

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Placing Habitus at the Hub of Inclusive HE Transitions

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Research Domain: Access and widening participation (AWP)

Abstract:

This paper draws on a research study about the experiences of students who took part in a creative and unique widening participation model based on immersing learners in the university environment whilst still at school. The paper applies a Bourdieusian lens to their subsequent progress to and through university. Findings point to the need to foster learners' cultural and social capital, in addition to their subject knowledge, in order to instil an HE learner identity which confirms aspirations and facilitates a sense of belonging, self-efficacy and a 'feel for the game'. The relationship between Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field is explored in this innovative context. By bringing together the 'fields' of school and university, students from disadvantaged backgrounds can develop 'transitional capital'. Key issues are highlighted including the significance of the development of a transformative HE learner identity which is enabled by an immersive experience of university prior to entry.

Keywords: widening participation; place; habitus; higher education learner identity

Paper:

Policy and context

The goal of widening participation to Higher Education (HE) in Scotland was reflected in the Scottish government's white paper of 2011. This policy sought to address support for progression to Higher Education for pupils from schools in the lowest deprivation quintile of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation. Activity, it argued, should be targeted on those pupils who are at risk of not achieving and those who are achieving but who do not recognise the benefits of progressing to HE. In response to this challenge, in 2013 Glasgow Caledonian University established an Advanced Higher Hub to provide a year-long immersion and transition programme to deliver Advanced Highers which are normally taught in school, in a university setting. School pupils would become familiar with the HE learning environment, which in turn would support their progression to and retention in Higher Education.

This paper applies a Bourdieusian lens to the findings of a research study exploring the transitional experiences of students who progressed to university after taking part in the creative initiative. Bourdieu's key concepts of habitus, capital and field enable us to conceptualise the transitional experiences of learners from disadvantaged backgrounds in this context. The research question examined:

To what extent does the immersion in Higher Education whilst still at school contribute to a learner identity for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds?

Habitus and Higher Education Learner Identity

At the heart of Bourdieu's sociological approach, habitus focuses on our ways of acting, feeling, thinking and being: 'It captures how we carry within us our history, how we bring this history into our present circumstances, and how we make choices to act in certain ways and not others'. (Grenfell, 2008: 51). As such it is an ongoing and active process and is constantly affected by experiences. For Bourdieu, the field is the social context within which an individual operates and it is in the interaction with the field where the habitus is formed. Students can develop a particular habitus from their field of origin (the local field) which may or may not be compatible with the field of HE (James et al, 2015). When an individual enters an unfamiliar field this results in a, 'habitus divided against itself' (Bourdieu, 1999:511).

However, the habitus is not fixed and can be transformed (Navarro, 2006). This takes time and requires an environment which is quite striking and sustained (Burke, 2015). When immersed in new fields, HE students can develop strategies and nuanced understandings of their previous experiences, social background and different learning cultures and contexts to inform the development of their learner identities (James et al, 2015). That is, despite initially experiencing a 'cleft habitus' whereby

their learning identities compete with each other, the habitus can evolve to accommodate a new learner identity as students, 'learn to become learners' (James, 2015:4). In the current study the fields constitute school and university and the place of learning (the Hub) is where the boundaries between the two fields are blurred.

Methodology

In-depth, one-to-one semi-structured interviews were undertaken with a total of 30 university students who had undertaken Advanced Highers as part of the programme whilst still at school. Interviews were transcribed and a 6 phase thematic analysis of the data was undertaken to identify key themes across the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Nineteen female and 11 male students were interviewed. Most interviewees were first year students (14) while 8 were second year students and 5 were third year students. Participants were engaged in a range of different degree programmes at a total of 8 universities U.K. wide. Interview questions sought to examine the experiences of these learners in terms of their transition to Higher Education as to the extent to which studying Advanced Highers at the Hub prepared them for university. Twenty-six of the 30 participants (87%) came from the two lowest quintiles of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (MD40) while 67% came from the lowest quintile (MD20). Twenty-one participants (70% of the sample) were the first generation students.

Findings

A key finding from the study is that the experience of immersion in an HE level academic programme delivered within university whilst still at school fosters a learner identity as HE student. Twenty six participants (87%) reported that the transition from school 'pupil' to university 'student' started at the Hub; that is before they made the transition to university. The experience confirms aspirations and facilitates a sense of belonging, self-efficacy and a 'feel for the game'. Factors contributing to a Higher Education learner identity include being treated as adults, as students, with respect and being allowed more responsibility:

"We could address the teachers using first name terms; you are made to feel welcome; you want to be there and they treat you like adults. You are trusted to study and to complete pieces of work."
(Patrick, Social Science student)

In addition, travelling to and from school or home to university, not having to wear uniform and being issued with a student card were cited by almost all participants as fostering a student identity. Other

factors associated with the development of an HE learner identity included delivery which is more akin to lectures and tutorials; sitting in on lectures; meeting new people; being surrounded by like-minded people; interaction with university facilities and resources and becoming an independent learner.

Discussion

A key message for the sector emerging from literature is the importance of moving beyond pre-entry and the first year experience to embed transition activity within a longitudinal student lifecycle model. This approach should have as its focus student engagement and developing pedagogy and strategy around transitional identity within the mainstream curriculum and broader academic sphere (Wayne et al, 2016). The model developed at the Hub reflects such an approach. What is unique about the immersive model of the Hub is that it aims to blur the school-university boundary. As such the 'field' of Higher Education becomes more accessible to prospective students since they have already acquired the cultural capital of the academy as well as the social capital provided via new friendships and networks. As a result the habitus is transformed with a distinctive Higher Education learner identity emerging. Participants 'feel like students' and feel that they belong in HE. Implications for policy makers are discussed in the context of the current dialogue on widening participation to HE in Scotland.

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