RESEARCHING RETENTION AND NON-TRADITIONAL LEARNERS: EVIDENCE ON PRE-ENTRY PREPARATION

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Hitting the ground running: reflections on pre-entry student support and new students' academic preparedness for higher education
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This paper reports on experiences of non-traditional undergraduates who have entered university following a pre-entry preparatory programme. The evidence is drawn from a collaborative European research project on Access and Retention: Experiences of Non-traditional Learners in Higher Education. The project focuses on access, retention and drop-out in higher education institutions in relation to non-traditional students (younger and adults) and the factors which promote or inhibit this (for further details see www.ranlhe.dsw.edu.pl). By 'non-traditional' we mean students who are under-represented in higher education and whose participation in HE is constrained by structural factors. This includes, for example, first generation entrants, students from low-income families, students from (particular) minority ethnic groups, mature age students, and students with disabilities.

We present here findings for the Scottish sample to date. We are particularly interested in looking at and understanding why some students from under-represented and disadvantaged backgrounds learn effectively, assume an undergraduate learner identity and complete their degree successfully, while others from similar backgrounds do not. We are also interested in identifying the learning, teaching and support processes which help non-traditional students to become effective and successful learners. Institutional cultures and structures can also impact on a learner's identity so these aspects are also explored. In this paper, we examine the extent to which pre-entry preparation is a factor in helping non-traditional students to become effective and successful learners within higher education. The question of what support non-traditional students need to ensure successful transitions, and even whether they need support at all, is a controversial one and we discuss our findings in the light of some recent criticism of the idea of providing support to students experiencing educational transitions.

The study

The project, Access and Retention: Experiences of Non-traditional Learners in Higher Education (RANLHE), is being undertaken by a partnership of eight universities from across Europe. Each partner is undertaking fieldwork in three higher education institutions in their own country; in each country, these case study HEIs have been selected to represent a spread of highly selective institutions, moderately selective institutions and recruiting institutions. We are interviewing samples representing three groups of learners: those who drop-out, those who stay in and those who drop-out but later return and re-engage with learning. We are interviewing staff and students at 3 higher education institutions in Scotland; at each institution we are interviewing:

- approximately 10 students in the early stages of their degrees – a second, follow-up interview will be carried out with each of these students
- 10 final year students
- 10 students who have dropped out
- teaching staff and senior managers with a relevant area of responsibility.

To help us analyse the students' stories we have identified three key sensitising concepts which offer a framework to the research. One of these is the idea of 'transitional space', which we use to highlight the inherently transitory identity of studenthood as well as the

events, places and relationships in which transitional processes occur (Holliday and West 2009). The concepts of ‘habitus’ and ‘disposition’ are drawn from the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. For Bourdieu, ‘habitus’ refers to the processes of socialisation that both position people within a given social milieu, and also help to generate ways of seeing the world, including the ways in which people come to take some things for granted. This can include a subjective element, which Bourdieu describes as ‘disposition’, or a broad orientation towards particular beliefs and behaviours. While Bourdieu explicitly intended his ideas to form part of a wider analysis of class and power, they lend themselves to the study of non-traditional students and the dilemmas that they encounter in the largely unfamiliar environment of higher education. In Bourdieu’s terms, the university student is moving between one habitus and another, bringing a set of dispositions that were generated in their milieu of origin to bear upon a milieu that is dominated by the values and standards of the middle class in general, and the service professional class in particular (Reay, David and Ball 2005). This generates questions about the nature of this transition, as well as about the extent and nature of support that students might require to make a successful move from one social space to another.

The sample

At the time of the interview, the students were at the beginning of first year or the beginning of their second year of a degree programme at a moderately selective institution in Scotland. All of them had completed an access course provided by the institution itself. The access course is a part-time course which facilitates entry to undergraduate study for those without traditional entry qualifications for higher education. It involves both study skills modules and a range of subject-based modules. The students were recruited largely opportunistically via an email circulated to students who had done the access course, and thereafter through snowballing.

There were 8 female and 5 male students. 12 of the 13 students were asked to describe their class background – ten identified as having a working class or low-income background and 2 as middle class. They ranged from mid-twenties to fifties, with most being in their 30s or 40s. Seven were first generation entrants; 5 were second generation; of these some had parents who had gained degrees as mature students. One had a grandparent who had been in higher education, but neither parent had.

This paper will address the challenges described by the students and what was found to be helpful. It will then conclude by assessing the role played by the access course and discuss some recent criticism of the idea of providing support to students experiencing educational transitions.

Confidence

A recurring theme in student interviews was the issue of confidence. It was notable that starting the access course often appeared to be the culmination of a process in which the student had gradually gained the inspiration and confidence to come to university, and arrived at a set of practical arrangements that would make this possible. This process had included learning in further education colleges, work-based training or community-based adult learning programmes.

Students tended to describe being nervous or daunted at the outset of the course. Those who did not presented themselves as confident, citing maturity and life/career experience; participation in an adult learning programme; and simply being "a confident person" as central factors. Students who had been nervous at the beginning of the Access course described feeling more comfortable as they progressed. However, a persistent lack of confidence, sometimes acute, was a recurring theme in other interviews.

These less confident students gave a range of reasons for lack of confidence. Some attributed it to having parents who had been both emotionally and educationally unsupportive, combined with negative experiences at secondary school. These students saw their social class as playing a role in these experiences at home and school. One described his secondary education – in an academy for those intending to pursue military careers – as of a low standard; he has an acute sense of being deficient educationally as a result. Another had experienced stigma and discrimination from peers and teachers based on her class and ethnic background. This student vividly described a lack of confidence in her ability and a process of exclusion at school in which she played the role that seemed to be expected of her, resisting school work and being combative with peers:

"[I got a wee bit of confidence, probably] from thinking, 'Right, this is who I'll be, so I'm *somebody*, so I fit intae some*where*, d'you know what I mean?... I think [sometimes] I would have preferred to have *been* the other kids even though I tried to make out I

wouldn't've… the ones that worked hard, and they were sorta dressed nicer and… maybe their parents cametae pick them up, or they did cometae parents night, or the teachers were – you know, nice to them… that kinna thing". Negative experience at secondary school was a recurring theme in the narratives of these less confident students, whether or not they saw this as playing a role in their lack of confidence.

Other students attributed their lack of confidence to their sense of being non-normative as mature students and to their feeling that they had been out of education for a long time; one believed her self-esteem had been undermined by her decision – for financial reasons and because of difficulties at home following her parents' divorce – not to go to university as a school leaver. She compared herself negatively with older siblings who had gone to university: "…I kinda felt – not as intelligent as them kinda thing and just – regretted it for years…" For another, despite describing herself as middle class and as having parents who were educationally supportive (with one having experience of higher education) university had assumed a kind of mythical status as a place where "you have to be some kind of professor or something…". She feared she was "too old" as a 34 year old, comparing her abilities negatively with younger students and describing how "…you're always waiting on someone to come and tap your shoulder… and say, you know: 'You shouldn't be here.'"

Other issues raised were: lack of confidence simply as part of one's character (one student wondered whether levels of confidence and self-esteem were innate); as the outcome of "not being pushed" to do things as a child; or as arising from a significant period spent at home as the main carer for children in which post-natal depression had undermined confidence and self-belief.

While levels of confidence at the beginning of the course varied, almost without exception the students had experienced doubts about their capability as they progressed. Some questioned whether they were 'good enough' to be at university. Often this was linked to a sense of being non-normative in the institution – whether in relation to length of time spent out of education, to feeling unintelligent or poorly educated, or simply to being a mature student. Others described experiencing self-doubt when they felt they had underperformed academically.

The students set high standards for themselves. They were not content simply to pass and in this they often contrasted themselves with younger students. They put pressure on themselves to achieve and improve, though this could have a psychological cost. For example: “I’m absolutely terrified now that I’ve maybe bitten off more than I can chew, but I’d rather have that than be lazy about what I’m doing...” (Alan, 42).

Often the students saw low grades as an indication that they might not be cut out for university. Conversely, high grades tended to enhance feelings of being capable and a legitimate student. But some students were not reassured by high grades: one academically successful student worried that they were flukes. Another had a sense of discovering and realising her own potential through higher education but this change in her identity was fragile – she feared forgetting everything and “[going] back to being plain old me again”. One student who was acutely conscious of gaps in his secondary education and had a sense of himself as starting from scratch, was at pains to ensure a high quality learning experience in higher education and described asking for the re-marking of an essay he felt had been graded too highly.

The importance to these students of achieving highly can be linked to its significant role in their lives as an opportunity to develop personally and to fulfil aspirations for the future. Conversely, the stakes were lower for another student who had come to university on the pragmatic basis that it would mean he could look after the children while his wife worked full-time, while also allowing him to change career. This student described himself as middle class and had a positive and academically successful educational background. He presented himself as confident and at ease as a student, which he attributed to his previous employment and life experience. While he set high standards for himself, he did not express concern about whether he was ‘good enough’ and saw being a mature student as an advantage: "I suppose when you're a bit older – you're not scared to open your mouth. You're not worried about what other people are gonna do, or think. ’Cause you've got your life and other things are more important" (Keith, 38).

While emotional support and reassurance from partners and extended family were helpful for some in addressing feelings of self doubt and lack of confidence, relationships with both staff and students on the Access course seemed to be particularly significant and

had played a key role in helping students to feel accepted within the institution. Staff were experienced as encouraging, approachable and responsive and as putting students at ease: "[At the beginning] they were up on a pedestal as *professors* and *fellows* and you think: '[sharp intake of breath] they're definitely not working class like the rest of us; they're definitely upper-class! And now… you think… 'They're only human'" (Sandra, 38).

In particular, understanding by staff of the challenges they faced as mature students, and acknowledgement of the emotional aspects of learning, were important for some students. One very unconfident student described how her success in gaining a place on the primary teaching programme had suddenly triggered thoughts of leaving because she was afraid she would not be able to manage it. She described overcoming this with the support of a tutor:

> I actually went in tears and [the tutor said]: 'Do you know what? This is so normal… as a student, you know, you'll go from [up] there, and [then] you'll crash, and you'll come back up.' And I think being able to experience that through the access course, that if that happens, because I now expect it to happen, that I'll… get back up again, you know, just kinda trodge through it…. that is probably the most beneficial part of the access course… I should've been overjoyed… that [offer of a place] was what every minute of hard work in the whole year was towards – and yet at that point I could've walked away. [After talking to the tutor] within a couple of days I was back up there again… I have no doubt now that I will stick the four years out… it does prepare you, not just academically, confidence wise – I just think every aspect of being a student is covered. Not just the academic side (Amanda, 33).

Other students spoke about being inspired and motivated by the teaching. One "fell in love" with studying English when he saw the tutor's enthusiasm for the subject; another had been inspired by a tutor to apply for a history degree: "[She] really gave me a sense of how wonderful history can be".

Being with others in a similar position, and making supportive friendships, was a particularly important aspect of the Access course. It was emphasised that friends from the Access course understood what you were going through. These friendships were often crucial in helping students through difficult times, particularly in overcoming self-doubt – for example: "there were two or three people who – maybe wouldn't be doing a

degree today if we all hadn't kinna backed each other up. So… the friendships that we've made have been a big influence in getting to this stage. And getting past those days of 'I don't want to be here, I can't do this'" (Pauline, 37).

They were also key to a feeling of belonging for some students: "I like the fact that we've kinna created a wee community for ourselves amongst the mature students, the ones that did the access [course] especially, are all still in contact, giving support, advice, help… I think I'm naturally a caring person as well, so I was always there asking people how they were getting on… very quickly, we all kinda bonded…" (Andrew, fifties). One student saw the Access course as a nurturing experience: "I think it's helping me grow as – a learner. A learner that I didn't think I could *be* before… the university has been a tremendous support group" (Sandra, 38).

One student, however, was less comfortable with the language of help and support than others and more equivocal in his evaluation of the roles of staff and other students. He explained that, not having children himself, he had felt "a wee bit alienated" from the predominantly female students with children on the course and wondered where he would fit in: "some of the classes can turn into a little bit like [the TV programme] *Loose Women*." However, he had found it helpful to meet other students informally for a chat over coffee and wanted more opportunities to meet other mature students on campus. Concerned to present himself as competent and at ease in the university, he distanced himself from the "hand-holding" of the study skills module, seeing it as unnecessary in his case and emasculating: "I'm a man... we prefer to work things out for ourselves. Or certain people do." Reframing it as "know[ing] the rules of the game", however, he saw it as a positive advantage gained by Access students over school leavers.

Combining study with family responsibilities and work commitments

Another key issue impacting on the students was juggling university work with family responsibilities and in some cases paid work. Although some of the male students had caring responsibilities, they did not present these as being difficult to manage around university work. One female student said that her partner or mother were able to look after her two children whenever needed. But other female students with children described difficulties – at times overwhelming – finding time for study. They spoke about being unable to give their families, and particularly their children, the attention they would

like and some described a renegotiation of their role in the household. Some experienced a conflict between their drive to achieve self-fulfilment through participation in higher education and their role in meeting the needs of others. In the context of a gendered division of labour within the home, self-fulfilment risked being seen as 'selfishness'.

While some women emphasised that having the support of their partners was crucial, others described having only reluctant support, or opposition, from their partner – supportive friends were particularly important for these students. For one, who had had significant conflict with her husband on this, time had assumed both practical and symbolic significance: "[My husband's] kinda been dragged along, a little bit kicking and screaming. But on the other hand… he's saying now, 'I'm really proud of you that you're doing this [laughs] but I wish it wasn't in – all of our time', sorta thing". For this student, negotiating a change in her role had been one of the challenges of participating in education and she had considered dropping out because of the combined pressure of this and the academic demands of the course; the support of friends from the course had been helpful at this point. Another student described her husband as very supportive, but was aware that her children were finding it difficult to adapt to her increased study commitments:

> They enjoy the childcare. But they don't like the fact that they're there. 'Cause their mum hasn't picked them up from school… so we have had a few behavioural issues… It takes time to work through… It is a transition phase: it's different for them, it's different for me, and they haven't got mum – 100% of the time. You know, which my daughter – doesn't like. And – my son isn't so concerned; he deals with it a little better, but I feel guilty that I'm not giving him as much time, especially with his hearing [difficulties].

One issue raised was the importance of the Access course as a time of adjustment to new domestic arrangements – for both the student herself and her family. One student was a lone parent with a full-time job who had worked overtime during the access course to make ends meet and found this nearly impossible. She described how emotional and practical support from her family of origin had helped her to keep going.

Disability

Disabilities were presented as being a significant challenge for some students. One had sustained a traumatic brain injury, which means he has to work hard to sustain concentration and process verbal and visual information. He was critical of the length of time it had taken to put in place the support he needs to study, and of a lack of information about what support was available. In contrast another student praised the university learning support services highly, saying he hadn't been left on his own. This student has a spinal injury which makes it difficult to sit and study for more than an hour at a time, and so is studying part time. When asked about disability, another student raised her depression, though said that she did not see it as a disability as such. She said that she sometimes gets overwhelmed and can't deal with things properly, though she tries not to let it affect things and hasn't spoken about it with anyone at the university.

Transitions and the role of the access course as pre-entry support

The access course was highly praised. Those who had been nervous or daunted at the beginning generally reported that their confidence had increased and some had experienced a profound transformation in their perception of their own capabilities, even if self-doubt persisted. Successfully overcoming challenges was an important part of this process. Students who had not experienced such improvements in confidence tended to be those who had already gained (at least some) confidence in their abilities prior to the Access course. However, one student, who suffers from depression, and had felt overwhelmed by managing the course on top of considerable work commitments and being a lone parent, had limited capacity to cope with challenges and felt her confidence had suffered a setback. But she felt proud of herself for completing the Access course and envisaged her confidence improving with time.

Students varied, of course, in the extent to which they found the course challenging. Students who had had negative experiences at school and parents who had been unsupportive had to work hard to bridge gaps in their literacy and found the course very difficult; one felt that expectations were too high. Another confident student with a successful educational background saw the study skills module simply as 'common sense', although he found it a useful refresher and saw the Access course as helpful overall. One female student saw the course as a "happy medium", straddling the divide

between what she saw as the “mollycoddling” of some further education and the relatively unstructured environment of undergraduate education.

Whether or not they had gained confidence from the course, however, the students spoke about their enjoyment of their studies and a recurring theme was the sense of having a new purpose and focus in life, fulfilling untapped potential and realising aspirations for the future – and feeling happier for it. For example: "I think I'm happier; definitely happier. I'm doing something that I love doing, and that makes the difference. As opposed to going out to do a horrible manual job that you're not gonnae get anywhere in... And hopefully this'll lead to me doing a job that I love". Some saw themselves as fulfilling personal desires and aspirations which had previously been put on hold, through lack of confidence and/or in order to care for children and others, for example: "You’re your own person again: you’re not just a mum, and a cook, and a cleaner…”.

The informal, participative approach to teaching was valued, as was the opportunity to get to know the university and have a head start. As highlighted above, the opportunity to make friendships with others in a similar position, and establish positive relationships with staff, was important.

Students interviewed in the first and second year of their degrees were able to reflect on the transition to first year after the Access course. A recurring theme was that the increased workload came as a shock, and some students would have liked more warning of this. Some students appreciated being told they could come back to see the co-ordinator of the Access course in future if they were in difficulty, though in practice none said that they had made use of this source of support. Instead, friendships made on the Access course emerged as a key source of support for students facing challenges during – and after – the transition to first year. The development of supportive friendships with peers appeared to have been a key gain from the Access course for these students, helping to sustain them through the ups and downs of undergraduate study, though for one, acceptance and respect for his work from academic staff was more important.

The Access course was generally viewed as vital preparation for undergraduate study, but as highlighted earlier, other forms of emotional and practical help – in particular from partners, extended family and disability support services – were also significant.

The Access course and educational transitions

In 2005, a report to the Scottish Funding Councils argued that

> We think that improving our support for learners to improve retention and achievement rates will be a continued focus for both sectors and needs to be given high priority as we take this agenda forward. Particular attention needs to be given to support needs at transition points (SFC 2005, 16).

The report's authors noted that this emphasis arose from what it called 'stakeholder' concerns over transitions faced by learners at all stages. The report particularly recommended that the funding bodies should ask the Wider Access Forums to develop and co-ordinate partnerships between further and higher education institutions that promoted and eased transition.

The notion of support for students undergoing educational transitions has been vigorously challenged recently by Katherine Ecclestone as potentially reducing the prospects for students learning through the very challenges that transitions involve. She has argued that "…the idea that people cannot deal with transitions without formalised help sits uneasily with the possibilities of creative risk, opportunity and change that transitions can create. It also erases the positive effects of difficulty, challenge and overcoming problems…" (Ecclestone 2009: 23). Ecclestone went on to express her fear that we "risk pathologising transitions by depicting them as unsettling, daunting, anxiety inducing and risky but also create normative assumptions about how best to manage them" (Ibid.). She believes that this can inadvertently infantilise 'non-traditional' young people by "creating more and more forms of emotional and practical 'support'" (Ibid.) She gives as examples of support "the smoothing of learning cultures and relationships" and "requirements to develop 'learning to learn' skills or self-awareness" (Ibid.).

While we agree with Ecclestone on the need to examine the normative assumptions underpinning the transitions discourse and what these entail in practice (e.g. new relations of power) and whose interests are served, our work so far suggests that support can be entirely compatible with agency and with learning. The challenges experienced by these students, many of which were related to class, gender and disability, as well as their commitment to a high level of attainment, meant that there was never any question of a comfortable and unchallenging experience. In addition, the level of the course is set

at SCQF level 8, and in the second of the two semesters students complete work at first year degree level. Thus while the Access course is part time and the volume of work required is much lower than that of a full-time course, the academic expectations rise during the course to a level similar to that the students experience when beginning their degree programmes.

Two members of staff who taught on the Access course were interviewed and asked about this issue. Both saw a need for a delicate balance to be struck between providing support and sufficient challenge to allow students to develop resilience and the ability to learn independently. One acknowledged that students had differing levels of confidence and ability at the outset of the course, but in deciding on the level of the course saw it as important to prioritise the needs of students with fewer resources for learning – for example, those with impoverished backgrounds (though he also believed that these students brought valuable life experience to the learning process). Both members of staff spoke about providing intensive support, where needed, at the beginning of the course to those who were struggling and then gradually withdrawing this as time went on.
Rather than removing challenge, therefore, participation in the course had provided psychological, social and cultural resources for learning to students whose access to these forms of capital had been structured by various social and economic inequalities. It had addressed issues of confidence and feelings of being non-normative as well as lack of familiarity with the knowledge and skills needed to participate in higher education; given the opportunity to make supportive friendships with peers and develop positive, accepting relationships with staff; and provided a transitional phase for the development of arrangements that would allow the balancing of university study with family responsibilities. For students already ‘rich’ in one or more of these forms of capital at the outset of the course the gains were less pronounced, but there were no indications that it had undermined agency.

Frequently students saw the encouraging and supportive environment of the access course as nurturing of their capacities, confidence and self-belief. It had underpinned a transformation in their perception of their own abilities which then made it possible and indeed enjoyable for them to learn independently and fulfil their aspirations. In these cases, therefore, far from undermining agency, support had been central to its development.

Of course, our work has limitations. The sample is a small one, and comprises those who had made it into the first or second years of study. Nevertheless, the evidence is suggestive, and indicates that it is possible to balance support with the challenges required if people are to engage effectively with the demands of the HE environment. In this instance, the aim is the promotion of educational access and inclusion/equality rather than a "seamless" or "comfortable" transition that is without risk or challenge. Given the classed and gendered nature of the social milieu of higher education, and its contrasts with the typical habitus of our mature student sample, a ‘sink or swim’ approach would in practice reproduce and reinforce existing social and economic inequalities.

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