Title

The Place of Widening Participation.

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Abstract

This chapter reports on a small-scale study to explore the learning careers of mature, non-traditionally qualified students. It reveals how they (re)engage with learning, and their transition from studying on a bespoke access course delivered in a university to study at undergraduate level. The study highlights the barriers and challenges students overcome and identifies their motivations and dispositions to learning. Whilst the majority of access courses are delivered in further education colleges, a small number of universities deliver bespoke access courses. These courses, which are usually designed to facilitate progression within the institution, enable students to experience teaching and learning in a university setting, facilities and support services.

The research adopted a qualitative approach, using interviews as the main method of data collection. Emerging findings reveal that (re)engaging with education and the transition from 'access student' to undergraduate student is not seamless and without challenges. Such students 'often undergo a unique and profound experience' (Burnell, 2015:6) as they enter this new space which provides an opportunity to create new social and class-related identities. The transition to undergraduate study is easier when learners are familiar with the routines and rhythms of higher education in general and the facilities and services of a particular institution.

Keywords

Full reference

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the learning careers (Bloomer and Hodkinson 2000) of mature-age, non-traditionally qualified students who have returned to higher education (HE). The research explores the learning careers of students who are currently on a university-based access course as well as those who have completed the course and progressed to undergraduate study. Whilst the transition from 'access student' to 'undergraduate student' may not be seamless and without challenges it is certainly made easier if learners are familiar with the routines and rhythms of HE in general and the facilities and services of a particular institution. The chapter aims to identify learners' motivation to (re)engage with learning and progress to HE, the challenges they encounter and continue to experience, and the support structure they draw on to overcome them.

New Beginnings – a bespoke access course

In this section we describe the bespoke access course New Beginnings, which is delivered at the University of East London (UEL) and provides access to undergraduate programmes at UEL. As Hudson (2019: 78) has noted:

> The origins, design and delivery of the programme are important. In common with the early Access courses, it was designed to meet local needs and delivered by staff with an understanding of the needs of students from underrepresented groups and a commitment to social justice.

Since the course was first developed in 2000/2001 with support from the HE European Social Fund (HE ESF) it has undergone a number of iterations ranging from being a two module credit bearing course with 30 credits at level 3 and 30 credits at level 4, to a period when it was delivered online. The credit level indicates the relative level of difficulty, whilst the number of credits indicates the amount of learning expected. In England learners on a full-time undergraduate course typically progress from level 4 to level 6 and must achieve a total of 360 credits. Whilst the two module credit bearing version appeared attractive it was more resource intensive for the institution and placed an additional burden on the students, very few of whom transferred their level 4 credits. From an institutional perspective delivering the course online appeared attractive. However, there were higher levels of attrition compared to the previous face-to-face delivery and those students who did complete the course online were less well prepared for undergraduate study compared to their peers who had studied face-to-face on campus. The course is now delivered over ten weeks by two

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dedicated teachers, both of whom have experience of teaching mature learners on pre-entry programmes.

We draw on a small sample of interviews from the ongoing study to illustrate and highlight that mature-age students, or in the case of our participants older mature-age students, are not a homogeneous group. Whilst mature-age students are defined as those aged 21 or over at the time of starting their courses we argue that the category this definition creates is less than meaningful and 'masks significant diversity' (Pearce, 2017: 59). For the purpose of our study we define older mature learners as those aged over 30 at the time of starting their course. The participation of mature-age learners in HE has been in decline over the last decade. There was a 42 per cent decline in the number of mature-age students entering undergraduate courses in England between the academic years 2011/12 and 2016/17; this adversely affected part-time courses in general as well as specific courses, such as nursing and midwifery. The decline of mature learners aged 30 and above was especially acute (MillionPlus 2018). The decline over this period has been attributed to the financial challenges of part-time study faced by mature-age learners who are further disadvantaged by the inflexible systems designed to meet the needs of younger learners aged 18-21 (Butcher 2015).

The Office for Students (2018a:1) recognises that the term mature student 'covers a large variety of learners of all ages, needs and backgrounds', and in setting out its expectations has provided institutions with guidance on reversing the decline in mature-age students participating in higher education (Office for Students 2018b). However, we would argue that treating mature-age learners as a homogeneous group is unlikely to yield results in terms of outreach, progress and success. To date much of the literature on mature-age students considers all students over the age of 21 as a single group (Foster 2009). We recognise that to better understand the experience and needs of mature-age learners consideration needs to be given to dividing this single group into more meaningful age groups: 21-24 (young mature-age), 25-29 (mature-age) and 30 and over (older mature-age). To date only a small number of studies (Pearce 2017, Barclay 2018, Sutton 2019) has explored the lived experience of older mature students, which differ not only from younger students (18-21) but also from younger mature-age students.

In the following sections, we briefly set out our theoretical perspective and the methodological approach adopted. This is followed by findings emerging from the study and concluding thoughts on how they might inform practice and opportunities for further research.

A theoretical perspective

Students who are returning to learn, and who have opted for the non-traditional route into higher education, such as the access course, are almost always mature students because they have had a break in their education before returning to learn. It is also important to note that mature students also tend to be from working class backgrounds (David 2010). Reay (2017: 185) has asserted that 'the working classes have never had a fair chance in education', and Burke has argued that 'Widening access and participation is largely concerned with redressing the under-representation of certain social groups in higher education' (2012:12). Access courses were designed to widen access and participation in HE for under-represented groups such as the working class and mature students. Crozier et al. (2010: 68) noted Bourdieu and Wacquant's (1992) point that 'One of the great achievements of the English HE widening participation policy and strategies is that it has helped working-class students to overcome that sense of place that leads to self-exclusion from places that they do not feel that is rightly theirs'. The New Beginnings course at the UEL is one such widening participation initiative that does redress the under-representation of certain social groups.

The theory that the working class is not academically successful was written about extensively by Bourdieu, the French sociologist. He argued that each class has a different habitus, and that the working-class habitus is limited not to include educational aspirations, through no fault of its own. He argued that being from the working class is like a barrier to educational success (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). Bourdieu is famed for establishing, amongst others, two very important theories that enable us to understand inequalities in education: habitus and cultural capital.

Habitus, according to Webb et al. (2002: 38) 'can be understood as the values and dispositions gained from our cultural history that generally stay with us across contexts'. One such context is education. Our habitus – the values and dispositions – is embodied, internalised, and operates on a level below consciousness (Bourdieu 1990). Therefore, when Bourdieu asserted that the working-class habitus is limited not to include educational aspirations, he did not mean that to exclude themselves from education is a deliberate decision on the part of the working class, rather it is a situation that is created and reproduced unconsciously and 'without any conscious concertation' (Bourdieu 1984:168), and, in addition, one that is 'internalised as a second nature' (Bourdieu 1990:56). Given this, it might seem that changing one's habitus to include educational aspirations would be too difficult. However, Reay et al. (2009:1104) suggest that the habitus is 'permeable', and can be adapted and modified as one's circumstances change. Research conducted more recently (Burnell 2015) demonstrates that the habitus of a group of research participants, all mature students

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in HE and from a working class background, has been modified to include the new practice of higher education. However, this is not without a struggle or conflict, as Reay (2017: 157) documents in her most recent work when she describes the struggles faced by one of her own research participants, experienced during his journey through education as 'continually engaged in a balancing act that requires superhuman effort, maintaining his status in his working-class male peer group while attempting to succeed academically'.

Cultural capital, the other of Bourdieu's theories (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990), is the set of knowledge, skills and behaviours acquired through one's habitus, and can be used as currency to procure educational success. Bourdieu asserted that educational attainment of social groups is directly related to the amount of cultural capital they possess. This capital consists of familiarity with the dominant culture in a society, and especially the ability to understand and use 'educated' language. Bourdieu protested that traditional students who know academic language, and can communicate in the discourse, are favoured by lecturers as being the best students; 'It is almost assumed that good students will master this mysterious academic discourse without being told (or needing to be told) how to do so' (Webb, Schirato et al. 2002:130). Hatt and Baxter (2003:19) noted that 'In some subject areas, academic staff have been accustomed to teaching and assessing a relatively homogenous body of students...'. By this, they mean the traditional student, with established study skills, and progressing straight from school. Teaching the non-traditional student who has had a break in education, lacks confidence and is trying to newly acquire study skills, would require a different approach. Thompson (2000) commented on how non-traditional learners have greater needs, and need significantly more personal attention, whereas traditional students are more likely to succeed in HE as 'at school they were able to devote time to developing the habitus and accruing the cultural capital they need to operate within the institution' (Bowl 2003:134).

When Hatt and Baxter (2003:25) commented on 'knowing the rules of the game', one of the rules they are referring to is the use of academic language, as pointed out by Bourdieu. Crozier et al. (2010: 66) conducted research into the preparedness of students for higher education. The middle class students in their study, who were groomed by their school and 'endowed with habitus' would have been accustomed to communicating in the language of the academy, whereas mature students, and the working class students in their study, would have had to acquire the language on entry. Even though traditional students will have different needs depending on their schooling and background, mature students will not have experienced the grooming as described above, because of that break from education. Bowl (2003: 125) concludes from her research into non-traditional

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learners in higher education that 'these [non-traditional] students were constantly engaged in an uphill struggle...the odds were stacked against them from the outset...'.

Nevertheless, non-traditional routes into higher education, such as access courses, have provided non-traditional students with the opportunity to return to learn and acquire the necessary skills, including academic language, needed for educational success. The access course participants in our study, some mature, some from working class backgrounds, have demonstrated that changing one's habitus to include educational aspirations can happen, and that their habitus is 'permeable' and can be adapted and modified as one's circumstances change, as suggested by Reay et al. (2009:1104). In the next section we outline our methodological approach and provide a brief pen portrait of the participants who contributed to the study.

Methodological approach and data collection methods

The research adopted a social constructivist perspective (Lave and Wenger 1991) and in terms of methodology is a case study (Yin 2009). Adopting a qualitative approach, one-to-one interviews were used as the main method of data collection. Interviews have become pervasive as a means of data collection in social research leading to what has been termed the 'interview society' (Atkinson and Silverman 1997: 304). Shifting from a position where social researchers were challenged for appropriating the voice of participants we are also mindful not to uncritically privilege their voice. Gubrium and Holstein (1995: 2) describe interviews as a method that provides 'windows on the world'. However, in order to ensure a clear view out of the window on to the social world, the researcher has to construct the questions on which the interview will be based very carefully. It is the interview questions that allow the opportunity for the interview participants to narrate their experiences. The semi-structured interview allows the researcher to ask open questions but gives the participant the time and freedom to answer. The interviews were semi structured with a scheduled duration of one hour. In some instances, interviews were shorter and others, where respondents were happy to continue and had more to contribute, were slightly longer. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Data were coded using inductive or open coding (Corbin and Strauss 2015) powered by NVivo (computer assisted qualitative data analysis software) and analysed using the 'thematic analysis' approach (Silverman 2011), which identifies common themes in participants' experiences.

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The UEL is a former polytechnic which became a university following the Further and Higher Education Act, 1992, that brought all higher education institutions into a single sector. However, differences between pre-1992 universities and post-92 universities persist, with the former being typically more research intensive and the latter having a greater focus on teaching. In common with many post-92 universities, UEL is a widening participation institution, and has a higher than average proportion of mature students – 50 per cent of students enrolled are deemed as mature. In total 10 students participated in this small-scale study, of whom 5 were current students on the access course and 5 were undergraduate students having progressed from the access course. In this chapter we draw on data from eight interviews; 3 of whom were on the access course and 5 undergraduate students.

However, as a researcher it is also important for one to be reflexive, and to be aware of one's position within the process, how one is situated and the assumptions that one holds. Cohen et al. (2018:303) comment by saying that 'Highly reflexive researchers will be acutely aware of the ways in which their selectivity, perception, background, values and inductive processes, frames and paradigms shape the research'. Reflexivity, therefore, is something that constantly has to be considered and reflected upon throughout the research process in order for researchers to be aware of the influence that they may have on the process and outcomes.

Researchers

The researchers all have experience of teaching mature learners on pre-entry courses such as the Access to Higher Education (HE) Diploma, on the bespoke access course, New Beginnings, delivered at the UEL, and on a range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes at Post '92 institutions. One of the team currently teaches on the New Beginnings course whilst another teaches on undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Interviews were arranged to ensure that researchers did not interview students who they were currently teaching.

Participants

To provide some context for the themes emerging from interviews we provide a brief pen portrait of the eight participants, three of whom are currently students on the bespoke access course: Ria, Vic and Louise, and five of whom have progressed to undergraduate study: Judy, Jim, Tisha, Mandy and Debbie.

Ria is an older mature female student who is currently on the access course. Ria experienced difficulties in her younger life; although it was expected she would do well at school, she did not achieve high enough grades to progress to university. Disappointed but undeterred, she is now looking forward to starting a degree in business next year. Vic is currently a student on the access course. He is a white male in his late 50s and a single parent with 2 daughters, both of whom are at university. He currently works in the building trade and on completion of the access course he hopes to progress to a degree in social sciences. Rebecca is currently a student on the access course. She is a black female in her late 30s, a single parent with 3 children, all of whom are at school. She currently works as an unqualified teacher and has returned to education in order to become a qualified teacher. Judy is a white, working-class female in her early 50s, and previously worked as a taxi driver. She had a difficult relationship with her ex-husband and is now a single parent to a teenage son with autism. She is currently in the second year of a BA (Hons) Education Studies degree. Jim is a white, working-class male, in his mid-40s. He had a difficult relationship with one of his parents and an unfortunate accident thwarted his career plans. He completed the foundation year towards a BSc (Hons) degree in Sports Therapy and is currently in the first year of the degree programme. Tisha is a black, working-class female in her late 20s. She grew up in the West Indies and London and has had to resolve issues around residency. She is currently in the second year of a BA (Hons) degree. Mandy is a white female, in her mid-40s. She graduated recently with a first-class BA (Hons) Education Studies degree. She grew up in London and is the mother of three children; the youngest child suffered from ill health and needed additional care. Debbie is a white, working class female in her late 40s. She was in a difficult relationship with her ex-husband and is now a single parent to six children. She also graduated recently with a first-class BA (Hons) Education Studies degree. In the following section we draw on our analysis of the data from qualitative interviews with our participants**.**

Emerging themes from the data

A number of themes has emerged from analysis of the data and in this section we highlight some of these themes in relation to the literature. We consider the following themes: previous educational experiences; motivations and reasons for returning to study; and confidence.

Previous educational experiences

Participants had varying experiences of secondary and further education; some were fractured and challenging, but not all respondents had a negative experience. Interestingly positive experiences were not necessarily related to successful outcomes in terms of qualifications and, fortunately,

negative experiences did not prevent some students achieving good grades across a spread of GCSEs at age 16. Judy noted that:

I've not got any GCSEs or A levels, you know…but I loved school, I always loved school.

Whilst Jim achieved seven GCSEs his educational experiences had been negative:

…when I went to secondary school…nobody cared, so after a while I stopped caring too.

For some students external factors such as the community in which they lived influenced attitudes towards education and academic success, whilst others, such as Tisha, reported that difficulties with housing and immigration status meant that:

My home life definitively affected how I was in secondary school…. I went through all of secondary school not knowing whether I was going or coming.

For Vic, despite his desire to continue his education, financial pressures and commitment to family prevented him from doing so:

I had to get out and earn a dollar for the family. …I wanted to go to drama school, because I acted at the National Theatre when I was at secondary school. I was there for two years as a summer thing…. I wanted to continue but my parents couldn't afford it…very expensive…plus I needed to earn a crust as well.

The likelihood of progressing to further or higher education, in Vic's case to drama school, was diminished because '…it wasn't the done-thing on my estate'. Mandy commented that:

…because I was in the top set and at lot of my friends weren't, I would, you know, dumb it down a little bit, just to try and fit in.

For both Vic and Mandy, this was not resistance to middle class schooling as youth theorists such as Willis (1977) suggested, but an acquiescence to peer pressure in Mandy's case and the working-class estate in Vic's case.

Motivation to study

As we have noted previously, mature learners are not a homogeneous group. Their reasons and motivation for returning to higher education are often multiple and consequently may be shared.

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Osborne, Marks et al. (2004) identify six categories of mature learners: 'Delayed traditional students', 'late starters', 'single parents', 'careerists', 'escapees' and 'personal growers'. The participants who we report on in this study cited multiple reasons for returning to education.

Vic had multiple reasons and motivations for returning to education and could be categorised as a 'single parent', feeling that it was now time for 'me', a 'personal developer' who '…felt unfulfilled, felt I had something in me', and an 'escapee' who had '…*been on the tools for too long…as my knees, back and shoulders will testify…that's why I want to do this [access course], I'm worn out'*.

Rebecca is also a 'single parent' and may be seen as a 'careerist' who wanted to progress from being an unqualified teacher to being qualified. She had worked in a number of different settings but '*never had the paperwork to back myself up'*.

Many of the respondents noted that they wanted their children to see them as role models and the value and importance of lifelong learning. Debbie commented:

> *But I sat my English GCSE two weeks ago, so he's watching me, and he's watching me take every step of this journey. And I'm hoping that he will, it's slightly different for him because of this autism and whatever, but I'm hoping that he'll look, and he'll be: 'Okay, my mum still wants to learn, my mum is still growing, my mum is 52 and she's still, she's still walking, she's still moving'.*

Confidence

Ria, one of the participants, talked about her levels of confidence: *'I am quite a confident person but I hadn't done as well as I could have [at school]'.* Ria felt that her lack of academic background had disadvantaged her and, coupled with the long break before she returned to education, she did not feel fully confident or prepared for academic study. This echoes findings from David's (2010: 185-6) research when they commented regarding their own participants that:

> …not only did they lack preparation for university but also their previous experience of learning had in many cases been negative and undermining…for the mature students their time away from academic study compounded their lack of self-confidence.

Many students have internalised their failure and they blame themselves for not having achieved what they feel they should have at school (Burnell 2019). Pearce (2017:72) asserts that 'confidence plays a crucial part in the experience of these students, and that as their confidence grows, their time management and engagement with the wider undergraduate culture improves'.

During another point in the interview Ria talked about her experiences of taking the 11 plus examination. '*I failed the 11 plus, at the time you feel like you are a failure'.* This exam, which is taken by some school pupils in England and Northern Ireland during their final year of primary school, determines access to secondary schools with selective academic entry. Unfortunately, many learners from under-represented groups, such as mature students, suffer from insecurities in relation to academic matters, even after achieving higher education qualifications. Crozier et al. (2010: 74) note that 'Universities traditionally have not been places for the working class'. In addition, learners may have internalised assumptions about what they can and cannot achieve. Reay (2001:337) discussed 'feelings of being an imposter' in her analysis of working class students in higher education. This concept relates to the insecurities that Ria was feeling, and internal questions about whether she should be participating in higher education. Flynn et al. (2011) discuss the phenomenon of imposter syndrome amongst high achieving professional women. In the book they cite an example from Clance and Imes (1978) who note that 'despite outstanding academic and professional accomplishments, women who experience the imposter phenomenon persist in believing that they really are not bright and have fooled anyone who thinks otherwise' (2011: 68). In addition, Burke (2012) asserts that even though the opportunity to enter higher education is presented, many are daunted by returning to learn, and may feel unprepared and that they do not belong.

What Ria does not lack is motivation; she is determined to make the most of her time at university and achieve the best degree she can; '*a degree is something that I always wanted to do'*. She also expressed that she brings life skills with her to university and that these are an advantage to her as a student. In the previous role of one of the authors as an access to higher education teacher, they taught many mature students who had returned to learn after a long break in education. Many had raised families, run homes, looked after their parents – their reasons for taking a break in education were many and varied. What they brought with them when they returned were the life skills they had acquired through their experiences. These often proved to be beneficial to their success on academic courses. Smith et al. (2009: 111) noted that 'Mature students can bring with them valuable

life skills and experiences which can help shape both their learning style and their ability to communicate with people'.

Conclusions

New Beginnings is a pre-entry course at the University of East London, catering to learners who could be considered as non-traditional because they may be mature and/or lack formal qualifications that would serve as entry requirements to higher education. Courses such as New Beginnings are commonly known as 'access courses' and are also considered to be the non-traditional route into HE. Access courses were designed to widen access and participation in HE for those groups who are historically under-represented and have provided them with the opportunity to return to learn and acquire the necessary skills needed for educational success. For the UEL, based in one of the most deprived boroughs in the country, a commitment to addressing inequalities and social justice is an important one; widening participation for under-represented groups is what underpins the ethos of the institution.

This small-scale research study explores the learning careers of mature, non-traditionally qualified students who have returned to higher education. They are either on the New Beginnings access course or have completed the course and progressed to undergraduate study. The research included a small sample of interviews from the ongoing study to illustrate that mature students, or in the case of our participants, older mature learners, are not a homogeneous group. Previous research has highlighted mature and/or non-traditional learners as having greater needs, and in need of significantly more personal attention. They are often working class, and because educational success has not been associated with working class identities, social class often becomes a barrier to success.

A number of themes have emerged from analysis of the data. Each theme presents itself with a deeper understanding of the needs of students from underrepresented groups. The theme 'previous educational experiences' demonstrates that not all respondents had a previous negative educational experience; some were positive. In addition, positive experiences were not necessarily related to successful outcomes in terms of qualifications. The theme 'motivations' presents very interesting findings in terms of participants who cited multiple reasons for returning to education. The motivations for returning to higher education are often multiple and personal. Vic, our participant, testifies to feeling unfulfilled with a desire to develop himself. The theme 'confidence' ties into 'previous educational experiences'; Ria, for example, was expected to do well at school, having been earmarked to pass the 11 plus, and failed. This she says left her feeling like a failure, although she

later returned to education with the intention of completing a degree. Despite her experience, she describes herself as a confident person.

The emerging findings will inform this ongoing research study which will contribute to the development and delivery of the programme at institutional level. In addition, the findings will also contribute to the wider literature on older mature learners, and those taking the non-traditional route, such as access courses, into higher education. From our emerging findings we will further our research and embark on a longitudinal study, following students as they progress through their access course, degree programmes, and possibly postgraduate study.

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