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By chance or by plan? The academic success of non-traditional students in higher education (0147)

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In the UK, a 'good' undergraduate degree is now achieved by 71.5% of all students, made up of first-class and upper second-class honours degree classifications (ECU, 2016). With this high percentage in mind, the need to distinguish oneself from others is ever more important in a crowded graduate market, both nationally and internationally (Tomlinson, 2012). While a range of personal and social factors determines an individual's degree outcome, available data suggest that first-class degree recipients are more likely to be from 'traditional' backgrounds, which is understood as students from white middle-class backgrounds. Students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds, by comparison, are less likely to achieve the highest undergraduate degree outcome. This paper is interested in the educational trajectories of high-achieving non-traditional (HANT) UK university students. We wish to deepen our knowledge of their social and structural opportunities and challenges. By understanding their pathways to academic success, we can focus and potentially amplify the collective experiences which have contributed to their educational achievements for a wider range of students.

Studies on high-achieving university students have predominantly focused on (micro) individual factors and aptitude, but often without recognition of (macro) structural influences and obstacles (HEFCE, 2015). From a sociological perspective, it is paramount to recognise that these dispositions and attributes are shaped and socialised within complex social structures and positioning. In other words, academic success is not totally random, but very much patterned, especially by social class (Abrahams, 2017; Bathmaker et al., 2016). Of course, individual choices, differences and experiences still exist, but our educational trajectories, for example, would broadly reflect and align with people from similar social upbringings and experiences. Here, we focus on Bourdieu's (1977, 1984) concepts of habitus, field and capital as our lens to interpret the educational experiences and pathways of non-traditional university students. As social beings, we develop and mature under specific environments and conditions, which facilitate and shape our comprehensions of and approaches to the world. These understandings, dispositions and preferences constitute our habitus, which is developed over time, constituting our past and present (Reay, 2004).

Higher education research has explored access and participation inequalities across university types and rankings. We do not intend to rehearse the barriers as experienced by non-traditional university students. These are discussed extensively in existing literature. Fewer studies, by comparison, have prioritised the experiences of high-achieving university students, especially from non-traditional backgrounds. In this paper, we explore the dispositions (i.e., habitus) and resources (i.e., capital) that high-achieving non-traditional (HANT) students could access, develop and utilise in the field of UK higher education. If these students are merely an 'exception to the rule' then what, if any, features do these students share and to what extent can these features be amplified or replicated for other, lower-achieving non-traditional students?

This paper reports from an in-depth narrative case study of 30 first-generation high-achieving final-year university students from working-class backgrounds, which include white and minority ethnic women and men, as well as mature students. We are interested in their educational biographies and lived experiences of higher education, from start to present, with a reflective focus on their pathways to academic success. We want to understand what worked for these students and the extent to which their experiences may also work for other (lower-achieving) non-traditional undergraduates. A range of issues was probed including family background and support, secondary school experience, detailed accounts of each academic year at university, preparation and support for assessment, and general reflections on their university experiences and aspirations.

Our analyses suggest that the academic success of our HANT students is underpinned by a mixture of plan and chance. Our HANT students may constitute the 'exceptions of the few' in a

socially reproductive educational system (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). In this study, we identified three agents of change that may have disrupted the cycle of social reproduction. These include 1) supplementary knowledge and support in academic skills, 2) a personal desire to prove oneself and 3) the influence of significant others; which formed as key dispositions and capital for our HANT students. However, these did not emerge systematically (e.g., due to their particular social backgrounds) but appear to have evolved through various unintended experiences or events which supported non-traditional students to be high achievers. Participants' pathways to academic success appear more diverse and unpredictable than traditional students, although the commonalities shared by HANT students can offer us empirical evidence on what worked for them and an opportunity for educators and policymakers to attest potential new initiatives to support high attainment.

As an example, our findings lead us to call on higher education policymakers and practitioners to consider an extended or prolonged provision of academic study skills for undergraduates, beyond the induction/initial period and perhaps even throughout the degree, because access to and a mastery of academic skills was found to be a key agent of change. On the whole, our data suggest that the emergence HANT students is grounded on a fortunate stroke of serendipity. Whilst we appreciate the mysterious ways that luck can open or close opportunities, our HANT students appear to have taken full advantage of their available opportunities to improve their odds of success. It is important to recognise that opportunities, when presented by chance or by plan, can also be misrecognised and missed, just as available educational capital or resources can be under-utilised or neglected. From this perspective, non-traditional students, in particular, will benefit from an awareness of the importance to convert their available opportunities into additional educational resources, which are often scarce and opportunistic. Universities and staff must play an active role to manufacture opportunities for academic development and ensure that students fully utilise their available support.