

# Widening participation in Higher Education:

## reshaping identities of non-traditional learners

Iona Burnell, University of East London

### ABSTRACT

Non-traditional students who have no history in the field of higher education (HE) in the UK, and have progressed through non-traditional routes, often undergo a unique and profound experience. This can involve reshaping their identities and perceptions of themselves.

This paper centres around research conducted into the experiences and perspectives of a sample of non-traditional learners in HE. For these students, HE has been made possible by widening participation policies and practice, and non-traditional routes such as access courses. The findings of the research are based on interviews with participants, all of whom are, or have been, mature working-class students in universities.

### INTRODUCTION

Higher education (HE) in the United Kingdom has traditionally been dominated by privileged and powerful social groups (Burke 2012; David 2010; Gorard et al. 2007). The government and HE institutions have made concerted efforts, through changes to policy and practice, to enable non-traditional learners to participate in HE; this movement has come to be known as 'widening participation'. Gradually, universities have opened their doors and encouraged participation by a diversity of learners. Learners from some social groups are considered to

be non-traditional, not only because they are not part of the traditional and dominant group entering HE, but because they remain under-represented within it. This paper will explore some of the experiences and perspectives of one such group: mature working-class students in HE. Interpretations of interview data demonstrate how these students have renegotiated their identities and perceptions of themselves in relation to their class and past educational experiences. The participants' names have been anonymised.

**KEYWORDS**

WIDENING PARTICIPATION  
NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENT  
SOCIAL CLASS  
WORKING CLASS

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE WORKING CLASS AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Taylor & House (2010: 46) assert that under-represented groups are 'those with no family history of HE experience, from low participation neighbourhoods, socio-economically disadvantaged students, students from ethnic minorities, and students with disabilities'. In addition to these groups, women, working-class, minority ethnic groups, disabled learners, and mature learners who have been out

of education for some time, and are also under-represented, have steadily been encouraged to participate by returning to learn. The introduction of access courses, an alternative and non-traditional route into HE, has been successful in enabling mature learners who have had a break in education to return. Mature learners can find it very difficult to be successful at university after a prolonged period of absence from education (Burke 2012). They can also belong to any or all of the above-mentioned groups, and this could be deemed a double disadvantage: coming from a social group that is under-represented in HE, and having had a break in education before returning to learn.

The Robbins (1963) report on HE declared that the sector needed to be widened and expanded to include learners from under-represented groups like the working class. Robbins was referring to working-class children in state education missing out on the opportunity to enter university, not on grounds of ability but because of class and poverty. 'There was a concern that poor boys [sic] of exceptional ability might not get their chance' (Pratt-Adams et al. 2010: 86). Robbins endorsed the principle that a higher education should be available to all those who had the ability and qualifications to benefit. This endorsement highlighted, for the first time, the inequalities and elitism present in the UK HE system. Robbins promoted the idea that HE should be available to everyone, as opposed to an exclusive few, and this was a radical idea for the time. As David points out, 'in the 1960s there was virtually no popular or public debate about entitlement to university access or participation' (David 2010: 13); it seemed that only those from a certain background or class would take advantage of opportunities to enter university. However, as Scott (1995) comments, 'when the Robbins report was published in 1963 there were still only 24 universities, with a further six, the first wave of "new" universities, in the process of formation' (p. 11). HE was therefore an extremely small provision at that time, and

expanding entitlement would have been difficult. Currently there are over three hundred institutions that offer HE courses, clearly an enormous increase in a short span of time, so much so that the sector is now considered to be a mass system of higher education. Nevertheless, there is a very deep-rooted characteristic within HE, the legacy of elitism, that although it may not be obviously present within the mass institutions, has permeated HE as a whole. Thompson (2000) states that 'the history of participation in Higher Education is largely a history of elitism which ordinary people, women, Black and minority ethnic groups, disabled people and the working class have battled to gain access and contribute to knowledge development' (p. 26).

It is this history of narrow participation that non-traditional students often find difficult to contend with. Reay et al. (2005) comment that 'Elitism is built into the very fabric of higher education whether elite or mass... very little will change until the ethos and culture of higher education radically alters' (p. 163). Furthermore, the 'battle to gain access' that Thompson (2000: 26) refers to reinforces the legacy of elitism in HE and it could be this factor that deters the under-represented groups from taking part. Reay et al. (2005) assert that 'Since 1998 participation rates have increased more rapidly among the middle classes than the working classes' (p. 6). In a 2010 report, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS 2010) stated that in the academic year 2008/9, 13.7% of participants in HE were from the four lowest socio-economic groups, with the remainder of applicants from the three highest groups. More recently, according to a report by Milburn (2012) on social mobility and child poverty (2012), that percentage had risen to 18% by 2012, indicating a level, albeit low, of participation amongst the working class.

Nevertheless, the British HE system has evolved into its present state as a result of increasing access. Widening the participation of learners taking part in HE

has, over the course of the previous 50 years or so, helped to create an education system that is completely different to the one that existed before. Certainly my participants, despite negative past experiences, their maturity and belonging to an under-represented social class, have taken full advantage of opportunities for education created by widening participation. The following themes emerged from the data after interviews with participants, during which they talked about their experiences of being HE students.

## NORMAL AFTER ALL

One of the themes that emerged from the interview data during analysis was that the participants had gained a sense of feeling 'normal after all', despite their mainstream schooling leaving them with feelings of having failed. All the participants expressed how their schooling had made them feel. For Yvette, the feelings were implicit: 'I think I grew up thinking that I wasn't intelligent and I don't know why I had that feeling'. Jane had a similar past educational experience that left her feeling that she was not capable of achieving a higher education:

*'I was always perceived to be the child in the family who was not particularly clever... I wasn't a particularly high achiever at school, I failed the 11+ ... it would have been nine years before I went into, well actually thought I can do a degree.'*

Tammi told me: 'I felt as I said – before, I felt dumb'. Kasim had his perceived failures openly expressed to him: 'I've always been called thick and stupid when it came to education. A teacher called me a spastic as well when I was at school. So, I never really thought of myself as having any intelligence when it came to academics.' With these perceptions of themselves in relation to education, it is no surprise that all developed into adults who felt that HE was not the place for them, was out of reach. Just as Britton & Baxter (1999) noted that education is a

'key site for the construction of identity' (p. 179), my participants had already constructed themselves as educational failures from their experiences of school. Askham (2008) discusses the 'cycle of failure' (p. 92) which places limitations on learning; he describes the learner's state of mind: *'I had a poor experience at school, so whatever else I might have achieved in life, my self-esteem as a learner is low; so when I return to education I do not expect to perform well'* (ibid.). Askham's theory resonates in Kasim's words when he said *'I've overcome a lot of things; the only thing I never overcame was education.'* He views education as a challenge, not a right.

Once the participants had returned to learning, and entered HE as mature learners, their perceptions of themselves began to change. Joy told me that *'I couldn't believe I'd actually achieved something at degree level... It helped me to see that I was not as hopeless as I'd been told I'd been when I was at school',* and this enabled her to break the cycle of failure. For Yvette, the realisation came part way through her higher education:

*'I often felt I didn't have the capabilities to do a degree so the fact that I am actually doing one and nearly finished and been doing really well has made me think wow you know you are intelligent, you are capable of more.'*

As Reay (1996) asserts, 'working class identities are not associated with academic success' (p. 552), so when my participants realised that they could achieve academic success, they redefined themselves and were not going to allow their past educational experiences to define them as failures any longer. Yvette expressed how she felt before she embarked on her degree course: *'there was a part of me that was unable to hold conversations with very intelligent people because I felt like less than'*. Tammi explained that HE *'made me realise, oh I can do it, I am good, I am good enough you know, I could do more'*. Jane expressed disbelief at her academic achievement and said that she

is *'amazed that I've done this, where I am now to where I was'*. Without their academic achievements, the participants might not have been able to redefine themselves and shake off the feelings of failure which had been acquired through their previous educational experiences and carried into adulthood.

Peter was my youngest participant, at 23 years old. Although he may not be deemed a mature student in comparison to the other, older participants, he did have a break from education between leaving school and returning to college. Whilst narrating his story, Peter told me how school used to make him feel, in comparison to how he feels in HE now:

*'... especially coming from my background...'*

Why do you say coming from your background?

*'... I don't know but when I was going through school teachers used to tell me that I wasn't really, this is not for you, school's not for you, you're not going to make anything of yourself and all those kinds of things so I kind of believed it in a sense... I didn't feel that I fit in and I didn't have a place... I'm happy in the place I'm in now,'*

Peter's young age meant that his memories of school are still fresh in his mind. Even though he is still in the early stages of his degree, he told me that *'it feels like I've actually gained something'*, which implies that he did not feel that way about his compulsory schooling. He had not believed that he could enter higher education; like the others, school left him with the legacy of failure. Now that he is actually undertaking his degree, he feels an enormous sense of achievement at just being on the course. I did not question Peter about why he had returned to learning despite an unpleasant school experience, but Crossan et al. (2003) comment that:

Non-traditional learners becoming involved in formal learning are often

(if not always) initially tentative about engaging in the process. Their previous life experiences have often given them little confidence about engaging in the process of learning, and indeed in some cases will have resulted in hostility towards educational institutions... (p.58).

During Nyla's interview, she described how *'I was crippled with self-doubt and lack of confidence and didn't think I could go to university'*. Overcoming her self-doubt, she completed an access course and progressed to university. Once there, the 'normal after all' sensation emerged: *'you realise actually I can do this... It enabled me to achieve a sense of satisfaction and inner happiness...'*

Mercer (2010), in her research on adults returning to HE, encountered a phenomenon she labelled as 'resolving demons from the past' (p. 29). Returning to education and, in my participants' cases, embarking on degree courses, allowed them to prove themselves, to demonstrate that they were not the failures they had been labelled as, and to feel that they were as good as anybody else. Mercer (2010) comments that education allowed them to 'reclaim something that had been missing from, and affecting their sense of self for many years previously' (p. 30). Mercer's research participants, just like mine, had 'appeared to have resolved issues from the past' (ibid.), and gone on to achieve what they once thought was not possible. In addition, they had been able to heal the wounds created by past negative school experiences. Nyla, in her interview, referred to the *'personal journey... where you're discovering things about yourself'* and how this led to her *'healing past experiences'*. For my participants, higher education was more than just education, it was a therapeutic process that enabled them to acquire a position of normality.

## VALIDATION

Many of the participants were looking for and had achieved a sense of validation

by participating in HE. Once they realised that they were not the educational failures they had been led to believe, or indeed had been told they were, and had put their demons to rest, the sensation of feeling validated began to emerge. Mike was the participant who actually used the word to describe his feelings: 'I feel more validated, I feel more, I feel proud of who I am what I'm doing now being a student in university'. Joy used an interesting metaphor to describe how she felt: 'I belong to this university... it's like membership to a private club that I got into eventually'. Kath used another metaphor to describe how she felt on completion of her degree:

*'there's a sense of well I have a degree, so I kind of tick the box... that is what is validated, I am clever to a certain extent... my comments are valid... it wasn't that I didn't feel it before, I didn't know I didn't feel it before until actually starting my studies...'*

Validation is more than feeling 'normal after all', it is the sensation of really belonging, that one is actually good enough to have achieved, or be achieving, a degree, of having 'ticked the box', as Kath expressed. Walters (2000) discusses mature learners and how their 'motivation for learning may also be associated with a desire to change... to prove oneself' (p. 273). Walters also conducted research into mature learners' experiences in HE, and theorised the mature students' three Rs – redundancy, recognition and regeneration. In her work, Walters (2000) explains the process that mature learners go through. The first stage is redundancy, which is the learner leaving the old and redundant parts of one's life behind. Walters explains that 'one is continually restructuring the reality of the past by reinterpreting it as one moves from one perspective to the next' (p. 272). The second stage is recognition, which is the learner recognising that change is possible. Walters comments that 'it is this recognition which fuels the motivation of mature students and their participation

in education' (p. 274); realising that they can change leads to the desire to effect change. The final stage in Walters' process is regeneration, and this is similar to my validation theme in that it is the outcome of the process. Walters explains that this stage involves 'a restructuring of one's frame of reference to a new, more appropriate and more personally satisfying one' (p. 275). Walters also comments that the data gathered for her research denotes that 'higher education is one potential means for individuals to begin the process of restructuring their lives' (ibid.), which is something that my own data also strongly indicates.

Yvette felt a sense of validation when she commented that 'I feel I can call myself an educated person now'. Previously in the interview she talked about how she felt intimidated by intelligent people because she felt 'less than' them. Achieving her degree has enabled the regeneration that Walters (2000) has theorised. Tammi referred to the same feelings of belonging that Joy did: she explained how 'I actually find that I belong somewhere now'. Mike explained his feelings of validation by saying that 'before I weren't proud of who I was, I used to walk around with my head down... I feel like I belong in uni now'. Previously, Mike had told me about his job as a builder, and how he did not like to talk about it as he felt that people were not interested and it was nothing to be proud of – 'It's just a job, it's not a career'. However, when he became a higher education student, that not only changed his perception of himself, he also started to feel that people were more interested in him:

*'when you say you are studying, I am studying politics and sociology, people ask you, what is that, where do you want to go with that, what are you doing with that and it's more interesting and stuff. And to me, it feels more, it feels like I am working towards something a lot bigger than just a job.'*

Mike is the same person now – studying politics and sociology at university – as

he was when he was a demolition man. What has changed is his sense of self, and how he feels that other people perceive him. Before, he thought that people did not find him interesting, now he feels that they do. This shift has enabled the sensation of being validated. Crossan et al. (2003) explain the process as 'one of discovery of a real self – of opening a door to something that is both new, yet has always been there' (p. 61). Peter explained his shift to feeling validated by saying that it '*makes you feel that you're a better person now and you've got your place in society*'. When I asked him to explain how being in HE and completing a degree makes him feel that he is a better person who has a place in society, he replied, "*cos society upholds that, they hold that at a high level you know they feel someone who's gone to university is accomplished and is someone, you know?*"

The feelings of validation came from infiltrating, and participating in, an aspect of the culture of the dominant class. By participating in HE, the arena that non-traditional students were once excluded from, the participants are proving that they are good enough, that they are as good as the others – the middle and upper classes. However, English (2004) discusses the concept of the 'third space' and how 'third space is where we negotiate identity and become neither this nor that but our own. Third is used to denote the place where negotiation takes place, where identity is constructed and re-constructed' (p.100). In this way, non-traditional students do not become part of the upper-class culture but create their own, alternative space to inhabit. Crossan et al. (2003) refer to one of their own participants' identities and comment that:

Her identity as a learner is also closely linked to her perceptions of herself in relation to class and gender. Like many working class women in educational settings, she was continually under pressure to prove that she was performing adequately. (p. 62)

Crossan et al. (2003) draw on work from Skeggs (1997) who asserts that to be from the working class 'generates a constant fear of never having got it right' (p. 6). It seems that, where education is concerned, the working-class desire is to measure up to the middle/upper classes and prove that they are just as clever, and therefore just as valid. Nicole told me of her experience, having finished her degree, of returning to the university because she was interested in studying another subject:

*'had I not done my degree, and had that piece of paper, I wouldn't have felt confident to walk in and talk to this doctor of anthropology who is like quite – like highly esteemed within his own area...'*

Having achieved her degree, and thereby achieved validation, Nicole felt qualified to approach the anthropologist. 'Otherness' is a theory in social sciences used to understand how society and social groups exclude 'others' who are deemed not to fit in, or not be part of the dominant hegemonic group. In the situation she described, Nicole did not see herself as 'the other' anymore and therefore does not feel excluded; she now belongs. In discussing identifications of class, Skeggs (1997) comments that in her research with her own participants, 'in every judgement of themselves a measurement was made against others. In this process the designated "other"... was constructed as the standard to/from which they measured themselves' (p. 74). Peter's measurement of himself is evident in his comment, 'society upholds that, they hold that at a high level you know they feel someone who's gone to university is accomplished'. Once he has completed his degree he, like Nicole, can achieve a sense of belonging, and not feel 'othered'. Leathwood & O'Connell assert that for some 'Doing a degree is legitimising oneself in the eyes of others' (2003: 610). This may well be some of the motivation behind my participants pursuing a higher education; along with

the sense of feeling validated, they may feel that others, particularly those from the middle and upper classes, would now view them as legitimate. However, does that mean that they have now left their own social class and become part of the dominant upper-/middle-class culture?

## CONCLUSION

In a 1996 paper on class by Reay, she demonstrated her awareness that, as she becomes immersed within the academy, there is a gradual shift in her position of occupying an identity entrenched in working-class values: 'Becoming academic is simultaneously an erosion of working-classness' (Reay 1996: 453). She implies here that as one enters the world of academia, one's working-classness, and the identity that goes with it, ebbs away. However, the research at this time was implying that there were two polarised positions: the uneducated working class and the educated middle class, and that learners inhabited one or the other. What seems to be the case now is that there is an in-between space. Crozier & Reay (2008), during their research, discovered that 'Students deconstruct and reconstruct their social and class-related identities. Some distance themselves from the old version but most seek to manage multiple versions of themselves, creating hybrid identities' (p. 3).

It is possible, several years after the 'widening participation' movement began, that a third space has emerged for students who are non-traditional and historically under-represented, but have found new identities in HE. This way, the learners can be a part of the academy, experiencing the new, without feeling awkward or not belonging. This concept is also discussed by Crozier et al. in David (2010); they assert that 'Universities traditionally have not been places for the working class' (p. 74), that they have no history and nothing to identify with in the academic arena. However, in their study 'the working class students navigate their way through... making or appropriating the space for themselves and hopefully

others like them' (ibid.). Therefore, upon joining, non-traditional students do not become part of the dominant upper-class culture of HE but have created a space for themselves within an arena to which they are new, and with it, a sense of identity and belonging. ■

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Contact: [ionaburnell@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:ionaburnell@yahoo.co.uk)