (to university)"; they showed you what was available at college, university was never discussed.'

The capital that these students bring to their higher level study experience might be physical and practical as well as personal, emotional and attitudinal. Studying away from a university environment sometimes means that study spaces have to be improvised, as first Ursy, and then Jon describe:

I was just saying to (Tutor) actually, I have a caravan in my garden that's in storage. But we've cleared it, so I have a little table at the end and I tend to just go in there and shut myself in.

I've dedicated a room at home to my studies. It's basically a shed. I had a shed built. So, I can go in there, switch everything else off. All my books are around. And when I'm down there, it's just for me.

Ursy describes a skill that many of the students articulated, of being capable of switching between study, work and home modes, which is nicely encapsulated in this extract:

I think at work now I'm a bit more like, I'll say, 'Oh we discussed that at uni.' And then I can drop in the stuff that I learn. So, the student self comes out a lot more at work where it can be applied really well. And then at home I'm mostly focussing on being a mum. And then in the evenings I have the, children go to bed and now I need to be a student kind of thing.

Nikki gives a compelling account of the personal and emotional capital she brings to the course when she describes what keeps her going when she feels the work getting on top of her:

We could be going really deep into things here, which I'm not going to do, but what doesn't kill me, makes me stronger, to the point that I've got it tattooed on me. I've been through more in a year than some people have been through in a lifetime. Now what keeps me going is my own self determination and my goal. If I want something, I'll get it and I'll do what it takes to get it.

### **Student identities**

The present neo-liberal discourse surrounding higher education works against a complete understanding of the depth and significance of the lived experience that students bring with them to their higher-level study. 'Lived experience' is a much-used term in constructivist work on education and it is a highly appropriate term bringing as it does a focus upon all the aspects and dimensions of life that influence and impact upon students' personal and professional identities. We have seen in the data presented above the range and variety of experience that the students point to as pertinent to their motivation, resilience and perseverance. Further, as King et al. (2013: 9) have noted, hitherto the theoretical literature 'paint(s) a picture of what is currently happening in college-based HE, rather than to analyse the views of HE students'. It is most important therefore that researchers, practitioners and policy-makers listen carefully to the student voice and avoid where possible imposing inaccurate or inappropriate world views that are likely to distort our understanding of what is and what works.

It is especially important that institutional decision-makers listen to the student voice when planning which courses to offer and how they should be taught. There is a strong body of opinion that there is a status issue with Foundation degrees (Harvey 2009, Robinson 2012), that are characterised as oriented towards work-based vocational learning compared with honours degrees that have a more theoretical emphasis (Greenbank 2007), focus too specifically upon workplace skills (Ainley 2003), and contribute little to social mobility (Field 2001).

These characterisations have given rise to the serious charge that the Foundation degree reinforces a negative social identity (Smith 2017). However, amongst the students in this study, there was little evidence that these factors played a significant part in their decisions on HE choice or judgements about their experience. In particular, there was little in the data to support the three identity shifts that Smith (2017) found in his study of student mothers. Whilst some of the mothers at Westshire expressed a 'need and often a wish to sustain established familial roles and identities' and that they had 'attempted to limit the impact that their studies had on their families' (Smith 2017: 115), more of them hoped that their study would inspire and motivate their children to achieve academically. Our data substantially support Duckworth and Cochrane (2012) and Webber's (2017) recognition of the significant influence of family capital on student mothers.

Smith's second identity shift is 'covering, stigmatisation and the limited status of Foundation degree study' (Smith 2017: 117). His subjects 'who were mothers, fathers and non-parents discussed how they had tried to disidentify from being defined as a Foundation degree student' and they 'expressed a strong view that this designation had not provided a positive social identity' (Smith 2017: 117). This disidentification was completely absent from our data; in contrast, mothers, fathers and non-parents in our study viewed the Foundation degree as highly instrumental for their career role and also cited other benefits of higher level study not explicitly connected to professional development, including simply becoming 'more knowledgeable'. This more positive take on the Foundation degree was also identified by Walker (2017), who reports in her study that students on a Foundation degree in Early Years valued the critical thinking skills and

professional identity developed during the course, and by Higgins, Artes and Johnstone (2010), who found that four out of five Foundation degree students felt that the subject they had studied would give them an advantage when looking for work, and over three-quarters believed the skills they had developed on their course had made them more employable.

Smith's third identity shift is 'Managing being a workplace learner and worker' (Smith 2017: 118). In his study, 'Many of the Foundation degree students suggested that work-based learning had needed to be completed in a way that did not impinge on their established workplace practices and personas' and 'took place on the margins or in the shadows of the workplace' (Smith 2017: 118). We were alerted by Kaarby and Lindoe in this Journal (2015: 8) that 'Students have very different experiences of the workplace as a site of learning; some get support while others experience resistance', and indeed in our study, some of our students described how their employers made special arrangements for them so that they could attend the contact sessions for the course, and even tolerated them turning up late for work commitments. Where our students mentioned the interaction between their work-based learning tasks and their employment environment, the relationship was always described positively; as Ursy puts it, 'I did a whole assignment on EAL, so English as an additional language, and now I'm EAL Co-ordinator for my setting, and do loads of stuff there with children who don't speak English, so it's just there's so much you can apply. It all really links really well.'

It must be acknowledged that we did not specifically set out to test Smith's constructs in this study. However, it is interesting that the studies looked at together appear to reveal contrasting perspectives on identity realisation and management, and therefore we would concur with Smith who suggests 'that studies of mature students on Foundation degrees and other vocationally-related higher education courses need to explore parental identities in their analyses' (Smith 2017: 119).

## Conclusion

It is clear from the data that these students bring with them many strengths and skills that contribute strongly to their retention and achievement against a range of hindrances typically experienced by mature and returning students (O'Shea 2016). There are therefore strong grounds to agree with the assessment of Duckworth, Thomas and Bland (2016: 262) who reject a prevalent WP discourse in which the 'nomenclature is often dominated by a "deficit" view of these students, positioning them as *less* motivated, *less* well prepared, *less* well qualified, and a threat to academic standards and norms.' In many senses, these students are making their way in an uncharted landscape, often they are the first in their family to participate in higher education. Their accounts reveal a burning passion to ensure that their own children avail themselves of opportunities that were until now denied to their parents. They truly demonstrated that they viewed higher education both as a passage to increased social mobility, for themselves and their children, and as personally meaningful and fulfilling.

The knowledge that our students gained thus had both intrinsic and extrinsic purpose; what Mason (2018: 24) has characterised as 'PPP; purposeful, principled, practice knowledge'. Crucially though, this study has highlighted both the presence and power of the agentic capital of these students. As neatly summarised by O'Shea (2016: 48), 'students do not necessarily arrive at university bereft of the necessary capitals to enact success but rather the capitals they described are not necessarily those traditionally celebrated'. Focusing upon student capital should help to remind us that learning opportunities and environments must be adapted to suit student needs, characteristics and capabilities (Elliott 1999). Perhaps most important of all, in the accumulation of social and cultural capital that has shaped, and continues to shape higher education, the capital of the student must occupy a more central place in institutional and pedagogical arrangements for widening participation, and in the theoretical literature of educational research, than has hitherto been the case.

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