

**Researching Higher Education Access, Retention and Drop-Out through
a European Biographical Approach:
Exploring similarities and differences within a research team**

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Introduction

Higher education institutions across Europe are transforming as a result of changing state/university relationships, economic and social changes, globalisation and policy interventions such as the Bologna process. Since the 1970s, these changes have resulted in a move away from an elite system, with many countries achieving what Martin Trow called mass higher education. Although the effects of recession are also beginning to impact upon higher education systems, this period of sustained general growth has enabled non-traditional adult students, to a differing extent by institution and country, to enter the world of academia. This in turn has led to new debates about the costs, financing, management and strategic focus of national higher education systems.

It is in this context that the question of retention has come to the forefront. Retention and drop-out are currently high on the policy agenda of national and European policy makers as these issues reflect the efficiency of both a higher education institution and the national system of HE.

This paper reflects on the work in progress of a European research project entitled 'Access and Retention: Experiences of Non-Traditional Learners in HE' (RANLHE) funded by the European Commission Lifelong Learning Programme (Project number 135230 –LLP-1-2007-1-UK-KA1-KA1SCR). The experience of learning and being a student at undergraduate level as an adult varies as higher education systems differ across Europe and within nations and this is reflected in policies and practice in relation to access, retention and drop-out. The project involves eight partners from seven countries (England, Germany, Ireland, Poland, Scotland,

Spain, and Sweden). Using interdisciplinary research we are looking at what limits or promotes the construction of a learner identity among non-traditional adult students in becoming, or not, effective learners and how this process may enable or inhibit completion of higher education.

A key question for our project, therefore, is why some adult students 'keep on going on' despite in some cases enormous difficulties, while others from a similar background in relation to class, gender, ethnicity, age and disability drop-out. Policy-makers at national level regard dropping-out as a negative process because of the economic loss on investment. For institutions drop-out is a sensitive issue as it has consequences for its status and may also result in loss of finances. For individual students, dropping out may have stigma attached to it as well as personal and family implications. The reasons, however, why adult students drop-out are complex but not always negative as many gain educationally and socially from participating in HE even if they do not complete. The question then is what the decision to quit means in the lives of the students. In some cases, dropping-out may be the start of a new transition and stage in their biography, while in others it may indicate a difficult set-back in what they see as an evolving learning career. These are particularly complex issues in the case of non-traditional learners.

Of course, the language of 'non-traditional' is itself contested. We use the term 'non-traditional adult student' in a simple descriptive sense, to denote those who are under-represented in higher education and whose participation in HE is constrained by structural factors. This includes first generation students, those from lower socio-economic strata and ethnic minority groups, mature students and students with disabilities.

Researching Transnationally

We are a transnational European research team and 'engaging in this type of research is exciting, interesting and challenging for the researcher' (Merrill, 1997: 2). However, such research can also, at times, be problematic as we bring with us our disciplinary and cultural baggages to the research team. Some of us draw on socio-cultural or socio-economic perspectives while others look to psychological ones. This is reflected in our different approaches to undertaking and analysing biographical interviews as we range from the objectivist stance through to the subjectivist stance. These differences in academic cultures and theoretical and methodological perspectives have to be worked through but can be helpful in developing an in-depth interdisciplinary approach to understanding issues of access, retention and drop-out in relation to non-traditional adult students across Europe.

As a way of moving towards an interdisciplinary approach we chose to employ three key sensitising concepts in helping us to analyse our data and inform our theoretical and conceptual frameworks. First, we are developing the idea of *habitus*, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's work on social and cultural capital, building on previous work by members of the research team (Peter Alheit, John Field and Barbara Merrill). Bourdieu's work on cultural capital is useful for looking at how working class adult students learn to cope, or not, with the symbolic and intellectual capitals of the university. They become, in Bourdieu's terms, either a 'fish in water' or a 'fish out of water'. The idea of social capital is also helpful, in that

it draws attention to the ways that people's social connections shape educational decision-making. More broadly, the concept of habitus provides a powerful tool for revealing the dialectics of agency and structure in people's lives. Bourdieu's work, however, can only take us so far as there are limitations with his concepts and theory in relation to our work.

Our second sensitising concept, proposed by Linden West, offers a psychological perspective on non-traditional adult learners. This is the notion of *transitional space*, which draws on Donald Winnicott's work on human childhood development (1971). Extending this idea to learning in adult life, we can see higher education as a

transitional space in which there is a constant negotiation and renegotiation of self in relation to others and the cultural world of the university...Basic questions may be asked in entering university...of who a person is, has been and might want to be. This in turn may provoke intense anxiety about a capacity to cope with change or whether a person is good enough in the eyes of significant people, whether other students or tutors. New transitions via 'unconscious memory in feeling'...may evoke connections with earlier transitional moments. Past and present may elide at such times and transitions may be especially fraught if past ones were traumatic (Johnston et al. 2009: 288, 289).

Equally, though, those who have experienced smooth transitions in the past may wrongly assume that higher education will be similarly problem-free.

Some of us are exploring a sociological use of the concept by viewing university as a transitional space for working out new identities with the potential for a changed self. In this sense, the identity of studenthood is itself an inherently transitional identity. We have explored studenthood as a phase that is not fixed either to earlier identities ("school pupil" or "mother", for example), nor yet tied to what is to become ("teacher", "engineer"). In this sense, studenthood is an identity that is highly regulated in some respects, but also allows a degree of freedom and creativity, of the kind defined by the anthropologist Victor Turner as 'liminal' (Field and Morgan-Klein 2010; Turner 1987). Universities can also be viewed as a safe space, a temporary space away from life, for example, on a deprived estate, poverty or family problems.

The third sensitising concept is recognition, introduced by the Irish team, (Ted Flemming and Fergal Finnegan). This idea straddles, in some ways, the concepts of habitus and transitional space. The concept of recognition derives from critical theory and the Frankfurt School and the work of Axel Honneth. In developing a critical theory of recognition Honneth focuses on the role of intersubjectivity in shaping a person's identity (1995a). Honneth argues that the individual strives for recognition through developing relationships of self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem in the family, civil society and the state.

Honneth's work, while derived from critical theory, or what has also been called 'Western Marxism', can be related both to Bourdieu and Winnicott. His idea of recognition, while largely inspired by Hegel, is explicitly influenced by his reading of Winnicott's object-relation

theory, which he sees as critical in understanding dependency on the mother, as the underlying form of 'being oneself in another', referring to Winnicott's idea of 'transitional objects' as part of the shift towards autonomy (Honneth 1995a: 99-103).

By contrast, Honneth has been openly critical of Bourdieu, whom he sees as a determinist or functionalist, and has criticised his theory of taste/distinction as ambiguous if not self-contradictory (Honneth 1995b: 190-201). Part of the problem for Honneth is that while those who have a particular type of social or cultural capital will recognise its value in others who have the same resources, they do not recognise other forms of cultural or social capital; its value therefore depends on one's position. Nevertheless, we can see such critical consequences of recognition as self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem in Bourdieu's terms as features of dispositions or habitus which can facilitate the participation and completion of non-traditional adults in HE. Without resolving the tension between Honneth and Bourdieu, we are able for the purposes of this study to locate these attributes in the cultural and social capital which individuals can access, and which both reflect and influence their relative positions.

A Note on Methodology

Each partner is researching three case study institutions and these reflect the different types of universities in their countries, for example, reform or elite; public or private. The focus of the research is on the student experience and how adults perceive themselves as students. Using biographical narratives we are interviewing different cohorts of students: those in their final year, those who leave but return to study later, those that drop out as well as following a cohort through from first to final year. Interviewing those who have dropped out can be challenging and problematic.

We are developing biographical narrative interviews to enable us to capture in depth the dialectics of agency and structure in the learning experience of adults in higher education. Biographical narratives also illustrate the dynamics and influence of past lives in initial schooling, family and work in constructing present and future lives as an HE student (Merrill and West, 2009, West et al, 2007). Biographies, although individual, also illuminate the collectivities and shared experiences in people's lives through issues such as gender, class and race (Merrill, 2007). Importantly, the biographical narrative can link the macro and micro worlds, as it:

...offers many examples of the wealth of biographical and life history research, and its unique potential to illuminate people's lives and their interaction with the social world and the interplay of history and micro worlds, in struggles for agency and meaning in lives. And to illuminate the interplay of different experiences and forms of learning – from the most intimate to the most formal (West, Alheit, Andersen & Merrill, 2007:280).

As stated above there are differences within the team in terms of the interview process. The UK teams, for example, favour a more subjective approach drawing on the traditions of feminism and symbolic interactionism. There is an attempt, from these perspectives, to

break down the power relations between the researcher and the researched so that the interview becomes more like a conversation in which the story is constructed. Participants are involved in the research process as they receive a copy of their transcript to reflect and comment upon. In contrast the German team use a more scientific, objective approach, keeping a distance between researcher and researched in order to achieve reliability and minimise researcher bias (Alheit, 1982). With this approach participants are asked to tell their life story and the researcher listens.

However, differences in approaches to biographical research are not only confined to the cross-national level. Researchers within the UK team come from different disciplinary backgrounds. The Warwick and Stirling teams are rooted in the sociological tradition while the Canterbury team favour psychological and psychosocial perspectives. This affects the way we analyse life stories as the Warwick team focus on the collectivity of stories and issues of class and gender while the Canterbury team focus more on the individual and the self, albeit located in a socio-cultural context.

Focusing only on the experiences and biographies of non-traditional students would not give us a full picture of the complexities involved in relation to access, retention and drop-out in higher education. Besides the dispositions and habitus which the adult student bring with her/him the institutional habituses also play a role in the successful participation and completion, or not, of such students. Institutional policy-makers, senior management, lecturers and support staff are also being interviewed to understand the interaction between the meso and micro levels and the influence of departmental and institutional cultures upon adult students learning experience and career.

Each partner is now at the stage of beginning to analyse their biographical data and early discussions have been held to identify themes and issues across the European data. This paper will focus on stories collected by the Scottish team (University of Stirling) and one of the English partners (University of Warwick) to illustrate how we are using the sensitising concepts.

Stories from Warwick

Contextualising the Research

The University of Warwick was opened in the 1960s along with other new campus universities as part of the policy push to expand higher education in the UK. Since then Warwick has grown and developed to become an elite university. At the same time there has always been a policy commitment to opening up its doors to the local community. This is reflected in the provision of part-time degrees, 2+2 Social Studies and foundation degrees for local adult students. (2+2 degrees are aimed at adults who do not have the traditional qualifications for entry into HE. The first two years are taught at local further education colleges (post-compulsory institutions) while the honours level is taught on the University campus. Foundation degrees combine vocational and academic learning).

The 2+2 degree programme in particular attracts working class students, mostly women, some of whom are single parents and all are first generation in their family to go to

university. The stories told by the adult students in this research reveal the centrality of social class in their lives and reflects the significance of class in UK society. The significance of class in sociological terms, however, is only recently re-emerging after the dominance of postmodern theory through the work of, for example, Skeggs (1997, 2004), Devine et al (2005) and Sayer (2005). As Beverly Skeggs argues class never went away it was just that many sociologists 'either ignore it or argue that class is 'an increasingly redundant issue'' (1997: 7). For the working class women in this research issues of gender are also important, as they described themselves as working class women. Class and gender, therefore, closely interact in shaping learner identities as an adult student.

Bourdieu's work on habitus, dispositions and capital are useful in looking at class. Habitus, for example, is a valuable concept as it enables us to explore how the social, cultural and economic capital of working class students copes and adjusts or not to the symbolic and intellectual capital of universities. Habitus locates a person's position or 'a sense of one's place' (Bourdieu, 1990: 131) in relation to others and the wider social space. While habitus reproduces and determines an individual's class and social trajectory Bourdieu also recognises that this can be transformed through the use of agency:

Habitus is not the fate that some people read into it. Being the product of history, it is an open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures (Bourdieu in Bourdieu and Wacquant. 1992: 133).

Biographical narratives, as illustrated in this study, illuminate the dynamics of structure and agency in people's lives. At particular moments in an individual's biography agency may be more dominant, for example, when taking the decision to study for a degree.

Honneth's work on self-respect and self esteem is also relevant to class and the learning experiences of the students in this study. As Andrew Sayer reminds us class; 'affects how others value us and respond to us, which in turn affects our sense of self-worth' (2005: 1).

Negotiating University Life

In drawing on the sensitising concepts identified in this research I will reflect on aspects of Julia's story to examine what keeps non-traditional students going on with their studies. Julia is white and was 37 and in her final year of a 2+2 Health and Social Policy degree when interviewed. She is a single parent. Her ex-husband is African-Caribbean so her son is of dual heritage. Julia re-entered education through participation on a Certificate in Community Research course taught by the Sociology Department at Warwick. As a result of her class background she experienced severe financial difficulties and housing problems during her studies and at times it was a struggle for her to keep going. She also suffered from dyslexia and dispractia.

Starting the degree programme marked a change in Julia's life but she found the modules hard and felt that that was due to 'not having a good education from junior and secondary school'. Compared to the Certificate course she found the degree subjects very abstract and

described this period as 'a bit of a dip'. She felt lost with the learning as she had difficulty in understanding the meaning and purpose of it.

Studying at an elite university raised issues of class as she found that some lecturers were 'very different from myself, from different backgrounds'. Most Sociology lecturers, however, were supportive and could understand what being a single parent, living in poverty on a deprived and rough council estate (social housing) meant:

One of my tutors had already done lots of books and studies about poverty and things like that and, you know, poverty was a really big issue for me at the time. I was really, really struggling and it was nice to know that she understood, whether she'd experienced it herself or not in her own life that didn't really matter because she really understood it at a very deep level. – what single parents go through. I got a lot of support and I found they were quite significant to me personally which then gave me the confidence to carry on working and to concentrate on my academic stuff.

Like many working class women she lacked confidence in her academic ability:

I never actually thought I'd make it to the end, so, each year that went by was quite a shock because I'd got through another year but I was determined to make things different for myself and for my son, so again this goes back to a personal side, that, I'd realised through all the reflective work that we'd done - I'd realised that I couldn't really make any changes in my personal life unless I really, really changed. What I was learning and how I was learning and what academic qualifications I was getting. It is determination that I wanted to change things and make a difference and be able to support us financially and move out of the neighbourhood that I was in too. I just thought I can't afford to drop out now because I'll have nothing to show for it but I will have lots of student debts.

Being a mother and an adult student also means that studying has to revolve around childcare, limiting time on campus. Despite the constraints Julia enjoyed university life; '...it was still a nice feeling. I don't know how to explain that in words. I suppose it's a feeling of being included. I felt like I was a part of something'. At the same time many women experience difficulties, often multiple ones, which affect their studying. Lack of finances was a big problem for Julia:

If you're worrying about silly things like whether you've got enough petrol to drive into University that really hinders your learning so much and it did get to the stage where I was struggling to even pay utility bills and buy food and it just seemed ridiculous that I was having a university education but I just couldn't afford it.

During her studies Julia moved to another council estate because she was fearful of where she lived after several violent incidents occurred. Some of this was associated with racial tension so she was afraid for her son. Moving to a better estate improved her quality of life and enabled her to focus back on her studies. Cultural differences of gender and class,

however, meant that she did not get support from her family while she was studying. She explains:

It's not because people didn't want to support me. It's because my family – nobody in my family has been to university. My mum has supported me through my whole life but she couldn't even remember the name of my course, let alone what university I went to. She had no clue because my life was so different from anything she'd experienced so it was really hard for her to support me.

Studying at university also made it harder for her to relate to other women on the estate:

I couldn't talk about University to any other mum's as I walked to school because I felt that they had snubbed me a bit, you know like, 'look at you with your big briefcase'. It was really tricky to explain to people why I wanted to progress myself. I withdrew from my friends on the estate a little bit because I found it hard to explain to them why I wanted something different but I understood why they didn't or why they were happy in the situations they were in.

Participating in education, at whatever level, does change women in different ways. For Julia:

Yes definitely although I still question myself a lot, I still worry about lots of things and I sometimes don't feel as confident as I should, it's nowhere near how I was five years ago. I've gained tremendously in confidence, being able to talk to people and not worrying so much if I get something wrong and take part in meetings. I don't feel threatened or nervous to open my mouth.

Women, like Julia, who participate in HE are affected by the experience, often in critical ways in terms of how they see themselves and society. Julia, like many of the working class women we interviewed managed to develop a learner identity and habitus which managed to keep them going on and find their place within an elite, middle class university. There were moments along this trajectory when she nearly dropped out as structural factors constrained her but her 'determination' (as echoed by others) kept her going. She was trying to change her situation for both herself and her son. She did not want to go back to the life she had before starting the degree and knew that she would have a large debt if she dropped out. The campus offered her a safe space where she could temporarily forget about her problems and develop her self and her academic learning. At the same time she continued to not feel confident as a learner although she did admit that by the end she was more confident as a person and had gained more self-esteem. She also gained recognition as a student and a person. However, her habitus remained working class and like many working class students she had to cope with two identities: an academic identity and a working class identity. This was not always easy.

Stirling stories

Context

Within the UK, Scotland's higher education system is highly distinctive. The upper secondary curriculum is broader than in the other three UK nations, and most young people leave school at 17. Those who are suitably qualified can enter higher education in the following autumn. Typically, Scottish Bachelors degrees require four years of full-time study, though they can take longer for those who study part-time. There are currently 20 universities in Scotland, as well as 43 colleges of further education who also provide substantial volumes of short cycle (one and two-year full-time study) higher education. The sector is highly stratified, with a small number of so-called 'ancient' universities that were founded in the medieval period, a number of institutions granted university status in the 1960s, and a number of ex-polytechnic sector institutions, as well as the FE colleges.

Scotland has the highest levels of higher education participation of the four home nations, with just under 50% of young people entering HE. In 2008-9, 226,875 people were following a higher education course at a Scottish institution. Of these, some 60% were taking a Bachelor's degree at a higher education institution, while 21% were taking a short cycle qualification at a college (National Statistics 2010: 19). Just under 22% of the higher education students in colleges came from Scotland's most deprived neighbourhoods, against 15% of students in ex-polytechnics, 11% in the 1960s foundations and 7% in the ancient universities (National Statistics 2010: 58). Among those entering a Bachelors degree, a clear majority (63%) were under 21; among those entering short cycle courses, a clear majority (70%) was aged 21 or over (National Statistics 2010: 43). While retention rates are high by European standards, the Scottish sector has the highest withdrawal rate of the four UK nations.

Within the Scottish system, Stirling is classified as a 'newer university'. Opened in 1967, it was seen at the time as a 'reform university', which had been created in order to help modernise the higher education curriculum. Its degree structures are highly modular, and students are expected to exercise considerable autonomy in putting together a programme of study that suits their own aspirations. Unlike almost all other Scottish HEIs, it is campus-based. It is also relatively small, with some 10,000 students in 2008-9.

While Warwick is clearly an elite university, Stirling's position is more ambiguous. Neither one of the 'ancients', nor one of the ex-polytechnics, it sits somewhere in the middle, and this is reflected in its student profile (HESA 2008¹). In 2006-7, some 23% of Bachelors degree entrants were aged over 21 in Scotland; the figure for Stirling was 17%. Some 87% of young Scottish Bachelors entrants came from state schools; at Stirling, it was 94%. Some 26% of young entrants in Scotland came from the lower socio-economic categories; at Stirling it was 27%.

So compared with the sector as a whole in Scotland, Stirling's student profile is comparatively socially exclusive, but relatively youthful. The University has a formal policy of

¹ Since 2008, the Scottish Government has asked HESA to exclude Scottish HEIs from the published performance indicators for widening participation. The reason given is that the significance of higher education outside HEIs means that the data are misleading.

promoting wider access, combined with high retention (University of Stirling 2008). As well as providing the range of student support that is common among Scottish HEIs, the University also runs an access course that is directed towards adult returners. The majority of students who complete the course go on to take a Bachelors degree at Stirling. Predominantly local, they come largely from the lower socio-economic strata, and from families with no previous history of higher education participation. Almost all of our interviewees self-identified as 'working class'.

Recognition, habitus and support

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.

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 into *somewhere*, 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 have... the ones that worked hard, and they were sorta dressed nicer and... maybe their parents came to pick them up, or they did come to parents night, or the teachers were – you know, nice to them... that kinda 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 kind of felt – not as intelligent as them kind of 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"'.

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. Because 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 at encouraging, approachable and responsive and at 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 trod 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 staying on. Interviewees emphasised that friendships from the earlier Access 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 kind of 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 kind of 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, 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 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.

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. In moving into the new, transitional habitus of higher education, then, recognition from insiders – staff as well as other students – was part of why you stayed on.

Conclusions

This paper has sought to show how the use of three shared sensitising concepts has helped to frame analysis of biographical narratives that were collected across different settings. While this paper has focused on data within the UK, the students were living and learning in two different countries with two different education systems and different educational traditions. At this stage of the project, we have no reason to suppose that the approach has been any less valuable in the data analysis for other national teams.

At the same time, a great deal has been learned about collaborative cross-national research. In particular, it has become clear that retention, while much debated in European higher education, is poorly monitored and narrowly defined. It is understood usually, as in the Bologna process, in terms of efficiency and cost effectiveness. We argue that this is both narrow and grossly over-simplified. Yet at the same time, even at the most reductionist and managerial level, there are no common approaches to data collection and information on retention and withdrawal at the European level. This seems an extraordinary gap in the platform on which claims for a 'common higher education area' have been built.

Inevitably, collaboration involves compromises. For the researcher, these can be extremely troubling: over our academic life course, each one of us has developed our own methodological skills and ontologies, our own theoretical frameworks and understandings, and our own values as researchers. We have often developed these distinctive approaches through a process of debate which involves differentiating and validating our own stance, and more or less explicitly criticising and often rejecting the standpoint of other researchers. Yet when you assemble a team of researchers from eight institutions, it is virtually impossible to avoid working with people who hold different perspectives from your own. And this is to set aside the equally fundamental compromises that must be made if researchers are to secure funding under a named European programme that includes very clear statements of focus and purpose, not all of which are fully endorsed by all the researchers.

This raises a number of challenges. When does flexibility become betrayal of long-held principles? Does compromise promote an incoherent theoretical mishmash? Is there a tendency to focus on the lowest common denominator, and avoid difficult and challenging disagreements?

We have given two examples of compromise here. The first is methodological. Different research teams are adopting slightly different approaches to biographical research, but this is mediated by agreement to work within a common framework. The second concerns the unresolved differences between Honneth and Bourdieu. Our view is that while Honneth's emphasis on recognition is helpful, he tends to underplay some of the structural influences that feature strongly in Bourdieu's work; while for his part Bourdieu tends to downplay the cultural assets and social resources of the disadvantaged. The Stirling and Warwick student cases discussed above show how recognition is shaped by such factors as class or gender, while the subjective identities of class and gender are themselves also impacted by recognition (Sayer 2005).

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