

246 Working class women on Access to HE courses two decades apart - A comparative analysis of risk, opportunity and (re)constructing identities across a 20 year period.

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

Widening participation (WP) in higher education (HE) remains a significant component of UK education and wider social policy landscapes. It aims to create a university system addressing the under-representation of particular social groups. Mature working-class students are one such group, yet they have recently largely disappeared from this agenda. The journey for those entering university via an Access to HE course provides valuable context to the WP agenda. This paper presents a comparative analysis of two narrative studies conducted 20 years apart. It evidences the ongoing value of progressing into HE for mature working-class women taking an Access course. The research makes visible the realities of class-based inequalities, highlighting how they are experienced and continue to shape educational and employment trajectories. The women participants were motivated yet constrained by their classed consciousness. We present practitioner-led enquiry as a valid epistemology which provides important insights into mature students' journeys into university.

Full paper

Introduction

Widening participation (WP) to higher education (HE) remains a significant component of UK education and wider social policy (McCraig, Rainford & Squire, 2022). WP refers to activities and interventions that increase the number of students from under-represented social groups (Jones and Thomas, 2005), including those from less advantaged backgrounds, and mature students (DBIS, 2011). Mature working-class students have recently become largely invisible in this agenda (Fraser & Arman, 2019). This is consistent with the significant decline in the number of mature learners entering HE over the past decade (OFS, 2020), and problematic since if access and participation in HE is to be increased and widened, the barriers facing this group of students need to be understood. The significance of progressing into university via an Access to HE (Access) course provides valuable context to the WP agenda.

Access to HE courses have long made a worthy contribution to the widening participation agenda by providing a pathway for entry into university for non-traditional students (Hubble & Connell-Smith, 2018). Mature working-class women students face specific barriers to success when taking an Access course as their lived experience of class is shaped by gender, and constrained by systemic inequality (Reay, 2003; James et al., 2013).

This paper draws upon two practitioner-led, narrative enquiries, carried out 20 years apart, to consider whether aspects relating to mature female student journeys have changed over that time. It applies the theoretical framework of Pierre Bourdieu to explore issues relating to the (re)construction of class identity and risks and costs involved in embarking on an Access course.

Class and identity (re) construction

Both studies considered here explored the changing classed and gendered identities of the women participants. They had often left caring roles and/or lower status, poorly paid work behind, work that was frequently precarious, particularly for those in the later study. Part of their rationale for returning to education later in life was to enhance

their employment opportunities. In many cases this was expressed as a wish for a more secure 'professional' role, one necessitating further study to achieve the necessary entry qualifications, and which would confer a middle-class status upon them. The tensions and challenges this involved are explored within this presentation.

Other aspects of identity (re)construction include the women's developing learner identities and, in many cases, a change in their family roles and other aspects of gendered identities. As Brine and Waller (2004: 97) noted, this transitional process of adopting new classed and gendered identities is not a simple linear one of shedding old identities and unproblematically adopting new ones, but rather a period of 'of reflexivity and risk, confusion and contradiction'.

Financial risks

A significant difference in the two studies related to the detrimental changes to student funding for both FE - and, particularly, HE courses. The financial risks for the 2022 women further compounded the obstacles they already faced along their journey into university. The FE and HE funding landscape had significantly changed. Access courses were no longer free as they effectively were at the time of the 2002 study. Increases in university tuition fees, the abolition of maintenance grants and NHS bursaries, had placed further financial and psychological burdens upon the women. Access students therefore took on debt even before entering HE, despite not being guaranteed a university place when first embarking on their Access course. Additionally, welfare benefit eligibility rules did not encourage their return to study, potentially accentuating inequalities and injustices.

Despite these extra risks, participants narrated their journeys through neo-liberal discourses placing responsibility upon themselves to improve their lives. This agentic approach placed further pressure upon the women.

Conclusion

This paper presentation evidences the continuing reflexivity and risk, confusion and contradictions experienced by mature students during their Access to HE course. The findings of the 2022 research echo that of the 2001 project and further challenges the assumption that a changing learner identity necessitates a corresponding shifting class identity. Moreover, a classed consciousness was ever more prevalent and restricting. Concerningly, the increased financial risks further compound the students' class positions more recently, especially for those who are parents. This is significant to the WP agenda because it highlights particular barriers for this group of students and suggests that getting into, and engaging with HE, remains challenging and presents specific risks for mature students.

This paper presentation makes a timely contribution to understanding of mature working-class students. Policy commitments to widening participation will remain empty rhetoric without practical strategies to support students who struggle under the significant material constraints faced.

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