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On reflection: mature students' views of teaching and learning on Access to Higher Education Courses

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Mature students' experiences of learning and teaching on Access to Higher Education course are coloured by their socio-economic backgrounds, their prior experiences of learning and their relationships with their tutors. After giving informed consent, 60 students and 20 tutors across seven colleges in a region of England in 2012–2013 took part in interviews on these topics, the former group on three occasions during the academic year. A further 500 students across the colleges completed two questionnaires during the year. Qualitative data were analysed inductively. Quantitative data were analysed with simple descriptive statistics. Findings suggest that students preferred tutors who treated them respectfully, modelled effective learning practices clearly and empowered them to be independent learners. They also welcomed working collaboratively with their fellow students and being supported by the institutions they attended.

Keywords: collaborative culture; student voice; agency and power; tutors' roles; policy contexts

Introduction and policy contexts

Few studies have been carried out specifically on Access to Higher Education (AHE) students although there is a growing literature on mature students in Further and Higher Education. This paper makes audible the views of AHE students, who mainly come from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, on the practices of learning and teaching on their courses. While there is anecdotal evidence in the academic literature that some mature students hold negative memories of earlier compulsory education (Brine & Waller, 2004), how mature students experience their return to formal education and how this is affected by their identities and identity transitions

(Askham, 2008) is less well known. Although some students perceive Higher Education (HE) as a way to fulfil their potential selves (Burke, 2007) returning to formal education involves considerable risks (Gonsalves, Seiler, & Salter, 2011) and can lead to significant turbulence (Hodkinson, Ford, Hawthorn, & Hodkinson, 2007) especially in people's personal lives.

Gaining access to HE enables people to pursue a wide range of careers and study subjects in which they are interested. Higher education across Europe is being transformed by changing state/university relationships from elite systems into mass higher education (Field, Merrill, & Morgan-Klein, 2010) in part in order to widen participation in HE through promoting life-long learning. HE is also a key site for enacting UK and European policies to create high-skilled, high-waged economies to compete in global markets. However, in some EU countries, attempts to implement open access education seem to be hindered 'by a prevailing belief that education is the realm of young people' (Moissidis, Schwarz, Marr, Repo, & Remdisch, 2011, p. 4). The British government emphasises access to HE as a means of strengthening the national economy and lessening youth unemployment (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills [BIS], 2012).

In England and Wales, AHE diploma courses, originally established in the 1970s to encourage more non-traditional mature students to become teachers, have formed part of successive British governments' attempts to widen participation in higher education and promote social mobility more generally (Burke, 2012; Reay, Ball, & David, 2002).

> The main role of the Access to HE Diploma is to provide a chance for adults with irregular education histories to enter higher education. Applicants may have gone straight from school to work at 16 without doing A levels, or underachieved in their exams. Access to HE Diplomas offer particular bene-fits, particularly for disadvantaged groups, helping individuals to raise their aspirations and giving them the chance to progress into study at degree level. (Quality Assurance Agency [QAA], 2014, p. 5)

AHE courses focus on generic skills and subject knowledge in a wide range of areas that now include nursing and midwifery, social science, arts and humanities, teaching and science and technology (Quality Assurance Agency [QAA], 2015). These courses are provided by a variety of Access Validating Agencies (AVAs). The AVAs develop, approve and monitor AHE courses, and work with Further Education (FE) colleges and other providers that deliver these courses to students. FE colleges are neither part of the school nor the HE sector in England and Wales but provide a range of academic and vocational education courses for students who choose to leave school at the age of 16 years and 'opportunities for lifelong learning' (Jephcote, Salisbury, & Rees, 2008, p. 164). The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) licences these AVAs across England and Wales. The courses try to redress the balance of educational disadvantage

(Jones, 2006) experienced by people with 'irregular education histories' (QAA, 2014, p. 5) by providing 'second chance learners' (Fenge, 2011, p. 375) with a level three diploma that qualifies them for entry to HE.

The AHE diploma courses attract a large cohort of students annually many of whom become academically successful whatever their prior experiences of education. In 2013–2014, 70% of the 44,686 students who registered for the AHE diploma completed it within that year. This was an increase of nearly 2000 on the number of students taking AHE courses in 2012–2013. Seventy-four per cent of these students were women. Thirty-eight per cent of the students came from areas described by the QAA as 'deprived' (QAA, 2015, p. 1). Fifty-three per cent of these students were aged 25 years or older. Of the 31,016 students who completed the AHE course in 2013–2014, 93% were awarded an Access to HE Diploma (QAA, 2015). In 2012–2013, 34,440 students on AHE diploma courses applied to enter higher education and 68% were accepted by universities and colleges. This was 5% of all acceptances by universities and colleges (QAA, 2014, p. 8). In 2013–2014, FE colleges hosted 83% of the AHE courses (QAA, 2015) in England and Wales. The remaining 17% of the 330 institutions offering the AHE Diploma courses included sixth-form colleges, higher education providers, and adult and community education providers (QAA, 2015).

AHE students in a study carried out in seven institutions in a region of England viewed attendance on their courses as an enriching experience, allowing them to instigate their own actions, thereby achieving a sense of agency (James, Busher, Piela, & Palmer, 2013). They welcomed the cultures that were constructed on their courses by formally powerful people such as course tutors as well as by their fellow students. These helped to give them a sense of community that was focused on learning in order to achieve acceptable knowledge outcomes which would qualify them for entry to university. FE colleges often promote collaborative cultures that support mature learners (Fenge, 2011) and dispel senses of social disadvantage held by some adult students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds (Dillon, 2010). However, AHE students in the study also commented on the negative impact of socio-political contexts on their studies, on the impact of the lack of sufficient government financial support and on the difficulties they experienced in coping with multiple demands (work, family and study) on their time because of the need to pay AHE course tuition fees while losing wages to make time to go to college.

The increasing emphasis of British government policy on efficiency, regardless of the social and educational benefits of learning (Field et al., 2010) has put FE colleges under constant pressure to increase income and reduce costs (Hodkinson et al., 2007). This tends to lead to AHE courses with relatively high non-completion rates (QAA, 2014) becoming institutionally marginalised (Woodin & Burke, 2008) because senior managers in FE colleges worry that such courses do not help their institutions to meet

their financial targets. These are embedded in the performative discourses governing educational institutions in England and Wales (Jeffrey & Troman, 2012).

However, well over 50% of AHE students who complete their courses successfully gain entry to HE (QAA, 2014), and institutional practices and cultures can influence non-completion and non-progression rates (Field et al., 2010). The relatively low completion rates are linked to the intersectionalities of AHE students of ethnicity, gender, marital status and social class, which are reproduced through broader social discourses (Chandra, 2012) rather than to an inability or unwillingness to succeed. AHE students are predominantly mature women over the age of 20 years many of whom come from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds (QAA, 2015). Of these, some perceive education as a pathway to self-discovery (Hinsliff-Smith, Gates, & Leducq, 2011) which makes the costs and sacrifices of undertaking the AHE courses worthwhile. However, adverse school experiences, periods of absence or under-achievement in education can have an impact on mature learner identities decades later not least by inhibiting their confidence as learners (Fenge, 2011; Jones, 2006), as discussed in more detail below. Others initially have their learning ambitions frustrated by the need to care for children (Gorard & Selwyn, 2005; James et al., 2013). Most AHE students juggle multiple responsibilities, which often have negative effects on them and their families, including demands on time and finances (James et al., 2013) as it did for mature female students in Canada (Gouthro, 2009).

Identity, agency and voice

Mature learners have complex needs when they re-enter education including a lack of confidence in being able to learn successfully (Canning, 2010) arising from negative memories of earlier compulsory education (Brine & Waller, 2004). Their previous life experiences have often given them little confidence about engaging in the process of learning, and indeed in some cases will have resulted in hostility towards educational institutions. Crossan, Field, Gallacher, and Merrill (2003, p. 58). Adult students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds are often constructed (and construct themselves) as lacking capacity, perceiving educational spaces as somewhere they do not belong (Burke, 2004) even though they want to be recognised as legitimate students (Woodin & Burke, 2008). Constructing supportive work-group cultures based on mutual respect and trust (Harris & Shelswell, 2005) help students from such backgrounds to feel engaged with education (Dillon, 2010).

Mature students develop their identities as learners alongside other adult identities such as those of family maker, income earner and householder (Johnston & Merrill, 2009). Identities as learners are not simply retained

from previous experiences of education but developed through space and time, and cannot be separated from students' past or present lives (Brine & Waller, 2004). Processes of identity change are part of the ongoing project of the self (Giddens, 1991). In order to change, people have to let go of the past, experiment with new strategies and behaviours, and become comfortable with emergent senses of identity, values and behaviours (Merriam, 2005). AHE students construct senses of agency and change through reflexive internal conversations to pursue their desires (Butler in Youdell, 2012) decide what actions to take (Archer, 2003) and how to position themselves in relation to others. Otherness and difference seem to shape the discourses which produce mature students as equal but different. 'Maturity' is the loadstone for AHE students' collective identity (James et al., 2013). To achieve their chosen academic and personal outcomes, students have to negotiate with their tutors, their institutions and their peers to construct particular practices and cultures within institutions and (Wenger, 1998) to facilitate their learning.

Students' voices arise out of their struggles to assert their agency and pursue their identity projects. Some people assume that all students speak with the same voice, i.e. hold the same views (Robinson & Taylor, 2007) but student perspectives are multifaceted shaped by the intersectionality of students' life experiences (Busher, James, Piela, & Palmer, 2014). However, creating genuinely democratic dialogue with students in educational institutions is difficult because of the asymmetrical power relationships in the institutions (Arnot & Reay, 2007). AHE tutors have more formal authority than their students because of the positions they hold in the institutional hierarchy. However, students, too, have legitimate power through access to welfare and learning support legislation. Further, students are experienced participant observers of educational processes (Busher & Cremin, 2012) and can often articulate clearly effective and ineffective teaching and learning practices.

However, listening to students' voices can be perceived as potentially threatening to existing institutional hierarchies and destabilising to processes of law and order (Foucault, 1977) since students are often perceived by tutors and more senior staff in educational institutions as subordinates who should only fit in with the organisational structures, processes and cultures created by those who have formal power in the institution (Arnot & Reay, 2007; Nabhani, Busher, & Bahous, 2012) rather than people who legitimately have their own agendas and have a right to assert their agency. However, listening to the multiplicity of students' voices helps tutors and senior staff in educational institutions to respond to the different needs of all the students and encourages students to engage enthusiastically with learning (Nabhani et al., 2012). This is especially important with students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Dillon, 2010).

Carrying out the study

Of the 11 studies carried out with AHE students since the year 2000 in England and Wales all are small scale, focusing on only one or two institutions, in subject areas such as Nursing (Hinsliff-Smith et al., 2011), Social Work (Dillon, 2010; Jones, 2006), Social Science and Humanities (Franklin, 2006), or on student groups such as working-class students (Warmington, 2002), working-class female students (Burke, 2004), female students (Brine & Waller, 2004), male students (Burke, 2007) and black minority ethnic students (Dillon, 2010).

The study from which this paper is drawn, begins to redress this situation, having investigated the experiences of AHE students in seven urban and rural colleges in one region of England in 2012–2013. The study used a social interactionist framework (Wenger, 1998) to investigate the views of participants in their particular social situations. AHE students and their tutors were asked about students' previous educational and social experiences and their perspectives on their changing learning identities through their developing relationships with their tutors and with each other during their AHE courses. It used a linked case study design (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to allow researchers to compare findings between college sites, in case site itself was an important factor in the experiences of students as they perceived them.

The study used a mixed methods approach to create trustworthiness by helping to construct a stable interpretation of events from multiple participant perspectives (Reed-Danahay, 2005). The quantitative data gave an overall picture of AHE students' views within and across colleges. The qualitative interviewing gained access to participants' views of their 'material, social and cultural worlds' (Warmington, 2003, pp. 98–99).

After gaining informed consent from putative participants, qualitative and quantitative data were collected, the latter through two questionnaires at the beginning and end of the AHE course which gained responses from over 500 students across all the sites with an overall rate of return of about 50%. Tutors in the colleges made the questionnaires available to all AHE students. The quantitative data were analysed descriptively and open-ended answers were aggregated to generate categories showing trends and patterns.

Qualitative data were mainly gathered through semi-structured focus group interviews, lasting 45 min, which were carried out three times during the academic year (December, February/March and April/May) with six AHE students at each site to investigated how students' views of learning and of themselves as learners shifted during their AHE courses. Focus groups were chosen to allow students to help each other in answering questions, although the researchers recognised risks of group effects and obscured participant perspectives. AHE tutors helped to select the student participants following guidance from the researchers that the focus groups

should reflect as wide a range of student perspectives as possible. Individual interviews were carried out twice during the same period with 20 AHE tutors across all sites to investigate their shifting views of AHE students' learning. The qualitative data was digitally recorded, transcribed and analysed using open or inductive coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

The profile of the student participants that emerged from the study was largely consistent with that portrayed nationally for AHE students (Quality Assurance Agency [QAA], 2013). About 73.6% of participants were female; 53.4% of the students were aged between 19 and 24 years; 31% were aged 25–34 years and 3.6% were aged 45 years or over, most of whom came from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Sixty per cent were currently employed, albeit mainly in low-paid jobs and only 10% had never worked. Nearly 18.1% of participants did not have Level Two qualifications (GCSE), while 70.1% did not have Level Three qualifications (equivalent to 'A' level). Only in terms of ethnicity did this study not reflect national figures with 76% of participants being white compared to 69% nationally (James et al., 2013). Amongst the students in this study, the most popular AHE pathways were: Nursing and midwifery (54%); social science (22%); Humanities (19%); Science (17%).

AHE students' views of their educational worlds

The qualitative data presented in this section show the views of different participants drawing out the themes that emerge from what participants said. The references supporting the quotations show the status of the participant, student or tutor, and in which college they worked. All the data were collected in the academic year 2012–2013.

Who were the AHE students?

To understand the views of mature AHE students of their experiences on their courses, it is necessary to understand their perceptions of themselves in their socio-economic, policy and institutional contexts. Experiences in schools had disengaged some AHE students from formal education. 'School was horrendous. It was a really a bad neighbourhood and horrible, horrible school. I left purely and simply so that I could provide for my family. My mum and dad needed me to go out to work' (Student Coll. 1). '… and it's boring. I didn't like teachers. I've got a problem with authority' (Student Coll. 2). 'In the schools maybe they thought that they were thick because they couldn't cope with school and were badly taught, or they were being bullied, or they had learning problems that were never picked up on' (Tutor Coll. 1). In some cases, peer or family pressure helped to construct negative views of competence as learners. 'When I was at secondary school I always wanted to go into psychology, but left sixth form. [did] hairdressing and I

still was interested in psychology' (Student Coll. 4). Another said, 'I like met this boy and then just because he didn't go, like he was older than me, I didn't go. I know you shouldn't do that for a boy' (Student Coll. 3).

AHE students' experiences after leaving school helped and frustrated them. It seems that many of the women AHE students had had children in their late teens. '[We] have a lot of students who left school at sixteen and … [are] bringing up a child' (Tutor Coll. 6). On the AHE courses these students had to juggle multiple responsibilities for themselves and their families. 'I've had three on Job Seekers Allowance last week who've come to me with problems. The employment service can get very heavy with them' (Tutor Coll. 6). Other tutors noted how difficult some students found it balancing the demands of their paid employment with requirements of their courses. This caused students 'a lot of pressure. They have to have a job in order to fund being a student, but sometimes if their work calls on them, they can't go to college because they're at work' (Tutor Coll. 6).

Experiences at work had helped some AHE students sharpen their desires for a different career. 'I was tired [going from] dead-end job to dead-end job. Then recession hit. Thought [I] might as well get into education and get qualified for something you want to do' (Student Coll. 1). In other cases, ambition was related to students' families, perhaps wanting to set an example to their son or daughter about what could be achieved through persistence and hard work (Student Coll. 4). Lone parents in British HE institutions in a study by Hinton-Smith (2009) held similar views. In other cases, it was personal. 'I'll be the first person in my family to go to university. So I just want to do this for myself and I want to be educated' (Student Coll. 7).

Early in their AHE courses students seemed to create a group identity, demarcating themselves from other and younger non-AHE students in their institutions by criteria of age, attitude to learning and different needs for college resources. As one student pointed out, 'there's just a massive amount of focus in our class' (Student Coll. 4), while other AHE students complained about non-AHE students messing about in class and in college libraries making it difficult for them to concentrate on their work. Younger members of the AHE courses identified themselves as the same as older AHE students, perceiving themselves as 'mature' and 'focused in their work', and having a commitment to study which they thought younger students did not (Student Coll. 4).

AHE students recognised the importance of being part of a college community and of informal learning through peer support but their uses of time and space – 'everybody's got, you know, their own responsibilities out of school … time pressure' (Student Coll. 3) – made it difficult for them to be fully participant and adopt a conventional 'student' identity through engaging fully with their institutions. 'There are no opportunities for us to speak to other people … I mean within the college' (Student Coll. 5).

'Access students have homes to look after usually, other jobs to go to. No social life' (Tutor Coll. 1). Students in a study by Frith and Wilson (2011) expressed similar views. To accommodate these time and life pressures, students constructed hybrid learning communities through the skilful use of social media and mobile telephone communications to supplement their face to face encounters with each other during their times in college.

The institutional contexts of AHE students

Institutional practices and cultures have an impact on the degree of participation and completion achieved by students (Field et al., 2010). In this study, the positioning of AHE courses within institutions was often ambivalent. Some included the courses in the A-level team, while others positioned it on the edge of the higher education department. In College 4 AHE courses were taught at the top of the tallest classroom block, away from other college facilities and there was a debate about whether the course should be located in the HE suite. In another college, AHE students were not allowed to use the HE suite although the suite was said to be under used and the study facilities they needed were not available in other parts of the college. In a third college, the AHE teaching base room was taken away so seminars had to be taught all over the place (Tutor Coll. 5), while in College 3 AHE was taught in a remote annex on the college site. This geographical marginalisation threatened the effectiveness of the courses (Tutor Coll. 5) and diminished the courses visibility institutionally. As one student puzzled, 'we're a prestigious course. Why are we being treated as though we're not?' (Student Coll. 4). This lends support to the contention of Woodin and Burke (2008) that courses set up to widen participation tend to be institutionally marginalised because performative education policies emphasise efficiency regardless of the other benefits of education (Field et al., 2010).

However, participants in this study acknowledged the importance of AHE courses, echoing the views of Fenge (2011). Some tutors thought 'it is the only second chance option for adult learners who've been out of education' (Tutor Coll. 7), while some students also recognised how limited were their options. '[For] a lot of stuff, you need GCSE in Maths and I haven't' (Student Coll. 4). 'If you've been out of education and you want to get back into it, if there wasn't the Access Course … I don't know another way of getting into university' (Student Coll. 6). The locating of AHE courses within FE colleges fits well with their overall purposes (Jephcote et al., 2008).

The curriculum of the AHE courses was also an important aspect of the institutional context for students and tutors. The AHE course demands were tough. 'Access people do in one year of study the same effectively as the kids do with two years of A-level study' (Tutor, Coll. 1). 'It's a lot more

intense [than A levels], but they're [tutors] very flexible as well' (Student, Coll. 4). Many students preferred the AHE courses to 'A' levels because of the transferable skills they learnt through the curriculum. '[AHE] does all the study skills and essay plans that A-levels don't give you because you just have your subjects. [AHE] makes you more prepared for university work' (Student Coll. 5). These transferable skills included the use of IT which students and tutors thought very important.

Many students welcomed the support provided by their institutions to their studies. 'There's good resources as well … books and loads of computers and there's always loads of staff around as well to help you out with anything' (Student Coll. 7). Informal learning spaces were provided by colleges through libraries and cafeterias, and giving students 'all the email addresses for the college tutors and everything like that' (Student Coll. 1). Most of the colleges hosted VLEs (virtual learning environments) to support students' independent study allowing students to create learning spaces at home in collaboration with their fellow students, as well as to some extent with tutors (Busher et al., 2014). 'Some points I understand and some things I don't … when I'm not understanding … everything that we're doing will be on the Learn Zone' (Student Coll. 4). The 'Learn Zone' was a VLE in one educational institution where material tutors had used for lessons and other materials were posted.

AHE students' views of successful teaching and learning practices

AHE students often had little recent experience of formal education. 'I'm so old I can't even remember what school I went to. I can really. I went to [name] School, but I seem so far removed from that now. It just seems another world, another time' (Student Coll. 4). Although studying was central to the purposes of AHE students, 'they are so committed' (Tutor Coll. 1), it had to be fitted in around the other aspects of their lives that have already been discussed. 'When I first started … I wasn't really sure if I'd be able to do the course and keep up with everything and working as well' (Student Coll. 2). Students' life-worlds were largely peopled by distracters from education such as children, partners and ex-partners who in different ways did not confirm students' identities as learners although some of them provided important emotional and practical support in students' educational struggles (Scanlon, 2009).

Tutors played an important part in modelling competent learning practice for AHE students. 'You get a mark but you also get comments at the bottom of your work pointing you in the direction that maybe you should have gone down' (Student Coll. 4). Tutors gave them practical help in planning essays and developing study skills such as smart plans and timetables as well as 'telling us how we should set out our assignments and helping us with things like referencing' (Student Coll. 5). Importantly, tutors gave

students lots of time even while encouraging them to be independent learners. 'If you didn't understand anything in the lesson or you don't understand the assignment, you can go and talk to your tutor … then he'll book you in for tutorials' (Student Coll. 7). In doing so, tutors became important agents for interrupting students' former identities as incompetent learners (Youdell, 2012) and helped them to rediscover their enthusiasm for learning.

Tutors also gave affective support to AHE students. 'You respect your teacher and she gives you the same respect back. She treats you as an individual on the same level as her almost. [Tutors] want you to succeed … as much as you want to succeed' (Student Coll. 4). In projecting these values, tutors helped to support purposeful activity – 'we all know why we're here, to get to university' (Student Col. 6) – through building collaborative activity. 'We all help each other out and the teachers help us out as much as they can' (Student Coll. 4). In this study, supportive cultures helped to create 'a very good, very positive, learning environment' (Student Coll. 1) 'where everyone wants to be there' (Student Coll. 4). AHE students' views on the nature and importance of collaboration fit well with understandings of building communities of practice (Wenger, 1998).

Among themselves AHE students also developed collaborative cultures for 'advice. Guidance. Moral support' (Student Coll. 4). 'If anyone wants my help … then I don't mind. I would like their help as well in return. If we work together … it'll all get done much quicker than one person struggling on their own' (Student Coll. 6). These cultures were based on reciprocity, mutual respect – 'everyone respects each other's opinions, respects why they're here' (Student Coll. 6) – empathy – ' [If] some people are struggling, we take the time out to kind of give them that bit more support if we're on track ourselves' (Student Coll. 6) and on a sense of shared purpose. 'It helps to all be in the same boat' (Student Coll. 5). These relationships grew naturally through time and practice. For some students, 'it's absolutely changed my life. I thought I'd just come here and be quite solitary' (Student Coll. 3). Many students thought collaboration improved their success in doing particular assignments as well as in coping with the general workload of the AHE course and reduced 'a massive [amount of] stress' (Student Coll. 1). However, in each college, there were some students who preferred to work alone. Some tutors referred to these as selfish students who did not want to help their colleagues.

Students used diverse means to create collaboration independently of the tutors. Some students telephoned their fellow students 'if I've missed a day and I'm not sure about something' (Student Coll. 4). Other students set up 'study groups in the library … and get stuff done there, which is a good help' (Student Coll. 6). In five colleges, students set up groups on Facebook 'so we could post if we were at home saying, "Can anyone help me with this or does anyone know how I can get around doing this sort of work?"'

(Student, Coll. 3). They were also spaces where students could share their worries. 'Like on Facebook everyone's been like, "I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know how to reference". We're all comfortable enough to kind of freak out and know that there's going to be someone there to help' (Student Coll. 4).

AHE students' changing views of themselves as learners

The outcomes of AHE students' interactions with their providing institutions, tutors and fellow students are reflected in their changing identities as learners. Some 30% of students in this study had left school with few qualifications at all and many lacked confidence in their abilities as learner. 'I failed all my GCSEs … no school qualifications … never learnt basic study skills' (Student Coll. 1). Another student explained, 'when I left that [primary] school I went to five secondary schools and I struggled in those schools as well and left school with very poor education' (Student Coll. 4).

Despite their nervousness and hesitancy at the start of their courses, after about three months AHE students were becoming more optimistic. 'Now we're this side of the Christmas holiday, I've felt much better about it and I enjoy it now' (Student Coll. 4). 'Becoming independent learners I'm a lot more confident like in my academic skills than when I started' (Student Coll. 4). That many of the students had had offers from universities by early in the Spring helped to encourage them. 'I've heard from three out of the four and it's just like, maybe people do believe in me. It is good for like confidence' (Student Coll. 1). However, some students were worried about the high tariffs for which universities were asking. 'I've got a place at uni … but because they're asking for forty-five credits at merit, I'm not sure if I'm going to get the right grades' (Student, Coll. 6). Further some students were worried about the esteem in which their courses were held by universities. 'A lot of the universities don't really like Access courses being your sort of qualification' (Student Coll. 6).

As the AHE students came to the end of their courses, most looked forward confidently if slightly nervously to becoming students in a university, a situation that they thought might pose challenges but ones to which they could rise. In this study, 92% of students planned to go to university and tutors said that 85% went. Such perspectives contrasted sharply with the views many students had of themselves as incompetent learners when they had begun their AHE courses. The students recognised that shifts in their identities were about who they were as people not just as learners, reflecting the views of Giddens (1991) on people's changing identities. This was brought about by the AHE courses. 'Changes you personally. It's a big deal to come out of your comfort zone isn't it?' (Student Coll. 4). The course helped to students 'to have that confidence because we are meeting different people from different backgrounds and different behaviours' (Student Coll. 2).

What tutors and colleges can learn from AHE students' voices

Mature students' voices reflect their identities and senses of agency. They arise from their internal conversations (Archer, 2003) as experienced observers of teaching and learning (Busher & Cremin, 2012) as well as from shared conversations with their peers about how to achieve their wishes and desires (Butler in Youdell, 2012) in education, and what they want to achieve in different aspects of their adult lives (Johnston & Merrill, 2009). AHE students' desires are complex, arising from the complexities of their lives (Arnot & Reay, 2007) and the strains of returning to formal education (Gonsalves et al., 2011) through which they embody the intersectionality of various social factors (Chandra, 2012), discussed earlier that make many of them educationally disadvantaged and 'second chance learners' (Fenge, 2011, p. 375).

Despite the diversity of students' voices in this study, students offered relatively homogenous views about the learning and teaching practices and relationships with tutors and fellow students that would help them to achieve academic success. These views can be loosely grouped into three categories: instrumental practices that build students' skills as learners; affective practices that build confidence and supportive environments for learning; and organisational practices that provide structural spaces and values that facilitate the implementation of the first two categories.

Students welcomed well-structured instrumental practices by tutors who explained academic subjects coherently and enthusiastically, and modelled and helped students develop a variety of transferable skills. Tutors' support in giving constructive positive feedback on assignments helped students to experience how to be competent learners, interrupting the ineffective study habits (Youdell, 2012) that students had previously learnt in their former unsuccessful learning experiences in other educational institutions (Fenge, 2011). Students welcomed tutors promulgating shared learning activities and discussions during seminars, empowering students to take ownership of the learning processes collectively and individually. This helped to create institutional learning communities albeit with asymmetrical power relationships embedded in them (Busher et al., 2014; Wenger, 1998). Students welcomed having tutorial time and being able to arrange additional tutorial time face-to-face, or by e-mail or telephone out of formal college hours to discuss aspects of a topic or learning process that they had not understood during seminars. They also welcomed tutors posting on VLEs the material they had used in class, as well as any relevant supplementary material, so that students could study independently out of college. However, some students wondered why not all tutors made these posts.

Students welcomed affective support from tutors who encouraged the construction of collaborative but purposeful cultures on the AHE courses based on mutual respect and trust (Harris & Shelswell, 2005). These helped

to build students' confidence as well as their learning and social skills (Crossan et al., 2003). For students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Dillon, 2010), like many AHE students building confidence is especially important. The collaborative cultures emerged through tutors' treating students in a manner that students perceived as respectful, acknowledging the complexities of students' lives in re-engaging with formal education but recognising that they were legitimate students (Woodin & Burke, 2008) who wanted to succeed because they perceived education as a pathway to self-fulfilment (Hinsliff-Smith et al., 2011). This involved tutors listening and responding to the multiplicity of students' different learning needs for curriculum, time and space in order to encourage students to engage with learning (Nabhani et al., 2012). This sometimes committed tutors to extensive engagement with students out of formal seminars by telephone or e-mail perhaps because they perceived the intensity of the AHE courses as presenting a very tough challenge to any students.

Many AHE students welcomed affective support from their fellow students. In several of the institutions in this study they set up hybrid communities of practice to help to create a supportive learning environment, working with their peers to solve the problems that new work presented and sharing their fears of not coping with these. Students used hybrid communications, combining face-to-face study groups, VLEs supplied by some of their institutions and social media platforms to circumvent difficulties of collaboration in space and time. In many cases, their homes were quite widely scattered and they could not afford to spend much time in college out of formal seminars because they needed to support their families through employment.

Many AHE students welcomed college-based institutional spaces such as libraries and cafeterias as sites for social engagement with fellow students and independent study, if their time allowed. Some students thought that facility opening hours needed to be changed to better meet the needs of students like themselves who worked irregular hours, although they acknowledged that because of the pressures on their time it was difficult for them ever to be more than peripheral participants in college communities. However, some tutors thought that educational institutions could do more to reduce a sense of marginalisation by students on widening participation courses (Woodin & Burke, 2008) by making physical spaces, such as quiet study rooms or identifiable course base areas available – as some students requested, too – along with the provision of more extensive VLE support for students. AHE students welcomed the provision of VLEs because they often had to study at home in the evenings after finishing employment and caring for their families. Some students welcomed the organising of AHE courses into teaching blocks of two or three day each week so they could continue in employment on at least a part-time basis to help support their families.

The widespread implementation of the practices discussed above are especially important for students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, helping to widen the range of academic and career opportunities for them and extend the pool of skilled workers who can contribute to the development of the national economy (BIS, 2012). Arguably, these practices are also likely to raise the completion rates and diminish the non-progression rates of AHE courses to the benefit of their provider institutions (Field et al., 2010; Jeffrey & Troman, 2012).

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