

## DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

### 'Non-traditional' student identity: developing a hybrid ethnographic framework to explore attitudes within a new University teaching and learning context

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*Award date:*  
2022

*Awarding institution:*  
Coventry University  
Buckinghamshire New University

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**‘Non-traditional’ student identity:  
developing a hybrid ethnographic  
framework to explore attitudes within a  
new university teaching and learning  
context.**

By

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the University’s requirements for  
the Degree of Doctor of Education

September 2021

Buckinghamshire New University

Coventry University

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# **Abstract**

## **Background**

'Non-traditional' student is a term associated with widening participation in higher education. This broad label contains a number of subgroups and characteristics, many of which relate to intersectional aspects of identity. Concerns have been raised in wider literature that the term can be negatively applied. Observations in practice indicated that tutors used the term divergently. One application celebrated student diversity; another labelled the student as lacking sufficient academic ability.

The demographics of the university studied indicate the high representation of students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds. The institution's vocational facing orientation means that a significant number of the tutors are recruited for their practice experience and many come from 'non-traditional' backgrounds too.

## **Aims**

To make use of this opportunity to compare how the two participant groups navigated their personal educational journeys and how they responded to the term 'non-traditional' in relation to their sense of identity. The aim was to develop separate dialogues that could then be used to inform aspects of professional practice. Specifically, to raise the voice of students and tutors and engage them in shared learning and to reduce potential stigma attached to 'non-traditional'. To promote an inductive framework of research to iteratively explore issues relating to student identity within a teaching and learning environment.

## **Methodology**

The two main data sources were interviews and practice reflection. An ethnographic lens was integrated to frame the inquiry and to support exploration of student identity, largely through consideration of class, gender and ethnicity.

## Findings

The students were predominantly unaware of the term. Some felt it devalued their efforts, others held it as a badge of honour or as a valid passport to a professional career. The tutors understood it as a loaded and outdated term. They demonstrated empathy and insight into the challenges their students faced, as they had shared many themselves. How the university could work more proactively in response to student need and profiling was a key area of concern. Reading wove through the narratives for both groups. For some tutors, the lack of it marked out many of their students. The students interviewed valued one to one tutor support most and felt a positive sense of belonging. While students being black may be considered a norm, this was not always the case with tutors working with in the institution. The monographs reveal exciting potential to be adapted as teaching and learning resources.

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# Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisors, Dr. Keiran Henderson and Dr. Fiona McCormack for their advice and ongoing support.

To acknowledge earlier encouragement from Dr. Ken Smith and Dr. Pat Mahon-Daly, my colleagues, friends and all the other informal cultural experts.

I would most like to thank all those that participated in this research project. Your stories are like fireflies lighting up the journey.

And finally, to Owen and Iris for 'keeping it real' and to Rachel, the proofreader extraordinaire, for all her support.

## Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and have been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University.
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated.
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed.
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work.
5. Where elements of this work have been published or submitted for publication prior to submission, this is identified and references given at the end of the thesis.
6. This thesis has been prepared in accordance with the Coventry University and Buckinghamshire New University.
7. I confirm that if the submission is based upon work that has been sponsored or supported by an agency or organisation that I have fulfilled any right of review or other obligations required by such contract or agreement.

Harry Nicholson

## Structure of the thesis

The introduction sets out the theme of the thesis in terms of widening participation and the use of the description of 'non-traditional' in relation to a potentially judgmental model of student deficiency. Questions about how the university can engage with and understand diverse student needs in order to support their learning are asked. Finally, there is some guidance on the monographs themselves and the potential response readers may have to them.

Chapter two is the literature review which is divided into four main sections. First, there is a selective historical exploration of education and social mobility and who gains access through widening participation, followed by a review and analysis of research literature that relates directly to the term 'non-traditional' student. The third section explores theoretical perspectives that can help scaffold exploration of identity and better enable the engagement of lived experience within teaching and learning environments. Finally, the fourth section reviews a range of literary texts, news articles and social media debate mediated through questions of class, 'race', ethnicity and gender.

Chapter three highlights the main intention of this research; to carry out an inductive inquiry that explored how two linked, but separate groups of participants attending and working in a post-1992 university understood the term 'non-traditional' student. It frameworks the exploration of their respective learning journeys through schooling to learning and /or teaching within higher education with a main focus on one-to-one interviews.

Chapters four and five are the monographs themselves. They maximise and prioritise the participants' voices by using extended quotations for the reader to 'hear' their words directly, in order to reduce the risk of misinterpretation. The reader is dropped into the narratives as they unfold, in other words – there is no specific beginning, middle or end.

Chapter five is comprised of discussion that explores themes from both practice and the ethnographic and insider researcher perspectives through the study period. Included are themes that were reflected on from research notebooks, which include the researcher's own ethnicity and class, previous professional employment in youth and community development practice and a more general discussion of identity and the ethics of representation. There is additional discussion of wider ethnographic reading and works of literature.

Rather than being a formal conclusion, the final chapter focusses on specific analysis and practice implications. It ends with a plea to universities to build expertise around supporting teaching and learning for people who have accessed higher education through diverse routes and to integrate co-learning and shared exploration to move from 'them' to 'us'. In this, the research demonstrates its importance for social justice and for potential future operating models.

# 1. Introduction

If we were to compile a key word directory, like Williams (1988) did in relation to the term culture, but cluster our choices around the word education instead, where would we begin?

In Williams's text, the author does not directly attempt to define education as a key word, but instead reviews and evaluates the term 'educated'. The meanings attached to the word 'educated' by different groups illustrates a social tension. Williams (1988, p.111) points out that "...to educate was originally to rear or bring up children". Williams highlights that the term 'educated' is used by groups differently and implies that being 'educated' is now specific to a particular type of education. Williams states that with mass education legislation it became less clear how the word was able to describe the social world accurately. He argues that everyone who went through the school system would by default need to be described as 'educated'. The author

contends that: “There is a strong class sense in this use, and the level indicated by educated has been continually adjusted to leave the majority of people who have received an education below it” (ibid, p.112). Williams concluded that there is being brought up and being brought up ‘properly’.

Williams (ibid) explained that he chose what he considered to be the most straightforward way of listing words to avoid hierarchy of meaning; so began with the letter A. If this approach is adopted for the word education, then A could include academy or academic, ambition and aspirational. B might be for books, belonging, maybe board game - *Snakes and Ladders* is one that springs to mind - perhaps B for bias, too. C could be for competition, class, culture or even cave. Should the list of words then jump to M, there could be metaphors, myths, meritocratic, mobility and mature. Another leap and we could arrive at W and include widening participation. Or if we consider the meaning again of the term ‘educated’, we might have to go back to D. D could be for discriminatory like dunce, disability or degree. E could include elite, ethnicity, enrol and engage. F for full-time, fail, facilitate or future self. G for grades, gender and getting better. H for higher. I for identity, independent, I.Q. and institutional racism. J for jargon, journals and journeys. All might agree that K is for ‘knowledge’, but not necessarily on what constitutes it. Some academics argue that universities themselves are at war and that truth and independent thinking are seen as the collateral damage created by a conflict with neo-liberalism and the marketisation of university study. The reader might wish to move to T and include the key words, truth, tradition, teaching and transformation. But then we would miss L, for loans, leagues, learning and losers; and S for socialisation and schools. Including all the alphabet would probably be a little contrived and might force some unusual or misplaced meanings. Z, I suppose through the lockdown period of the current world pandemic, would reasonably include Zoom.

The language of education, at least the language that is wrapped around it in areas of the literature, is as much about myth as it is about fact. Myth can involve transformative magic, or it can be a cynical vehicle to perpetuate falsehoods and lies.

This thesis is all about widening participation, but it does not hold to a policy focus, other than in the broadest of senses. The process of encouraging more of the population to continue their education through access to university has been a slow procedure of widening access through history. But, in the last two hundred years it has certainly accelerated. In the last twenty years, the increased numbers and diversity of the higher education student population has prompted some academics to feel that they struggle at times to understand their students; that some of their behaviours are conceived as representing their misrecognition of academic identity. Many students appear to feel apprehensive about university expectations and tutor identities too. Sometimes it might feel like the two groups speak a different language.

Occasionally, in classes that discuss social discrimination, I say to the students, “hands up who would describe themselves as a ‘Chav’.” Usually at least one person raises their hands and then laughs. Often the whole group laugh. ‘Chav’ is a term that is usually reserved for certain people to use to label a group; to ‘other’ them. It is not a term that generally appears to be used by members of a group to describe themselves. It is a finger pointing social exercise and usually the term is spoken out of earshot, often behind people’s backs, so to speak.

The following research suggests that the term ‘non-traditional’ in relation to students, could share some of these exclusionary characteristics in how it could be applied within a higher educational context. Though it sounds a little more polite perhaps, it may hide, in its ambiguity, a judgmental model of student deficiency; suggesting that students from a ‘non-traditional’ or widening participation background are not ready, equipped or suitable for a university education.

Rather than a judgmental silence, we can ask how universities and tutors could more fully engage with and understand diverse student needs? How can education in post-1992 universities scaffold positive learning environments? As important, is the question of how the sector can ensure that the term ‘non-traditional’ student is not used as a negative label, if it is used at all. How the participants themselves responded to this term in many ways challenges the usefulness of this group descriptor, but they do go on to invert and take ownership of it more as a transformative label, a badge of honour and a passport to professional practice.



Fixing down the meaning of key terms is a complex project and some of the problems that arise from wishing to label and characterise have been central to a number of disciplines of knowledge, from philosophy, through to scientific use of categorisation, sociological and policy discourse. In many respects it is a straightforward process of determining the nature of things through classification and using these systems to then discriminate between a number of entities. This is the subject of Bowker and Star's study *Sorting Things Out* (1999), that, as humans, this is an engrained aspect both of underlying behaviour and drives aspects of the societies that we live in:

First, we seek to understand the role of invisibility in the work that classification does in ordering human interaction. We want to understand how these categories are made and kept invisible, and in some cases, we want to challenge the silence surrounding the categorisation (loc. 124 - 27).

The authors (ibid) more fully illustrate the dynamic whereby our classification systems directly impact the social sphere. They argue that relying on the universal use of standardised testing within education values specific knowledge areas '...and renders other kinds invisible.' (Bowker and Leigh Star, 1999, loc. 132). The classifications that are used to inform social policy are both considered necessary, but they tend to operate for the benefit of particular groups:

For any individual, group or situation, classifications and standards give advantage, or they give suffering (loc. 138).

The reader will find many examples of how students and tutors positively overcame social discrimination and challenged educational inequalities. Education may not be able to magically solve social inequalities, but it can be a motivator for people to feel more confident about developing their sense of self and to interpret the world. To articulate about why social justice can be such an integral part of how we respond to names, name-calling, classification and social constructs. While we should not be shocked by some of the content, we could be moved.

There are a few words quoted that some readers may find offensive. They are included as direct and accurate quotations, as words directly said in interviews or written as text.

In Partlett's *History of Board Games* (2018) the author describes the game of Snakes and Ladders as a modified version of an Asian game, The Chaupar of Knowledge. It was played as an instructional exercise to encourage moral learning and the use of a die was to replicate a response to fate. The author describes it as "a sort of pilgrim's progress" (2018, p.93). Partlett (ibid) argues that the Victorian appropriation of the game essentially made it into a race to the top, with only the vaguest hint of moral instruction; in order to win. There are six main sections to this thesis, so the reader could roll a die to choose which chapter to read. If, like McGarvey (2018), they are intimidated by books, they could decide which chapters they feel most interested in. Strategic reading plays a role for students with busy workloads. If this thesis were a book, the two monographs would be placed at the beginning, as many readers would choose to start there. As a thesis, the monographs follow a review of literature and a methodology section, so have been set within a more traditional academic structure. These narratives also tell of lost voices, that were found again. It is time to listen and then respond.

## 2. Literature Review

The literature review falls into four main sections. First, there is a selective historical exploration of education and social mobility and who gains access through widening participation. This is followed by a review and analysis of research literature that relates directly to the term 'non-traditional' student. The third section explores theoretical perspectives that can help scaffold exploration of identity and better enable the engagement of lived experience within teaching and learning environments. The fourth section reviews a range of literary texts and social media debate mediated through questions of class, 'race', ethnicity and gender.

## **Section 1: Gold, Silver and Bronze – from the Cave to the Quad: a selective history of social mobility**

In *A Short History of Myth*, Armstrong (2005, p.3) suggests that myth “looks into the heart of a great silence.” The author argues that myth is ‘...not a story told for its own sake. It shows us how we should behave.’ In many senses a myth relies on the circulation of a story and the re-enactment of a narrative to maintain its authority. Corresponding behaviour is the enactment of transformative rituals. Armstrong (2005, p.32) explores the emergence of logos, and unlike myth, ‘logos must correspond accurately to objective facts.’ The rise of rational thinking challenges aspects of faith in a myth, as it demands evidence, not a blind faith in an unproven idea. Armstrong goes on to point out that Plato compared myths to old wives’ tales and that according to Plato, human potential could be reached only through rational discourse. However, in relation to Plato’s formulation of the soul, he ‘...falls back on the old myth of reincarnation’ (ibid, p,106). This apparent contradiction implies that separating faith from fact is not a straightforward process. The basis of ideas may be a little more arbitrary in nature, when assumptions or myths become enshrined in rational thought. The exploration of myth is central to contemporary debates around educational abilities, meritocracy and opportunity. Educational debate itself appears to operate around myth and metaphor.

Plato’s *Republic* (Hamilton and Cairns, 1961) describes a utopian society ordered by rational thought, but built on the bedrock of myth that outlines intelligence as immutable qualities that relate to the innate and fixed attributes. The rulers of this idealised society have golden souls, the administrators have silver and the mass of the people have bronze. Those with the golden souls, the lovers of wisdom, possess the attributes of reason and are not driven by emotions or influenced by the relativity found in cultural discourses. Socrates, Plato’s main protagonist, suggests that truth is developed through reason and not through experience, which is mediated through the senses. It is only the golden ones, the philosopher rulers, that are able to see through the illusion of worldly sensation and cultural differences to find unconditional

and abstracted laws of reason. That is why they should rule, because they would be able to determine the rational approach to good governance and social control. They would know how to meet the needs of people to ensure the orderly running of society. Should those unable to comprehend reason rebel, the silver 'administrators' would restore order, as their sense of duty would come to the fore.

Plato uses the metaphor of the cave to explain social control, but also to justify the elite roles prescribed to the philosopher rulers and to justify why they were the ones that would continue their education separately. The reader is asked to imagine a dark cave and people shackled and bound so that they can only see a wall in front of them. Behind burns a fire, while unnamed agents hold objects up to the fire, so that their shadows appear on the wall like a screen. In such conditions, Socrates explained, "... in every way such prisoners would deem reality to be nothing else than the shadows of artificial objects," (Hamilton and Cairns, 1961, p.748). The cave dwellers were trapped in a state of induced false consciousness. Should a person escape from their shackles and venture out into the sunlight, surely, they would be blinded at first and would need to become accustomed to seeing the world directly.

Socrates goes on to ask if this person was to then venture back into the cave and explain what they saw, whether they would not face derision and disbelief from those still shackled in the cave? "They most certainly would," concurred Glaucon (one of the dialogue participants, in Hamilton and Cairns, 1961, p.749). Socrates (ibid, p.750) continues and suggests that:

Then, if this be true, our views of these matters must be this, that education is not in reality what some people proclaim it to be in their professions. What they aver is that they can put true knowledge into a soul that does not possess it, as if they are inserting vision into blind eyes.

Socrates (ibid, p.750) then asks whether those who are:

...uneducated and inexperienced in truth ever adequately preside over a state, nor could those who have been permitted to linger on to the end in the pursuit of culture ...?

Having agreed this, Socrates and Glaucon go on to outline different aspects of what would be the ideal subjects to include in terms of setting an educational curriculum, and they bear a striking resemblance to the STEM subjects currently found to curry favour within our educational system and government funding priorities (Weale, 2021). Socrates outlines the system in a little more detail explaining that the whole responsibility would rest with the state and would involve a filtering system to ensure that the right kind of character is chosen for special training, away from their family and the corrupting influences of social intercourse. There would be no such thing as private tuition or fee-paying entry to the academy, as access would be through the individual's display of rational thought. The purpose of initial education would be to sort through the population and to separate the different quality of souls.

Of the golden ones, Socrates (Hamilton and Cairns, 1961, p.767) states that:

They must have, my friend, to begin with a certain keenness for study, and must learn without difficulty. For souls are much more likely to flinch and faint in severe studies than in gymnastics ... We must demand a good memory and doggedness and industry in every sense of the word ... the aspirant must not limp his industry.

The golden ones would become the property of the state and live and breed separately to the other citizens, this way maintaining a constant stream of future rulers to the academy. While this would ensure purity in the ruling class, Socrates does not rule out the chance event of a 'gold child' appearing every so often from one of the baser metallic families and they would need to be winnowed and trained with the elite. So, we can discern an embryonic form of meritocracy, albeit a destiny prescribed by genetic disposition.

Access to elite training in the skills of philosophic argument (which could be reasonably translated as the discernment of truth through rational argument, rather than through learnt experiences and the senses) must be rigorously vetted to ensure that those admitted to the academy: "... have orderly and stable natures, instead of the present practice of admitting to it any chance and unsuitable applicant," (Hamilton and Cairns, 1961, p.771).

Socrates makes it clear though that the ruling elite would not be rewarded with riches, though all their needs will be fully met, as the social framework would forbid the philosopher rulers from having any access to money and wealth. The love of wisdom, rather than of gold would be the driver in educational success but alas, the model promotes the restriction of opportunity in education, not the widening of participation.

In many respects the utopian society described in Plato's *Republic* models a clear form of class reproduction, except that the ruling class did not have access to acquired capital and could not use wealth to pave the way for their children's progress, in part because they were taken away and raised in state nurseries. Once the children were sorted into their metallic categories there was no sense that education could have an alchemic effect on transformation from bronze to gold. Education was not the source of liberation for those people shackled and facing the shadows in the cave and Plato does not clarify in the dialogue who or what force maintains their bondage.

The term meritocracy was first coined in Young's satire (Allen, 2010), *The Rise of the Meritocracy 1870-2033: an Essay on Education and Equality* (1961). This treatise 'sent from the future' inverts the central point in Plato's *Republic* of removing family influence from education and explores how this has exacerbated the dominance of inherited wealth in controlling access to upward mobility. There has been some considerable revival in interest in this dystopian imagination of a future society run according to intelligence quotients (Start the Week, 2020; Bloodworth, 2016; Allen, 2010). Historically this satire was intended to defend the emergence and development of the comprehensive school system, that aimed both to provide academic subjects and provide practical and vocational skills (Allen, 2010). Bloodworth (2016) argues that the New Labour government, led by Blair's clarion call for 'Education, Education, Education!' inverts Young's satire (1961) and incorporates the phrase and concept to open up opportunities for all. Bloodworth argues the universality of the meritocratic mantra was little more than a smokescreen to hide the fact that opportunities for upward mobility are still problematic for people from working class backgrounds; that not all degrees were passports to a 'good life' for all social groups. Bloodworth's book provided an update to Willis's ethnographic study

(1978) *Why working-class kids get working-class jobs*. Tight (1998) explores how the emphasis in recent times has shifted from government responsibility to provide adequate education, to it becoming a personal responsibility for learners to ensure that they “fulfil their potential, modify their behaviour and personally invest in their future” (ibid, p.483). The work of academics such as Reay (2017) decries the limited access working class children have in relation to gaining access to elite universities, while at the same time apportioning some blame to the lower order institutions for not providing high quality education to drive up students’ aspirations. An irony in the back-story surrounding Young’s family background was that his own child Toby Young, who was recently appointed to sit on the Office for Students, got into Oxford University with two Bs and a C at A-Level, as the result of a phone call to the university from his father (Jones, 2018). For McKenzie (2018) the contrast to her own experience is stark:

Nobody called up Oxford for me (or for millions of other working-class people). The ending of my formal education was a careers interview in an unused and unusable classroom at my comprehensive school in 1984, against the backdrop of the miners’ strike. An uninterested adviser asked me which factory I would like to work in...

Eddo-Lodge (2017, loc. 983) who became the first black, British woman to top non-fiction book sales in 2020, argues that: “we don’t live in a meritocracy, and to pretend that simple hard work will elevate all to success is an exercise in wilful ignorance”. The author attended university, but suggests that other black people should not bother as they will most likely have found it more difficult to navigate their schooling without experiencing racism. Then experience this discrimination at university, graduate with a poorer degree classification than their white counterparts, leave in debt and be less likely to access graduate paid jobs.

The higher educational term ‘non-traditional’ student includes people from working class backgrounds and minority ethnic groups. The term has been highlighted as potential to carry loaded meanings and can be considered to be a ‘chaotic conception’ (Trowler, 2015) that might bring with it unwanted stigma (Goffman, 1963).



What challenges do students from diverse backgrounds face in their learning journeys? What motivates them to overcome difficulties of access and belonging? How do they understand the term 'non-traditional' student? How might tutors from similar backgrounds interact with the issues outlined above and how can universities, students and tutors develop support and develop co-operative inquiries into needs and positive support for developing learning opportunities that could facilitate active participation and confident future selves?

## **Education for learning not earning**

In a review of lifelong learning, Tight (1998) argues that the policy surrounding continued education post mandatory secondary schooling contained aspects that place an increasing emphasis on individuals modifying their own behaviours so that they are able to 'personally invest in their future'. The author suggests that this approach cloaks an underlying sense of individual blame for school leavers not realising their own responsibility in the process of widening participation by continuing their educational progression and the engagement in learning to support access to the labour market. Tight's critique (1998, p.483) is that that higher education policy drivers appear to ignore what has happened previously in a person's schooling and that:

Perhaps even more important, though, is the realisation that it is formal education and training that has turned so many people off the idea of learning. Re-engaging those with bad previous experiences of school and further education in learning will require something different from more of the same.

A more recent study comparing students' higher educational experiences in England, Italy and Sweden, carried out by Antonucci (2016), surveys the extent to which the transfer from state funding for universities to enable access by students that historically had been considered excluded from higher education opportunities, illustrates the extent of the transfer from state support to private and personal risk. The "privatisation of social risk", according to Antonucci (2016, p.162) has underlined social inequalities through shifting the function of welfare from state to individual responsibility meaning that: "the family has a more evident role in stratifying young

people's experiences [as students in higher education]". The author (ibid, p.162) notes that many students who "rely on precarious short-term jobs are often captured in lived experiences of precarity." Interviewees in this study from lower socio-economic backgrounds reported increased levels of anxiety during their periods of study and were less able to project positive feelings into their future opportunities for graduate level employment. Students with additional support from their families reported much lower levels of anxiety and were better able to anticipate a successful transition into employment and professional careers. Antonucci (ibid, p.169) concludes that Higher Education policies are "creating a major driver of inequality".

Marsh in *Class Dismissed: why we cannot teach or learn our way out of inequality* (2011), explores the limitation of educational drives to widen participation in post-compulsory education in the United States. The author's argument suggests that the fundamental premise that mass engagement in higher education can deliver students from poverty and create equality of opportunity in the labour market relies on a misplaced myth of its transformative powers. The author states: "Only by first decreasing inequality and poverty might we then improve educational outcomes" (ibid, p.22). The book scrutinises the justification for expanding higher education that has led to trends in the United States (that correspond to widening participation in the United Kingdom) and contrasts this to the relative decline in social mobility since the late 1950s. Drawing on key analysis by Berg (1973), he demonstrates a mismatch between this decline in opportunities for well-paid employment, the rise in college attendance and questions whether the majority of jobs available specifically need a degree qualification. Marsh (2011) is an academic that was raised in a working class family and realised that he was living proof that educational attainment could lead to a professional career, but through involvement in widening participation programmes began to question that this was real evidence of education acting as 'a magic potion for the poor' (ibid, p.22). For Marsh, the only way to improve educational outcomes was for there to be political changes that reduced social inequalities more generally, by reducing the overall impact of poverty. The author highlights Berg's concern (1973, cited in Marsh, 2011, p.152):

The use of educational credentials is a screening device [that] effectively consigns large numbers of people, especially young people, to a social limbo defined by low skill, no opportunity jobs in the 'peripheral labour market'.

The impetus for Marsh (2011) to begin considering the limitations of a university education in relation to it addressing social inequalities arose from his own reflections on upward mobility. He had originated from a working class background and had developed a successful academic career. If he was able to achieve this then why could not others do the same? But his experiences in contributing to a widening participation programme aimed at mature learners illustrated the extent to which external factors including personal circumstances, the impact of poverty and the necessity of work impacted on people's engagement in this process. Near to the conclusion of his book the author articulates a difficult tension within this framework of teaching (ibid, p.202):

For a poor African American child growing up in the Bronx or East St. Louis, education maybe his or her first, last, and only chance. Declaring the whole thing a charade seems both heartless and hopeless. According to this position, education matters too much to abandon it out of mere principle or because it may distract from the fight against a greater injustice.

Marsh (ibid) suggests that realising the limitations of education in itself to conjure up opportunities that do not exist in the world of work, should not downgrade the importance that a good education can provide for a person. That while this process may lead to personal advancement, personal economic security and national productivity; "we should seek to make education more of an end in itself". It is suggested that while we can still argue for the civic right to access a high standard of education, the broader issues associated with addressing many of the issues encapsulated in social justice fall outside of its possible remit and sphere of influence.

The emphasis on the power of continued education in the United Kingdom higher educational policy papers published in the late 1990s has been argued by Tight (1998, p.478) to reveal a significant blind-spot in terms of "their lack of direct reference to anything that happens before the age of 16."

## Jackson and Marsden – routes out of the working class?

We've got no time for any questions or anything that leads off the syllabus ... I like teaching our A stream boys, but you should see our C stream! They're shocking, absolutely shocking. I don't like teaching them at all, and I don't know what it can be like in the secondary modern schools. I'm not made out for missionary teaching. (Jackson and Marsden, 1966, p.51)

These were the comments of a grammar-school teacher and, as the Jackson and Marsden (1966) study *Education and the Working Classes* clearly highlights, attitudes such as these compound the filtering process between class and ability. The authors argue that the system “shows how savagely and sadly a school system can become a tenacious self-fulfilling prophecy, cutting down talent in the hunt for the chosen few” (ibid, p.248). The authors use the metaphor of invisibility to suggest that the end product is a forgotten working class world that is there, but not seen; in the way that slum clearance and new suburban estates hide the poor from view. They use longitudinal test scores to reveal that (ibid, 249):

The statistics...tell us the story of how working-class and middle-class children enter primary school, with the second already having an advantage. The schools start the search for the gifted child, and use the device of A and B classes to help them. In the A classes the children's test scores improve, in the B classes they deteriorate. A working-class child in a B stream was – in these terms – duller when the school had finished with them than he was when his parents handed him over at five years ... society's dominant group knits the schools into standards and values so as to produce a school system which strongly favours its own children whilst appearances of justice and equality are suitably preserved. It is unlikely we will ever get a better statistical record of how the self-fulfilling prophesy works.

This historic educational text demonstrated that many of the working class children that managed to pass their entry exam were statistically more likely to make up C stream numbers and leave before taking A-Levels. Jackson and Marsden (ibid) report children experiencing alienation from their home cultures, anxieties about

fitting into a middle class set of values, having one foot in each of the two worlds, so to speak. What their research also revealed was a more divided sense of the working class, one rooted in their communities and fixed to location and another more concentrated on getting out and leaving their class origins behind.

This pattern of attainment is shown in McKenzie's analysis of schooling on the St Ann's estate (2015), where significant numbers of the children living in poverty progressively fail to flourish through their school careers. Beck's model of a risk society (1992) suggests that uncertainties and disruption accumulate around poverty and that an inability to move from a specific community through to flexible professional employment can exacerbate risk. A world negotiated through constant identity construction, as the post-modern project of self-financed enhancement that can personify the modern-day project of 'self' (Giddens, 1991) may not become viable options or relevant for all cultural groups and classes (Docherty, 2015; Simpson, 2011; Smith, 2005).

## **Willis and class replication – a boy's-eye view**

*Learning to Labour* (Willis, 1978), an ethnographic study of a group of male pupils nearing the end of their secondary schooling, engages the kind of pupils that the grammar-school teacher quoted in Jackson and Marsden (1966) appeared to consider needing missionary intervention. The "lads" as Willis referred to them, operated in opposition to those students that conformed to the expectations of the formal school ethos. The "lads" called these students the 'ear'oles'. The "lads" worked to create an environment in which learning was secondary to having a "laff", and, "...as a group they created a continuous hum of talk... and everywhere there are rolled-back eyeballs and exaggerated mouthings of conspiratorial secrets" (ibid, p.13). All around them was orchestrated chaos, as they formed what Willis described as a "counter- school" culture (ibid, p.124) and the individual transgressions and opposition to authority fitted into a framework of cultural "penetrations" (ibid, p.119) that asserted their class cultural allegiances, but failed to change their outcomes in relation to promoting social mobility after school. Willis's central thesis is that it in fact, replicated the conditions for perpetuating the passage from restricted and

oppositional engagement in education to working class jobs, in factories and production lines which historically became less stable through the 1980s as manufacturing declined (Jones, 2012; Willis, 2000). Like Reay, Davies, David and Ball (2001), Willis is not convinced that the purpose of education can be to address social inequalities. That advancement through merit is in effect a persistent, recurring and recycled myth. In terms of the upward pull of education, Willis (1978, p.128) suggests that “A few can make it. The class can never follow.” Diane Reay’s overview of her research practices, *Miseducation: inequality, education and the working classes* (2017, loc. 2202) suggests that little has changed and that:

... since the 1990s sociologists in education have been pointing out that educational choice is based on the resources and social power and networks of the parents rather than the ability and effort of the child. Meritocracy has become the educational equivalent of the emperor with no clothes, all ideological bluff.

Central to her argument is that middle class families are better equipped to navigate the school and education system (Reay, David and Ball, 2005). Parents use state school facilities and the streaming system to push for their children to be placed within the top sets. This effective monopolisation of education by the middle classes has produced a kind of educational apartheid in the state sector. The additional access to private tutoring is also a factor in building on their child’s competitive edge, of sitting high in the tables of achievement and ability to make more prestigious choices in higher education (Reay, 2017).

The focus of *Degrees of Choice* (Reay, David and Ball, 2005) ends by questioning the myth of social mobility, but throughout is concerned with getting a more balanced representation within elite universities. While arguing that this perpetuates middle class dominance of these institutions, the matter of how to best respond, as educators, to all those who are not drawn from the highest A-Level is not resolved or explored. Even if the balance was addressed in terms of representation in elite institutions, so that access matched the proportions of different groups within the whole population, the system as a whole would be relatively unchanged. This study does not really address the potential for higher education learning to be transformational for those students accessing with lower grades or through access

courses. Docherty (2015) picks up on this point and argues that even if working class access to elite institutions were to rise, this would still only represent a very small proportion of the working class, which was a concern raised by Jackson and Marsden (1966).

Engaging working class students in higher education is a central aspect of widening participation, but as we will see later in this review, though access to universities has dramatically expanded since the 1970s, there are still persistent issues relating to specific and diverse groups of students accessing and continuing their education journeys (Clarke and Beech, 2018).

Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2010) are critical of working class students that choose post-1992 universities out of a sense that they may feel less out of place in that kind of environment and that many of these establishments are said to emphasise their extracurricular activities above their academic credentials. The authors cite Bourdieu's concept of people excluding themselves from environments that they do not feel they would belong to, or that could make them feel uncomfortable. The authors cite Modood and Skinner (1994, quoted in Reay et al, 2005, p.114), stating that a disproportionate number of minority ethnic students access universities near to where they live. They also point out that, "...there is a process of class-matching which goes on between student and university; a synchronisation of familial and institutional habitus" (ibid, p.92). The point being that students are implicit in reducing their own academic aspirations. We can see from some of the student responses in this research that there are positive reasons that influence a strategy for students avoiding the more elite institutions.

Reay et al (2005, p.111) point out that "40 per cent of all ethnic minority higher education students are in London HEIs, mainly in the new universities." The general discussion is that working class students (ethnic minority students included) both limit their choices in doing this and make their self-exclusion from more prestigious universities worse. Whereas, it could be argued, there are some notable reasons for adopting this strategy. One being financial. Students can dramatically reduce the debt they accumulate over a three-year period. Another is the perceived potential to reduce experiencing forms of racism from within predominantly white environments.

Another significant reason for choosing a post-1992 university could be that lower entry requirements can positively facilitate entry into higher education and represent a real opportunity to gain an enabling qualification. It is suggested that students might feel happier to develop their learning identities without the additional stress of feeling 'othered' in a majority white learning environment (Daley, 2018). While the authors (Reay et al, 2005) do acknowledge the issues of perceived racism elsewhere, the main emphasis of their argument is often linked to lowered student aspiration, rather than positive student choices that are made in relation to fears of perceived institutional racism. Particular ethnic minority groups face additional barriers in terms of secondary education and grade attainment, so, attending post-1992 universities maybe a candidate's only viable option (Department of Education, 2018; Mason, 2003).

Reay's position (2017) implies that post-1992 universities themselves are partly responsible for the inequalities within the higher education sector that are associated with widening participation. This problematises how tutors, who may themselves feel caught in a "teaching ghetto", can make a positive difference (Hussey and Smith, 2010, p.5). Reay (ibid, loc. 2209) suggests that:

The new opportunities for the working-class have diminished value because they are studying in low-ranking universities with 'too many' students like themselves who are perceived to be low status.

On a professional level this comment highlights a troubling issue, not just for the students but also for the tutors who work within these institutions. The statement appears to suggest that in effect, within higher education a negative social streaming takes place – that tutors act like teachers working with lower sets that struggle to engage academically and as such, are not considered the 'right stuff' for university. Reay (2017) discusses this not just in her primary research, but also in relation to the experiences that she went through, first as a child and then as an adult learner. Both student and tutors appear to be 'tarred with the same brush' of low self-esteem and mediocre status and apparently, excluded from the wider process of meritocratic social mobility, but locked in a self-fulfilling educational ghetto. Bathmaker (2003) reminds the reader of the former bipartite structure in higher education and how research funding disproportionately supported the research driven universities to the



detriment of polytechnics. This added to the further disadvantage for the post-1992 universities where the majority of the 'non-traditional' students enrolled (Reay, 2017).

## **Breaking down the monopoly**

It is important not to bracket widening participation as simply a recent trend in higher education. Thomas (2013) in *A Short History of Education* reminds the reader that higher education had been monopolised by a much smaller cultural and capital elite and that education has also operated around a diverse range of routes in and out of formal classrooms and qualifications; night schools, distance learning, evening classes and university outreach programmes. Docherty (2015) highlighted the importance of the World Wars in shifting gender representation. Hall (2017) writes about being a black scholar at Oxford in the late 1950s. The British rap performer Stormzy has recently set up a foundation to help black candidates secure and fund places at Cambridge University (Cambridge University, 2021). Reay's (2017) main research output explores how educational elites have been controlled through restrictive access and shows how persistently less inclusive characteristics continue to mould aspects of the widening participation debate. Alternative routes for professional qualifications, such as Teacher Training Colleges (Jackson and Marsden, 1966) provided access into professional practice for a wider range of students from working class backgrounds; as former polytechnics provided increased levels of working class participation in higher education (Bathmaker, 2003). In many respects the development of Foundation degrees embedded opportunities for vocational training and 'second chances' within the higher education framework.

The work of Callendar and Thompson (2018) shows the decline again of some of these newer established routes into higher education qualifications. They highlight an area of real concern in relation to the recently changing nature of Higher education, and demonstrate conclusively that there has been a significant collapse in part-time study. This predominantly affects mature students and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds; those students that the authors consider most in need (ibid, 2018, p.3):

Studying later in life is an important 'second chance' route to social mobility, and part-time learners are more likely to be from less well-off backgrounds than those on full-time courses. Yet since the 2012 tuition fee rise, the numbers nationally have decreased by 51%. This is a serious blow for those who missed out on university when they were teenagers.

It can be clearly demonstrated that aspects of widening participation and perceived opportunities for upward social mobility are reduced, specifically when it comes to accessibility. While it can still be argued that the whole of higher education is now of a monolith construction, it is one with non-interconnecting networks and many of the historical inequalities that existed between previous tiers are as evident as ever (Brown and Scase, 2009; Bathmaker, 2003). More recently, reduced access has been exacerbated by the impact of the government imposition of loans and the risk of debt that these threaten or actually impose (Callendar and Thompson, 2018; Antonucci, 2016). Callendar and Thompson (ibid) point out that lifelong learning appears to have become more restrictive for less wealthy potential students, even when considering re-skilling, enrolling on a second degree, engaging with STEM subject areas or taking up less formal training.

## **The unification of higher education**

The study by Brown and Scase (1994) was carried out on the cusp of the unification of the higher education system. In fact, the interviewing of students and employers took place just prior to the change in status of polytechnics to new universities. This study questioned the apparent transformation as a wholly successful unification. The single-market favoured those institutions already wealthy enough to capitalise on the growth in student numbers. The prestige of institution and the cultivation of being seen as a 'safe pair of hands' maintained social advantage for middle class students in a changing career landscape. Flexibility and critical thinking were considered key skills for the fewer high level roles that oversaw newer and flatter hierarchies of organisational management. Invariably a 'safe pair of hands' would also mean that the employee's face fitted (along with the same schools and universities that they were likely to have attended). Brown and Scase (1994, p.41) argued that, "...a new

binary divide may emerge as many universities at the bottom end of the hierarchy become teaching only organisations.” The study (ibid, p.165) goes on to emphasise the social benefits associated with access to elite learning institutions and their corresponding cultural capital as “a power struggle for scarce credentials”, in a world where, “certificate holders always stand relative to one another.” Brown and Scase (1994) conclude that widening participation more generally led to an intensification in the race to monopolise elite educational and cultural advantages in order to ensure a competitive edge over the increasingly qualified opposition. They argue that the rhetoric of upward social mobility hides the perpetuation of social stratification running through a unified higher education system in name only, not form (1994, p.173):

In Britain, we have argued, the recent increase in graduate numbers will simply mean that differences between institutions of higher education will increase, rather like the situation in the United States, and the labour market for graduates will become polarised between the “fast-track” leading to senior managerial positions, and a mass of other jobs which offer little in the way of career prospects.

Changes in the university fees and loans system, coupled with the types of courses being offered has seen a reduction in part-time options available for mature learners or those studying whilst working, resulting in a dramatic change to the demographics of the current ‘non-traditional’ population in English universities (Callender and Thompson, 2018). Their work highlights a mismatch of intentions within the widening participation agenda.

## **Between two worlds**

Weis’s ethnographic study *Between Two Worlds: Black students in an urban community college* (1985) explores the relationships between neighbourhood, race and class in the United States. It analysed both student and tutor cultures within an institution that drew its students from the working class to train them for working class jobs or send them back to the ghetto, as the author suggests. Weis (1985) writes about the cultural tensions faced by black students being taught in academic

subjects by predominantly white tutors and by black or Hispanic tutors teaching less academic or vocational-facing subjects. White tutors reported feeling happy with their work, but did not mention their students or teaching as a positive aspect of practice that they enjoyed. In contrast, many of the black tutors commented on how much it meant to them to see students' progress from the streets into education to make what they saw as a better life for themselves. Weis's account (1985) illustrates the impact of 'othering' by white tutors; but the author also argues that students need to moderate and control their own cultural behaviours if they wish to conform to academic standards (middle class behaviours and styles), attend more lessons and read more in the library to, "become more familiar with the discourse of dominant groups if they are to challenge the class structure effectively" (ibid, p.166). While poverty is seen as an influence on problematic and chaotic attendance, Weis does not appear to fully prioritise or address the impact of resources on the completion of study. Though arguing for the rise of a more collective form of emancipatory education, Weis (ibid, p.163) emphasises the "...culture students produce, in the final analysis is self-destructive." More radical black academics such as Lorde (2018), would not agree that learning to talk white was the most effective strategy to overcome cultural domination, as her book title emphasises: *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House*. The continuation of poverty and social inequalities has been further exacerbated by the 2008 world recession that has led to a widespread crisis throughout the college system in the United States. Enormous numbers of students fail to complete their courses, struggle with housing, run up debt and face significant food poverty, with many tutors admitting that they regularly buy their students meals from their college canteens (Goldrick-Rab, 2018). The collective development of emancipatory education suggested by Weis (1985) as a force for change appears, over the intervening years, to have become as muffled as examples of the American dream enabling personal success from any culture or background. Universities need to find ways to bridge diverse cultural expectations, rather than to judge and label them as inadequate or without value. The subsequent work in the United States of The Freedom Writers and their college tutor Gruwell (2010) in the 1990s illustrates both the potential for engaging differently with diverse learners and the inherent resistance to this from higher education institutions. Instead of buying students sandwiches, Gruwell bought them books and note pads by taking on additional work outside of her teaching to pay for these basic resources.

## Paired peers: separate lives

The three year study of two English universities (one in the Russell Group and one a former polytechnic) *Paired Peers* (Bradley, Abrahams, Bathmaker, Beedell, Hoare, Ingram, Mellor, Ingram and Waller, 2013) picked up on some key themes from the Brown and Scase study (1994); nearly twenty years on from the establishment of the unified sector. The study highlights the social value placed on getting a degree at university, as it is seen as an essential requirement for career progression, whether or not its value is relative to those awarded through elite access to higher education. But the research additionally reveals the cracks that clearly separate off smaller post-1992 institutions from their wealthier and more ably resourced counterparts. The importance of which kind of institution a student accesses, continues to impact on class and social trajectories and is seen as maintained by institutional orientation, family wealth and the closeness of fit in relation to acquired social and cultural capital. While some working class students were clearly enabled through their study to transcend their class origins, trajectories were really set by family knowledge of playing educational systems and advantageous social networking opportunities. Working class students were clearly reduced in their ability to access extra-curricular events and networking opportunities, on top of the additional distraction of needing to work their way through university. What is clear from this study is that the middle class student's sense of right to access a Russell group university is matched equally by their previous educational and cultural grooming (as far fewer students from working class backgrounds gain places there). Not all of them however coped with having less attention from tutors than they got from their previous teachers. There was evidence that some working class students adapted more robustly to the rigours of light touch independent learning. The authors (ibid, 2013) argue that the resilience associated with overcoming challenges on their journeys to get to university might have enabled working class students not to expect to be spoon fed. The study shows that middle class students still tended to leave with more opportunities available to advance their career aspirations. A stark expression of the continuing class division between the two local institutions was expressed in the name calling by some Russell group students of the residential units owned by the

other university, as Poverty Hall and Council Court. In the unified system of higher education clearly the unity is not structural or necessarily cultural.

Interestingly, all students agreed that universities generally should concentrate their development funding on additional tutor time and library services (Bradley et al, 2013). The authors suggest that this goes against the grain in the current climate of higher education neoliberalism, where buildings and IT equipment appear to be prioritised before teaching staff. Though this was highlighted as a top priority for both working class and middle class students, for the latter it was considered particularly important. It would not appear that this has been a key concern for senior managers within higher education more generally, as a growing reliance on the widespread deployment and subsequent demoralisation of fixed-term and part-time contracted staff might indicate (University College Union, 2019).

## **Section 2: Who are the ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional’?**

Trowler (2015, pp. 298-99) provides a concise definition of the qualities that characterise what a ‘traditional’ student identity is bounded by:

In the same way that the ‘other’ has been distinguished from the ‘norm’ in many other contexts (for example, ‘non-white’ used as a bucket-term to cover all people whose only common characteristic is that they are not ‘white’; or ‘non-academic’ which is still used in many universities to designate all staff whose only common characteristic is that they are not employed on academic conditions of employment)... ‘non-traditional’ students exist as a group only in the presence of ‘traditional’ students. These ‘traditional’ students are often understood in the UK higher education context to be native British, mostly white, from broadly Christian traditions, fully able-bodied, middle or upper class, heterosexual young people whose parents attended higher education, directly transitioning from public or ‘decent’ state schools, with the requisite numbers and grades of Highers or A-Levels, and without dependents or family responsibilities, studying full-time, forming a gendered distribution among the disciplines.

The term 'non-traditional' student is directly related to the expansion in access to higher education by people who are most likely to be the first in their family to progress beyond mandatory secondary schooling; and the characteristics of this classification includes people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, mature students, part-time learners, learners from minority ethnic groups, vocational and work-based learners, disabled learners and care leavers (Moore, Sanders and Higham, 2013). Docherty reminds us that women would have been considered part of this group previously (2015). In their review of research into higher education and widening participation, Moore et al (2013) present a range of problematic issues associated with students from these groups once they have successfully accessed university programmes. A key area of concern is that as a whole, they are more likely than their 'traditional' counterparts to impact on the attrition statistics and drop-out from courses before completing. Much of the review indicated this area as a major concern. It represents specifically a drop in potential income for the universities they leave and negatively impacts on the multiple statistics that generate their position within the university league tables (Thomas, 2012).

Kim (2002) and Kim, Sax, Lee and Serra Hagedorn (2010) suggest a number of issues associated with the global use of 'non-traditional' student. The authors argue that the term in itself is too broad a category to be useful as a signifier for educational need. That to be useful, it needs to be understood first as a term that encapsulates a wide range of diversity, but in addition, it tends to display contradictory qualities and at worst can hide specific learning needs by pushing this group into marginal positions within the system. Essentially, that the term itself could carry an element of exclusion. For example, the increased access of 'non-traditional' students to higher education prompts the discussion of whether these students are becoming the 'new-traditional' and whether or not some previously 'traditional' students are more like 'non-traditional' ones. This can operate in both ways, for example with part-time working and the apparent lack of active classroom participation. We can see these characteristics partly emerge in Nathan's (2005) account of her ethnography of a freshman's year, which she undertook after she stopped understanding student behaviours as a professor. She was bemused by her observations of her students missing classes, not engaging in reading, working part-time jobs and their strategic approach to study. These were, in her view,

characteristics that described 'traditional' student behaviour and that ethnic minority students appeared to take their education more seriously than many of the white 'traditional' students, who were fitting it into their other roles and activities alongside their various college, leisure and work networks.

Moore, Sanders and Higham (2013) did not use the word to encapsulate the list of students they outlined, but at various points in their review, 'non-traditional' backgrounds were mentioned and the difficulties that some of these students were having with their student identities and the pressures associated with feeling at ease with terms such as 'independent learner'. There was also a theme within the research implying that working class and minority ethnic students were 'failing to be engaged by or being alienated by some pedagogical practices' (ibid, p.60). Integrating cultural and power issues into the curriculum and reducing the emphasis of the formal written text as an academic assessment were raised as areas that needed additional research, as they appear to be thematic issues within the widening participation research. Students feeling valued by staff and proactive personal tutoring were highlighted as having a positive impact on retention of students and how they felt about their studies and their time engaged in higher education (a strong theme found within this research). The authors also cite Thomas's report, *Building student engagement and belonging in higher education at a time of change* (2012, cited in Moore et al, 2013) on the centrality of fostering an encapsulating "culture of belonging that maximises the success of all students, as opposed to interventions targeted at particular groups..." Thomas argues that higher educational institutions need not to address problems within a problematic student deficit model; it is not so much for the students to change, but for institutional transformations to respond better to the specific needs of students. Since the time of writing this report, carried out in part as preparation for major changes anticipated in the relationships that universities would have with their future fee-paying customers, the pressures on recruitment, rather than belonging may have over-ridden some of this optimism. The financial limitations and risks many universities face to keep afloat was very recently highlighted by the University and College Union in *Universities at Risk* (2010) and in more recent media coverage (Fazackerley, 2018).



## **Square peg, round hole: fitting in or accommodating?**

Like Kim et al (2010), Thomas (2012) implies that one group title does not cover the specific learning needs of individual students and Trowler (2015) suggests that the term 'non-traditional' is a potentially labelling term that has both contested and chaotic functions as a student marker. This 'culture of belonging' is questioned directly by Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011) as their quantitative study on student retention highlights the external obstacles and barriers that 'non-traditional' students experience in relation to course completion. Their findings suggest that 'non-traditional' students that do drop out of courses are characterised by lower perceptions of social integration and engaged with fewer university services than those that continued. The most significant finding statistically, was whether that person was employed, while they studied. This was a significant single correlation in their findings. Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011, p. 34) suggest that the institutional transformation discussed earlier may be a little more problematic:

...it is interesting, therefore to thoroughly analyse this type of student, upon whom the present university policies could have a paradoxical effect: on the one hand, they encourage their enrolment in the university system, partly because of the emphasis on lifelong learning, but on the other hand they do not seem to be concerned about understanding their needs and circumstances, thereby maintaining an institutional system designed for a very different type of student.

The impact of students, specifically those entering from lower socio-economic backgrounds, needing to work their way through their time at universities (in Australia) has been highlighted as a major change in the experiences of both students and tutors (Munro, 2011). In a more recent study by Antonucci (2016) comparing experiences in England, Italy and Sweden, the wider impact of this on individual emotional and psychological well-being and the negative sense of optimism for future success raises many concerns. The author illustrates an increase in 'personal risk' for 'non-traditional' students as it reduces their abilities to designate sufficient time for study. In addition, it enhances the stressors that impact on

learning, their financial burden and can compromise student well-being and future post-education outcomes.

Aside from there not being an agreed list of characteristics, not all social scientists in education use the term 'non-traditional'. For example, there is only one use of the term in *Degrees of Choice* (Reay et al, 2005, p.83), which we can interpret as not a fully accepted term to use. Reay et al (2005) have essentially subsumed this category under the banner of class.

### **“They talk about people like me in social policy...”**

Trowler (2015) points out that many students that could be classified as 'non-traditional' do not necessarily see themselves represented in this construct; as many class themselves as hailing from more 'traditional' cultural and faith backgrounds. This ambivalence to whether the term fits is evident in the participant interviews and contained in the sentiments expressed in student cultural accounts. But using a matrix of factors could be applied to locate more specifically how the student could define themselves and/or express their potential learning needs. This type of approach to a large 'lumped together' group could separate people out and indicate more personalised definitions of self and potential areas for personal development. Trowler (2015, p. 297) states:

The conception of 'non-traditional' when applied to students encompasses a large variety of characteristics that have little of significance in common, do not form structures, nor do they interact causally in any notable fashion.

Rather they are included by virtue of what they are not, rather than by virtue of any essential characteristic that they possess in common.

In Bowl's participatory study (2001), the term 'non-traditional' is used as a marker of student need, but the increased access of these students did not result in a corresponding change in the culture of higher education to respond directly to a whole range of needs that are the result of using widening participation policies in the first place. Bowl cites Weil's studies (1986; 1989. Bowl, 2001, p.142) suggesting that many 'non-traditional' students arrive to higher education in a "state of shock"

and sharply aware of feelings of 'personal powerlessness'. Bowl (ibid, p.142-143) indicates that there is strong evidence to suggest traumatic and isolating experiences are common and that for many ethnic minority students fears of these issues can be amplified in relation to their white working class cohorts. Bowl specifically uses the accounts of the learners to open up debate about how the habitus and field (Jenkins, 2002) of academia can both be inappropriately imposed or remain stubbornly rigid when faced with difference. The study highlights an important point about engagement in topics of learning and how the university curriculum tended to silence certain lived experiences that many of the 'non-traditional' students would be able to share personal insight into. One of the respondents thought that talking about racism in class with a majority of white students and tutors, for example, "makes them feel they've done something wrong..." (Bowl, 2001, p.150). Many 'non-traditional' students felt silenced, marginalised and faced issues negotiating benefit payments and loans. Many of the arriving 'non-traditional' students were studying in poverty and even should they struggle to achieve their degree, they were no nearer to resolving their financial circumstances through fresh employment options either. Figures from the Institute of Fiscal Studies (Belfield, Britton, Buscha, Dearden, Dickson, Van der Erve and Zhu, 2018) clearly show the relative earning value of degrees from the Russell Group universities and pre-1992 universities compared to those awarded by post-1992 institutions. Subject choice accounts for many of the additional variations in potential graduate earnings on offer. As we see from the narratives explored in this study, this can be sharply felt in relation to course and subject hierarchy within institutions (and can be felt both by student and tutor).

While the term 'non-traditional' appears not to relate directly to one group or culture, the concept of a community of need may be an appropriate general term to use to break down this problematic categorisation of groups (Freire, 1972; Poppel, 2015). The seminal work of Freire (1972) was both a guide to approaching needs assessment specifically and the term conscientization operationalised this process to explore specific need of those engaged in learning. The corresponding concept of a shared community of learning (developed in New Zealand) could link tutor research around engagement to break down the barriers between professional practice

(academic expectation) and student and tutor co-learning learning (Mills and Morton, 2013).

## **Measuring the ‘non-traditional’ entities**

Kenner and Weinerman highlight Horn’s ranking system (1996, cited in 2011, p.88) to judge the degree to which a student may be considered to be ‘non-traditional’. This intersectional aspect of ‘non-traditional’ (and then by implication, ‘traditional’) is an important area in terms of the whole debate around whether it can even operate as a useful homogenising term, given the diversity of those found within the construct. In a more recent review of the term (Chung and Turnbull, 2014) the authors are still none the wiser and in many respects repeat previous findings in that they confirm that the term is largely used in international research literature. They do make a pertinent addition to the debate in pointing out that readers were not sufficiently able, in many cases, to identify the specific groups being discussed within the wider literature. Chung and Turnbull (2014, p.1234) are unable to provide a consistent definition that encapsulates all the variables encountered and conclude by accepting that the ‘societal, geographical and systemic contexts’ of each study would tend to establish use if addressed by the researchers clearly. Chung and Turnbull raise an important area in relation to research, student well-being and policy development in highlighting that there is not always clarity around what the purpose of naming this ‘group’ is in the first place. Particularly as they argue that the global trend in widening participation suggests that many of those so categorised will eventually make up a new tradition in higher education student demographics. The authors (2014, p.1234) argue the following:

... the use of the term ‘non-traditional’ does not necessarily reflect ‘under representativeness’ as suggested by its historical origin and serves little value in communicating a distinct concept. It is recommended that researchers re-examine the purpose of categorising ‘non-traditional’ status ... For instance, does ‘non-traditional’ refer to having characteristics which are common among majority of students? Or does it refer to having characteristics which predispose university students to non-completion of their degree/program?

The point of clarifying purpose means that institutions may be in a better position to respond to the changes in student diversity, but as we have seen this is a contentious area of debate as the monolithic and historical nature of university culture appears either unable or unwilling to change, forcing conformity to ingrained academic expectations instead. We might just as well be asking, what is the purpose of learning in higher education? Can or should higher education be an environment that pro-actively addresses the barriers and the effect of educational inequalities that have been transferred from schooling and the social context in general?

In naming this as a 'fluid' concept Chung and Turnbull (2014) suggest that the work of Kim et al (2010) presents a positive strategy to control some of this inconsistency or more specifically to narrow down the range of associated characteristics. They suggest that through student centred studies that allow self-definition, more specific group qualities can be determined. This approach could then be more specific in terms of purpose around what institutions can effectively do to accommodate difference and diversity; both to improve student well-being and more effectively support learning potential. Rather than being confined to research, this approach could inform aspects of student induction through a personalised process of needs assessment or be embedded more specifically in curriculum development that reflects the diverse needs of different groups and their expectations of higher education in comparison to the academic expectations placed on students, too.

Many universities in the USA run a module that encourages freshers to engage in a chosen piece of literature, as a way of 'bonding' as a group (Nathan, 2005). A biographical or auto-ethnographic module that explores a student's learning journey, their experiences of education, what they like to read or use to learn, their aspirations, attitudes and fears. This kind of approach moves away from blanket assumptions and critically develops individualised assessments of need that can be used as an informal plan to maximise study, alongside ensuring that students are aware of services that can support their specific needs.

The research participants in this project met more than one of the defined characteristics listed under the widening participation markers but invited participants to consider how or whether they felt part of this 'umbrella term' and whether the term

was considered useful for universities in terms of the potential support they could offer in teaching and learning.

## **Am I really an academic? Imposter syndrome and defence mechanisms**

Working with students to develop curriculum materials, topics and themes is an under-researched area in relation to engagement (Trowler and Trowler, 2010) and relates to the practical application of aspects of learning attached to this research project and will be discussed further in the closing chapter.

A deficit student bias would place responsibility for change on to the student to raise their performances to meet academic standards and therefore focus less on how the university or the individual lecturers might contribute to the situation or how they could improve practice to work better with students to address areas of perceived need (Becker, 1998; Mac an Ghail, 1993). We see aspects of this blame culture in Findlow's (2012) account of responses by nursing tutors teaching when the graduate qualification threshold was introduced as a practice standard for nurses. The research highlights (2012, p.124) that lecturers complained about 'under achievement', a 'lack of analytical depth' and a failure in what many people describe as evidence-based practice (the linking of theory to practice scenarios). Other grumbles included the lack of background reading, not being able to link ideas across study to understand practice, seeing the 'bigger picture' and the lack of a critical response to ideas. However, the research paper is nuanced in that it sets some of these issues within other concurrent narratives relating to some of the issues implied by widening participation – that the students begin study with lower standards of entry, that they come from 'non-traditional' backgrounds bringing with them a potential set of issues that challenge this newly emergent and 'self-conscious' academic discipline. The nurse tutors themselves felt like 'academic imposters'. Findlow's study (2012) is one of the few that openly explores the fact that not only are some of the students in question 'non-traditional', so too are the tutors (coming to academia from practice, not from a PhD) and from similar backgrounds as some of those they were teaching. As they were worried about the performance

of their students, they too were anxious about their own academic credibility within the broader institution (ibid, p.127):

As a nurse lecturer my students want me to be a nurse, the university want me to be an academic, and my academic mentor would like me undertaking research. In truth we are pulled in all directions.

Identity can be as much a problem for tutors and some of these themes come out in this research and relate to differences in perceived professional roles and academic identities. Findlow's paper (2012) did not emphasise the insight that the tutors had in relation to teaching engagement and tended to fall back on traditional 'chalk and talk' approaches to prescriptive learning techniques.

We will see from the student and tutor monographs how universities could utilise this situation as a real advantage in terms of developing engaged, authentic and empathic learning opportunities for tutors and students to share their experiences and explore common barriers that emerge around the term 'non-traditional'.

### **Section 3: New identities and ethnic minority positions within the class**

Reay (2017, loc. 218) discusses the impact on her own development, having read *Education and the Working Class*, (Jackson and Marsden, 1966), as it explored the diversity 'of being working class' and how this restrained a tendency to understand this group from her own specific experiences. She talks about becoming a teacher and working with predominantly working class children, but differently to the demographic studied by both Willis (1978) and Jackson and Marsden (1966), as many of the children were ethnically diverse. Clearly this group have gone on to form a large section of those now accessing higher education (Modood, 2003). Whilst many would have gone through schooling in the UK some through their personal diaspora have used access courses much later in life to gain entry and have very different school narratives. Reay (2017, loc. 225) goes on to explain her growing discontent and cognitive dissonance, as a realisation that her commitment to

addressing inequalities in education, her hard work and “sheer force of love” was not enough.

## **Binary definitions of ‘self’ and ‘other’**

Goffman (1963) presents what appears to be an essentially a binary definition of social identity and one where the reader may consider the question of identity is a ‘black and white’ construction formed around two polar opposites. However, his system has within it a more complex set of relationships when applied more generally to how people define themselves and others. A more fluid base of interrelationships (1963, loc. 2073 - 2068):

In conclusion, may I repeat that stigma involves not so much a set of concrete individuals who can be separated into two piles, the stigmatized and the normal, as a perceived two-role social process in which every individual participates in both roles, at least in some connections and in some phases of life. The normal and the stigmatised are not persons but rather perspectives.

It is this interplay of being across different social situations and institutional interactions where opportunities for fixed definitions begins to break down and it is the breaking down of these polarities that has been explored in more recent discussions of identity. People are not just defined by who they consider themselves to be, but are defined by wider judgements made by other groups within the social mix (Mason, 2003). We define ourselves; but are also forced to define ourselves in relation to others and others define us in relation to themselves. What informs these constructions of self is not an arbitrary process and involves consideration of much wider historical situations. Wright-Mills (1959, p.3) provides a succinct summary of this: “neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both.” This is a complex task and in Wright-Mills’s world, a considerable project to undertake, let alone achieve. In his construction of the sociological imagination, it is only through moving from the local perspective of an individual life to the global arrangements of history, power and social movement that either can be understood: “No social study that does not come back to the problems of biography, of history and their intersections within a society has completed its



intellectual journey” (ibid, p.6). Most people are not up to this task, according to Wright-Mills and his writing is extremely gendered, in that his discourse appears to only include men as the sole active agents capable of developing these kinds of insights. The model presented raises the bar in terms of the challenges that social theorists need to integrate (Wright-Mills, 1959, p.7):

For the imagination is the capacity to shift from one perspective to another – from the political to the psychological; from examination of a single family to comparative assessment of the national budgets of the world; from the theological school to the military establishment; from considerations of an oil industry to studies of contemporary poetry. It’s the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self – and to see the relations between the two.

This process of locating individual identities will be dependent on who it is that undertakes the enterprise. Neither is history a straightforward procedure of understanding the past in order to illuminate the present situation. It is largely dependent on who constructs this history; it is mediated through ethnicity, gender, class and competing cultures (Hall and du Gay, 1996; Hall, 2000; Brah, 2007; Simpson, 2011; Eddo-Lodge, 2017; Daley, 2018).

The popularity of Eddo-Lodge’s account of racism (2017), reminds the reader that history informs current social situations, but that many marginalised ethnic minority accounts are frequently underrepresented within mainstream discussion. The author relates this to ‘black’ experiences and the inherent barriers that many minority ethnic students face within the education system as a whole and points out (ibid, loc. 851-57):

It’s worth looking at the distinct lack of black and brown faces teaching at university to see what might contribute to this systemic failure. In 2016, it was revealed by the Higher Education statistics Agency that almost 70 percent of the professors teaching in British universities are white men. It’s a dire indication of what universities think intelligence looks like.

The title of Eddo-Lodge’s book (2017), *Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People About Race*, raises many issues that relate to being a white man, such as myself,

teaching in classes that include an ethnically diverse range of students. The author reminds the white reader that they can often feel uncomfortable when talking directly about racism, or worse still retain an unconscious bias more generally through holding a 'colour blind' mentality that assumes equality when in fact institutional racism and unconscious bias is still very much apparent. We saw this also in black narratives in Bowl's research (2001).

Stuart Hall (2000; 2017) describes that during his upbringing in Jamaica he never heard other people refer to anyone as 'black' and that it was only on his arrival to the UK in the 1950s that he heard the term applied. He mentioned that his grandmother was an expert in identifying different shades of brown; "people think of Jamaica as a simple society. In fact, it had the most complicated colour stratification system in the world." (2000, p.149). Hall then described how family members would calculate a person's social position through reference to shades of brown (ibid, p.249):

Black is not a question of pigmentation. The Black I am talking about is a historical category, a political category, a cultural category.

Hall describes the term 'multiculturalism' (the 'celebration' of diversity) as the enemy of identity, as while there was little interest from the white community to talk about racism, there was an appetite for eating exotic food, the enjoyment of 'exotic' songs argot and wearing ethnic costumes. The process of 'othering' has been a perpetual model of human behaviour that has been used as a marker to denote people not immediately part of one's own group. It forms an aspect of the dualistic opposition described in the seminal work on deviancy by Goffman (1963) and is an aspect of what Hall (2000; 2017) describes with the term 'black'. One essential quality being set in opposition to another; Dressman (2008) points out that these binary constructs, such as, normal/deviant, white/black, male/female and straight/gay have a tendency to promote one side of the 'coin' as being the 'better' of the two. Goffman (1963, loc. 2158 - 2163) writes:

...in group deviants, minority members, and lower class persons are all likely on occasion to find themselves functioning as stigmatized individuals, unsure of the reception awaiting them in face-to-face interaction and deeply involved in the various responses to this plight.

By “in group deviants” Goffman refers to those people that would now be characterised as living with a disability, so within today’s educational context this would include people who have been diagnosed with dyslexia. Though not a visible ‘stigma’, as such it might become public through education and within the classroom.

The binary constructions are neither neutral or equal in their opposition (Hall and du Gay, 1996, loc. 183 - 193):

Moreover, they emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity – an ‘identity’ in its traditional meaning (that is, an all-inclusive sameness, seamless, without internal differentiation)...

The term ‘non-traditional’ is a clear case of being the absence of any quality related to ‘traditional’ and the modalities of power could relate to the education system as a key influence in its manifestation. ‘Traditional’ students attend the more prestigious universities, whilst the ‘non-traditional’ (aside from a relatively small number who gain access through their high grades) take a different route into post-1992 institutions. The term is like saying that someone is a kind of ‘non-student’; white students would rarely, if ever, find themselves described as being ‘non-black’. Having an absence informing a definition might very well invalidate aspects of being able to maintain a positive student identity. Brah (2007, p. 136) contextualises this problem in stating:

... the question of who people think they are, how they define the boundaries around ‘us’ and ‘them’ and what follows from their identifications with others proved to be the key to understanding both emerging and historical patterns of social relations.

By approaching identity using a framework of intersectionality we can potentially begin to unpick differences, whilst attempting to create a less divisively constructed framework of othering. Brah (2007) argues that this process of understanding difference and similarity must span various academic disciplines and that the complexities of understanding each other will, through this, begin to reveal both specificity and complexity in how each relates relatively to a sense of belonging,

rather than producing a problematic essentialist and fixed position of identity that can avoid splitting identity in a binary opposition. One of the key points in this debate is that identity is a process of becoming, rather than an 'absolutely accomplished fact' (ibid, p.139). Brah (2007) uses the example of exploring the position of women using the concept of difference, but not in relation to men, but amongst themselves as a monolithic group. The intersectionality of an individual female identity can therefore be explored in terms of gender as a whole, but also in relation to 'race' and class. It is very clear from the data collected in this research that 'binarized' identity is an insufficient model to use in actively understanding the student and lecturer narratives and that while this in many respects deconstructs the 'non-traditional' identity marker, it offers a more specifically individual approach to understanding how the participants define themselves in the present and their future aspirations. It effectively allows participants to define themselves within the broader social and historical frameworks they choose to place themselves in; but offers clear opportunities for them to explore jointly their specific needs in relation to the learning and teaching environment. It could reduce the potential for tutors and organisations to stereotype groups, open up authentic opportunities of mutual learning and integrate this through an inclusive curriculum that can begin to break down perceived and real barriers or expressions of power and disengagement. It could allow for a more dynamic and person-centred definition of self, allowing a fuller expression of self in relation to students' understanding of their social contexts. A dialogue that acknowledges their challenges, but also their efficacy in relation to developing narratives of change. Ones that could support strategies of development or affirmation of their identities and the opportunities they have to build on their 'possible selves' (Stevenson and Clegg, 2011). In terms of pedagogical or more strictly andragogic approaches, this would involve some aspects of learning built around what Freire (1972) termed *conscientization* and inform debate around 'critical consciousness' (Freire, 1972) that could enable students to both locate themselves within learning institutions and facilitate how they can use education to propel their 'future selves'. Thereby managing and anticipating many of the challenges they faced in their journey through learning and the contexts within which they have learnt (Sleeter, Torres and Laughlin, 2004).

One of the prime reasons for introducing formative student cultural accounts into the learning environment was to introduce discussion within the classroom and for students to share and learn from each other's experiences. This could enable classroom debate to explore ways that people's lives had both been compromised or enriched through their education. By more specifically building in inclusive curriculum content, universities can begin to engage students in meaningful learning that they have a direct stake in participating in and setting in terms of the interaction of learning. The fourth section of this review looks at literature that might support this.

Brah (2007, pp.143 - 144) makes the point that:

In terms of our identifications (or contra-identifications, for that matter), we are all diasporized across multiple social and psychic 'borders', and the 'homing desire' is a desire for security and belonging... The point is that multiple processes are involved in the construction of what we call identities. They are not a priori givens. Identities mobilize both personal biography and group history.

The point is that identities can be seen as multiple constructions that respond to different circumstances and that active and new identity formation is not formulaic, but a potential response to a person's experiences of specific social environments they access or are prevented from entering. Collective historical narrative may bind groups and individual navigation and life-plans or personal ambitions demonstrate differences. One's sense of self may indeed compete with formal, traditional and imposed sets of suggested characteristics. It may actively confront those labels or expectations that are being imposed from outside or by dominant ideological practices and institutional forces demanding conformity.

## **Section 4: Working class and ethnic minority modalities – native and immigrant**

The contention that post-1992 institutions and their student bodies have a tendency to reduce academic expectations and 'dumb down' aspiration strikes a chord with the covering up of stigma and spoiled identities described by Goffman (1963, loc. 2149):

...Like ethnic and racial ghettos, these communities [social deviants] constitute a haven of self-defence and a place where the individual deviator can openly take the line that he is at least as good as anyone else.

In emphasising the ghettoization of working class students and their own apparent willingness to access particular institutions, Reay (2017) and Reay et al (2005) appear to confirm a persistent labelling of the working class student as the 'other'. Which would appear to berate them for not aiming higher academically and suggesting that they have in fact aligned themselves, by association, with further stigma. This illustrates the complexity of the higher education system and the potential of it to continue to damage student and tutor identities that by necessity operate within the lower status fields of practice. It might appear to leave both student and tutor languishing in self-doubt, either ignorant of their situation or deceived by their genuine attempt to value the products and processes that confirm their learning and development. It surveys the bigger picture, on the one hand, but does not allow for there being any real sense of learning or achievement by those excluded from the field of academic excellence. To understand the realities of higher education as a unified system appears to be a matter of belief, like in the novel *The City & The City* (Mieville, 2010). This novel has a central theme of two cities existing in one location and the citizens from each are bound by law to live separate lives. They achieve this through a process of "unseeing" and any wilful failure to do this triggers a "breach", which in the novel, is punishable by law:

With a hard start, I realised that she was not on Gunter-Strasz at all, and that I should not have seen her. Immediately and flustered I looked away, and she did the same, with some speed...

This metaphor is an ongoing example of people living in the same location (higher education) but each in a different place. A continuous life of being and non-being, of belonging and separation. It was not that people could earn the right to live in the more affluent section or were able to move there with a desired set of skills or social attributes; it could only be achieved by accident of birth. The story is in many respects fatalistic and determinist, a place that actors are unable to acknowledge their own position in society, unable to change it should they wish. It establishes a

sense of 'homelessness' or grandiose sense of not being able to overcome your immediate circumstances.

The following discussion of literature explores aspects of belonging and the pressures around operating within or across different cultural worlds. The literature has been selected partly because it highlights the voices from diverse and shifting cultural perspectives. Much of the literature could certainly inform aspects of classroom debate and engage students in discussion of their own lived experiences, providing a validation through the advocacy of unheard voices and complex identity constructions that resist stigma and the concept of being spoilt by virtue of being excluded from academic discussion. Lived experiences can inform taught learning, just as taught learning can help to contextualise lived experiences. These diverse perspectives can be felt as being stifled or lacking credibility within university teaching environments or they can be seen as not sufficiently middle class to conform to academic excellence (Reay, 2017; Moore et al, 2013; Craddock, 2018; Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003; Bowl, 2001). 'Fitting in' or 'sticking out' is a theme that appears not to have been resolved in the research literature centred on 'non-traditional' experiences in university.

## **Of Snakes and Ladders: the impact of place and home cultures on learning**

The things that were difficult for low income kids included being identifiable as receiving free school meals, being told off for not having resources or the correct uniform, missing out of trips because of cost, missing out on PE because of a lack of PE kit, being left out during show and tell time, being bullied for not having the same branded clothing, phones or accessories as their peers, not being able to access extra-curricular opportunities because of the cost of public transport if they missed the school bus. (Hudson, 2012, p.137)

Hudson (2012) interviews the head teacher at a school that she had attended as a child, that she remembers as working sympathetically with working class students,

especially those experiencing the impact of poverty. The school had introduced a branded and affordable water bottle for their students, as it was observed that even the type of water bottle a child brought into school could be a marker of poverty and stigma.

Hudson, whose upbringing (and eventual access to higher education) was graphically portrayed in the semi-autobiographical novel *Tony Hogan Bought Me an Ice-cream Float before he Stole my Ma* (2019), provides an insight into many of these areas of stigma and discrimination. The impact of a harsh schooling environment, in which some teachers and pupils judged and compared children raised in poverty suggests division with working class culture. As Janie, the central character of the book (ibid, p.213), negotiated the painful fallout of being singled out for social exclusion, she would often skip school and head for her local library:

On the days when it was too much, and I bit my lip and picked my cuticles bloody while trying not to cry, I'd catch the bus to town, take off my tie and button up my denim jacket and try to breathe past the panic...until I got far enough away from school. If the librarians thought I was a skiver they never said a word. Maybe they realised that I learned more those afternoons than I ever did sitting in Home Economics or RE listening to people whisper that I was a smelly cunt.

This is an area that is highlighted in the work of Hanley (2016), who explored the distinctions between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor. Her term for the 'deserving poor' is encapsulated in the title of her autobiography, *Respectable*. The author discusses Willis's seminal work, *Learning to Labour* (1978) from the perspective of how 'the lads' at school were so intent on spoiling classroom learning for other students keen to engage and how she was unable to fathom why they were so intent on behaving disruptively. Hanley was unable to understand how they could not comprehend how their behaviour would be a self-fulfilling strategy that would ensure that they remained part of the process of class reproduction and precarious future employment. Hanley (2016) quoted a young man from the Social Exclusion Task Force report, *Aspiration and Attainment amongst Young People in Deprived Communities* (2008, cited in Hanley, 2016, p.192):



'I want to be an electrician, but I am going to go to prison... I don't want to. That's just what is going to happen'. Another shrugs: 'There is no point in trying, because I am no good at anything.'

Hanley (ibid) in contrast, saw education as a possible escape route, from both 'dead end', temporary and monotonous future employment. In addition, it provided a pathway out of the environment of a working class estate, that some might demonise and label as a ghetto (McKenzie, 2015). The impact of place and living environment is viscerally explored in the powerful and hard-hitting poetry-slam performance on YouTube by Clint Smith (2013) in which he compacts the interwoven and psycho-social impact of a hostile social architecture and the inadequate educational context that his teaching practice took place within:

These are my students,  
My warriors,  
Fighting a battle against an enemy they cannot clearly see.  
These kings and queens,  
Meant to feast not to fester,  
But their zip code has already told them that their life expectancies are 30  
years shorter than the county seven miles away.  
I can see the faults of my own ancestry shaking in their eyes.  
Diabetes and high blood pressure run through the roots of my family tree.  
Heart disease is as much a part of my history as shackles and segregation.  
So from my father's kidney transplant to Oliva's asthma,  
These things are more than mere coincidence.  
Both grew up in places more accustomed to gunshots than gardens.  
  
So tell me place doesn't matter...

Smith's (ibid) 'warriors' are black, 'brown-skinned' and Hispanic children attempting to overcome the challenges that their lived experiences have forced them to struggle against. The poem distils a sense of the historical impact of social injustices and segregation that is literally mapped out in the children's health and well-being.

The Universities UK and National Union of Students (2019) report an attainment gap of 13% between the final results of minority ethnic groups and their fellow, white students. This is a concerning statistic, not least as something unexplainable happens in relation to the fact that A-Level results have shown that even Chinese and Indian British students who generally exceed other ethnic groups (Department of Education Skills and Training, 2021) experience a relative drop in their final degree classification results. Black A-Level students continue to attain lower marks than most ethnicities listed and Gypsy, Roma and Travellers fall far behind all groups. The links to poverty, social bias and the impact of social exclusion experienced by these groups are stark (Greenfields and Rogers, 2020; NUS and Universities UK, 2019). In 2018-19 there were only 184 known Gypsy, Roma and Traveller students studying in higher education (Office for Students, 2020) which highlights considerable concerns in relation to the comparative success of widening participation between different ethnic groupings and communities.

McGarvey's autobiographical assessment of living on the fringes in poverty, *Poverty Safari: Understanding the Anger of Britain's Underclass* (2018) describes the toxicity of poverty on family and child development and the challenges this manifests through schooling and the negative consequential outcomes that can weld to a person's future life-script. Schooling is explored in relation to negative formative experiences of socialisation. The author (ibid, loc. 132 - 140) states:

People like me don't write books – or so my head keeps telling me. 'Write a book?' it sneers over my shoulder, 'you haven't read enough of them to even attempt such a thing.' It's true. I am not a regular consumer of words. Since my school days, how words look, sound and what they mean has been my primary interest...I don't remember the moment so many people speak of, when they finish the life-changing book that ignites their passion for reading... Just the thought of a big book was enough to defeat me.

McGarvey preferred discussion as it was more 'engaging and fun' (ibid, loc. 164). He goes on to point out that the cultural climate within his male peer group was actively hostile to others that took an interest in classroom learning and that there was pressure from the other boys that considered academic achievement and the act of reading to be, '...either feminine or the preserve of posh people and freaks'

(ibid, loc. 164). Books, like 'fancy food', were for 'fancy people' who lived in 'fancy houses'. Like in McInerney's *Working Class: An Escape Manual* (2019), the avocado represents a powerful marker of class and culture; essentially a forbidden fruit for the working class. The observation, like the title of her contribution, is a tongue-in-cheek comment, though not one without a serious implication. She explores how surprised middle class people can be when they hear working class people and writers using long or complex words. As a writer, McInerney (ibid) struggles with the 'exotic' label placed on the subject matter she chooses to explore:

...because if I am working class, why wouldn't I write about working class lives? It's not as if I'm doing it as a court-ordered community service. A potential explanation is that writers, like characters, are assumed to be comfortable middle class by default, and because no one likes cognitive dissonance, the working class writer will be encouraged towards redefinition.

This conflict appears to revolve around social pressure to culturally assimilate into the world of another class, not to stick out as what could be seen as an 'othered' voice. But, for writers contained in the anthology, *Common People* (Waal, 2019) this sense of experiencing class as a stigma (Goffman, 1963) is challenged by many of the discourses. The diversity of identity is one of the overall impressions that the reader can take from this anthology. They challenge and question any clear sense of working class culture being either homogenous or indeed singular in nature. The impact of class, gender and ethnicity (or 'race') were seen as mediated and ingrained with judgement and one-dimensional stereotypes that shamed and restricted people's aspirations for learning, rather than for passing themselves as representatives of middle class culture through modification to conform to the habitus of academic cultural capital (McKenzie, 2015). Promoting positive representations and articulating alternative cultural voices is a clear component of 'cultural penetration' (Willis, 2000).

McKenzie (2015, loc. 225 - 230) explores how important story telling is to working class identity and the importance of recording and promoting these stories, so that they do not fade through interruptions in the oral maintenance and transmission of both historic and contemporary experiences:

Narratives, and storytelling, are important in working class lives. It is how we

explain ourselves, how we understand the world around us, and how we situate ourselves in a wider context. We learn to make sense of what sometimes seems senseless through narratives. Anyone who has done qualitative research will know it is very difficult to get a succinct answer from a working class respondent. It is much easier to listen to 'their story' from the beginning and see where it goes.

McKenzie links the importance of qualitative research, in particular the archiving of people's stories and their locational context to the work of bell hooks (1984, cited in McKenzie, 2015, loc. 564) who points out that these personal representations, "...may be the only record of how life is, or was, 'on the inside'". The insider positionality of McKenzie, as a person who grew up living on the same estate on which she developed her ethnographic study, is likely to enhance her ability to record authentic cultural accounts that are free from any threat of 'symbolic violence' (Jenkins, 2002) or external judgement. Though it might not meet some of the objective requirements that subjective and autobiographical representation may pose (Bourdieu and Waquant, 1992). McKenzie (ibid) makes an important additional point in that these narratives as a whole, reveal the resilience of communities under pressure from the lack of resources available to others. A point reinforced by McCrudden (2019, p.34): "Poverty is such an important issue within the working class, but it's not the only story we can tell about it".

*Home Coming: Voices from the Windrush Generation* (Grant, 2019) provides expression and legitimises the experiences of the Caribbean diaspora and the struggles and abuse that the majority of black people faced on and after arrival. What these kinds of narratives reveal, are not just the problems and social exclusion that was the result of a hostile and racist response, but the resistance to discriminatory labelling and the determination to assert personal and collective opposition:

We thought that people will accept us, but it was very hostile to us. We couldn't go quietly in a shop without them abusing us: 'Blackie, Nigger, Moonshine! One chap said to me, 'Why don't you go back to your country? I can remember this clearly, I said, 'Well I belongs to England. I solve England and I come here to build England. So, don't you tell me to go back to my

country.’ Of course, I was young, and I had a terrible temper. I would not stand no abuse from these people.

The contributors in *Home Coming* do not represent a single perspective, either in terms of a monolithic cultural expression or in relation to political responses to navigating their situations. There is a diverse range of attitudes displayed that indicate a spectrum from assimilation to resistance and these positions are reflected in the wide range of perspectives that form the first-hand accounts of the ‘new arrivals’ from the 1950s.

Seminal texts, such as Gilroy’s *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack* (1992) include analysis of the changing dynamics of ‘race relations’ that emerged in the media in the years that followed and deconstructed elements of absolutist definitions of ‘race’ and ethnicity. Gilroy (1992, p.36) suggests that absolutist, hierarchical and binary definitions of ‘race’ limit the need to investigate specific historical contexts critically, and that rather than understand:

...racism in the singular, analysts should therefore be talking about racisms in the plural. These are not just different over time but may vary within the same social formation or historical conjuncture.

We can see the complexities of ‘race’ in the work of Gilroy, who argues that racism has moved from ‘vulgar to cultural forms’ (ibid, p.38) and this debate is picked up by the work of Eddo-Lodge (2017) in the central debate of ‘colour blindness’, which the author argues is a term that dis-associates white people from the past excesses of British involvement in slavery and the subsequent rise of the British Empire. *White Fragility* (DiAngelo, 2019) illustrates just how much this phrase disguises and complicates white people’s acceptance of previous social injustices and its ongoing social impact. Much of DiAngelo’s book centres on the difficulties that white people have in relation to their own reflexivity, but that their lack of engaging in this creates blocks that deny making cultural, or subtle, discriminatory actions or biases visible. Hall (1980, quoted by Gilroy, 1992, p.23) states that, within specific historical contexts, “race is the modality in which class is lived.” The practical manifestation of class within a ‘racialised’ context relates directly to additional social inequalities that have become historically entrenched (Mason, 2003).

Mac an Ghaill's work (1993) reveals an interesting twist to 'colour blindness'. The author states (p.155):

Most unexpectedly, the students identified with my Irish nationality, and this had major implications for my research. For example, on a number of occasions outside of school, when their [the participants] friends questioned or objected to my presence among them, it was pointed out that I was 'Irish not white'.

Mac an Ghaill (ibid) links this kind of 'colour invisibility' to discussing English imperialism, and the impact that the empire had on its respective colonies; colour has not always been the marker of difference.

Massey's *Don't Mention Class* (2019) is a multi-factored exploration of her identity that details the different strands that have contributed to her sense of self. She resists a simple definition and illustrates how family culture, social interactions (the responses from other social agents and experiences), schooling, class, ethnicity, gender and place all contribute to this construction. One that effectively 'shape-shifts' through social and institutional interactions, mediated through consideration of her multiple heritage status:

But all of the elements that go to make up a person's social class – income, locality, race, education, parents' profession, etc. – are impossible to separate, meaning considerations of class that limit themselves to one or two of these characteristics are horribly unreliable when applied to the individual.

The anthology *The Working Class: Poverty, Education and Alternative Voices* (Gilbert, 2018) graphically highlights both the range of cultural hurt that working class people experience in education, the labelling and the impact on self-confidence, belonging and social expectations are painfully rendered in a diverse set of narratives and commentaries. At the core of this book, compiled by people who self-identify as working class, there is an acknowledgement of how this construct of identity has changed in post-manufacturing Britain. That, "...the identity of an individual is much more diverse, grey and subjective than ever before." (Harris, 2018, p.i). The contributor stresses the complexity and diversity of markers that contribute to the contemporary sense of identity, from faith, ethnicity and cultural

practices, sexual orientation, hobbies and leisure pursuits, fashion and musical tastes, to our television and media consumption, to name but a few. Harris (ibid, p.ii) then points out that the majority of students he meets have "...no concept of the term 'working class', no ownership of it." Class structures have certainly gone through a period of change but there appears to be very little evidence that they have become less significant in how people identify them as an important element of their identities and cultural affiliations (Savage, Cunningham, Devine, Friedman, Laurison, McKenzie, Miles, Snee and Wakeling, 2015). Class can be seen clearly as a mediated phenomenon, one that may be influenced more directly at specific historical points and dependent on the experiences of those finding themselves placed within a specific class or category or with particular qualities (or not). For Savage et al (2015, loc. 668 - 674):

Classes are the product of the myriad processes of accumulation and sediment. They form in combination with other inequalities, such as those which exist around age, gender, race and ethnicity, as distinctive crystallizations of advantage, derived from the accumulation of ... different capitals.

Through the contributions in *Common People* (Waal, 2019) run familiar and painful examples of schooling and education marking them out as 'others' or writing off any aspirations and dumbing down curiosity and potential talents. But, as the editor points out, these stories are not apologies for being working class, they are celebrations of its diverse and vibrant cultures and of the persistence in overcoming socially stigmatising challenges. The intersectionality of class, gender, 'race' and poverty highlight specific responses to the idea of being working class, but all show how they are not about 'passing' as middle class authors, nor a sense of promoting a homogenous group bound around similarities of ethnicity or gender. They are examples of working class people writing about working class lives and how they feel navigating through the culture of disapproval, low expectation, micro-transgressions and obstacles that the social and cultural architecture of the system present.

The collection of essays in *The Good Immigrant* (Shukla, 2016) is a multivocal set of inter-locking but distinctly diverse set of identity explorations. These insights are bound by their experiences of institutional racism and bias, but explored through a

variety of social contexts. Varaidzo's (2016, p.27) *A Guide to Being Black*, discusses her mixed-heritage identity and concludes that:

My mixedness plays as much a role in the way I'm experienced as a black person as my blackness does... because the truth is there is no singular way to be black... there is no stereotype that can accommodate the vast array of personalities and histories and ethnic backgrounds that black people possess.

As a young woman growing up, the author felt that she belonged to no 'race', while she did not want to be an 'Orio' (a more modern term for a 'coconut' or a 'bounty bar'), neither did she always feel authentic in her "own blacknicity". Varaidzo acknowledges her 'light-skinned black child privileges' (2016, p.27). Ellams (2016, p.123), who works in the arts performance industry as a poet running writing workshops with young people in schools, stated that:

Whenever we beg for nuances, for our differences to be articulated, for more diversity and accuracy in how our communities are described ... our voices are either silenced or ignored.

In a Guardian online review of the book (Parmar, 2016) *The Good Immigrant*, the editor of this crowd-funded anthology is quoted as saying that the work was driven by the "constant anxiety we feel as people of colour to justify our space, to show that we have earned our place at the table". The collection of essays illustrates a growing confidence and of entitlement that both challenges expectations in relation to 'immigrant' group assimilation and highlights the ways that subtle forms (as well as overt expressions) of racism pervade institutional cultures, within the creative arts, media and educational institutions.

In *Natives: Race and Class in the Ruins of the Empire* (2018), Daley (otherwise known as Akala) provides a searing critique of schooling and institutional racism. The author's experiences of non-school based weekend black education provided him with support to critique those negative experiences and empower an entirely independent approach to learning. This efficacy was born from resistance to both being labelled with a mysterious diagnosis of educational special needs and to questionable bias hidden in sarcastic interactions with particular white teachers. The author's school account describes the confusion and doubt that ambiguous



comments have on students which, he argues, impacts on both their lack of belonging and their confidence as active learners. The alienating process is amplified psychologically and is de-stabilising (Daley, loc. 1056):

Real-life racism makes you paranoid, even in children it creates a dilemma of not knowing if someone is just horrible in the 'normal' way, as people so often are, or if you are being 'blacked off' – as me and my friends call it.

Daley goes on to discuss that his mother had thought of trying to access a scholarship for a private school, but the thought of “being the only poor child among rich kids and the only brown child among white ones” made him realise that, “As hard as state education was proving, I would take my chances with my multicultural inner-city school over the cultural isolation...” (ibid, loc. 1063). Though Daley (ibid) achieved high marks before leaving school, his formative experiences did not encourage continuation into further or higher education. Eddo-Lodge (2017) did access higher education, but as we see later in this review, she would not necessarily recommend it as a way of overcoming the financial and ethnic penalties that many might face in doing so. Malorie Blackman’s poem *Snakes and Ladders* (2019, pp.218 - 220), expresses some central dilemmas succinctly, as this section illustrates:

Were you born on square one?  
Or on square ninety-nine?  
Do you need extra help,  
Or are you doing just fine?  
Do you even make it  
Into the game?  
It's not about love,  
It's control, cash and fame.  
Don't let them convince you  
You've got to be playing,  
Make up your own mind  
If the price is worth paying.  
The game? It is rigged,  
And you are not to blame  
The ladders are broken

The snakes have your name.  
Stop and listen to what I am saying  
Don't throw the dice, cause I ain't playing.  
Up the ladder, down the snake  
Once on the board, you don't escape.

For Hanley, getting to university was about getting onto the first step of the ladder and transitioning to middle class status. The author discusses widening participation in higher education (2016, loc. 2286):

Then again, there's 'university' and there's 'uni'. Rather than stepping up to the 'elaborated' multisyllabic breach, this new and widened cohort of students was encouraged to chop it down to fit the 'restricted' code they knew. There was a great deal of meeting in the middle: rather than extending the research-intensive, highly academic model of Victorian and sixties 'plate-glass' universities, the newest wave of universities – formerly polytechnics, colleges of higher education and teacher training colleges – have tended to pile it high and sell it cheap, marketing themselves as distinctly 'local' institutions which will give you a degree without trying to force you out of your class comfort zone.

This suggests a tension within working class discourses, that might imply that meeting in the middle is more of a dumbing down of academic expectations, rather than an accommodation of difference or the ability for the post-1992 universities to be able to offer transformative opportunities in learning, as opposed to transformation of class.

## Conclusion

In the first section we saw how, in Plato's *Republic*, those displaying a gold soul, the lovers of wisdom, would access elite learning in order to preside over society for the good of all. These philosopher rulers, though having their basic needs met, would not receive any personal riches. We see through the passage of thousands of years an inversion of this ideal, in that the lovers of wisdom have become the lovers of

inherited wealth. Exclusion from elite education was not so much genetic, as based on the accumulation of social and cultural capital, gold being a symbol of this inherited wealth. Opportunities for upward social mobility in real terms continue to decline; but the myth of meritocracy (that there is always room for the talented at the top) still circulates strongly. Can education provide the metaphorical ladder to a 'better life'? Or is this an outdated myth?

There is a relationship between socially stigmatised groups and educational performance; outcomes and educational institutions of all sorts are not outside of the sphere of social discrimination. They would appear to penalise and discriminate against particular groups. These are key themes in developing an understanding of the diversity that students and tutors can bring to enabling a better sense of belonging and engagement within learning environments. Co-operative inquiry can be used to break down institutional barriers, develop a more nuanced understanding of student learning needs and validate life experiences as key areas of learning. This is especially important in learning and teaching around cultural diversity and anti-discriminatory practices. The term 'non-traditional' is both contested and ambiguous and has been used as a neutral descriptor of the groups that previously were not accessing higher education, but can also be applied as a negative label. A polite word that can be used as shorthand for a host of less polite, value-laden and cultural assumptions. The term is associated with problems of fitting in, poor attrition, a deficit picture of student identity and a failure to meet academic expectations. Direct engagement with students and tutors that share some of the particular characteristics of this term to discuss how they understand it in relation to themselves and their learning journeys, represents a niche in the literature not fully explored. This research explores some of these ambiguities and informs future dialogue and consideration of teaching approaches around identity and learning, lived experiences and academic study. The involvement of students in this process is in itself an example of engagement that appears to be highlighted as a key area for universities to initiate. The narratives contained in the student and tutor monographs embody many of the themes explored through the four sections of the literature review as issues of class, ability, ethnicity, 'race' and gender are welded to how they tell their stories. The student participants were chosen not for the problems

that they presented, but for their enthusiasm to engage in active learning and, in the case of the tutors, their commitment to working in widening participation.

The impact on personal identity through the use of names, labels and categorisations are profound and might counter any sense of belonging or may deliver the sting of exclusion or bias. Working to reduce or dispel harmful characterisations and stereotypes to understand student need and engagement in learning represents a clear area of future development across the university sector. For post-1992 universities it could make the difference between contributing to the problems associated with the replication of continued educational inequality and developing more engaging and robust approaches to supporting teaching and learning. The research is intended to explore critically whether the term 'non-traditional' student can stand as a useful homogenous label or whether the diversity of student identities overwhelms any sense of imposed or cultural conformity. Do labels such as this hide the students' actual needs or simply amplify areas of perceived deficiency? Either way, what can universities do to respond to either of these issues? This research framework was developed and informed to explore these crucial factors that relate to developing positive learning identities, whether the reader is a student or whether they work in universities. The ethnographic monographs, one from interviews with students (Chapter 4) and the other with tutors (Chapter 5), explores these issues. It can be used to stimulate further dialogue in teaching and learning environments as well as within the broader university system. Some of the key themes that relate to identity and names are picked up from a more specific researcher practitioner perspective in Chapter 6.

## **3. Methodology**

### **Research summary**

The main intention of this research was to carry out an inductive inquiry that explored how two linked, but separate groups of participants attending and working in a post-1992 university understood the term 'non-traditional' student. The research explored their respective learning journeys from early schooling to learning and /or teaching within higher education through one-to-one interviews. How the groups specifically identified with this term and how they shared aspects of its defined characteristics formed an axial theme around which discussion was raised in terms of how the university could respond to the associated perceived teaching and learning needs. The research was, in part, a 'test' of whether this group of students and tutors constituted a specific cultural entity and whether being referred to as 'non-traditional'

could present benefits or alternatively lead to marginalisation through negative labelling.

In relation to applications to teaching, the methodology supports the evaluation of using school and learning journeys as a technique to co-produce autobiographical links to curriculum development and foster peer-learning in the sharing of diverse experiences and cultural backgrounds. The inquiry was designed to engage participants in exploring student identity and facilitate evaluation of their respective roles within a post-1992 university. In addition to this, it was to provide a rationale for, and demonstrate ways in which the university could create opportunities to engage students and tutors in participatory learning and support universities to understand how learning can celebrate diversity and promote social justice.

## **Research aims**

As we have seen from the literature review 'non-traditional' students appear to experience additional difficulties in relation to their higher education studies, than do their 'traditional' counterparts. These are in relation to completing courses, the development of positive student learning identities, self-confidence in their abilities to achieve academic expectations (independent learning), balancing learning while continuing in employment and many of the contingent social roles and responsibilities that run parallel to their study time. Many of the students that fall into this category arrive at university through various routes, not simply through completion of A-Levels and may well harbour very negative experiences of their previous experiences in education more generally. Often being the first from their family to enter higher education, they may not have benefitted from the kind of support associated with proactive parental social capital or they may be returning to education after a long break with feelings of insecurity; often doubting their academic capacities.

The university's vocational facing orientation has meant that a significant number of the tutors are also drawn from 'non-traditional' learning routes, because one priority in work-based learning is the integration of direct practice experience with academic

learning. Many, though not all, of the practicing lecturers did not arrive at teaching through the traditional doctoral academic route. Choosing these participants was a conscious decision, designed with the intention of opening up discussion of this key higher educational term, as it operates within a situated context; seen from two sides of an institutional perspective and from distinct roles and interrelationships within the teaching and learning environment. Using tools within an ethnographic model facilitated collecting narrative based data relating to life profiles and biographies that specifically explored experiences that influenced the personal construction of educational selves and identities. In essence the educational narrative explained how the participants had ended up at this specific institution.

While the term 'non-traditional' would appear to be a widely accepted constituent of higher education jargon and was routinely used by colleagues (including myself), it was less clear how embedded this term was within the student lexicon. Anecdotally, there appeared to be two main ways in which tutors within the university applied this phrase. Many associated the term directly with the ethos of widening participation and saw it as a way of highlighting the fact that these students arrived at university having overcome considerable personal and social challenges; carrying elements of the inequalities that people experienced through their schooling. Another use of the term appeared to hold specifically negative connotations that accentuated a deficit model of student identity. That the students were either ill-equipped to perform in higher education or were not sufficiently motivated to meet academic expectations; that their attendance was potentially problematic in relation to them being unable to cope with the rigors of academic life. Some tutors openly expressed their dissatisfaction with working within a widening participation framework, as they felt that the environment was more like a liminal space located somewhere between further and higher education. They expressed their desires to work at a 'proper university' in the future and were biding their time and prioritising research output as a way of achieving their goals.

Nathan (2005), in deciding to undertake an ethnographic account of undergraduate life, explains how she arrived at the point of failing to understand student behaviours, and this appeared to have struck her after a considerable number of years engaged with university teaching. Nathan (2005, p.2) describes the dissonance that was being

experienced and the puzzlement at the apparent lack of student enthusiasm for learning:

After more than fifteen years of university teaching, I found that students had become increasingly confusing to me. Why don't undergraduates ever drop by for my office hours unless they are in dire trouble in a course? Why don't they respond to my (generous) invitations to do out-of-class research under my guidance? How could some of my students never take a note during my big lecture class? And what about those students who bring whole meals and eat and drink during class? Or those other students who seem to feel absolutely no embarrassment in putting their head or their feet on their desk and taking a nap during class?

Reay (2017) points out that her own studies highlight that working class students face additional stressors around working at the same time as studying and dealing with domestic issues (see also 'non-traditional' extraneous pressures on study in the literature review for a more detailed consideration). Reay sees these complications directly impacting on performance and that working class students find themselves "often lacking the confidence and self-esteem to be able to construct themselves as successful learners" (ibid, loc. 2218). However, what is less clear from Reay's discussion is how people working in "...poor 'working-class' universities in a segregated system," can even begin to level the playing field. How can teaching and learning in these conditions respond more specifically to the needs of 'non-traditional' students? Is the goal even to convert non-traditional students to the status of being somehow 'traditional' and ensure that they begin to more successfully benefit from the spoils of a good education (however we measure educational success)? In *Degrees of choice* (Reay, David and Ball, 2005) point out that some universities, most markedly in the London area, attract 'non-traditional' students in what are considered disproportionate numbers. Other research (Read, Archer and Leathwood, 2003; Reay, Crosier and Clayton, 2010; Testa and Egan, 2013) indicates that this is for a host of reasons – including a positive sense of belonging and of 'fitting in' and not standing out 'like a chav' in an Oxford quad (Reay, 2017). This evidence highlights areas that teaching teams need to consider when meeting the needs of diverse teaching groups.



A strong impulse driving this research is to better understand these issues as they map out in the learning careers of 'non-traditional' student lives. Given that many students do struggle at university and that poorer post-1992 universities struggle for additional resources, the question to be asked is how can institutions develop learning and teaching more fully to meet the student profiles and range of needs that have by and large manifested themselves as the result of entrenched educational inequalities? This research sets out to ask and answer this question.

## **Methodological approach**

This section describes the methods used to carry out the research, discusses the rationale for the methodology and then goes on to explore methodological issues that are associated with developing a non-standardised qualitative framework (Cresswell, 2013). One that incorporates aspects of ethnographic inquiry (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983) and that is additionally influenced by 'insider' practitioner approaches and broader organisational and action research models of investigation (Coghlan and Brannick, 2005; Whitehead and McNiff, 2006; Coghlan and Brannick, 2007). The methodology is an applied 'insider researcher' hybrid ethnography using a comparative case study approach.

The main data collection was through one-to-one interviewing, using the same initial set of open-ended questions for each participant; though each interview varied in terms of how the issues raised were developed around the themes that emerged from discussion. In many respects the nature of the research could be specifically described as the first phase of a wider ethnographic project that explored the nature of student and tutor identities through the lens of the higher education term, 'non-traditional' student. Not least as both participant groups identified with qualities that have been associated with this classification; these formed the inclusion criteria. Specifically, the questions asked for: an account of the participants' educational journey up to this point; how they understood or would describe the term 'non-traditional', how it applied to them, how others may interpret it and the difference between 'non-traditional' and 'traditional' students; and finally, how they thought that the university did or could provide support for 'non-traditional' students. This

ethnographic method was chosen as it represented the best way to hear the voice of the participant.

While an ethnographic approach has been used to describe the methodology, it must be stressed that this research is not considered to be a full ethnography. Its limitations meant that the iterative process of thematic development was not subsequently carried out in full through further interviews investigating the original emergence of questions and themes found within the interview process (Spradley, 1979; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Though most ethnographic methodologists acknowledge that there has been a growth in this area of 'hybrid' and applied ethnographies there is no consensus on their status as such within the longer tradition of this research paradigm (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983; Willis, 2000; Wolcott, 2001; Van Maanen, 2011). Proponents such as P.R.Trowler (2014) argue that adapted and reduced scale and practice-situated ethnographic studies in higher education settings are both appropriate and realistic research frameworks.

This issue is explored and to some extent it is problematized within Chapter 6, but so too is the fact that these same authors are acutely aware of the lack of an agreed definition for the genre as a whole. In fact, methodology can be a very messy business and clear lines of distinction are often blurred when we review and evaluate exactly what we have actually carried out (Thomas, 2002; Thomas, 2011); with each research example being potentially reducible to 'a case' (Thomas, 2002).

As a practitioner these issues have resurfaced over the period of this professional doctorate, through the generic preparatory modules and throughout the field work and data analysis stages and appears to have centred around the intention to ensure that participants play an active role in the development of the material, but in ensuring that their voices are not lost or subsumed in the requirement of such a programme to develop and apply theory. The balance between approach, description and analysis has led to various compromises in completing the final product (Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Wolcott, 2001). Developing one aspect clearly impacts others in ways that are not always foreseeable when enmeshed within the procedural and practical application of research intentions and design (Buckanan and Bryman, 2009).

Progressing through these stages I have been presented with a recurring question: does the researcher really choose the research methodology or does the methodology choose the researcher? On the face of it this appears to be a rhetorical question as a methodology has no agency of its own; but when we consider the questions that have been at the heart of research paradigm choices (Denzin and Lincoln, 2013), the researcher's own values, biases and cognitive inclinations, appear to empower the choices they make. Wolcott (2001, p.85) points out that: "we all make hopelessly subjective decisions in selecting topics we research, regardless of how some researchers proceed beyond that." While there is a certain degree of humour attached to this statement, it effectively highlights that developing research areas is influenced by a range of issues that are both personal and professional in nature. As somebody coming from a specific practice background, the professional aspect can also be strongly influenced by values and experiences associated and informed by areas that are not overtly academic in nature (Eraut, 1994).

Having described the methods used to conduct the research, the next section describes the process by which the participants were targeted and how the interviews were carried out.

## **Research sample**

The university at which this research is based has a population with a vibrant range of students when it comes to cultural diversity. A proportionally high number of students enrol from what is termed a 'non-traditional' background in relation to accessing higher education. More information in relation to this can be found in appendix 3.

The term 'non-traditional' refers to any students that identify themselves as being:

- A mature student,
- From a lower socio-economic background,
- Someone living with a disability,

- A part-time learner, work-based or vocational learner,
- A care leaver,
- Part of a minority ethnic group, and/or,
- A first-generation student (being the first in a family to attend university).

These groups of people have been encouraged to access higher education through widening participation policies (Moore, Sanders and Higham, 2013). This list of characteristics was used specifically to generate the inclusion criteria for the participant recruitment.

The university's vocational facing orientation has meant that a significant number of its tutors are also drawn from 'non-traditional' learning routes, as many have arrived through their professional practices, rather than from more advanced university qualifications. Two of the six tutors interviewed had entered through doctoral routes, the others held masters level qualifications, bringing with them their professional experiences. One had completed their PhD relatively recently.

## **Recruitment**

Trowler (2010; 2015), declared the term 'non-traditional' itself dysfunctional as it did not have the ability to express the true complexities of student identity and in a review of literature, the importance of engaging students was highlighted as a priority area for universities to more specifically develop. This research explores the identity framework associated with being 'non-traditional' and targeted students that had clearly successfully participated in teaching and learning and tutors with a perceived interest in supporting widening participation. While the student participants were prioritised in this study, the tutor perspectives were included to enable greater comparison of attitudes around the main research theme of student identity.

The sample was convenient and purposive (Buchanan and Bryman, 2009) and targeted students that represented each of the defined characteristics relating to the definition of the 'non-traditional' student and there was equal gender representation. While the 'non-traditional' qualities (previously listed) provided the inclusion criteria

for participation, the purposive aspect of the sampling related to a number of other considerations. Students were targeted (aside from three social work participants) through previous and existing contact with the researcher. There was a relationship already established; seven of the ten had been taught by the researcher in two different modules, one in the first year of their course and one in the second year of their course. As the researcher, I felt that this would maximise the potential quality of the interview data, as a relationship of trust had already been established. My approaches were therefore based on prior knowledge of each of the seven students. They were targeted because I considered that they would be interested in talking about the research area. I was also partly aware of the diverse range of life experiences these students illustrated, though they were not exclusively targeted in relation to the complexity of their lives, as the majority of these details emerged through the interviewing process itself. The students were not chosen through any consideration of their assessment grades and there were no questions asked that referred to this aspect of study. Individual students were approached directly, and this proved to be effective, as there were no challenges to reaching the target.

On the other hand, these participants did not represent a historically persistent group of students who were not fully engaging in formal studies or who were considered at high risk of drop-out through low levels of attendance. Therefore, an element that represented the whole sample was one of fuller engagement in university proceedings. The group of problematic attenders, though discussed to a degree in some interviews, have been in effect excluded from the study as a direct result of choosing this sampling approach. It does, of course, represent an important and persistent issue that directly relates more broadly to the recent strands of research around widening participation and study retention (Read, Archer and Leathwood, 2003). This exclusion represents a clear bias. An aspect of this inquiry is to focus on positive examples of engagement, not least to understand how to include the findings in developing more inclusive approaches to student teaching and learning, specifically around the practices of anti-discriminatory practices and the contextualisation of student life experiences within the academic curriculum.

Throughout my time as a tutor, I have been struck by how certain students apply themselves to study and how they had overcome considerable challenges and

inequalities to prioritise their ongoing education. How many changed during their time studying: their increased confidence, their commitment to participating in classroom discussion and their engagement more generally with other students and university staff. From my own practice perspective, examples such as this were inspirational and provided motivation to continually encourage greater engagement in participatory and transformational learning (Freire,1972; Mezirow, 2009).

## Sample summary

10 students and 5 tutors were interviewed. Through the recruitment process all categories from the list of ‘non-traditional’ characteristics were represented. The tables below clearly demonstrate this for both of the participant groups. Many of the participants acknowledged that they fitted into more than one of the categories listed. It was interesting to note that many of the student informants were not specifically aware of the term ‘non-traditional’ student; though reading the research information sheet (see appendix 2) enabled them to identify or at least relate to certain characteristics that they shared. In addition, throughout the research different colleagues interested in the subject contributed to some areas of discussion that have been included anecdotally.

Participant Table 1: The student group

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Gender (Male – M, Female – F)	M	M	M	M	M	F	F	F	F	F
Mature Student	X	X		X	X	X	X		X	X
Lower Socio-Economic Background	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	
Disability			X				X			
Work-based /Vocational Course	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Care Leaver		X								
From a Black or Minority Ethnic Group	X				X			X	X	X
White Other			X							
First Generation Student	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	

Participant Table 2: The tutor group

	1	2	3	4	5	6
Gender	M	M	M	F	F	F
Mature Student	X				X	X
Lower Socio-Economic Background	X	X	X	X	X	
Disability						
Work-based /Vocational Course	X					X
Care Leaver		X				
From a Black or Minority Ethnic Group	X		X		X	
First Generation Student	X	X	X	X	X	

## Interviews - Sometimes you have to listen to see...

The interview scripts were essentially the same for both of the research participant groups (see appendix 4). The questions were generally designed to be open-ended, non-directive and exploratory in nature (Mason, 2002). They were formulated in this way to maximise the opportunities for participants to explore the issues raised in their own way and to encourage a more inductive approach to understanding their perspectives and standpoints, through consideration of lived experiences and educational journeys.

Both groups were asked the same set of questions and as an entry to the interview they were all asked to describe their educational journeys up until they either enrolled at the institution as a student, or secured employment as a tutor there. The later questions asked about what the term 'non-traditional' meant to the participant and whether they felt that the university offered sufficient support for students represented by this term. While these provided consistency across all the interviews, there were variations in questioning that related to topics raised by the different participants. The range and diversity of these stories meant that unique aspects of their life and educational journeys provided more nuanced discussion than the basic questions set.

Generally, discussion around the key term involved greater intervention (in terms of explanation) within the student group, than that of the tutors. As a result, aspects of the interviewing in the latter part of the student sessions involved an increasingly directive approach. However, for both sets of interviews my input appeared to increase (in terms of seeking clarifications and follow-up points) as the interviews proceeded.

While ethnographic methodology involves repeat interviewing and iterative changes to the questions and topics raised (Spradley, 1979) the reduced scale of this research project meant that this longer-term approach was not adopted. Continuing to contact students who had left the university and the time between interviews and analysis made this original intention unrealistic; though it was possible to get further clarification and open new areas of discussion with some of the participating tutors.

On the whole, the interviews were carried out within a four-month period but had to be archived before full analysis due to work commitments and this added to some of the difficulties in their potential to provide further iterations around emergent themes.

Having said this, the interviews themselves were often intense and moving. Three of the female students interviewed cried during the interviews as they recounted aspects of their lives and their educational journeys. Having already established a teaching relationship with 7 of the ten students enabled a sense of trust and conversation was generally unforced and open (though the generally positive responses to the university support available might have indicated a reluctance for some to openly criticise the institution that I was working from within). The interviews all lasted over an hour and the responses and feedback from the informants were positive on completion.

Three of the participants were not from health and social care courses but were studying for their professional qualification in social work. They were included in order to provide a comparison of the perspectives of students who were studying a professional qualification. That is to say, the former area of study is not regarded yet as needing academically validated qualifications before real practice is allowed. (Some of the issues of relative status between health and social care students and



trainee social workers and nursing students were highlighted in the interviews with tutors).

## **Trial by water – immersion, treading water, waving and drowning**

P.R.Trowler (2014) argues for the need for there to be some mechanism present in 'insider' and applied ethnographic enquiries, in part to ensure that the researcher experiences a distancing from the research context. In effect, to enable making the familiar strange. Other ethnographers (Hammersley, 1992; Van Maanen, 2011) are more inclined to doubt whether practitioners in their own workplace can achieve this separation. The interviews in themselves created such an opportunity to engage students, not directly in any teaching and learning relationship, but to spend time on an individual basis getting to know about their lives, aspirations and thoughts. While the interviews were held in classrooms, the time together was unlike the daily routine associated with teaching. We stepped outside of classroom and curriculum agendas and participants were engaged in a broader consideration of educational histories. The emphasis was on the participant and what they, in effect, brought along to the classroom (which is mostly unseen or not usually specified from within the learning and teaching environment).

## **Transcription process**

Using a third-party transcriber appeared, in theory, to be an efficient strategy to reduce the time it would take to set data analysis into motion. What I found to be the case however, was that the material produced was highly inaccurate, not just in the sense of containing typographic errors, but in how the transcriber had clearly struggled to make sense of some of the recorded dialogue. Phrases were re-written; grammar was changed, and in many cases, meaning was obscured or indicated as indecipherable.

For example, one participant was quoted as saying, *“before school, I had to go to market with a tree on my head and sell at the market.”* On listening and comparing the transcripts, it was clear that a key issue was the range of accents in the research cohort. Many participants had strong accents, and there were occasional points in some of the conversation that I could not decipher accurately. But, in this instance, recording “I had to go to market with a tree on my head” appears to be more of a cultural slip of sorts, of not realising that the statement was strange in any way. From the reader’s perspective, it would make little or no sense. In this specific transcript, the word tree should have been replaced by the word tray. A tray on which produce was placed and then taken to market for sale. It would appear that the nuances of the accent the word was spoken in were not understood in their broader narrative context. It is likely that the transcriber failed to pay close attention to the detail as they typed. This shows the importance of researchers engaging with their interviews at the level of each and every spoken word. In some senses the story must have seemed strange to the transcriber, a child selling family produce at a marketplace in Africa, before getting ready for the second school bell.

Six of the participants spoke English as an additional language. There were clear discrepancies between the transcripts, as the narratives from white British participants were generally more accurately notated. The fact that the transcriber was generally more accurate with the voices of the white British participants raises issues possibly more in relation to the transcriber’s experience of interacting with diverse cultural groups, rather than a conscious act of correction. As a result, I reduced my expectations of the transcriptions and realised that this was essentially a more exaggerated aspect of my own teaching experiences. There have been times in class when I did not recognise specific words used by students or sometimes understand how the words were being used. The fact that I was also not always able to decipher them, as someone who has ten years of experience to draw from, reduced most of the irritation at inaccuracies in transcription. However, the process highlighted issues, discussed by one of the respondents, in relation to some tutors not bothering to listen or attempt to engage with some students less fluent in their use of standard English. Unconscious bias appears to be a pervasive issue, but one that can be difficult to specifically influence without a complete institutional buy-in (Clarke and Beech, 2018).

In short, this experience directed me back to the data and highlighted the importance of needing to engage directly with both the original recordings and the subsequent re-transcription. This reinforced the habit of continually checking that the individual narratives were accurate and representative of the participant conversations. Hearing the voices of the interviewees many times encouraged a more nuanced contextualisation of the final transcriptions. The time this aspect of the research consumed was underestimated prior to the implementation stages.

## **Cultural accounts**

A secondary data set was originally collected that comprised of formative assignments written by students that explored their own family cultures and compared them against mainstream notions and cultural values. The collection of these and the discussions around consent with students provided a significant moment in the research as it revealed that the majority of the students were unaware that the term 'non-traditional' student existed. As the criteria were discussed in class it became clear to students that they could directly identify usually with more than one of the characteristics. However, the accounts themselves often portrayed other contradictions, for example the sense that many of the student accounts highlighted what would be termed as traditional values. These included respect of elders, celebrating cultural rituals, holding values associated with their faiths, looking after their parents in older age, being good pupils, expecting discipline from adults and people in authority. One comment about 'cringing' when being expected to use first names with teachers and how this inhibited student engagement in class was also shocking in relation to developing andragogy. While these accounts are important in that they are an attempt to engage student experiences within the learning environment, they have not been fully analysed in this study, in their own right. They have been incorporated anecdotally and for illustrative purposes; even though they represent a clear area for future consideration.

## Field notes and reflective writing

Participant observation is a key aspect of ethnography and the researcher's interactions, observations and reflections of personal and group behaviours within the field of study are usually the main source of field notes (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 2001; Van Maanen, 2011). Their content is considered private and often contains personalised and detailed accounts that influence the development of research as it unfolds; they may inform the final report, but often this is not in a direct or transparent manner. There are various reasons for this and a prime one is that they may contain sensitive material that is not necessarily strictly addressed through ethical approval. Being an insider researcher adds to both practical and ethical uses of general and specifically located observations of interactions (between colleagues and students). Coghlan and Brannick (2007, p.61) remind the reader that:

It's become increasingly common for individuals who are participating in academic programmes to, particularly on a part-time basis in conjunction with full-time employment to select their own organizational setting as the site of their research.

Field notes and practice reflections have a liminal nature as they represent interactions with people who are not necessarily aware that they may form part of a research study. They make it difficult to determine where and when the research starts or stops, which can blur lines of inquiry. Being a relatively small-scale research site could mean that the subjects included in the observations recognise themselves or feel that they had not explicitly given their consent to be included. In addition, as this research is limited in scope, integrating more general and institutional issues (not covered by the main data collection and thematic interests) could detract from the person-centred approach that has been adopted. For these reasons personal field notes and observations have been used in a general and anecdotal manner. As will be explored below, personal observation through participation is a key activity in developing research ideas; though the direct relationship of these are not necessarily straightforward to decipher or incorporate (either for the reader or the researcher themselves).

## Interviewing, coding and thematic analysis

Braun and Clarke (2006) remind the researcher that a fatal mistake in thematic analysis would be to use the data research questions as the reported themes. They argue that this approach implies a crude understanding of what themes are and how the data and its manifestations (in this case the responses to these questions) interact and operate in relation to both the research topic and the development of underlying concepts that can be used to make sense of the data collected or attempts to further set the subsequent analysis within a wider social or theoretical context. The original questions set out in an interview schedule (see appendix 4) however, do set confines around what is elicited by the interview interaction and in more quantitative inquiries specifically set the data to be analysed. This highlights a number of issues that can beset and confound the novice researcher in their attempt to come to terms with the complexities involved in both deciding on research paradigms and the painful process of first sorting and analysing the data collected (Spradley, 1979; Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Becker, 1998; Wolcott, 2001; Braun and Clarke, 2006; Becker, 2007). In both qualitative and quantitative methods, they are significant, but in the prior, rather than being significant end points they are the means by which the inquiry generates the materials for interpretation. The original questions are the stimulus for generating themes, while they represent the semantic themes, they do not represent the latent ones. Latent themes (underlying mechanisms of concept building) are the all-important 'grail' of the research process. But, not unlike the original Arthurian legend, this artefact may not be easy to find; especially if you do not follow a very specific blueprint. Early in a research career or given the limited nature of an inquiry this may not always be achievable. If we look at the process of both grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) and ethnographic approaches (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983) it is very clear that there is an expectation that the questions asked in the field are iteratively and actively modified as a direct result of the research process. The intention of this research on the other hand was to essentially ask the same set of questions to all the participants in order to compare the responses. In many ways the limitations of the project precluded elements of this process and therefore stands more as a preliminary inquiry and would not entirely fit the grounded theory paradigm as it clearly does not exhaust the

generation of new data (given that the ongoing search is limited in range and scope of participants).

## **Interviews as ethnographic travelogues and shared walkabouts**

An interview alone does not necessarily constitute an ethnographic approach, but it is a central research tool used by ethnographers. The interview format developed fell into an approach that is well documented in specific ethnographic studies; that being opening with a “guided grand tour” question (Spradley, 1979, p.87). It is used as a method to open up descriptive content from the participant’s perspective, a request for the interviewer to step into their world. This is said to enable the interviewee to construct their own representation of their lived experiences by walking through a place, a period of time, an event or a cultural practice. Spradley’s (1979) example began with a literal tour of a space, but the author suggests this is often recreated outside of a literal event. In effect, the walk throughs are re-constructions, rather than literal activities happening and captured through specific participation. Like a remote form of participant observation.

The grand tour question central to this study was to ask the participants to take me along their educational journey from as early as they could remember, to the time they found themselves agreeing to be interviewed. Some of the follow-up targeted questions represent the “mini tour” question (Spradley, 1979, p.88). Asking people to specifically share their ideas on the term ‘non-traditional’ is a clear example of this.

This broad approach and ethos regarding interviewing is not confined to ethnographic studies and is universally recognised in the field as a technique strongly influenced by feminist and participant-led methodological approaches (Ritchie, Lewis, McNaughton Nicholls and Ormston, 2014). The opening question in all interviews provided at least half an hour of the interviewer primarily listening, which promoted a non-hierarchical atmosphere to make the “...distinction between the roles of researcher and participant less stark...” (ibid, p.180).

## Description versus analysis

Another dilemma has been the tension that is apparent in all qualitative research and that is the tensions between description and analysis (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983; Wolcott, 2001; Braun and Clarke, 2006). The problem relates as much to the type of assessment a study relates to, in terms of constraints that it sets in word count and expectation to engage with theory. This tension opens another more ontological question, of whether the data is used to generate theory or whether theory is used to understand or confirm theoretical perspectives (Dressman, 2008). The authentic voice of the research participant could be lost if the data is reduced to categories of explanation, rather than used to show the complexity of a given subject area and the unique or individual responses to the research questions. Balancing these demands and justifying methods of coding become more urgent in the final reporting stages; not least as some of the implications of the approach outlined in an ethics application manifest themselves. While the original intention was to simplify the process through adopting an interview protocol, the resulting data generation was surprising in how diverse many of the resulting narratives were. This impacted on the management of the data and added difficulties in locating underlying themes that did not remain semantic (very broadly descriptive) but also that meshed together this divergence into more latent themes (the underlying concepts that hold together the data in a construct of meaning) or that did not reduce the complexities of different lived positions within reductionist or forced concepts for assessment convenience. The novice researcher is advised not to take the data simply at face value but is warned against distorting the data to fit their own theoretical or social biases. This is a tight rope of anxiety for the would be independent researcher, but one necessary to constantly monitor for approaches that use inductive or exploratory methodologies (Becker, 1963, 2007; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983; Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Wolcott, 2001; Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The immersion of the researcher into the data and the emergence of themes have tended to operate like a ghost within the machine of analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). But, experiencing sustained time within the data (whether listening, transcribing or reflecting), did have an impact on the thought processes in a way that

remained elusive. This period of intense concentration and constant comparison influenced the re-rendering and condensing process needed to represent and summarise the overall material. Developing the monographs certainly involved analysis of themes and some of this was structured through compiling coding cards, rough mind mapping and thematic tables, but also involved a series of decisions that were less clear and more loosely creative in the sense of developing the 'plots' of the monologues and how the different narratives interacted. Switching between the voices of the interviewees at times took on the form of consulting a range of critical friends. When I jokingly told one of my colleagues that I could virtually spark up conversations with my data, it felt like a partial truth.

Separating what the researcher brings to a study from the position of being an applied example of practitioner research (Coghlan and Brannick, 2007) makes the process of 'keeping an open mind' (Urquhart, 2016) fundamentally problematic. Not least as there is a consensus within the 'how to' literature that all selection and representation of data implies choice, bias and intention. Thematic analysis, is a nebulous activity (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Coding and concept building can be seen as a constituent of all qualitative research methods; whether the themes are classified as being 'cultural domains' (Spradley, 1979) or 'categories' (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Urquhart, 2016), 'typologies' or 'indigenous categories' (Ryan and Bernard, 2003).

The next section pulls together the background work done to analyse the themes and provides examples of the tables constructed to map out and compare points within the narratives.

## **Thematic tables: frameworking the monograph narratives and thematic analysis**

Due to the diversity of backgrounds and learning journeys described by the participants, it was initially a challenge to recognise similarities within the narratives and it was through the process of mapping out the themes that these became more apparent. The development of the thematic tables was iterative in nature and closely



bound together with going back and forth between the transcripts and audio files of the interviews; compiling summaries and comparing the data and themes. This movement between data and constant comparison between the different narrative topics and emerging themes gradually built a spine from which to generate the framework for the two monographs. In turn this facilitated the representation of component parts; including the plot and the many sub-plots. To use the fish-in-water analogy, the tables marked out the seas, the rivers, the tributaries, the swamps, the pools and the canals. The source or the once upon a time aspect of the narratives was contained in and specific to the individual, for each of the profiles and narratives. This enabled the monographs to become essentially character-driven, rather than being defined to fit an overarching design or pre-conceived story line.

Below are tables that list the themes compared, alongside some examples of the kind of content that was summarised.

#### Student interview themes (male and female):

Country of birth	Asylum seeker/immigration
Enjoyed school days	Family set up
Parents actively supported engagement in education	Experienced corporal punishment as a routine part of school discipline
Going straight from A Levels to University	Interrupted education
Course to gain entry to Higher Education	Other route into Higher Education
Successful at school (leaving with sufficient qualifications)	Personal challenges to engaging with education
Options and choices on leaving school	Motivation to continue in education
Attended boarding school	Living with extended family members
Mature student in HE	Working and learning
Dependents while in HE	Parents proud of educational achievements
Sent money 'home' to family	Choice of University
Aware of non-traditional category	Response to the term non-traditional
Student identity	How has the process changed identity
The HE system	University support for people considered to be non-traditional
Comments about other students on the course	Faith a key aspect of their narrative
References to employment	Housing
Stories of 'home'	References to 'home culture'

How life experiences influenced choices in relation to HE	Language barriers
Attitudes to independent learning	A love of reading
Engaging with classroom discussion	Libraries
Rote learning	

Additional student interview themes (female students only):

The 11+	Issues of self-esteem and confidence
Using education to resolve personal issues and biographical experiences	References to discrimination or racism
Advantages of working in a diverse student group	Tearfulness during the interview
Tutor roles/impact of specific tutors	Writing
Comments about this research	

Example from the male student table:

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Options and choices on leaving school</b>
Male student 1 Black African (mature)	Door to door salesman
Male student 2 Black African (mature)	Initial inclination was to join friends (and distant cousins) in South Africa illegally processing gold stolen from gold mining plants
Male student 3 White European	Realised they wanted to be a social worker or a nurse
Male student 4 White British (mature)	Do a BTEC, get a job and that will be that... standard working class thing
Male student 5 White British (mature)	Worked in retail and in a print company for a number of years

Example from the female student table:

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Choice of University</b>
Female student 1 White British (mature)	Local provision suits domestic arrangements
Female student 2 Black African (mature)	Local provision suits domestic arrangements
Female student 3 Black African (mature)	'I chose this place because of the environment and when I came for interview, the way we were interviewed, the way they were' and

	<p>'I liked the building, the canteen, the library and the fact that there were so many computers available to use'</p> <p>and</p> <p>'These studies help me to do it, I am telling you, it's as if it's that man I am always dreaming about telling me that I am in this University because of what I want to do in Nigeria in the future'</p>
Female student 4 White British	<p>Father unwell, so decided on this University as it was near and it meant she could live at home...</p> <p>Music scene excellent here and friends at other University so would go there for weekends away</p>
Female student 5 Moroccan/Gibraltarian	Clearing

#### Tutor interview themes (male and female):

Birthplace and upbringing	Enjoyed school days
Experienced discrimination at school	Experienced support from secondary teachers
Successful at school (leaving with sufficient qualifications)	Going straight from A Levels to University
Used access course to gain entry to Higher Education	Other route into Higher Education
Parents actively supported engagement in education	Faith mentioned
Disappointed family expectations	Part of a single parent family (mother)
Enjoyed University	Overcame personal challenges
Went back into education to retake O Levels and A Levels	Love/interest in reading
Inspired by particular books	Made use of public libraries as a child
Inspired by particular people	Enjoyed University
PhD route into lecturer post	Employed through vocational experiences
Identify as working class	Identify as an ethnic minority
Commitment to widening participation	Committed to teaching
Expressed education as an issue relating to social justice	Would rather work in a more prestigious University
Expressed positive nature of their current role	Expressed negative nature of their current role
Expressed discrimination or racism experienced at work	Passion for a subject area
Aware of non-traditional category	Critical of the term non-traditional
Highlighted student issues in learning	Highlighted institutional issues in learning and teaching

Expressed ideas to better meet learner's needs	Ideas that would better meet student teaching and learning
Practical skills versus academic skills	Critical of specific student groups
Encouraging reading as an important activity in learning	Awareness of wider issues that impacted on a student's ability to engage in study

Example from the tutor table:

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Overcame personal challenges</b>
Lecturer 1 White British Male (over 50 years old)	Lack of GCSE qualifications, self-confidence and literacy
Lecturer 2 Black British Male (over 50 years old)	Not being seen initially as having potential to study at HE level
Lecturer 3 White British Female (over 40 years old)	Not being clear as to which Higher qualifications were considered of academic worth
Lecturer 4 Afro-Caribbean Male (over 40 years old)	Leaving school and re-taking O Levels (not considering University as a realistic option)
Lecturer 5 Black British/Afro-Caribbean Female (over 50 years old)	Experiencing racism through school from other children and the lack of motivation from teachers to address this

## **Contextual influences on methodological development**

While an essential feature of applying appropriate methods relates directly to ensuring a match between collecting the right kind of data that is effective in measuring the intended 'phenomena' of the study, much of this comes from subjective positions and the participant underlying drives (be these conscious or unconscious).

Matching the ontological and epistemological consequences of our endeavours is part of the 'intellectual puzzle' (Mason, 2002), but can be a process that spills out from the initial stage of developing a research topic and can re-emerge much later in

the overall process (Ritchie, Lewis, McNaughton Nicholls and Ormston, 2014). The formatting of the final thesis balanced against creating an ethnographic report (Wolcott, 2001), the use of field notes and practice reflections (Coffey, 1999; Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 2011; Van Maanen, 2011), the adoption of a specific methodology within specific organisational contexts (Bell and Wray-Bliss, 2009; Buchanan and Bryman, 2009; Levin and Greenwood, 2013) and the maintenance of confidentiality (particularly in relation to the setting) in small scale qualitative research projects (Coghlan and Brannick, 2007) and development of eventual data analysis techniques (Spradley, 1979; Strauss and Corbin, 1990), all contribute to creating tensions within the overall design and implementation process.

While ethical approval may appear to propel the researcher off with a set of relatively clear intentions, there is a sense that this simplifies a complex iterative process and can hide aspects of the overall complexity of research, particularly one that is based in the practitioner's place of work. The apparent need for a predefined and consistent methodology can gloss over the blurring between paradigms and constrain aspects of the original development of non-standardised qualitative research, as a pragmatic need to get underway can just as easily overly-simplify the approach.

The following discussion will explore some of these complex implementation and analytical orientated issues further.

## **Locating the self**

In relation to the ethnographic enterprise there is discussion around the nature of the researcher's relationship to the field of study and in particular the group being studied. Many of the general ethnographic commentators (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983; Van Maanen, 2011) are a little wary of 'insider' or auto-ethnographic stances, on the grounds that the researcher may not be able to stand back enough from the proceedings, as distancing from the subject is considered an essential requirement of representation. Additionally, there is a vague charge of putting oneself too firmly into the picture (when the idea of pure ethnography is to portray another culture). Wolcott (2001, p.67) suggests that there is a rule of thumb in

ethnographic studies that entails the researcher clearly locating themselves in the research scene, but not to the extent of taking 'centre stage'. A point that fails to come to the fore in this comment is the important position of reflexivity as a built-in dimension of methodology. This primary function enables the researcher to more fully explore their own biases and their relationship within the expression of power differentials and cultural and organisational positioning. It clarifies the standpoint of the researcher for the reader and indicates the value base and motivation of the study.

Another concern raised with being an integral part of a group or organisation is the charge of 'going native' (Coghlan and Brannick, 2007) and of relinquishing any objectivity and being too emotionally close to the subject area. These points are important considerations and can open up difficult questions around ethical practice. For example, being part of an organisation means that the researcher has access to many of the day-to-day issues that occur in everyday practice. The researcher can draw on an incredibly detailed and wide-ranging set of observational data and potentially from different vantage points. When exactly does research begin and end in this process? In the course of the last few years the keeping of field notes and practice reflections have helped to explore areas relating to the research. This 'privileged' position though has prompted concern that if I were to include certain examples of this, they could offend or embarrass colleagues, or provoke a hostile response; even 'land somebody in it'. Focussing on broader institutional issues could in this case detract from the main purpose of the research and deflect the actual direct participant emphasis. These factors have reduced the potential impact of the field notes, as many of those observed behaviours and institutional idiosyncrasies were not specifically considered in sufficient enough detail through the initial ethical approval processes. In terms of informing contextualisation of institutional issues and discussions with colleagues and other students they proved useful resources to draw from, albeit, by and large, indirectly.

## The ethics of studying 'others'

Photographs of the 'father' of ethnographic research Malinowski (The Public Domain Review, 2014), picture him standing there, clad in his colonial regalia, inspecting a bare breasted native Trobriand Islander young woman, while apparently indifferent members of the same group sit by. I was struck by the 'othering' process that seemed so obvious. Malinowski – the white, male, European researcher stood out like a sore thumb. Looking at the picture now it is the researcher that appears to be the 'other' and not the Trobriand Islanders. Ethnographic studies have a contested past and a diverse richness that make it a difficult methodology to pin down. The account of indigenous people's responses to what was then an activity associated with a colonial world system of European domination prompted indigenous researchers to label it as being the 'dirtiest word' in Colonial lexicon (Denzin and Lincoln, 2013). The representation of groups, considered to be 'natives', 'primitives', 'sub-human' even (Back and Solomos, 2000). The representation of people as others, by another is clearly fraught with potential to both offend and misrepresent, or even identify for altogether negative purposes (Bowker and Leigh Star, 1999; Jones, 2012). Research and its origins have been imbued with implementation issues that directly relate to differentials in power that has determined the extent to which participants are viewed as passive objects being studied, rather than as active participants in a process of co-learning.

Immediately this raises the level of active engagement of participants in this piece of research. Though the methodological approach is one that prioritises the words of those informants taking place, the ongoing and iterative engagement of those that took part in further analysing meaning and representation of the final product, is of a limited nature. Some of the issues of full participation of the 'informants' is both a question of time (as a resource) for both the researcher and the participants, and one of commitment to the underlying value of this kind of built-in feedback and appraisal. Student populations are by nature transient, they 'pass through' the university system and maintaining contact is not always practical. This research analysis by committee is not necessarily accepted in all academic disciplines, in particular ones that link directly to academic assessment (which is singular and

individualised). Though it could be argued that a typical practice applied action research model implies this level of ongoing participation from those initially engaged, this process is time consuming and demands specific consideration of additional resourcing to complete (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006).

As a project in itself this research is limited in this area and does not fully release complete ownership of the findings. But when seen as the first stage in widening the potential to carry out located and applied research with students and their learning needs, it represents an active resource for future consideration in the development of learning materials in classroom settings. Using these with students would be a clear way to discover whether students and tutors in any way 'saw themselves' in the monographs, whether they recognised the representations found in the research narratives and perspectives. This would test the validity of the study in relation to authenticity of voice and portrayal of student identity. As has been explained earlier the nature of the recruitment for interviewing highlights clear aspects of bias. For all we know the small numbers of participants could illustrate what many would consider to be the voices of random and idiosyncratic voices: outliers from the main target population. However, one of motivations of using tools from an ethnographic approach was to actively engage myself in being in part guided by my own participant observations, from my 12 years of practice experience. In my view, data surprises included the fact that the participants did represent the wider student population and that over the years of teaching there would have been many examples of such students, keen to engage directly in higher education learning. While these narratives are in many senses inspirational, they are not exceptional in the sense that they would merit status as outliers.

From a social justice perspective, it could be argued that this research is not targeting those most in need. In relation to this research this could include those students who would have a problematic relationship with their engagement in the learning and teaching environment. It might have been more useful to have explored the perspectives in more detail of tutors whose perspective was that 'non-traditional' students were a problem and that working in a 'real university' should be the soul aim of an aspiring academic. The research could have engaged students who were more erratic in their attendance and engagement with the university. It could be



argued that their needs are greater than the students who demonstrate a more proactive or orderly relationship of engagement within higher education. They need more support to develop their access and study orientation.

The two monographs presented do discuss issues that relate directly to the students that are more risk of dropping out of university and the tutor interviews do highlight issues of concern about key areas of learning, but these students are not the focus of this research.

The bias is clear in that the student participants targeted are regular attenders and appeared to be engaging positively with tutors and the learning environment (though from different levels of personal development). A key idea is to continue to consider how exploring identity can inform and develop links between students and tutors and facilitate opportunities for shared learning.

## **The dumbing down debate**

While widening participation, the demographic changes to the higher education field that are associated with this policy and the term 'non-traditional' has generated a wide range of research over the last twenty years, much of this has centred on negative aspects of both engagement and problematic notions of student of learning identities (largely expressed by the embodiment of academic expectations). There appears to be less research that expressly explores how students come to understand terms such as 'non-traditional', hence the underlying rationale for this research. There is only fragmentary evidence to suggest that previous studies have explored the relationship between how students understand the term in relation to how tutors (coming from similar backgrounds as many students) use or are influenced by this. Rather than approaching the student tutor relationship as a set of opposing identities, this inquiry explores how tutors from similar social backgrounds, in terms of social class and ethnicity, relate to the term 'non-traditional'. As we have seen there is a general argument that this term is increasingly at odds with the rise of mass participation in higher education, but it is nevertheless a term that continues to be used within practice. As a term that represents a number of groups that

historically did not access degree study the term operates as a measure of inclusion. However there are concerns that it also operates around a number of less desirable characteristics, such as this group being everything that their 'traditional' counterparts are not. Aside from the absence of the social capital investment associated with the middle class educational progression, the implication is that 'non-traditional' students lack other key graduate attributes, such as being a self-propelled independent learner, out of sorts and out of their comfort zone. This ethnographic style of study seeks to explore this 'myth', using the student interviews to give voice to this. Additionally, there has been a background noise of the new universities 'dumbing down' the broader academic portfolio, with 'Micky Mouse' degrees and inflated marks. While ten years ago this strapline centred more on the development of degrees being offered by the post-1992 universities, the vocational content of these degrees appeared to be one of the issues raised in academia. The media debate threw up some surprising champions. Boris Johnson (2007) summarised the media debate in saying:

Up and down the country - so we are told - there are hundreds of thousands of dur-brained kids sitting for three years in an alcoholic or cannabis-fuelled stupor while theoretically attending a former technical college that is so pretentious as to call itself a university. After three years of taxpayer-funded debauch, these young people will graduate, and then the poor saps will enter the workplace with an academic qualification that is about as valuable as membership of the Desperate Dan Pie Eaters' Club, and about as intellectually distinguished as a third-place rosette in a terrier show. It is called a Degree, and in the view of saloon bar man, it is a con, a scam, and a disgrace.

Johnson argued, however, that at the heart of this dialogue was a patronising position that people would suggest a vocational degree for others, but not necessarily their own children (we might feel that Johnson is talking from a particular class perspective here). Johnson went on to relate these new degrees to engaging directly with new and emerging patterns of employment in the service industries. The dumbing down debate has spread from the post-1992 sector and now engulfs the whole of higher education. Even the Sun Newspaper (Davidson, 2018) has added their opinion to the recent rise in the number of firsts being awarded:

'DEGREESY PEASY Universities accused of dumbing down higher education by doling out first-class degrees too freely'. The newspaper article quotes an academic who states that, 'A first, which used to be the accolade of outstanding achievement, is now little more than a good pass'. The academic elaborates on this and suggests that it is the result of competition within the ranking system and not simply the result of allowing in less academic students to study vocational courses. Students remain the ones that have been caught within the crossfire of this national debate, with both their value and worth under question.

## **Further labelling**

Smith (2005) raises this issue through suggesting that the participant group may not directly benefit from their participation in the research. They may even suffer as a result of a negative portrayal and become further marginalised as a social entity. This was a point raised by the ethics committee in relation to this study. Could the research, carried out by a white male, contribute negatively to the general perception of 'non-traditional' students? It was pointed out that the motivation was to explore positive engagement (rather than the more specifically problem-based issues of poor attendance and poor academic performance). There is the potential that negative stereotypes or self-disclosure may contribute towards a negative stereotype of this broadly composed group of students. However, not knowing what students feel themselves about being labelled represents a more important area to explore and clarify. Not least as this would appear to be an under-represented aspect of the overall research literature (Trowler and Trowler, 2010; Trowler 2015). Negative aspects of portrayal were formative in the development of this research project and the participant choice was decided on to specifically project more positive and realistic portrayals of a group that appears as a broad categorisation, but fails in many ways to be a self-conscious and antonymous culture (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983; Wolcott, 2001; Van Maanen, 2011).

## The ethics of location within applied research

According to Costley, Elliot and Gibbs (2013) insider research throws up similar ethical questions as applied ethnography and can open a number of conflicts for the researcher to manage. A foundation stone within ethics is the maintenance of anonymity, both of participant and of location. The authors (ibid) point out that by implication insider-led research can easily be unravelled to reveal the location of such studies. Though it would be more difficult to pinpoint the student voices and determine individual identity, colleagues could make informed guesses based on auto-biographical instances and speech patterns, this would be more difficult for the outsider to determine. Interestingly, the ethics committee did not raise any objection to this potential compromise in securing absolute anonymity and approval was duly granted for the research interviews to take place (see appendix 1). What is more the inter-relationships of the researcher and their institution in this scenario can manifest other far-reaching dilemmas and difficulties (Coghlan and Brannick, 2005).

Organisational management may respond defensively to the research findings, colleagues may feel that their trust has been manipulated (never sure of when or if their own behaviours form part of the participant observations) and students might feel that their trust in the researcher was misplaced. Costley et al (2010) highlight the sensitive area of reciprocity and trust that binds colleagues together in ongoing practice and how accessing behind the scenes information can add additional strain should the findings present a picture that does not quite fit their perceptions of the culture of how or where colleagues work. This is akin to Becker's (2007) description of the growing realisation that the teachers were as much the focus of his attention as the perceived problem: the students. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the ethical considerations around the parameters of the research brief limited aspects of the scope of the research, but did so to reduce or minimise the long term relationships to colleagues working in the same organisation. The focus of participant observation meant that some of the more idiosyncratic aspects of institutional management were more carefully considered in contextualising the study as a whole. This strategy was as much to ensure that the focus remained on concerns of those most directly engaged.

The findings of this research have been developed into two separate monographs; one that highlights the student narratives, the other, the tutors' perspectives. These ethnographic studies were developed to convey the rich and interwoven diversity of lived experiences expressed in the participant narratives and to hear their voices.

## 4. The Student Monograph

Although I say, "Come here! Come here!" the Fireflies Keep Flying away!  
Uejima Onitsura (Bowers, 1996, p.77)

### Introduction

As described in the methodology, the student monograph includes experiences and personal accounts from ten students who were targeted by way of previous or existing contact with the researcher. They were asked to participate in the interviews because they are included in a diagnostic cluster which can be described as 'non-traditional' students. In other words, they all self-identified as having one or more of the characteristics (Moore, Sanders and Higham, 2013) as part of the widening participation policy. They were asked questions about how they understood the term

'non-traditional' and how they thought the university could better support their needs, as well as an account of their educational journeys.

## **The students (not their real names)**

Jason was a white, working class, British student, who hid himself away in a library to avoid some of the complications he experienced at school. Amina was schooled in Africa and spent many hours reading by the light of a candle and, when older, she walked miles to and from school to access her uncle's electricity. Frank and Hassan went to private schools in Africa before their families experienced the onset of severe financial burdens. Frank considered smuggling gold in South Africa; Hassan's parents sold everything so that he could leave a civil war and start a new life in the UK. Patti and Lucas went through periods when they disrupted their own school environments; Patti's mum read to her every day and Patti was very widely read from an early age but failed to go on to study literature. Lucas was from Europe and had spent time during his childhood in care both before and after his father died.

Rashida's parents moved to Europe from North Africa and she was very certain that she was 'doing it' for Hijabi women. Chinara wanted a degree to validate her years of practice in care, but she also had a very different kind of vision to take back to her African homeland. Pete, in his own words, was a 'bang on' average student who knew that any degree would help him to become a teacher. He was not keen on the student life. Catherine was a white, British, working class girl until her mother married into money. After this, she was sent to a private girls' school which she hated. A painful and violent relationship left her as a lone parent who returned to study later.

## **Key Themes**

This chapter will focus on themes which have emerged from the students' accounts, which have been grouped as follows:

- How and why students made decisions to enter higher education, including influences on them and their relationships with family.
- Barriers and disruption which impacted on their educational journeys.

- Motivations and life events that influenced re-engagement with study.
- Epiphanies, both secular and religious.
- Passports to professional practice and upward mobility.
- Student relationships to the university, being classified as 'non-traditional', fitting in or standing out.

This monograph maximises and prioritises the students' voices by using extended quotations for the reader to 'hear' their words directly, in order to reduce the risk of misinterpretation. This material, that explores the students' lived experiences, has the potential to open up the possibility to share ideas, applicable for developing a wider sense of shared learning and 'knowledge equity'. In themselves they can be used directly to generate further dialogue and analysis. The monograph has been developed around the student narratives and with the intention of not developing detailed theoretical analysis. The participants' words are meant to speak for themselves, so the discussion of supporting literature is kept predominantly descriptive in nature. The reader will be dropped into the narratives as they unfold; in other words – there is no specific beginning, middle or end. Additional analysis can be found in the chapters that follow.

## **Learning Journeys and Family Cultures**

Graduation is an occasion often shared by students with their families; and tutors may be introduced to beaming parents, who appear pleased and relieved that their children have successfully achieved their degrees. I was introduced to Patti's father and mother after the formal ceremony had closed. Patti had told me how influential her mother had been in encouraging her interest in literature; she '...would read to me every single night religiously'. In describing her family, she had mentioned that her parents had gone through difficult periods and that her father had been 'a drug addict' for ten years. Her mother's childhood had been difficult and '*she did the same as what I did and escaped into literature.*' What I remember that day was the delight that Patti's parents took in celebrating their daughter's success; though they no longer lived together as a couple they had both been very supportive through her time as a student. Not all graduates are fortunate enough to share this moment of



achievement at the end of their studies and some family members would not be invited, even if they were able to attend. There would be tears of joy, tears of sadness and tears of anger. Families are not always indicative of 'blood being thicker than water.'

Jason was considering what contributed to his decision to seek access to higher education. He tells of working for a printing company and found that he was forgetting to fill the machines with paper because he was so engrossed in one of the books that he was reading. His daily routine was mindless and he compensated by reading on the job:

*...I was getting bored with it and I met these friends who are pretty much family now, because there was a falling out on the family side, but that is not important.*

*Did you move out?*

*Kind of like first of all we got evicted because my parents were too busy smoking and drinking and even though I was paying rent to them, the rent I was paying them could have paid the actual rent itself.*

Later on in the interview we talked about his relationship to his parents. His stepfather had been a grammar-school boy and became an armchair critic of his school performance:

*I was almost never set homework and my stepdad who is from a grammar school literally kept assuming that I wasn't doing it and I wasn't bringing it home when literally they didn't set it. It was different if you were in the higher groups, they were set homework, just the bottom groups weren't.*

There is no indication from this account that either of his parents actually went to the school to find out why this was or was not the case. But the stepdad continued to berate his 'poor' attitude to study. Jason's parents' behaviour appears to have had an inverse motivational impact, as near to the end he admitted, that though he does

not stay in contact with his stepfather, he would take pleasure in seeing him should he end up with a degree; *'I would probably go ha ha, sort of thing. I know that sounds petty'*.

Noreen, one of the tutors interviewed, remarked on the fact that one of her students had told her that they had studied for an A-Level without having a teacher to guide them through their course. Noreen commented that she would not have allowed this to happen to her own children, that she would have *'been down the school'* to complain. When she was a child though, her family did not interact with her school, either. It's the middle classes that tend to monopolise engagement with educational establishments (Reay, David and Ball, 2005; Reay, 2017). Clearly the earlier seminal work on working class family attitudes to education (Jackson and Marsden, 1966) indicates that this is not an entirely middle class pre-occupation. Elements of the working class were highlighted as being aspirational in seeing education as a way of entering into the professional classes. The way that schools relate to the working class may be a more of a constant measure in terms of educational success.

Rashida's goal in life was to become a midwife, but she struggled with completing her A-Levels. Nothing in her family background prepared her for the rigors of this transition, even though her parents wanted her life to be different to theirs and made financial sacrifices to keep her in education. But good intentions are one thing and knowledge of the system is entirely another. Rashida was very respectful of her parental support, but realised that education was more difficult when families did not possess the social experience to help orientate their children through the process. The schools did not always help either. She explained this further:

*In biology my teacher had favourites, she favoured the kids that did really well, so favoured the really smart kids in the class, that's how it works. But there isn't that kind of support and as well again when I went to apply for uni I got rejected a bunch of times. I really wanted to do midwifery...and wanted to be the first Hijabi Moroccan midwife in Gibraltar which would have been an accomplishment for me and as a representative of my community as well.*

Much of Rashida's narrative of her educational journey reflects social pressures and judgements that specifically relate to being from an immigrant family, being a minority traversing new social environments. She specifically called herself the 'tester' child and mentions how she reflected on her own experiences to guide and support her younger sisters. Rashida found it difficult at times to explain to her parents what the point of university study was all about exactly: '*So they ask me what jobs you can get with it*'.

In Jason's interview, he was asked about his relationship to his mother:

*Non-existent to be honest, cos the same reason, like when she moved up there [back to where she was born] we sort of drifted apart a little bit, but it was always me keeping on trying to keep the relationship going and she was always after money from me and when I told her I was at college and I intended to go university she didn't really care...*

In all but one of the family narratives that emerge from the diasporic journeys encountered by some of the students there is a strong emphasis of separation from family members. But there remains a strong sense of continuing obligation to look after their parents; to make use of their positions of employment and potential to develop future careers in order to payback the support and sacrifice their parents made to ensure that their children could access education and get on in life. Frank, who moved from Zimbabwe, has an infectious way of injecting humour into his conversations, but the only time he visibly changed emotionally during the interview was when he spoke about not being able to see his sister and mother before they died:

*...Zimbabwe was really going downhill. I really wanted to go home to see my mum, but I couldn't because of my papers and I knew things were not really right back home. Now it was on us to support mum, because we had said to her just stop working and we will send you money every month.*

Hassan's parents had sent him to a government boarding school in Sierra Leone, even though they were poor market traders. When his father became ill the money

ran out and he was forced to leave after taking his GCSEs. The civil war brought further sacrifices as Hassan's family sold all their household belongings to get him out of the country. When asked whether his family were proud of his achievements in education he replied:

*Yes, my mum is pleased with me, it's just sad that my dad passed away while I was here, but my mum is pleased with me because she gained from all that I am going through...*

For Rashida the outcome of her university education meant that she could use her confidence to protect her parents from being looked down on because of where they lived. Paying back and honouring parents appears to be more clearly associated with some of the educational narratives:

*...I am able to stand up for myself in a way because when you are growing up and I have seen people talk to my parents, like talk down to them in a way. It's very subtle now you know you have the ability to stand up for yourself and for your parents even...and defend them...I am very proud of that, so it makes me like yes, I definitely have the ability, having been to university as well I think has helped a lot.*

The domestic backgrounds of the students varied greatly; for example, Chinara stated casually that she came from a very large family, one that comprised of having forty-two siblings; her father had eight wives. They lived in their own apartment block separately, but under one roof. She was very keen to move away from her family and make her own way in life, so left school after successfully completing her GCSEs and moved to Greece from Nigeria to work. Catherine had been born into a single parent family, but her mother had married into money and so paid for her to attend a fee-paying boarding school. She spent many unhappy hours feeling out of place and judged by her fellow boarders: *my mum didn't want me at home, but to be fair my home life wasn't great...I think that's kind of why in a way my mum got me out of the situation.* One of the abiding memories of her description of school was her staring out of the window. From the school she could:

*...see my house across the valley and on the other hill, it was miles away, but I could see it...I used to get other mothers to drop me at home and my mum would bring me back.*

Catherine felt like she could not really ever do the right thing in terms of pleasing her parents and her wider story indicates that there was a sense of parallel lives and lack of connection:

*It was the most bizarre life I've had; I have a mum and stepdad who are incredibly rich and then there is me, I would go to their house and have the best beef, the best things and then go home and not have any electric, but they didn't see that, it was never seen...*

Having no access to electricity links to another of the narratives. Amina was brought up in a small Senegalese village and when her father went into retirement, access to electricity was beyond their family budget. So, she explains:

*...[every day] my mother has to buy a candle and give it to me... [tears start to form] because my mum believes in me and knows I love education and also me, I believe it is only through education I can get somewhere and just keep doing it... but, my mum is the one who suffers more because she has to go and buy and sell something to buy food, to buy books and everything for us, she support me and one day my uncle come... to our house but he was late there and he saw me reading in the candle, he said what happened here is very dangerous... my mum said we don't have an option... she has to memorise her lesson.*

After this Amina went to live at her uncle's house during the week, as there she could make use of electricity. Her commitment to study caused some conflict within her uncle's family as her cousins did not share her application to homework. While this extended family support was practical it meant that she had to walk twelve miles every day to and from school twice, as she also had to go back to the house for lunch.

Lucas was aged one when his parents split up. He describes them both as being alcoholics and himself as a 'naughty' child. He alternated living with both of them. This made him unsettled at school, with little focus and neither parent checked whether he did any homework, which he never completed. He got into fights, left school without permission and '*kicked my teachers*'. By the age of thirteen Lucas was in care for a year. Shortly after returning to live at home, his father died suddenly, so he went back to his previous foster parents. For a year, '*I just didn't do anything, if you imagine like a teenager with no routines or anything, as I just laid in bed and was just depressed*'. During this period, Lucas had what he described as an epiphany, '*I decided I want to do something important, I want to help people*'. In clarifying this realisation, he elaborated that:

*If I think of that now, compared to then, I think it may have something to do with my childhood, cos I notice with the students here, all the students I have spoken to have some background relating to why they are here [studying to become a social worker].*

Pete's family background is the only one that could be considered stable. He was a very level-headed student and lived with his parents in their childhood house for the duration of his study. They had never pushed him, beyond encouraging him to get his homework completed. He shared a lot of interests with his dad and they both made additional money through making computers to order, so went to IT sales together to buy their components. His mother worked as a teaching assistant, but rather than pushing her son, she wanted him to be happy. Pete's dad just wanted his son to not have to do night shifts in factories; so take a different route into the workforce than he had. In relation to describing his family's attitude to education, Pete said:

*...it's never been a big thing of being top of the class academically, its rather succeed, get a good job and be happy, which we all are.*

Having listened in detail to students relate how and why they made their decisions to enter or return to higher education, and how their relationships with their families had

influenced them, the next section will look at disruption as a key theme characteristic of these learning journeys.

## **Schooling - Habitus Interrupted – ‘love and hate’ as an educational narrative.**

Interruptions, changes in family fortunes, moving to new school environments, beatings, estrangement from family, living with extended family members, walking miles to school, getting up at day break to contribute to the family business, taking on care roles, reading by candle light, reading as a form of escape, working in order to avoid beatings, running in your gym kit covered with green leaves (during a public school initiation) and singing the song ‘*we are the greeners...*’, experiencing rampant unchecked bullying, ineffective discipline, going to private schools and either loving or hating them and feeling like an outsider, all reveal a diverse range of educational experiences from the students interviewed. One of the emergent themes that binds these diverse narratives together is the disruption they have in common as a characteristic of their learning journeys. The narratives move from rural villages, small towns to large cities, across continents, see the decline in family fortunes, alienation and anomie caused by upward social mobility, chaotic family dynamics that involve substance misuse, illness, bankruptcy, asylum seeking as a result of civil war, social meltdown, post-colonial use of punishment and control and chaos in classrooms.

Pete’s upbringing was, in contrast, relatively stable; living in the same place all his life and going to local schools with his mates from the neighbourhood and pressure-free expectations. All of the other narratives detail disruption and dislocation through their school days. A far cry from the middle class ‘fish in water’ analogy raised in *Degrees of Choice* (Reay et al, 2001). If we apply the ‘fish in water’ metaphor to these cases, we would be forced to recognise that the medium in these instances represents a range of habitats. Ones in which the fish would find themselves running rapids, floating for periods in stagnant water, gliding for periods in protective schools through waters with rich pickings, but avoiding patrolling predators; even at times being forced to crawl using fins from drying lakes, desperate to find a channel that

may lead back to a stream. The accounts of middle class transition (Reay, 2017; Reay et al, 2001) from school to higher education imply a much more regulated set of waters, with optimum feeding conditions, well oxygenated water and a course that leads from origin to source without apparent obstacles (aside from the ever present pressure to gain the highest test grades) protected by strong and orderly 'schools' lead by those with experience of the whole terrain through which the water passes. In relative terms, an aquarium environment kitted with all the necessary pumps, lights and filters. These accounts are fish in and out of water, but they appear to have made it to their 'intellectual breeding grounds'. The metaphor of water and migration routes returns unconsciously when the authors discuss how private schools prepare their students for their journeys into higher education; Reay et al (2005, p.53) state: 'For many parents this kind of preparation and channelling is what they are paying for...'

It is clear that neither of Hassan's parents had received private education as children as his parents had come from poor families, but they were very keen for their son to be schooled privately as they were convinced that this could lead to a 'better life'. Frank's mother had done well at school and had built up a successful business and shop. She was also a very well-respected local councillor and often helped local families out, through providing goods on credit. However, in both cases family bankruptcy and ill health terminated their relatively brief attendance as full boarders; both left before they were able to study their A-Levels. Hassan went into a badly paid job selling door to door insurance, masked by having to wear a suit, while Frank went on to consider whether smuggling gold from South African mines offered a good future (one that he did not realise as those who he knew making their fortunes were soon sentenced to ten years' imprisonment). But when his mother '*caught wind*' of this, she and his brother suggested he enrolled in A-Level studies. By then there was not enough money available for him to sit his final exams.

On seeking asylum in the UK, following civil war, Hassan found employment as a janitor in a school, and this rekindled his interest in continuing in education; but he had to work for a number of years before he was eligible. He worked as a kitchen porter and a road cleaner before getting work as a carer.



Frank followed his brother over to the UK in his mid-twenties and spent time in Scotland working as a building labourer and then in various care homes and projects supporting vulnerable young people. Some of his sisters, who had also emigrated to the UK, were already in higher education and urged him to take that step. But, initially he was unable to, until he sorted out his immigration papers:

*...so when I came they [the sisters] were like education is the key, but I started working so I started enjoying the money, you know once you start enjoying money it's hard to get into education...*

A striking aspect of the students' attitudes to early education was how differently those from outside of the UK related to their more formative educational experiences, which they describe positively. Hassan explained:

*...just once in a while we used to have these people, they called the Peace Corps, they come from abroad here, they go just for project, but it was purely a black school, taught by black teachers...*

*Was it a happy time?*

*Yeah I can remember there was happy time, other areas there was no happy time, because the rules at that time in the country the way of teaching is different because our time, if you don't do your work nice today, that makes it unhappy, we have this thing they call hot metal. The teacher will [use a] cane or rattan. So, they ask you questions in class, like times table, you have to go there, you recite them. Our education ... was more about... recitation. You memorise...*

*If you got it wrong?*

*You just give your hand...and then they beat you...we have this thing you call a rattan. It's a long cane...it was very common... it's not like here where there is no flogging. The respect between we and teachers was just too great. You*

*can't challenge a teacher... that is the difference I can see here; children have more rights to say what they want to say.*

Hassan's school narrative was also inseparable from the daily activities of the family business. So before and after school there would be very specific tasks. During primary school he would have a tray loaded with fish that he would sell in the market, later his task would be to make sure he physically defended his place while queuing for water at a communal tap. As well as daily homework tasks he would have household duties to perform and if he did not do these he would not be given food. *"You had to be physically fit...some people would jump the queue and that is where the fights would come in..."* The local school would ring a bell that could be heard all through the small town, once as a call to be getting ready and then one that marked the start of the assembly.

*When you miss the second bell, you are liable for punishment. They punish you in front of the whole school... humiliation, yeah, and that was just common. We had to go through all that...*

*The school was run through competitions between classes in 'spellings or maths'.*

*As a child did you find it difficult or unpleasant?*

*I used to love it. I used to love it, because I grew up with a passion for education, so I used to love it and I used to prepare all the time. So I was ok with that, because that is the times they give prizes and you want to win a prize, so obviously give you the cause to even read...many competitions anyway, class to class. So, all that was very interesting, actually...even in primary school they give you homework. If you don't do your homework you get beaten, everything over there is by flogging...*

Patti really enjoyed going to her local primary school, it was full of children that she knew and the class sizes were small and she felt that the teachers could support her needs. The local comprehensive school that she could have attended had recently

been assessed with a very poor OFSTED report and her mother decided she should attend a school outside of the area. Her adjustment to this new environment was not straightforward. If we compare the experiences of Patti, who was raised in the UK, she was never beaten by her teachers, but her experiences of being bullied were ignored, so it could be argued that discipline was an issue in its absence of addressing pupil behaviour:

*...I went to her [teacher] about what was happening, she shouted at me, 'I just don't have the time to deal with this, you need to deal with this'...and that was the response I got, so what can you do?*

Being bullied made Patti retreat into books, which later in her secondary school was nurtured by one of her teachers. But when they left things took a turn for the worse.

*I was very well behaved until I think year nine and then I think I rebelled in quite a big way...I skipped school and had arguments with teachers, just had real disregard for authority I think...I had a lot of trouble at home at that time as well.*

Her new English teacher appeared to pick on Patti over what she considered to be trivial things, and she describes thinking:

*Ok, I'm not as stupid as you think, so I'm going to make your life really difficult, and I did.*

*What kind of things did you do?*

*I turned his classroom upside down, everything in his classroom with my friends, everything - the tables, the chairs, the white board and we used to be on the ground floor of a tower block and he came in and I think it was the final straw and he started screaming and was like I'm going to get the head of year, he ran up to the top of the tower block, while he was gone we turned everything back over and she came in and we sat there silently and the head*

*of year said what's the issue I don't understand what they've done and so it was really bad.*

For Hassan the strict discipline and pervasive public testing and completion provided a love of learning, whilst for Patti the lack of classroom order and the lax following through of the school anti-bullying policy in many ways contributed both to her estrangement from the literature lessons that she loved and plunged her more deeply into the reading in which she took refuge.

Lucas described losing all interest in school, he got into fights with other children, he '*kicked teachers and all this*', and explained that he did not know how he actually managed to navigate school and leave with the equivalents of GCSEs; he stated: '*I did not think it important*'. One aspect of schooling that would suggest a more inclusive educational policy was that Lucas was not threatened with exclusion or school transfer, but instead accessed school counselling services. This may well have ensured his progression, though for him his relative success remained a complete mystery, given his chaotic family life and his parents' hands-off attitude to learning.

Jason, when thinking back on his time at school, says that he recollects very little of the time spent in class, but that '*from as far back as I can remember I have always needed help*'. There was one primary school teacher that devoted her lunch times to supporting Jason to read and this is something that clearly triggered a later love of reading. But it is significant that when he did attend secondary school he would 'bunk off' from particular lessons and take himself down to a local library and, '*stop there for a bit*'. Like Leonard (one of the tutor interviewees), Jason found his own way of meeting some of his learning needs through regular visits to the local library; invisible as if wearing Bilbo Baggins magic ring (Tolkien, 1975). In both cases, this activity and independent learning orientation was not specifically encouraged by either family, nor was it acknowledged or picked up on by their respective schools. Neither were channelled by their schools to consider continuing in their education after their GCSEs. On eventually arriving at university Jason had received a diagnosis of dyslexia and contrasts with Lucas's school access to support services:

*Yes, some of the lecturers here are really good and they remind me of that old teacher I had and they are really engaging...so that has really helped and since I have come here I have been diagnosed as dyslexic which explains a lot to me and I can't understand why I was never checked before, considering everything I have gone through, how they never thought to assess me before.*

The university has also provided some additional software and advice around searching journals and structuring assignments, which Jason is generally pleased with. In fact, the diagnosis has impacted on his self-esteem:

*...Did it make you feel worse about yourself for a while?*

*No. It explained a lot to me and when they said that I felt like a bit of pressure had been taken off me because I realise the whole thing, even though I didn't like education, the whole thing didn't interest me and the mistakes I was making, it wasn't me as such, like I wasn't being stupid, it was just I needed more help.*

*In terms of confidence then...how does that come out?*

*Confidence that I belong here is definitely higher because for a while I felt like, how did I even get here?*

As a tutor here, I have personally talked about my own dyslexic tendencies (as I refer to them). Initially this was because sometimes students would point out spelling errors on the whiteboard, but I soon used it as a way of discussing aspects of learning more generally with student groups. Having been placed in a remedial class during primary school and then kept on what felt like a 'losers' register' through not being allowed to read any other books apart from the Wide Range Reader prescribed texts, I am acutely aware of how this can impact on confidence. I felt particularly labelled as a result, but through developing a love of reading – once free from Wide Range Readers – I gradually covered up some of my obvious stigmas. Like Jason, I was 'a bit slow', and this could induce a certain level of panic within a

time constrained exam situation. Rashida alludes to this kind of educational difference, too, but without having been formally tested or diagnosed:

*I get anxious [in exams] and also I am, like slow, the way I think about something takes me time, I think I rarely finished an exam...I think that was a disadvantage.*

Both Jason and Rashida were full time students and both mentioned that this gave them a little more space to take things at their own pace (though Jason did have some paid work through student liaison roles and Rashida was aware that without her parents' financial support this would have been much more of a challenge).

Catherine's mother '*...completely did a personality change*' having married her second husband, who was a very successful self-made businessman. Though coming from a working class background, she had always spoken 'nicely' and held high standards when it came to 'manners' and had never sounded working class, '*whatever that sounds like*'. Catherine's private school was quite near to the family house and was an all-girls' establishment, while her brother was sent to a mixed boarding school further away. In her own story about attending the girls' school she specifically mentioned feeling that she wished she could have been back in their original home, living and going to school in what she called an ordinary area. The new school experience was '*...horrible, I hated it*'. This social shift from what Catherine called an ordinary background was made worse by it being single-sexed, '*it was really weird being with all girls, I think that was the most negative impact on my life*'. And the transition into the new world of money had a negative effect on how she felt about herself:

*I think I had gone from quite carefree in school life to suddenly having to conform and I was dealing with people, that was a school that was very affluent and there were a lot of girls in there who were very aware of money and I wasn't really aware of money, because I wasn't born into it...because I had come in and it was really obvious I wasn't born into money and I think there was a lot of jealousy because we did have a lot of money, so my mum drove the best, there was a lot of money, it makes me feel sick, my mum*

*drove the best car and they were aware of that. It's a bit like that thing in Titanic, the new rich kind of thing and that's what they viewed me as I think. I was not established.*

Catherine stayed on at school until GCSEs.

*Did you excel?*

*No. I did absolutely nothing...we had to do homework club after school, it was part of the curriculum and I wouldn't do it...my mum said I was defiant, but I think it was I was just so unhappy really in a way so didn't do it. I used to get into trouble every day for not doing it and still I wouldn't do it.*

Catherine explained that she had no idea what she wanted to do with her life, 'no idea who I was, where I was going, what I wanted and I think that was the biggest thing...'

If we compare this account of private schooling to Frank and Hassan's we see a different picture of student life in a boarding school; while both of them hankered after home life, they found the routine and discipline that the environment provided, conducive to study. Hassan was pleased with the provision of meals, the constant interaction with other boys and recounts the fresher rites of passage with some sense of positive achievement; after all, once the first year was completed, he would then be able to 'drill' the new intake of boys. Able then to beat or taunt the 'greeners' as they ran the gauntlet of chants from the established boys mocking their lower status. After all, for him coming from such a tough routine, he now considered himself 'at a different level'. His parents had made specific sacrifices to get Hassan into a boarding school that they were convinced could:

*produce good result and a lot of things... boys become confident and probably after education they may have some form of influence and get good jobs... yes, a stimulating environment, it built up my confidence, my social interaction... more than when I was just with my books at home.*

The social side of boarding school life and the interaction with other boys, often older, was a key memory for Frank and he pointed out that the grounds and the school buildings were much better than here, at the university. They were grand in comparison and surrounded by well-manicured landscapes. While Frank mentioned doing well in his studies, as did Hassan, it was the social interactions that he spoke of most, sneaking out of the school grounds, getting into the girls' section undetected and hanging out with the older A-Level boys, '*drinking and you know [hysterical laughing]*'. His brother had been to the same school and that appeared to help him eventually settle in as there was a sense of shared history and tradition. The harsh discipline took Frank a while to get used to, but:

*For some reason I ended up liking it, I hated boarding school, 'cos I'm the last born in the family and I always wanted, I was too you know, I was connected to my mum... she made sure everybody went to school, did well... there was never a day we went without food and even though in the end she was struggling because the business [he tilted his hand to indicate that it was shaky] my mum was a giving person and where we come from most people don't have jobs.*

We already know that for both Hassan and Frank the advantages of private schooling were cut short and they were unable to complete A-Level studies, move effortlessly into higher education, build on their cultural capital and move into the field of academia. There was a clear interruption, not just in their personal accumulation of cultural capital, but in maintaining their formation of a future academic habitus (Jenkins, 2002; Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010) that could enable their effortless flow through the more rarefied confines of higher status educational routes. More specifically, while the shaping of habitus (Jenkins, 2002) in relation to the personal construction of self and the social capital had been interrupted, it would be fair to consider it as a much a disruption in the actual field, rather than in their academic performances more specifically.



## Starting afresh – and you may ask yourself... how did I get here?

All the students interviewed deviated from the accepted pattern of traditional progression from school to university. This section explores the motivations and life events that influenced their re-engagement with studies, that led to their eventual enrolment at the university.

After some years working in a number of different jobs Frank saw many of his friends (many of whom had come to the UK as asylum seekers and immigrant workers) doing well, through getting degrees and professional qualifications they were putting down their foundations, buying houses even. He repeated the phrase on a number of occasions, *'a fresh start, a chance to start afresh...'* Frank's work with vulnerable young people had reminded him of his own sister who had died suddenly of a brain aneurism. He had not been able to go home and be with his grieving mother, his papers were still not in order and he had not been able to go for promotion at work for this reason. He and his brother and sisters had come to the UK, *'for a better life'*. Frank decided then to enrol on an access course in health and social care and he used this to secure a place on a foundation degree; after which he planned to complete a top-up award and then a masters to qualify as an occupational therapist. Once in post and earning money he could think about going into property development with his family and build this up gradually over time. He had a plan. Frank began saving money to make sure that he could reduce his employment hours to optimise his study time. Only two people from the student sample of ten accessed the university through A-Level study. But, all the sample, except for one, implied at some point in the interviews that they considered accessing their degrees as a *'fresh start'*.

## **‘Become whole, become what you want, become yourself...’ - Rose (Reay et al, 2001, p.93)**

Catherine declared, *‘I have no self-confidence at all’* and she did not realise until recently, *‘how much that education is the journey alongside everything else in my life, but it obviously got me to where I am now’*. Having completed her private school education, she was adrift in terms of knowing what she wanted to achieve in her life. She ended up enrolling on a secretarial course and left that feeling that she was *‘top of my game secretarial wise’*. Catherine ended up working in her stepfather’s business and for a few years she enjoyed the work and was successful, but there followed a very difficult period, during which she experienced the breakdown of her marriage through domestic violence and found herself a single parent, having to give up her job and feeling isolated living in a council house and on benefits. One of her children *‘is mixed race and that put the cat amongst the pigeons, they [her parents] are racist really’*. Catherine was on benefits for six years but went back to work in a homeless hostel and *‘that was my calling for working with people’*. When Catherine’s third child was born, she had a nine-month break from employment and then started work supporting adults with learning needs. During this period Catherine took maths through learn direct, *‘which was a cinch, really’*, and completed an NVQ level three course that provided the entry requirement for social work. The strategies of re-entry into education are not always planned in great detail (Reay et al, 2001; Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009; 2010) and in this sample of students it does not specifically relate just to academic aspiration and getting into the most prestigious universities; it is about getting in where you can and whether it will fit into the wider patterns of students’ lives. Many appear to have made very pragmatic, rather than academically aspirational choices in terms of educational re-entry (and as we will see later, many arrived through relatively idiosyncratic choices and simply because they were able to). If anything, the irony of the concluding point presented in *Degrees of Choice*, (citing Walkerdine et al, 2001, Reay, David and Ball, 2005, p.163) is directly challenged by many of the students’ autobiographical studies to enable their fresh starts in life and to better themselves:

There is a creeping assumption... that if we open up higher education to working class students then we can all become professionals. This is the biggest fiction of all.

After a long period of self-reflection, after filling up '*books and books*', Catherine explained that she had, '*repaired myself and found myself and [was] ready to do what I should have done years ago*'. That is, to enrol on a social work course and become a professional (which in turn she achieved). She went on to add, '*I want to be in control and managing and make it better from above, the managerial point...*'. But the point at which she wavered, just prior to the application deadline, it took a chance meeting to confirm her decision, when she met a woman (a social worker), from whom she was buying a coat on eBay, who simply told her to '*do it Catherine...*'.

Patti had always been encouraged to read by her mother and books were always given as birthday and Christmas presents:

*...my mum used to take me to the library every Saturday and I would max out as many books as I could take and I would read them every single day, but I neglected things that were important like maths... I was reading a lot of C.S. Lewis... Louise Renson before I went to secondary school... I started to get into poetry... reading Sylvia Plath and things like that. Herman Hess as well...*

Patti was twelve at the time and even though:

*They did tests and said that's really good, your reading age is five years above what it should be, but there was no sort of like let's push you some more and give you something else to read or use that to work on, there was no sort of praise.*

Patti did sit the eleven plus, but she had little interest in it.

*I still feel to this day that the eleven plus is an unfair test of anyone's ability because you are testing children from such a young age constantly all the time, it is just an unnecessary strain on them I think.*

There was a significant English teacher at Patti's secondary school that provided both inspiration and support, who acknowledged her love of literature and in addition, provided support in other subjects, but his leaving the school occurred at a time when Patti's home life became difficult to manage. Correspondingly, she started to 'bunk off' school, drink alcohol and smoke 'weed' with a group of friends. While she did manage to do enough to pass most of her GCSEs, she ended up dropping English literature at A-Level and ended up with a BTEC in Health and Social Care. Looking back at her education, Patti remarked:

*... you have this fantastic mind when you're a child and a fantastic imagination and this ability to really absorb things and when it's taken away from you it ruins you a little bit. Definitely. I really feel that was a really bad period of my life education wise.*

Having felt so alienated from schooling and separated from one of her prime passions, it was her grandfather's suggestion that she should consider keeping on going and seriously work towards getting to university. Patti still blamed herself for the situation that she found herself in and considered her 'reckless behaviour' the cause. So, she put in more effort and '*... I sort of knuckled down not as much as what I should have done*'.

By the end of her sixth form, she left with a BTEC in Health and Social Care and her summing up of this was:

*Yes, I found it very boring not because of the topic itself, but because it was a BTEC ... all you would have to do is copy two pages of work, hand it in and that's a pass and that would be a really good distinction pass.*

Deflated, Patti got a job in Homebase to consider her options, still '*umming and ahhing*' about whether to apply to university, which she did a day before the closing

date. Her choice in the end was this university, which was close to home. The decision was based on being able to provide support for her parents, who were still experiencing personal difficulties.

*Do you regret that now?*

*Yes, no, in some ways I do because I feel maybe I missed out on the whole social side of university, where you go out drinking and meeting people... but I don't regret it... I was really excited; I was really nervous... but... I went from working full-time and earning quite good money... and I was like going to quit this job and go to uni and do something different, it was a culture shock, but I was really excited to learn and my first year was fantastic... I found it really engaging.*

Pete also felt ambivalent about participating in the 'party going' student lifestyle. Like Patti, he wanted the impact of his learning to cause the least possible disruption to his daily routine. He described himself as a '*bang on average student*', who, when he passed his GCSEs, was not entirely sure whether he wanted to go into teaching or into an area of IT. He mentioned that his teachers recognised his social skills and leadership qualities, which they told him '*formed the mould of a teacher*'. His original thinking was, '*do a BTEC, get a job and that will be that. Standard working class thing*'. But Pete soon found himself working instead as a teaching assistant in a school for children with special needs, something his mother had been doing for a number of years. Through the school he accessed a foundation degree, which led him to this university to complete a top-up year. He self-funded his course, though was provided with a day release to study and was very clear about why he chose this university. It was near to where he worked:

*Yeah, I know some people say like about this university and everything and read in the tables where this university is in the league of universities and everything, but I really do not care, but at the end of the day I am coming out with the same bit of paper as you. If we go for the same job, we have both got the same degree so whether you do it at Cambridge and I did it at [here], how I come across as to the person interviewing should mean more than what our*

*bit of paper is saying... they have probably had zero experience of working in a school... as soon as people started saying you can still work and study one day a week, as soon as I knew I was allowed to do that, I knew this is what I wanted to do, one hundred percent.*

In this instance, while Pete's strategy did not follow a traditional route and involved a change in direction, his task focused attitude to higher education showed flexibility and some defiance in terms in developing a counter argument to more middle class preoccupations with university status and a full-time university identity. We will see some of these 'cultural penetrations' (Willis, 1978; 2000) re-emerge in the discussion that follows around the term 'non-traditional' students, from him and other interviewees.

## **Epiphanies – profane and sacred...**

Lucas talked about having an epiphany when he was studying for his A-Level equivalents in Sweden. The events in his life had, in some senses, provided a period of inertia, but also a time in which he could reassemble himself and prepare for continued study; and it was during this period of schooling that he became motivated to study. While the root meaning of epiphany is 'to reveal', in Lucas's case this was a specifically secular moment of insight and calling:

*I don't know if it was due to my father's death or due to just my childhood and my parents [their chaotic drinking and domestic issues] but I decided I want to do something important; I want to help people, this original speech that everybody that does nursing and social work [laughs].*

Lucas directly related this moment of clarity and the determination to engage fully in learning. He explained that for three years he had absolutely no social life and that every weekend was taken up with study. This personal transformation was fused to his biographical history and to his strategy that formed out of his childhood experiences. Lucas decided he was not going to become like his parents, he was not going to become the victim of circumstances, as many of the children he met in the

care hostel had become (through getting heavily involved in substance misuse) and that he would aim to not just transform his own future, but contribute directly to being a client-facing, active listening professional. Securing this qualification, though not making him rich, would be a way to avoid the fate that he saw others in similar positions fall into. His experience of social work had made him feel invisible as a client:

*it's like talk above me and talk behind my back and disclose things that I didn't want disclosed, so I didn't trust the system either. So, I think I wanted to become the social worker that I wished I had back then ... become the social worker that social workers should be.*

The internalisation of Lucas's environmental issues and social position is a striking example of Freire's conception of *conscientization* (Freire, 1972). Lucas had considered different aspects of his life, isolating the desire to not be a passive recipient of a pathological projection of his future and had worked out strategies that would liberate him from his current social location. This could then contribute to reducing the impact of potential powerlessness within a system that had caught him, but at the same time could entrap and bind him to a passive narrative of circumstance. Lucas says:

*you can't always see growing up in dirt in the middle of nowhere without any kind of support, you don't have sunshine or water, you either grow up to be this weed and no use to anyone or you turn into this nice flower and you actually have a purpose.*

While Lucas does not specifically refer to the political situation that bound aspects of his life to a restricted trajectory (one that he illustrates by highlighting the plight of others he knew within the care system) his determination to overcome and address the difficulties he faced does imply a more generalised aspect of decoding the circumstances that were not of his own making. 'Freire proposed that education should help students to achieve a critical understanding of their own reality and to engage in transformative actions' (Sleeter, Torres and Laughlin, 2004, p.82). In this instance the personal is political:

*I think I have used the kind of qualities and skills, my self-awareness and all that has been fuelled from my childhood. So my confidence comes from my childhood, but in a positive way and the use of myself comes from my childhood, so I think I should be grateful to my parents for the childhood they gave me, because I am a confident person and I became confident and now I am ... taking my degree and its going great, but it could just have easily gone the other way.*

These moments of clarity and the resulting action that they may stimulate or direct over time can also be seen in the moments students recall what fed their motivation to engage with education and learning. Transformative reactions can have very different sources for individual behaviour.

When I first worked with Chinara in class I was often struck by her beaming smile as I walked into class and one day I told her how pleasant it was to be met by her welcoming smile and asked her what the secret was to her disposition. She explained that she *'just loved this module'*. It was not until I interviewed her two years later that I fully understood the wider implication of her interest and enthusiasm, and I was certainly not expecting the story to unfold in the way that it did.

We had been talking about why gaining a degree was so important for Chinara. It held value in validating her years as a professional care worker, but also that it was a marker for her to establish her voice with in a much larger arena too. She explained that it was something to use to provide a platform to start a social reform and media campaign in Nigeria. Chinara detailed her strategy and had already announced her intentions on Facebook, found sponsors to pay for billboard advertising campaign and intended to return to Nigeria to influence change in what she saw as a corrupt government system run by the rich that denied support for the poor, the vulnerable and for excluded women. She had explained that her father had been a very wealthy businessman and that she was going to make use of the government connections he had made.

*Where has this come from? This drive and the ambition you have?*



*I dreamt about this. Dreaming, like one very old man with a big beard, which I believe is Jesus Christ, sitting with me in my dream, that equality and diversity in my country, everything is inequality in Nigeria. Health is words, words is health. Inequality and wealth distribution is really affecting so many people. So, in my dream this man will come to me and be telling you what to say, what to do in Nigeria. I will just get up and write it, type it on my slide. I have 78 slides of what I am going to follow and it's not by my power.*

When she was asked to explore how studying had helped form this intention, she said:

*These studies help me to do it, I am telling you, it's as if it's that man I am always dreaming about telling me that I am in this university because of what I want to do in Nigeria in the future. From my first year I have been dreaming about this man... From the first year when you were teaching us psychosocial... he would come to me, telling me I must properly focus on what you were telling me to do in the class. He is always telling me what to do.*

While Lucas had revealed an altogether secular vision of clarity, Chinara's vision was the literal embodiment of Christ and expressed an altogether different application of the term, calling. This was more specifically an emancipatory narrative that involved a direct dialogue with a religious conviction. As Chinara described the situation in her homeland she had cried as she described the hopeless destitution she could see on the streets. Her account opens up the personal to the political and far extends the local nature of health and social care into a globalised application of a psychosocial response to poverty and well-being. It might be considered to be out of place in today's climate of personalised educational attainment, where the project is inherently self-obsessed or focused around 'getting on'. While researchers are cautioned to be wary not to simply take of our informant information at face value (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983; Becker, 2007; Van Maanen, 2011) this example is a powerful reminder that student motivation may not come from books, but from an assessment of social context steeped in a religious framework. The schooling

accounts found in Ainley's (2008) anthology of undergraduates expresses how central faith is to many students learning and would indicate that this is potentially an under explored aspect of curriculum development.

The position of closely held cultural values has been a key narrative explored in the academic discourses gaining credibility from Canadian indigenous networks of learning (Simpson, 2011). Cultural co-learning and co-operative inquiry (Heron, 2009) can actively engage students from indigenous backgrounds and those with educational needs within a widening participation approach (Mills and Morton, 2013). Citing Berryman and Woller (2012), Mills and Morton (ibid), writing in relation to New Zealand, raise a key point that approaching pedagogy as a symbiotic and two-way process of learning engages groups traditionally excluded from academic discourse, but also educates the academic in terms of how their methods, pre-occupations and biases may exclude participation. This mutual process of learning could additionally reduce potential to undervalue expectations in learning and provide opportunities for students to integrate their own experiences within the classroom learning environment. They conclude: 'to have moral value as a vocation, pedagogy has to be more than a one-sided or one-off exchange, more than a purchased service or commodity relationship', (Mills and Morton, 2013, p.168). In many ways their writings confront a socially constraining element of the neo-liberal enterprise (Back, 2016) in higher education, one that appears to impose a hegemonic set of secular constructs over deeply personal values. This point is alluded to in relation to students holding onto their cultural beliefs, rather than rejecting them in favour of more mainstream attitudes that may have a tendency not to acknowledge how these personal constructs can underpin people's learning and how they might intend to more broadly apply it to validate a cultural heritage (Simpson, 2011, p.13): 'In order to have a positive identity we have to be living in ways that illuminate that identity, and that propel us towards *mino bimmaadziwin*, the good life'. This relates broadly to the notion that represents the importance in the promotion of social values that ethnographic research can bring to developing more inclusive cultural components of curriculum development and represent issues that directly engage student experiences outside of the academy as well as those within. The narrative accounts are particularly useful in providing data to support teaching, as they bridge the

distance between lived experiences and academic discourse. This may mark the rise in 'non-traditional' students claiming that they are the 'traditional' students now.

The extent and importance of faith challenged aspects of my own practice, as it was an area that was inadequately considered in terms of how it might motivate students within the learning environment. The themes that emerged from the student personal cultural accounts of their own values, highlights how significant this area is for some of the students included in this study. This is key theme for potential curriculum design which is explored by Ainley (2008) in *Twenty Years of Schooling: Student Reflections on their Educational Journeys*.

Rashida talked about the centrality of her faith, within a cultural context, of being 'a Moroccan Gibraltarian' and a female and as an embodied religious symbol of being a Muslim. She linked these elements together when she explained her long-term motivation to complete a degree that could then be converted into a post graduate qualification for midwifery. Part of this vision was:

*I really wanted to do midwifery... and wanted to be the first Hijabi Moroccan midwife in Gibraltar, which would have been an accomplishment for me and as a representative of my community, as well.*

When I was seeking permission from students to access their personal cultural accounts, which formed part of a formative assessment for a module exploring culture and community, it became immediately clear that the vast majority (apart from one student who had studied A-Level sociology) were not familiar with the term. Many of the student cultural accounts described home cultural values as conflicting with mainstream cultural ones. They discussed being brought up with a strong religious perspective, following customs and values that they held dear, such as, looking after their elders, not maintaining eye contact as a sign of respect, being well behaved in the classroom; in short following traditions passed down to them by their parents. Though some challenged particular aspects of this, there was a more general sense from the cultural accounts that UK mainstream society was breaking with traditions, was loosening the cultural bonds of shared values and cultural histories. So the very term 'non-traditional' appeared to provoke an immediate

dissonance; *what, us 'non-traditional'? I don't think so...* One of the students wrote that:

*the elements of my identity that I value the most is my family and my religion... without these things I would not have an identity as this [is what] makes me who I am in today's society (quote from a student cultural account).*

This general response to the term 'non-traditional' student implies that it is not a label that students either necessarily immediately relate to, nor one that is of particular currency in terms of their own use. It is a term that is regularly used by colleagues working in the university; both as a descriptor in relation to specific need, but also as one that is linked to a deficit student model of learning. People arriving ill-equipped, maybe not being ready for university study and not fully understanding the academic expectations that some tutors use to describe what they see as inadequate performance. This position could also be seen as questioning their right or suitability to higher educational learning. Was the term considered a negative labelling process that winnowed the 'good' student from the 'poor' student, the deserving or the undeserving (Hanley, 2016). It's a little like the situation, which I have integrated into classroom discussion when talking about labelling and the term 'chav'. When asked would all the 'chavs' in the class raise their hands, it is usual that, along with some muffled giggles, there would be no show of hands. We would discuss how some socially used terms are not the result of a group adopting themselves, but very much the product of other groups separating specific people off as being in that group. There are plenty of studies that show this to be the case, whether they are demonised specifically or associated with some form of social and moral deviance (Goffman, 1963; Cohen, 1972; Jones, 2012) or part of a process of dumbing down of the whole higher education experience and devaluing their perceived worth (Lipsett, 2008). A moot point in this article is whether it is the result of the wider intake of students into degree study or the response by universities themselves to inflate marks and thereby their own reputation and standing in the formulation of positions in national league tables.

The position of 'non-traditional' students within the framework of higher education is a contested area of internal discussion and many authors are challenging this label

as one that does not represent the changes that have taken place in the UK, Europe and the United States with headline statements such as, 'Non-traditional students are the new traditional students' (Donovan, 2014). What is clear from the interviews carried out in this research is that though there is clear evidence to suggest that the term is viewed with caution and with some scepticism (in what it might imply in terms of attaching stigma), the responses to it illustrate clear aspects of cultural penetration (Willis, 1978) and positive resistance to it as a potentially negative force. There is significant reluctance to embrace a more discriminatory discourse. Sometimes cultural penetrations can be surprising in how they are framed. When working with first year graduates new to a programme I would often introduce the idea of andragogy and illustrate this with the fact that as adults we could be less formal within the classroom. For example, at school pupils are obliged to refer to teachers as 'sir' or 'miss', but at university students are encouraged to call tutors by their first names. Looking through the cultural accounts a statement leapt from the page:

*We were always taught to be disciplined and respectful so, calling a teacher by their first name was disrespectful in Nepal. However, when I started college, well not so much at school, but I had to call a teacher by their first name which I found very uncomfortable and always hesitated to call them...*  
(quote from a student cultural account).

Practitioners make assumptions about identity and unchecked it may not be clear what kind of harm these can do to developing relationships with students. This point suggests that how tutors refer to students can be as significant as how they would like to refer to the tutors. While many students were unaware of the term 'non-traditional', many tutors would have been ignorant of the fact that asking for first name intimacy could close down communication within the classroom setting so profoundly.

All but one of the tutors interviewed were immediately familiar with the term, but it appeared that though all the student group had a relatively vague conception of the term, they had all made sense of it as a result of reading through the research information provided when asked whether they would be interesting in taking part in the research.

Lucas immediately inverted the label:

*First of all, I don't like the word traditional... 'cos I associate traditional with someone who is usually religious, often judgemental, narrow minded, very prude and very better than anyone else, so to speak... but I have met traditional people who are not like this... Well, I take non-traditional as a compliment... some people would be like, why am I non-traditional, some people would assume that it's a bad thing but in relation to this list [on the research information sheet] we have lots of these in our class, we have a lot of mature students, we have low socio-economic backgrounds, we have minority ethnic groups, first generation is me as well... first of all I thought it is because I have come from Sweden... is it because of my sexuality... when I saw the list it made more sense.*

The word 'traditional' appears to baffle some of the participants as much as its binary opposite. Hassan, before the interview, had carried out some research and followed up on the research description. He discussed the various qualities associated with being 'non-traditional' and linked most of them to his own experiences:

*It reflects the process I went through, it describes who I am, 'non-traditional'... first point, I have come a long way from school, I don't finish, I have a long gap, now I am a responsible man, I am independent, at the same time I am working, I am studying... for me if I am an employer anyone has the same qualification, but if I am looking for qualities to put somebody in a place [a job vacancy] I would look at first, how people endure, how resilient you are, commitment to go through all these barriers in life, they never back off or give up, so I think if I employ this person they will apply the same things again and so they will be more productive and even lead a team and succeed.*

Hassan's positive attitude to being considered 'non-traditional' is intimately bound with the struggles related to his journey and his endurance against the odds, he may not be the fish of a channelled and elite waterway, that leads from the refinement of habitus, as the internal locus of cultural capital that fits to the external realities of the 'field', but he is one that has swum against the current and through challenging

terrain. The effort that this has entailed has influenced his mind-set, his bearing and produced a personalised hybridity of the traditional habitus: *'like a challenge is not big to me because I have been through difficult times...'*

Having explored some of the epiphanies students had in making their decisions to return to formal education, alongside their responses to the term 'non-traditional', the next section will look at the idea of upward social mobility as a potential outcome of higher education, and students' thoughts and views on how this relates to their situations.

## **A passport to practice, not a passport to party...**

Pete's attitude is what Willis (1978; 2000) would definitely describe as a form of 'cultural penetration' within a self-conscious working class response to the concept of meritocratic social mobility. His forthright response around the value of his degree and the lower prestige of his choice of university is striking. The term '*untraditional*' as he called it, referred to people from working class backgrounds, who did not get top grades at school: *'it's borderline racial in a way ... it is almost rude'*, like saying that somebody should not even be at university. He was adamant that a degree was *'the same bit of paper'*. He visibly and audibly became quite incensed at this point of the interview, saying of the 'traditional' student that he would:

*love to see some of them doing it, working at the same time as doing this, because some of them wouldn't be able to cope... they have probably had zero experience of working in a school, they have probably had zero experience doing anything outside of uni, other than partying and things like that... I certainly feel in a way that just this untraditional term, it's quite open for debate... there is a lot of people who would quite easily go, like, yeah, that's you, so it would be a lot of finger pointing.*

Unlike Willis's '*lads*' from his study (1978), while their attitude to education was confrontational and prepared them for the rigors of working on the shop floor of factories, it did not necessarily resolve their social situation in terms of leading to

better paid work associated with graduate qualification, but led to unemployment or insecure work and potential labelling (Jones, 2012). Though this position can be questioned, if we consider aspects of deflation in relation to 'second rate' degrees, from 'second rate' universities (Reay, 2017). Pete's attitude and strategy has been very carefully managed and designed to intentionally 'buck' the social expectation he feels is levelled at working class people. He added:

*if you come from a grammar school... they expect you to get a top job and earn the top dollar, whereas someone from a state school they would expect to find you doing a casual office job working your way up from that rather than looking to progress yourself.*

Pete appeared to be sceptical about whether going straight to university even provided the right kind of degree for future employment, as going there straight from school meant that students had limited life experience. But he admitted that: '*I couldn't afford to come out of work, I wouldn't be able to become a student and live the student life*'. Pete had already expressed his lack of desire to engage in a full-on student experience, living in halls and studying full-time. It is clear that a student identity was of no interest to him, though he did consider what he had achieved through part-time study was something he felt proud of being able to manage successfully and however he thought others may judge where and how he accessed university, it was a passport to practice.

This sense of the degree being of the same practical worth as ones gained through the auspices of 'traditional' study at a more prestigious institution goes against the grain of current research preoccupations with access to elite universities and statistical evidence that suggests graduates from these courses command higher wages (Reay et al, 2001; Britton, 2017; Reay, 2017). The point to bear in mind here is that these students have made a specific vocational choice and one that is not evaluated in terms of hard currency, but in relation to what sector they intend to practice in. Teaching, social work and nursing as professions have set starting salaries and aside from longer term potential internal promotions, they do not generally lead to the financial returns associated with graduate jobs open to doctors, bankers and barristers. Health and Social Care students often needed to use their



degree to change the direction of their careers through post graduate professional development. The students are fully aware of this implication in their choice of occupation. Frank's response was to laugh and suggest that the term 'non-traditional' implied:

*A bit of labelling, because you are put in one basket, it's like you are not a proper student [lots of laughing]*

*Do you feel like an improper student?*

*[More laughing] No, I feel like a proper one... it's opened a lot of gates for me... I know there is something at the end of the tunnel... that's how I view it.*

Patti did not think that 'non-traditional' necessarily implied being from a working class background and could see the point of it as a way of monitoring who in real terms accessed higher education, but did feel that the term held negative connotations: *'I think it's a bit of a dodgy term ... nobody wants to be labelled as anything anyway, I certainly don't'*. Patti experienced mental health issues during her second year and as a result, missed a lot of classes. She felt more labelled by this experience, as the university bureaucracy made her explain and provide evidence that had already been made known:

*How did you cope with this?*

*I didn't, it really upset me, and I was nervous about having to speak... and to fill out those forms, so many forms of like justification of this... very personal information... they didn't treat me well considering what was going on.*

Her experience was isolating as she was unable to attend formal classes when she returned, but appreciated the individual support that she received from some of the tutors. As her health improved Patti became even more determined in her studies and finished her foundation degree with a distinction. When she enrolled on a top-up course to gain a full Honours degree, she arrived with a sense of being more resilient and intent on getting what she felt she needed from the course. I asked Patti if she

thought that she had fitted in at the university, even though she had experienced dramatic ups and downs in her experience. Her response says a lot about the discussion of terminology that attempts to chorale people into a specific category:

*I don't really try that hard to fit in with anyone, I just do my own thing, I have got that now.*

The last sections of the student monograph cover their relationships with the university, specifically in terms of how they see themselves 'fitting in', the adjustments made to their lives in order to study, how studying has changed them and their identities and finally, how the university has reacted to those from 'non-traditional' backgrounds in terms of their academic competence.

## **A close fit**

From Jason's point of view, though our interview did not explore the term in any great detail, he felt positive in that having many people coming to the university from a diverse set of circumstances meant that he did not feel himself to be judged, that he fitted in. The majority of the students felt that the institution was a 'good fit' for them, even though not all their experiences here were entirely positive. He said:

*... I don't stand out too much... here I don't feel judged, but had I gone somewhere that was more traditional... yes, I would feel like I was being judged.*

For Rashida 'non-traditional' simply referred to taking a different path through education, usually a longer one, that eventually would lead to the desired destination or personal goal. For her, it was about

*... making up for my A-Levels, so that I can get into nursing, so it's not really the traditional way, the route that it goes... maybe not having the support system... traditionally it's English education.*

She explained that her parents were very keen for her to complete her education to improve her employment prospects, but that they did not speak English well, as a result found it difficult to engage with her schools and as first-generation immigrants had very little knowledge of the system. Asked whether Rashida felt judged by the term, she replied:

*Not really. I think you [the university] actually address the fact that these students are different than these, it addresses there is a difference... do you know, I'm quite proud, I've had to struggle to get what I've got.*

Part of Rashida's pride was linked to her feeling that students at more prestigious universities would be from, 'a wealthy background with a very supportive social system'.

Catherine, when asked whether she felt that 'non-traditional' was a negative or positive label, replied:

*I don't mind it, cos I'm not traditional really, because of my age, but I'm not made to feel like that here, maybe I would on a different course, but I don't find it... but I know that in two years I will be a social worker and I can say yes, it's worth it to them people who kind of question you. I don't mind the term untraditional at all.*

One of the issues that keeps appearing from these interviews and reflections on working with students at this university is not the pursuit of becoming an academic, per se. This contrasts with Reay's focus on the result being to be represented within elite institutions (2017; 2005). To return to the metaphor of water, keeping one's head just above the surface, in order to take breath and not be drowned. Hassan describes a poignant aspect of this; study is just one aspect of life and student identity is at times a trait or characteristic to be nurtured in between every other demand:

*I was doing a job, I have to do my work, sometimes I had a submission, every day I had to go to work, sometimes I'd be reading on the bus, when I reach*

*work, each time I have and I cannot do anything, I would just use that time to read, I was struggling as well, just to make sure I submit on time, so all these are difficult issues. The whole night I will be studying and reading and in the morning sometimes you come to class you are tired, sometimes your head is heavy, you cannot even get much, but you are trying to pursue and pass.*

Frank had already made practical adjustments in his life so that he could focus on his studies, through saving money in advance and reducing his shifts so that he could spend more time studying. He always checked with tutors that he understood the assignment brief and after that his attitude was, *'just give me a library'*. Frank had a very positive set of social skills and was an accomplished conversationalist, always in the thick of discussion and in many ways appeared central to his cohort and often drew positive praise from academic and administrative staff. He thought that the term academic was *'cool'*, and that it bestowed a sense of social prestige, *'it gives you status without a doubt'*. His position as a 'cultural expert' or informant (Spradley, 1979) was interesting because of his successful engagement with the other students of his programme. He held a 'backstage' and a 'frontstage' vantage point (Goffman, 1966) so to speak, as his observations about the behaviour of other students provide insight into why he thought other students found engaging with tutors and university services problematic. He told of having to regularly move the location of where he sat in the library as his fellow students would approach him to help them in their own studies. Frank went on to explain:

*What I have noticed is that many people are scared that if you tell them to go and change something that is more time on their work, so I have a feeling people think, oh, I'll just put it in... so that I don't have to deal with having to be told to change this or that... I see a lot of guys struggle, I don't want to lie, to the extent that some will be, oh, can you write a bit of my work... it's also to do with age, because some people, the older they get, the less they concentrate even in class, some they just want to sleep, it's one of those things really and like I said work, sometimes you are thinking I need to go to work to cover this bill, yet the lecture is going on, you have got this work... you are feeling this is important, but that is important as well, it's pressurising.*

Frank mentioned that he thought students may not turn up to tutorials in part as they saw it as an opportunity to take time out, from both work and studies.

Lucas suggested that:

*... all the students I have spoken to have some background relating to why they are here... they might have children who have learning difficulties and have dealt a lot with social services, been in care... or whatever...*

Chinara had little to say about being classified as a 'non-traditional' student. Along with Catherine, her father was a successful businessman. Both her and Catherine had, to a degree, rejected aspects of their comfortable family background; choosing to leave their families on completing their GCSEs. Both women are, in effect, examples of what Patti had described when she considered that 'non-traditional' as an indicator would not necessarily be confined to a definition of being working class.

After experiencing domestic violence, Catherine decided to be single, concentrate on supporting her family and get back into education to secure a professional qualification so that she could make a difference in other people's lives; but at the same time her motivation to study was a deeply personal journey that involved her resolving and understanding her experiences of domestic violence. The course was in part, a psychological cure or a way of '*putting lids on the boxes*'. Catherine described a teaching session that had domestic violence as the main topic:

*... which really brought up stuff which you forget and I think it's like anything in your subconscious, you forget the little things and when something triggers it you remember it, so then you do play it round in your mind a bit... the next two years is going to be quite painful because it's obviously my journey and its dealing with the stuff I have gone through and the people I'm dealing with will be having the things I have gone through. So, it's me building my resilience... I think reflection... now I've been taught to do it properly, like put it to theories, I use that a lot in my personal stuff, so think that will really help me... definitely the theories are helping me sort my head out and my life...*

Chinara's wealthy upbringing was against the backdrop of extreme inequality in her country; her eyes filled with tears as she described the conditions of poor people living on the streets in abject poverty, unable to secure work or health care. Her vision of change that coincided with her study can be seen as resolving a sense of powerlessness and a return to where she was so eager to leave as a young woman:

*The rich want to go back to their community and just look round, whatever help they can do, that is all I am going to say, we cannot leave everything to government, we can help one another... I have a vision and nobody can blind me, I have a vision...*

## **Personality changes**

Hassan was clear about one thing: his personality would never change, like his father he is 'a quiet guy', but in other ways study has made him more confident and articulate:

*In terms of understanding things... more about my work I am doing and the course I am doing, I am able to see more in there and more issues that I can address too, where before I did not understand if there are issues and not issues... [study] makes me improve my level of communication, how to talk to people in a way I wouldn't be so offensive to them because I learn communication skills... I can really talk, I have ideas... I can express myself; I don't have issues with that really.*

Catherine repeated the fact in our interview that she had suffered with low self-esteem and poor levels of confidence, but the impact of going to university has transformed aspects of her attitude to self: 'I am quite confident, though I didn't realise it until I came here, I definitely think I am growing in confidence'. She later discussed the development of a student identity, saying that when she heard younger students discussing possible post-graduate studies that she discounted this as an option for herself:

*I'm too old for that, just get your degree; but now I can see that I am not going to want to stop learning... like my brain didn't retain much information before, it took a long time to get going and I want to always feed it. I used to go to bed reading crap books, but now I am going to bed reading journals, whereas before I couldn't even understand the language... now from reading it, I know the words... I am the most content I have ever been in myself as a person, as a being, because it has made all those feelings I had before about myself, I've got self-worth, it's given me self-worth, it's made me more confident in me. It's been the most brilliant experience... I don't want my brain to stop.*

An aspect of this research that beguiled me and continues to inform how I have developed this joint inquiry has been my response to the literature around widening participation and its relentless return to deficit models of student identity, comments and behaviours observed in practice situations and the sense that success appears to be dominated by a defence of academic identity as being the be-all and end-all ideal of education. Over the past twelve years I have been amazed and inspired by students that I have had the pleasure to work with. Experiencing first-hand the transformative nature of education on students who have struggled against the flow of social capital; how people have overcome barriers, life disruptions, work and family commitments to not just 'pass', either in the sense of their assessments or academic demeanour. How their faces have changed over the years from being fraught with stern anxiety, imploded self-esteem, bewilderment that often prevented engagement and silenced an evident hunger to learn or to succeed in their aim of leaving - happy with their achievements and a degree certificate tucked under their arm. But, as Chinara expressed, something can take place that wipes away years of educational hurt, under achievement and lack of self-belief:

*...because in the beginning I was nothing, I would soon leave, but gradually, gradually... [pauses]*

*Your confidence is increasing, isn't it?*

*I have confidence to do this and do that, I am really grateful that I came to this school.*

For Rashida the very diversity of that which is contained under the banner of 'non-traditional' has impacted on her sense of self as peer learning had influenced her own attitudes to tolerance and cultural understanding. This is echoed in Amina's embrace of difference and has challenged some of her assumptions about others:

*I am more tolerant to be honest, because I mean my religion is Muslim... I am becoming more tolerant and less judgemental.*

She elaborated by saying that for Muslims certain issues were forbidden, such as being gay or lesbian. She now has made friends on Facebook with a gay man and is more accepting of difference:

*like my group class I learn a lot from them because they come and share their experience... I learn from them... sometime when you come you stick to your belief, you don't want to change a bit, but when you get that that sort of group sometimes you can't escape from where you are and you jump to join them.*

## **Knowledge does not have a colour, does it?**

Many of the interviewees did not speak English as their primary language, but all those who agreed to be interviewed expressed that they felt more confident in how they could articulate themselves as their studies progressed. There were many occasions that language issues arose in marking and moderation with colleagues, and it would be fair to say that not all of them would agree on matters of written style and grammar. One area of marking and academic competence directly relates to presentation and style, but writing elegantly, though a bonus for the reader, is not necessarily of paramount importance, it is the content, the substance of what is being raised, that in many ways determines whether learning outcomes have been met (Wolcott, 2001). One colleague was prone to announce that, 'no student script with a single grammatical error could ever achieve an A grade'. Her comment was in response to a grading of a paper that while grammatically awkward and containing some errors in spelling, appeared otherwise to fully engage with the assignment



learning outcomes. Scripts of this nature can be a challenge to grade, as their surface articulation could be considered poor in terms of scholarly expectation, but engaged in terms of content and analysis of relevant and applied ideas. Not necessarily ready for publication as such, but worthy of a high mark, nevertheless. Evaluating scripts written by somebody using a second language is more time consuming, as the marker needs to work harder to unravel some of the content and given time constraints some tutors have a tendency to mark these kinds of scripts lower than a well written but more descriptive one, written with more fluent style and grammar.

Amina was keen to discuss an issue that links to language, accent and tutor perception of the student:

*Something I want to share with you is that it doesn't matter the language, because some people undermine you because you have accent, to be honest my first year people surrounding me wasn't judgemental about my language or French [African] accent...*

*You mean students or...*

*No students, they know, but I am saying... people ignore what you say...*

*Oh! The tutors?*

*Yes.*

Amina went on to raise the issue of colour and the choice of courses. She had originally been interested in studying psychology and had discussed this with various friends who encouraged her to rethink her plans, as they considered some subjects the domain of white people. Her response raises some key issues, not just in terms of subject choice, but wider educational philosophies and social discrimination:

*White people, I said, but knowledge does not have a colour... I think if you know something and have knowledge it's not about colour. They can stop you*

*doing something but they can't stop you thinking. But thinking, nobody can stop it. That is freedom.*

## **Final thoughts: student narratives**

The student narratives undermine the attempt to study them as a specific homogenous group or distinct culture. The ethnographic objective of capturing and representing a specific culture succeeded to prove the opposite. The diversity of identities explored, the particular lived experiences highlighted, the range of learning journeys and dramatic twists of circumstance undermined any coherency in the term, 'non-traditional' student. Many of those interviewed recognised particular characteristics in themselves and therefore could identify with some of the qualities (their ethnicity, colour, class, gender, social inequalities and disabilities) but they did not realise that this placed them automatically within this group label. They all recognised that the consequence of this could be unsettling and negative and each, in their own way, responded by redefining it, inverting its meaning, celebrating it as a badge of honour, a passport to practice and upward mobility. Patti said that one thing her education had now taught her how to resist just '*fitting in*' and '*... just to do my own thing, I have got that now*'. The value of her learning was that it enabled her to reject the negative labelling and resist conformity to other people's norms. The common themes that bond and weld the narratives together are not encapsulated in the term as a label, but in the term as a descriptor of lived experiences, and these have come to life through these narratives. What is left as shared characteristics are the themes that relate to how they have responded to these circumstances. A passion for learning, resilience in the face of adversity, disruption, rejection of a negative label and successful management of change and opportunity.

Having heard the student voices in terms of the themes and issues raised through the construction of the monograph, the next chapter turns to the tutor interviews to set out the dialogue and discussion which emerged from their stories.

## 5. The Tutor Monograph

### Introduction

I was explaining my research to a friend; she herself had attended Oxford as a school leaver and her daughter had just completed her undergraduate degree at Cambridge: 'They made us sign an agreement, before enrolment, stating that my daughter would not take up any paid work during the academic semesters. They said that this was essential for full engagement in study'. You can read the policy relating to this on the Cambridge University website (2021).

'Living in books' is the leitmotif that Back (2016) uses to describe the importance of signing up to a program in higher education. Books are a strong theme in the following account, both in the positive impact they can have in propelling aspects of

student learning journeys and making sense of a world and their position within it. For some of those interviewed there was a concern that within the main student body there was a perceived reluctance to engage in reading. 'Living in books' is one thing to achieve and navigating your life in the world is another. Books have been instrumental in how the tutors came to understand some of the issues that impacted on their learning journeys and for some, have continued to impact on their lives.

The question of earning while learning has in some senses problematised the capacity to read, but an over emphasis on this as a deficiency will also relate back to all the specific challenges that many of the university students' personal profiles highlight. How university tutors and the wider institutional infra-structure can better support the motivation towards this key aspect of learning appears to be part of an ongoing wider academic discussion that never appears to be resolved (Nathan, 2005). This research offers an opportunity to open up dialogue, to engage tutors and students in dialogue to explore ways to enhance active learning, be that through reading, watching, group work or just talking about and sharing ideas.

The material also illustrates that for many, social mobility involved overcoming persistent disruptions, putting in the hours of study and making the most of their opportunities to continue or get back into education. For some, having arrived was not a process of simply belonging. The narratives are riven with class consciousness and cultural infringements. Some of the discussion around colour may shock some readers, but the scenarios should not present surprise at the pervasiveness of these narratives and the growing evidence of discrimination (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2019). Accounts by academics from working class backgrounds highlight a sense that they often feel that they do not fit into university culture (Craddock, 2018). This monograph provides opportunities to consider how class, gender and ethnicity express themselves in response to intersectionality through education narratives and learning identity development (Brah, 2007). It shows that the act of 'passing' (Goffman, 1963) can involve pain, discomfort and anger, as even when somebody might feel like they have 'arrived' their interactions might not always make them feel that they always 'belong'.

These accounts show resilience in the face of adversity and are a testament to the participants' commitment and passion for the power of education to be transformative. The discussion provides bridging points and strategies to engage students in active learning and promotes dialogue between students and their tutors.

The interview questions included an account of the participants' educational journey up until they started to work as university tutors, how they understood or used the term 'non-traditional' and how they thought that the university could better support the needs of the students they taught. The phrase 'seeing people like yourself' at the front of the classroom, is a crucial point of engagement, and these tutors would certainly be positive role models for many of their students.

The style of this monograph is near to being a case study (Thomas, 2011) and has deliberately used long excerpts from the discussion. This was to better enable the narratives to open up topics, whilst at the same time limiting the paraphrasing of what was discussed and the interpretation that this might impose. These quotations are not snippets to weave around a specific theory (Wolcott, 2001), but starting points in ongoing dialogue around student learning and support and the struggles that tutors have experienced in becoming and belonging. There is some ongoing discussion and analysis of the themes raised and this in part reflects the practice application of this kind of small-scale research, as it explores wider areas relating to teaching and learning that this group were keen to expand on.

None of the tutors thought that the direct use of the term 'non-traditional' student was a positive label and all thought that it was highly problematic as a marker for such a diversely populated group of apparently homogenous students. Though the persistence of it being a negative label used by their colleagues was acknowledged, nobody suggested a specific need to come up with an alternative, apart from John.

The participants were asked to participate in the interviews because through prior contact I had understood their commitment to the underlying ethos of widening participation and because they shared a range of qualities and characteristics, when they entered higher education, that form the diagnostic cluster for being 'non-traditional' students.

These narratives are also important historically, as they represent the positive impact of grant aided study, rather than the current loans system (Antonucci, 2016) and the positive impact it had on people's reading habits.

## **The participants (not their real names)**

Noreen was from a working class family living in an outlying new town and came into academia after a period in publishing and then through completing her PhD. Wendy came from the Caribbean as a child to join her parents and new little sister in London. Richard came from the Caribbean to London to enrol as a mature student on a nursing programme. Leonard was born in London and raised by his mother who had moved from the Caribbean to train as a nurse. John, like Richard and Leonard, left school as soon as he could. He subsequently returned to study, later completed his doctorate and then went straight into university teaching. Leonard recently completed his doctorate during his time in post. Richard was planning to enrol on his doctorate and Wendy thought research into the lives of the Windrush Elders would pay something back to those who had felt the pressures of being 'the first to arrive'.

The tutors were all around or approaching middle age, with Richard being the youngest. Apart from John, all the others had worked in other career areas before their current roles as academics. All, aside from Wendy, were 'second-chance' returner students making good. As before, there is no particular beginning, middle or end; the reader will be guided through the narratives thematically.

## **The Tutor Narratives**

... a middle-class boy may feel no compunction in being seen going into the library; a professional criminal, however, writes: I can remember before now on more than one occasion, for instance, going into a public library near where I was living, and looking over my shoulder a couple of times before I actually went in just to make sure no one who knew me was standing about and seeing me do it. (Goffman, 1963, loc. 96 - 100)

One might make the assumption that most academics would look back on their school days with a certain degree of fondness, as a formative part in their latter development as academic selves. But all of those interviewed did not have the kinds of journeys that built on a straightforward or linear narrative of educational development. Their home lives were less disruptive than those described in some of the student narratives, but their relationships to education were often fraught and, in most cases (particularly the male participants), fractured. There were few positive mentions made to their schools being in any way proactive in their support for continued education. There are areas that resonate with the student accounts, not least as only one member of the group went straight from school to studying in higher education. Their accounts were of starting over, of getting a second chance; and usually this was a result of self-motivation, not necessarily through parental guidance. In fact, parental influence could be said to have been initially ambivalent, as going to work was seen as a practical necessity, not to delay through continued study. Only Wendy expressed strong support from her parents, as her father would reassure her that he would help her out through her continuing education whenever possible. Richard's mother supported his education very strongly up until his GCSEs and championed education as a route to 'a better life' which, Richard pointed out, was a strong element of Caribbean parental social capital. Unlike the students in the previous monograph, all of these participants made the most of funding opportunities and commented on how this made their choices essentially more manageable. John was adamant that student loans do not provide a sense of value for today's students, whereas receiving grants somehow did.

A significant difference between the student and the tutor group was how they saw the university they were part of. The students interviewed were generally positive about the institution. Their perspectives were upbeat when they described their choice of university, including that the environment was considered welcoming and in a general sense met the majority of their expressed needs (though there were acknowledgements to some additional requirements).

The tutors were less positive in describing their work environment; some felt strongly that there were fundamental issues with how the institution addressed student need.

Noreen was sure that the university had an identity crisis itself and appeared to agree with John's view that it struggled with academic embodiment. His point was that tutors are working within what is really a further education college that calls itself a university by default. All agreed with Wendy, who thought that the value of the institution was its potential to enable students to address their previous educational challenges, but that it 'missed a trick' in not making this its strength and purpose in being. All the tutors, though raising concerns about student engagement in studies, expressed empathy in terms of their understanding of student profiles; recognising a part of themselves in many of those that they taught.

There is a strong emergent narrative around books and reading – seen as problematic tools for the engagement of students themselves, at times, but pivotal nevertheless, in the development of students as academics. Books and reading changed many of the tutors' lives, inspiring them in their learning journeys and contextualising their experiences. Books were considered as inspirational pieces in their own autobiographical jigsaw, enabling them to 'see the bigger' picture.

All considered that they operated consciously within a proactive social justice framework and the promotion of working class and ethnic minority student opportunities to access professional employment and to enable students to 'pass at being middle class' or as professionally equipped graduates. For example, Leonard considered that the term 'non-traditional' was understandable in general monitoring of access; but appeared to be a time-weary concept appropriate more to the days when higher education was only accessed by a privileged few. Was it really a term for what people used to call the working class? Why bother with it anyway, who wants to be labelled like that? All except one, were very familiar with the phrase and heard it used regularly within the institution. To the tutors, their students were defined by their educational journey and their social experiences; they were students with potential, carrying the weight of a failing education system that they knew had not fully supported their learning journeys and sometimes disruptive or chaotic home lives.



## **We have arrived**

When Richard met up with another black man with whom he had studied briefly some years before, they both stood in the corridor and smiled. Richard announced that '*we have arrived...*'. Both men were employed as university lecturers after many years of study while working. '*Being the first is a lonely place*', as Wendy (a black tutor) had exclaimed, and the position is fraught with difficulties that are associated with standing out as 'the other'. Arriving somewhere does not, on every occasion, mark the end of a journey, nor does it necessarily imply that people are made to feel altogether welcome. It took Richard many years of trying before he secured his job as an academic and he has recently enrolled on doctoral studies to further bed himself in. Both tutors have experienced disturbing and unsettling incidents in relation to wider issues of academic belonging.

Even if John did bemoan the lack of student reading, his approach to teaching was to deliberately unpack basic academic expectations (independent learning skills, essay structures, integrating theory, etc.) that he thought had not been covered by schools and to keep on dishing out reading handouts and explaining how they would relate to passing the assessment. Noreen developed an academic support module, not unlike the kind described by Medicot (2009). Wendy suggested two young parents rotated childcare to enable individual study time and integrated one-to-one sessions that could take on the form of life-coaching. Leonard championed the 'underdog' through his management interventions and Richard was adamant that the students were fortunate to have him as their tutor as he honestly wanted them to achieve their best and that he understood many of their challenges through experiencing many of them himself, through both his early education experiences and subsequent journey to becoming a black academic.

In his short chapter entitled Cultural Capital, Bourdieu (1986) defines and distils how he understands the term. Bourdieu (1986, p.242) argues that it embodies three distinguishable states: one being the state 'embodied' which relates to 'long lasting dispositions of mind and body', the next being 'objectified' which refers to the valued cultural artefacts, 'instruments, machines, etc.' of the day (and presumably the

'society' in question) and lastly, the 'institutionalized state' that would include educational qualifications. In short, we align ourselves accordingly, in terms of what choice we have to understand the world, the words we use to describe it, the commodities and activities we put up on a pedestal and the institutions we engage in that develop (or hinder) our life and careers. Incidentally, Bourdieu was from a working class background, but through his early school achievements, accessed increasingly elite educational institutions in France. The argument runs that if we present wearing the 'right' clothes, with the 'right' accent, making the 'right' noises at the 'right' times, we may get to join particular institutions that are in alignment with our social ambitions. Carrying a certificate to the interview with at least three A\*s does not go amiss either. What Bourdieu effectively describes is a whole range of social behaviours, that relate directly to social groups and classes, that develop the self to assume an identity that fits with an intended environment or social position. Bourdieu was himself a 'class blow-in' (Bourdieu and Waquant, 1992; Jenkins, 2002) and given his eventual intellectual status he obviously disguised himself very effectively to fit into elite academic culture; presumably, in part, to protect himself from the exclusionary aspects associated with academic cultural capital. The discussions developed around the sociology of education and the inadequacy of personal narratives obviously stands in direct opposition to this kind of biographical approach adopted in this study (Bourdieu and Waquant, 1992).

While personally aware of the pressures facing people from outsider groups accessing elite institutions, Bourdieu clearly became adept at concealing his different cultural markers, as he became an extremely successful academic from a working class background accessing the French equivalent of the UK's Oxbridge. His career embodies the literal example of the mythical *Stranger in Paradise*, discussed by Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2009) in which they directly discuss Bourdieu's concept of 'a habitus divided against itself'. However, their data also suggested that, for the majority of their interviewees, going to a prestigious white, middle class university vindicated aspects of the isolation that they felt from their peers during their school careers; feeling alien in some ways to the other 'people like us' (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009), and experiencing different levels of bullying for standing out as different within their classes. Their 'swimming against the stream' and commitment singled them out as hard working 'swots', both in terms of their application to study

and rejection of what Willis (1978) would have called the '*lads*' culture of educational defiance in favour of the '*ear'ole's*' perspective of educational conformity. *Stranger in Paradise* (Reay et al, 2009) interrogates some aspects of Bourdieu's discussion of how cultural capital operates in determining educational outcomes. The interviews carried out with working class children who gained places in an elite university show that the participants did not specifically illustrate domestic influence in their educational achievement. Being the first in the family to go to university was the result of their hard work and self-motivation in terms of developing adaptive learning identities that would prove to, above all, prioritise their own time and input into achieving high results. Their motivation was internally located and not the result of being hot-housed or built into family routines and expectations. While this chimes with the following interviews, the extent to which schools influenced educational aspiration appears weak. The experiences of 'second chance returners to education' can be markedly different when it comes to the school setting influencing aspirations. This appears to be supported by Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2009, p.110):

For Linsey and most of the southern working-class students, the institutional habitus of the school played a relatively minor role in encouraging a sense of entitlement in relation to elite higher education... rather, as we have seen, it was often the support and effort of one individual teacher.

Leonard described his secondary education as attending 'a sink school' and that when his brother told the careers advisor he wanted to study law, his mother, who was present at the careers advice session, scoffed at his aspiration, along with the careers advisor. For John, the school experience crushed any curiosity about learning. Neither interviewee expressed any positive comments about their time at school or talked about supportive input from teachers. But when they found people who saw potential in them as learners, their experiences and attitudes changed dramatically. Although they changed, John emphasised how much effort this took in terms of time and disciplined study (as reflected in the elite entrant participants of *Stranger in Paradise* study). For John there appeared to be a process of re-invention; mediated through mixing with more middle class friends and adopting the characteristics of a serious and committed scholar (driven in part through fear of failure). He says, '*I worked very hard, because I thought that I wasn't good enough to pass...*'.

This was how John looked back on his experience during his secondary school years:

*At school it was just terrible, 'Yes, sir!' It went on like that – the relentless crushing of your spirit – for the next few years...*

*The year that I was there, they got one O-Level pass, one O-Level pass... he was like the only clever kid in our class – he passed English O-Level and the rest of us failed... you know... and [the teacher], who must mercifully now be dead, kept his job! That was their expectation, whereas in maths they would regularly get 20 O-Level passes and I passed maths – it was one of the only O-Levels I got... by the way I was 28<sup>th</sup> out of 30 in the class. The other area the school was good at was technical drawing. All the other kids I went to school with left school to get jobs with British Telecom.*

*We knew industry pretty much meant BT... I said no... I hated technical drawing, hated everything pretty much... you'll have to work in an office... this was in the days when they used to fix you up with jobs... They actually had jobs for 16 year-olds...*

When Bourdieu (1986, p.242) discusses what he thought of as crude economic analysis of education, he points out that there is more going on in relation to the investment people are prepared to make (or unconsciously go along with):

...they neglect to relate scholastic investment strategies to the whole set of educational strategies and to the system of reproduction strategies, they inevitably, by a necessary paradox, let slip the best hidden and socially most determinant educational investment, namely the domestic transmission of cultural capital.

The salient point (Bourdieu, 1986, p.242) being that the investment in specific identity construction and the 'hidden' cost of this enterprise of social alignment (the real socialisation of education in all its manifestations) would suggest that:

The relationship between academic ability and academic investment show that they are unaware that ability or talent is itself the product of an investment of time and cultural capital.

Developing cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) involves a complex set of social relations, not strictly speaking capital in the shape of money alone, but in time and dedicated strategies of socialisation and specific cultural learning. Some of this involves access to additional opportunities to promote aspects of education, special interests, musical activities, additional tutoring, the use of particular equipment and facilities, familiarity with acceptable conduct and socially communicated cultural prompts that illicit commensal ideas; spark the same light bulbs, so to speak. He argues that purely economic arguments of the social value and productivity of education miss out on the central point that many people in different social groups do not have access to these opportunities or these 'invisible' investments that place additional value into the future success of some students. The way that Reay (2017) describes this is direct and highlights how accepted it has become and consciously applied by the middle class to monopolise best opportunities and resources in education. Plenty of evidence (Jackson and Marsden, 1966; Reay et al, 2005; Reay, 2017) points to the fact that maximising cultural capital is dependent to a large degree on accessing networks and being familiar with systems and procedures, feeling confident to address authority. Having the full weight of family behind them – both in terms of their attentions and their acquired capital (their funds) – is a key indicator of potential success (Bourdieu, 1986). Neither John nor Leonard had unambiguous support from their parents to initially buy the time needed to accumulate the knowledge and cultural trappings of going into higher education. For Leonard, his mother was ambivalent about him continuing in education, largely because it meant delaying working for a living and John's mother was equally concerned with *'putting things in the fridge'*. Family fortunes can be scarce, if we compare Jason's account of his mother ringing him for a share of his student loan, we see an inversion of the traditional student sense of family support. While some of the African students were committed to supporting their families back home by sending money, this did not equate to subsidising their alcohol consumption.

## Scholarships and educational grants substituting domestic capital

John and Leonard came from single parent families and traditions that needed to balance financial survival against time and inclination to engage in a potentially costly delay to entering the workforce. Both went to schools that would, in today's terms, be considered to be failing schools. The teachers seeing little benefit to their students in encouraging them to think beyond their immediate social circumstances. Both are now academics working within higher education, one a Reader and the other in middle management. Their routes to their current roles are clearly different, but both made full use of grants and access courses that were available at the time. In effect, this addressed issues around time poverty and provided opportunities for extended study and reading time. But, in order to get to that point, they made personal choices about deferral of paid work to make the most of that time available.

John saved money to cover the rent he gave to his mother for a year and Leonard went against the grain in terms of resisting the home culture of immediate earnings, rather than the longer-term approach to investing in a future career post-higher education. Leonard commented during the interview:

*I wouldn't be here unless County Hall [in London] put on all those access courses... it was for black people to get into professions.*

Leonard had displayed a unique talent in becoming invisible as a learner, at least in the eyes of his schoolteachers. Like Hanley (2016), Leonard felt that libraries were a haven for a curious imagination that opened up new worlds, invisible too, until the pages are turned. Hudson's (2012) love of reading described in her semi-biographical novel and her appreciation of the capacity for libraries to provide the materials to feed a motivation for learning outside of formal education, is another example of this. This time a marginalised white working class child making their way out of a chaotic set of circumstances. Noreen's parents took the family away from estates like the ones that Hudson grew up on (2019). Libraries were a 'lifeline'.

## My secret library...

While Leonard left school with few qualifications, he had always been a regular user of his local library. He spent much of his time buried in books and said that he was aware he had a natural curiosity about the world. After working for a few years, he found that he was reading the Guardian newspaper while working in the “Ford factory” and a girlfriend, at the time, encouraged him to use his interests to go and look for courses that could promote a different career outside of factories and the casual workforce. He soon found an area of interest, *‘It was all very generous, grants no loans, it was all very generous. And when I was a student, I still worked and had three or four jobs at one stage. It was a good time, there was no financial hardship there’*. Going to university was, *‘something I took to...’*. Leonard was very clear on the benefits of being given time to continue with his studies:

*The process of that access course, during that process, you come to learn, because before then you feel that anybody within the professions merited by dint of their superior intelligence; you don’t know in terms of how society is set up, in terms of the different levels, the strata of education, private and public and secondary modern and grammar and that, I was not aware of that... where you are born and your social class, etc. Once you become aware of that you begin to believe that you can achieve what you want, basically. That the only barrier in terms of what you can achieve educationally is your horizons and you know, you have to resist taking and internalising what people may put on you. And I was glad specifically to meet that one person in that shop front [an education recruitment office] that I went to that encouraged... because a young black guy walking off the street, he wouldn’t necessarily think that there is teacher material – I have heard since a lot of people who are actively discouraged to enter a profession and at that time you are not full of confidence about your intellectual intelligence... teachers looking after you, minding you...*

John and Leonard’s narratives show a single-minded determination to go back to education after their initial negative experiences of state schooling and what would

be described as, either counter or ambivalent, family support. The advantages of being able to have accessed grants neutralised some aspects of the financial burden and dependence on their families. This is in sharp contrast to the current student obligation to absorb the personal risk attached to loans and the need for this to be supplemented through ongoing employment (Antonucci, 2016).

## **One step forward, two steps back – re-engaging with learning journeys...**

A similar re-engagement occurred with both Noreen and Richard. The piecing together again of an educational pathway into higher education was facilitated through access to grants, not loans. While it is clear that for some of the group this still meant that there was a need to earn additional income, this financial cushion ensured or released dedicated time to full time study, in a way that appears absent in most of the student narratives.

John and Leonard's interviews resonate in their narratives of educational neglect and labelling as each, in their way, express the failure of education to nurture potential and to label the participants as 'academic failures'. Both left at the earliest opportunity and were directed by their school's careers advisors and by domestic influences to leave education for paid employment. Neither participant had anything positive to say, other than that one of the most terrible teachers was probably dead, now. John was adamant:

*They didn't like oiks like me, you know, who were no good a... my literacy levels were appalling at 11 or 12... [School was witnessed as] a relentless crushing of your spirit.*

He was twenty-eighth out of thirty in the tables of achievement, hated school and then hated work, starting on eleven pounds a week as a clerical worker for the civil service. Soon work offered an option of accessing day release to sit further GCSEs, but the thought of this filled him with a sense of dread:



*Part of this was shyness, I was really nervous... By the way, I have students like that now... I always feel sorry for mature students [as they often displayed the same horrified look and anxious expressions]... didn't want to make a fool of myself.*

For Richard, the situation was different as his mother was very keen for him to do well at school and had made sacrifices to ensure that he was placed in a 'good' school but, in his own words 'something went wrong'. Richard went to school in the Caribbean and explains that his mother was very keen to support his and his sister's education:

*She was very ambitious. I should mention that I am from a single parent family, so my mum raised us and in Trinidad there is this thing about education is sort of like the window to being successful. So there is a big push in the Caribbean about being educated and I think it's more of a push there than here because when I speak to second generation Caribbean people who are born in England there does not seem to be so much focus as those people raised in the Caribbean for education.*

Though money was an issue, Richard's mother managed to move her children to a private school and both he and his sister were on course to do well in their final examinations. However, something changed in Richard's attitude as the exams got closer. While he engaged in a lot of extracurricular activities (drama and dance) his interest in other subjects declined. He felt ashamed when the results came through and ended up re-sitting his O-Levels to restore some family pride. But, by then he did not have any plans to continue in education and became in his own words a bit of a hustler:

*I was very off the rails and my mum moved house. We went to a more deprived area where being unemployed was OK, working in a chicken farm, or local shop or grocery or cutting a bit of lawn was alright, just hustling really...*

## Working your way up the ladder

Richard had carved out some work as a professional dancer but realised that his life in this area was limited and he was also aware of the negative judgement of this lifestyle from his father. In order to make enough 'bread and butter' money to get by, he worked as a health auxiliary. He later went on to work as an auxiliary nurse and at the same time studied to enhance his qualifications:

*While I was doing the course, I walked into the classroom and there was this tall black man with a 'ball-head', and he was extremely passionate, very enthusiastic about education and about treating people with compassion and care. He, I would say, was the trigger for me making the decision then about me wanting to be a lecturer...*

After working in mental health for a few years Richard decided to study in the UK to become a fully registered mental health nurse and work in community health. The intention was originally to get qualified and then to return home. Richard ended up getting a job working within the health care sector and subsequently went on to take a masters degree as a mature learner, which due to work commitments, ended up taking five years to complete. His work in the field, particularly around training eventually meant that he was offered a dual role with a part-time post teaching at the university. The difficulties for colleagues to secure work and promotion is well documented in Higher Education (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2019; Adams, 2017). Richard explains:

*... it's been a long, long journey, 21 years, and in that there were lots of opportunities for lecturer and I had 5 interviews and failed all of them, and I wonder why I couldn't get a job as a lecturer, I was never good enough.*

Richard worked his way up from the bottom in terms of his nursing career and very much considers this to be an important aspect of professionalism. While his ambition to become a university tutor illustrates the value he still holds for learning, he was critical of people using education as a way of by-passing the everyday aspects of

practice associated with nursing and compassion. He was relatively critical of people who were only concerned with getting ahead through further academic study alone:

*... when I started my journey, I started at the very bottom, I used to wash all the beds, and run errands and do all the stuff that unqualified nurses did. I did it for years and I think anyone who wants to be great at what they do they need to be able to be very good at the basics first and once you can understand the basics it makes you much more secure when you come to the point to deliver and teach and influence.*

Richard is proud that his learning journey was routed in service and practice experiences and feels that this is the most appropriate foundation to then build an academic framework around to develop professional competences and standards.

### **“There’s a whole different world out there and it’s inside this book” (Noreen)**

In the children’s story book, *Miss Happiness and Miss Flower*, Rumer Godden (1961) tells the tale of a young Indian girl moving from India with her family to live in a cold and grey England. The shock and isolation and home sickness begin to shift as the young girl builds a perfect Japanese house when she is re-united with two Japanese dolls that had been sent from India. It is a striking coincidence that this was a formative book that influenced Noreen’s interest in reading as a young child, but an aspect of the biographical detail (moving to England from a sunny, family filled part of the world) relates to some of Wendy’s formative experiences. Both loved reading and vividly accounted this, in relation to phases of their educational journey. Wendy, who grew up in the Caribbean and within an extended family that held education in great esteem and whose uncle was the headmaster of a local school, mentions the blue skies, the outdoor breezy lessons and the reading of school books from the Wide Range Reader publications. When I heard that Wendy loved and devoured these books, I experienced a visceral response. Due to my own early career as a remedial reader, the series of age-related developmental reading tests for children marked a personal lack of progress against the majority – if not all, of my

classroom peers. It got to the point where I was the only child not able to be allowed to choose my reading book from the collection of non Wide Range Readers (as I had not yet made my way through the whole series). Wendy did not however, remark on the White British portrayal of the characters and themes explored in this set of reading resources.

## **Education as a contact sport...**

I was never asked by anyone whether I had a tail hidden under my school uniform or whether I liked swinging in trees, though occasionally labelled as being a bit 'thick', I was only spat at once at school and never called a "*nigger or a wog*". These were the incidents that Wendy encountered; not just the coldness of the weather, but the harsher realities of social discrimination. Wendy at one point said, "*I punched my way out of secondary school*", and as she said it, she held up a fist and showed where her knuckle had once been broken. Her idyllic start to education was rudely interrupted through cultural relocation and full emersion into an alien onslaught of a hostile environment (Grant, 2019). Though Wendy was, at the time, re-united with her parents and a new little sister.

Noreen, on the other hand, had her shelves of plastic books at home, that with a push of a finger revealed the drinks cabinet hidden from view. It provided a somewhat paradoxical lure to reading from an environment where she felt little expectation for her to do particularly well at school. But she considered hers a life that seemed to be very similar to those of the other children and families she lived and schooled with. Noreen's narrative is to reveal that when she left for university, it was then that she felt the force of feeling an outsider. Stigmatised by her lack of knowing the system (having a non-academic qualification), her lack of money and the alienation of not feeling fully prepared and acclimatised for a new institutional environment, in which she suddenly felt not like all the others.

Noreen grew up on an outlying estate and Wendy moved from the Caribbean to East London as a child in the sixties. Noreen lived in a new town estate created to rehouse people living in urban slums, with about seventy thousand others who all

lived in council houses; in her words, *“it was a pretty level playing field”*. She received generally positive feedback for her school work and was a quiet, but enthusiastic learner. Both worked in other areas before becoming academics. Noreen achieved this employment shift through gaining sponsorship for a doctorate and then teaching in a prestigious university, before arriving at her current post. Wendy had taught in Further Education colleges and worked for a number of years in the corporate world of training in a large telecommunications company – primarily relating to promoting understanding of cultural diversity in supply chains. Wendy has considered completing a doctorate interviewing first generation Windrush elders as something to close her own academic learning journey.

Noreen did not talk much about her primary school experiences; it appears that the family moved around a lot. Her parents were from a *“historically very deprived migrant area”*. Her siblings had been raised there, in what was essentially a bedsit. But just before she herself was born the family moved to a purpose-built new town built on the outskirts for relocation of the city slums. *‘They wanted to move out of there, they could see that it wasn’t a very good place to be, so they were aspirational in that sense’*. An odd fact was that her father had attended grammar school, but Noreen said her dad never knew how he had ended up there (not remembering any tests). But he had not been able to ‘make a success of it’. Noreen’s point was that:

*It requires parental investment, space to work, support, somebody who has an understanding of your lack of social and cultural capital. So, he would have been in a very alien environment. I doubt he could have afforded the uniform, so I don’t know what happened there. But anyway, he showed up occasionally, but most of the time he played truant with his friend, they used to go to the cinema, which cost a jam jar to get in. You handed in an empty jar [glass jars were collected for recycling] to get in the cinema – that’s how much it cost.*

*Did he encourage you there then?*

*No, he didn’t! He thought education was important, but he had no idea how to make that happen and made very little effort to make sure that it happened.*

*All we did is show up to school every day. My parents never interacted with school. They wouldn't have dreamt of showing up to school and saying to a teacher I think Noreen should do a bit more of this! It would not have occurred to them; they would never have done that.*

*... there were no real expectations, so yes, you could do what you want but as soon as you started to do things like history, that was my passion. I loved history at school I thought it was a brilliant subject, I really enjoyed it, I was really good at it, and I could see that I could make a success of it, and I remember at home saying that I really like history... nobody [at home] could see the point of history, the point being employment... who does that for a job? You had to have a skill, so you should learn to type.*

Wendy's parents left for the UK six years before they were eventually able to arrange for her to join them. Wendy described how she felt when her parents left and reflected on the fact that she was not particularly affected by this separation, as she continued to live with her extended family on the same piece of shared family land. It was common where she lived for people to move either to the United States or to the United Kingdom in their search for a better life. It seemed natural enough that, *"if you were doing nursing, you are training and you really can't have a child. It's very difficult."*

It was on moving to the UK that Wendy felt a sudden sense of estrangement:

*... when I came, my mum had my sister, she was born here. So, I felt a little displaced because they had created like a new family and I remembered wanting to go back, because it was cold, I thought it was horrible, there were smoking chimneys, the coal man would pour the coal outside... coming here really was difficult and I wanted to go back, I didn't want to be here... I didn't like the food, it's too cold, my hands were freezing, my skin dry, people called me names. I didn't want to be here. But going to secondary school that all changed.*

*I discovered people like Marvin Gaye, James Brown, I started seeing positive black people, on the TV (you had to move the aerial). I discovered Angela Davies, Malcom X, Maya Angelo, Alice Walker. I read *The Colour Purple*, so I*

*discovered a lot of positive blackness, in a way. It literally made me feel I'd take no shit from anybody [said in whispered tones]. I read Soledad Brother and I read Martin Luther King... I liked literature, I liked reading and I read everything, you know, but at secondary school I discovered other things... self-empowering, absolutely! Not just knowledge for knowledge sake... We had to write an essay on somebody who inspired [us]. I remember writing about Martin Luther King. He was pretty amazing... everyone was writing about Florence Nightingale and all that nonsense, that had nothing to do with me... I couldn't relate to them people. I remembered hearing his speeches and feeling moved by them. I was young and you need to find an anchor and he was one of my first anchors.*

Both Wendy and Noreen appear to have very positive attitudes to their secondary education experiences (unlike John and Leonard). Noreen was enthusiastic about history and languages, recognised part of her motivation was linked to a competitive quality, was glad of having things to counter a sense of boredom, but also presented as a very compliant learner and as a consequence felt that the teachers like this response in a classroom, so she reciprocated positively:

*I liked doing academic work... people liked you if you were quiet, more than that I enjoyed the lessons, I liked the tasks, I think I was bored. I just wanted something to do. There were no specific family expectations as nobody in my family had an O-Grade.*

She describes that while at school and living where she did, that it was the slightly 'posher' children:

*the ones that wore smarter uniforms, that wore socks from Marks and Spencers, rather than the cheapy ones from the Co-op... I thought they were odd, rather than the other way round... there were so few people like that in our town. They were usually the children of school teachers.*

Wendy describes her educational progress as one that after the dislocation of leaving her home in the Caribbean, the transition up from primary to secondary

school reduced aspects of isolation, as there she met other black students: ‘*we are still friends to this day and we’ll die friends...*’. Her initial response was to ‘*come out fighting*’, but she soon realised both that she was not alone and the advantages of books to guide understanding of the world and clarify her cultural identity. For Wendy books were tools to equip and prepare for being a professional in the wider world by informing evidence-based practice.

A main preoccupation for John, as a returnee to education, was finding a girlfriend. He noticed that there appeared to be a gender imbalance at the college, which appeared to be described both as an incentive to attend classes, but also as an area of personal dread, as he did not want to appear to be ‘*a fool*’ in front of so many young women, mainly from middle class social backgrounds. “*Part of this was shyness, I was really nervous...*”. At the time John could remember saying to himself: “*I do not want to be here, didn’t want to make a fool of myself.*” A particular anxiety was around having to read anything out in class.

### **“I worked very hard, because I thought that I wasn’t good enough to pass...” (John)**

Apart from the acute social phobia bound up with the return to education, it becomes clear from this account that there was something of a sea change and a growing awareness of class issues that could impact on education. An influential book that John studied – and wanted me to note, ‘read from cover to cover’ (how many of our students do this, he also asked?) – was *Education and the Working Classes* (Jackson and Marsden, 1966). The two-hour tube journey to college was used to read and John began to buy books and treasure them (using plastic covers to protect his precious commodities). First, he chose short stories (the Penguin series with the red covers) and progressed onto reading novels, history books and key sociological texts. He prided himself on going to the original sources, owning his own copy and presumably being one of the few to very actively engage in a wide range of reading around his subject areas. Why this renaissance? John is clear that while a combination of factors came into play the role of positive teaching attitudes and engagement with students made an enormous difference:



*I just thought to myself – well I do want to be here [on day release to college] ... I didn't want to make a fool of myself, now that's quite an interesting thing actually, because we had a teacher once and he went round the class and got people to read out loud, now I never do this now that I am a teacher, now my reading out loud when I was sixteen was really with my finger on it and mispronouncing difficult words, it was embarrassing... by the way I have got students like that here now, still, you know, I don't know how to say that word, this is allegedly a university... you know – but I was like that at sixteen... and I remember going up to the teacher after one of my first classes and asked if he could not ask me to read out loud again over the period of the two years. I got such a lot of help from those teachers, whose names I've put at the front of my book, I got such a lot of help from them, that instead of telling me I was an idiot, which is what school had repeatedly said, they said, no! No! you are really clever, you are going to do really well, you must go to university... they were saying that to me within a year... 3 O-Levels on day release and then I went back full time to do A-Levels – which I had to get my mums permission to... my mum didn't want me to quit the job. My mum was of the view that work was virtuous, now I have never seen work as virtuous. Her view was totally that working was good and not working was lazy and bad... and she thought I was just mucking around and hanging around with all these middle class people, my mum didn't like the middle classes. I had to save up the money for a year to give her a year's worth of money – I gave her a hundred pounds, nowadays if I was to remind her of that she'd be very upset, but at the time it wasn't like that, at the time she just thought I wasn't serious... By the end of the first year, I think she recognised that I was serious and I was working quite hard... and I worked very hard at A-Level I worked harder than many of our under graduate students do here, because I thought that I wasn't good enough to pass, you know. And I thought I was going to fail and I definitely didn't want to fail...*

## **“Things don’t just happen in life; they happen for reasons...” (Leonard)**

In listening to Leonard’s journey, it struck me as odd that a child with such self-directed interest and enthusiasm in reading was so evidently ignored by the ‘minders’ of the school and that there was not a single positive comment in Leonard’s narrative on school. That his passion for learning was somehow invisible to all around him. While he was showing many of the attributes that would work so well in the future through applied study, there were no signs of external encouragement. In his words he was, ‘*a second chance return to study student*’.

*From a young age, I would take myself down the library and lose myself in the books I had a love of reading, and that is a key to it also... there were no books in the house, no encouragement from home. No, no cos my mum was a nurse and I didn’t grow up with my dad, there were no books in the house apart from these ones that I brought in at a young age, but even though mum was a nurse and had to study for that there wasn’t any encouragement.*

Leonard’s brother finally found a job as a solicitor’s clerk, so he did get on the path and he could have worked his way up, but that is a different story.

John’s journey back into education appears to have involved a ‘*series of nudges...*’. While John was the first, in terms of generations of his family, to go to university, his older brother had sat the 11+ and from Grammar school had gone on to study engineering at university. This demonstrated potential, but family tensions were also significant in terms of John choosing his subsequent academic pathway. John had experienced incidents of domestic violence throughout his early childhood and as a result expressed loathing towards his father and said on a number of occasions that he actually hated his father. So much so that he had plotted a way to commit murder, should this prove necessary, in defence of his mother. Out of the two parents it was his father that urged the children to do well in school and to concentrate on their maths, as this could lead to future employment as an engineer. The father had been a semi-skilled labourer and had realised that had he gone to university he would

have been able to secure better pay and the prestige of being professionally qualified. Though John said that he both hated maths and his father, it was the only GCSE that he ended up passing on leaving school. John's mother on the other hand, had a more laissez-faire approach and would be more likely to say that she was only concerned that her children did something that they were happy doing. She certainly did not encourage her children to do well in education particularly and certainly was not a pushy parent in terms of coaching her children or actively networking with the school to check on her children's progress. John explained that after his parents separated, the relationships in the family polarised, his brother tending to take his father's side and him siding with his mother. The practical need to earn an income also informed the mother's position. She was a practicing catholic and became keen on her children learning formally about the scriptures. While there was reluctance from the brothers (as they were older than the other children attending church classes), some of this was overcome by the mother buying the boys a bicycle each. They would use this to ride to Mrs Sunderland's house for personal lessons (she was the head teacher of a 'posh girls' school', who was part of the mother's church). John was pleased about the bike and used it on his paper rounds. These more bespoke and individualised sessions, though not confirming any religious faith in John, did have an impact on his development. Or rather some of the positive responses from the head teacher did, as he sat in her 'nice posh' house near a coal fire eating biscuits and drinking tea. The positive feedback that John received was highlighted as one of the key nudges that began to open up new educational possibilities:

*When we got there, her mother used to make us some tea and sit us by the coal fire and Mrs Sunderland had a nice middle class house and she was head mistress of a local girls' school and it was one of those posh schools – grammar or private...then she would rush in late from work and sit down and start talking to us about some aspect of catholic doctrine and of course it was all very nice, getting one to one teaching off of a really good teacher and she was very encouraging and I told you that story about how she asked us why we shouldn't sin... my younger brother said that we should not sin because we won't go to heaven... then I said that we shouldn't sin, because every time we sin we are driving the nail further into Jesus Christ's hand on the*

*cross... she was, you know, blown away, she was completely blown away – fantastic – she would write me down for the priesthood, you know for the seminary... and er, but, but because of course she was saying that was such a good answer, you know... [he gives out a sigh] you know... and I thought, perhaps I thought that maybe I am not such a clot, but back at school they were telling me every single day.*

John's experiences with Mrs Sunderland and the positive praise that she showed in response to his interactions began a smouldering reaction that would ignite in later years. The contrast of her middle class house to his own accommodation appears instrumental in offering an element of motivation to begin to extend his earlier aspirations. He wanted a 'better life' but just not the one his father promoted.

## **Being the right kind...**

Noreen found that her qualifications were not of the right kind. The typing qualification was not considered academic, so she had too few points to complete a degree course. She had had no idea that this would be the case and, whilst at school, nobody had informed her otherwise. She dropped her aspiration to study history; the subject that she felt so passionately about. So, it was when going into higher education that she began to realise that not understanding how to manage the system left so many at a disadvantage:

*When I went it wasn't a great success, in fact, it was a bit of a disaster. The kind of social capital thing really came into its own, because I was taking myself out of that little town, where I was quite cosseted and everyone is quite similar really, into a big city where I had no idea, I had no money and I didn't know how things worked. There were quite a lot of posh people around, so the whole thing was really intimidating, and I hated it. Absolutely hated it... but I stayed there. I hated the whole experience and did an HND in Business and Languages... I didn't do a degree, I thought that was for really, really clever people... I thought I would like it more than I did. Housing was constantly a*

*problem, reminded me of students [here]. I worked in a chippy, worked loads of extra hours, but then I went to university again and did it a different way.*

The irony was that it was her non-academic qualification (her typing and business qualifications) that got her initial employment when she and a friend decided to move south to find work. The other irony was that this eventually led to working for an academic publishing company and she enjoyed working with her colleagues and soon found herself being promoted. She said that she felt anthropologically interesting:

*... they'd never met a working class person before. Everyone around me had about fifteen degrees and I thought that there must be something in this degree malarkey.*

When Noreen started her career in publishing, she remembers causing a storm when she started to remove what she thought of as tatty dustcovers from the display books. Noreen found her colleagues were cordial and she felt that she learnt a lot from them. Working on a history series re-kindled her love for the subject and after having studied an English Literature A-Level at night school to test her motivation to complete a degree, she accessed a discretionary award from her county council and went on to take History and Politics, '*which I loved*'. Noreen graduated with a first and felt, '*right, that opens doors...*'. The university had suggested that she carried on with post-graduate work, but she then applied for a teaching qualification to be a history teacher in secondary education. Caring responsibilities changed this decision and the direction of her career as Noreen established herself in a bureaucratic university role, complete with a promising pay scale and room for promotion. "*I could have had loads of money and a much easier job*" (she had remarked that her job did involve the feeling that she was banging her head against a wall). Through her new role she accessed and secured a funded PhD programme and after that worked as a lecturer at a Russell Group university for five years, prior to her current appointment.

*That is where the story ends...*

*Or starts... [both laugh].*

## Redefining 'non-traditional'

There was little enthusiasm for the term 'non-traditional', even though all the tutors interviewed had agreed that they met some of the characteristics linked to the term. They must have seen something of themselves not just in relation to the term, but directly with the students they engaged in teaching and learning. Richard was the least sure, as he was not really aware of the term before being approached. '*It's ok, I suppose*' was as far as he would go. But he soon began talking about student groups being ghettoised through the courses they studied, he talked about expanding potential and the importance of second chances, of raising student aspirations and better understanding the challenges that many students face.

Noreen was able to make a direct comparison between working in a post-1992 university and a Russell group institution. Her comparison is stark:

*It's a shame, because I think it's a bit of a missed opportunity, because we have got this institution which is actually quite unique in the sector, and I think that we could build a brilliant, brilliant... It's a real opportunity for bringing in people and giving them an education they actually deserve, rather than, they should have already had it, and they haven't had it for a variety of different reasons, and a lot of the students I meet... have incredibly complex lives. Unbelievable complexity, I mean you would, there was a student I was catching up with today and I ended up just bursting out laughing when she told me the third thing that was happening in this person's life and I thought, well! She isn't going to meet that essay deadline, then, is she! Its unbelievably complicated, I mean, when I worked at Warwick, where you only see white grammar school kids and I came here, it was such a shock. I went into the first class and thought, OK, they had no idea of what I was talking about... they haven't got a clue. It's taken me years to work out how to teach this group as it's a very different teaching experience. What is it that the Warwick kids have that these kids don't have here? What can we do to develop that? I think we need a commitment to it in the first place...*

*Let's assume for the sake of your research that we had a commitment to really developing the skills that they need. I have a notion about it, I have given it a bit of thought because I developed this academic skills programme, because I knew there was a gap there.*

Immediately we see issues that relate specifically to biographical differences that illustrate how past experiences can impact on student engagement in learning; not least in revealing the absence of key study skills, but also with the routine challenges students needed to negotiate, that sprung from their material circumstances. Noreen, in our interview, would come back to the complexity she learnt about in the lives of her students. They were bringing in altogether new problems that universities had not traditionally needed to respond to. The growth in numbers of ethnic minority students attending higher education was another aspect of the overall population that academies had not uniformly accommodated:

*The complexity of people's identities! Traditionally middle class people went to university and working class students were excluded...*

*I don't think I came across a student from a minority ethnic group in the five years I worked at Warwick. Everybody was white, which is shocking...*

'Non-traditional' might make sense as a monitoring exercise to measure access into higher education; but it does little to help tutors understand the complexities of student lives:

*I think it's a useful term from a policy perspective, but I am not sure it's a particularly useful term to operationalise in the classroom. I think from a policy perspective it's important to look at the evidence and the patterns of participation in higher education... 'non-traditional' it does kind of belong, it is a quite old fashioned term in the sense that it is about distinguishing particular, usually social, classes; it doesn't really capture the complexity of people's identities... because if you are 'non-traditional', that means that traditionally middle class people went to university and working class people were excluded, but now that we have mass participation in higher education with, what 47%, of the particular population in a particular age band of 18 to*

*25 or something, going to higher education, we would expect that to be a more complex picture, so with that mass participation I don't think 'non-traditional' works particularly well. If you use the 'non-traditional' phrase to the populations of people who went prior to the expansion of the early 90s it might be more useful, because it's a much more homogenous group that were going...*

Leonard agreed that 'non-traditional' was an outdated phrase that had not moved with the times of greater access to higher education. It was relevant to the elite model of universities that saw ten percent of the mainly white middle class section of the population monopolise the upper tiers of professional life and well-paid careers:

*Well, it's getting a bit dated, but I understand it to be that traditionally for me you had the white middle class, mainly public educated or mainly grammar school educated were seen as those that would naturally go on to move from school, move to university, move in to the professions – they were the traditional, the ten percent of society that used to fill that role before it was opened up a bit more and all the others in a sense 'non-traditional', so you would have the working class, the poor, minorities, to some extent girls, there would be girls in there, unless they were middle class girls, immigrants, migrants, people with second language – all of those would be exceptions of this ones who were going through the traditional A-Level route... It seems a little outdated... 'traditional', 'non-traditional' - it would be interesting if you asked a young person, I am over 50 now, but if you asked an 18 or 20 year old they would have a different... or they may not know what you are talking about...*

For John the term is a misnomer and sits uncomfortably with how he understands the situated aspect of learning. John, in many ways, presented as a model academic, in terms of his approach to teaching and in his output as a research active academic. He struggled with what he saw to be trends within teaching that suggested many students were not engaging with reading to sufficient levels required to meet a basic academic standard. Even when short handouts were circulated in class there was evident reluctance from some students to read the



material (an anecdotally common observation made on a regular basis by tutors, not formally interviewed). He maintained that he understood many of the issues the students faced in their lives but despaired at how uncommon it was for students to cover the basic reading of a module.

*What does the term non-traditional mean?*

*I don't like the term... when did they stop calling them working class kids? I don't like, understand or know what it means... used to be working class but now it has a broader meaning. I don't like the word tradition, negative labelling...*

There is a tension in John's account. In that, he clearly locates himself as a learner within what many would call a time honoured academic and traditional set of standards. His warmth for the collegiate system, for maintaining high standards and expectations in reading widely, critical analysis and essay writing. Yet there is also a counter side to his perspective; that the term 'tradition' is linked to the presence of social labelling:

*I wonder if now that you have introduced the term to them [student participants], that they would see it as a derogatory term? What you are saying is that they don't seem to have a conception of themselves as 'non-traditional' students. Whereas absolutely every lecturer in this university thinks we are teaching 'non-traditional' students. When you actually get a traditional student, you are blown away... they come to every lecture, they sit in the front, they take notes, they ask questions. Why aren't they all like this?*

As a 'non-traditional' student, John had self-consciously adopted the habitus associated with becoming an academic. Through the process of cultural accumulation and the time that Bourdieu (1986) suggests is needed to mould our 'inclinations', responses and institutional behaviour. He grew his hair long when he went back to college – which at the time was seen as a middle class trend; he hung out with middle class friends, wanted a middle class girlfriend and pushed against his mother's ambivalence to keeping middle class company; and continued his

education. He also applied sustained discipline to overcome a range of educational and social barriers (his literacy, his writing skills, his classroom anxiety and poor levels of self-esteem). The support that John also got from college provided motivation and validation of his worth educationally and his success in study. It also provided an ongoing blueprint to evaluate his future choice of university, a highly ranked red brick institution. His experience there confirmed his desire to teach in universities, so he went on to undertake a doctoral programme for that purpose. In this respect we can see how terminology begins to strain or become transformed through John's learning journey. In essence as his academic career progressed, he became more like a 'traditional' student, more specifically he adapted to ensure that he took what would be considered a traditional route to becoming an academic (A-Levels, university, post-graduate studies and a doctorate). Starting as a 'non-traditional' entrant he emerged as a 'traditional' lecturer. John is keen to state that although he can pass as middle class, he describes his underlying attitudes as being still firmly rooted in his working class consciousness. This role reversal is seen in the student scripts analysis and from some of the student interviews: that many of the 'non-traditional' students consider themselves to be 'traditional', especially in relation to their cultural perspectives and their expectations of formal educational relations (such as wanting to call their lecturer 'sir' and their holding of traditional values relating to their faith, family customs and attitudes to authority and their elders).

*'My students don't do any work!'* John emphasised this point and suggested that reading for example, was for some students, considered to be an inappropriate academic expectation. He even went as far as to suggest that not working hard on study could be seen as a 'non-traditional' quality:

*This is not university teaching; this is school teaching. I think I have ended up teaching at an FE college, except we don't call it one.*

Talking to John you got a palpable sense of frustration and bemusement – the kind of feelings of dissonance that prompted Nathan's ethnography (2005) of a freshman's year. But John appears to have considerably more insight into some of the basic challenges that follow the students into class or that might keep them out of

it. Nathan (ibid) shares John's enthusiasm for students to be encouraged directly in their reading habits more specifically by universities.

We discussed the cuts to budgets and teams that support people attending who have disabilities and the absence of classroom assistance for those needing note taking support. It is also acknowledged that some of the students were able to use the three years to develop their confidence and their written abilities to more fully conform to a graduate definition of becoming more independent learners:

*I can think of students who are so turned around from year one to the end of year three. I talk a lot about the value we add...*

For Wendy, it's all about the journey and the different routes that people find themselves following or are able to carve out from challenging situations and cultural contexts:

*They ['non-traditional' students] are people who have had a different journey. They tend to be older, do not have the A-Levels, but they are very highly skilled and experienced, they are experts in their field... all we are doing is giving them a framework on which to hang all the expertise that they have... they are coming through a different route.*

Wendy teaches on a course that attracts students who are already practitioners, many of whom bring insight from their employment experiences to their work-based learning. While the last quotation suggests a singular alternative route into higher education, the conversation around the term 'non-traditional' makes it clear that it is the diversity of these alternative pathways in that provides an axis for her definition of this group. That the range in the types of journeys that the students undertake determines them as a broad group, in that they did not enter higher education straight from school with three A-Levels. The term itself, Wendy considers to be a wholly negative label in every other sense.

Wendy saw the different routes into higher education as a crucial aspect of defining student identity and was the crux of the matter in relation to being able to work with

and understand need. Putting pre-established labels on students was not considered to be positive and emphasised deficit, rather than potential:

*... it's almost that it implies sub-standard to a certain extent or not as good as... 'non-traditional', non-white, if somebody were to call me non-white, I would knock them out. Call me what I am. I don't have an issue with you calling me black because that's the term I use. 'Non-traditional'! What the hell am I? Sub-human? It's the same connotation, it is not as valued. It would undermine some of the students.*

*I'm not sure that you would call yourself a 'non-traditional' student?*

*I'm not a 'non-traditional' student...*

*You are on paper, because you are black...*

*Yeah...*

When asked how Wendy saw her own experiences in relation to them providing insight in relation to student learning paths, she said:

*... that stems from my own journey and I always acknowledge that I have been very fortunate in terms of parental support, how my journey started... I understand not everybody has had that. But I also understand when it comes to the discrimination and victimization and all those things, my journey is exactly the same as the other people. So, from that perspective I understand what the barriers are... while the journeys are not the same, there are a lot of things that are the same or very similar.*

*[Interviewer] I particularly liked the widening participation element, the extending opportunity type things... that's what drives me. Some colleagues feel that they are not working at a proper university?*

*Yeah... for me it's like, if the only thing written on my headstone when I am gone is that she made a difference to 'non-traditional', if you like, though I don't like that word...*

*What word would you use?*

*I don't know, I don't think that you need to use the word, you know you should have varied routes... there are varied routes to the same outcome. Do we really need to label it? For me the definition should be created by the individuals themselves... [on introducing a particular student] she was definitely 'non-traditional', she had her baggage, her issues, whatever! But the determination to achieve, that, on her wall her husband was a graduate, her sons were graduates, all her children had gone to university, she said that on her wall she'd saved a spot that was going to be my photo, of when I graduated, her husband thought it was hilarious...*

*She kicked him out.*

*Yeah! I know and this woman, she struggled, honestly, and in the end, she got her degree. That for me is much more important than teaching a straight A\* student, who goes on to get a first. For me you'd have achieved that without me. But I made a positive contribution to that person's life and so that's what I find gratifying...*

*I am much more interested in how the learner feels... Do we try to put people into an academic shape? To conform to something we shouldn't be getting them to conform to?*

*I think conforming is important, to a certain extent. You need to have a framework, because it provides the scope for assessment or whatever, but I think there needs to be some flexibility within that framework... if being written well is a prerequisite we cannot teach on an assumption; we need to provide proper support for those who do not have the capacity when they come, to do*

*the 'written well' bit we need to provide the support... you know the content and the presentation is of equal importance.*

*... don't teach me on the assumption that I should know it. Because if I did know it and I had it, I wouldn't be coming here. I'd be somewhere else. I think we are missing a trick. I really do, we need not to compete with anybody else, we need to market our strengths...*

*What are our strengths?*

*The less traditional cohort. We need to be seen as an organisation, you know when you come in, you're not at that level, but we have things in place to get you to that level. Other universities don't do that. They say you come with your two As and a B and you start running and if you have a problem, you tell your tutor, type thing. Whatever your journey we provide the support you need to get you to where you want to go. I guarantee if we took that approach, we would be far more successful. There are people who are well able, we see them coming in the FDAs [Foundation Degree of the Arts], they don't have a clue a lot of them. But [as a specific tutor says] he looks for the potential to learn... but they are not quite there yet and they leave and they get 2:1s and go on to great things. That for me is what it is all about, that's definitely it.*

On winning the most inspirational tutor award one year (which is a vote taken from nominations from final year NHS student feedback) Wendy said:

*I was so touched by it because it was like, yeah! I want to inspire them; I want them to think of shit! I can do this, but I need some help, as opposed to, oh, I couldn't do that! I don't wanna hear that. If I hear that I want to ask: what stops you?*

## Life coaching

Wendy makes use of what she referred to as her life coaching skills; she often shared problems that she had encountered in education and in work to help people realise that they could develop strategies to get through or around obstacles:

*I've got a student who is now going on to do social work and her family told her, oh, you've got two children, be satisfied with what you have got, what do you want to do that for? When you were at school you didn't do very well. Oh, waste of money; all those negative feedbacks, and she has finished her second year [of a foundation degree] and has got onto the social work course and I am so proud of her... because she was so insecure when she came, no family support, and I said don't worry about them. Find somebody on the course, do a buddy up. She's a single parent, I said, one Saturday let her have the children and come here [the university] for a few hours. The following Saturday you have her children. Don't look to the family because they are not going to support you. They are dragging you down and she's got through, and I'm like wow!*

Getting to know a person's background, Wendy feels, helps to engage the student and learning authentic things reduces the likelihood of tutors making assumptions about learners. We discussed the importance of a structured proactive tutoring system (not as a voluntary, but an integrated mentoring aspect of the course).

For Noreen, the term 'non-traditional' refers to:

*somebody who is usually the first person to go to university, I think... I usually ask my students who are the first to go to university, eighty percent put their hands up, its big...*

*As a teacher here, I find it useful to know the backgrounds of my students, I mean I wouldn't pry, and I don't know their personal lives, I mean I know a lot of details about their personal lives, but not because I've asked for them, I find it useful to know whether they are coming from a 'non-traditional'*

*background... and I would like to put some support mechanisms in place to help them through it, but I don't think we have the infrastructure for that... I try and do what I can in seminar work and things like that, but I see barriers all the time to their progress, and I think a lot of it is because they haven't got a clue what they are doing. And when I say they haven't got a clue what they are doing... when I say that, I don't mean they haven't got the ability, I mean they don't know how to negotiate the system and they don't know how to work within the system and I think that is because they are new to higher education.*

*Yeah, I think I do have the insight from my own experiences, knowing what the barriers are and knowing how utterly clueless I was, at their age. Well, they have a bit more information than me because we live in the information age... but when you talk to them about how they chose their university, they don't really know very much more than I did.*

*What kind of reasons did they give for choosing their university?*

*They say, well I looked online, and I came to [this university] and I just found it randomly. I looked at the courses that were listed, oh that's alright, I'll just do that. I think, um, that's not how other people apply for university, but I don't tell them that...*

On the high proportion of 'non-traditional' students and their specific needs, Noreen is clear where the blame lies. An enormous contributing factor in how students present when arriving at university has been formed through inadequately resourced schooling. The disadvantages faced by students in their initial education could be used as positive strategies within new university environments. Enhancing modules to accommodate the educational deficits and creating programmes designed to scaffold these gaps would address and reduce the anxiety many face on arrival, wondering whether they are able to meet academic expectations.

*I think that that could be such a strength of our university and I think it's a shame because if... you have got that population I think you need a particular infrastructure. I think you need a skills-based infrastructure, you need to teach*



*them, I run an academic skills programme in the first year as part of one of the modules, it's only an add on to the module, but really it needs to sit and have a lot of curriculum time and contact time because they need loads of help. And when they start to tell you about their school experiences, it's really shocking what they tell you, so they'll say, well I did that A-Level (because a lot of them have very poor A-Level grades) I did that A-Level, but we never had a teacher... so we turned up every week and the teacher was there for the first five weeks and then the teacher went off sick and nobody else showed up, we were just left to do it ourselves and I have heard that so many times. And I don't think they are exaggerating... and they haven't got their parents in the background saying, your average middle class parent would not allow that to happen. I would not allow that to happen to my child... Somebody was telling me earlier today that he hated school. This guy is a good student, he's your model student, he's done every single piece of seminar preparation work you set, he comes with reams of notes, he's got lots to say, he's quite clever, really engaged student. He hated school. Got no qualifications. Went to college and got on well at college and used that as an entry into university. There was a group of students talking about their school experiences before the seminar started and all of them said they hated school, so I said it's interesting that you have chosen to continue with your education, given that you hated school. What emerges, when they say they hate school, what they mean is that their school was really quite dysfunctional and they were not treated well and that they didn't have many friends and there were loads of problems in the school, so they might have like another school that suited them better, but the school itself is quite dysfunctional... the reason they are taking this 'non-traditional' route is because we've got this quite broken state education system that isn't really educating people properly.*

Noreen presents her student profiles as part of the wider educational and social justice narrative that highlights failure to fully engage, support and prepare people to meet their potential. Like the other tutors, she feels that the lower reaches of higher education are now faced with the task of addressing these persistent social

problems. As John suggested, it's the baggage that cannot just be dumped outside of the classroom and ignored, *'like a coat left at the door of the classroom...'*.

But there seems to be a nagging doubt, as John feels that institutional academic standards have fallen, that increasing the entry requirements could raise expectations. The forty percent pass mark in John's opinion was detrimental to setting the challenge to learning: *"you are teaching the students in the first year that you can do more or less any shit...because it's a forty percent pass"*. Like Reay's (2017) comments on post-1992 universities adding to student inequality and aspiration, John suggested that the system is *"teaching them to fail"*. John compared the current system to the one that he experienced at university. The pass mark was higher and you could only progress onto major areas of study with a mark of at least sixty percent (it is worth pointing out that John teaches on a full time academic programme, not a specifically vocational one and that there are very few discreet and traditional academic departments making up the institutional portfolio at this university). This then appears at odds with John's personal academic identity and accentuates what he considers to be a lack of academic standards that he associates with the way that the university is set up. He struggles at times to hold together and balance his academic ideals and the organisational culture he sees himself working within.

John returns to these points regularly through the interview, but also discusses how he works to enable academic success. He explains in detail how important it is for students to know how to structure and develop an essay. He takes in handouts, develops group exercises, provides examples of assignments and has won student awards for 'most inspirational' tutor.

*We have to raise their standards. We've got to get them to read, they don't read. They don't watch the news; they just play on their phones...*

John makes the point that:

*... when you got a grant you felt valued, but when it's a loan you are another commodity, a punter and you have to pay for the privilege of coming to university...*

In John's story there is a link between feeling valued and motivation; getting to university was less a privilege and more of a right. He had done the hard work to get there not because he was pushed by his family:

*When middle class kids got to university they weren't keen, they were made to be there. I was genuinely interested.*

John was convinced the working class students were generally more motivated where he went to college, than their middle class counterparts that felt it was simply expected for them to continue in higher education.

## **Negative labelling**

For Leonard the term, 'non-traditional' needed radical revaluation in the light of how widening participation and new opportunities for improvement had radically shifted the notion of what it was to be a university student now. While acknowledging the elite formation of an upper tier of institutions with their restrictive practices, his view was that access more generally has shifted thinking from privilege to entitlement:

*I don't know if we need any terms to replace it, nowadays everybody has the right to go into HE regardless of income, we know there is still an imbalance, you can buy a top education... but it should no longer be seen as normal for this group and abnormal... in a sense you can replace traditional and 'non-traditional' with normal and abnormal. It's an exception when they go, so we should just get rid of that and say that every young person should have the opportunity to go. We can't get rid of class advantage. We will always have*

*poor and rich... the Russell groups and the others – the post-1992... We don't have to reinforce that by calling them 'traditional' or 'non-traditional'.*

*[However]... we need to reduce bias in the system, so the term can be used to monitor access, etc.*

Leonard is very aware that the choices students make in any case relate much more tangibly with their own justifications for their choice of university. He perceives that many ethnic minority students might not be inclined towards certain institutions, as they may represent a compulsion to conform to their cultural expectations. The process of assimilation into academia, brings with it the association of being made to de-emphasise their cultural differences and ignore the very real and uncomfortable reality of difference within a generally white, monolithic environment (Hall, 2000; DiAngelo, 2019). Leonard remarks:

*In Oxbridge they wouldn't have many people like this, that's true, ok... I can see the need to call them something... don't know whether 'traditional'/ 'non-traditional' helps... it reinforces difference... it may well have a labelling effect. Seen as an admin term, not sign-posted. That would manifest itself if some of these students went to other universities that had a minority of these students, then they would feel different, that they might feel a pressure to fit in... [a specific university] for example has more minority students in it than the whole of the Russell group put together, and that's not an accident, not just because it is in... London, but because these groups feel safe and they won't stand out by applying to that university. So, where there is a group of people there who they feel they will be comfortable with, then they apply there... they'd say it's hard enough going to university but going there and being isolated is not what many people sign up for.*

## **What challenges does representing diversity present?**

While Leonard could not coin an alternative term, he was aware that people from diverse social backgrounds arrive with an assortment of skills and confidence levels.

That many will arrive carrying some social or educational sets of potential disadvantages. Confirmation of their right to feel that they do belong in higher education was seen as a key role and one that needed to be established quickly and then maintained and nurtured by university lecturers. This, Leonard thought, was not always consistently played out in all tutor/student relationships, as some expect university students to land running:

*Recognise that they don't always come from traditional A-Levels; their education may be poor so they need additional support – basics – literacy, then you can forget the confidence part – you'd have to try to ensure that their induction and their first year that they know they belong there and that they should be there... so you have to do work on their self-esteem, giving them some success early on... There can be attitudes from staff which expects what they may see as the best, you are in university... with little regard to where they come from, their development and people finding their academic voice.*

### **‘Progressing’, ‘passing’ and being ‘pulled up’...**

John was convinced that part of his role as a tutor was to offer enough support and encouragement for students to engage more with the bread-and-butter issues of academic life: reading and constructing essays. He is convinced that this can lead to a better life for his students. His point being that through educational self-improvement, working class students can ‘pass’ at being middle class (informed, confident and articulate). Removing the ‘markers’ of class bias was a central project of higher education. However, the last comment made by Leonard, suggests that some tutors were generally a little more judgemental when faced with students who may not display a complete set of skills that mark them out as already being self-motivated independent learners. Transformative approaches to education (Mezirow, 2009) would promote a more concerted attempt at the alchemy of learning, to challenge the fixed ‘platonic idea’ and that individuals can perform their own change in state from ‘bronze’, through to ‘gold’. This links to Wendy’s preference to work with students on their personal development and transformations.

Richard's take was that many students were unaware of an invisible force within their midst that, in effect, quietly undermined some aspects of student achievement. When Leonard explained that university was a difficult enough process in itself without the additional anxiety of feeling judged by colour, one might assume that given the predominance of minority ethnic students populating post-1992 universities, that bias or incidents of racism would be less expected, but this would counter the available evidence of its widespread manifestation throughout the sector (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2019).

Richard had raised the point that he had noticed mental health nursing was low down in the overall hierarchy of the profession and that he also perceived that the health and social care students were even off the scale, in terms of the low prestige of the course.

*However, I think that those students don't always realise that they are fighting against an invisible social culture, a sort of biasness towards certain groups... Yeah, I don't know if they [the students] realise that... That in itself will in some ways breed a certain type of professional. They probably come in here feeling less than they are anyway and they probably look at education as something that is a tick in the box because they want to do better... a bit of paper at the end and then against a system who also look down on the group, health and social care, it's not really that important [Richard adopts a more English accented voice]. And then the staff they put to teach also represent this kind of group...*

Richard describes what appears to be a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy in relation to expectations of both minority ethnic students and the tutors that teach them. Richard had met a black man in the library who had asked him whether he was a mental health nurse or a social worker? How do you know this he asked? *'Well look what you look like, a black man with dreadlocks...you couldn't possibly be teaching computers?'*

*First of all, let me say I think these students are lucky to have me because, not academically, but because I am very passionate about them being*

*successful. I feel I am in a fortunate position to teach these students. The flip side of it I think sometimes my colleagues might look down on me being African Caribbean teaching health and social care... because when I speak to them about a group, they always have negative things to say, it's almost like pass the buck, Richard is the new one, give him the group, we've all had a turn. [Both laugh]*

The world being described here is one apparently bound within social assumptions that operate through maintaining hierarchical constructs that inadvertently create a sense of a teaching and learning ghetto. Rather than being seen as a group of students with additional learning needs and challenges (such as English as an additional language, having completed an access course rather than A-Levels, and often with the responsibility for dependents) their needs are understood more as problems, with them fitting or belonging fully to the academic system. This situation leaves at least some involved feeling like second class citizens within an already externally stratified system of higher education.

*When I look around the class, maybe me just being biased, but the majority are blacks, African women looking for a second opportunity or another chance for whatever reason, some of them may have dialect may be a bit sharper than others, some quite a bit more, some quite a bit less, but then you think - what about the other groups of people, are there any Chinese interested in health and social care, are there any English interested in social care, do you understand?... So, I think we have to have more integration racially, where they could be part of bigger groups... I can understand it [students maintaining same-culture networks]. It makes people feel more secure and safe. I totally get it. But in terms of giving them more confidence as students they need to probably have more integration with other students.*

In talking to Richard, he appeared to hold relatively essentialist ideas in relation to identity. He was sure that he was exactly the same person now as he was as a child. His knowledge base had changed, but he felt secure in the fact that nothing about his personality had. During our discussion, however, there were moments when other people's perceptions of Richard triggered uncomfortable moments in public.

For example, he told me of three separate incidents when, on gowning-up ready for the graduation ceremony, he was informed that he was in the wrong queue and that the students' section was elsewhere. Richard found this disconcerting and upsetting, while his colleagues suggested that it was that he looked too 'trendy' to be an academic, Richard felt that it was the expression of bias; that the wardrobe department were making assumptions. That academics are white.

In the bestselling novel, *Small Great Things*, (Picoult, 2016) the white public defender talks to a black nurse who had been suspended for negligence and then charged for the murder of a white baby, about her 'colour blindness'. She explains that she does not see colour, but just sees the person: "the only race that matters is the human one, right?" (ibid, loc. 3037). Ruth, the black nurse purses her lips, but does not directly respond. The term race and its importance as a complex construct is discussed by Eddo-Lodge (2017) in relation to the 'colour blindness' of whites. A position that sees discrimination as occurring elsewhere, like a fading historical phantom (DiAngelo, 2019). Eddo-Lodge and Picoult explore this assumption that somehow discrimination is a thing of the past and not bound up by what is actually a shared history of social discrimination. There is just one human race, but the differential treatment of some members, primarily people of colour, contributes to a sense of people living in a set of different realities. Ones that would appear to suggest that discriminatory bias, exclusion and racism operate on 'race' lines or that 'race' is seen as a colour classification.

The following example, explored with Wendy, highlights another incident that brings this theme into the picture and illustrates the pervasive effect of cultural assumptions that are made under the veneer of polite 'colour blindness' and the influence of unconscious bias or moments of outright racism (depending on whose perspective is adopted).

We talked about some of Wendy's previous work for a large corporate telecommunication company and related this back to the academic institutional environment:



*... the supply chain was predominantly white, but when you looked at the customers, they were very diverse. So, the customers were buying from you, but you are not buying from them, OK. So, for me, it was really important that you are engaging with people because the strength and longevity of your business is dependent on your ability to engage people. If you are engaging a very diverse group of students, like we are, retention, progression, success; all these things are linked to lots of factors, and I think one of them is mirroring the composition of your student base in your teaching base, and that's not to say that white teachers don't do a good job. A good lecturer is a good lecturer, but the definition of good is different for people on different journeys... somebody who understands without you having to explain... I still think it takes a woman to explain to a woman what it is like to be a woman. It takes somebody who has had a similar journey to understand your journey and how that journey might impact on you. I don't think we do that here; we don't have any senior bods... I don't think people should be recruited simply because they are black or Asian or minority, but it was a question I raised at a meeting we had and the response was, we don't seem to be attracting them. They are not applying. Yeah! They are not applying because they don't see people like themselves in our organisation and people are fed up with being the first. It's a lonely place to be a first.*

We discussed that there had been a black head of department and that this had encouraged some people to apply for jobs at the university, having spoken to a black colleague who had recently joined the teaching team; she said that they had felt, *"OK, that battle I had somewhere else, I may not have here... it's not because people are not qualified, a lot of people are well qualified, but they tend to be associates... they don't get tenure"*.

When asked whether there had been any issues with racism, Wendy described an incident in which she was using a staff toilet that was in a staff only area on one of the university sites that she did not routinely teach from. She had gone in with her employment ID card that gave her access to use any of the work areas across all the sites to complete some marking.

## Segregated toilet blocks

When Wendy was washing her hands in the toilet a colleague approached and said:

*Do you realise students are not allowed in here? I said, student! Now, would she have said that to a white person? She would not! I rang my manager because I would have pushed her head down the toilet and flushed it... I would have drowned that bitch in there. He said, whoops! Saw a black woman in the staff toilet, so when people talk about discrimination its subtle in a way because it's in people's psyche and it's there, and it shows its ugly head and that's the reality. But then, somebody looks at you and makes those kinds of comments, it might be things like, oh well, you people, what does that mean? How am I, 'you people'? Does that represent everybody? Do I represent everybody that is black? I'm not their representative. I'm not their advocate, so why 'you people'? It's just little subtle things that are said... Even here I have observed and I think, oh my god! But you know if you say anything they say, oh you are so touchy! I'm not bloody touchy, that's been my journey and my journey has been blue printed by your behaviour, so I'm not touchy, I am fine-tuned to the processes that are used to undermine people of minority origin.*

While representation of minority ethnicity in senior academic management posts would be low:

*... there have been brilliant black academics... Stuart Hall, for example, there are some good people. How you see yourself is not necessarily how others see you and it is how they see you that determines how they treat you. So, you might be brilliant and others see you, but those who are in the position to acknowledge your greatness, they may not see that as greatness; they might think you are the fluke, you are the exception rather than the rule.*

The complexity of social situations in relation to concepts such as the 'other' – in this instance a colleague assuming that a black person is a student, rather than a

colleague raises issues that Goffman (1963, loc. 2159 - 2165) raised in the seminal discourse, *Stigma: notes on the management of spoiled identities*:

Now it is apparent that in-group deviants, social deviants, minority members, and lower-class persons are all likely on occasion to find themselves functioning as stigmatised individuals, unsure of the reception awaiting them in face-to-face interaction and deeply involved in the various responses to this plight. This will be so if for no other reason than that almost all adults have to have some dealings with service organisations, both commercial and civil, where courteous, uniform treatment is supposed to prevail based on nothing more restrictive than citizenship, but where opportunity will arise for concern about invidious expressive valuations based on a virtual middle class ideal.

In this description we can clearly locate a framework of stigma that already anticipated qualities later to be demarked by the term 'non-traditional' student. Goffman (1963) makes it clear that that in most social interactions, deviancy is a quality that generally operates through application to the 'other'. Othered groups and individuals are not so much spoiling their own identities, but they are already 'spoiled' through the overt and covert operation of mainstream judgements and institutional behaviours. To some degree all the participants have felt, at critical points of their journey into higher education, the impact of how their own personal identities have felt under attack through engaging in education. These points of conflict and emotional hurt and social sensitivities are clearly expressed in the different narratives; whether from being steered to careers deemed suitable for non-academic students, subject choices that are gendered or responses to class and ethnicity expectations, or subsequent work environments.

When we consider Wendy's response to the staff toilet incident and her discussion of the term 'you people' we can see the strength of the social hurt, the defiance of protecting a positive self-identity (the challenge to being asked whether they were meant to be in a specific location, part of a specific organisation) and to what degree people represent the specific group they have been labelled as (consciously or unconsciously), we see that responses are contextually related; but that they also have a private and a public dimension. There is a reaction against the generalised labelling felt by challenging people's rights to being somewhere (both formally and

personally) that is public. It is a reaction to a broad-brush perception – say, that black people are students, rather than academics – but this may also obscure or completely hide a desire for people from that same generic group to undermine through their own practice and behaviour the generalised label that is being presented to them. We see a different side to this when Wendy speaks about how she addresses the issue of being black with her children, privately.

While we have free will to an extent, in making choices or deciding on life plans, the specific environments we find ourselves operating within are defined by wider historical determinants. As Wendy goes on to explain:

*... we are our brother's keeper... and I say this to my children. I don't know what it is like for white people, I think it's different. One white person who is a serial killer is not used as a yard stick to measure other white people, there isn't that correlation made. But all the time when black kids get up to their nonsense, it is used as a brush for tarnishing all of us. And I say to my children, you are a representative of your group, whether you like it or not. You can have a positive impact on the perception, or you can reinforce the negative perception... because we are judged by the individuals in our group, not by the group as a whole. Look at the years of sweat and labour, my own mum went into nursing, she was spat upon, that bitch get your hands off me, all those kinds of things; but she persevered and looked after white people who were abusing her... yes! Seventy years of black toil and sweat, degradation, victimisation and brutalisation; all those things happened, and I am talking from first-hand experience, my mum. Where are they now? They are not in the senior levels of the NHS. I mean, by now we should have had a minister for health that was a black person, because they understand the health system more than anybody else. So, for me it's there, it's just a lot more subtle and my place in the world is not determined by anyone else but me. And it's about how I feel, not what you think of me and that's really been part of the journey. When I was nine, what people thought about me mattered... please!*

This section highlights how complex the interrelationship between public and private perceptions are in relation to identity development. It suggests that the context of identity is not just linked by personal attributes and desires, but also how these are negotiated within a more public realm. Here a sense of personal identity can be compromised or overwritten by wider social realities, bias and discrimination, that create more generic forms of identity that more specifically relate to sub-categories, associated stigmatised identities and the status of an outsider (Goffman, 1963). Wendy's passionate responses and her separation of the public response and the private strategy, problematizes a straightforward analysis of identity. One narrative challenges the broader social stereotype (whether it is unconscious or conscious) and the other undermines it, in the sense that it encourages her children to adopt a position of being their brother's keeper. Success is then not measured on the grounds of how successfully a person assimilates their identity into the prevailing social conventions, but rather how they can successfully negotiate a separate and autonomous position that acknowledges their own personal attributes and achievements. That acknowledges the person as an entity in themselves, rather than either accepting a position provided by others or having to accommodate cultural changes that require jettisoning aspects of what we might call somebody's parent culture. Academia and the adoption of the 'academic habitus' (Bourdieu, 1986) can be seen as imposing a particular identity in the form of the independent learner identity (Bowl, 2001; Moore et al, 2013; Reay, 2017). But no one can make their skin colour invisible. Wendy's perspective goes beyond a colloquial concept of the 'coconut' (brown on the outside, white on the inside), and suggests a more challenging approach to the issue of a black academic operating in the predominantly white environment of academia. It is a much more straightforward message for people operating in public spaces: black people are academics - get used to it!

The emphasis of this approach being on white people to question why they see a black face before they see the academic (DiAngelo, 2019). While it is clear that there have been many social changes that have reduced some aspects of social discrimination based on skin colour, there is evidence that disadvantage and inequality continues, especially within the broader educational system and that some of the more surprising results of relative achievement between different ethnic

groups is ignored (Mason, 2003). Wendy suggests that discriminatory mind-sets have just become more subtle or muffled in their manifestation, and it is this that may be driving aspects of the public versus private strategies that are illustrated here. In public, the essentialist (Gilroy, 1992; Hall and du Gay, 1996; Hall, 2017) perspective of identity needs to be resisted and challenged, but the private building of individual identity is difficult to develop without any link being made to a shared historical process and experiences of lived social realities. Essentialist definitions of identity are notoriously complicated and depend very much on the relationships between those people using them to describe themselves and others (Gilroy, 1992). Homogenous status of specific groups would appear to be a myth and unhelpful to exploring cultural identity and its complex historical and cultural hybridity (Gilroy, 1992; Back, 1996).

I asked Leonard during our interview whether he felt that completing higher education and recently his doctorate had made him feel that he had assimilated into the traditional model of higher education:

*No! No! Not a bit of it, and I like the question, I am aware of that sometimes when I am sitting in these meetings with these people who may or may not have, maybe I am making an assumption, come through the traditional route. When you sit with the Deans and the Professors and that and I am aware, it's all white... it's not all traditional, but I don't tow the line if they are making decisions that impact badly on certain groups, I let them know what they are doing... so I am glad that I am confident enough to do that.*

Leonard did raise concerns about how seriously equalities issues were taken by the organisation as a whole. He felt that his role in the equalities committee was tokenistic and that its business was about 'going through the motions', rather than a real commitment to change:

*Here, it is predominantly white, apart from nursing, health and social care and social work. [There is] accessibility in terms of our lower entry level... bums on seats rather than fully widening participation as a concept.*

## **Cheap socks, from the Co-op**

For Noreen, though not influenced by a difference in the colour of her skin, the experiences she had when going first to university appear mediated by other cultural indicators relating more to class and social capital ('cheap socks from the Co-op', working in a chippy to pay rent, not having money and not being fully versed in the behavioural and cultural norms of middle class culture, their ways of dressing and what subjects were worthy of discussion). Her transition later to academic life appears to have challenged the initial feelings that she expressed in relation to being an anthropological curiosity for the middle classes, as her later career proved that working class people can be just as intelligent and capable thinkers and meet the standards set historically by the middle class and traditional personification of academic practice (Bourdieu, 1986). It is unclear whether this comes at a personal cost to Noreen, or a gain, in terms of the distancing of oneself from one's class, culture and social origins. Does social mobility and personal 'transformation' bring with it other pressures to conform to the hegemony of learning as a specifically middle class or white, European construct; by rounding off the edges of a square to fit the round hole, so to speak? Having gone back to university for the second time, Noreen certainly did not express the angst that runs through Hanley's account of crossing over to middle class status careers (2016). Her account suggests she was no longer a peg that did not fit the shape, but one that knew how to shape their responses according to academic expectation.

It is clear that all the tutors interviewed are committed to the idea of education as an enabling process, so retain their sense of loyalty to people coming from similar backgrounds to themselves. Practitioners are committed to using their own experiences to inform not just their teaching approach, but also how they engage with their students and their critical analysis of the wider role of the university.

## **The library revisited...**

In McGarvey's, *Poverty Safari: understanding the anger of Britain's underclass*, the author discusses his attitude to books (2018, p.xxi):

By the time I was ten, I was formulating my own short stories ... from my main influences at the time: Granny and Batman... But I don't remember reading any books... I don't remember the moment so many people speak of, when they finish the life-changing book that ignites their passion for reading. I do, however, retain vivid memories of struggling with books and being intimidated by their physical size and word-count. Just the thought of a big book was enough to defeat me.

McGarvey (ibid) describes that, in his school, the act of reading or completing any academic activity was seen by his male peers as 'feminine' and only something that 'posh' people and 'freaks' commit to. Though he secretly longed to read lots of books, he would frequently start and quickly give up on the project. McGarvey (2018, p.xxiii) describes a crushing sense of failure, but points out that much of the educational curriculum did not engage him in the sense that he understood its purpose or who it was aimed at or what it was meant to achieve; and his frustration: ... led me to take an increasingly hostile and suspicious attitude towards reading and readers... and I developed a fear and anxiety around books despite my interest in their main ingredient: words.

Big books belonged to a different and 'fancier' world than the one that McGarvey was born into and were not aimed at the likes of himself. He later talks about libraries and their importance in supporting poor communities, that they allow for space outside of cramped noisy and difficult family situations, a lifeline to information and advice; but they were not spaces he ever utilised. We see aspects of this in Noreen's own account of growing up, but even so, she is shocked by how alien both the act of reading and using libraries appears to many of her students. For both Hanley (2016) and Hudson (2019) these places were havens, and refuges from judgement or humiliation, where people like them could find outlets for independent learning and imaginative exploration and escape.

## **Universities are...**

*Universities are about ideas, aren't they?* said Noreen.



We had been talking about some of the issues that could be associated with practitioners taking on academic roles. Noreen had explained how she had increasingly become confused and experienced cognitive dissonance in relation to theory and practice. She felt a disconnect between two different approaches to these issues and was struggling with how the two were encouraged to meet in what could be called the 'holy grail' of praxis and that each side of the equation needed to be valued and not set in opposition. University courses were not all about practice, though Noreen felt at times that there were aspects of anti-academic thinking that undermined both critical thinking and evidence-based practice.

Books and reading constituted a major theme within the tutor interviews, with all but one discussing their impact on stimulating learning and in changing how the tutors understood the world in which they lived and were schooled. Richard was keen to progress his doctoral studies; his emphasis was more on practice learning as a stimulus for getting qualified, but he felt that acquired knowledge provided greater confidence. In many respects the act of reading, was not just a tool to strategically pass examinations, but one that could help people to challenge widely held assumptions; also to explain the world in a different way than it had been perceived through school. We have already heard how independent reading had enabled Wendy to make sense of some of her school experiences; but that it also provided a lifeline in terms of developing her sense of self as a black person growing up in a predominantly white, British context. John having hated school, later fell in love with reading and avidly collected books. From his narrative we can imagine how *Education and the Working Classes* (Jackson and Marsden, 1966) helped him, in some way, come to terms with the negative experiences he had had at school. Leonard explained the impact of reading Stuart Hall and how it suggested that ideas or facts taken for granted were less absolute in their truth and more the perspectives of those with a vested interest. His readings opened up the whole notion of critical thinking and how this could be used to challenge the status quo:

*... he [Stuart Hall] was an inspiration, truly, yeah. He was, at the time he came over too, as a black academic he would have stood out as there weren't many or any at the time and he made an impact, his politics were consistent with*

*mine and the way he conducted himself, the way he spoke, he was held in high esteem... his take on race and society – he dissected it and analysed it, in a way that everyone stood up and took notice... he spoke for the voiceless I think, in his analysis of society and education, the included and excluded, the privileged and non-privileged... when you go through higher education... you don't just take away what you are studying, you go through a political process, so you become aware of things that you thought were facts, but which you then become to realise are choices, you know political choices. He more or less contributed to that awakening in me to say that things were not as they are because they are, somebody has determined that they should be like this and they are probably doing that in their own interest... there is a whole group of people below them who are the victims of these people who are really being manipulated by them...*

University was seen as directly transformational for Leonard and his experiences of reading and questioning:

*Did the whole process give you a lot more confidence in yourself as a learner or a teacher?*

*I tell you what it done... it made me a champion of the underdog, as it were and it has stayed with me to this day... and that's why I would be keen to see people come on the course who started from relatively nothing or I can recognise people who have no confidence in their abilities and sometimes that's justified, so you can recommend a course of action, sometimes not, it's just their confidence has been... they don't believe higher education is for them, because they have been told that all their lives, so it has made me champion and question people who may go along with that, because some people still do... where they were born, brought up, went to school...*

Reading, while valued by all the tutors, was broadly highlighted as a fundamental problem associated with student deficit; this was a particularly an area of concern highlighted by John and Noreen (both of whom came to academia through doctoral qualification).

John had explained that in his childhood home there was a dictionary and a complete collection of the *Guinness Book of Records*. His mother would worry more about how long John spent studying, which John thought to be a reversal of most middle class parental responses to their child's application. Noreen's family also owned a dictionary and another interestingly symbolic artefact:

*Did you have any books in the house?*

*We had plastic ones, that when you pressed them, they spun round and revealed the drinks cabinet [laughter]... on one of those sideboards you get. We had a dictionary...*

Noreen's narrative winds itself around books in so many ways – both directly and indirectly they hold a strong sense of significance (as they do in other narratives). They are present through the narrative, but not always tangibly accessed; but still retaining a symbolic form of influence. When we consider the effect of having the A.J.P. Taylor book, seeing this impressive book sitting on the history teacher's desk, of feeling that there was an almost magical pull, drawing her into the world described within the always closed sheets. Never quite feeling confident enough to ask the teacher if she could borrow it and herself dive as enthusiastically into the world it depicted as her passionate teacher had so obviously done.

*I remember I got a book for Christmas once, and I LOVED IT... it's still in print actually, I bought it for my own child... I fell in love with it, it's a little story book called, Miss Happiness and Miss Flower... it was about two Japanese dolls coming alive and talking to this little girl who was a migrant from India.*

*Did it have a big impact on you, by any chance?*

*I remember the story incredibly well, so, I bought copies [for my] son and niece. I just loved the fact that somebody could write a story about all these people from around the world, and I didn't know anything about that... I think I was about nine or ten when I read it...*

Did it change the way Noreen felt about education in general? The answer was probably not, at least not entirely clearly or immediately. Her relationship to books was one of lighting a slow fuse with the warning to stand a little further back.

*I do remember that she had this big book, we didn't have any books at home or anything, so you only got what the teacher gave you and there was no other information, no internet, there was very little television, so I didn't know anything, but she had this big book, by AJP Taylor who's very famous in history and of course I'd have never heard of him and she kept trying to get me to read this book, but she'd never directly asked me to read it. So, she never came up and said would you like to borrow this book. Which I don't know if I'd have borrowed it anyway because it was a kind of intimidating book, it was really, really thick and I would have been a bit scared of it... But I remember that she left it on the corner of her desk every week in the class and she would say, if anybody would like to borrow the book and I would never quite have the courage... no, nobody ever borrowed the book. And I always assumed that she was kind of talking to me... but I never had the courage to go and get the book and I don't know why. I look at it as an adult now and think, I wonder why she didn't just say I think you would enjoy this... maybe she didn't want to force it... Or maybe she was aware that if you took a big book like that home, it might get destroyed or ruined or God knows what might have happened to it...*

*... not knowingly at the time, I mean I don't think that when you are a child, you necessarily think in those terms, but I think I found it, it's interesting because I loved it and I enjoyed it, but it didn't change my actions, I didn't then go to the library. I kind of reflect on that now and think how odd! I wonder why I didn't do that. We did have a library there, a small local library... and when I was a teenager, sort of fourteen, I used to go there with a friend, but we went there because we had nothing to do. So, it was open until eight o'clock at night, or nine, and we used to meet up to wander around the streets and we went there to get warm. [Whispering] it never occurred to us to take a book out! Which of course now I find hilarious, why didn't we take any books out? But we just used to sit there and chat. [laughs]*

*I used to work in the [school] library for a little phase, as a volunteer at lunch time...*

*I didn't know how to go about joining the library...*

*I remember going to the library when I was very little and getting books out and I remember the smell of it and thinking, oh I love it in here, it was warm and it smelt nice and you could sit down and it was really quiet...*

This apparent ambivalence toward the direct influence of the library in Noreen's learning and the early confusion about what it could provide, is interesting when we consider how important an influence she considers it for her students.

## **Back to the current day students**

Noreen recounted a typical introduction to the library that she runs each year for students: *"I ask when was the last time you went to a library? This year was the first year when I got that nobody had ever been in a library before"*. It is interesting that when we compare Noreen's own relationship to libraries, that she highlighted this as a symptom of need. Presumably her subsequent success in education was through changing her own habits and attitude to libraries.

Noreen has a clear strategy to encourage student engagement with books: *"I compel them to read initially, they do everything I tell them in the first few weeks!"* She has championed interest through the use of novels. However, in addition, she has noticed a difficulty for her students to suggest any titles of books they think others would like to read. This strategy has not entirely been successful in generating enthusiastic student engagement:

*Some of them can't actually read very well. I'd be very interested to know their reading age... that would be the first thing I would do. If found that some of the students had a lower age score, then we can't expect them to deal with reading these journal articles...*

Noreen raised many concerns that she had around how we work with our student population, as she felt that there were some important educational issues that needed to be addressed to set benchmarks against which support could be more systematically introduced through the courses. She felt that reading was an issue that had not been specifically addressed. Noreen, said of the students:

*[Running standardised reading tests], that would be the first thing I would do. If their reading age is 9 then we can't expect them to deal with reading these journal articles... it's the fundamental part of all learning, is being able to read well. Vocabulary quite limited... some are very resistant to reading because they say they don't like the act of reading. So, you have to screen for dyslexia and various other things. I think we have a very high proportion of students with dyslexia, undiagnosed... I'll have to think about how to do that [the screening of reading age] very sensitively.*

On many occasions Noreen came back to the point that learning was not specifically impeded by people's potential to learn, but that there were clear and persistent barriers to this being as straightforward for 'non-traditional' students, as it was for most traditional students. Noreen contextualised many of the student population (as do all the interviewees) within an educational framework of inequality. Universities lower in the formal university ranking system would need to address this fundamental difference between these two categorisations of higher education students. She compares what she knows about students attending top universities and the difference in their lives compared to the ones she now works with:

*My husband is a professor at [one of the top most ranked universities] and he has a very different group, I mean we do laugh about the students I have compared to the students he has... never the twain shall meet, we are at either end of the educational establishment, so you have a real insight into how it works and they are different worlds... [pauses]. The idea that our students can work their way through a higher education degree with their complex lives and their lack of fundamental education, the kids he's got are not problem free by any stretch of the imagination, but there are certain privileges that they have all the way through that put them in a very strong*

*position to succeed with the written word... hugely autonomous, very motivated. I think our students are very motivated in many ways, but they have got more calls on their time, they have got a lot of other responsibilities. These students [her husband's] don't have jobs, let alone anything else. They are just there to work [study]. Our students don't have that kind of life. So, does that mean they shouldn't be in higher education? Because they can't commit to it? I think that it's that the model we have got, [we] tried to mimic the other models and it doesn't fit, doesn't fit our population. We should have many more part-time degrees and recognise the fact they actually do have to work 25 hours a week to keep their heads above water... Why can't they do two modules a year, instead of four? Why don't we have more evening teaching? We don't offer them part-time degrees, it's insane... Why do we teach them at nine o'clock on a Tuesday morning, that's another thing that annoys my students, loads of them live miles away and they commute and they have childcare commitments, they have shift work. We don't take account of any of that. We just say no; you must be here by then... we are setting them up to fail to some extent because we've got this model that doesn't fit our population and that includes the sort of skills and things that they need.*

There is a tension here in terms of whether or how much students need to fully embody the life of an academic or whether academic life needs in part to respond more flexibly to the needs of the student. All the tutors interviewed agreed that there was value in their students coming to terms with some of the expectations that academia holds as requisites to graduation and independent learning.

As we have seen, both John and Leonard took to higher education and hold dear the opportunities that higher education provided in terms of counteracting their earlier failure through state schooling. The choice that John made in university was determined by whether or not the institution reminded him of his further education college and, if anything, he wanted a very traditional set up. The positive experiences of attending sixth form college and the glimpses he saw through weekend trips away with the college had made him think that he could easily fit into the lifestyle associated with being an FE tutor. By the time John had successfully

graduated he realised that completing a doctorate could lead to teaching in a university. In this respect, John's journey from being a 'non-traditional' student could be seen as becoming progressively 'traditional' in terms of his adoption of key academic traits and aspirations. Though John always maintained that he was still working class, but one that could move between classes through the application of his academic code-switching.

For Leonard, his promotion within higher education developed through a specific professional path and like many of the tutors at the university, had enrolled in doctoral studies after becoming academics. Nevertheless, his commitment to traditional academic values, in terms of promoting informed and critical independent learners was very evident. When talking about whether completing a doctorate had troubled him, Leonard said that what the process really demonstrated for him was an ability for people to fully organise their time around getting the thesis completed, rather than being a real test of intelligence.

A key driver for Leonard was being in a position to '*champion the underdog*' and use his academic credibility to influence aspects of the institution to benefit students who have arrived with certain disadvantages or low levels of self-esteem. But he was at the same time adamant that students raised their standards to meet academic expectations, too. While certain students may need additional support, it was felt that they needed also to realise the expectations for an appropriate investment in learning.

Whether reading is pursued on strategic grounds around doing the minimum in order to pass assessment or as an act of more actively having an interest in understanding the world, was a strong theme explored in Nathan's *My Freshman Year* (2005). The catch-22 position is that all the evidence suggests a poverty in time that can prevent many students from spending their period of study, 'living in books' (Back, 2016). If students really are not, as a majority, interested in reading, what could interest them more specifically or provide a 'spark' of motivation to visit the library to read? Removing the need to earn additional money through study time, would be a well evidenced response (Munro, 2011; Gilardy and Guglielmetti, 2011; Antonucci, 2016).



*How do you mend what hasn't happened?*

*Well, it's that kind of word 'non' again, isn't it? When you say somebody is 'non-traditional' it means like that they are missing something... they are deficient, and they have got to become something, and I think well, why? No! We should deal with their reality. I kind of feel like we are looking over there and saying this is the model and actually our population is over here and living very different lives. So, we need to research and get evidence on the kinds of lives they are living, other than anecdotal tales of what they are living, so we really need proper hard evidence on how many hours they work, what kind of caring commitments they have, what their commuting distances are, all that kind of thing and with that evidence base we could put together a model of education that fits them and I think we would be very successful and I think we'd be known for being good at that, and I think why can't we do that?*

One of the major concerns expressed by the tutors about their roles, is that they are keenly aware of how much additional support some students need in order to engage them in relatively routine academic tasks. The withdrawal of tutoring time from teaching hours, the ad-hoc provision of study support within courses and the lack of institutional resources to provide systematic enhancements to teaching and learning can be alarming to practitioners committed to addressing educational inequalities.

That we are not always able to respond to student need, can provoke a sense of taking part in an unethical relationship, if it is felt that the students are not provided with the right resources to achieve the standards that are expected. This uneasy feeling that we may be contributing to the wider perpetuation of educational inequality that Reay (2017) considers to be the main feature of the two-tiered higher education system.

One tutor questioned whether the organisation responded to widening participation and said: "*They [the students] come in and I think they are sold a bit of a dummy...*" The comment was referring to the fact that we were not providing what some students really needed and that there appears to be no overarching ideological or

system-wide buy-in to responding to widening participation in full, as that demands additional resourcing. As Leonard, matter-of-factly said: *'it's more bums on seats'*, he explained that there had to be a financial aspect attached:

*...now we are talking about the office of fair access, a lot of noise being made about participation... there is a premium on those students, depending on their postcode.*

Or as Wendy might say, *'we might be missing a trick'*. Clearly widening participation in this instance can be seen as an opportunity for specific recruitment and cornering a niche market. The point that Wendy raises in relation to 'missing a trick' is about responding to this niche by developing the framework and environment to best meet the needs of this group and build a reputation of excellence in supporting students from very diverse backgrounds with specific cultural and learning needs. Can the university rise to the challenge of meeting the needs of their main student body profiles?

The Goffman (1963) quotation at the introduction of the tutor narratives might imply that learning and reading in a library is a shady business. One that demands that the person entering the building needs to look over their shoulders, to make sure that nobody is watching. A heightened sense of being somewhere that you do not feel that you entirely belong. But somewhere you might be able to pass as being part of the furniture with some modifications to self. Is even wanting to go to the library a betrayal or an opportunity? Is it somewhere you feel safe and accepted? Social mobility and transitioning between cultures can be clearly fraught with tension.

Hanley (2016, loc. 3267 - 3272) described her mysteriously invisible progress to university employment:

*...it feels as though I spent my early years squashing my nose against plate-glass walls - cupping my ear to them, too - then made a run for them. In the invisible wall there was an invisible door just wide enough to bolt through, which upon looking back appeared never to have been there.*

This section suggests an obvious comparison to glass ceilings and restrictive or mysterious access. Whoever stumbles on the hidden entry or climbs the invisible ladder would appear to be decided on chance. The lack of transparency in relation to social mobility may conceal the conscious and unconscious cultural gatekeeping that surrounds how people access these 'hidden' entry points to success and well-paid professions. Micro-aggressions (Grant, 2019; DiAngelo, 2019) add confusion and uncertainty.

Making use of invisible doors in sheet glass institutions sounds a little like landing on a metaphorical ladder of opportunity. We see in some of the black lecturers a realisation that invisibility for them would be an entirely different proposition, even an impossible act. So the metaphoric ladder turns into a snake and sends the player lower down the board in the competition for the top. Our language and timbre, the choice of diction can be altered to facilitate elements of work environment assimilation. No matter how much effort is spent on the development of *Code-Switching* (2020) the impact of a person's colour remains clearly visible. The point of the interviews in the radio programme was to explore whether or not black people should consider code-switching to tone down their home cultural markers or whether they should be able to present themselves as they are. The discussion was split in relation to this issue. One participant was a black lawyer and he actively used code-switching, first to engage with clients in custody '*from the endz*' through street talk and then to address the judges within the court room with the Queen's English. The contributor felt that this approach maximised the best of both worlds and provided an advantage to how black people were represented. But this approach did not prevent court staff from assuming that the lawyer was the client, rather than the legal advocate when he showed up to the court rooms (Code-Switching, 2020). The lawyer commented on the number of times he had been stopped by the police whilst driving home from the courthouse.

The notion of passing (Goffman, 1963) takes on even more sinister and disturbing tones in the lives of the black participant tutors. Passing for people of colour is far less a transparent or 'colour blind' process (DiAngelo, 2019; Eddo-Lodge, 2017; Daley, 2018). DiAngelo (2019, p.143) reminds the reader that: "racism hurts (even kills) people of colour 24-7".

Being resilient to challenges and social inequalities was highlighted in the conclusion to *Home Coming* (Grant, 2019) when the author discusses the advantages of having parents that were from the Windrush generation in preparing their children to better negotiate the 'hostile environment' presented by immigration to the United Kingdom. "They showed how they might triumph from and through adversity" (ibid, p.264). It is not that education can magically remove class markers or dismantle the barriers to living a healthy and successful life. It cannot remove the social inequalities that inform how education interacts with personal development and future prosperity (Bloodworth, 2016; Marsh, 2011). But there are opportunities to ensure that learning can enable students to better understand the world and navigate the challenges and benefits of informed living. For the tutors it would very much appear that they see a real social value in their roles not just as academics; even as tutors, mentors, coaches and empathic supporters on the 'chalk face' of teaching. An explanation is that this group did not fully intend to leave their communities and classes behind for the culturally rarefied oak clad or sheet-glass corridors of prestigious research institutions (Collini, 2017; Docherty, 2015). They chose to remain, not least because they felt that their input could be transformative for individual learners in how they might comprehend and manage their future challenges.

## **Deserving and undeserving readers**

In relation just to the perceived lack of reading, and given what the tutors know about their students, it might be appropriate for us to put down our books and engage in active dialogue with students about this 'white elephant' in the university library.

What would a student say to on arrival being tested on their reading age?

An update on the surveillance of people accessing libraries, could capture the ghost of Goffman's (1963) recidivist reader in the CCTV footage discussed by McKenzie (2015) in her description of the multi-service centre that replaced the old library, a once vibrant community resource. The author (2015, loc. 744) reports that the "...centre does not 'belong' to the local community, but to the people that work in it, and the security guards who patrol it." A sense of belonging or a lack of it is a key

theme entwined through both the literature review and the participant accounts. There are strong themes identified that converge around libraries as representative of a safe haven, presenting opportunities to explore exciting new worlds, as access points to supportive information, networks and to cultures different from the user's own. Between Hanley (2016) and McGarvey (2018) we see starker class tensions and alienation from the traditional commodities associated with libraries, namely books and being or attempting to become middle class or not: books as magnets, one set binding at opposite poles, the other bristling with resistance as the same poles push apart. Books compel or repel different readers and refusers. This is mirrored metaphorically by the concept of the deserving or undeserving poor (Welshman, 2013).

A number of the research participant accounts express the positive influence of libraries as retreats into safe, enthralling and imaginative zones, rendering the reader invisible, unseen, as they silently learn in their own time and often without any sense of judgement. Reading was a key area that triggered escapes and their interest in locating themselves more specifically within the world. As an activity it contextualised their lived experiences and contributed to what they recognised as their identity and their bearings in relation to future opportunities. Libraries became symbols of affirmation, that mirrors identity construction, making people more visible.

To return again to Goffman's (1963) secret library user, they would now need to wear a mask to retain their desired anonymity and would very much be deterred by the presence of a camera installed over the door. For those living through a pandemic, entering a public building wearing a mask would not be considered strange behaviour. When the doors to this multi-service building are shut and with the darkness of night, the surrounding area is known by residents as a location to either avoid (especially if you are a stranger), or as a place to deal and score heroin and crack-cocaine (McKenzie, 2015). Not a picture that conjures widening participation in education and lifelong learning.

How people feel about libraries in relation to their own identities and what would make them more freely associate with the range of materials, resources and learning aids that they contain would be an interesting follow-up study. An ethnography of life

in the library would be straightforward for researchers in education to inhabit and make themselves become part of the furniture. What narratives around reading and not-reading would be found? How might they inform the way in which we encourage people to explore around a diverse range of reference sources? What do students find most interesting? Most useful? Most difficult? What media and what learning style do they favour? What are their specific reading habits? What stops them engaging in their subjects? Whatever happens to books in the future, reading is still central in relation to academic study, hence, the traditional adherence to silence in the library. Learning through dialogue makes much more noise, it certainly does when students are actively engaged in group learning or accessing multi-media. But, as educators what do we specifically know about the link between the breaking of silence and the motivation then to adopt the vow of silence in order to read? This research does not answer any of these questions, but very much begs them for the future.

## **6. Reflexivity, methodological themes, names, identities, ethics and reflections from field notes and practice**

This chapter is comprised of discussion that explores themes from both practice and the ethnographic and insider researcher perspectives during the main research period. Included are themes that were reflected on in research notebooks, such as considerations of my own ethnicity and class, previous professional employment in youth and community development practice and a more general discussion of identity and the ethics of representation. There is additional discussion of some ethnographic reading and works of literature, both biographic and fictional that supported development of what could be described as the 'ethnographic imagination' (Willis, 2000). It highlights reflexivity and positionality through discussing the role of cultural experts. Some of the style is a little less formal than in previous chapters and

contains some humour and discussion around sensitive and distressing areas. It starts with names. Well, names and labels, at least. It talks of narratives gained and narratives lost.

## **It's all in the name: the derivation of the term Welsh is an Anglo-Saxon word for 'the other' or 'foreigner'...**

My great grandfather was nicknamed Joe Belgium by those he worked in the steel mills with. He had moved from rural living to find work in the industrial heartland of South Wales. He had not become fluent in English, unlike many of his work mates, who were also Welsh. Their families had encouraged their children to speak English, so they knew very little of their indigenous language and thought that Joe sounded foreign. His children brought up their children, including my mother, to speak English at home, as that was spoken in schools.

In my own family, one side comes from a poor working class background and the other from an upper working class and aspirational semi-professional culture; rumours circulated in the family that my father had married a little beneath their social status. My parents were from South Wales and moved after university to England to find work and access opportunities for a 'better life'. To this day my mother swears that she has never modified her voice, but she did. She stopped sounding like her brother and sister, unless on the telephone to one of them. My father never had even a hint of a Welsh accent. They appear to have fitted in well when they moved to London and were able to secure professional employment and buy a house in a white, middle class area, with accessible open spaces and separate bedrooms for their children. As a child, my mother had shared her bed with her grandmother. I was conscious of being 'half-posh' when I was young. Some of my parents' friends were 'proper posh', though. At secondary school, my football team mates would most likely have said that I was 'posh'. My grandfather taught me how to say, "mochen di cysnac", which is Welsh for English pig. My older brother was an ardent England football fan, I was half one; but the rugby home nations clearly divided us. Not that I watch rugby now. Our middle sibling preferred to get a DNA sample and every now and again we get the updated results. Currently the



balance of ethnicity is: Welsh 76%, Scottish 11%, English 11%, Icelandic 1% and Norwegian 1%. My brother has said he considers himself working class and our mum, my brother and me middle class. He said it was because of the working class friends he kept. He is now the head of a secondary school having left school himself at the earliest opportunity. When my mum went to her university halls of residence, her new roommate had to explain to her that she needed to turn round in the bath to avoid the taps sticking into her back, as she had only known a tin bath growing up. I am an academic now, but never thought that I would be one. Assimilation is clearly more possible in Europe when you are white, regardless of any specific ethnic heritage and if regional dialect can be overcome, then signs of stigma can be more easily concealed (Goffman, 1963). Though evidence clearly suggests there were historical disadvantages experienced by the Welsh and Irish immigrants living in England (Mason, 2003).

Mostly, I identify with being of London Welsh ethnicity. People assume however that I am English, due to my accent. Though proud of my Welsh heritage, and very fond of all my memories of staying with relations during school holidays and playing in the streets in South Wales in what were, at first, strange environments so close to the blazing infernos of Margam and the enormous British Petroleum refinery, I am not comfortable with overt nationalism. It has always made me feel a little bit nervous. Whenever my Grandparents stayed with us in London and met my friends, I had to translate even though they did not speak Welsh. I loved my Welsh relations and adore the different ways that they talked and still talk. South Walian English can sing in everyday conversations, like some Asian and Jamaican dialects and intonations. I knew the odd phrase, like 'warra teg' for fair play, and pretty much mastered the accent. We pushed and rode 'gambos' (home spun go-carts) and played football, cricket and chase, down a network of back alleys and walk throughs. Went to a white sandy long strand beach with a concrete prom, that often had oil slicks (and getting the oil off meant Nana getting out the methylated spirits). Ate chips and bought sweets. It was like having access to two different worlds and these separate and shared experiences influenced a great deal of my unconscious identity building through childhood.

My father's parents were Welsh and English and sent their children to small private schools. My father's dad was the manager in a shoe shop and his mother we all called 'Queen Elizabeth'. They had a cigarette machine in their sitting room that was emptied and re-filled each week and they kept older chipped cups under the sink for any workmen that might visit.

I was very nearly called Aled, but that did not come to pass, so no specific cultural reference. Harry in Welsh is Ari.

## **Cultural experts – over to Den, not Shaun.**

During data analysis, I was fortunate to be able to use an ex youth work colleague and close friend as a sounding board, not least because he was prepared to listen to me, but also because he was a 'non-traditional' university student himself. He used to tell me of not being always able to make September starts at school as a kid when his parents could not afford to buy him and his brothers suitable shoes. Denis is in his sixties now.

His family emigrated from Ireland to Liverpool. One day he told me the story of why he is called Denis. This is how he put it:

*At my christening the priest asked my dad what to name me.*

*"Sean" he says, "spelt S...E...A...N".*

*The priest says "No, you spell it S...H...A...U...N".*

*Dad says "it's spelt the Irish way, S...E...A...N".*

*Priest says "you live in England now so you spell it S...H...A...U...N, the English way".*

*Dad responds, "Fuck that, call him Denis".*

## **Meet Mr Kurd and Mr America**

Hall (1996) asks his reader whether identity really matters, and let's not forget that he wrote a book on his own identity (2017). His question is infused with ironic

criticism of the more powerful over-looking the cultural constraints and assimilations that can render identity problematic. Making somebody feel that they may indeed be the 'wrong' person in the 'wrong' place at any given time; that they will be outed and that they will not be able to 'pass' (Goffman, 1963). The recent European Cup Football Final illustrated this point, when black players who missed their penalties for England, experienced a barrage of hate on social media (McVeigh and Hall, 2021). Their Englishness denied, though they wore the country's colours and sang the national anthem along with the crowd. Sudden and offensive rejection. But, in response to these violent infringements, there were many spontaneous public acts of collective love and support for those players too. If I were religious, I would say thank God, or maybe thank all the gods?

On 26<sup>th</sup> September 2018, Donald Trump gave an extraordinary open floor press conference during which he called on various reporters to ask questions (Cummings, 2018). At one point he pointed at a man in the audience and said, "Mr Kurd, go ahead..." Astonishment from the viewer may be understandable, given that this was the president of the largest global economy addressing a journalist in a most unusual manner (at least in relation to public discourse). As a viewer, I wondered whether Mr Trump would have taken offence if a head of state had referred to him directly as 'Mr Chav'.

However, the 'Mr Kurd' in question was a Mr Rashim Rashidi, and he was not offended. In fact, the term of address reportedly made Mr Rashidi feel happy and later he tweeted to the world, *#MrKurd & very proud* (Cummings, 2018). Other media colleagues agreed, stating that "Kurdishness is an identity most Kurds are openly proud of." Had the Kurdish reporter forgotten President Trump's name and wanted to provide an identity that the president could be proud of; then he could have paid the 'love' back by referring to him as 'Mr America'. Both Donald and Rashim left with their love and respect for the Kurds intact. Extraordinarily, they both 'passed' in this particular public transaction – neither left feeling that any potential stigma had been publicly exposed: their pride was kept intact. On searching 'Mr Kurd', 'press reaction to Trump saying Mr Kurd', there were 2,990,000 results. Whatever one's personal views on this incident, the subject certainly 'pushed a lot of buttons'.

Imagine if a tutor did a similar thing to a student, “Morning Mr Ghana, please ask your question.” My mouth would probably drop open as wide as it did when I listened to Mr Trump in the press conference.

But I was teaching a group of students and many of them were African, from a variety of different countries. They formed a very sociable network, incredibly polite and fully engaged with class discussions. Quite regularly, I would sit and drink coffee and chat with them in the canteen if we were in at the same time. Discussion was vibrant and cordial. Sometimes about assignments, but usually not.

One day in class, after most of the students were settling in at the start, one of the men from the group came in. “Ah, Mr Ghana has finally arrived!” said one of the others. The whole group laughed, and the arrival beamed with delight, lifting his hands triumphantly as lightly held fists. He wore formal clothes, trousers, a collared shirt, well-buffed shoes. “Yes”, he said, and then repeated, “Mr Ghana. Yes, I am very proud.” Everyone kept smiling and it set a good mood for the session. We had recently been sharing and talking about our cultural accounts and whether we thought our home culture fitted in with mainstream Western culture. We had been exploring thematic analysis by getting groups to share their accounts and writing down any key themes onto post-it notes. Usually, this session went down very well with the groups and we would often spend two or three sessions comparing notes. They liked that I identified as London Welsh, for some reason. One time a student asked about the Welsh accent and I instinctively started to describe my Welsh relations in a South Wales accent. It was a bit of a risk, but again the group laughed and some thought that I should deliver a lecture using this accent. One student laughed and exclaimed, “but usually you sound so posh!” An African student said that what I said was not actually Welsh and when I admitted that all I knew was a few words, there was a quiet disappointment felt in the room. Many of the students spoke a number of languages; most were at least bilingual, but quite a few were polyglots, at least in getting by. I was monolingual.

## **From laughter, good-humoured banter and celebrations of culture to apocalypse – from Mr Kurd to Mr Kurtz.**

During the research I read a lot of different novels that came out of interview discussions. These included *Beloved* (Morrison, 1997), *The Underground Railway*, *The Nickel Boys* (Whitehead, 2016; 2019), *Things Fall Apart* (Achebe, 2013) and *If This is Man* (Levi, 1969), and I briefly re-visited *Heart of Darkness* (Conrad, 1983). If ever a clutch of books could remind a reader of the implications of identity, these would rank somewhere in being some of the most necessary and harrowing to read. But maybe not all at once. These are all emotionally and psychologically difficult reads. Visceral and unnerving, violent and tragic; with but glimmers of hope. Sometimes these glimmers burst open; like finding a secret getaway train or that Levi lived through the horrors of the holocaust to recall the story, so that we could never forget. People in the crowds at Black Lives Matter shout out, “Say his name?” and crowd shouts back, “George Floyd!” Social discrimination appears to change, but not disappear (DiAngelo, 2019; Eddo-Lodge, 2017; Dorling, 2015).

Fryer’s (2018) historical accounts that detail the longer-term presence of black people in Britain, not only prevent these narratives from being lost, they provide an opportunity for white people to consider their own relationship to entrenched historical processes and social relationships. The black narratives have been mediated through white intervention and the systematic discrimination that emerged through trans-Atlantic slavery, the expansion and the subsequent contraction of the British Empire. Fryer (2018, loc. 213) reflects on his own whiteness and that of his potential readers, concluding that, ‘...this may entail a painful rethinking of basic assumptions’. The author stresses, in the same passage, the importance of non-black people needing to ‘...grasp imaginatively as well as intellectually the essence of the black historical imagination’ to understand the wider implications of social discrimination.

Levi’s very simply written story (1969) is shocking in every sense of the word; it recorded almost unbelievable lived experiences. I saw *Heart of Darkness* (1983) as a gruesome critique of European Empires in Africa and the film as a haunting

analysis of American modern-day imperialism. With embarrassment, I realised that I had failed to notice and appreciate at the time, how the African characters were quite so marginal and stereotypically thin and one dimensional (though portrayed as a threat). If you are unhappy with the story others tell, write your own and *Things Fall Apart* (2013) is the response. I talked, after reading Levi's account, to a woman from the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community and she reminded me that a forgotten aspect of the Nazi Holocaust was the story of the Roma and Sinti. There are precious little first-hand accounts for this cultural group experiencing systematic genocide too, as their traditions and ways of sharing experiences were orally transmitted. The Romani term Porajmos (The Devouring), viscerally describes this forgotten history. In an interview with the Guardian newspaper (Brookes, 2004), Walter Winter, who had experienced the loss of so many family members and was part of an academic archiving project, has some shocking feedback for academics:

... it was not a happy experience, not so much for the pain of reliving the memories – although that was difficult enough – but for what Winter sees as the high-handedness of 'experts' on the Holocaust. He is suspicious of people who rate education over experience and felt thoroughly patronised by the encounter.

*Hate: "as regular as rain"* (Greenfields and Rogers, 2020) provides a poignant title, as well as the evidence that extremely high levels of social discrimination and exclusion is still experienced by the GRT communities.

## **'Yes, but where are you actually from then, Iqbal?'**

I have also been fortunate enough to talk a lot of issues through with someone I have known since my school days; we have continued our close friendship ever since. Iqbal would describe himself as Indian British. Though he is an England football fan and follows the domestic game avidly. Goes to matches, a 'proper' fan. I remember a recurring theme in Iqbal's life, that we often found ourselves commenting on. White people asking him, "yes, but where are you really from?" Whenever white people asked him where he was from, he always replied North

London. Well, he was. It was his parents that were not. Iqbal became a teacher straight from university and worked at this until his recent retirement.

Over time we discussed our school days and the diversity of the ethnic backgrounds of the students. We laughed sometimes at how we were not prepared for university, but that without going to that kind of school we would not have been so aware of cultural diversity. That in many ways it helped and prepared us for understanding aspects of the wider world. There were also a large number of middle class pupils from the leafier, suburban households. One person in our school year tragically later died as the result of a police cell beating and another slightly older pupil became a very prominent television news journalist. A teacher quite recently was sent to prison for grooming and abusing a vulnerable schoolboy.

By the time I got to secondary school, I had begun to read more effectively and engage in school work. I was very keen on sport still and played for as many of the school sports teams as I could fit into the week. I was surprised to find that I was placed in top sets along with a majority of other white faces. When I played football for the school these ratios were effectively reversed, I was one of the fewer non-black faces to make up the starting line-up. Though I played on many football pitches across different parts of the city with my team mates, we would end up parting ways, as I retreated home to my middle class quarters - to my white, more privileged life. I would go on to either university or art school (as it was then called) and most of my teammates would leave school at sixteen, with the need to find work.

### **‘Do you want me to call you Paul, Paul?’**

Myself, Iqbal and Paul, all found ourselves alone at a recent Christmas, so agreed to meet up for a shared dinner on the day, with all the trimmings. Everyone contributed to the feast. It went on for hours and we covered a lot of ground, talking about our different childhood experiences of being brought up within a 5-mile radius in North London. We are all very close to each other in age. It was a strange coincidence, but in relation to this research it was serendipitous.

Our lives had been quite separate while in London, though obviously I saw Iqbal at school and then became close friends when we went to the same university. Paul had gone into an apprenticeship in carpentry, his parents were very keen that he could start to pay some rent. Iqbal, while at school, had spent many weekends visiting relations in more Asian populated areas of London. Paul lived in a more predominantly black area than me or Iqbal. I sat on a middle class hill, mainly with other white people tucked in trees, with a park behind my garden. We had three very different perspectives on things. I realise just how important these kinds of discussions have been in terms of exploring my own positionality within my research. Honest and frank discussions about class, ethnicity and social inequalities made me more acutely aware of different experiences that are defined by race, white European culture, privilege and cultural understandings: my privileges were regularly checked. At times the discussion was pleasurable and funny, but there were times that it was gravely serious.

*“It cut very deep. I mean, it made me ask does my life really matter?”* Paul was talking about the murder of George Floyd; the anniversary of this tragic event is coming to pass as this is written. I had gone to check if Paul was ok with me writing about our discussions over the past few years. Paul is a neighbour and we have got to know each other well and through the research period we have regularly shared a cup of coffee or conversations over the garden fence. But, when the news of George Floyd’s death broke, I did not see Paul for a couple of weeks. I knew he was home; I could hear the tv on in the background for, what seemed like, 24/7. When I did catch up with Paul next, he looked very tired and we had an emotionally charged conversation about the awful places his head had been for the past two weeks. Paul explained that, after the horrifying news coverage and the explosion on social media and Black Lives Matter became a global movement, this murder scenario kept playing around and around in his head and he felt like he was:

*Trapped in a parallel universe. This parallel universe describes the existence for all people of colour. Anyway, I think you remember what effect it had on me, at the time. I guess there is a little shard... something good has come from this tragedy. Something positive from a very negative experience. People are talking more. White people, too. The conversation has raised by a*



*few decibels and I expect change to be slow, but life goes on. But it's a proper mental health issue, when I was growing up watching stuff with my parents about the Windrush generation being turned away from lodgings, how do you think that made me feel? All of this was in my mind growing up in a parallel universe. I didn't know whether I could actually get through it.*

I realised that, although I felt genuine outrage, the event had initially seemed at the time to be another death that had been reported of a black person at the hands of an American police officer. But, talking to Paul about how he felt, made me realise that acknowledging this as a stream of statistics, was not a full or proper response. Just knowing about the horrific incidents of discrimination does not always connect thinking to lived experiences and the consequences of how we live and interact socially. For Paul, he had personally felt threatened with death just for being black. I'm an invisible London Welsh man; I am white (there is a pattern forming here).

When I explained how important our conversations over time had been in terms of his informal role as a cultural expert (Spradley, 1979), he laughed as he said he never knew he was implicated in the actual research. I asked him whether he thought this a serious breach in ethics, he replied *"maybe!"* and we both laughed. I asked about my being white and from a middle class background. I was relieved in many ways by his response: *"You've always asked me about being black, you've never not noticed. You show that you are interested."*

### **'Sorry Iqbal, where did you say you came from, again?'**

Iqbal, in responding to my exploration about what it meant that I was white and middle class and doing research in this area said: *"take a look at your mates, la. We were into The Clash and went to Rock Against Racism, we were into different forms of black culture, remember. Anti-Apartheid, Barclays Bank..."* Besides, he added, *"you are not really that middle class, you only are because your mum and dad did so well for themselves. You haven't got lots of inherited wealth."*

Talking to Denis, Paul and Iqbal about the research helped me to see more clearly the intersectionality in people's lives. Both realising my own privileges of class and colour and appreciating the opportunity to share and learn; I continue to aim to contextualise lived experience and taught knowledge. The other coincidence was that Denis, not Shaun, had gone to the Welsh university that I had anguished over not selecting when offered a place when I was nineteen.

## **'I'm not English, not on any level'**

*"I'm not English", Paul said very firmly. "Not at any level. I am black British. My daughters are mixed heritage and I thought that they might benefit from that. I was wrong. All people see is the black. They identify as being black, too, not white. Everybody else just sees the black."*

Iqbal is a serious Queens Park Rangers fan, and I am, what could be called a 'plastic fan'. I renounced any team preferences for supporting individual players. I loved playing football all through my childhood, up until the time I became far too injury prone. It was partly because I played so much football at one youth project based in a park. Me and Denis had used it to engage with a group of young people, so briefly we were semi-professional, as we technically got paid for doing this. I played with peers once a week on a hired pitch, too. So, though he knows a lot more about football as a subject, he puts up with my plasticity as he realises that I have a similar passion for it as a beautiful game. I spoke to Pete from the student group monograph about football, too.

The following incident was written up using the metaphor of education as a game of two sides and two halves. It is based on a real practice experience. The reader needs to predict the final score.

## **Chants from the terraces: a short footballing parable**

If education were two teams in a football match and one of them was called 'When Do You Think We Will Be Able To Recruit More Aspirational Students FC', and the

other 'But So Many Of Our Students Are Aspirational United' what would you predict the final score to be?

It's a difficult prediction perhaps? Arriving as well read, confident learners, fully active and already equipped with the tools required would provide any team with a great start. It should be a walk over. It usually is – 4-1. End of story. But on the other hand, the 'underdogs' are hungrier and are passionate team players too. Anything could happen on the day. It's a cup knockout – 1-1. But do not forget that the commentator has just told you that in all previous meetings the 1-1 draw has never actually happened. Though they have a very long history of fixtures dating back to Victorian times, indeed their meetings are dotted randomly through time, as they only ever play together when drawn in the FA Cup competition. Place your bets, please!

These two questions followed each other on a Zoom staff meeting. I made the point about aspiration following the original question (this was in the online chat that was going on during the briefing). It was short because I was absolutely livid and knew that if I did not 'bite my tongue' I could easily have written a very angry comment. Something like... 'maybe when you get yourself a job at a Russell Group university, or when we stop being a university within the widening participation agenda'. Anyway, there was no roar when the goals went in, but eight tutors following the chat down the side of the screen added a thumbs up. You might be wondering the score?

4-4. I was a little disappointed because for much of the game I was leading 4-1, but somehow the game just slipped away in the second half; there were some dreadful refereeing decisions mind, they got given two penalties in 15 minutes...and we had two players sent off.

## **'What do we call our research participants, John?'**

Names and naming are complex constructs and procedures of categorisation (Bowker and Leigh Star, 1999). The following is a reflection from working in a youth club some thirty or more years ago. Meet the Johns.

Early in my youth work career a group of male teenagers from the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community started to use the youth centre in an area demonised by many people that lived further away in the city. Over time, members of this community made regular visits to the club, as they had traditionally camped nearby in the summer. It had been a frequent summer stop-off for generations. Their presence in the youth club dramatically charged and changed the dynamics. There was negotiation, interaction and underlying hostility. Later there was a very violent fight between two young men, one from each of the two local communities. The Gypsy Traveller was called John. Then again it struck me that most of his companions were also called John. It became clear that John was the name they told 'outsiders', it was not their real name. A common name that 'outsiders' (many of the youth club users) used to describe Gypsy, Roma and Traveller young people was 'Pikey' or 'Gypo' and often these would be affixed by a profane expletive. Gypsy, Roma and Traveller groups have their own names for 'outsiders' too. To the youth club leader's credit, he worked hard to mediate the parties and successfully enabled access of both communities to the youth club facilities, confirming a commitment to widening participation and anti-discriminatory practices.

## **Two weeks of formal school and a PhD: Lottie's extraordinary learning journey**

Twenty years later, a mature student enrolled on a widening participation foundation degree, with just two weeks of formal school teaching under her belt. Lottie had been very active in community initiatives and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller networks and had gained access to the course through demonstrating potential, not through any formal education qualifications. Over the two years of study her progression in articulation was remarkable. Inspirational. Lottie became a determined reader and was able to express her cultural values and integrate her reading to support her material within what read as an alternative academic text. It was like reading the work of Simpson; *Dancing on the Turtle's Back* (2011): the melding of learning around lived experiences, this time not at the expense of their cultures; but dynamically driven by them. Her assignments were very well supported with an excellent range of reading, but her understanding of lived discrimination informed the

material and developed a unique academic voice, very different from mainstream academic formality. Whatever shape an academic perceives the metaphorical hole to be, her assignment material was a 'peg' that matched to the shape that she had formed. Lottie had fully justified and illustrated that her shaped peg had every right to fit and if it did not fit then the perceived shape of the whole was incomplete in its original shaping. In the second year of study her work consistently confronted traditional academic expectations in extending its barriers and opening up its language to cultural scrutiny. She often illustrated her work with photographs and cultural artefacts and used quotes from members of her community. This was before Gypsy, Roma and Travellers were even recognised and classified as distinctive and protected ethnic groups; acknowledged as a set of social identities. Lottie explained all about the different groups and communities that interwove with her nomadic culture. Widening participation had finally admitted a historically excluded group and one that is still under-represented within the reaches of higher education. If we return to education as a 'waterway' these are the fish that generally have 'got away'. But clearly there is no reason to suppose that they could not become a 'fish in water', nor teach us how different fish thrive in different waters and how they learn to swim.

Lottie explained how she had managed to complete her studies after two weeks schooling as a child. She sat for hours with a book and a dictionary and kept going over the same sections until she understood what she read. Lottie went on to another university and is completing her PhD. Whether it is limited time spent in school as a child, or overcoming hardship, trauma, diaspora, previous labelling, bullying, discrimination or having to learn a completely new language; these complex biographical profiles reflect strategies that overcome personal challenges and social inequalities are examples from practice that confirm potential over examination grades. The diversity and the resilience of individual narratives confirm that even education through a lower prestige post-1992 university can be transformational. How many will be able to follow? We'd better ask the cultural experts.

What the researcher brings to the research is an important element in how intended research is framed. I acknowledge both a research sensitivity (Spradley, 1979; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) and a 'closeness' to the subject and the participants. This matters to me and I have been committed to working within a widening participation

framework. If anything, this commitment has grown as I have developed close teaching and learning relationships with both groups and in particular through an increased awareness of the pressures, social issues and challenges that students have had to overcome to develop their learning identities (or not). While I currently have a 'non-academic' footprint in that I mainly teach, I do not personally feel that the comparatively low relative status of the institution impacts on my sense of self-worth as a tutor. Experiencing student development first-hand and the impact that this can have on individuals has been a key driver in maintaining my own commitment to teaching within the institution. I am acutely aware of the restrictions associated with working within a relatively poorly resourced university.

## **'My name is Harry, my kids call me Haz, but you can still call me sir!'**

Unlike Nathan (2005, p.2) it did not take me fifteen years of being a tutor to provoke in me a desire to carry out an ethnographic style inquiry to reduce or address any 'confusion' over:

How could some of my students never take a note during my big lecture class? And what about those students who bring whole meals and eat and drink in class? Or those students who feel absolutely no embarrassment in putting their head or their feet on their desk and taking a nap during class?

I could describe much worse behaviours, such as incessant talking over other people, arriving late, constant 'pinging' of texts, arguments and insults, non-engagement in group exercises, not reading any of the core texts or attempting to integrate references in essays, openly expressing a, 'yeah whatever! Talk to the hand' attitude. One student emailed me to say that he was sorry he could not attend the session, but his flat had been broken into and his car was stolen, but he ended saying, "see you next week, 100% certain". The likelihood was that this would have been true. I noticed trends in sporadic attendance as external events impacted on attendance.

The general absence of students from class provoked discussion within one group. Where had all the others gone? We could not understand why students who were paying for their courses did not attend classes anymore. A conscientious mature learner told me about her children's friends who had applied for university courses, just to access student finance. They saw this as an alternative way of accessing benefits and they told her that they had no intention of actually attending classes.

One colleague arrived back from a particularly challenging session and said: "this is not university teaching, its youth work". So, in some respects, I really did feel more like a 'fish in water' than many of my colleagues whose academic identities were being pushed to their limits.

The formative cultural accounts were deliberately developed to encourage students to bring in their own biographical issues into the classroom discussions. While I have not fully analysed this source of data due to time constraints, I immediately found out from looking at my research notes that a number of students cringed when they were told to address their lecturers by their first names. That they felt it went against much of their traditional values of respecting teachers and their elders. They preferred to use the title of 'sir' or 'miss'. I had spent years explaining to first years how the move from pedagogy to andragogy was a transition into adult learning relationships. They could call me Harry. I never knew the complexity behind my request. Obviously, I now say that they can call me Harry or 'Sir'.

I do not obviously know always when I cross cultural lines that somebody may feel should not be crossed, or if I've triggered 'micro-aggressions' in people without being aware of doing so. People do not always tell you and we are not always able to benefit then from feedback about the impact of potentially insensitive behaviour or inappropriate comments. I think more about what I have read and the stories that come with engaging students in their learning and through one-to-one contact. I try to understand. During the last year of lockdown I worked with a group of Somali women, all of whom identified as being Muslim. Their passion for education was quite extraordinary. Through the pandemic many of these students experienced challenging and tragic circumstances. I thought back to my notebooks and the time I had spent pulling out key themes from the cultural accounts that I had asked the

students to submit. There was so much about extended families and caring for elders and looking after siblings, cooking meals and sharing their faith and cultural traditions. I heard of many deaths from this community during the pandemic and so many struggled at times with juggling childcare, IT connectivity and bills. The main theme was tradition, not non-tradition. The statistics on minority ethnic groups being at additional risk of death from the virus, shone a bright light on the social inequalities that already exist (Myers, 2020).

## **A cup of shaah!**

We often broke some of the seriousness with cups of tea – a cup of ‘char’ or ‘shaah’. The women laughed when I tried to say the Somali word for tea and made me repeatedly say it over the online session. When I thought that I had got the intonation right, the whole group burst into laughter. I think it needed to sound more like the gasp of pleasure when you finally drink a much-anticipated cup of tea. At this university there are so many cultural experts to learn from.

To be honest, as a practitioner I have benefited as much, if not more, from peer learning and discussions about student culture in teaching and learning, as the students. The reciprocal nature of the exchange is not prominent in the wider academic literature, though it is present as a niche area of curriculum development (Sleeter, Torres and Laughlin, 2004; Kim et al, 2010; Mills and Morton, 2013).

## **I am waiting to be taught!**

More formal sessions in the classroom, that adopted the transfer ‘chalk and talk’ banking style of learning (Freire, 1972) can often result in the universally experienced ‘death by PowerPoint’. Blank, drowsy faces expressing student disengagement can be just as demoralising for the tutor (especially if the subject matter or theoretical perspective informs core aspects of the module learning themes or could be used to more specifically validate life and practice experiences). Sometimes getting people to contribute anything or generate a sense of participatory learning presents a barrier in terms of teaching. Soon after I started as an academic,



I began to employ workshop techniques such as icebreakers, games, art-based exercises, group activities, video footage, film and images to generate interest as an attempt to increase levels of engagement in the classroom. Using non-academic based materials to generate debate is an important area, as many students have reported over the years finding books and journals dull to read. Extending the range and scope of sources can improve the chances of lively discussion. Robinson (2017) argues for more creative and group-based learning to stimulate collaborative and participatory learning, to the point that he essentially suggests all schools should be like Google HQ, not Victorian workhouses. He does not suggest how this might be funded, though. To further encourage students, I make use of a wide range of potentially inspirational videos. These include the likes of Clint Smith's poetry slam, *Place Matters* (2013), Ken Robinson and the RSA animation on educational paradigms (2010), Prince Ea's rap on taking education to court for trying to assess a goldfish's ability to climb a tree (2016). The TED Talk on the intelligence of cephalopods (Gallo, 2008) is one that is very useful to include in a broader discussion of how intelligence is measured. If these fail to engage, then there is always Malala Yousafzai's Nobel Peace Prize Lecture (2014) to stir up a passion for education. Each awe inspiring in their own way; each great triggers of classroom discussion; each, the students are told, can be referenced. Interaction is not everyone's favourite learning style however, it can be embarrassing, and people can feel unconfident (even in small study groups).

In one session I had set an exercise for small groups to carry out and I noticed that one mature student, an African woman, sat motionless and refused to join in. I approached her to ask whether there was a problem and to check that she was aware of the task in hand. She smiled at me and replied: "*I am waiting to be taught!*" This was a critical incident, as I had assumed that group work and discussion were preferable by far in terms of engaging students in learning. However, what we see both from the student cultural accounts and the interviews are educational narratives that highlight the normalcy of school discipline and rote learning (transfer) as expectations associated with the classroom.

## The original research idea just did not get enough likes

Buchanan and Bryman (2009, p.xxiv) point out that the ethical process can be oversimplified through initial approval and can influence the kind of research that is validated or encouraged:

Choice of research method relies not only on research aims and epistemological stance, but also the organizational, historical, political, evidential, and personal factors, which are not 'problems to be solved', but factors to be woven effectively into practical research designs.

These interlocking factors do not represent easy tick-box responses to ethical approval, but illustrate more specifically restraining factors that can inhibit progress and the dynamic potential in which research ideas could unfold.

The original idea for my research project was to work with a small group of students in a co-production and co-operative enquiry (Mezirow, 2009) to produce a range of participatory learning materials for a work pack that could be used to explore cultural diversity in relation to anti-discriminatory practices. This method of peer learning was common practice during my work with young people, specifically around substance misuse and sexual health education. We asked young people what kinds of media and styles of presentation might interest their peers in specific subjects. This form of group work is linked to participatory appraisal and advocacy (Chambers, 2002) and was stimulated from a similar set of issues; young people not wanting to pick up existing health-related information because they were put off by the formal presentation and language. The young people would research around a topic and decide on ways of presenting the material both visually and linguistically in ways that resonated with their peers. It needed to be both visually attractive and written in a style of language that was accessible to them. The information itself was supported with evidence and then checked for accuracy by a group of specialist practitioners to ensure that the material contained safe and valid information. Similarly to this approach, academics could work with students to develop more student friendly ways of creating teaching and learning materials.

However, it proved difficult to express this in a way that convinced colleagues or could be matched to research frameworks seen as viable by the university. Developing this idea was not well received, which implied that developing it specifically for ethical approval might represent a risk. The high level of student commitment and researcher input to facilitate this process would have demanded consistent contact over time and then a secondary phase of trial and evaluation.

## **Turning from outside to in and inside to out: the maze of identity**

When I completed university, I did not move into a graduate paid job. However, twenty years later, after I studied a professionally validated masters degree part-time as a mature vocationally orientated learner, I became 'non-traditional' by definition. I then managed to secure a graduate level career teaching in higher education. This happened through being professionally qualified with twenty years of practice experience in youth and community development, as opposed to having followed a traditional doctoral route to becoming an academic. This 'shape-shifting' occurred again when enrolling on to the professional doctorate as I was 'earning while learning', looking after dependents, studying late in life and experiencing some of the disruptions to study that I had become so aware of impacting on students' lives. At times, I did not feel confident about constructing an effective learning identity. Study was squeezed and crammed into weekends, replaced holidays and extended evenings into later nights. The process has tended to make me more sympathetic to the demands of studying and working full-time.

Back (2016) in his reflections of higher education, justifies taking a degree largely as it accommodates the process of 'living in books', of full immersion in study. This portrayal of student life may not fit the experiences any longer of a significant portion of the student population. Addressing this through future interactions with students could explore ways that universities and government could respond to the real poverty of time that so many students currently experience in relation to free time to study (Antonucci, 2016). Involving students directly in this dialogue and finding out

how best to spark motivation to extend learning opportunities, appears to be a critical area of development.

## **The study of 'non-standard' students**

Willis (2000, loc. 2448 - 2452) suggested that the changing nature of higher education access provides a potentially rich source for developing an ethnographic exploration of institutional and historical change. The author states:

Meanwhile other older institutions are developing and changing. For instance, there has been an astonishing growth and change in the institutions of higher education in the UK... Apart from white working-class males, there is also a continuing strong flow of adult students... 'non-standard' students comprising of 40-50 per cent of the student bodies of at least the non-elite universities... these institutions are becoming peopled with new kinds of student.

While there have been significant events impacting on student life since these points were raised, most especially the incremental rise in tuition fees, the marked change in character of the national student body has been significant (Clarke and Beech, 2018). Willis (2000) goes on to suggest that older institutions still have some way to go in order to catch up with the changing character of what could currently be called the new consumers of higher education. Willis (ibid) argues that institutional responses to this identity diversity have not been fully responded to in relation to appropriate course and programme development to match the rapid changes in participating students.

In talking to a colleague about this research, their response was that academia was rigid and still expected all its entrants to conform to an established higher education paradigm; much like forcing a 'square peg into a round hole'. Their explanation for using the analogy was that after years of experiencing inequalities in education the academic framework disadvantages students further by standardised formal academic assessment tools that many of the students are not always fully equipped for or possess the educational confidence to autonomously respond to. That many

the students were always conscious of feeling like they were the 'wrong kind of shape'.

## **How can this study nurture student-centred responses in teaching and learning and curriculum development?**

Willis (2000, loc. 2457 - 2464) elaborates on issues of curriculum development with a greater sense of shared cultural engagement:

With personal histories and contemporary realities involving a variety of lived cultural practices, many students very often feel that their own experiences are unrecognized in curricular, teaching and learning practices. Their cultures seem to be invisible, or like coats in winter, to be dumped at the classroom door. Ethnographic accounts, scripts, texts and stories could have a role to play here, meeting the experiences of the students, releasing a recognition of their own symbolic work and developing a recognition and respect for other kinds of symbolic work in other forms of life...cultural practices are, in effect, learning practices and can be connected and mobilised as such.

In many respects, given Willis's output and interests, exploring the identities of what he calls the 'non-standard' student would fit into his academic portfolio. However, his high-profile academic career means that his field of operation is now defined more by the elite and international agenda of global university research activities. The relative weakness of smaller post-1992 institutions in relation to supporting research output impacts then on the support for ongoing research projects that centre on teaching and learning practices, rather than areas that might be seen as more overtly profitable. The literature review highlights a range of research around widening participation and the emergence of a 'problematized group' of students, but also shows the persistence of problems in terms of their meaningful engagement. There were very few instances of research detailing student involvement in developing learning resources or co-producing content used for peer-learning.

Ten years on, Trowler and Trowler (2010) reminded the reader that students remained, by and large, outsiders in the process of such engagement and their fear

was that when it happens it is tokenistic, to the point of being 'decorative' (Arnstein, 1969). Trowler and Trowler (2010, p.14) argue that:

Despite the rhetoric on the (uncontested) value of student engagement for individual students, their institutions, the higher education sector and society more generally, very little evidence can be found in the literature of students being engaged in issues beyond their own learning, as individuals, in any direct way. Students are typically presented as the customers of engagement, rather than co-authors. Where students are involved in shaping the design and delivery of curriculum, it tends mostly to be indirectly through feedback surveys, often with problems reported around closing the feedback loop.

The focus of this methodological approach and the centrality of the student voice that it has prioritised can, in a small way, stimulate some change in this area. However, sustained support for local small-scale practice applied research involving students directly in issues that support their learning could maximise the context that informs future work, such as similar hybrid ethnographic and practice facing projects directly engaging the student voice.

## **Introduction to ethnographic studies: the monograph and the 'polygraph' - a cultural lie detector test**

'Thick description' is a term credited to Geertz and often used by methodologists to highlight a broadly interpretive style in culturally rich ethnographic accounts (Thomas, 2017). I have also been a fan of the idea of 'thick description' as it was a tool that I used in some of my developmental recordings that had informed much of my professional practice as a youth worker. Therefore, I had been looking forward to reading *The Interpretation of Culture* (Geertz, 1973). Part of detached youth work was to orientate and find your local bearings and gradually become part of the social furniture of an area. To understand how it ticks and to explore the cultural atmosphere. Developing links with local people to hear what they say and how they describe the area is an important part of this formative and developmental period. I ended up calling them process recordings and though there were not always tangible results from this activity, the very process of recalling and describing appeared to

encouraging a less superficial engagement in what was trying to be understood or what could be done to improve or maximise future engagement.

The account *Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight* (Geertz, 1973) seemed strangely detached. The author explored what he said was a Balinese tendency to 'unsee' strangers; to look beyond and through them, never to catch their eye. Until, according to Geertz, the outsider gained acceptance and then the transfer to visible was 'total', with a melting away of boundaries. However, there was not one piece of narrative translated from his interactions that applied a participant perspective on the significance of the cockfight to Balinese culture and in particular the men. While some plausible discussion was raised around these occasions being spaces where men could replicate and confirm their status in society through the participation in ritual bloodletting that acted out public humiliation or triumph, there was no sense that Geertz (1973) was relying on his informants to, in any way, validate his interpretations of their cultural experiences. There were no distinct voices, aside from the author's own. Having stated that the Balinese initially made him feel 'invisible', that appears to be exactly what he achieved with them. Cultural voices silenced through outside interpretation. The invisible 'informants' seemed secondary, even peripheral in Geertz's model of cultural analysis. Passive and inactive and denied their cultural expertise. The cultural interpretation, and the description runs full circle, as the analysis does not produce rupture or open up contestation. It provides a sealed interpretation that locks the 'participants' in an observed silence. The *Deep Play* in the title was not even skin deep.

Geertz (1973) comments that the cockfight was a social ceremony that separates the genders in Bali, it was strictly no-women. Yet he does not include any problematic consideration of gender. If the voices of the men actually at the cockfight are not heard, why would you hear the voices of the women who were never there? The story is all narrator and there the power stops.

## **The voice of the participants versus the narrator**

In *My Freshman Year* (Nathan, 2005) the academic goes undercover and then appears reluctant to quote her research participants. Much of the material and insight was collected covertly, through observation. Like Reay (2017) she uses 'snippets' from interviews. Small snippets from the formal interviews that she gained permission to carry out with her participants. In effect, she fails to make her ethnography 'talk'. There is very limited use of the participant voice. Nathan raises some interesting points in relation to how students strategize their input and how ethnic minority students feel more isolated and marginalised, but there is little further discussion from students around these issues. They are not presented as full lived-in and expressed experiences but used to confirm an observation only. One of Nathan's original points for going 'undercover' was to find out why students were not really interested in the material that she taught. Apart from some valid issues about scheduling for the 'busier' working students, there was no discussion about what her time as a fresher taught her about making her lessons and topics more engaging, even when she admits to becoming bored in classes herself. It was not ever really discussed, certainly not with any of her student cultural experts. As Becker (1998) pointed out, educators often took offence when they were interviewed and realised that they were being seen as part of the problem; it's the children you need to focus on, not the teachers, he was often told.

## **The cacophony of new voices and maintaining authorial presence or placing the researcher centre stage?**

Van Maanen (2011) discusses at some length the diverse use and construction of the authorial voice(s). Locating authors in ethnographic accounts may not be straightforward, pointing out their relationship to the unfolding action, as interpreters and re-assigners of truth and group representation can reveal or silence participants agency through the narrative. Using large sections of quoted material to authenticate participant perspectives, can enable the reader to engage with a full response to a given question. In *Sex Work on the Streets: Prostitutes and their Clients*



(McKeganey and Barnard, 1996), the authors make use of long sections of dialogue from the women of the study. The reader can hear more clearly into how the participants manage and understand their world, how they develop ways of reducing risk and how they care and look out for one and other. The foreword underlines the importance of allowing the prominence of participant voices, which means that outsiders can understand more about a world they only have limited experience of. Insiders can generate more confidence to speak out, rather than be passively judged.

But even when it may prove difficult to locate the ethnographic voice, we know that the researcher's hand is behind the stitching together and representation of any cultural account. The researcher summarises and re-orders, classifies and codes; maybe bends 'snippets' around pre-supposed theory or uses their selection of data to prove a point or conveniently illustrate a theory. Representation by others will always be a fraught and problematic enterprise.

## **Interweaving of contextual description, group narratives and wider social mechanisms**

Alice Goffman's recent ethnography *On the Run* (2014), includes long sections of dialogue from her informants, and over a four year period, she became the official scribe for a group of black families and youth, so much of her prose is very descriptive in that it tells an unfolding story through a set of activities and occurrences that rippled through the lives of this group. This development of participant observer 'data' shaped by the stories unfolding within the context of the group, is usually held up as one of the key defining aspects of ethnographic methodology (Van Maanen, 2011; Spradley, 1979). Goffman (2014) draws on background data specifically around incarceration processes and procedures that relate to both the policing policies and the social dynamics and the lives of a particular group (the 'gang' and the black population). She integrates it into the main ethnographic text, rather than as a separate chapter more usual to academic thesis production. Wolcott (2001) suggests that this is often divorced from the main point of an ethnographic account which tends to be more inductive and by virtue of this

centres more prominently on the voices and views of the informants first and then begins to embed theory in an attempt to better interpret themes from the research. Wolcott (ibid) is very reluctant to assign hard and fast conclusions and applied recommendations.

## **What is ethnography anyway?**

P.R.Trowler (2014) asserts that ethnography is a highly contested term, not least as there are no agreed formulas for its activities, scope and final format, nor any agreed application of it as a methodology that supports practice applications. The article problematizes the apparent lack of coherency in how data is analysed, interpreted and either creates new theory or fits with other existing social theory. He cites Van Maanen (2011) arguing that much ethnographic interpretation is more related to personal preferences, rather than being generated from the actual data. This is likened to a magician pulling out theory, like the metaphorical rabbit from the top hat; implying it is a kind of academic showmanship (and we all know that magicians do not give their tricks away by explaining how they were done).

P.R.Trowler (2014) is still very much concerned with the role of insider ethnographers (many of whom work directly within the higher education sector). How are these 'old lags' going to make the ordinary strange? What are they specifically going to miss through their own normalisation of practice over time? One aspect to this might be that, for the first time, the practitioner will have an opportunity to specifically stop and listen to the voices of those that they are attempting to represent. The strangeness may indeed arise from the specific insights that they gain from the act of listening. 'Listening' tutors become the new strange, rather than 'transmitting' tutors. They can observe how their participants respond to specific questions or the ways in which they relate their narratives to themes that emerge from inquiry. Having an hour and a half just to talk to students (and lecturers) about their own perspectives is 'strange' in itself, given the usual lack of time we actually engage with students personally. Bits of stories emerge from teaching practice, as students relax or become more actively engaged in classroom discussion, but the use of one-to-one interviewing was significant in just how much detail and nuance

was produced. It is not that tutors fail to ever get to know their students; but often this is the result when the student is unusually forthcoming or when they might need to explain difficulties that are impacting on their studies.

Prioritising the participants' views (rather than the researcher's interpretation of them) may be another way of making the familiar strange, as so few examples of this were found in the wider literature. Strange, not least as one could reasonably expect or assume that tutors as a matter of course 'get to know' all their learners.

Conversations with colleagues imply that teaching loads preclude the full integration of this kind of personalised needs assessment. Feedback from the students acknowledged how important they felt this to be in supporting aspects of their learning. This study has shown that learning styles are one aspect in a student's learning journey, but that there are so many others that are the result of their lived experiences of inequality within education and their social and cultural context.

## **Developing locational contexts and sub-plots to ground the ethnography**

Early plans for the research were to backup an ethnographic account through additional survey work with the larger population and to explore the institutional archives of the university. However, time constraints made this an implausible aim. In some ways this limits this piece of research in relation to fuller or more purist ideas of ethnography (Hammersley, 1992; Spradley, 1979).

P.R.Trowler (2014) suggests the use of wider staff within a higher education setting, the administration team for example to more widely contextualise research themes. Cleaning staff, librarians, security guards and canteen workers could be other perspectives to explore, too. They may provide more sufficient context comparison. Eddo-Lodge (2017) commented on the lack of ethnic minority tutors found working in universities, against the number of cleaners and ancillary workers working there, as a point of comparison. What perspectives would these groups have to offer on the discussion around what is a 'non-traditional' student or what kind of institution they find themselves working in?

P.R.Trowler (2014, p.27) states that applied higher educational ethnographies, even the 'hybrid' versions (scaled down versions that do not usually conform to the classic anthropological expectations or timescales), can be effective methodologies to develop areas of change within learning and teaching contexts. One of its key credentials must be that:

It has two levels of truth claims and significance: one relating to the particulars of the practice performances being researched, the other to more general reservoirs of practice, or practice entities. Its research methods should be fit for both if its value is to go beyond depictions of practices in specific places and times, mere snapshots ... it pays close attention to situated and contested frames of reference, and their consequences.

The 'contested frames of reference' is in many respects the term 'non-traditional' itself and aspects of the dialogues relating to reading habits. Comparisons between students and tutors provided a multi-level set of perspectives, some converging others diverging. Two views of the learning identity, but through multiple perspectives. The contested external world of social mobility provided a kind of external check on both discourses.

The extended use of participant narratives to build a montage of comparative case studies that collectively explored specific themes could fall into the category of a 'snap-shot' and may therefore be limited in how they translate wider than this study or the institution.

While I chose to edit down the interviews around broad themes initially, the focus on the particulars of what participants said was maintained as a central drive to building the authenticity of voice in the two ethnographic accounts. These can be considered against the wider discussion of shared concepts operating within universities and the higher education sector.

## **Breach in *The City & The City* (after Mieville, 2010)**

Alice Goffman (2014) tells of her growing alienation from the predominantly white campus that she visited less frequently when completing her doctoral thesis. She describes the antipathy that she felt towards the academic approach and constraints imposed on developing an understanding of particular groups. Her four years immersed in the daily lives of disadvantaged black families eventually made the university environment transform from the familiar to the strange and the 'ghetto' to the familiar. Examples of this 'cognitive dissonance' relate to what P.R.Trowler (2014) highlights as a core quality that effective ethnographies expose - the making of the familiar to become strange. Many authors (P.R.Trowler, 2014; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983; Van Maanen, 2011) point out that without this distance from the subject our biases take control of an inquiry and the researcher lacks the insight to understand behaviours and assumptions that are taken for granted. This distance from daily routine behaviour was accomplished in part through developing open interview questions that began by exploring participant narratives centred on their previous educational journeys. It stepped outside of classroom, curriculum and assignment agendas and engaged participants in a broader consideration of educational histories. The emphasis was on the participant and what they in effect brought along to the classroom (which is mostly unseen or not usually specified from within many classrooms and learning and teaching environments). Wondering whether the context a practitioner works within follows entirely ethical practices can provoke similar feelings. Do we offer the support to all our students, do we understand their detailed needs, can we enable confidence and an ethos of independent learning? Sometimes these questions have raised doubts and in many ways this research itself raises such doubts. There is rhetoric and practice and it is clear that they do not always entirely match.

## Researcher and shape-shifting: “that’s my fucking white girl...”

When we consider Alice Goffman’s *On the Run* (2014), her portrayal of self could hardly be more of an ‘outsider’ immersing themselves within. A white middle class student, daughter of the sociologist Ervin Goffman, becomes the official storyteller for the 6<sup>th</sup> Street Boys and lives for four years in a black community marginalised by entrenched poverty and policed by a force and policy that effectively criminalises a huge proportion of black males. The material highlights frequent negotiation of her position, as there are many occasions that some of the community did not understand her presence within the unfolding scenes. It is clear that she became a trusted member, even if a peripheral ‘player’, of the social network there. She talked about painful encounters, ‘eyes like daggers’ and her own embarrassment, especially in larger social gatherings, where her position was unknown to some of the people there. She would be the only white person present (aside from when there was a police raid, or when visiting hospitals). Equally both black and white people were suspicious of her presence, so the ‘stranger’ persona was cultivated in conjunction with the building of trust within a smaller social network; being accepted as a legitimate part of the group, allowing for full and partial membership:

When the fumigator guy arrived with his tank of insecticide, he demanded to know what a white woman like me was doing in the house, prompting Miss Linda to yell what had become her usual answer: “That’s my fucking white girl. Is it a problem?”

Goffman (2014) discusses how she became increasingly alienated by her visits to the university, in particular her meetings with her supervisors. Her immersion into black street life made this aspect of her previously engaged academic life become disconcertingly alien. It jarred with the realities she was experiencing in the field. This change through lived experience threw a different light on academia and her relationship to it. One of the controversies of this account, when the closing pages reveal that the ‘outsider’ label had all but disappeared and dropped completely during the events that followed a fatal shooting of one of the 6<sup>th</sup> Street Boys (Goffman, 2014, loc. 4690), relates to her ‘stepping over the line’ and ‘going native’:

We started out around 3:00 a.m., with Mike in the passenger seat, his hand on the Glock as he directed me around the area.

Later Goffman (ibid, loc. 4695) explains why she drove the car looking for the gang member's killer, making herself a potential accessory to the revenge murder:

But I don't believe that I got into the car with Mike because I wanted to learn first-hand about violence, or even because I wanted to prove myself loyal or brave. I got into the car because, like Mike and Reggie, I wanted Chuck's killer to die. Perhaps Chuck's death had broken something inside me...

The ending to the account could have been so different and the final write-up could have been far from any university library, locked away in a prison cell. Goffman (ibid) doesn't discuss the potential in this situation for her sentencing being more lenient, given her status as a white, middle class, PhD student, nor the likelihood that Mike would have maintained her innocence, in terms of not being 'in on the act'.

The study ends with her feeling centre stage, she was glad that she had (loc. 4701):  
...learned what it feels like to want a man to die – not simply to understand the desire for vengeance in others, but to feel it in my bones, at an emotional level of eclipsing my own reason or sense of right or wrong...at the time and certainly in retrospect, my desire for vengeance scared me...

Not reporting a student for plagiarism or passing a borderline assignment are not in this league of ethical dilemmas; but the point that 'insider' ethnographic stances are viewed as inherently problematic by some appears not to accept that the lines between 'us' and 'them', even when clearly drawn, do not always remain intact in either 'outsider' or 'insider' approaches (Coffey, 1999).

I was employed in academia later on in working life and made use of a professionally validated masters to be appointed as a Senior Lecturer in higher education (the university made practitioners with the right kind of practice experience that they needed to run their courses Senior Lecturers to acknowledge their work-based knowledge). My experiences of being a student and working full-time within the same organisation certainly impacted on my studies. Completing assignments under the

pressure of time, with insufficient periods of time to fully articulate the material. The input was not consistent, the university policy for teaching remission caused some additional conflict. It was a matter of trying to fit everything in, cram in bits when possible. Suspended study time was used to cope with increased work schedules, too. I got divorced, which was an additional trauma; gained considerable insight into the challenges faced by so many of my students. Though I have taken reading very seriously, it certainly was not exclusively 'living in books' that Back (2016) so enthusiastically describes as the virtues of higher education. But I regularly arrived to teach in the mornings with a 'heavy head' from reading a little too late the night before, just like Hassan and Catherine. The outside of university contact I had with the participants was marginal in comparison to Alice Goffman's (2014) and I witnessed nothing of their daily lives outside of the university setting. As so much of my own daily routines revolved around developing teaching and learning relationships within the institution, this provided me with glimpses and new insights. Especially during the pandemic lockdown. The impact of the research did at times certainly flip my insider role to the outside.

Having said all this, the real drama of this research is to be found in the student and tutor narratives, and their responses to the term 'non-traditional' student. Some of the testimony within the interviews themselves was very moving to witness, there were tears as some told aspects of their stories that marked their journeys through education or talked about their personal lives. There was laughing too. Many of the narratives surprised and all engaged me, in developing a more nuanced understanding of how they defined identities and how events so varied shaped their educational journeys. My middle class origins and my privileged start could not be washed away through insights of similarity though. In a sense my contribution to becoming an 'insider' was to enable and validate these stories through the participants' own speech, not just as a vehicle to raise an academic voice.

In the seminal sociological ethnographic text by McKeganey and Barnard (1996), there was convincing evidence to suggest that an applied approach to ethnographic research can promote a more accurate understanding of a stigmatised group of women. The field work and analysis contributed to developing and directly informing outreach services to marginalised and vulnerable communities and was used to



inform wider policies to control health threats, regionally and internationally. Perhaps a rare outlier. *On the Run* (Goffman, 2014) provided a searing indictment of systemic policy driven by social discrimination through the policing of a particular group. Not using 'non-traditional' student as a negative label is a step to working with a social justice agenda in education.

The narrative accounts of the students and tutors are seeped with race, class, ethnicity, gender, ability, diaspora, discriminations and both micro and macro-aggressions. Sometimes there is nothing more to add, as the stories say it all. They are recorded. They exist.

While this research contribution is small scale, it directly links to concepts of social justice, in ethos and approach. It is a contribution to understanding a slippery and negatively loaded term. 'Non-traditional' might sound polite, but in a way, it acts and operates like a swear word. Covering a multitude of inarticulate meanings and feelings, but not specifically clarifying them. We'd better not forget, that when I write loaded, I am using the word most readily associated with the gun. And there is the ethics and the drama wrapped up in one. Labels are seldom neutral.

While the reader may consider the voice of Gypsy, Roma and Travellers to have been marginalised in this inquiry, the experiences of people from this collection of communities are totally central to the main educational theme of widening participation. The places that people find themselves in when hate "*is as regular as rain*" (participant quoted in Greenfields and Rogers, 2020), are not schools or universities. Widening what?

## 7. Discussion points, practice implications and concluding thoughts

In the BBC's social science collaboration with the Open University (*Thinking Allowed*, 2016), the radio presenter sounds as if he is scratching his head after talking to the academic Antonucci. The subject of the program was: *Higher education: Crisis or Change?* A key area of concern being raised was the extent to which financial burdens were being placed especially on the shoulders of the students from poorer family backgrounds. It is hard to tell whether Laurie Taylor, the presenter, was actually scratching his head, because this was radio. But there was a pause that was followed by a reflection on the presenter's teaching days:

I can remember teaching at university; it never occurred to me to, as it were, to look at my own seminar group and think that these students, many of them, were having completely different experiences from each other in terms of their financial abilities ... that is a new thing isn't it, really?

The academic Docherty, author of *Universities at War* (2015) suggested that through the wholesale 'privatisation of all interests', government and universities had severed a key value of education and its direct link to 'social good'. That the marketisation of higher education was a clear sign that university is all about the turnover. During the interview Docherty (*Thinking Allowed*, 2016) suggested that universities are guilty of betrayal in their promotion of degree certificates as passport to social mobility. The wider implication raised in Docherty's critique is that universities fail to co-operate with each other, that they actively suppress criticism, or anything that may spoil their 'brand' and they encourage conformity of thinking, rather than promoting more engaged learning through independent enquiry. Docherty (ibid) concludes that universities have essentially institutionalised social discrimination. He was not specifically talking about the tiering in status within the high education sector that Reay highlights (2017), nor about the widespread issues of cultural bias that have been clearly documented across the whole sector (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2019). For Docherty (2015) the treachery defining the war is the act of compelling conformity and competition. It is about the groups of people this process deliberately ignores or impedes access to. The emphasis of the war was the overall fixation in higher education on the model of learning as acquisitive individualism.

Widening participation is appearing more to seem a mis-firing myth (Reay, 2017; Docherty, 2015). Well-informed and diverse perspectives are falling away within the wider drive for conformity. Conformity, interestingly, is not to be seen within the two participant groups of this research. Though there are some key areas of conformity around themes and educational purpose that manifest through the narrative accounts of this study. These include dislocation, interruption, counter-suggestion, upheaval, challenge, grit (continuing against the odds) cultural relocation, navigation, application, insight, motivation and re-engagements. These common themes are woven through the narratives, but so too are the specific areas that those interviewed felt had influenced their learning journeys, their student identities and whether a student identity was even a desirable or aspirational goal.

## **‘Non-traditional’**

Many of the participants, especially in the student group, inverted the question when they stopped to consider what ‘non-traditional’ meant; they described it as a badge of honour and resilience or as a temporary identity to facilitate achievement of a professional passport to practice. This is not to say that the students ignored the academic skills that being a student in higher education requires, but that they had realised or found ways to integrate them to more specifically support their personal development and learning progression. They were not so much trying to shape themselves in the image of an academic but exploring how adopting aspects of academic identity could help shape their own goals and in effect, aspects of their identity. Not a square peg trying to fit a round hole.

Students and tutors were wary of the term as a floating nebulous one that could easily be applied as a one-dimensional label to highlight non-conformity to the stereotype of a ‘traditional’ student, replete with the merit of aspiration and talent, hitting the ground running. Lumping people into broadly defined groups has many consequences, especially in relation to the construct of this term. Groups of people described by what they lack, who would appear to share none of the qualities of what has historically defined a traditional student. A common feature would be the lack of family financial support, though not the considerable parental emotional investment in education; particularly in relation to ensuring that their children gained opportunities denied to themselves. Another feature would be a lack of time to immerse themselves in study and inhibited opportunities to ‘live in books’.

## **The myth**

Armstrong’s (2005) erudite summary of mythology traces the shifting pattern of myth in the psychological human drive, to come to terms with or symbolically overcome our limited understanding of the world and its place within the universe. Myths have been used to ‘look into the heart of a great silence’ (ibid, p.5). Though Armstrong (2005, p.32) does not look closely at how myths are circulated as socially constructed lies, or wish fulfilment, she is clear on one issue: ‘logos is quite different

from mythical thinking. Unlike myth, logos must correspond accurately to objective facts.' The author argues that for myth to be effective, it does not have to correspond entirely to facts, but its needs to provide 'insight into a deeper meaning of life' to provide hope that may enable and '...compel us to live more fully...' (ibid, p.10). The narratives contained in this research study reveal an aspect of this mechanism in the overwhelming sense that education can provide people with viable routes into more secure employment; but they also reveal that the myth of meritocracy is not entirely left unquestioned (Reay, 2017; Bloodworth, 2016; Dorling, 2015). If not through access to facts, it is through direct experiences of social discrimination and educational inequalities that can appear to take away as many ladders as adding snakes, to hinder or interrupt this social re-engineering of class positions and racialised relationships.

Both the research findings and the literature show that the poverty of resources competing with the poverty of time have combined to define the circumstances that many students from widening participation backgrounds experience in accessing higher education (Antonucci, 2016).

## **War and the rise of the precariat**

If we extend Docherty's (2015) metaphor of universities at war; then it may be considered after reading these accounts and the discussion of literature that those tutors and students working and learning in the post-1992 universities wage their wars from the trenches. The trenches are used as a training ground for a new social division of foot soldiers: the precariat (Standing, 2016). Is the lower tier in the overall higher education framework in some way implicated in this? Is widening participation raising unrealistic expectations for students that expect to find a good career once they have graduated, only to discover that social mobility has become increasingly downwards in orientation, with fewer opportunities to advance (Eddo-Lodge, 2017; Reay, 2017)? Trends in the UK and in the United States, reveal that it is well known that the rate of upward mobility has stagnated since the late 1960s (Dorling, 2015; Marsh, 2011; Berg, 1973). Education in itself (and its expansion), cannot reasonably be considered as a straightforward expression of merit and worth in relation to where

an individual ends up in terms of their career and earning potential. Standing (2016) suggests:

the precariat has no occupational identity or narrative to give to their lives. This creates existential insecurity, and goes with the fact that for the first time in history many people have education above the level of labour they can expect to obtain.

Savage et al (2015) point out what they consider to be a fundamental shift in class structures and its social architecture. The authors build on Standing's ideas (2016) and describe the emergence of the precariat, a growing group in a situation where many graduates are not ending up working in 'graduate jobs', where their future careers morph and evaporate, in a system governed more predominantly by insecure work on zero-hour contracts and living in rented accommodation, teetering perilously and unable to see a positive or predictable future (Standing, 2016). The formation of this growing social group, it is argued, is in direct contrast to the growth of an elite 1% who have accumulated more of the various forms of capital to secure a safer passage to continued success. The middle classes, according to Savage et al (2015), are now even preoccupied with defining themselves as middle class, to disassociate themselves from the growing precariat class. The fear of reverse social mobility is driving people, not only the 'just about managing' but those who consider themselves as somewhere in the middle in financial terms, where in reality, they are far better off than they admit, in relation to many others experiencing the reduction of opportunities for upward mobility. The works of Dorling (2015), Pickett and Wilkinson (2010) and Jones (2012; 2014) confirm the impact of growing social inequalities on social groups and the most recent report from the Social Mobility Commission (2021) suggests that the opportunities for social mobility are even worse post-pandemic. This government website highlights a number of issues in relation to which social groups face the greatest level of exclusion through poverty. It is suggested that class is not the demarking factor, but whether a child is eligible for free school meals. This group are underrepresented in the higher education factor (Social Mobility Commission, 2021).

If education up to degree level cannot grant access to upward mobility for all of those awarded this level of academic achievement, then what can the process of learning

end up providing? Christie, Cree, Mullins and Tett (2017) explored some of the less explicitly financial related gains for 'non-traditional' students. They highlighted how participants learning from their degrees had triggered a slow-burning fuse, in the sense that qualification had been followed by promotions and opportunities to access higher professional qualifications and personal development. Not all the study respondents considered themselves to have benefitted and appear to feel trapped in the sense of feeling overqualified and under-employed. Many of these participants also pointed out that their vocational and people-centred degrees, while useful, could not remove the relatively low-paid or professionally under-valued wages of the sectors they chose to work in. The authors reported a very high rate of positive responses to how committed those that were interviewed felt about their ongoing and active commitment to learning as a general and useful principle to help them navigate their lives and careers. Many continued to establish the habit of reading, seeing this as both encouraging them to approach issues critically and through careful reflection. One of the respondents (ibid, 2017) said that university encouraged her to question everything, that the 'learning bug' had triggered a constant process of analysis that she used in an attempt to more fully understand the world. Many of the respondents discussed how their study had impacted on their children's interest in learning and attending university, seeing it more as an expected route after school. This particular group of 'non-traditional' students all attended a Russell Group university, one that would usually be associated with providing a greater degree of access to higher salaried professions (ibid, 2017). So, while Hassan (one of this research's participants), was happy with his own university choice, he was very clear that if he could support his children to achieve top grades, he would prefer them to go to one of the bigger universities due to the social networking opportunities: "... because most of the big universities, you see rich people, money children going there". Hassan would be less happy to read that Christie et al (2017) argue that the trajectories of their sample confirm that already established social inequalities outweigh the perceived advantages of a prestigious university branding. Rubbing shoulders with 'better connected' students does not simply open up the hidden 'class doors' of entry to a new class or a different world (Hanley, 2016). Though of course there is always a chance that it might, as there will always be outliers to prove exceptions to the rule.

## The limits of ethnography

Advocates of critical ethnography and others who argue for a closer relationship between ethnographic research and practice often make strong claims for the potential practical contribution of ethnography... and I suggest that the contribution of any research to practice is rather small... and that the relevance of ethnography to practice is most likely to be general and indirect, rather than providing solutions to immediate practical problems. (Hamersley, 1992, loc. 199 - 204).

Many ethnographers (Van Maanen, 2011; Wolcott, 2001; Hamersley, 1992; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983) are very wary of directly claiming that ethnography can, could or should be used to directly inform practice. They question it being used by practitioners who have not undergone the full fieldwork training, or for them to make use of ethnographic research tools to carry out insider or practitioner-based studies. In some ways this runs through the development, implementation and analysis of this research project. How can the researcher that is embedded, act as a fresh pair of outsider eyes? How can a practitioner maintain an independent presence to make the unfamiliar not seem strange or successfully make the familiar strange? Wolcott (2001) explained that it took twenty-five years to complete the conclusion of their doctoral study. The point being that for many ethnographic studies hard and fast conclusions are notoriously difficult to arrive at. In addition, doing so may involve the insertion of a hidden personal agenda of the researcher or funder or it may be driven by an intention to promote or validate a particular theoretical approach.

My understanding is that while it appears appropriate not to force conclusions that do not emerge from the data, the act of facilitating the voices of participants, to hear their perspectives and directly highlight how specifically people formulate their ideas around themes can be used to inform teaching and learning. This is the start of a listening process, not the end result of an experiment that can be summarised and analysed to see if the hypothesis is proved significant or discounted as null. An apparently under looked aspect of ethnography may well be its power to stimulate



further discussion, rather than to provide conclusions. Clearly this is not possible to fully anticipate. However, one of the clear advantages of the research focus in this case is that it relates to both the practice element of tutors in how they begin to build up clearer indicators of need within in their student groups, but more significantly, how they can draw on lived experiences to stimulate engagement in areas of academic knowledge. As Noreen said, it took her years to understand how to work with her students and her contribution to the discussion of how we are to encourage reading and more specifically respond to needs she has become aware of, raises areas for ongoing discussion and collaborative research. All the interviews contribute something towards this.

Small scale qualitative research is limited in many ways, in terms of how findings and analysis can inform wider practice and institutional change. How individual standpoints and perspectives fit with the population as a whole is a puzzle in itself, how the research findings can influence organisational change is another. Part of the 'silent ethnography' that ran in conjunction with the formally approved ethical approach was considering working and learning more generally within a post-1992 university. The day to day, semester and whole year routines. The pressures that are placed on academics from high teaching loads and recruitment anxieties and for many tutors, do not arise from the pressures of developing original research and producing publications for journal articles. The academic footprints are very different between research and teaching-led institutions (Collini, 2017). How a tutor in a teaching facing role transitions from the classroom role to developing research is not an insignificant question to raise. On reflection, during this doctoral study, the importance of remission from teaching duties was not fully addressed. The reasoning for this was that additional study was seen an area of individual gain (acquisitive individualism) rather than a direct benefit for the institution. This approach presents a number of issues and dilemmas, not just for academics, but also for universities themselves. In placing the value of professional development into personal responsibility, integrated organisational learning could be reduced. It loses connection with a collective sense of learning, as can completing a solitary piece of research. Ownership of the endeavour can be misplaced, not least as the material produced becomes detached from the collective actions of academia. While I may personally benefit from the qualification, the opportunity to embed the research

within the organisation and involve others in how the themes build momentum and interest within a more collective framework of learning could be lost. When Wendy said that the university was 'missing a trick' it was in part a call for the university to build on a specific area of expertise. The fact that the university recruits significantly around widening participation and includes a statistically significant proportion of students who meet some aspect of the broad parameters encompassed by the term 'non-traditional', suggests that the institution is very well placed to develop expertise in supporting students from diverse educational and cultural backgrounds. There would be nothing preventing the university from capitalising on this situation through developing active and ongoing research with this target group around a whole range of areas that could better support particular learning needs. Rather than seeing the student as presenting problems (not reading enough, for example, or not managing expected workloads) students and tutors could develop better understanding of how to more effectively address these challenges.

## **Integrating lived and taught experiences**

In asking permission to use a formative assessment, the student auto-ethnography of their home cultures, it was discovered through explaining the research information that the majority of the students had never heard of the term, 'non-traditional'. But, as John rightly pointed out, the majority of tutors used the term very freely and on a regular basis. This research approach presented an opportunity for students to consider how their lives and experiences fitted in with discussion of other groups and theories around inclusivity and participation. Additionally, it embedded active research into the teaching schedule and did not rely on grant funding to enable buy-out of teaching. It would not be too much of a stretch to imagine ways that discrete research could be embedded within a large number of modules and classroom learning. However, completing research does demand the allocation of time, otherwise it can become an overbearing burden to fit into busy teaching schedules. It would not be impossible for universities to look more inwards and work alongside students to address issues that they and universities face. The range of professional experience, disciplinary knowledge and expertise within an average higher education institution could access the wealth of lived experience knowledge that such a diverse

range of students 'bring to the table'. This could also reduce the impact of students being viewed as empty vessels, that tutors at times struggle to fill. Each glass is half full and provides one aspect to fitting together the jigsaw of learning. It would also increase engagement of students in the very business of teaching and learning and provide them with a sense of belonging, as the university would be directly involving them in the resolution of issues that could promote their learning. Collaborative learning could reduce the 'othering' effects between student and academic, lived experience and learned knowledge. This would require an undertaking by universities to allocate time and resources to enable such an embedded approach to active research. It would begin to explore areas in more detail, such as what blocks students have to reading and what would be the kinds of teaching and group work that could better motivate study. The impact of class and 'race' on learning is another area, as is the impact of discrimination within institutions that would both benefit those that have not lived these experiences directly, but could also begin to address aspects of social justice. Being part of change initiatives could provide people with a clearer sense of belonging and challenge attitudes that may suggest or make people feel that they had not properly arrived. Such initiatives could reduce the psychologically damaging effect of people being made to feel out of place.

## **Books to beat students with**

Before we use books to beat students with, universities may need to explore in more detail how some students struggle with reading and what might help to support motivation to read and feel confident to independently explore their subjects. If a large number are unable to study due to time constraints through having to work their way through study, then the sector might not have fully acknowledged this in relation to the reading expectations. Capitalising on recruiting students to full-time courses may not be a sustainable situation. This may mean considering a wider range of options for completion over time or could imply more targeted support for establishing reading patterns. Enabling access to materials that are less intimidating or involve learning through different interventions may motivate learners and increase their active engagement.

There are some clear ideas proposed from the interviews; for example developing more accurate student profiles, mentoring and coaching support (through tutorials or built in directly to course modules), or more generalised forms of learning support and development. These ideas could feed into the relationships between students and tutors and enhance areas of active engagement and support, but again, that depends very much on larger institutional changes that have resourcing implications. We have already learnt that many universities have been struggling in relation to developing sufficient revenue to support the additional staffing time that such changes would require. This is clearly not just the result of the significant shift in university funding from government sources to student recruitment. Byrne and Clarke (2020) raise an underlying and historical factor that impacts on both how teaching is viewed and the importance of high-status research. The authors claim that out of 160 universities, around 50 are considered to be producing 'world-class research' (ibid, loc. 443). The importance of teaching excellence is not prioritised within the national debate or in terms of access to additional funding. Byrne and Clarke (2020) make the point that there may be a link between excellent teaching practice and the presence of tutors who are research active in their fields. Smaller, poorer institutions are stuck somewhere in the middle, as they cannot resource either activity fully. The authors suggest that currently there is "little recognition and esteem for the outstanding university educator" (ibid, loc. 477). Clearly the authors' view is centred here on individuals, rather than a more collective approach to promoting this area of academic practice.

## **Making history**

Hammersley (1992) explores the nature of ethnography and how cultural accounts can soon become effective and detailed historical documents. One of the outcomes of this research was that in looking at the tutors' journeys, we could see direct parallels with the student narratives. However, there is one very particular and significant difference. The tutors were able to access grant funding, that reduced their financial burden and enhanced the potential for them to more specifically 'live in books' (Back, 2016) and spend more time immersed in their studies full-time. The student group had accessed their programs just after the introduction of student

loans, so were paying less than half the amount now levied within the sector. It is clear now, having completed the research, the extent of the rapid change in Higher Education and challenges that widening participation has in relation to resourcing teaching, research activities and the additional support needs of students entering from such a diverse range of cultural backgrounds and previous educational experiences.

## **On research aims, customers and take-away products**

To remind the reader, the research aims stated earlier in this thesis were to explore the term 'non-traditional' in relation to students, and to engage both students and tutors who identified with characteristics associated with this formal definition. In addition, the chosen methodological approach (interviewing the two separate participant groups with an emphasis on exploration of learning journeys and a focus on the idea of interrogating whether a group culture could be said to exist) provided a framework to explore the term. The monographs themselves cast serious doubt on the general application of the term as a specific cultural group. While the intention had been to open up more specific dialogue between students and tutors, the two separate narrative accounts more specifically lay a foundation for future dialogue.

As the research unfolded, not all the explicitly stated aims came to fruition and at points through the study the emphasis of an ethnographic lens became blurred and to a greater degree became submerged in what became a more predominantly qualitative use of interviews to explore learning journeys, not least due to the emergence of polyphonous identities and diverse voices. As Thomas (2011) asserts, in some senses all research can be boiled down to a case study or set of studies. The stated aim of the research providing a rationale for universities to engage students and tutors in participatory learning and to support universities to better understand cultural diversity (as opposed to cultural conformity) and promote social justice more specifically, remain aspirational products of the findings.

The contextualisation of lived experience within subsequent taught learning remains suspended between the student and tutor relationship bound within the more

generalised apparatus associated with higher education teaching and learning. How this unfolds may well be linked to the further morphing of student identity that is tied up with the growing association of students as customers (Back, 2016). In this construct, institutions and tutors can be seen as the traders of commodities in the transactional acquisition of value. If anything, this represents an even broader homogenisation of the student identity, than the term 'non-traditional'.

So, we turn full circle and return to the ambiguity of broad terms used as identifying labels. If we use the market as the metaphor, then the essential take-away points of this thesis are in fact two products: the two monographs. Both highlight the problematic nature of labels and externally applied definitions of homogeneously categorised identity. Labels are embedded in the marketing of products; through their logos, their barcodes, the numbers sold and their perceived worth. They single out products and consumers, so as an active metaphor, the use of customer as a descriptor may contribute to a continued ambiguity that has enshrined the term 'non-traditional'. The etymology of the term stigma and its origins in ancient Greek manuscripts is associated directly with the indelible marking of words with ink into the skin of slaves, thieves and other indentured classes (Tyler, 2020). This process of marking to denote property and making shame visible, continued to be used through physical use of branding irons (Tyler, 2020). The semantic shifts in the meaning and use of branding through history has rendered the term polysemous. In marketing, branding provides the distinctive element of a product and indicates how it sets an offer apart from its competitors through symbolising desirability and value. Applied to higher education qualifications, it would still appear that the institutional branding and the rise of students as customers does little to address how they may be compared in their worth either during their studies or as future employees.

## **Final thoughts**

The literature review highlighted a key theme around social mobility. One where talented students from working class and minority ethnic backgrounds are not always successful at gaining access to high status and elite higher education institutions (Reay et al, 2005; Reay, 2017). The higher education landscape can be described

as a two-tiered monolith, where academics are seen as actively making the situation worse by not pushing up their professional expectations and fully challenging student development. The post-1992 universities represent a labyrinth of lost opportunity and poor development of academic habitus. To use a metaphor for this divided sector, it's like a library; but one that has multiple access points that lead to a different set and range of learning resources and a different range of services. An environment where different groups could push their noses to plate-windows and wonder what worlds of knowledge unfold in each of the stratified areas of learning. A world in which there are personal consequences for those that may be able to upgrade their library card to access the different resources, to mix with the other students and presumably respective scholars found reading quietly, working on their research and nurturing their love of knowledge in an endless search for truth. In some sections the junior scholars may even be preparing a lesson. In some sections there will no doubt be students asleep, talking, using their phones, eating food and maybe even dog-eared pages in books to locate points of interest. Some areas might have children and relatives who could not be left at home alone. There would be students all through the different areas that may be trying to settle down to some study but keep wondering whether they belong. Like Goffman's (1963) 'hood' looking over their shoulder before entering the library, to see if anybody that might know them might witness their cultural transgression. Reading is certainly a complex social process, as we see by the way that this activity presents itself in so many different ways through both the student and the tutor narratives. Its nature renders people to seem invisible, hidden in a private world of learning. At other times it renders the person more visible; as it can help the reader to locate themselves through critically informed understanding of their identity and positionality within the broader social architecture.

The questions raised about the deficit in reading within student cohorts more generally need to be carefully considered and more fully explored. The clear evidence that appears to separate the 'non-traditional' from the 'traditional' is whether they have to work their way through their university studies (Antonucci, 2016; Gilardi and Guglielmetti, 2011). Munro (2011) suggests that students in Australia are as likely to be found dashing off to work, as they are inside the library surrounded by books. The tutors were very much aware of this as one of the major

restrictions that their students faced, but still passionately argued that more was needed to encourage active reading. For many students (the majority spoken to in this research) their vocational work-based learning and part-time program took into account that they worked often full-time, too.

From a tutor's perspective, reading is a basic requirement of academic practice and therefore a central activity associated with student learning and activity. Many students have expressed to me through years of practice the reluctance they have in relation to reading and the fact that they do not enjoy it. This raises a number of questions in relation to diagnostic support for dyslexia, exploring student relationships to reading more specifically, talking to students about what motivates them to read, how this can be triggered, what they find difficult about academic texts, how teaching and learning can promote interest in areas of reading, what kinds of learning activities might be used to kindle a learning enthusiasm to encourage more reading to be embedded in their challenging schedules of work and other responsibilities.

But, if students are continuing to struggle to fully engage with their reading, we must as educators ask ourselves some questions. How are we contributing to this? Are we expecting people to do things they are not yet ready for? How do students themselves feel about reading and how their interests or issues could be more effectively supported? Beating them into submission with books could exacerbate the problem and be seen as another label, like 'non-traditional' to highlight deficiency of character or status. The point of transformative learning (Freire, 1972) is to start where people are, not to make assumptions about what they can or cannot achieve. This process of listening to the student's story starts the process of co-production and learning. The two monographs could be used to start some of this dialogue, to begin to explore how each student understands or engages with reading, how teaching could accommodate group discussions that connect the learners with areas of learning and iteratively develop motivation and independent learning.

Reading is in many ways the act of listening, of attempting to understand exactly what an author of a book is trying to say. Universities could better 'read' their students and spend more time exploring what they have to say; especially around



topics that have such wide implications for motivating independent learning to support in how they might be able to 'read' the world. To locate themselves, to make what may have been invisible, visible. It is easy for academics to overlook other avenues of learning that are related more to lived experiences, rather than taught knowledge.

As tutors, are we to fashion ourselves around one form of academic ideal or do we fashion ourselves in a way that creates opportunities for students to complete their personal transformations? Are we offering an idea of self for them to be measured against or are we offering opportunities for them to emerge from their studies the kind of person that they construct? Is learning plastic and flexible, ready to undergo change, to move between states and to perform the mercurial task of alchemy – can it make a base material turn to gold? Reading Collini (2017) and Docherty (2015) on the neo-liberalist threat to independent academic integrity and following them through their portrayals of academia, I realised the precipice between the tiers of higher education and the extent to which academics lived and replicated themselves within very different worlds. These worlds require a different set of skills and navigational skills; as the tutors interviewed illustrated, a compass keenly set to face social justice. No more constant checking of ID cards for students who do not look like they should be there, no more assumptions to do with gender, 'race', ethnicity, class or ability. The student and tutor monographs interrogate the term 'non-traditional' to the point of collapse as a construct to include the range of people it broadly refers to. They illustrate how diverse student and tutors can be in both what shapes their lives; what baggage they might arrive to university holding. Is it right to call this baggage? Experiences might be a far more positive way to begin, should we wish to explore the needs of students and how we can better actively support engagement in learning.

To understand the needs of learners we need to appreciate their learning journeys and lived social experiences, how much they work, whether they have dependents, have secure housing, or any other kind of specific need that may or may not have already been addressed. It is not clear whether universities have fully taken account of this kind of individualised profiling, or how this might work to support rather than label the student. This research makes a significant contribution to this area of work,

by using the voice of the students and tutors in detail, rather than using snippets, which may have then been interpreted to fit particular perspectives.

Improved understanding of the lived experiences of students (and tutors) can better inform practitioners about the needs particular and specific groups of students may have or the stressors that react with developing their student identities or their orientation towards developing efficacy and confidence. Of considerable concern for universities is to ensure that they are able to respond positively to student and staff well-being. This research revealed incidents and scenarios of participants directly experiencing many of the social issues raised within taught learning. The stigma attached to mental health or the negative impact of social discrimination indicates a clear need for additional support, training and resources. Universities need to consider how better to engage more directly with these sensitive issues and foster more compassionate and user-friendly policies to support welfare and to promote anti-discriminatory practices. In addition to learning about specific student need those engaged in teaching can also use the opportunity to consider co-learning. This may well reverse aspects of established roles and relationships. The focus of this shift in dynamics promotes listening and shifts some emphasis from the transfer of specialist knowledge to mutual exploration of an issue from what it feels like to actually experience discrimination or social inequalities. This is particularly appropriate for working in practice within people-centred occupations, but this approach is also applicable for developing a wider sense of 'knowledge equity'. That is currently promoted within some academic research disciplines, specifically the work initiated by Sandhu (2017) through the Lived Experience organisation that promotes experts and people with knowledge from lived experience to work collaboratively to enhance the positive impact of social change, policy and innovation. When the author discusses social change initiatives and developing progressive social policies to resolve negative impact this relates clearly to many issues that form around the concept of social justice. The model of interaction is one that has a 'bottom up' approach, but that sets to influence change from the 'top down' too, so that lasting change may begin to influence institutional change through the participation of what could be called multiple stakeholders, in key decision-making. Those sharing their experiences are not seen as 'research informants' but are engaged as equal partners in an ongoing dialogue of development. The inclusion

of multiple voices and perspectives would better inform those with no lived experience of an issue and enable initiatives that resonate more specifically with consideration of how issues impact people living through the social issues or problems being discussed. This strikes many chords with the work of community development in practice, but links directly to the aims of this research. The monographs provide an opportunity for readers to listen and then to consider how the narratives inform a more detailed and nuanced understanding of where a student is and how they arrive at university.

Spending time just talking to students and finding out about their lives opened up so many aspects of their journeys that would remain otherwise glimpsed at or hidden. Developing classroom discussions around culture and ethnographic inquiry encouraged significant sharing and learning between students, peer to peer. Many of the student narratives emphasised how important this had been and how it had fundamentally altered aspects of how they understood and engaged with different cultural practices. For the university, the ideas discussed around enhanced learning modules, with integrated mentoring and coaching, academic development support and reading diagnoses are areas for academics to consider.

Post-1992 universities, given their student composition and many of their tutors own lived experiences, are uniquely placed to build expertise around supporting teaching and learning for people who have accessed higher education through diverse routes. Integrating co-learning inquiry into embedded practices could create opportunities to engage students and universities in participatory learning and optimise shared exploration; enabling movement from 'them', the 'other', to 'us'. The monographs themselves provide a rich source of data which demonstrates this process, and the research demonstrates its importance as a result.

If a degree program is not simply instrumental in guaranteeing a better job, it could be instrumental in supporting students and universities to understand how learning can celebrate diversity and promote social justice. Integrating lived experience and taught learning may be an effective way to start.

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## **9. Appendices**

### **Appendix 1: Letter confirming ethical approval for the research**

Content removed on data protection grounds

## Appendix 2: Student and Tutor Research Information Sheets

### Student Research Information Sheet

#### **Background information to the study – exploring ‘non-traditional’ student identities...**

Our university population has a positive and vibrant range of students when it comes to cultural diversity. A relatively high number of students enrol from what is termed a ‘non-traditional’ background in relation to accessing higher education.

The term ‘non-traditional’ refers to any students that identify themselves as being:

- A mature student,
- From lower-socioeconomic backgrounds,
- Someone living with a disability,
- A part-time learner, work-based or vocational learner,
- A care leaver,
- Part of a minority ethnic group, and,
- A first-generation student (being the first in a family to attend university).

These groups of people have been encouraged to access higher education through widening participation policies supported by the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE).

The university’s vocational facing orientation has meant that a significant number of its tutors are also drawn from ‘non-traditional’ learning routes, as many have arrived through their professional practices, rather than from more advanced university qualification.

The importance of developing positive communication between tutors and students from ‘non-traditional’ higher education backgrounds has been highlighted as a key area to improve student experience and course retention (completion of studies). Research also highlights that some students may struggle with certain aspects of student identity.

*If you are interested in exploring how you feel about any of these issues, then please read on!*

#### **What is involved?**

Participants will be asked to take part in an interview that will last about one hour. The interview questions will explore people’s educational routes into university and how the term ‘non-traditional’ student is understood.

Some students will be asked for permission to use their formative assignment narratives exploring their cultural backgrounds as additional supporting data for the broader research study.

### **“What’s in it for me?”**

By working and learning together, students and tutors can open up new and positive opportunities to support and enhance teaching and learning experiences within the university.

By engaging in this research participants would be contributing to processes that will constructively raise the student voice within the university setting.

Participating directly in a research project can encourage the development of transferable academic skills useful to many different subject areas.

### **What if I find that it is not for me or I find the responsibility too much to manage?**

Students will be offered debriefing at the end of their interviews and, if necessary, will be able to access any additional services, such as counselling, should any of the discussion trigger any personal or emotional discomfort.

Participants are free to withdraw from the project at any time – without having to provide a reason. Participants can request that any data relating to their input is also removed from the study prior to analysis.

### **What might happen to the materials that come out of the research process?**

In line with ethical good practice, the protection, welfare and well-being of participants are all of paramount importance. So, for example, all materials will be anonymised, issues raised will be confidential (unless of course they raise any serious issues in terms of safeguarding or harm to self and or others).

All data will be stored securely and will not contain any information that could be used to identify participants directly. Consent forms will be fully explained before anyone signs up to engage in any of the research.

As this research is forming part of a doctoral study in education the findings will be presented outside of the research group. It is highly likely that the research findings will be used to develop articles for circulation in academic journals and within educational forums and research networks.

There is no external funding supporting this research.

### **So, what next?**

If you are interested in getting involved, then please contact Harry Nicholson...

**Many thanks for your interest and time**

## Further information and university contact details:

Should you wish to verify the nature of this project, its support from within the university or any other point of information please feel free to contact...

.....

**About the researcher:** Before Harry Nicholson was a university tutor, he spent about twenty years as a professional youth and community development worker. During this time, he specialised in developing arts and issue-based group work and peer education projects - including the development of user-friendly resources with a diverse range of community groups around a range of health, well-being and social issues.

.....

For more information concerning widening participation and the definition of a 'non-traditional' student please go to: The Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE) [online]. Available from: <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/data/>

- Background research references:

Testaa, D. and Egan, R. (2013) Finding voice: the higher education experiences of students from diverse backgrounds. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 2014. Vol. 19, No. 3, 229–241

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## Tutor Research Information Sheet

**'Non-traditional' student identity: developing a collaborative framework to explore attitudes within a new university teaching and learning context.**

### Background information

The university population has a positive and vibrant range when it comes to cultural diversity. A relatively high number of students enrol from what is termed a 'non-traditional' background in relation to accessing higher education. The term 'non-traditional' refers to any student who has one or more of the following characteristics: being a mature student, from a lower-socioeconomic background (or low

represented area), having a disability, are part-time learners or work-based and vocational learners, care leavers, people from an ethnic minority and first-generation students (being the first of a family to attend university).

The university's vocational facing orientation has meant that a significant number of the tutors are also drawn from 'non-traditional' learning routes, as a priority in work-based learning is to employ lecturers with first-hand experience in practice.

Research suggests that a high frequency rate of students from this widening participation category can struggle to fit into identity roles that are associated with wider academic and institutional norms (Testaa, and Egan, 2013; Scudamore, 2013; Moore et al, 2013). The importance of developing positive communication and relationships between tutors and students from 'non-traditional' higher education backgrounds is highlighted by research as a key area to improve both student experience and course retention.

*If you are interested in any of these issues and want to get involved in research aiming to collaboratively improve teaching and learning experiences, read on!*

### **What is involved?**

Participants will commit to one interview that will last about one hour.

### **“What’s in it for me?”**

Taking part in this would be an opportunity to explore and re-appraise the key issue of shifting professional and educational identities. Collaborative inquiry between students and lecturers can open up new and positive opportunities to better nurture effective relationships and improve teaching and learning experiences.

### **What if I find that it is not for me or I find the responsibility too much to manage?**

In line with ethical good practice the welfare and well-being of participants is of paramount importance. So, for example, all materials developed through the process will be anonymised, issues raised will be confidential (unless of course they raise any serious issues in terms of safeguarding or harm to self and or others). Tutors will be offered debriefing at the end of the interview and, if necessary, will be able to access additional services, such as counselling, should any of the research process trigger any personal or emotional discomfort.

It is absolutely important for all participants to realise that they would be free to withdraw from the project at any time – without any prejudice and without having to provide a reason. Tutors would also be able to request that any data relating to their input is also removed from the study.

All data will be archived securely and will not contain any information that could be used to identify the source of this data.

### **What might happen to the materials that come out of the research process?**

As this research is forming part of a doctoral study it must be recognised that the findings will be presented outside of the research group. This will be discussed in full, should you be interested in becoming a participant. It is highly likely that the research findings will be used to develop articles for circulation in academic journals and within educational forums and research networks.

Currently there is no external funding or sponsorship for this research project and any changes to this situation will be made clear to all participants.

**So, what next?**

If you are interested in finding out how to become a participant in this research initiative, then please contact Harry Nicholson...

**Many thanks for your consideration**

**Should you wish to verify the nature of this project, its support from within the university or any other point of information please feel free to contact...**

.....

**About the researcher:** Before Harry Nicholson was a university tutor, he spent a twenty-years as a professional youth and community development worker. During this time, he specialised in developing arts and issue-based group work and peer education projects - including the development of user-friendly resources with a diverse range of community groups around a range of health, well-being and social issues.

## Appendix 3: Research location profile

For over one hundred years the site of this research has been associated with education and learning. For the majority of that time it has specialised in technical and vocational skill-based training. It was well placed during different periods to supply niche skills for local employment and later branched out, offering practice-focussed and professional qualifications. It was not until the early 2000s that the college gained full university status.

The university is still vocational and business-facing in its orientation and though it offers a fairly wide range of programmes, fewer fall into the traditional academic stand-alone subject areas, such as maths, literature, geography or specific science disciplines.

Currently, the university offers a range of courses that includes the following: performing arts, game art, animation, music and music management, photography, sound design, kitchen design, interior and spatial design, accounting, business with human resources, airline and airport management, aviation management for professionals, commercial pilot training, air transport with helicopter training, law and business law, sports therapy, sports coaching, football development, strength conditioning, sport marketing, early years and primary education, education studies, fashion and textiles, illustration, product design, fine art, dance, nursing (including a wide range of specialist areas of practice), community and public health, social work, police studies, building and construction, computer science, software engineering, health and social care, psychology, counselling psychology, criminology, positive psychology, acting, hair and make-up for film and performance, event, festival and venue management, international tourism, politics and international relations, film and TV production and costume design.

The university is located in the South East of England. While there are a number of separate campuses located in different towns, the overall student population is not considered large in comparison to more established universities. It fits within the

smaller medium-sized higher education institution bracket. In addition, the university validates programmes across a number of partner higher education colleges.

In relation to the various higher education league tables that rank individual organisations, exact positioning of the university is fluid and recent trends suggest clear upward mobility from the lower ranks. It is also keen to gradually raise its comparatively low tariff of entry.

The buildings are both dated and modern and plans are afoot for major capital development of the main campus, to upgrade some of the more dated areas and to boost student satisfaction and enhance the learning environment ambience.

### **Student population profile**

The total student population is in the region of 10,000 (including partner organisations). There are approximately 10% more female students than males. The numbers enrolled on part time undergraduate courses is dominated by women (who account for nearly four times the numbers of males) and they make up significantly greater numbers within the partner colleges. 55% of the students are aged between 16 and 25 years old. For full-time undergraduate courses this rises to 70%. There are seven times the number of undergraduates to postgraduate students. At least one in ten students have been identified as having a disability and just over half of these have a specific learning need (dyslexia, dyspraxia or ADHD) and a quarter have a physical or mental health condition.

The university is proud of its role in widening participation and has developed specific pledges and initiatives to encourage greater participation from typically under-represented groups (including Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities and people leaving the armed services). The majority of students are the first generation in their family to access higher education. In other words, they are less likely have a parent with higher education experience than the sector average. This indicates that a higher proportion of students at the university come from homes and



neighbourhoods that can be defined as experiencing higher levels of social deprivation and lower household incomes than the sector average.

Just over 40% of the student population self-identify as Black, Asian or minority ethnic (BAME) which is above 10% of the sector average. This figure rises in the partner colleges. The BAME/White attainment gap is smaller compared to the wider higher education sector average. The university have set targets to continue to reduce the gap; in particular for mature black students on part-time courses (where the gap is more significant) and black male students. There is a clear difference in overall attainment for students studying on full-time undergraduate courses, that come from lower socio-economic backgrounds compared to the national data. The number of mature students engaged in learning programmes is nearly twice the sector average.

A significant number of students living at home access the university, enabling them to reduce their living costs. In fact, 70% of the intake live within a 25 mile radius of their campus and many take up local employment opportunities after completion of their studies. The rates of students accessing highly skilled employment is lower than the sector average, but employment rates more generally and movement onto postgraduate qualifications are buoyant.

There have always been departments and courses that have punched above their weight, in that they figure in national top-ten satisfaction rankings. It would be realistic to say that in relation to being research-led, the institution has a relatively modest academic footprint. Many tutors feel that they do not have the time to carry out research and others do not see it as their primary role as academics. Research-led academics do work for the university, but they are more of an exception than a rule. Many of the tutors are employed primarily for their practice and business experience. Teaching standards have been judged to sit in the middle of the national measure of standards of Gold, Silver and Bronze. Like many other higher education institutions, this one underwent various redundancy rounds which has impacted on teaching, programme administration and wider services and support staff. For tutors, maintaining teaching hours close to the maximum contracted is an expectation and recruitment to programmes an ever increasing part of the academic role. Having said

that, there are many tutors that have worked within the university for a number of years.

The student profile is culturally diverse and a high proportion of the students would be formally classified as 'non-traditional' or from a widening participation background. Some cohorts include a relatively high number of students that speak English as an additional language. The institution does not currently have a high tariff access policy and a fair number of students could be described as arriving with a range of academic support needs. Previously the university ran a wider range of work-based, part-time courses that attracted a lot of mature students; they have more recently re-structured their programmes to target secondary school leavers for three year Honours degrees. This has reduced the numbers of students from this pathway, though work-based programmes still continue.

### **Informal student feedback**

The reviews of the university found on social media sites are mixed. A polarised response; with some students professing their love for the institution, their tutor's enthusiasm and support and a fondness for their memories of a vibrant social life. Other perspectives were the opposite, highlighting poor organisation, disinterested teaching and student cliques in a cramped urban campus. However, this appears to be a pattern associated with informal student feedback found on social media (regardless of a university's formal ranking). Over the period of this study, I heard many staff refer with pride to the ethos of 'small enough to care,' as an affirmation that the size of the institution itself facilitated the student-centred approach and support for individuals' needs.



## Questions

Could you please describe your educational journey that has led you to being a student at this university?

How would you describe the term 'non-traditional' student?

In what kind of ways does the term directly apply to you?

How do you think that other people may interpret the term 'non-traditional' student?

Has becoming a student influenced in any way your sense of personal identity?

What do you consider the main differences to be when the terms 'non-traditional student' with 'traditional student' are compared against each other?

Additional prompts:

- Do you consider the term 'non-traditional' to be a positive descriptor?
- Would you consider that the term could be seen in terms of negative social labelling?
- Does the term reflect aspects of social status, in relation to the idea of a 'traditional' student?
- How does the university provide support to 'non-traditional' students and their learning?

.....  
**Thank you for your time and finally:**

Would you like to receive a transcript of this interview?

Yes  No

.....  
**• Tutors**

The tutor interviews followed the same format as above but with minor differences to some of the questions. The tutor questions are listed below:

## Questions

Could you just tell me a little about your journey through education and how it led to you working here?

How do you understand the term 'non-traditional' student?

Has this term influenced in any way your own development of an academic identity?

Do you feel that the term represents specific challenges in terms of teaching and learning with this group of students?

As an academic, have you engaged in any subsequent programmes of learning? If so, in what kind of ways did they impact on your identity as a lecturer?

Have your own experiences helped you to understand any specific issues that relate to teaching students from a 'non-traditional' background?

Additional prompts:

- Do you consider the term 'non-traditional' to be a positive descriptor?
- Would you consider that the term could be seen in terms of negative social labelling?
- Does the term reflect aspects of social status, in relation to the idea of a 'traditional' student?
- How does the university provide support to 'non-traditional' students and their learning?