

## **‘I’ve been on a real journey . . . ‘ the experience of mature women students in Higher Education (0112)**

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Designed as a two year Higher Education (HE) qualification Foundation degrees (Fds) were introduced with the dual purpose of providing vocationally based HE and furthering the government’s widening participation agenda (HEFCE, 2000, DfES, 2001; Edmond et al, 2007; Stanton, 2009). Predominantly taught in FE colleges, Fds provide local access to HE, thus addressing structural constraints identified as influencing HE choices (Reay et al 2001; Leach, 2013). Evidence indicates distinct differences between Fd students and those on other forms of HE provision, with a higher percentage of Fd students aged over 21 and engaged in part-time study (Harvey, 2009), suggesting Fds have been successful in drawing hitherto ‘under-represented groups’ into HE (Leach, 2013). In particular Harvey identifies a distinct cluster of females over 25 studying part-time, who were more likely to enter from employment, and less likely to hold academic or vocational qualifications. Thus Fds appear to be reaching ‘a more diverse group of older students’ in accordance with government aims (John Denham, 2008 cited in David et al, 2008, Leach, 2013). Teaching assistants (TAs), the focus of this study, typify this group and provide an ideal sample to explore the impact of HE study on non-traditional students.

Teaching assistants were central to proposals for Workforce Reforms (DfES, 2003:3), with structured training for all support staff following the introduction of national induction training. Fds formed part of this structure, offering TAs the opportunity for professional development whilst raising the status of the role (Dunne et al, 2008). Although difficulties associated with managing study alongside existing work and family responsibilities have been acknowledged (Reay, 2003; Tierney and Slack, 2003), many TAs continue their study to complete an honours degree, with some going on to study for a teaching qualification (Dunne et al, 2008). So it appears that Fds are not just successful at bringing non-traditional students into HE, they also facilitate further HE study.

This study looks at the long term experience of a group of mature women entering part-time HE study from employment, namely teaching assistants who initially completed a specific Fd within a University partnership in the south west of England.

An initial questionnaire was used to obtain general information about the TAs’ employment, level of study and experience and to select individuals for a semi-structured individual interview about their experience of study. This paper concentrates on individuals who went on to complete an honours degree and then a teaching qualification. Their HE study represents a long journey, usually 6 years part-time study to complete the Honours degree then another year for the teaching qualification, negotiating unknown territory for individuals with limited prior academic achievements.

All the respondents viewed the FdA as a means of career development, the next step after working as a TA or HLTA, with the benefit that it could be studied alongside their existing employment. For some the purpose initially was to provide CPD to enhance their practice ‘*to understand aspects of teaching and learning more deeply*’ (Judy), some just wanted the

opportunity to undertake some study: *'it was a personal goal . . . and then I didn't want to do the degree either, or the honours part'* (Donna), whilst others, such as Martha, saw it as a route to gaining a full degree with the ultimate aim of becoming a teacher: *'I used to think, I can do a better job than them [supply teachers]'*.

These students demonstrate the importance of locally accessible, part-time HE study (Reay et al 2001; Leach, 2013), *'I could also do it whilst I was working and bringing up a family . . .'* (Martha), but also the opportunity to return to education after limited academic achievements at school: *'I'd always wanted to get a degree and I think I'd always felt I'd let myself down as a teenager'* (Rosalind). Martha, who *'was always told I was not good enough for anything'*, then went on to gain a First class degree. These women were often the first in their family to gain a degree, though subsequently other family members followed *'it's lovely now, because more and more of my family are going on'* (Rosalind) and they encourage their own children to *'and I said, you can do this, this is what I'm doing'* (Donna). So these women are not just part of widening participation themselves, they are contributing to widening participation.

All the interviewees mentioned the importance of the support they received, both financial and emotional. Some had their degree study paid for by the school, *'the school actually paid for it, they paid for the whole of my degree'*, one received funding as a single parent, *'I wouldn't have done it otherwise . . . having a mortgage and running a home with two kids'*. One, who paid her own fees, commented this was only possible because of the level of the fees – *'they were so low'*. With subsequent policy changes noted by Leach (2013) women in a similar position now might not be afforded such study opportunities. There are also implications for the schools involved. In some cases the TA continued on to undertake a GTP or SCITT placement within the school and subsequently joined the teaching staff, like Donna, who has worked in the same school for fifteen years, as a TA, HLTA and now a teacher, *'they knew I didn't want to leave . . . but they created a job for me'* and Jen who similarly worked in the same school as TA, HLTA and now as class teacher. In other cases there were no opportunities within their 'own' school, so Martha had to take *'a big step into the unknown'*, handing in her notice from the TA job she had held for many years at the school which had funded her study, to undertake a one year PGCE at a local University.

This paper showcases the positive outcomes of HE study for these participants and argues for HE provision which can meet the needs of a diverse student body.

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