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Capital that counts in higher education. (0063)

Long before the release of the Browne Report in 2010, UK higher education had been subject to significant and far-reaching changes. Already expanding admissions (Maringe and Fuller 2006) were given new impetus by the 1997 Dearing Report and the pursuant widening participation agenda which was explicitly underpinned by social justice and economic rationale (DfES 2003a, 2003b). With the emergence of the 'knowledge' or 'information' society, HE was expected to contribute to developing national competitiveness in the global economy and simultaneously facilitate and enhance social cohesion and equality (Naidoo 2000; Osborne 2003).

Despite a significant increase in the proportion of students securing the necessary qualifications to enter and the number actually participating in HE, under-representation of those from less privileged social backgrounds remains an enduring problem (Reay et al. 2005). It has been suggested that students from non-traditional backgrounds have to contend with a variety of significant challenges that can have a marked impact on their performance, retention and experiences (see, for example: Ozga and Sukhnandan 1998; Yorke 2001; Thomas 2002; Leathwood and O'Connell 2003; May and Bousted 2004; Sambell and Hubbard 2004), but growing appreciation of the depth and complexity of the issues has witnessed a movement away the apparent assumption of deficit towards greater recognition of the role played by institutions themselves (Thomas 2002; Leathwood and O'Connell 2003; Sambell and Hubbard 2004; Greenbank 2006). Despite changing student demographics, significant challenges to the dominant culture of HE have been slow to emerge and its long-established traditions and practices continue to be oriented towards its traditional white middle-class student population (Read et al. 2003). The literature offers insight into the constrained choices, the challenges encountered and even the successes achieved by students from non-traditional backgrounds (see, for example: Ball et al. 2002; Archer et al. 2003; Forsyth and Furlong 2003; Crozier et al. 2008; Reay et al. 2009; David et al. 2010). There is, however, less consideration given to how the practices and culture of a particular learning environment directly influence students' experiences as they negotiate the learning requirements of HE.

In a three-year longitudinal case study, a neither unique nor extreme health-related programme in one of the UK's research intensive universities became a vehicle for exploring the educational experiences of students with non-traditional academic backgrounds. Thirteen volunteer participants were drawn from a single cohort as they prepared to commence their studies. Data were collected via initial focus groups exploring pre-entry educational experiences and expectations of studying in HE, reflective diaries recording educational experiences that participants considered significant or meaningful, and one-to-one semi-structured interviews conducted towards the end of participants' first and third years of study which focused on exploring their learning experiences. Background data were collected via participant-completed demographic information forms and family education and employment maps. Supplementary and contextual data were provided by analysing institutional, school and departmental documents to provide insight into the culture and practices of the learning environment.

Distinct arenas of life or social spaces such as HE are described by Bourdieu as 'fields', each with their unique, established and taken-for-granted practices which effectively define the range of possible and acceptable actions and behaviour available to individuals operating within it (Wacquant 1998; Grenfell 2004). Fields therefore have their own particular 'logic of practice' or 'game', the governing principles of which reflect the interests of the most powerful or dominant groups in that field, and entry into a field is dependent upon at least implicit acceptance of the 'rules of the game' (Grenfell 2007). Resource holding symbolic value are described as 'capital' and act as a form of

'currency' in a particular field, denoting the position of an individual within it or, more broadly, within the hierarchy of society (Moore 2008). Common to and underpinning the experiences of each of the study's participants were the concepts of academic, linguistic, social and practice-oriented capital, portfolios of which were held in variable configurations and volumes by each participant. Individual experiences within the field, and participants' ability to develop a feel for the game that they encountered, reflected their portfolios of these identified forms of capital.

This paper will outline the nature and illustrate to role played by these key forms of capital in mediating congruence between individual dispositions and backgrounds and the dominant culture of the field, and therefore the 'affinities, convergences and divergences' (Grenfell 2007 138) participants experienced. Although derived from a specific context, the research findings offer useful insights applicable to the educational programmes of other professional groups and more broadly across HE. The concepts of linguistic, academic and social capital are readily translatable, although individual disciplines and fields will naturally have their own logics of practice which define specific nuances. There are a substantial number of professional and vocationally oriented HE programmes, both within and outside the health-related disciplines, and with an increasing emphasis on graduate employability the relevance of practice-oriented capital across the sector seems only likely to increase (again, in forms determined by the logic of particular fields and the practices of specific disciplines). While rendering the 'game' completely transparent is not achievable, Bourdieu (1990 p.116) highlights the possibility of reducing its opacity. The conceptual model presented potentially provides a tool to guide curriculum development, efforts to facilitate social inclusion and enable non-traditional students, and to enhance student experience across the board.

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