Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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'Swallow your pride and fear': The Educational Strategies of High-Achieving Non-Traditional University Students

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Research Domain: Access and widening participation (AWP)

Abstract: With more graduates, degree outcomes have a renewed significance for high-achieving students to stand out in a graduate crowd. In the UK, over a quarter of undergraduates now leave university with the highest grade – a 'first-class' degree – although students from non-traditional and underprivileged backgrounds are the least likely. This paper explores the experiences of high-achieving non-traditional (HANT) university students. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 30 final-year students who are on course to achieve a first-class degree from working-class, minority ethnic and/or mature backgrounds, we examine their pathways to academic success through identity works and negotiations. We argue that early successes are crucial for students to re-evaluate their self-expectations as students who can achieve in higher education, while self-esteem, pride or fear can prevent students from maximising their available resources and opportunities. Implications for practice and policy are discussed, including the reflective advice from HANT students toward academic success.

Paper: In the last few decades the general expansion of higher education, especially in developed countries, has enabled more people from a wider range of backgrounds to join the graduate club. In the UK, the widening participation (WP) agenda was championed by the New Labour government (1997-2010), which aimed to increase and improve the number of university student from non-traditional backgrounds through targeted outreach initiatives and financial support (Burke 2012). Higher education policies and performance indicators have mostly focused on access figures and participation targets, with comparatively lesser attention given to student success, beyond retention/progression percentages and until more recently, the 'destinations of leavers from higher education' (HESA 2017), or 'graduate outcomes' (due 2020). Few studies have explored degree outcomes, especially between students from different backgrounds (e.g., Berry and Loke 2011; DfE 2017). Predominately quantitative, existing research has found that students from non-traditional and underprivileged backgrounds are less likely to achieve the highest degree outcome (HEFCE 2014) – a 'first-class' honours degree – which is now achieved by over a quarter of all undergraduates (Baker 2018; ECU 2016).

In this paper, we explore the experiences, decisions and pathways of high-achieving non-traditional (HANT) university students, a demographic cohort who tend to experience more struggles and challenges in higher education. Our aim is to better understand how non-traditional university students can accomplish academic success, with the focus on their educational strategies and their negotiations of personal pride and fear. With richer insights into their educational trajectories, including the problems encountered but also the solutions devised, we offer evidence-informed suggestions for practice and policy that can potentially improve the academic outcomes of non-traditional students.

A plethora of research has investigated the struggles and challenges of non-traditional students in higher education, such as the student experience before, during and after their degrees. Researchers have explored the difficulties of widening university access and improving student success, which include discussions of student attainment, aspirations and university readiness, as well as broader identity concerns of university belongingness, including inequalities of gender, social class and ethnicity (e.g., Cotton et al. 2015; Kuh et al. 2006; Richardson 2007; Thomas 2011). Many studies have also explored university student's transition, retention and adaptability, where differences or clashes in cultures, values, identities and practices between higher education institutions and non-traditional university students have been highlighted (e.g., Bathmaker et al. 2013; Holmegaard et al. 2017; Leathwood and Read 2009; Lowe and Cook 2003; Marshall et al. 2016; Reay et al. 2010; Willcoxson et al. 2011). These studies, among others, have illustrated the barriers and struggles of non-traditional students in higher education. Fewer studies, by comparison, have explored their academic success at university (e.g., Devlin 2013; Garrett and Rubie-Davies 2014).

This study is informed by the lens of identity. According to Gee (2000), our identity is essentially boiled down to the certain 'kind of person' that one wants to be and be recognised, which constitutes a continuous and fluid process as identities change over space and time. With our focus on HANT university students, we believe an exploration of these students' ongoing (re)construction and negotiation of identity will offer a useful lens in understanding their pathways to academic success. Specifically, identity work focuses on how individuals construct, or author, their own identity within specific contexts, such as established/institutional norms and cultures of practices (Gee 2000; King 2011; Reay et al. 2010).

This paper draws on an in-depth narrative case-study of 30 HANT students, who are final-year students from the social sciences in two post-92 universities in London. While our aim is not to generalise, a range of students were recruited across age and ethnicity, albeit with a heavier balance of women than men. Our students were all 'on course' to achieve a first-class degree, indicated by their attainments in the previous year and ongoing grades. Interviews lasted 90 minutes on average and 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 of their university experiences and aspirations. This paper focuses on their pathways to academic success, especially educational strategies. We encouraged students to reflect and discuss why certain decisions were taken (or not), which also sheds light into their identity work and processes.

Our data suggest that the educational strategies of high-achieving non-traditional (HANT) students

are typically developed through trial and error, in a recurrent and reflective process where students gradually learn and practice the explicit and implicit rules of their own higher education. In our presentation, we will provide empirical evidence to support our arguments that early academic success is important in the development of a high-achiever identity, which constitute a new identity for many non-traditional students. We will also explore the multifaceted identity work and negotiations of students to seek or accept support due to their fear and pride. Here, we will include empirical data and quotations.

Essentially, we argue that the overarching strategy for the academic success of HANT students can be boiled down to their willingness to ask for support or help, be it from staff, peers or family. Here, we mark the difference between *knowing* what to do and actually *doing* it, with the latter complicated by identity conflicts, namely that of fear and pride. Our focus on identity work has offered us important insights into the subtle but significant influences of fear and pride on student practice and action, which may disproportionally affect non-traditional students who often lack the dispositions and capital needed to excel in higher education. The academic success of our HANT students certainly bucks the trend as we discussed our implications for policy and practice, especially their atypical and extensive use of their available support. This paper unveiled the power of 'just ask' and if we can play a part in students' educational journey, educators ought to accustom themselves to proactive practices whenever appropriate, possible and feasible. For instance, to break down the apparent stigma of seeking support, the practice of asking for help must be normalised as part of the teaching and learning process. We need to dispel the perception that seeking support is reserved for those who are desperate or dependent and promote the importance of students utilising their available support as a key attribute of an independent student.