

What are the motivational factors of mature learners for pursuing a qualification in Higher Education in the 21st Century?

Introduction.

This research proposal will explore the experience of mature students in Higher Education in the twenty-first century and the contextual circumstances surrounding their lived experience. It will examine the pre-conceptual attitudes of students prior to enrolling on a course, exploring their reasons for engaging with education, whilst examining any emotive purposes which underpin their applications. In undertaking the research, the central aim of the enquiry will be to explore any correlation between the mature students' applications and admittance to Post compulsory education and the surrounding cultural influences pertaining to these applications, in particular examining any cultural attitudinal influences proffered by the students' wider communities. This will include examination of the mature students cultural and socio-economic backgrounds and its relevance to the educational experience, using a cross sectional comparative study of students entering Higher education, exploring any variation in experience between the mature students and their direct entry counterparts. The objective of the research proposal is to identify the constraints inhibiting mature students' access to education and their subsequent opportunity of completing their course, whilst simultaneously examining the role of the institution in alleviating these pressures by implementing a service which is truly inclusive and accommodates the needs of society. This is representative of Labour's Lifelong Learning Commission's vision which advocates the need for a comprehensive service, 'for Every Child- and Adult -Matters'¹¹, which delivers a provision 'from cradle to grave'. ²

¹ Labour 'The Lifelong Learning Commission's Interim' <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Lifelong-Learning-Commission-Interim-Report.pdf>

² 'Further education in England Transforming lives and communities' http://www.open-access.bcu.ac.uk/5240/1/Transforming_lives_FE_report_Jan17%20%28002%29.pdf

In addressing this area of concern, the researcher has composed robust, rigorous questions to inform the research, which will highlight common occurring themes and patterns to inform the enquiry. The questions I propose to ask will focus upon 1) what is the previous educational experience? 2) what is the student's socio-economic background? 3) what are the motivational factors which inspire the student to pursue a Higher Educational qualification? 4) what are the intergenerational attitudes of the family of origin towards education? 5) how would you describe your experience of Higher Education?

Literature Review

On conducting the literature review, I explored a range of frequently occurring themes arising in the journals and articles, which included Bourdieu's theory of family capital, to include social, cultural and economic capital (Tan, 2017). The vocabulary explored included culture, cultural capital, social hegemony (the tacit practices which maintain the power dynamics between individuals), social support and social reproduction and socio-economic background. On examination of the literature review, the relevance of culture was synonymous with marginalised groups entering Higher Education with them experiencing significant conflicts in interests (Busher et al, 2019; Lin, 2016) between their own intent to develop and accentuate their education, perceived as individualistic, whilst simultaneously adhering to the social expectations of society, securing employment and maintaining and servicing family responsibilities (Myles, 2019; Hamilton, 2018; Lin, 2016). This highlights the significance of the interplay between the student and their background context, influenced by social structures and negotiations with significant others (Hugh Busher & Nalita James, 2019), which impinge upon their ability to fully apply themselves to their studies on the basis of cultural and society biases and the power relations

which co-exist between these associations (Afridi et al, 2017; Ecclestone, 2007; Foucault, 1986).

In contrast to the direct access student entering Higher Education, the mature student is not necessarily equipped with the same supportive social structure (Lin, 2016) as that which encompasses the direct student, often challenged between intergenerational perspectives involving social stratifications and the ensuing capital cultures which can hinder or assist with social improvement (Hugh Busher & Nalita James, 2019; Oriane Georgeac et al, 2019). Consequently, the mature student is considered to be placed at a large disadvantage due to their accommodation of multiple generational demands across the life course and the variation in attitudes towards education according to cultural status and capital (Phillips et al, 2017). However, for marginalised groups with specific characteristics, the opportunity of engaging in education is prohibited, on account of their restricted socio-economic status, a common reality largely apportioned to ethnic minority groups (Lessard-Phillips et al, 2017). Traditional emphasis placed upon women to be the primary care givers for children has a mounting effect upon their future prospects (Davies et al, 2019) especially when equally encompassing responsibilities for the wider familial (Clarke et al, 2017), which highlights the complexity for women in engaging in higher educational activity and accessing equal employment opportunities (National Assembly for Wales, 2108). Attention is drawn to the cumulative effect of cultural capital and the disparity in it for different social groups, most notifiable is the reference to the persistent inequalities in social stratification and how social advantages are maintained by the top of the social stratification, ensuring that family advantages are sustained (Zhang, 2018). Furthermore, the cultural dynamics of the institution are considered to further exacerbate the Higher Educational experience for mature learners, due to institutionalised hegemony and the promotion of social reproduction, which is considered to sustain the social stratification of society (Hamilton et al, 2018; Busher et al, 2019). This tacit perception implies that institutional practices are defined by their maintenance of a 'habitus' and standards according to social culture, capital culture and economic culture (Ecclestone, 2016; James et al, 2015; Jury, 2017). Nonetheless, it also suggested that due consideration be given to pre-existing experiences of education and the diversity of students entering into Higher Education, adopting a collaborative inclusive approach

to learning, which will not only enhance the development of teaching practice amongst a diverse range of learners, but will equally nurture cognitive growth and development of the students (Hamilton et al, 2018; James et al, 2016). Additionally, the literature suggests that the creation of support frameworks within the institution and the wider community will aid the completion of higher education qualifications for mature students and those student from disadvantaged backgrounds (OECD, 2015). However, it is also inferred that students with a poor socio-economic background experience less support from their families. Equally, this research will challenge the embedded and institutionalised concept of hegemony, which is deemed to be entrenched within all social networks and institutions (Wright, 2018: Hamilton et al, 2018) and which according to the literature, alienates and marginalises vulnerable groups in society, especially through the suggested selection process, adopted by universities as a screening process for identifying suitable candidates for the course (Jury et al, 2017).

Methodology

The research will adopt a mixed method approach to the academic research, which is considered the most effective means of gathering answers for the research undertaken as it combines the data from two sources of research, quantitative and qualitative and integrates the data derived from these practices for interpretation using their strengths to answer research problems (Kumar, 2014; Merriam et al, 2015). The research undertaken will examine the differences between the direct entry learners and the mature learners experience, using qualitative methods, such as questionnaires and interviews, semi-structured in design to allow for wider contextual details to be conveyed (Sharp, 2012; Newby, 2014). Simultaneously, the research undertaken will gather specific details which underpin the enquiry, through the incorporation of specific quantitative research methods, to capture numerical data which will help to substantiate the findings of the qualitative research undertaken (Newby, 2014; Sharp, 2012). This will ensure that first-hand experience of the phenomenon of interest will be captured, which is viewed as closest in time and space to the phenomenon (Merriam et al, 2015; Kumar, 2014). However, Freebody (2004) emphasises the need to be mindful of their participants engagement and rely on robust and rigorous analysis to reveal the informative details to their enquiry. The researcher has chosen this style of approach to data gathering to capitalise on the

holistic life experiences of both groups, gaining the contextual details surrounding their learning experience, which would not necessarily be possible if a structured approach was applied, due to the bias incorporated into the framework (Kumar, 2014).

Contents

The literature suggests that students entering higher education through direct access, following a traditional route to their studies (Hamilton et al, 2018; Lin, 2016), do not necessarily appreciate or capitalise on the opportunity, unlike their counterparts (,Money et al, 2017) the mature student, who relishes the opportunity to return to education, motivated by their prior experiences and their need to have a break from their caring responsibilities and invest in the education as a means of future change (ibid.) and their deep learning approach to enrich their academic potential (Hamilton, 2018) and improve their employability status (Hamilton et al, 2018;Jury et al, 2017; Busher, 2019). In contrast the direct access students are perceived to acquire merely surface learning due to the lack of life experiences, although the value of the qualification is recognised (Hamilton et al, 2018; Lin, 2016) The aim of the research therefore is to identify the barriers preventing mature students from engaging in Higher Education, whilst examining the variants experienced by both cohorts of students, those of direct access and those classified as mature students. Furthermore, the research undertaken will explore what significance, institutional practices have upon student outcomes and whether these practices support or discriminate marginalised groups in pursuing further education (Hamilton et al, 2018; Jury et al, 2017). Additionally, the enquiry will investigate what support mechanisms are in place to support students from both cohorts with their learning, which is highlighted as an area of concern (Hamilton et al, 2018;Jurt et al, 2017), examining the financial assistance available to students, through student loans, grants and bursaries, exploring the students experience of accessing this support, albeit that economic assistance alone is consider not sufficient to ensure success (Jury et al, 2017;Hamilton et al, 2018). Additionally, the research will explore the flexibility of institutions to accommodate the needs of the students, by offering flexible timetables in order to complete studies. However, it is noted that this is not necessarily recognised as a need by the institutions (Lin, 2016) despite evidence in literature which suggests that personal circumstances compromise mature students'

opportunity to engage with education via conventional routes (Busher et al, 2019). Therefore, it is the intrinsic motivational attributes of the mature student, to gain university status, which require further examination, attributes which have been suppressed by disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds (Hamilton et al, 2018; Busher et al, 2019). This fact, supported by the evidence in literature of the extensive growth in post compulsory education for mature students worldwide, due to changes in legislation, making higher education more accessible (Lin, 2016; Jury et al, 2017; Fragoso et al, 2013), is evidence enough to warrant further research into the contextual nature surrounding this phenomenon. Furthermore, reported increases in applications from mature students aged 36 years and over signify a growing demand in this demographic, in 2017, which is apportioned to the fact that employment opportunities at this time are sparse, therefore this demographic will explore educational opportunities to improve their employment potential (UCAS, 2018). Support for the demand from mature students to enter higher education has been fuelled by the implementation of the 'Right to Lifelong Learning' document, devised by Welsh Government and further supported by the 2018 Progressive Development strategy, to increase the number of part time and post graduate places, with emphasis placed on those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Labour Party, 2019). It is suggested that the increasing trend in post compulsory education applications will continue to grow due to the increasing demand for higher qualified personnel possessing a degree qualification as a determining factor for securing employment, given the scarcity of jobs, due to the ongoing austerity crisis (Jury et al, 2017; Walsh et al, 2018). Furthermore, Welsh Government policy advocates its support for adult education, recognising the need of adults to upskill themselves in readiness for the changing face of the workforce and as an exemplary model for inspiring their children's aspirations (Welsh Government, 2017). Therefore, the proposals for adult education reflect a constructivist paradigm in its implementation, advocating that learners have the autonomy and self-efficacy to plan and direct their own educational progression, actively participating in their own development (James et al, 2015; Money et al, 2016). This is representative of Bruner's constructivist theory, whereby the learner constructs their understanding and knowledge through interaction with the learning process (Aubrey et al, 2019).

Conclusion

In conclusion therefore, the literature would suggest that despite increasing demands for Higher Education opportunities, there are significant concerns surrounding the variation in educational experience offered by the institutions, largely dependent upon the key characteristics of the student and preferences (Walsh et al, 2018; Money et al, 2017). The evidence would suggest that those students entering Higher Education via non-traditional routes and possessing a key characteristic, may encounter varying degrees of adversity due to shortcomings in their cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, not availing themselves suitable for direct entry into Higher Education, opting alternatively to further education (James et al, 2015; Eccleston, 2007). This detail combined with prior negative educational experiences reflect the complex situation mature learners face when returning to adult education. Therefore, the research undertaken will build upon the recommendations from previous studies for examination of the intrinsic motivational factors which underpin success in higher education for disadvantaged students (Hamilton et al, 2017; Busher et al, 2019). The relevance of self-actualisation and the development of 'self' as the driving force that determines success, will be explored, in spite of adversities such as lack of cultural and economic capital for marginalised students (James et al, 2015). Furthermore, the institutional practices of Higher Education will be explored to identify any perceived differences in provision for higher socio-economic students and lower socio-economic students (Jury et al, 2017; Hamilton et al, 2017) and any ramifications these may have upon the well-being of these students. Equally, the strategies and interventions offered by Higher Education institutions, who as stakeholders have a responsibility to support all students, will be explored and the relevance these systems have in supporting students in their quest for academic success (Jury et al, 2017; Busher et al, 2019; Lin, 2016). Furthermore, the innate characteristics of mature disadvantaged students, who enter higher education with insurmountable cultural deficits (Hamilton et al, 2018; James et al, 2015; Lin, 2016), will be examined to identify the determining factors which bolster success.

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