

**Bangor University**

## **DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**'Like a fish in water' : aspects of the contemporary United Kingdom higher education system as intended and as constructed**

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*Award date:*  
2005

*Awarding institution:*  
Bangor University

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**'Like A Fish In Water':  
Aspects Of The Contemporary United Kingdom Higher  
Education System As Intended And As Constructed.**

**Sally Baker**

**A Thesis Submitted for Doctor of Philosophy**

**University of Wales, Bangor**

**Faculty of Education**

**2005**





## **Summary**

### **'Like A Fish In Water':**

#### **Aspects Of The Contemporary United Kingdom Higher Education System**

#### **As Intended And As Constructed**

**Sally Baker**

This thesis explores the social functions and meanings of the UK's higher education system through a careful analysis of policy documents, existing scholarship and the life narratives of selected samples of people who have undergone higher education themselves. The theoretical framework is provided by Bourdieu and Foucault in an attempt to link individual experience with broader social formations. The debate around widening access and participation is explored with a view to detecting the implicit models deployed in the debate and the functions the higher education system is increasingly expected to undertake.

The investigations reported here were prompted by a growing unease with much existing literature on access to higher education which has dealt with 'barriers' to participation, conceived of largely in terms of class, ethnicity and gender. Instead, the studies presented here explore the interaction between the 'field' and the 'habitus' in an attempt to characterise the matrix of shared

meanings through which individual experience is linked to broader social structural factors.

The findings are interpreted as revealing that class, race and gender barriers alone provide only a crude index of whether people participate advantageously in higher education and that instead it is necessary to consider a socially mediated suite of aspirations for which the term aspirational habitus is coined. This involves a rich seam of imagery which sustains the individual through the struggle to gain access to university and serves a protective role once entry has been achieved. It may involve a sense of one's history, or the values of the community or family, a sense that one is gaining qualifications on behalf of other family members who did not have the opportunity, and the sense that one's 'rightful place' may be one at a more elevated social level, acts as a powerful motivator. The implications of this for some of the recent changes to UK higher education policy and the effects of this are explored as part of a larger ongoing work on the evolution of contemporary higher education.

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## **Acknowledgements**

Thanks are due to John, for being a really brilliant supervisor and to Brown, for being a really brilliant friend and for inspiring me to be interested in sociologists and philosophers in the first place. Also to Alaric, who is well aware of his contribution, my colleagues at RIEL for providing a congenial atmosphere, and of course to the many people who gave up their time to be interviewed for the studies presented here. I am also grateful to Dr Ron Iphofen, who as the internal examiner, gave helpful advice on the final presentation of this thesis.



## **Structure of This Thesis**

This thesis consists of two parts, Part I, an introduction and overview and Part II, with seven chapters, consisting of the first drafts of five papers which have subsequently been submitted as journal articles, a short chapter that applies some of the ideas of Michel Foucault to the contemporary HE system and a final chapter with some general conclusions.

## **Details of Draft Papers in Part II of Thesis**

A substantial part of the body of this thesis is made up of the first drafts of a series of five papers, which have subsequently been submitted as journal articles. The details of the papers are:

'Whose Failure To Adapt? Governmentality and Individualism in the Widening Participation Debate'.

(Sally Baker, B. Brown & John A. Fazey).

Approximately 70% of the authorship is attributed to Sally Baker. This paper has been submitted to 'Higher Education Quarterly'.

'Mental Health and Higher Education: Mapping Field, Consciousness and Legitimation'.

(Sally Baker, B. Brown & John A. Fazey).

Approximately 70% of the authorship is attributed to Sally Baker. This paper has been accepted for publication by 'Critical Social Policy'.

'Gender and the Higher Education Experience: In Search of the Reflexive Self'.

(Sally Baker, B. Brown, & John A. Fazey).

Sally Baker conducted and transcribed all participant interviews.

Approximately 70% of the authorship is attributed to Sally Baker. This paper has been submitted to 'Research Papers in Education'.

'*Like A Duck To Water*': Entering Higher Education and the Aspirational Habitus'.

(Sally Baker).

Sally Baker conducted and transcribed all participant interviews.

This paper has been submitted to 'Higher Education Quarterly'.

'Habitus and Homeland: Educational Aspirations, Family Life and Culture in Autobiographical Narratives of Educational Experience in Wales'.

(Sally Baker).

Sally Baker conducted and transcribed all participant interviews.

This paper has been submitted to 'Research Papers in Education'.

The fact that part of this thesis was compiled as a series of papers means that there is some repetition in the various chapters, such that the same quotations may re-appear from time to time. However, within the context of each chapter, they are necessary to sustain the argument and integral to the narrative thread of the respective chapters, so it was decided to leave them in place.

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## **Part I**

## **INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW**

The foci of this thesis are the political and social construction of Higher Education (HE) in England and Wales and the consequential constructions of individuals who pass through the system. These two perspectives are combined with a socio-political commentary with a biographical analysis. The topics covered are widening participation and engaging with diversity, encompassing issues relating to mental health, gender, and educational and intellectual aspiration. I am aware that concepts of employability, social exclusion and individual responsibility impinge deeply on the areas discussed in this thesis. However, in an attempt to set the boundaries and provide a focus, an in-depth exploration of the notions and conceptual debates around employability and social exclusion that may be considered to drive much current policymaking are considered to be outside the scope of this thesis. I instead outline these areas and how they have recently become part of the domain of HE. Readers are referred to Brown & Hesketh (2004), and Baker & Brown (forthcoming) for a further exploration of these concepts in relation to HE.

Scotland has its own HE system, so although I do sometimes draw on research carried out in Scotland and include aspects of the history of the

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Scottish system in this thesis, my comments and analysis mainly refer to the HE system in England and Wales. I use the term 'university' as well as 'HE' in this work. My own experience of education and employment has been within the university sector – however, government policy and much of the literature now refers to the 'HE' sector, encompassing higher education institutions (HEIs) and further education (FE) colleges containing students studying for degrees, as well as universities. I have tried to use appropriate terms for the appropriate context.

### ***How I Came To Write This Thesis***

This thesis explores some of the aspects of the contemporary UK HE system that I find interesting. I had been observing this area informally for years since my time as an undergraduate in the early 1980s, as a result of a keen layperson's interest in socio-political change.

In some ways, I was a typical university student of that time, being 18 years old when I went to university, having good 'A' level grades, studying a traditional science subject in a traditional university, assuming that I would eventually find employment in academia or research. The thing that marked me out as being very untypical however was my social background. I came from a rural Somerset working-class community, in which it was assumed that pupils' future lives would remain mostly in the domestic sphere if they were girls, or their opportunities would be within agriculture, industry or retail if they were boys. There was one careers officer in the local town who was notorious for promoting the idea that there were good opportunities to be found in wet fish shops. Very few people from my school saw university as a realistic ambition and the few that did were often the children of our teachers. I did not perceive this social structure as being at all oppressive or unsavoury at the time – I had never encountered anything else and apart from a vague awareness that there were some 'posh' people in the world, like the Queen or politicians or vicars, I was unaware that I was actually living in a very

disadvantaged, uneducated rural community. At that time, any theoretical framework that may have been used to understand the role of HE in either perpetuating or challenging this situation seemed virtually absent. Although people such as Illich and Freire had previously written very critical radical work about the education system, this seemed to have been almost buried by the socio-political discourse of Thatcherism. Work attempting to explore the very different HE and career opportunities available to young people from different social classes was twenty years into the future and even the classic work of Richard Hoggart (1956) concerning the situation of the 'grammar school boy' had little relevance to children in comprehensive schools in working-class communities where careers advice was very much geared to manual or retail work.

Despite this, I did end up going to university. I decided to do 'A' levels mainly because I enjoyed school work and was good at it and once I entered the local sixth form college I became close friends with a boy who was from a middle-class family, who told me that it would be unthinkable to do anything other than get a degree. He then helped me to begin to negotiate the minefield of university entrance, advising me on which subjects and which universities to apply for.

I had an interesting experience on the day of my first university interview. I arrived in Bangor, never having been there before and wondered where the appropriate university department was. I saw a rather smartly dressed young woman standing nearby, so I decided to ask her. It transpired that she was a prospective student as well, actually for interview in the same department as me. I struck up a conversation with her and she then told me that she was very worried about this interview as she didn't have a dress watch, so she'd worn a wrist watch. I hadn't heard of a dress watch before, but I managed to work out what one was from the context and I experienced a moment of cultural terror as I realised that this young woman's world was clearly very

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different from mine and that I didn't own any sort of watch. I then gained some degree of security a few minutes later when she revealed that she had already failed one set of 'A' levels and was re-sitting.

The incident with the dress watch was an extreme example of the culture shock that I encountered when I did subsequently arrive at university. I had expected some 'posh' people, but by my standards they nearly all were. When talking to my university friends about their lives before university I began noticing anecdotally what is now well-documented in educational research. Most of the students had come from backgrounds and schools where entry to HE was assumed. Some of them had initially done badly in 'A' levels and undeterred, had simply re-sat, sometimes with the aid of extra tuition. Those students who could not be described as 'privileged' often had, like some of the people I'd known in Somerset, parents who were teachers. I became quite interested in why university students were so overwhelmingly middle-class, because I soon realised that this phenomenon wasn't linked to ability. However, in the early 1980s I was not aware that this was a matter of explicit concern, although academics had been previously exposed to the earlier work of scholars such as Westergaard & Resler (1975) and were aware of such concerns raised in the Robbins Report (1963). Despite concern regarding such issues among much of the academic community, there was not such concern among the government of the day.

After my first degree I followed a research career which took me to the London medical schools, where middle-class students and staff were even more obvious, although the situation in medical schools had started to become a topic of concern, amid allegations of 'old boy' and public school networks. I left medical research after a few years because of a serious illness and subsequently spent years in Snowdonia renovating cottages and occasionally travelling.



The boy that I'd been friends with in Somerset had become an academic and by the late 1990s he was telling me that things in HE were changing at an incredible rate and it was all very different from 'our day'. I was aware that the recently elected New Labour government was keen that HE should form a central part of the social changes that they were keen to implement. There was much debate as to how more people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, could access HE. Remembering the overwhelming 'poshness' that I had encountered in HE, particularly in medical schools, I was entirely in sympathy with this – being posh is absolutely fine, but it was clear that some people were losing out here.

In 2000 I returned to university to do PGCE, then spent two years teaching. Having academic interests I often used to visit the university library where I discovered the work of Diane Reay, an educational sociologist who researched areas that I found interesting as a teacher, such as gender issues in schools and the images that children from deprived communities have of themselves and their schools. Reay and her colleagues were incredibly prolific and were also taking a keen interest in analysing why some social groups entered HE in such large numbers and others didn't. Reay drew heavily on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist, in her analyses, so I started reading his work. Although his work had evolved with reference to the French education system, I found that even in a very simplistic way, much of what he said was consistent with my own observations. (I will outline Bourdieu's principle ideas shortly.)

I was particularly interested in Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus', describing what is possible for oneself. It seemed a possible explanation for what I had seen in rural Somerset - my classmates hadn't failed to go to university because of any lack of ability, it seemed more because they had not seen HE as possible for people like them and that their community had reinforced this message. The success of the teachers' children who had gone on to HE could also be

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explained in Bourdieuan terms – they had a different habitus from the others in the community.

I became very interested in such issues and could see that many of the alleged problems being encountered, or according to some commentators being caused by, the 'widening access' policy that some sections of the media were beginning to report needed to be thought about using the work of sociologists. Bourdieuan theory offered the possibility of transcending a theoretical impasse – very little of the existing analysis of HE and social class was useful in explaining the embedded values that I had previously observed.

I will at this point outline Bourdieu's main principles. Bourdieu is known principally for his ideas of 'field', 'habitus' and 'cultural capital'. The concept of 'field' can be described as 'a relatively autonomous structured domain or space, which has been socially instituted, thus having a definable but contingent history of development', (Warde, 2004) and Bourdieu himself defined 'habitus' as 'a system of durable, transposable dispositions that mediates an individual's actions and the external conditions of production' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 53). Bourdieu (1984) also developed the notion of 'cultural capital'. He theorised three forms of cultural capital: 'embodied', ie. long-lasting dispositions of mind and body, 'objectified', ie. cultural goods, and 'institutionalised', ie. objectified forms of cultural capital such as educational qualifications. In the context of the work that I subsequently carried out, the political and social agenda, (ie. the changes being urged upon the HE system) constitutes the field, and the individual passing through HE possesses the habitus.

I began to investigate the possibility of funding for a PhD in the area of widening access, utilising Bourdieuan notions as well as the work of other scholars. I was fortunate enough to be awarded a scholarship that enabled me a high degree of flexibility in my research.

In the weeks before I took up the scholarship, some very interesting anecdotes reached me. I had previously been involved in supporting people suffering from mental health problems and had also lectured on a course attended by people suffering from such difficulties at the local FE college. A number of these people had told me that they had felt great pressure on them from mental health professionals to 'do a course', even when these clients had felt unprepared for such an activity. Two people maintained that they had been coerced into enrolling at either the FE college or the local university. Sadly, all of these students had withdrawn from their courses in a matter of weeks, stating their reasons to be the inability to cope socially, or health problems, rather than academic difficulties. If indeed they had been advised, or coerced, into going to college, it would seem that whoever advised them had not taken many crucial considerations into account, apart from the idea that perhaps a FE/HE college would accept them. Someone in the locality who knew that I was involved with adult education then asked my advice about 'going to college'. They explained that they'd had mental health difficulties and that their social worker was telling them to go to university. I expected to hear perhaps worries about the course content, level of academic ability needed, or whether they would feel accepted socially. They didn't mention any of this however and it transpired that they hadn't yet thought about their proposed course. However, their social worker had told them that they needed counselling and that counselling was not available locally on the national health service (NHS), but if they went on a course at the university they could book in with a university counsellor and the prospective student wanted to know if this was true. Of course, I had no solid evidence that these people were not misleading me, but there was a degree of similarity between these anecdotes.

I wondered what exactly was going on in terms of policy, either local or national and decided to explore various aspects of the contemporary UK HE

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system, particularly those relevant to widening participation, as well as the (then) less publicly debated issue of whether HE might be becoming part of social welfare. Some of the comments made by the people with mental health problems suggested, as is often the case where mental health issues are involved, a degree of surveillance, control, or 'remodelling'. Perhaps these people could be brought into the fold, even if they didn't want to be, by HE. Years previously I had read the French philosopher Michel Foucault, who wrote about mental health care as control. I had also read many other authors who had written variants along the 'psychiatry as control' theme, eg. Thomas Szasz, R.D. Laing & Aaron Esterson and David Cooper. Although such people undoubtedly made a strong case for interpreting 'care' as control, their analyses could not be applied to the HE system. But after reading more of Foucault, I began to think that perhaps his work could help us understand what might be happening in the HE system.

Foucault examined power relations and how systems enable such relations to operate such power more efficiently. He talked about discipline in terms of controlling and remodelling people and the development of a notion of a norm. Foucault tried to expand the study of power and discussed the way that everyday existence is regulated, normalised and disciplined. He saw power as taking many forms, some negative and controlling, some enabling, encouraging and authorising. Foucault's work suggests that it is possible to think about HE as a site for disciplinary practice, a regime of truth and power and a mode of regulation of the social and the self.

Bourdieu explains how a complex of ideological and cultural factors may constitute the habitus, directing individuals towards or away from HE and how people from certain social groups acquire language and means of expression that make up the 'cultural capital' enabling access to HE. However, by incorporating Foucault's theorising, it is possible to understand how education

policy and practice and the resulting power shape the consciousness, or to use Rose's (1989) term, the 'soul' of HE staff and students.

### ***Attempting To Address The Issues***

The construction of the contemporary UK HE system is of course an enormous subject and the widening access field alone is currently supporting many researchers investigating a plethora of problems from many angles. When I was awarded my scholarship, I envisaged my thesis being somewhat different to the thesis presented here. As I became interested in particular issues, or issues manifested themselves in a different way to that expected, my research took different directions.

The research began as planned, with a review of the academic literature relating to widening access, and this resulted in the paper 'Whose Failure To Adapt? Governmentality and Individualism in the Widening Participation Debate'. I was initially interested in the way in which the debate was constructed in the literature, the questions that scholars thought were important, how they were conceptualising these questions and what sort of analytical framework they were using to address them. The most obvious feature of this literature was that it virtually fell into two categories. One category clearly conceptualised HEIs and their staff as the problem and attributed the absence of people from certain social cohorts in universities to, at worst, elitism and hostility on the part of the HE system or, at best, indifference. Much of this literature involved the relating of dreadfully unhappy non-traditional student experiences within the HE system, but there was often an absence of any extensive reference to the wider body of sociological research. The other category of widening access literature did draw substantially on sociological literature, particularly Bourdieu and scholars using his theory. Although this did not deny the under-representation of certain social groups within the HE system and the unhappiness experienced by students from these groups, there were efforts to explain the problem by a

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wider socio-structural analysis. Elitism and hostility by HEIs was sometimes discussed, but it was discussed with reference to culture, identity and values and by scholars like Reay, with reference to Bourdieuan concepts of habitus, cultural capital and field.

The way in which the first category of literature described almost 'blamed' the HEIs and their staff led me to consider the work of Nikolas Rose (1989), who also drew heavily on Foucault, and talked of the reform of the 'soul', the interior space in one's head. Rose most famously applied this to the 'psy' disciplines, but in 'Whose Failure To Adapt?' it is argued that the authors of some of the widening access literature are suggesting that the 'soul' of the educator needs to be remodelled in a similar way. There is a perception that the educator is in some way responsible for the limited success of the widening participation policy. The writing of this paper also entailed me reading scholars such as Ulrich Beck & Beck-Gernsheim (2001) who wrote about 'individualisation'. It was clear that while some scholars in the widening access field conceptualised problems in terms of society's structure, others saw a very much more 'individualist' solution. If only HEIs and the individual staff within them would change, there would be no problem. Much of the literature is relentlessly individualistic, problematising universities and their staff, and often ignoring the wider body of sociological research that has attempted a socio-structural analysis of the reasons why certain groups do not enter HE in any great number. Some of the widening participation literature clearly pursues an agenda of HE as a form of social justice, touching on welfare reform, even if this results in the abandonment of scholarly tradition.

After completing 'Whose Failure To Adapt?' my direction was clearer. I felt that regardless of the injustices and inequalities in society, it was oversimplistic to suggest that the under-representation of certain social groups in



HE was solely due to hostility and elitism on the part of HEIs. I was therefore keen to pursue the issue and the associated sociological theory, particularly Bourdieu. Although criticism has been levelled at Bourdieuan theory, I was particularly attracted to his work because it offers an explanation of a big problem in differential entry to HE. If disadvantaged people are prevented from accessing HE only because of hostile staff, societal inequality and oppression, no disadvantaged people, in any number, would ever enter HE. Yet some do. Neither was it simply the lucky few slipping through the net, although it is likely that did happen. The less advantaged people who did access HE were those who may have been restricted financially, living in the same communities as those who didn't access HE, but they appear to have been, in large measure, those like the teachers' children that I went to school with, who had what could be described as a middle-class habitus. This is more than simply having middle-class values, which might be an explanation from those who reject Bourdieuan theory. But the person who has the 'right' habitus to propel them into HE doesn't merely have the appropriate values, they have a habitus determining that access to and success in HE is possible for them and had been reinforced in this view by a small number of adult 'role-models' who stood out from the cultural milieu of childhood and adolescence. Many of the (few) disadvantaged people that I knew who had entered HE, had like me, from quite an early age, worked on the assumption that it wasn't actually out of the question for them. Bourdieuan ideas of 'cultural capital' resonated with me too. I had noticed when I was younger that it wasn't so much 'intelligence' that was needed for good 'A' levels and a degree, it was a certain way of articulating and presenting oneself. Bourdieu described such presentation very nicely when talking about cultural capital and of course also described the types of cultural capital needed to become accepted as being middle-class in other ways. I will return to the further advantages of using Bourdieuan theory later.

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My research interests were now crystallising. I was interested particularly in the habitus and the role it might be playing in enabling some people, yet preventing others, from accessing HE. I was keen to utilise other Bourdieuan concepts as well that seemed so appropriate, such as cultural capital, and to a lesser extent, field. There was a part of the clearly changing field however that needed something additional to a Bourdieuan analysis in order to understand it. Some of the literature that I had reviewed for 'Whose Failure To Adapt?' was written by authors who explicitly stated that they were 'working from a social justice' stance and whose writing made clear that they saw HE partly as a social welfare role. Remembering the comments of my acquaintances with mental health problems, I decided that at this point it would be useful to explore this particular change in the field.

Thus Chapter Two in Part II of this thesis, 'Mental Health and Higher Education: Mapping Field, Consciousness and Legitimation' examined how far HE is now an agent of social justice and welfare reform. It explores the notion that HE will serve a rehabilitative (or even curative) function in people suffering from mental health problems. It is interesting that at a time when all the major mental health charities and pressure groups are expressing serious concern about the failure of the mental health system to care for and support their clients, when a considerable proportion of the prison population is composed of those suffering from serious mental health problems and when members of the Government find it a matter of concern that much of the money distributed by the benefits system is paid to the mentally ill, that universities should be encouraged to accept these very vulnerable people. I am not suggesting that people with mental health problems should be systematically excluded from aspects of life that the rest of us enjoy, but it is paradoxical that a mental health system allegedly designed, resourced and staffed to prevent the social deterioration and exclusion of these clients, is manifestly failing to achieve this, yet an already under-resourced HE system



that is ill-equipped indeed to nurture and support such vulnerable people, should be handed this remit with virtually no preparation. This chapter also begins to explore how politics has come to be conceptualised under New Labour, and how the notion of the 'responsible individual' has been recapitalised. The notion of 'individual responsibility' is now being vigorously promoted in public health (Iphofen, 2003), including mental health contexts and has also been an issue in education (Iphofen, 1998). The work of Bourdieu, Foucault and Rose is used in this chapter.

The research and analysis for this paper led to other avenues, revealing a high degree of central government control over HEIs and their curricula and thus the education of students. A friend with similar interests and myself then began work on a forthcoming book, a Foucauldian analysis of the contemporary UK HE system, exploring such issues in greater depth. A brief outline of this work constitutes Chapter Six in Part II of this thesis. This attempts to demonstrate how, in a very Foucauldian way, a high level of control is now being exerted over the HE population, often in the name of 'social inclusion' or welfare. Cohorts who have often been seen as somewhat deviant or problematic, such as people with mental health problems, or travellers, are now being encouraged to enter HE. In one way, this could be seen as profoundly liberating and laudable, but somehow such ideals seem a little tarnished when one hears tales of distressed people being coerced or seduced into HE, only to shortly withdraw after finding themselves unable to cope. (Interestingly, some travellers are now making statements about authorities trying to force them into an unwanted lifestyle, although I have yet to hear a traveller's representative comment on HE.) Chapter Six in Part II is a brief exploration of how Michel Foucault's ideas can be applied to some aspects of the contemporary HE system, with particular emphasis on the notion that HE is now performing a disciplinary function, involved in the production of 'docile' bodies. I have included this chapter, as there is much

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mention of Foucauldian ideas throughout this thesis, and in some ways they link in with the Bourdieuan concepts that I have made central to this thesis. This brief look at HE using Foucauldian notions is part of a larger on-going work in which I look at many more aspects of the recent reconstruction of the HE system, its staff and students, from a Foucauldian perspective.

As this part of the work was begun, mostly involving analysis of policy documents, literature, media reports etc, I also began my investigative fieldwork, the methodological details of which are supplied later. I initially interviewed a group of participants with a view to exploring gender issues in relation to HE and the life-transitions of people passing through HE.

After conducting the interviews I analysed the material in order to examine the way in which men and women construct themselves and their identities in relation to HE. No substantial and consistent gender differences were found. Both men and women saw themselves as reflexive beings, in line with most contemporary perspectives on late modernity. Individualistic narratives were evident, with HE clearly being viewed as a Foucauldian self-improvement project, bestowing 'choice', 'confidence', 'qualifications', 'skills' and 'employability' onto those passing through it. The results presented in this paper are contrary to many of the findings from earlier work on gender and HE. They do not suggest that contemporary orientations to HE cleave along gendered lines. The narratives of the participants instead show a plurality of individual identities. It is suggested that the work here has implications for the concept of habitus, habitus transforming as the individual passes through HE. The idea of an 'aspirational habitus' is advanced, seemingly possessed by some disadvantaged people who have accessed HE.

The same data was used for biographical analysis to explore the life transitions of individual students during their passage through HE. As well as discussing the 'epiphanies' that some of these people experienced as a result of HE, the construction of the HE experience by students of different

generations is examined and contrasted and a link is made between such constructions and the prevailing socio-political climate of the time. This paper also further explores the concept of an 'aspirational habitus', which seemed to be manifested by some people who achieved success in HE, despite coming from backgrounds of disadvantage and/or with no tradition of HE entry. If such an aspirational habitus exists I suggest that it will be valuable indeed to study it, particularly in the light of current concerns that, despite widening participation initiatives, numbers of 'non-traditional' students entering HE are still far lower proportionally than the government's vision.

Another study was planned and carried out, to follow up my now growing interest in the habitus of people from disadvantaged backgrounds in Wales. Members of this group often had a strong sense of their 'culture' and their 'history' as a people, which seemed to play a significant role in the development of their habitus. It has long been an image held of Wales by others that it is a nation producing 'preachers and teachers', composed of deprived but socially aspiring people, yet some scholars (Jones, 1982) have maintained that much of this is mythological. Previous work that I conducted, however did reveal a high number of Welsh people who, having grown up with disadvantage, entered HE and were now present in the professional/middle-classes. Not having encountered this phenomenon to such a great extent in the part of England in which I grew up, I considered it of interest to establish whether this was indeed significant, or whether I was simply being influenced by a romantic stereotype. I take the view that the argument about the reality or otherwise of the socially aspiring Welsh is unimportant – it was the image of this, and the belief in a Welsh culture supporting aspiration, that constructed the habitus. Bourdieuan concepts are again employed in my analysis which I hope also contributes something original to the notion of habitus.

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I used biographical interviews to show how the field encourages people (eg. policymakers, students, and staff) to grow in certain ways and to characterise the habitus, trying to draw out the implications for HE and policy. The work looks at groups that have not been highly represented in research so far, from understudied areas such as rural Wales, as it may be possible to draw out specific implications for HE policy and practice from the inclusion of such groups.

As previously stated, Bourdieuan theory resonated with my concerns, albeit in quite a superficial way, when I first encountered it. Bourdieu, in sociological terms, is quite eclectic theoretically and combines a number of approaches. Bourdieu seems to believe, unlike social constructionists, that there is a social reality to be discovered, although it is a complex reality, dependent upon on our own interests and habituses. For him, there is the 'reality' of society and to observe this we need adequate theoretical concepts. He also considers 'reality' to include symbolic, reflexive actions resulting in given positions in the field. To illustrate why I believe that Bourdieuan analysis is so useful, I will compare his ideas with another influential contemporary sociologist, Anthony Giddens, in particular with Giddens' structuration theory (Giddens, 1984). Both authors try to integrate macro-level theories dealing with structures and institutions of society with micro-level theories of everyday life. These theories involve balancing our understanding that individuals are free to interpret, influence and act, with an understanding of organisational, political and institutional constraints, power and social reproduction.

Giddens' structuration theory maintains that structure and agency are a duality - that they cannot be conceived of separately. He sees human practices as recursive ie. individuals, through their activities, create both their consciousness and the structural conditions that make their activities possible. People adapt their actions to their evolving understandings because they are reflexive and monitor the flow of their activities and structural conditions.

Thus, Giddens believes that social scientific knowledge of society can change human activities.

Giddens states that people continually develop routines that give them a sense of security and enable them to deal efficiently with the challenges presented by their social lives. While their socially embedded motives provide the 'plan of action', the routine practices determine the shape that the action will take. Although Giddens emphasises that people have the power to shape their own actions, the consequences of the actions can be unintended.

'Structure' is the rules and resources giving similar social practices a systemic form. Structure can only exist through the activities of people. Although Giddens acknowledges that structure can be constraining to the individual, he believes that the importance of structural constraints have been exaggerated. He also believes that structure can enable people to do things that they would otherwise not be able to do. A social system, for Giddens, is a set of reproduced social practices and relations between individuals.

Structuration theory states that there can be no agency without structures that shape motives into practices, but there can also be no structures independent of the routine practices creating them.

Bourdieu's theory of habitus and field presents an alternative to structuration. Bourdieu bridged individual subjectivism with societal objectivism. He used structuralism, focusing on the objective structures of language and culture giving shape to human action and constructivism, looking at the social genesis of schemes of perception, thought and action. He examined the social construction of objective structures with an emphasis on how people perceive and construct their own social world, without neglecting how perception and construction is constrained by structures.

Bourdieu conceived of the habitus as the mental structure through which people deal with the social world. It can be thought of as a set of internalised

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schemes through which the world is perceived, understood, appreciated, and evaluated. A habitus is acquired as the result of the long-term occupation of a position in the social world. Depending on the position occupied, people will have a different habitus. The habitus operates as a structure, but people do not simply respond to it mechanically. Bourdieu argues that the habitus both produces and is produced by the social world. People internalise external structures, and they externalise things they have internalised through practices.

Bourdieu's concept of field is the objective complement to the idea of habitus. A field is a network of social relations among the objective positions within it. It is not a set of interactions or intersubjective ties among individuals. The social world has a great variety of semi-autonomous fields such as art, religion, and higher education. The field is a type of competitive marketplace in which economic, cultural, social, and symbolic powers are used. The pre-eminent field is the field of politics, from which a hierarchy of power relationships serves to structure all other fields. To analyse a field, one must first understand its relationship to the political field. The next step is to map the objective positions within a field and, finally, the nature of the habitus of the agents who occupy particular positions can be understood. These agents act strategically depending on their habitus in order to enhance their capital. Bourdieu is particularly concerned with how powerful positions within a field can perpetrate 'symbolic violence' on less powerful actors. Cultural mechanisms such as education impose a dominant perspective on the rest of the population in order to legitimate their power.

Bourdieu's (1984) analysis of the aesthetic preferences of different social groups suggests that the cultural preferences of the various groups within society constitute coherent systems that serve to unify those with similar tastes and differentiate them from others with divergent tastes. Through the practical application of preferences, people classify objects and in the process



classify themselves. Bourdieu believed that the field of 'taste' involves the intersection of social-class relationships and cultural relationships. He argued that taste is an opportunity to both experience and assert one's position in the class hierarchy. These tastes are engendered in the deep-rooted dispositions of the habitus. Changes in tastes result from struggles for dominance within both cultural and social-class fields, as different fractions struggle to define high culture and taste.

As well as providing an explanation for entrenched phenomena such as 'not for people like us' (Bourdieu, 1990b) and for the interesting manifestations of class, such as 'taste' (Bourdieu, 1984), Bourdieuan theory also explains phenomena that scholars like Reay are beginning to analyse, that of the hierarchy among HEIs in this time of mass HE, whereby the non-traditional students who do enter HE attend low-status institutions, the 'elite' HEIs still being firmly colonised by more privileged students (Reay, Davies et al, 2001). Giddens' ideas relating to actors shaping their own actions, individual responsibility and to sociologists exaggerating the importance of social constraints are attractive, suggesting that we are all masters of our own fate and thus may liberate ourselves, but do not explain why, for example, there is still such limited social mobility in relation to HE. On a personal level, I am worried by Giddens' 'individual responsibility' discourse, now very important in terms of public health and education. An increasing prison population of mentally ill people and the stubborn failure of some social cohorts to succeed in HE suggests that there are limits to the practice of individual responsibility, despite Giddens' theorising.

There has been criticism of the use of Bourdieuan theory, with accusations that Bourdieu is overly deterministic (Alexander, 1994; Garnham & Williams, 1980; Reay, 2004a). I hope that the work that eventually became this thesis attempts to address that criticism and extends Bourdieuan notions, liberating them from over-deterministic terms. Bourdieu (1990b) claimed that

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his concepts were open, designed to guide empirical work. I have tried to show that this is indeed true in the context of the work presented in this thesis. The habitus is shown to be permeable, responsive to events and continually restructured by encounters with the outside world (Di Maggio, 1979) and I demonstrate how the possibility of an individual social trajectory enables conditions of living that are very different from their original ones.

I have tried to extend our understanding, not merely looking at the benefits and gains of HE, but looking at how HE policy is characterised, what HE does in terms of re-creating individuals, or new forms of individuals, and how HE draws upon the field and pre-existing habitus, transforming the two, thus escaping some of the criticisms levelled at Bourdieu.

Much of the work here has been concerned with habitus and its development and the idea has been developed by a number of scholars since Bourdieu's theorisation. I hope that the work in this thesis, particularly that exploring the experiences of graduates from disadvantaged Welsh backgrounds, has refuted the claim that Bourdieu is over-deterministic. The habitus does have limits and defines what is possible for one, which perhaps explains why some social cohorts have proved so stubbornly resistant to entering HE, despite enormous government enthusiasm. However, there is a degree of flexibility involved in the habitus, enabling some people, even when raised in conditions of socio-economic hardship, with no history of HE in the family, to possess a habitus in which entry to HE was not defined as completely unthinkable. Some of these people had not necessarily actively considered HE when they were younger, but they had been aware of the possibility of 'doing well', of leaving the community and of change. When the possibility of HE presented itself, these individuals seized it. The one real theoretical addition that I hope to have made to the notion of habitus here is that of the importance of someone's image of their culture or history.



This was clear in the work with people from Welsh language communities. The history of the Welsh people could be read as a sad one, of people in severe poverty, suffering oppression and exploitation and experiencing very difficult living conditions. Yet many of my respondents subscribed to the idea of the Welsh being a people with a history of literature, culture and a musical tradition, Wales being the stereotypical land of Bards. This image existed in parallel with a great awareness of the dreadful hardship experienced by their forebears, but there was a sense that university education was for them, that their forebears had been cheated and that now the opportunity was available, the participants had taken advantage of it. The reality or otherwise of the history and culture of the Welsh didn't seem to play a part in their habitus, it was the image that was important.

I hope that I have demonstrated in this thesis that in Bourdieuan terms the field is certainly undergoing enormous changes. A different type of student is now to be found in HE, with different needs. According to Bourdieuan theory, field and habitus interact and change each other, so it would be expected that the habitus of students in the future will be different to the habitus of those of today, or past students.

### ***Events Since This Began and Future Work***

My intellectual journey since first having had the idea for this thesis has been exciting. Although the work that I carried out re-affirmed my beliefs that Bourdieuan notions provide a convincing explanation for the relative success of certain social groups within the HE system and that Foucault's theories relating to the exercise of power and the creation of 'docile' populations resonate with many aspects of New Labour's vision of the HE system, this work has also led me to encounter other valuable scholarship which I envisage will add to my understanding of the area eg. work on identity, class cultures

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and the wider field of narrative and discourse. Some of this work is now quite old, but is still useful – our society is still hierarchical and different cultures, sub-cultures and identities are thriving.

In terms of my future direction, gender remains an area with much potential for future research. Gender is still a salient issue, as inequalities, oppressions and paradoxes remain, but I maintain that much of the classic gender work, although very relevant when written, no longer always provides us with an appropriate analysis and a different theoretical framework is needed to understand gender issues today, particularly in HE, which is becoming increasingly 'feminised'. Interestingly, one of the very relevant criticisms levelled at Bourdieu's original work is that of his complete neglect of gender.

I have thus been exposed to scholarship previously unknown to me that has helped explain so much of what I see happening around me, both within and outside of HE. I hope that I have also become more rigorous and competent at applying the work of writers that I had previously encountered and to be critical where necessary. Although much of the detail of the issues that interest me will remain only discussed within academia, some of the areas that I have written about in this thesis have since been debated in the media. The sections of the popular press dealing with education have recently shown great interest in the area of students with mental health problems in HE and there is growing interest in the disposition or features of 'successful' students. Such media interest has allowed me the privilege of writing for the broadsheet press. The idea of HE being a Foucauldian type of social control has yet to be debated in the lay press, but the letters page in a recent issue of 'The Guardian' made interesting reading. Among correspondence from disillusioned FE lecturers wondering whether the education that the students that they are preparing for HE will receive will be worthwhile, was a letter from Bill Rammell, Minister for Lifelong Learning, who gave examples of the advantages of HE. One advantage given was that people who had experienced

university were 'less likely...to become obese' (Rammell, 2005). Rammell considered this as much a benefit of HE as the decreased likelihood of becoming involved in crime or becoming unemployed. This has parallels with Foucault's work on the controlling of the human body, the weighing, the measuring, indeed the 'normalising', of people as a means of social control.

My work for this thesis has proved fruitful. A collaboration between myself and researchers at the University of Bradford has been set up, after they found a distinctive habitus in successful disadvantaged students from south Asian communities in the north of England, showing parallels to the habitus that I had identified in graduates from disadvantaged Welsh communities. A paper is currently being co-authored and a sizeable collaborative research bid has been submitted to the ESRC to extend the work on habitus in successful non-traditional students.

I have planned more work on the habitus of the graduates from disadvantaged Welsh communities, after taking advice from established academics in this field. A small number of these people will be interviewed and their formative years explored in much greater depth, involving interviews with members of their families and members of the communities in which they grew up that are remembered as influencing them. Working on the old adage 'it takes a whole village to bring up a child', in this way I hope to build up a fuller picture of 'the whole village' (ie. the many varying influences) that contributed to the habitus of these people. I hope to tease out some key features in the development of the habitus, which will perhaps explain why certain individuals (or families) differed from the other people who sat next to them at school, or who lived in a very similar house in the same terrace, or who were on a similar income or employed in the same sort of work, in what they believed was possible for 'the likes of us'.

I have also recently become involved in other related research, such as the question of whether the habitus that might successfully enable non-traditional

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students to access HE might also lead to success in the graduate labour market, or why certain non-traditional students actively seek entry to traditional universities, which are portrayed by much of the widening access literature as being 'hostile' to such students. I have become interested in a recently emerging strand of sociology being investigated by scholars like Rachel Brooks (2003) and Wendy Bottero (2004), regarding 'intra-class differences', challenging the notion evident in much previous research of the middle and working-classes being homogenous groups. Initial work suggests substantial differences within these classes in terms of educational orientation or destination.

#### Historical and Socio-Political Backdrop

The English and Welsh HE system has had a dynamic history since its inception. The changes have been numerous and there are many 'lines' one could adopt when documenting such changes. Because I am interested in widening participation, I will place emphasis on issues relating to this, as well as changes that are relevant to a Foucauldian interpretation of recent HE changes. The HE system is a complex one and whenever a particular focus or issue within a complex, dynamic system is taken by an individual, the experience of another individual within the same system may be distorted, or even unrecognisable. I was educated and have been employed in the 'traditional' university sector, so I perceive issues such as widening access and vocationalism as of relatively new concern to these institutions. People previously involved with polytechnics or other areas of adult higher education will be well-versed in these areas and may not see them as new or a change in direction at all.

I will provide a brief overview here of the history of the system (including the history of some parts of the Scottish system, as that is salient in this context), with particular emphasis on the universities and the relevant socio-political backdrop.

Outside Wales, the early universities, such as Oxford and Cambridge, were established in medieval times and many universities grew from smaller, earlier colleges. In Scotland many of the universities were founded at the time of the Renaissance. St Andrews was founded in 1411 and Glasgow and Aberdeen were also founded before the close of that century. Edinburgh was established in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Durham initially opened in 1657 but it disappeared and reopened in 1833 (Evans, 1953).

Such universities were not always exclusively for the rich. The Scottish Reformation Parliament of 1560 tried to ensure that poverty did not hinder academic achievement. However, the Parliament failed to address how to properly finance the university education of the poor and this remained a problem. There were some attempts to rectify matters – for example, when the 5<sup>th</sup> Earl Marischal established Marischal College (which eventually became the University of Aberdeen) there were included six poor scholars who were provided for by the college. However, this provision proved inadequate and the money for these scholars wasn't actually available due to the financial problems of the poorly endowed college (Vance 2003).

From the second decade of the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, colleges in Aberdeen did experience a system of scholarships for the poor, endowed by successful academics returning from the continent, ministers, wealthy widows and the gentry. By 1660 this financial assistance made a considerable contribution to Marischal College. However, a close analysis of the individuals that the bursaries went to suggests that they educated the classes who were already educated, or at least the classes who controlled urban society (Vance, 2003). Similar criticism has of course been leveled at our modern HE system, in which undergraduates, who are overwhelmingly middle-class, have traditionally enjoyed a subsidised education). There were conditions attached to the bursaries though. Religious orthodoxy was one of the conditions – Marischal College was founded as a Protestant institution and the early

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regulations stated that people entering the college had to be Protestant. There were also regulations concerning academic dress and behaviour. Scholars were expected to behave with 'humility and obedience' (Vance, 2003: 108). The tuition fees were variable. They were set down in 1619 and reiterated in 1659 and stated that the sons of noblemen would be charged twenty marks, other students £10 and bursars were to be exempt (Vance, 2003).

Marischal College was not alone in imposing religious restrictions on students. Oxford and Cambridge effectively barred nonconformists until 1871, when religious tests were finally removed (Williams, 1985). Nonconformists were able to go to 'London University', (the forerunner of University College London), which opened in 1828 and had low fees and no religious tests.

In 1873 a 'university extension movement' began at Cambridge and it emerged at Oxford a few years later. Lecturers from Cambridge and Oxford giving a series of lectures in northern towns after representatives from these towns petitioned the University of Cambridge to open up 'to those whose circumstances prevent them from being able to reside there' (Fieldhouse, 1996: 37). In 1891 university extension was described by one of its pioneers as being 'for the whole nation' (38). It was not aimed particularly at the poor or working-class (indeed it was very popular with middle-class women), but the promoters of university extension were concerned by their failure to attract young middle-class men and working-class male students (there was no real attempt to attract working-class women).

Interestingly, Fieldhouse, (1996), observes that the reason why working-class people didn't participate in university extension was that many of them felt uncomfortable with the alien bourgeois culture of university extension and academic approaches. Such theories can be found today in the literature analysing why certain social groups don't go into HE (Archer & Hutchings, 2000; Hutchings & Archer, 2001). This phenomenon is explored throughout



this thesis, particularly in Part II, Chapters One, Three, Four and Five. Furthermore, fees for the university extension lectures were beyond the means of working-class students. This again parallels some contemporary concerns relating to student contributions to HE. The university extension movement had suffered a serious decline by 1914 and finally came to an end in the early 1930s.

Some of the premises used for university extension later evolved into university colleges and then universities, (eg. Bristol, Leeds, Nottingham, Sheffield, Reading, Exeter).

Fieldhouse (1996: 41) states that university extension

'failed to provide for the whole nation; it failed to develop a social conscience; and it failed to maintain the high educational standards anticipated by its founders. Its lack of public funding...meant that it was forced to chase popularity instead of quality, and price itself beyond the means of most working-class people.'

Interestingly, such charges have also been levelled at the result of current HE policy, a subject to which I will return later.

So far, I have only mentioned women in the context of their presence in the university extension movement. Of course, women would not and could not have attended the earlier establishments that have been mentioned because of the restrictions on women's behaviour and opportunities at the time. However, women's education became a topical issue in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and over the next few decades the barriers that women had faced in their quest for education were gradually dismantled.

The struggle for women to be allowed into medicine, and perhaps the wider struggle for women in HE generally, was represented by Elizabeth Garrett Anderson's attempts to become medically qualified. She initially had to enrol as a nurse because no medical school would admit her. Sympathetic people

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gave her lectures, but then no examining board would examine her. Eventually, in 1865, the Society of Apothecaries licensed her to practice medicine. Yet she still had no qualifying degree in medicine. Elizabeth eventually had to go to the Sorbonne to qualify, which had finally opened its doors to women. It wasn't until 1876 that Parliament passed an Act permitting women to enter all of the medical professions.

Shortly after Elizabeth Garrett Anderson's battle, steps were finally taken signalling the acceptance of women in HE. Two colleges for women at Cambridge and two at Oxford were established by end of 1870s. The University College of Cardiff and Manchester both admitted women by 1883. The College of North Wales, which soon became the University College of North Wales, admitted women on establishment, in 1884. Approximately one third of the students were women when the college opened. The College of North Wales had an interesting and unusual foundation. The small farmers on Anglesey and local quarrymen made financial contributions, funding scholarships, although support was also forthcoming from wealthy benefactors (Williams, 1985).

The First World War had a profound effect on universities, causing the rapid development and expansion of technical HE. The relatively poor development of science education in Britain in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was acknowledged and Imperial College was founded in 1908 as an attempt to co-ordinate academia and industry. By the time that the First World War was underway, 'The Times' (February 9<sup>th</sup>, 1916) was quoted as stating that the universities were considered to 'have woven themselves into the very fabric of our national life' (Gente, 2003: 127). During this time, state funding of, and intervention in, the universities were seen by many as a truly dreadful thing, a reminder of the German-Prussian educational system (Gente, 2003).



After the First World War, there was a desire to revive the humanities in universities and these subjects finally regained some of the prestige that they had lost.

In 1907, Oxford University, in partnership with the Worker's Educational Association, (WEA) had set up a network of tutorial classes in industrial towns, aimed at working-class people. Most universities in England and Wales followed Oxford's lead. This movement encompassed ideas of individual self-fulfilment, social purpose, public service, social justice and class emancipation. It was thought that it would reduce pressures and conflict, neutralise class antagonism and integrate the working-classes into British society (Fieldhouse, 1996). Interestingly, Fieldhouse (1996), perceived the tutorial class movement to be concerned with enabling students to fulfil themselves intellectually, or to become better educated, not simply to become better trained workers. During the First World War, the proportion of women in tutorial classes rapidly increased. The movement thrived until the Second World War, when there was a temporary decline. The movement did not aim to serve the whole community, but instead saw its remit as redressing the social imbalance in education by making university scholarships available to the working-classes. However, the tutorial classes did always contain large numbers of clerical workers and teachers and the number of manual worker students steadily declined.

Fieldhouse (1996) chronicles that in 1919 the Ministry of Reconstruction's Adult Education Committee produced a Final Report recommending the establishment of university extramural departments, stressing that these departments would be a link between the university and the non-academic world. The Report also talked of bringing HE into every community, so that it became 'as universal as citizenship' and referred to ideas of what we would now conceptualise as wide access to lifelong HE and continuing professional development. Paradoxically during the inter-war years, the expansion of

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extramural departments was marked by a decline in the proportion of working-class students (Fieldhouse, 1996).

After World War Two, there was rapid extramural expansion in England, Scotland and Wales. By then, nearly all universities had established extramural departments and numbers of staff increased. During the 1950s and 1960s the extramural departments, like the universities that they were attached to, became increasingly establishments serving the educated middle-classes in their quest for self-fulfilment. The commitment to educating the working-classes and disadvantaged waned. University extramural departments also often took on the role of training welfare state professionals such as social workers. Certificated courses were also an area of growth in the 1960s, as were day-release courses for trade union officials. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, radical tutors had started to move into the extramural departments, bringing with them once more ideas of social purpose (Fieldhouse, 1996). The 1970s saw a different emphasis put on the extramural departments, that of educating people for the employment market. A similar philosophy was beginning to take hold in the parent universities, perhaps reflecting the economic problems of the time.

It is worth mentioning here the adult residential colleges, established to offer HE to educationally disadvantaged people. These were initiated by educationists and philanthropists and supported by some Local Education Authorities, trade unions, the Workers Educational Association and by some within the University Extension Movement. These colleges grew substantially immediately post-war, due to interest and support from the Army Educational Service and the 1944 Education Act (Iphofen, 1996). The adult residential colleges did suffer from dilemmas involving clashes of ideology, ie. collectivist ideals of working-class education versus an individualist ethos (Iphofen, 1996). Prior to 1919, students of these colleges returned to their original communities and occupations, but by 1939 many looked for improved career

prospects and approximately 50% went to university (Speak, 1949). Iphofen (1996) documents how the 'remedial paternalism' of the adult residential colleges lay uneasily against their goal of 'class activism'.

Until the 1960s, universities were doing what they had done for generations, educating a small sector of the population, that sector being mostly young, privileged, and male. In 1963 the Robbins Report on Higher Education was published by the Committee on Higher Education, concerned with the future of HE. At the time that the Robbins Report was published, approximately 4 or 5% of the relevant age group went to university (Budd, 2003). The Robbins Report set out four aims of HE. Budd (2003) reports them as follows.

Instruction in skills suitable to play a part in the general division of labour; a system to produce not mere specialists but rather cultivated men and women; the advancement of learning through research; and the transmission of a common culture and common standards of citizenship. The Report proposed substantial university expansion, determined by student demand – it proposed that courses should be available for all those qualified to pursue them and who wished to do so. It was believed that about 12% of the population would be so qualified (Budd, 2003).

Some of the underlying ideas and assumptions in the Robbins Report are of interest in the context of the current debate on HE. The Report found it necessary to point out that HE had an economic value. It argued for an increased focus on employment-related skills whilst continuing to represent the values of traditional liberal education. 'Employment-related' and 'skills' are terms that were scarcely used in connection with universities until Robbins, although the polytechnics did have a strong vocational emphasis. Such terms dominate present day debates concerning HE.

It also remarked upon 'the absolute necessity' for more places in HE if the country was 'to hold its own in the modern world'. We hear some government ministers arguing this today. One difference, however, is that the Robbins

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Report rejected the view that economic benefits could be measured by the earnings differentials of graduates. They considered that this type of calculation would underestimate the value of university education to society (Budd, 2003). Yet the idea of graduates earning higher salaries than they otherwise would have had they not had the benefit of HE is often promoted as a good one in present debates concerning the desirability of HE expansion and may well have been an influential factor with aspirant students in the 1960s.

The Conservative government of the day accepted the recommendations of the Report and the proposed university expansion began. Over the following years a number of new universities, such as Stirling and Surrey, were established and a substantial increase in student numbers occurred.

Despite the many changes that HE system underwent some ideas concerning HE remained fairly constant. Although Robbins introduced the importance of 'employment' into the notion of the purpose of a university education, the primary function of universities was considered to be education and the pursuit of knowledge. It was accepted that this luxury was only available to a few, usually relatively privileged, members of society, although many saw this as an undesirable situation. Polytechnics however did have a tradition of employment related education.

The arrival of Margaret Thatcher's administration in 1979 can be perceived as the beginning of an enormous contemporary upheaval for HE. By the beginning of the 1980s, the Conservative government was widely perceived by the staff in universities as being hostile to them, their work and their institutions. In their eyes, this was confirmed during the 1980s when parts of the HE sector suffered severe and painful financial pruning implemented by the University Grants Committee, (UGC), headed by Sir Peter Swinnerton-Dyer. Many considered that some universities were fortunate to survive this. Change, and even more suggestions for change, followed shortly, but it was primarily change in systems of HE funding, both in funding for the research

carried out within Higher Education Institutions, (HEIs), or financial support for students. Despite ideas being expressed by some members of the Government, their advisors and supporters that some rather questionable activities were being pursued in HEIs, (usually involving the funding of research or teaching of courses with a content that was interpreted as opposing certain Government policies), the notion of the purpose of HE, especially universities, was not fundamentally challenged – it was there to educate and disseminate knowledge, the controversy mainly being about what was taught and researched, how this was being financed and how it contributed to UK economic growth.

During the early 1990s, further change occurred when fifty polytechnics and colleges of HE were given university status, becoming generally known as the 'new' or 'post-1992' universities. By this time, the issue of how 'vocational' HE should be was a matter of heated debate, many of the new universities having had a history of vocational, rather than academic, education. 1997 saw the publication of the Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (the 'Dearing Report'), and with this a principle was established - the HE system's primary purpose was to prepare students for the world of work. Many of the new universities considered this to be their remit anyway, but the issue of universities producing employees per se, rather than well-educated people, was anathema to some in the more traditional institutions. Perhaps it was at this point that the real battle for the soul of the universities began.

In 1997 the UK elected a self-styled 'New Labour' Government, headed by Tony Blair. One of his key election slogans was 'Education, Education, Education'. Many within the HE system were clearly relieved at the election of the new Government, believing that what they perceived as a dreadful era of an administration frequently believed to be pathologically hostile to academia was over, and that the incoming Government would be considerably more

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sympathetic to the needs of the HE sector, whose finances were now very strained indeed.

The new administration however proceeded to introduce and followed policies that were even more radical, creating far more of an upheaval in the HE system than the Conservatives had ever managed by simply starving it of resources and denigrating some aspects of it. Central among the policies was that of 'widening participation', which had certainly been debated previously, but had never been followed with such zeal. The Government did not simply want to make HE more accessible to under-represented groups in HE, (an idea that many had been sympathetic to for some time); they wanted 30% of people in the 18-30 age cohort to experience HE (DfEE, 2000). The desired figure later rose to 50%. (The widening participation agenda is more extensively reviewed in Part II, Chapter One.) It was clear that if this proportion of people were to enter HE, apart from reacting to the stress that such an increase in the numbers of students would exert on the institutions, the institutions were going to have to change in many ways, as they were going to be catering for a rather different sort of student than previously.

(This agenda was strongly linked to the notion of personal responsibility which was the focus of discussion and a driving principle in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The Employment Department, later the Department of Education and Employment, (DfEE), later to become the Department of Education and Skills, (DfES), had begun to influence HE by managing the drip feed of additional resources for such exercises as 'Enterprise in HE'. This was eagerly seized on by HEIs already operating on a reducing resource base. Henceforth, the notions of 'enterprise' and 'employment' began to be connected with HE, a phenomenon that I will look at in more depth shortly. There was also substantial funding in England, (not Wales), for 'Teaching and Learning' projects, competitive and centralised, providing career paths for the few 'curriculum development' leaders who 'made waves', but, through project



funding around the periphery, these failed to address the reduction in the resource base, as once project funding came to an end, HEIs had to provide continuation and/or embedding mechanisms from their existing, reducing funds.)

Simultaneously with the move towards widening participation, the New Labour Government published a number of policy documents explicitly charging HE with a new role: that of fighting 'social exclusion' and playing a part in social justice and reform (DfEE, 1998) largely predicated on the Dearing Report. Although HE had previously sometimes been envisaged as having a role in the social well-being of the nation, the New Labour view of this role was somewhat different to the vision of previous reformers. The university extension movement, the WEA and the adult residential colleges had aimed for self-improvement and the betterment of the whole community and it was expected that these ideals would be taken out into the community and remain there. However, New Labour's 'HE as welfare reform' was directed at quite a different population. Previously, such HE movements had been directed at able but uninformed people. With New Labour however, the people targeted often had quite severe difficulties in various ways and there was almost a reformatory agenda. To use Rose's (1989) notion, it is the 'soul' of the student that needs to be reformed, the very intimate personal, spiritual field eg. one's 'self-esteem', 'employability' (DfEE, 1998). The very purpose of HE had now been redefined within a short space of time (New Labour's particular vision of the role that HE has to play as part of welfare reform is examined further in Part II, Chapter Two of this thesis). Few resources were allocated to implement this change in role, and the training and nature of the staff within HE remained substantially the same as it had always been. The battle against social exclusion that the HE sector is now expected to participate in, and the discourse around a related concept that has evolved at much the

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same time, 'employability', has resulted in such profound changes for HE that it is worth examining these ideas, and their impact on HE, a little further.

### **Social Exclusion and Employability**

Social exclusion now enjoys a high profile in policymaking, yet it is still ill-defined. During the 1980s, economic and associated social problems were evident in the UK. Unemployment was high, however one compiled the figures, and there was much talk, particularly in the liberal press, of an 'underclass' having developed, a dispossessed group of people, without education, employment, or money, often thought to be involved in criminal activity, whose prospects were perceived to be grim. The discourse surrounding this underclass metamorphosed into the discourse of the 'socially excluded'.

In 1997, Peter Mandelson, the Minister without Portfolio in the newly elected Labour Government, stated that the vision of the Government was to end social exclusion. In December of the same year, the new Prime Minister, Tony Blair, launched the Social Exclusion Unit, established to deal with this problem.

Kleinman (2000: 53) looked at the concept of social exclusion in some depth, and noted that it 'has moved to centre stage in British policymaking with remarkable speed'. He also argued that the concepts of the 'underclass' or 'social exclusion' do not assist policymaking, suggesting that 'focusing on social exclusion is politically attractive because it avoids the difficulties associated with addressing inequalities and power relations in wider society' (55).

Bynner & Parsons (2002: 290) talked about the polarisation between the 'haves' and 'have nots' in terms of 'human capital' attributes (Becker, 1975), and mentioned that such polarisation is 'increasingly characterised as social exclusion for a substantial minority from mainstream adult life'. They refer to



earlier work showing that the consequences may be 'patchy employment prospects...difficult relationships, lack of social and political participation, poor physical and mental health, drug abuse, and criminality'.

The widening participation strategies have been linked to the values of equity and social cohesion (Naidoo, 2000). Learning is thought to contribute to a sense of 'belonging, responsibility and identity' within communities. HE is seen to offer a way out of 'dependency and low expectation' and is thought to be 'capable of overcoming a vicious circle of underachievement, self-depreciation and petty crime' (DfEE, 1998, quoted in Naidoo, 2000: 28). The Government's justification for following a policy of widening participation is that it constitutes a weapon in the war against social exclusion (HE as a weapon in the battle against social exclusion is explored in this thesis in Part II, Chapter Two).

The concern regarding social exclusion grew along with a similar concern about people's 'employability'. The two can be perceived to be linked in that the socially excluded were usually unemployed, and were thus thought to be lacking in employability. Just as fighting social exclusion has become the remit of HE, so has increasing the employability of students and this has resulted in considerable change for HEIs. The recently evolved concept of employability has had a huge impact on the construction of the present HE system, as well as causing profound changes to other parts of the State apparatus.

Although I am deeply fascinated with the notion of employability and its history, I do not have the scope in this thesis to examine it in detail, so I will merely outline here its possible genesis and briefly explore the profound effect that the concern with employability has had, and is having, on HEIs. The notions of both social exclusion and employability, and the role that they play in the present HE system, are analysed in more depth in Baker & Brown (forthcoming).

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Peck & Theodore (2000: 729) examined the concept of employability and noted that the 'heavily loaded keyword has been afforded a prominent position in the recent European employment and social policy guidelines'. They argue that although the term employability may be relatively new, the ideas that it represents are not, basically attributing the problem of unemployment to the unemployed themselves, rather than to the 'old' problems of demand deficiency and job shortage, thus conceiving of unemployment in 'individualistic and behavioural terms'.

Mills (2002: 347) also speculated over the genesis of employability while reviewing the ideological transformation of the Labour party during the 1990s, noting that 'there was a strong desire to attack the effects of poverty through worklessness by increasing the capacity of the unemployed to find work'. He observes that

'if government no longer has a role in creating employment... it can instead ensure that workers have the necessary skills to make them attractive to putative employers' (348).

Noting an important relatively recent shift in government thinking, Mills states that: 'individuals are encouraged to take responsibility for their own employability' (350), and believes that this 'is much more in keeping with contemporary neo-liberal solutions...' (354).

Gray, (1995), gives an account of the beginnings of the importance of employment and the employability discourse in the context of HE. Holroyde (1995: 6) chronicled that there was concern in the 1980s that HE was

'dominated by cloistered scholarship, the content and delivery designed as much for the pleasure of the professor as the stimulation of the student...'

In 1984, the UGC and the NAB (National Advisory Body for Public Sector Higher Education) issued a joint statement, 'Higher Education and Needs of

Society', to identify skills that were not believed to be addressed by a conventional degree course. (This was actually published as Section 2 of the NAB document, 'A Strategy for the Late 1980s and Beyond'). 1986 saw the NAB publish 'Transferable Personal Skills in Employment: The Contribution of Higher Education'. The recommendations within this document were formulated by a group including employers, making the accusation that UK graduates lacked drive and initiative. This claim was made in the face of Margaret Thatcher's 'enterprise culture' and naturally such a government sought change. In 1987 a meeting was called by the Rt Hon Lord Young and the Rt Hon Kenneth Baker to discuss ways of achieving 'a greater awareness of enterprise...emphasis on small business...how higher education might contribute' (Holroyde, 1995: 7). 'Enterprise in Higher Education', (EHE), a government sponsored initiative, seeking curriculum change in order to 'improve the quality of preparation of students for working life' (Gray, 1995: vii) was conceived and very soon born. Employers and their desires and needs, featured heavily in the EHE programme. By the late 1980s the Employment Department was interested in 'the world of work' and 'better preparation for working life' as the focus for EHE.

The publication of the Dearing Report in 1997, and the government response to the Report, explicitly endorsed the links between HE and the employability of graduates. The following extracts from the Report, included in the subsequent government response to it, 'Higher Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Response to The Dearing Report', demonstrate this:

Recommendation 18: 'We recommend that all institutions should, over the medium term, identify opportunities to increase the extent to which programmes help students to become familiar with work, and help them to reflect on such experience.'

Recommendation 19: 'We recommend that the Government, with immediate effect, works with representative employer and professional organisations to

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encourage employers to offer more work experience opportunities for students.'

Response: 6.6: 'The Government agrees with the Committee that enhancing the employability of graduates is a key task for higher education and that work experience can be very valuable in helping students develop...'

Response 6.7: 'A number of recommendations which are covered...will also contribute significantly to improving the employability of graduates...'

Harvey (2000: 4) also explored the development of the employability agenda in HE and recorded that following the Dearing report, there was 'growing pressure from government and government agencies to ensure better links between higher education and employers' and the DfEE (1999: 40) noted that

'The Government has endorsed the view of the Dearing Committee of Inquiry 'Higher Education in the Learning Society' July 1997, that enhancing the employability of graduates is a key task for higher education.'

Just prior to that, the publication of the Green Paper, 'The Learning Age: A Renaissance for a New Britain', demonstrated once more that education and employment were seen as being intertwined:

'The fostering of an enquiring mind and the love of learning are essential for our future success. To achieve stable and sustainable growth, we will need a well-educated, well equipped and adaptable labour force.' (DfEE, 1998: 942).

Perhaps the biggest endorsement of the importance of employability in HE was the subsequent inclusion of an 'employment' performance indicator into the accountability mechanisms of HE in the UK (HEFCE, 2001). This had enormous effect on HEIs, as chronicled by Rolfe (2003), in a study of the effect of funding on universities. She found that one new university had, as one of its specific aims, 'to improve employers' views of the quality of their

graduates' (26). Rolfe also observed that 'senior managers were acutely conscious of their university's position on...employability' (32). She quoted a senior manager of a traditional university referring to employability measures used to assess a university's quality:

'We have been extraordinarily naïve and have actually given honest, straightforward answers...Other places we believe to have said to their graduates, 'Would you like to work in the car park on a graduation ceremony day? Good, here's some money and you're employed'. We have only put down people who are in gainful employment in a relevant subject.' (33).

In recent years, universities have certainly perceived that embracing the concept of employability will attract students. Although university prospectuses have long since referred to graduate employment opportunities, there is now great emphasis on this. A quick look at university websites reflects this – universities clearly use it as a way to market themselves. At the time of writing, (February 2005), De Montfort University's website was emblazoned with the slogan 'increase your employability'. Most HEIs websites have references to, or details of, either directly or indirectly, the skills that the students will acquire which impress employers, or the sort of employment that the prospective graduate can expect to find. University of Wales, Aberystwyth, boasts that its students can 'improve skills employers value'. The University of Luton's website has a section entitled 'Where are they now?' featuring Luton graduates with glamorous and exciting-sounding job titles. The University of Wales, Bangor, announces on its website the percentage of graduates in employment or further training six months after graduation. The impression gained from these websites of the importance of employability in the marketing of HEIs is backed up by the literature. Rolfe (2003) noticed that in the marketing of universities there was a new emphasis on the employment benefits of HE and that the post-1992 universities referred in

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their marketing material to the vocational content and outcomes of their courses. A senior manager was quoted:

'We...say 'Yes, you will finish your course in debt, but (you) will be able to pay it back because your employment prospects and market worth will have improved.'" (41).

Rolfe noted that the post-1992 universities 'had little difficulty' with this message. A marketing manager at a new university was quoted as saying:

'As a new university we've stayed very close to the poly ethos, so nearly all the courses involve the possibility of working after the course.' (42).

In her conclusions, Rolfe summarised by observing the increase in the vocational content or vocational relevance of current courses and concludes that this has been a consequence of student demand.

The mantra of employability has not just had a superficial influence on university marketing ploys. The literature on HE curricula reveals that it has affected the content of HE courses. Knight et al (2002: 263) observed that institutions are 'being given a fairly firm steer regarding their curricula'. As a consequence of collaborating with a 'Skills plus' project involving 17 departments from 4 universities, designed to enhance student employability, Knight et al found that

'a need was perceived for the dimensions of employability to be introduced early in a curriculum and revisited periodically'. They also suggest that 'The assessment of employability...needs to be developed...' (272).

It is clear that the idea of employability has exerted enormous influence on policymakers, and the managers and staff of HEIs. It would seem to have also had a major effect on the consciousness of students. As yet unpublished data that I have collected revealed that although previous generations of students talked of going to university because they were interested in



academic study and that employment 'wasn't an issue', (a phrase used by a professor in a traditional university when remembering the attitudes of his generation), today, both students aiming for HE entry and students already in HE, were overwhelmingly giving employment-related reasons for entering HE: 'I went to get a job' (female student at a new university); 'I think getting a job out of it, getting a better paid salary is part of the reasons [sic] why I decided to go' (male student at a traditional university). Some students stated that university was now such an expensive venture that it would be unaffordable simply to go to university because you were interested in studying a particular subject. Published work, and much of the research conducted for the work presented in this thesis, (referred to in greater depth at later stages particularly in Part II, Chapters Three and Four), revealed similar findings. Employability has had an effect on the staff of universities too - one lecturer rather cynically stated that the main purpose of universities these days was to 'produce employees'.

We have seen how many students today go into HE in the pursuit of a 'good job'. Historically, graduates assumed that they would find professional employment, or at least employment that could be considered middle-class. It was accepted that 'good' employment would be waiting for one on graduation and the main point of discussion when applying for university was the subject one wanted to study or the institution the student wanted to attend. Graduate jobs were relatively easy to come by and graduates fewer. Today's economy is very different, with many more graduates seeking jobs and the competition for prestigious 'graduate employment' more intense. Some courses are clearly vocational with good prospects for employment. A degree in medicine still virtually guarantees the graduate a professional job and degrees in subjects like engineering, veterinary science and pharmacy also mean good employment prospects. But the situation today is vastly different from the situation thirty years ago.



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Despite the impact of the employability discourse, a fierce debate rages over the question of graduates' employment destinations and whether there is now an over-supply of graduates. Harvey (2000: 5) thinks that there is not, just that graduates need to step outside the idea of a graduate career. Harvey, in this context, seems to accept a very wide definition of 'graduate employment'. Interestingly enough, Harvey quotes the definition of a graduate job now offered by the Association of Graduate recruiters in the UK as 'any job that a graduate does'.

Aston & Bekhradnia (2003: 11) point out that although the HE White Paper (DfES, 2003a) states that graduates and people with sub-degree qualifications earn on average about 50% more than non-graduates, 'calculations rely on previous data about entrants to a very different labour market with far fewer graduates'. Any statement about the financial advantages gained by today's graduates are purely speculative. What we do know is that 'graduate premiums', although still large and still significant, 'have been falling since the early 1980s' (Aston & Bekhradnia, 2003: 13).

Another phenomenon to be taken into account, already mentioned, is that of a graduate doing what is traditionally considered a non-graduate job. This now includes a significant minority of graduates (Mason, 2001). Aston & Bekhradnia (2003: 20) while reporting on the findings of research by the DfES (2001) noted 'incidences of the under-utilisation of graduate skills across the business and public service occupational group'. Aston & Bekhradnia (2003) also reported that no evidence was found to suggest that graduates were progressing into traditional graduate roles after obtaining work experience, nor was there evidence to suggest that such graduates were growing their jobs into traditional graduate level jobs.

Brown & Hesketh (2004) have looked at the graduate employment situation in detail and attempted to make some predictions. They maintain that numbers of lower skilled jobs have expanded at far faster rates than 'knowledge

worker' jobs. They also predict that the 'knowledge economy' is not set to expand. Brown et al consider that the government have vastly over-estimated the future demand for graduates in the economy and maintain that a university degree is not enough to make one employable; it merely allows entry into the competition for tough-entry jobs rather than entry into the winner's enclosure.

A recent report based on HESA, (Higher Education Statistics Agency), data (Taylor, 2005a) makes sombre reading for any students who believe that they will easily find a traditional 'graduate job' when they obtain their degree. The analysis in this report showed that only 12% of graduates find employment in a 'traditional' graduate job.

So it would seem that for many graduates, a 'good job' clearly cannot be taken for granted. Some students begin to realise this while still at university. One student studying sports science at a new university told me that:

'I think I should get a job that I want at the end of the course but I think it's going to be due to me doing extra certificates on top of my degree. I don't think I'd get the job I wanted through just having my solo degree'.

(This student had worked extremely hard at acquiring further qualifications, such as a lifeguard's certificate, an aerobic instructor's qualification and a certificate enabling her to teach in a gym, whilst she was an undergraduate).

Despite the widespread take-up of the notion of employability across the HE sector generally, opposing views are still held concerning the application of the idea. Harvey (2000: 9) deals with academic instrumentalism associated with employability, as well as a more traditional sort of instrumentalism, in which

'engaging directly in the world of work is seen at best tangential to the principal concern of education and, at worst, anathema to it'.

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Harvey proposes the need for an 'omniversity', an integrated lifelong university, not a 'fortress of academic impregnability'. Harvey (2000: 11) believes that the current issue for universities is addressing employability skills in an appropriate way:

'not about delivering employability skills in some generic sense, rather it is about developing critical lifelong learners – and employability is subsumed as a subset within that'.

Harvey concludes by stating that the

'...real challenge...is not how to accommodate 'employability' but how to shift the traditional balance of power from the education provider to those participating in the learning experience' (14).

Gibbs (2000: 560) takes a very different view while examining the notion of employability in relation to HE. He observes that there is a danger that

'we might instrumentalise our education system to such an extent that employability becomes the prime purpose of higher education'.

Gibbs considers that an

'ill-considered notion of employability stripped of the context of its communities' values is put forward as the basis of education which rapidly constitutes itself as training to work for others, as employees or as debtors to financiers' (564).

Gibbs (2000: 568) comments on the possible outcomes for HE and the students:

'Should the learning become only a means-to-an-end instruction...the process can become impersonal and lacks a realisation in humanity'.

Contu et al (2003: 941) while carrying out an analysis on 'learning discourse', also consider employability:

'since the 1980s a utilitarian conception of education has become increasingly dominant, so that education is increasingly conceived of in terms of vocationalism'.

They demonstrate how the learning discourse encourages people to understand themselves as learners, responsible for their own employability. This idea is borne out by data presented in this thesis, showing many individuals adhering to the notion of the responsible reflexive self. However, Contu et al do believe that the 'narrowing of education' 'never really exerted the hegemonic influence which New Right ideologues might have wished for' (941). Some would disagree.

Hesketh, (2003: 1), describes employability as representing no more than 'policy chimera'. He argues that responsibility for lifelong and economically relevant learning has been relocated with the workforce. Using Aristotle's concept of 'eudaimonia', (that which makes life worth living and lacking in nothing, or the process of achieving one's full potential), he demonstrates how policy makers seem to be advocating enhanced employability as the way to individual eudaimonia, education being the way to achieve this. Quotes that Hesketh (2003: 9) has extracted from Government sources (at the turn of the millennium) illustrate how individuals are now responsible for both their own employability and the acquisition of 'skills' (often through HE) that ensure such employability. eg. One DfEE Report talks of individuals having a responsibility to invest in their own employability through the acquisition of portable skills, and another talks of individuals reviewing and renewing their own skills regularly to ensure their long-term employability.

Perhaps I should finish this section on employability with an observation from Knight & Yorke (2002: 261) that although some have suggested that employability is an empty concept, it has 'far too much face validity for politicians to abandon it'.

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Although the rhetoric of social exclusion, employability and widening participation is entirely contemporary, many of the issues that HE is grappling with presently seem to be echoes of the debate in earlier times. The perceived failure, in the eyes of many, of the widening participation policy, has parallels with the limitations of the earlier university extension movement, or the tutorial classes. The CVCP, in 1999, identified social class as being a significant problem in creating an inclusive HE system, seeing the continued absence of students in HE from less affluent backgrounds as a significant challenge to HE. Six years later, despite this problem being identified as one causing deep concern, little has changed. As I implement the final touches to this thesis, a HEFCE (2005) report reveals that the proportion of students entering HE from low socio-economic groups is still worryingly small. Despite all the Government initiatives, HE in England has been shown, yet again, to be still predominantly for the middle-classes. Such was the university extension movement, which was supposed to deal with the whole nation, but attracted few working-class people (Fieldhouse, 1996).

One can draw parallels between previous generations' concern at certain groups of people not being able to access a university education and the concerns of our present government. Some early pioneers of HE were concerned that university education was often not open to women. Even as late as 1963, the Robbins Report mentioned the 'wastage' that was female school leavers who were appropriately qualified but not progressing on to HE. Although women now make up over half of HE students, there is still concern regarding their representation in certain fields of study. The fact that even in the early years of Aberdeen, bursaries were available to enable pauper scholars to attend, indicates that lack of income must have been identified as a potential barrier to certain students – the same problem is hotly debated today. Centuries later, University College of North Wales was proud to be educating (albeit only small numbers of) children of the quarrymen and

farmers who lived locally and the perceived radicalism of that action is still a source of pride to many in the locality today. Some HEIs are explicitly trying to attract students from certain under-represented groups. A look at HEIs websites reveals the groups that the institutions are trying to appeal to. The University of Derby and the University of Westminster both have home pages which advertise 'disability support'. Interested parties can click on these home pages and access extensive information relating to the support that these universities offer disabled students. A number of universities, including Manchester Metropolitan University, the University of Wolverhampton and Liverpool John Moores University also feature ethnic minority students prominently on their home pages.

However, the new policy, even though the effects of it have not yet been as far reaching as its advocates had hoped, has not been universally welcomed. Criticism from the opposition and in the lay press abounds, both in the liberal press and in the right-wing press. There have been accusations that the Government is indulging in 'social engineering' (Cavendish, 2004; Henry, 2003); that many students in HE now will not benefit from it; that some degrees being offered by universities are now 'worthless' and that students are being plunged into debt for no benefit, (Luckhurst, 2004); that the courses leading to some degrees are not academically rigorous and that many courses and degrees have been 'dumbed down' (Sharr, 2004). At one point during 2004, the education correspondent of 'The Daily Telegraph', John Clare, was requesting disillusioned academics to act as 'whistleblowers' to expose such dubious practices at their institutions, offering them anonymity. He precipitated a considerable response.

In the wake of this recent sea change in HE policy, which has undoubtedly changed HE, even if there is not the proportion of socio-economically disadvantaged students in the system that was intended by the originators of the policy, we are left with questions relating to the experience of HE as



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intended (by politicians and the society that elected them) and as constructed (by the individuals who are going to pass, or who are passing, or who have passed, through the HE system).

#### Methodological Comments

Each chapter within Part II of this thesis has a methodology of its own. Therefore I will not repeat those details here, but will instead outline the methodologies that I used and explain why I used them. Chapter One consists of a literature review and analysis and I give a detailed account of the methods that were used within this chapter. Chapter Two consists of a socio-political over-view and analysis and therefore does not contain a methodology as such, relying instead on the examination of policy documents, campaigns, academic literature etc. Chapter Six is principally a short philosophical analysis and simply draws on the work of Foucault and a number of other authors.

Chapters Three, Four and Five, ie. those chapters looking at the construction of the habitus, have very similar methodologies. This may make the reading of these methodologies seem repetitive, but I hope that this will be excusable in the context of this explanation.

The methodologies used for Chapters Three, Four and Five were eclectic, adaptations stemming from a number of social science methods, including phenomenography, phenomenology, grounded theory and biographical analysis. Because of the nature of the work presented in this thesis, methodological approaches were needed that united all the themes involved. I wish to make links between levels of analysis and processes in the social sciences, not simply taking phenomenographic accounts 'for granted', but relating them to sociological structures. I believe that this is consistent with the approaches of Rose and Bourdieu, such approaches needing to consider the breadth of the whole range of information.



I concentrate on the experiences of individuals who were either in, or had been through, HE, as part of my interest lies in identifying features and experiences of those people who are successful at gaining access to HE. Although it might well have been valuable to have looked at people who are 'aspiring' to HE, not all of these people realise their ambition. An investigation of the reasons for this would of course make a useful study, but would then have been more of an investigation into 'barriers' to accessing HE, an area now very well researched, rather than a study of the self-construction of those individuals successful in overcoming such barriers.

Although carrying out a large scale survey, rather than small scale individual interviews, would have enabled me to increase the numbers of individuals studied and therefore perhaps to study patterns or trends that may not be obvious in a smaller survey, I initially chose to look at individuals' narratives/biographies as I believe that this yields more subtle, perhaps more meaningful, information. Most importantly, a 'questionnaire'-led survey would have involved the danger of my asking individuals about issues I thought were important, rather than allowing them to relate their own narratives and reveal what they perceived to be relevant. I use the term 'narratives' here loosely, literally meaning my respondents' stories, as related by them, after Richmond (2002: 1) 'based upon their recollections and statements about their own feelings and perspectives'. To use Labov's (1997: 2) description 'The tellers were not known as gifted story tellers...They were ordinary people...They did not manufacture events or elaborate the experience of others. Their narratives were an attempt to convey simply and seriously...important experiences of their own lives'. Scholars such as Labov are experienced in highly refined techniques of socio-linguistic narrative analysis which I do not use here. In this thesis, I am simply interested in my respondents' stories and what they thought was happening, or what the salient themes in their stories or biographies were. As Redwood (1999: 674)

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states 'the form of the analysis often appears to be a largely intuitive process. What is common...is an emphasis on temporality – time and place, plot, scene and the multiply-placed voice of the researcher'.

Although there is an emphasis on qualitative research in this thesis, I intend the work presented here to constitute a pilot study which will inform the design of a large scale survey.

There is of course both existing and archival material related to many of the themes in this thesis. I did access much of this and used it to gain a 'feel' of the area and to inform my thinking. However, because my interest is partly in issues such as the use of available narratives, people's construction of their experiences in the light of recent policy and what we now consider to be a 'good thing' and in the light of the influence of commentators such as Rose, Giddens and Beck, I chose to 'start afresh', conducting new interviews. However, I also include participants who passed through HE at a time when society was structured, and HE was conceived of, somewhat differently.

The material derived from these interviews consists of biographical reminiscences, and there are obvious problems associated with interpreting such material naively or uncritically. People may simply remember things inaccurately or selectively, there may be social distortion in such accounts, or there may be a certain romantic harking back to a 'golden age', where of course the summers were hotter. Nonetheless, despite such pitfalls, I believe that biographical interviews yield valuable results. They are the only way in which people's own stories may be heard and are the only way in which we can gauge what the individual thought was real, or was happening, rather than what may actually have been real, or happening. This distinction is particularly important in my ideas relating to the construction of the habitus. It is also valuable to explore the way people currently talk about HE, as this forms the field, in a Bourdieuan sense, for the next generation. We can see

this phenomenon manifesting itself now, as people who passed through HE in previous decades experience a sense of 'it was different in my day', some of these people having developed the discourses of 'dumbing down' and 'Mickey Mouse degrees'.

The work presented in Chapters Three and Four is based on interviews held with twenty men and twenty women. They were recruited using a 'snowball' sampling technique, in which people known to the researcher were invited to participate in the study and then asked to recommend others who might be willing to take part. The approach may be considered to be self-fulfilling, but I did request that people should not 'prime' others by discussing what they had talked about themselves, but simply ask their acquaintances if they would be willing to participate in a research project about their experiences at university. Although I accept that a high degree of trust was involved here and that trust can always be broken, people did not seem to simply repeat others' answers, although recurring themes emerged. People also tended to greet me with phrases such as 'can you explain what the project is about?' or 'can you tell me what you want me to talk about?'

Although the sample size would constitute a small one in some academic disciplines, in a biographical study of this nature, it represents a sizeable number. The interviews were open, with me beginning with the question 'Was university a life-changing experience for you?', then allowing the participant to answer in their own way, with me asking for clarification or elaboration on certain points. Although it could be argued that my initial question was highly leading, I decided to open the interviews thus on the basis of much previous work by other scholars that has repeatedly found people experience HE as life-changing in some way. However, in the light of such possible criticism, it was refreshing to find a very small number of people were able to state quite frankly that they did not believe that it had been life-changing and then explain why they felt this. The data in Chapter Five are derived from

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interviews with ten men and nine women. Although this is a smaller sample than that used for the work presented in Chapters Three and Four, the phenomenon explored is narrower. I was satisfied that my sample size was sufficient from which to draw meaningful conclusions because there were indications that a 'saturation point' had been reached, as themes and issues were being repeatedly mentioned and described, in the same contexts, using strikingly similar language. Again, participants were recruited using a snowball sampling method, as before with the same request made not to 'prime' others being recruited.

I will now provide a brief overview on the methodology that I consciously drew upon when developing the research techniques used for the studies presented in Chapters Three, Four and Five.

### **Phenomenography and Phenomenology**

These two approaches were the obvious ones to employ, both being explorations of experience, but differing in method. It is salient here to distinguish such methods from 'ethnomethodology', which may be described as the study of the ways in which people make sense of their social world (Poore, 2000). Ethnomethodology suggests that all meanings can only ever be subjective and has a distrust of analytic schemes and researcher identified categories, whereas phenomenography extracts themes that make themselves apparent to the researcher.

Phenomenography may be described as 'the description of some examined phenomenon' (Kroksmark, 1987: 226-7), with human experience as its object. It is focused on ways of experiencing different phenomena, ways of seeing them and of knowing about them. It encompasses the variation of experience and the architecture of variation. The differing experiences, understandings, etc are characterised in terms of description. The dominant method for collecting such data is the individual interview, carried out as a

dialogue, whereby the interviewee is encouraged to reflect on previously unthematized aspects of the phenomenon being examined. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysis carried out on the transcripts. The units of analysis are the distinctly different ways of experiencing the phenomena. Marton (1986: 38) distinguishes 'pure' phenomenography as 'how people conceive of various aspects of their reality'.

Closely related to this is 'phenomenology', a movement whose adherents included Sartre. This attempts to capture the fullness of all the ways in which a person experiences and describes the phenomena being studied. To summarise these approaches in the words of Marton (1996), 'While the phenomenologist might ask 'How does the person experience their world?' the phenomenographer would ask something more like 'What are the critical aspects of ways of experiencing the world that make people able to handle it in more or less efficient ways?''

### **Grounded Theory**

Strauss & Corbin (1998), high profile advocates of grounded theory, maintain that it is a qualitative research method using a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived (ie. moving from the specific to the more general) theory about a phenomenon. It is considered to be a methodology in which the theory is derived from the data and involves expanding upon an explanation of a phenomenon by identifying its key elements, then categorising the relationships of these elements to the context and process of the study. Three distinct but overlapping processes of analysis are usually involved: open, axial and selective coding. Open coding involves 'cracking open' data, ie. identifying relevant categories. Axial coding is the process by which codes are related to each other and is usually used when the categories are in an advanced state of development. Selective coding involves selecting a 'core' category, and relating all the other categories to that one, the idea in grounded theory to develop a single storyline around which everything else

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'hangs'. The data is usually analysed by more than one person, agreement being reached on common themes in the narratives. Grounded theory was developed and initially used within sociological research, but has now been utilised in fields such as education and nursing.

### **Biographical Analysis**

This has been approached in many different ways by a plethora of researchers. Denzin (1989) has been particularly influential in biographical analysis. However, I have deliberately avoided Denzin's approach, as I believe many of his ideas privilege 'the expert' when attempting to understand people's narratives. Although this is an understandable approach in some contexts, for example much of Denzin's work dealt with pathologies, which may be why he suggested giving interview material obtained to mental health professionals to analyse, on the grounds that they are somehow better at interpreting such data. However, this is complicit with an elitism that I want to avoid, and more importantly, is inconsistent with my desire to understand people's narratives in their own terms. Therefore I attempt to use strategies that may be seen as utilised by researchers at 'the other end of the spectrum', privileging the informant. Of course, in any dialogue between two people there will be issues of understanding and interpretation, and this has to be borne in mind. It could also be argued that by using Bourdieuan and Foucauldian thought, the expert is still being privileged. However, in the context in which I use Bourdieu and Foucault here, the 'expert' is used as a possible theoretical framework to explain phenomena, rather than to actually interpret someone else's story. Therefore I favour taking an approach, even one that could be criticised for its 'naivety', that allows the respondents to relate their own stories, along with their own interpretation. This is essential if the construction of the 'self', or the 'habitus' is to be explored.

Although I use an eclectic approach, I was particularly influenced by the work of Chamberlayne and colleagues (Chamberlayne & King, 1997; Chamberlayne



*et al* 2000; 2004), who employed biographical analysis when working with 'carers' or those being 'cared for'. My respondents were not in this category, but Chamberlayne *et al*'s method is useful for exploring patterns of biographical continuity and change and interrelationships between the personal and the social. Many of Chamberlayne *et al*'s participants were also from marginalised groups, who had sometimes later joined very different, more dominant, groups. This was not one of my prime reasons for drawing on Chamberlayne *et al*'s methodology, but this dimension of their work may have contributed to mine.

For validity and reliability checks, all analysis of interview data was carried out in conjunction with Dr John Fazey and Dr B.J. Brown, both social scientists. Throughout the course of this research, I became well-acquainted with many of the respondents and I used this informally to strengthen my analysis and ensure that the themes and issues that were identified were appropriate. Although my interviews with the participants provided only a snapshot of their views and understanding of HE, my on-going relationship with many of these participants allowed me to effectively carry out participant validation, where identified themes were challenged against the interpretations of other researchers and against participant observations over a period of time.



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## **Part II**

## **Chapter One**

## **Whose Failure to Adapt?: Governmentality and Individualism in the Widening Participation Debate**

### Introduction

It is now the established policy of the UK Government to widen participation in HE in an attempt to encourage more diverse social and cultural groups to engage in HE, (CVCP, 1998; 2000a;b; DfEE, 2000), with an oft-repeated target of 50% participation among people aged 18-30 by 2010. It was envisaged that this policy would involve significant shifts in the role of HEIs, and amongst their population of applicants, as increasing numbers of non-traditional students would be attempting to enter HE. However, the recent publication of the report from HEFCE (2005) analysing the results of the widening participation policy among young people has made sombre reading for its advocates. The report reveals that HE is still dominated by students from the higher socio-economic groups. The 20% of young people from the most 'advantaged' areas are five to six times more likely to enter HE than the 20% of young people from the least advantaged areas. Furthermore, in terms of participation rates between students from 'advantaged' neighbourhoods and 'disadvantaged' neighbourhoods, the difference actually

increased between 1994 and 2000. Despite these entrenched inequalities however, widening participation has had a considerable effect on the HE system. Because there are now many more people entering HE, there are greater numbers of people in HE from groups that did not previously participate in HE. This fundamental demographic shift is bringing with it a unique set of difficulties as hitherto separate ideas, values and styles of life are brought into contact, and changes are not only being wrought in the applicants, but are being urged with increasing vigour upon HEIs themselves.

There has already been much discussion of the demographic movement of people into post-compulsory education in developed nations and how they may best be educated once they are there, as well as the career prospects they may enjoy once they have graduated (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003; Tonks & Farr, 2003). What interests us here however, are the conceptual shifts which accompany these demographic and policy changes. There have been a number of reconfigurations of what it means to be a student and what HE entails, as well as reinscriptions of the nature of HEIs themselves. These partly involve noteworthy changes in the realm of public discourse, but more interestingly, some of them are sedimenting into the conceptual landscape of thinking about education in a relatively uncontested fashion.

In this context the term 'access' tends to refer to the representation of the overall population of interest in HE, and 'participation' is used to denote the extent to which different subgroups of young people are represented across the various offerings of universities and colleges (Tonks & Farr, 2003). The term 'non-traditional' is generally applied to applicants who are over twenty-one, or from ethnic minorities and/or socio-economic groups who traditionally have been under-represented in HE, or students with qualifications other than 'A' levels. Such students make up an increasing proportion of the HE intake, particularly in the 'new universities' (Connor *et al*, 1999). The UK government has now increased the financial incentive for institutions to widen

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participation, and under the controversial 'top-up fees' policy, the institutions are obliged to demonstrate to the new access regulator, the Office for Fair Access, OFFA, that they are widening access and providing support for poorer students (DfES, 2003a;b; Jary & Jones, 2003). Once non-traditional students have enrolled, institutions and students themselves are faced with the problem of their staying on the courses. There is concern that these 'non-traditional' students have a much higher drop-out rate than traditional students (HEFCE, 1999).

This, then, represents the basic mechanics of the situation. The debates in the public domain are widely rehearsed, both in the popular and educational press and also in the many policy documents on widening participation from bodies such as the CVCP, HEFCE and DfEE (Leslie *et al*, 2002). In addition there is a growing body of literature which has attempted to characterise the difficulties experienced by non-traditional students in HE. Examination of this literature reveals an interesting phenomenon. To a substantial extent, it may be perceived as falling into one or the other of two 'camps'. One of these camps comprises literature that is often published by educational sociologists and draws extensively on sociological theory for an exploration of the difficulties encountered by non-traditional students (Reay, 2001). The other camp, while dealing with the same group of students and their problems, often makes little or no reference to sociological theory and relies on an analysis that problematises the HE system itself. We are struck by the scant interaction between the two camps. Although there is a small number of researchers who are 'bridging the divide', we feel that the divide is sufficiently obvious to be worthy of comment. We have termed the two types of literature the 'sociological literature' and the 'empowerment literature'. It is in the latter that some of the more subtle shifts can be observed and here we will attempt to analyse the kinds of explanations offered in the empowerment literature as to why non-traditional students so often have problems engaging

with HE. It is in this micro-politics of education, where the attitudes, dispositions and cognitive capacities of the participants are brought into being as objects of scrutiny, that some of the most interesting shifts are being observed.

The intention is not to suggest that the empowerment literature is 'wrong', 'misguided, or 'lacking in objectivity' in any simple sense. Rather, we are interested in the way in which implicit models of the process of being educated have been developed by researchers inquiring into the HE process and we will be attentive to the way in which notions of 'limitations' and 'barriers' are constructed in situ by writers on the topic. This kind of analysis has been popularised in the social sciences by Nikolas Rose (1989; 1996) who argues that notions of the predispositions and interior psychological architecture of individuals are forced into being by the forms of inquiry themselves. The way in which persons are conceptualised and problems are formulated has an important mutual relationship with policy and politics in HE. The political context helps to establish the widespread belief that the experience of HE, the skills and competencies it provides, and the life opportunities it transforms, are of great benefit to the individual and the economy (Tonks & Farr, 2003). The way in which the policy questions are formulated generates the sense in which certain kinds of solutions are 'naturally' required once the problems have been posed in a particular way. Traditionally it was the HEIs themselves that defined the benchmarks of entry. Whilst dependent on students for funding, until recently they were remarkably successful in retaining a sense that one was privileged to participate in HE. This intersected with broader discourses of elitism and selectivity so as to create a sense that there was something special about attending. Following from this, widening access involves working upon the potential students so they are ready to participate. Within this model, it is the values and experiences of potential students prior to entry which are somehow lacking.

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This has yielded a number of attempts to provide pre-university experience in the form of outreach courses and top-up programmes (Walker, 1999; Walker *et al*, 2004). This enables the applicants to be refigured as informed and knowledgeable about the HE experience, perhaps even possessing measurable 'skills' and 'competencies' which will aid them on their path. Those embarking on a post-compulsory educational path can be seen as forming a nexus of 'dispositions to learning' where attitudes and skills are intimately connected with a sense of the elite status of the institution for which they are aiming (Hodgkinson & Bloomer, 2000). Moreover, the demand for education is also connected with the students' understanding of the labour market and the role of qualifications within it (Fuller, 2001). Broadly, we might characterise this kind of literature as having a 'dispositional approach', where students who were perhaps once seen as having qualifications or aptitudes, are now seen as having a variety of demographic, cognitive and attitudinal variables which might propel them towards HE. Moreover, in the spirit of widening access, once these issues have been 'forced into being', as Rose, (1989) conceptualised, they are capable of modification. This may be undertaken in ways which will ensure a higher take-up and completion rate, perhaps by means of a suite of 'ascetic practices', (Dean, 1995: 567), through which it is sought to govern the intending student and prepare them for immersion in HE culture.

This approach resonates with over a century of 'scientific' measurement and assessment of students' abilities and attitudes. However, a more interesting second approach has rapidly gained ground in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in which it is the students and their experiences who are taken as the point of reference and it is HEIs that are the objects of critical scrutiny. This newly ascendant strand in the widening participation literature has emphasised an empowering rhetoric, in which students 'speak for themselves' (Archer & Hutchings, 2000; Bamber & Tett, 2001; Bowl, 2000; 2001; 2003; Hutchings & Archer, 2001;



Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003). This raw, hyper-authentic style, using extensive, phoneticised quotes from the students themselves, is a pervasive motif in the widening participation debate. As Fairclough (2003) has noted, this helps to create a sense of freshness, realism and immediacy, in otherwise dry academic reportage. This helps set the stage for a further manoeuvre on the part of many authors in this field, where a segue is undertaken from the students' grievances to an analysis of the HEIs role in society in maintaining inequalities. This might at first seem a refreshing change from the dispositional literature that we have identified above. It might, furthermore, present some new tools for challenging inequalities which might be deployed if we are to maximize the capacity of individuals and collectivities to shape the knowledge bases, contest the authorities and configure the practices that will seek to govern them in the name of their personal betterment and employability (Rose, 1996).

In the empowerment literature however, it is rare to see the governmental powers of education under what Rose calls 'advanced liberalism' exposed or challenged in a thoroughgoing way. In some cases, as we shall see, students' complaints have been taken in themselves as if they were veridical socio-structural analyses of the HEI. This then is a variant of empowerment, curiously denatured since the term was originally discussed by Friere (1972). It has lost the original socio-political analysis and focuses instead almost exclusively on the arbitrariness and injustice the students see as inherent in the experience of HE and thus leaves the authors and study-participants with a curiously individualised and depoliticised vision of why HE is not working for them (Lankshear, 1999). Thus, as Cruikshank (1993: 238) reminds us, the 'empowered' are not the same as the powerful.

This is a somewhat novel departure for the literature on the sociology of HE. The traditional picture created in such literature, concerning the studies of life in HE, is of a process of preparing and adapting the potential students

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themselves, so they are equipped for the experience, ultimately channelling increasing numbers of people into the HE system via initiatives which introduce and prepare them for the experience (Murphy & Fleming, 2003).

The empowerment literature, on the other hand, formulates the issue largely in terms of the complaints students have about the HEI. As will be argued in greater detail later, this results in an analysis of the situation of non-traditional students which is very narrowly focused on their immediate desires and the putative personalities of HE staff. In this way, the approach occludes the manifold ways in which HE is problematic to non-traditional students and makes a more socio-structural or political approach to the issue all but impossible to conceptualise.

Although the literature on widening participation taken as a whole does offer accounts of the structural inequalities that exist and hinder non-traditional students, even these inequalities and barriers are often discussed in the empowerment literature as if they are somehow put in place wilfully by HEIs. This smuggles in an expectation that it is the responsibility of HEIs, and in particular their individual employees, to do something to overcome the barriers. The way the problem has been conceptualised unfolds new territories of governance. The empowerment literature opens up a new space inside the lecturer's head which is susceptible to management and reconfiguration. There are exhortations for HE staff themselves to redesign and renew themselves in line with the requirements of widened participation (Bamber & Tett, 2001; Bowl, 2000; Srivastava, 2002). In this respect, the discussions of widening access resemble the 'governance of the soul' (Rose, 1989). The redesign of the HEIs, and particularly their staff, is an instance of the process of 'governmentality', or processes of regulation and social control (Dean, 1999), especially where the conduct of individuals is being regulated in line with policies, statutes and governmental initiatives, which may emanate from a variety of sources. The situation in HE is reminiscent of Rose's (1989)

account of the relationship between power and the processes which shape and govern the psyche or 'soul' of the individual in late 20<sup>th</sup> century society. Rose contends that the development of new psychological vocabularies and ways of talking about the self, and about the relationship between the state and the individual, have helped to construct different kinds of selfhood and consciousness. In particular, the idea of an autonomous, self-aware, self-disciplined, self-governing individual has become the dominant way of making sense of the person, especially as a result of the promotion of ideologies of self-reliance through the 1980s. This view is aligned with an important trend in late 20<sup>th</sup> century social welfare and therapeutics, namely the emergence of an understanding of the self as a kind of complex of acquired competencies and habits, where the self is a composite of skills of life and conduct that can be taught and learnt. In this view, individual empowerment through the acquisition of skills and competencies itself is seen as a micro-technique of surveillance and control - a form of governance - rather than a genuinely emancipatory experience (Thorogood, 2000). In addition, this mode of being involves a good deal of introspection, self-disclosure and reformulation of one's inner psychic space. The insight from this literature is that policy changes initiated by the government or through a complex of knowledge-bearing, organising processes of regulation may well have effects on the mindset of the workforce (Rose, 1989).

In particular, the way in which the newly proliferating research on widening participation is identifying HE staff as responsible for making changes to themselves and their host institutions to enhance the experience of non-traditional students may have far reaching implications for the staff themselves. UK HE staff have historically enjoyed relative autonomy from government and have hitherto been able to insulate themselves from student grievances. However, the present day alignment of wider access policies with financial incentives and a new thrust of scholarship makes the present

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situation different from any faced in the past. The current alignment of disciplinary discourses directed at HE staff may, as Rose (1989), and Foucault (1977;1980), might argue, alter how they come to be encouraged to see themselves, their jobs and their role within the larger polity. It is these psychic sequelae of widening access research and policy which make these interesting from our present point of view. Whereas the effect on HE staff cannot be discerned directly with the evidence presented here, it is possible to see the groundwork already performed in the literature. Pursuing Foucault's notions of the confessional, and Rose's notion of the 'soul' or psychic space, it is possible to see the implicit model of HE staff as being one of wayward souls in need of confession, penitence, abasement and reconstruction.

It is important to note however, that the literature on widening participation is not monolithic – there are, for example also hints that widening participation can be accomplished more successfully without demonising HEIs and their staff. Some literature contains other models of non-traditional students and their experience in education which reflect a greater degree of success (Pickerden, 2002). The thrust of this latter literature is that if appropriate support and learning opportunities are put in place to facilitate the progress of non-traditional students, then at least equal benefit should be experienced by traditional students – that is, all will benefit. However, this, as I will argue, attempts to reconstruct the 'soul' of the educator just as stridently, with the added imperative that it benefits the full range of students.

#### Review Methods

A literature search was carried out on work since 1999. This marks the start of the period when work on the barriers facing non-traditional students accessing HE began proliferating. Papers were selected that related to widening participation and access of non-traditional students to HE. The terms 'non-traditional student', 'widening participation' and 'widening access' were entered into the following databases: ERIC (BIDS), British Educational

Index and Educational Research Abstracts. There is a considerable amount of “grey literature” in this area such as government policy documents and circulars and reports from bodies such as CVCP and HEFCE. This was not formally included in the review as such documents tend not to actually contain research in the area but more usually are statements of intent, policy or opinion.

The papers were subjected to a close reading by the authors with a view to identifying themes relating to the restrictions on access and barriers faced by students. The coding process began with an initial intuition that there were important issues at stake in the way the tension between students and HEIs was conceptualised. Texts of articles were inspected and searched electronically for occasions where issues relating to barriers to access or tension between students and institutions were mentioned. Agreement was reached on the features which provided evidence of authors trying to make sense of these difficulties and offer an explanation for them, either explicitly or implicitly.

The presentation of results here follows a series of themes, which, in line with a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), first emerged as ‘open codes’, taking the form of intuitive guesses used to ‘crack the data open’. They were subsequently developed and elaborated so as to resemble Strauss & Corbin’s notion of ‘axial codes’. At the core of this analysis, the over-riding code to which the others are related concerns the notion of elitism and unhelpfulness on the part of HE staff, which leads to the notion of incompatibility between non-traditional students and HEIs, and the idea that HE staff have failed to adapt.

#### Analytic commentary

The presentation of findings from the literature review is organised in terms of four major themes, namely: 1) The elitist and unhelpful qualities which this

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literature attributes to HE staff; 2) What HE stands for – a kind of 'Brideshead Revisited' image; 3) The image of HE and their students as variously 'sad', miserable or idle; 4) The literature associated with HE and the essence of academia. These codes or categories are sustained dynamically by the authors of the empowerment literature from the basic raw material of participants' accounts, who have worked through the material to sustain notions of elitism and incommensurability between non-traditional students, institutions and their staff.

Let us firstly turn our attention to the implicit models of HE staff presented in the empowerment literature.

### ***HE Staff: Elitist and Unhelpful?***

One of the most prolific authors on the subject of widening access, Marion Bowl (2000; 2001; 2003), paints a particularly damning picture of HEIs and their staff, in the words of her interviewees:

'I don't think they're helpful at all really. I think that they think you're there, you should do your work and get on with it. They're just there to give lectures about the things they are interested in and that's it. There's no back up, no support . . . And when I talked to my tutor about my grant thing, he said: "oh well you'd better get that cleared up, because [the HEI] don't hang about waiting for people to pay their tuition fees. They're going to come after you".' (Bowl, 2000: 34).

'there's certainly no back-up, no support. And they make it clear that you're not going to get any.' (Bowl, 2001: 146).

A student talking about an evening course remarked:

'the tutor had no enthusiasm left. Tutors arrive, overworked and tired. Do part-time students get the left-overs?' (Bowl, 2001: 152).



Bowl observes that 'relations between student and tutor can be problematic'. (Bowl, 2001: 157). She also states that 'feelings of marginalisation are affected by support and by the attitudes of tutors'. (Bowl, 2000: 34).

Another of Bowl's interviewees felt that:

'sometimes the lecturers haven't got time for you. They hand out the work; you can feel isolated when you come home because you've got bills to pay.' (Bowl, 2000: 36).

Another student, discussing relationships with lecturers, said:

'with adults, it should be a power sharing situation. Quite often, mature students are older than the tutor. We need respect as adults, especially where the tutor is the student's junior. Do tutors feel threatened by older, experienced students?' (Bowl, 2000: 36).

Bowl also noted that non-traditional students were concerned that 'raising issues' with HE staff might endanger their chances of successfully completing the course (Bowl, 2000: 36).

Bowl explicitly identifies herself as working within a 'social justice framework' which involves, as she terms it, her 'taking sides', (Bowl, 2000: 33) and thus foregrounding students' grievances. This lends itself to an implied socio-structural analysis of HE and contrasts with the kind of dispositional account of the more traditional literature on HE. Rather than being a consequence of their thinking or demographic position, students' accounts are presented as fully formed and veridical. There is no critical leverage on how the students' reported experiences are constructed and they are presented as if they were a socio-structural analysis of the shortcomings of the institutions. What is effectively sidelined in Bowl's work is any account of how the students' experiences relate to broader contextual factors, such as larger scale inequalities of politics, economics and social issues. Although these are considered tangentially in some of the other widening participation literature,



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the model presented by Bowl is relentlessly individualistic. It is in this way that the spaces are carved out for the staff: in this sense, staff are somehow morally defective and bear the weight of responsibility for changing the institution. The interpretation or gloss of the comments is unrelentingly negative towards the HEI. A tutor who was perceived as being unhelpful because of his comments over tuition fees might even, in using these words, be commiserating with a student over a draconian regime. In any case, a passing knowledge of life in HE would suggest he would not be empowered to do anything to assist the student in the way she expected. He would be unlikely to have control over government, or even HE, policy. Another student thought that 'raising issues' with staff might endanger her chances of completing the course - this consolidates a view of HE staff as vengeful stick-in-the-muds, who have, yet again, failed to adapt to the new circumstances confronting them. Whether or not this fear might be grounded in reality is not our major concern. What is at stake is the sense in which it is taken to be true in this particular strand of argument.

This process of identifying staff themselves as being responsible resonates with larger scale process of individualisation in contemporary societies. Ulrich Beck (1992) and Beck & Beck-Gernsheim (2001) argues that this process has disarticulated people from collective and communal relations which traditionally defined and supported them, and has instead led to an opening up of choices across all strata of society. The contemporary individual has the responsibility of choosing and changing their social identity as well as taking the risks in doing so (Beck, 1992: 88). Thus, in line with this contemporary spirit, individual staff are rendered responsible for the regime in which they are embedded and made responsible for the difficulty of adapting their institution to the needs of their new found constituency of customer-students. In line with this individualisation thesis Bamber & Tett (2001: 8) are also critical of HE staff, suggesting that staff need to change and that 'a two-way

process of change and development is required' and that lecturers might have to 'critically examine and change their own attitudes and practices'. Bamber & Tett believe that critical thinking and re-examining experience can be an emotionally challenging and threatening process, 'hence the need for a supportive course environment, especially in terms of the relationship with tutors'. They also maintain that:

'staff working in [an elite] institution who aim to enhance social equity because of a concern for social justice find that they are marginalised within their institution.' (Bamber & Tett, 2001: 15).

Smith (2000: 28) talks of 'suggestions of elitist attitudes' and notes that some feel that HE academic staff are 'more concerned with research than with the needs or interests of a group in the community'.

MacDonald & Stratta (2001) investigated whether non-traditional students were seen by tutors as a 'problem'. Initially, they found that there was an unwillingness to see non-traditional students as a distinct group – tutors' quotes stressed that they wanted to treat them as students 'on their own merits' (251). However, in further interviews with tutors, characteristics of non-traditional students did arise – these characteristics were positive. Among tutors observations were: 'non-standard entrants will contribute more readily' and 'as a group they tend to be slightly more articulate and more assertive' (251). However, tutors did talk of the 'anxiety' of performance that non-traditional students often displayed (MacDonald & Stratta, 2001: 252). MacDonald & Stratta considered that the tutors they interviewed believed that the students' learning was the students' own business and that opening up access to HE was about allowing students to fit into the situation, not requiring any radical change on the part of the tutors or the institution. Thus, despite the individually supportive comments made by staff, MacDonald & Stratta considered that this view undermined the collective concerns of certain groups of students. Thus, where more collectivist and social structural

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repertoire of explanations was used, once again it was to the detriment of HE staff.

This is the pervasive picture painted of HE staff in much of the widening participation literature – that of, at worst, elitist, hostile individuals, or at best, indifferent people who are unconcerned about the difficulties non-traditional students face. This picture of the staff as somehow hidebound in their focus on elite concerns is one which also emerges from literature on pre-HE preparatory courses as part of the 'Aim Higher' initiative, (Slack, 2003), and in coverage of the attitude of some staff in elite institutions who talk disparagingly of 'Mickey Mouse' students and degrees (Leathwood et al, 2003). It seems that to construct a model of hostile HE staff, arguments have been built on a variety of sources of information distributed across a number of different sites and structures - students' intuitions, introductory programmes, press reports and the like - rather than the actual HE staff working with such students, who on the whole, were rather positive. Thus, if we look at the way some of these arguments are constructed, we can see that the important and pivotal points are supported by a highly particular means of privileging certain kinds of evidence over others. The accounts from staff are inherently untrustworthy and are placed lower in the hierarchy of credibility than those of the students.

In this way a number of authors in the 'empowerment' camp of the widening participating literature have developed their arguments so as to pivot on the veracity of student participants' comments. This represents a solipsistic retreat into a state of analysis where things are the case because people say they are. This is seductive in the social sciences because of the lingering authority of the Thomas maxim, (Thomas & Thomas, 1928: 572), that 'if men believe things to be real they are real in their consequences', yet at the same time it is clear that many of those contributing to the empowerment literature have not undertaken a systematic sociologically informed analysis of the

nature of institutions or society, but have instead rely on the subjective, individualised realm of student experiences. This 'retreat into solipsism' has been noted in other accounts of disempowered participants in organisations (Brown & Crawford, 2003). In this case it has enabled the authors to take what the students say, as itself being the analysis of the HE system. This has then led the literature away from other considerations. Broader structural inequalities have been collapsed into notions of financial difficulty and poverty. The effects of students' positions in larger-scale social formations and the consequences this has for the educational experience and life chances of the student has often been marginalised. Some authors have been quite explicit in their condemnation of the HEIs themselves and their staff, constructing them as elitist and indifferent to the problems facing non-traditional students. Thus, the experience of students who:

'found that the voice of their experience, as working-class people on low incomes and as black women, was silenced' (Bowl, 2001: 158)

is foregrounded.

In the view of most authors in the widening access arena then, it is this individualised, personal barrier that prevents non-traditional students accessing HE or progressing once they have arrived, rather than, for example, social-structural factors beyond the academy.

A similar process can be seen when we look at the empowerment literature dealing with other barriers that non-traditional students face.

### ***The HEIs and All That is Associated With Them: Brideshead Revisited?***

The widening participation literature is extensively critical of HEIs and there is much emphasis on the need for the institutions themselves to change, although some of the literature does move on to a broader socio-structural analysis of the factors that may be preventing non-traditional students from accessing and successfully completing HE. Some authors simply allude to a

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world very different from that familiar to non-traditional students and suggest that this very world causes serious problems for them. George & Gillon (2001: 16) talk of 'an alienating, not merely an alien, world'. Bowl (2001: 145):

'some talked of the alienation they felt from the ethos of higher education institutions, and a sense of isolation, that they felt other students did not share'.

There are also more specific problems identified, for example, financial problems faced by non-traditional students, child-care issues, academic problems, the language used in HE documents, the HE environment, cultural issues, time-management problems and the image of HEIs and their students.

Financial issues crop up again and again in the widening participation literature. Sometimes, they are presented as being caused by the HEIs:

'Administrative regulations discourage payment by instalments, and insist upon payment by cheque or standing order, failing to recognize that many students from low-income groups do not operate a bank account and are unwilling to apply for student loans (the pre-requisite for one type of fee waiver)' (Pickerden, 2002: 40).

'Barriers within the higher education system may include the cost of participation, including direct costs and living costs' (Thomas, 2001: 365).

Bowl (2001: 147) observed:

'the word-processing of essays was a course requirement of which she [the student] had not been made aware...she...could not afford a computer'.

Bowl (2000: 35) talks of the 'insensitivity' of HEIs to the students financial problems:

'examples of such insensitivity were highlighted in the large booklists given to students, regardless of the costs of books and without guidance as to the need to buy them, and in the common assumption that students would have access to personal computers'.

Students were often unable to afford basic course materials. Interestingly, financial issues were raised by working-class/non-traditional students before they had even applied to HE. Hutchings & Archer (2001: 77) found, whilst interviewing such groups, that 'going to university was said to be very expensive', although there was 'considerable vagueness and some misinformation about how much money would be needed'. Many people in the groups interviewed said that they would be reluctant to take out loans, because of the burden of debt, and only a minority of interviewees were aware of the special arrangements for student loans. Some people even perceived HE as a money-making venture by the HEIs (Hutchings & Archer, 2001: 76-7). Most damningly, one person remarked: 'it's a complete and utter rip-off, education' (79).

Once again, the HEIs are constructed as placing barriers in the non-traditional students' way. Since the abolition of maintenance grants, student poverty has been well-documented, yet much of the empowerment literature implies that the HEIs themselves are responsible for this and it is their job to remedy the situation. Again, the personal feelings of the students, the client-customer ethos and the apparent indifference of the institution are placed in the foregrounds of the analysis and any focus on larger scale variables is sidelined. Again, the major locus of explanation and analysis for this literature is in the experience of the students which forms a fulcrum about which the account pivots. These issues are of course legitimate topics of enquiry in their own right. However, the manoeuvre which is accomplished in this kind of account is to segue directly from the personal accounts of difficulties to the implication that HE staff are somehow culpable. It is, for



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example, 'dismaying that the tutors do not appear to have taken any action to construct a more inclusive and less oppressive space for all members of the group' (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003: 609). Moreover, a further implication is that if only the staff would undergo a process of re-orientation, then the situation would change. This involves a kind of solipsism or nominalism, (Parker *et al*, 1995), inasmuch as it perceives the individual and their attitudes as being somehow prior to and causative of, a particular set of social relations. This assumption is perhaps reliant on the commonsensical individualism of everyday reason (Lukes, 1977; Shanahan, 1992). That is, if staff were 'persuaded' to change (Murphy & Fleming, 2003), were willing to be more 'flexible' (Johnson & Deem, 2003), were capable of 'getting out' to meet potential students (Osbourne, 2003), then the situation might be ameliorated. Again, as Beck (1992) and Rose (1999) have identified, the cultural condition of individualisation has helped to open up the individual HE lecturer as a site for scrutiny and reform.

The empowerment literature also considers other factors that may constitute barriers to non-traditional students. For example, time management crops up, with some non-traditional students finding that they don't have time to read around the subject or to throw themselves wholly into their course. George & Gillon (2001: 16) state that the 'practicalities of education – time management...are beyond their means'. Bowl (2001: 156) noticed that students were 'reading only what was essential to pass the assignment and snatching time to study wherever they could'. Cultural differences between non-traditional students and HEIs are extensively documented. One student interviewed by Bowl (2001: 146) observed:

'If you're not white and middle-class, you're not accepted. There's nothing overt, you just sense it.'

Bowl (2001: 157) also talks of students finding difficulty with 'comprehending the mysteries of academic culture and conventions' and states that:



'dislocation seems to centre on class, gender, and ethnic difference between the overall ethos of the institution and that of the non-traditional student'.

Thomas (2001:365) suggests that 'an institutional culture that does not accept, nor accommodate, diversity' is a barrier created by the education system. Hutchings & Archer (2001: 71) state that:

'people from lower socio-economic groups perceive HE to be a culture dominated by the middle-classes and may therefore expect to be alienated'.

Race is also presented as a problem in the widening participation literature.

Archer & Hutchings (2000: 563) found respondents talking about HEIs as predominantly white places. A respondent was quoted:

'And like when you see it up there like actually the prospectus it's like white people, white people'.

There was also a feeling that respondents associated the 'best' HEIs with whiteness and middle-classness and perceived HEIs with large proportions of black and working-class students as not 'good' HEIs. Ideas of 'good' and 'bad' HEIs were also explored further by Hutchings & Archer (2001: 82). They related an anecdote about someone being sneered at during an interview for entry to Oxford because his father's title was Mr rather than Dr or Professor. Smith (2000: 26) points out that there is no tradition of post-compulsory education in some communities 'and the local further education college appears as hostile as the more distant university'.

Here then, HEIs are themselves responsible for the demographic mix of students they recruit. On the face of it this may seem reasonable – it is easy to imagine how marketing departments and admissions tutors are able to determine these policies. At the same time though, we can see the kinds of evidence that these claims are based on. Without wishing to deny the

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experience of disenfranchised groups in the education system, it is important to be aware of the argumentative strategy which is being pursued here. The students' experiences, at least as manifested through the studies mentioned above, are granted the status of literally true and substantive analyses of the HEIs. Here again, the accounts are not grounded or analysed within a social formation, but are presented as literally and unproblematically true. Of course, HEIs may be exclusive and unwelcoming places, especially for some disadvantaged groups. Our point here is that the elision from these experiences to a theory of how HEIs work is altogether too rapid and trite to be useful in grasping the systematically structured and emplotted inequalities in society and within the education system. It is as if Richard Hoggart's well known working-class grammar school boy has suddenly lost his sociological acuity (Hoggart, 1956).

***HEIs And Their Students: "And She Was A Miserable Cow".***

Cultural differences were also very clearly illustrated in the third theme in the literature. This concerns negative views of HEIs and their members held by non-participating students. The interviewees quoted in Hutchings & Archer (2001: 80) were potential non-traditional students, not yet in the HE system, who were asked about their images of HEIs and HE students. Some highly negative images were elicited. When asked what sort of picture he had of universities, one respondent replied: 'Shit! Depression! Depression and like the pressure...' Another: 'Thoroughly boring!...like a lot of work...and not much enjoyment'. Another still: '...professor like in a lecture for about four hours chatting complete crap'.

Somebody else had a mother who had been through HE:

'...she's got a degree in social science and she's got a Masters degree as well. And like I saw the pressure and the stress and she was a miserable cow' (81).

A minority discourse found among respondents was that HE was peopled by middle-class students who drink, take drugs, go to parties and are unable to face the real world. HE students were variously described as:

'snobs', 'trendies', 'hippified people who smoke pot in the toilets and just get stoned every night and drink', 'people who were afraid to hit the big wide world', 'some of them are just there to get a social life, they're the sad ones' (84-5).

It can be seen here that in the face of such devastating images and stereotypes, HEIs will already be facing an uphill struggle to recruit students from social groups holding these views. Yet at the same time these seem to be presented as barriers which the institutions themselves, and more importantly, their staff, are expected to tackle. Despite the possibility that a range of extraneous factors in the broader culture as a whole might be involved in creating the image of an HEI, it is potentially resolvable if only the outreach programmes were appropriately designed, (Slack, 2003), the qualifications they offered were made acceptable as 'valid cultural passports', (Warmington, 2003), or, significantly, 'it would be difficult to overestimate the importance of personal friendships as a contributor to the process of developing an integrated multi-level approach' (Murphy & Fleming, 2003: 36). All of this then outlines a growing and increasingly diverse set of roles in which HE staff are exhorted to succeed, and although often it is difficult to see what HE personnel could do to tackle some of these larger scale factors by themselves, their inability to do so is once more, a 'failure to adapt'.

***The Literature Associated With HEIs And The Essence Of Academia:***

Pickerd (2002: 41) talks about university literature constituting a barrier:

'University application forms and recruitment literature can be a barrier, as they are written in a complex manner requiring considerable prior knowledge'. 'It was not enough to simply take a prospectus and a course leaflet. There

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are barriers to widening participation in the language and descriptions used' (42).

Some of the fiercest criticisms of HEIs in the empowerment literature centre on the very nature of academia itself. Some students struggled with the academic demands made upon them in HE. Bowl (2001: 156) states that: 'The difficulties experienced by...students included...reading and structuring assignments'.

Bamber & Tett (2001: 12) are extensively critical of academic expectations: 'The students report that engaging with literature, having to produce formal essays and comply with all the other aspects of academic literacies, often seems like unnecessary hoop-jumping. Some retain a distrust of academic language and struggle to master it throughout the length of the course'; 'They often express disappointment when they realise that theory is not a simple set of instructions for the resolution of practice problems'.

Bamber & Tett (2001: 14) also suggest that:

'...texts that are inaccessible to all but the most academically able could set back, rather than enhance, intellectual development'.

This extensive critique of the day to day expectations of academia suggest that the authors of such literature are expecting HE to fulfil a role radically different from that which has traditionally been expected of it. Once more, it is as if these requirements, rather than being part of a particular scholarly tradition, are imposed capriciously and awkwardly by the staff themselves. There are a whole range of debates about the role of convention in learning, and the necessity and appropriateness of iconoclasm in shifting otherwise moribund disciplines forward. However, the point here is that once again the picture is of an individualised practice where academic languages and conventions are imposed with cruelty on unwilling students, in the manner of

schoolmasters Thwackum and Square in Henry Fielding's (1897) novel 'The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling'.

#### General discussion

In this paper, we have attempted to analyse the stance of the empowerment literature where it concerns non-traditional students and their experiences of HE. The picture built up in the literature is a profoundly negative one, with non-traditional students encountering a plethora of barriers and inequalities. That the road of individuals seeking to transcend multiple oppressions and deprivations is a difficult one is certainly not in dispute. What is interesting from our point of view is that increasingly these barriers are presented as if they were put in place by the staff of HEIs themselves. It is as if a tribe of crusty, hidebound academics were conspiring to keep non-traditional students out of HE. This widespread cultural condition of advanced liberalism which Beck (1992) and Beck & Beck-Gernsheim (2001) has identified as being saturated with individualism has, it seems, co-opted a good many academic accounts of the issue of widening participation. Of course, it may be possible to find individual members of staff who fit this stereotype, but what is new in the empowerment literature is the opening up to scrutiny of the putative attitudes, prejudices and re-skilling needs of this body of people who have 'failed to adapt', as objects of inquiry and possible reform.

Even when barriers which may be more fully explained by reference to broader structures and processes are encountered, these are still conceptualised and explained in resolutely individualistic terms. Moreover, this individualism brings with it the implication that the HEIs ought to be doing something about these factors. In Rose's (1989) terms, the 'soul' of the academic then, is to be brought under the gaze of the confessional and hence into governance. If this literature is taken at face value then, the picture which will emerge is of a system where the staff themselves are the villains of the piece, rather like the problem that schoolteachers have been struggling

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with for some time (BBC News Online, 2000). If this picture gains credence in policymaking circles, the future of HE staff will, we would hazard, not be a happy one. The sociological and economic amnesia of much of this literature may ultimately do a disservice to HEIs and non-traditional students themselves by underestimating the nature of the obstacles faced in rising from a less advantaged background to achieve a degree. Many of these obstacles may well not be removed by this incessant scrutiny of the academics' presumed attitudes and prejudices.

As Beck notes, under the pervasive condition he calls 'reflexive modernisation', the persons who have been individualised are also called upon to reform themselves in the form of 'a vigorous model of action in everyday life which puts the ego at its centre, allots and opens up opportunities for action to it' (Beck, 1992: 136). As Beck recognizes, in any project there are psychological costs to putting the ego at the centre. As a corollary of this, are events which throw an individual off-course, which are no longer seen as 'blows of fate sent by God or nature', (Beck, 1992: 136), or constraints imposed by social structure. Sub-optimal events are seen as personal failures, even when they appear to be outside the individual's control.

In other words, in line with the spirit of individualisation, the individual HE staff become the agents of their educational and market-mediated subsistence and the related life-planning and organisation (Beck, 1992: 90.). Business culture, with its attendant rhetoric of the market and the consumer has already hegemonised notions of students as customers (Johnson & Deem, 2003). Thus, the literature which stresses the empowerment of students or applicants may present "solutions" which would be extremely difficult for HE staff themselves to embrace, and undertheorises the constraints faced by HEIs themselves, from societal factors and government policies. For example, the state substantially controls fee levels and thus exerts considerable influence over a HEI's income and the monies demanded from students.



In contrast, we would make a plea for a more sociologically nuanced approach in the empowerment literature to understanding the situation of non-traditional students so as to adequately conceptualise the other factors that may be at work, such as structural inequalities and the perception of HE by certain social groups. We are aware that some researchers such as Archer are now interested in issues related to the identity and culture of such groups, but this is a recent phenomenon, and is still, we feel, somewhat neglected by many in the widening participation arena. It may be these factors, or a combination of them, that constitute barriers to wider participation, and these are all but invisible within much of the kind of literature reviewed here. Our plea then, involves trying to open up this tendency to individualise issues itself to scrutiny and see this as an effect of a more pervasive cultural process of late modernity, rather than giving us explanations.

It is only by tackling this in a broad-based fashion that researchers may ultimately aid non-traditional students in their attempts to access HE. Whilst respecting and validating experiences of exclusion, it should be acknowledged that these are starting points of social analysis rather than completed analyses in their own right.

A further suggestion that emerges from the present consideration of widening participation is that perhaps a greater interest should be shown in stories of success. Again following Beck's logic, the use of HE by students to design their biographies in a positive, transformative manner might be informative. Whereas these may be the exception, they are important in that they may suggest important lessons for good practice. A proportion of the literature is indeed beginning to deal with the success of non-traditional students and the strategies that were used to achieve this (Baker, 2005a in review; Baker, 2005b in review). Such strategies, which assist but do not patronise, could be adopted more widely by HEIs, and may well contribute to the education and success of the student population as a whole.



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[Link to Chapter Two](#)

It was apparent after the completion of Chapter Two, that some literature in the widening participation field not only considered HE to be an essential tool of social reform, but seemed to view this as a more important function than that of education, and indeed perhaps a function that conflicted with its role of educator, as arguments were advanced suggesting that much scholarly tradition and academic rigour was simply 'hoop-jumping' that alienated non-traditional students and should be abandoned.

I therefore decided to examine an area in which the interface between HE and social reform was evident. I chose to explore the issue of people with mental health problems participating in HE, because: many people with such difficulties do possess the ability to benefit from HE if appropriately supported; the HE system is mentioned in a number of policy documents and other literature as a key system that should be playing a role in the rehabilitation and inclusion of people experiencing mental health difficulties; and because I have become aware of much anecdotal evidence that the suggestion to 'go on a course' is now standard advice given by many mental health professionals to their clients.

Chapter Three reviews the history of ideas connecting education and mental health, examines the contents of recent policy documents that promote the notion of HE being beneficial to people experiencing mental health problems and presents an overview of the current reality and the possible consequences of this policy for people suffering in this way, other members of the HEI and the HE system as a whole.

Terms such as 'mental health problems', 'mental illness' and 'psychiatric illness' are all used in this chapter. Many clinicians would be critical of such loose usage, but as there is considerable disagreement among clinicians themselves regarding diagnostic categories, or the usefulness of such

categories, it was considered fairly meaningless to become involved in such a debate, which would be worthy of a thesis alone. Perhaps the umbrella term 'mental health problems' is most useful for this chapter, but much of the literature drawn on does not specifically use this phrase. The term 'vulnerable' is also used. Although not all 'vulnerable' students will have mental health problems, this is a very commonly encountered type of vulnerability among the student population, and it is in this way that it is used here. Some also feel that 'vulnerable' is perhaps a more respectful (and accurate) term when discussing people with such difficulties.

This chapter also makes reference to the conceptualisation of politics under New Labour and the notion of the 'responsible' individual.

Using Bourdieuan notions, this chapter argues that the field (the HE system) has been substantially redefined.

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## **Chapter Two**

## **Mental Health and Higher Education: Mapping Field, Consciousness and Legitimation**

### **Introduction**

In May 2004 the UK press (Smithers, 2004) reported a speech by Professor Anthony Smith, president of Magdalen College, Oxford, warning that the UK's HE system must not 'become a branch of social welfare'. This prompts a reflection on the extent to which the eventuality that Smith was concerned about may have already happened in the UK HE system in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century and the implications this has for social policy in the contemporary era. The fact that Smith was speaking in the future tense - 'become' – masks the extent to which the HE system has already begun to undertake an increasing proportion of welfare work. Smith's comment was made in the context of a growing debate as to whether HEIs should take applicants' social backgrounds into consideration when making offers. Yet there has not been a similar level of debate about the work that HEIs are increasingly being encouraged to undertake in order to support vulnerable students whilst they are undertaking their studies; nor has there been very much discussion of the way in which this kind of work is increasingly seen by policymakers as a means of

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addressing the agendas of social inclusion and employability which have pervaded the social policy landscape of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The recent policy alignment between learning and wellbeing was most explicitly stated in the 1998 Green Paper, 'The Learning Age', which has been a key document in setting out New Labour's stall as regards the role it sees for education in Britain in the 21<sup>st</sup> century:

'For individuals, learning will help everyone to acquire the new skills and qualifications needed for employment and advancement. Learning will increase our earning power. In addition, it will help older people to stay healthy and active, strengthen families and the wider community, and encourage independence. Opportunities to learn will lead us to greater appreciation of art, music, poetry and literature, and develop our potential as rounded human beings' (DfEE, 1998: 3).

In addition, education was seen as the remedy for a variety of other social and individual ills:

'...learning will be the key to a strong economy and an inclusive society. It will offer a way out of dependency and low expectation towards self-reliance and self-confidence' (DfEE, 1998: 3).

This signalled the new territories which education was charged with colonising, and new tasks for educators and the institutions within which they work. Policies such as this play an important role in helping to construct the kinds of people who inhabit the landscape of what Rose (1999) has called 'advanced liberalism'. A complex tapestry of forces involving the social sciences, medicine, criminology, educational studies and New Labour policymaking, have combined to create a situation where new forms of sociality and personhood can emerge. In line with scholars such as Rose, we would suggest that the matrix of policies, initiatives, legal frameworks, research and information, calls into being new phenomena which can become

socially effective agents in their own right. The changing climate of HE could be argued to have created novel forms of consciousness, obligation and responsibility for HEIs and the staff who work within them. The obligation to address human failure is shifting from what Foucault (1975) has called 'the clinic' into other sites and moral arenas. These have included prisons (Davies, 2004a) and, most importantly for our present purpose, the education system. These discourses of obligation, dysfunction and inclusion, we will suggest, have played a very significant role in making up our educational world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and the persons, phenomena and entities inhabiting it.

We live, inescapably, in a culture where the private conduct and distress of the individual are matters for political intervention. Not merely the sicknesses of human beings, but also their personalities, intellectual capacities, passions, 'employability' and the forces that mobilize them — their 'identities' themselves — now appear to be at least potentially explicable in terms germane to the policymaker and educationalist, and increasingly in terms of their potential to benefit from inclusion in the education system. The learning age, then, is relentlessly inclusive.

The process by which education struggles to create a particular mode of formulating and dealing with human problems has a specific genealogy which can be traced through the last two hundred and fifty years. The present debate is contemporary through and through, yet it alludes to anxieties and hopes surrounding the process of education which have shaped discourse on the subject for many decades.

At the same time there is increasing evidence that the benefits of having a degree do not accrue readily to the individuals involved. Taylor (2005a), using statistics from the Higher Education Statistics Agency, (HESA), showed that, after six months, only 12% of graduates had gone into "traditional" graduate occupations, including medicine, higher education and science; 29% had gone into either 'modern' or 'new' graduate jobs such as management,

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information technology, marketing and sales management. 38% were working in non-graduate employment.

At the same time the level of debt students carry with them away from their studies is reported to be rising. Present average levels are believed to be between £12,000 and £13,000 (Grant, 2004; Halpin, 2004) with students in London graduating with debts of £20,000; considerably more than the reported average £17,000 annual salary of a UK graduate (Taylor, 2005).

This reveals a curious tension. On the one hand education is charged with the role of keeping people healthy and strengthening families, as well as building independence and confidence and combating exclusion. On the other hand there are a growing number of reports to the contrary: that the contemporary HE graduate is debt-ridden and is often unable to secure employment of a kind which allows any prospect of independence and self-reliance.

#### Students and Their Well-Being: Political 'Sturm und Drang'?

There are a number of bodies, reports and articles which are raising increasing concerns about the psychological well-being of students in HE (Andrews & Wilding, 2004; Rana *et al*, 1999; Roberts *et al*, 1999; Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2003; Stanley & Manthorpe, 2001; Stewart-Brown *et al*, 2000). This set of concerns goes back a decade, and can perhaps be dated from warnings initially raised about mental health problems in UK university students by Phippen (1995) who found that 85 (64%) of the 152 counselling services surveyed reported an increase in the proportion of seriously disturbed students seen and this report was instrumental in shifting attention to the needs of this group and the resources available to meet them. At the same time another key element in the picture was originated, in the form of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, which defined disability as a physical or mental impairment and required HEIs to ensure that their admission



procedures avoided discrimination, while at the same time, developing reasonable provision for disabled people.

The catalogue of accounts of students' mental health problems is substantial. The National Union of Students identifies leaving home, debt, new relationships and the stresses of study as leading to psychiatric problems. A relatively small proportion of students develop schizophrenia, whose peak age of onset is between the ages of 18 and 30, and is purportedly made more likely by stress. More common are anxiety-based problems, affecting 46% of male students and 64% of female students, one in ten of whom are also estimated to be bulimic (Crompton, 2004).

This survey of opinions and evidence is necessarily cursory, but it should suffice to show that by the time Professor Smith had made his comments about education and its role in May 2004, the UK's HE system had perhaps already become intimately involved in the practice of social welfare, catering to some of the most economically fragile and psychosocially vulnerable citizens of the UK. It has, in an important sense, become an under-resourced branch of the social welfare system, now expected to cater for some of the most deprived groups in society whose welfare has been systematically neglected for generations.

In addition to the evidence we have mentioned already of relatively high levels of mental health morbidity in the student body, there is a growing raft of evidence that the mental health of young people in the UK as a whole is getting progressively worse. Collishaw *et al* (2004) reported the results of an analysis of the data from three major studies and concluded that substantial increases in emotional problems and conduct disorders had occurred in the 25 year study period. Moreover, these differences could not be accounted for by different methods of detecting and reporting problems, but instead reflected a broad secular trend. In other words, the people who are entering the education system are themselves more volatile and vulnerable.

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New Labour policy on HE and social inclusion currently suggests that people with mental health problems may benefit from HE and should be encouraged to participate in this to combat social exclusion, (Social Exclusion Unit, 2004: 28), because education can 'build self-confidence and social networks'.

This contrasts with evidence that exactly the opposite is taking place in the HE sector. The substantial and increasingly urgent presence of mental health problems in HE has been documented by many scholars and professional bodies, (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2003), although whether this is because more students are developing mental health problems during HE, or whether more students with pre-existing mental health problems are entering HE, is unclear. Either way, the phenomenon is reflected in many HEIs policies and services. Whereas HEIs have for some time typically provided counselling services for students, some now employ other mental health professionals and many have structures in place to support students with mental health difficulties such as sheltered accommodation. Many have detailed policies relating to students with mental health problems, (eg. De Montfort University, 2004; University of Nottingham 2004,; University of Wales, Bangor, 2004). Some institutions have dedicated mental health support workers as part of the university team, such as Nottingham Trent University (eg. Progression Support Team, Nottingham Trent University, 2004). Government policy implies that the socially excluded mentally ill could and should benefit from education. We will look at the reactions and possible consequences of this later.

### Education and Wellbeing: A Convolved History

Firstly, let us turn our attention to the history and genealogy of ideas linking mental health and education, for this can help illuminate 'the conditions under which our current forms of truth have been made possible' (Rose, 1996: 106). Like his near contemporary Foucault, Bourdieu (2000) was convinced that the history of ideas contained the keys to understanding them:

'It is...from the social history of educational institutions...and from the history of our singular relationship to these institutions that we can expect some real revelations about the objective and subjective structures (classifications, hierarchies, problematics, etc.) that, in spite of ourselves, orient our thought' (Bourdieu, 2000: 9).

The history of links which have been hypothesised between mental health (or as it has previously usually been spoken of, mental illness or madness) and education is a long and convoluted one. George Cheyne stated, when writing about the English and England, that:

'We have more nervous diseases, since the present Age has made efforts to go beyond former Times, in all the Arts of Ingenuity, Invention, Study, Learning, and all the Contemplative and Sedentary Professions' (1733: 54).

He seemed to believe that the alleged prevalence of 'nervous disease' among the English was due to their intellectual and cultural superiority, thus ushering in an era of anxiety about the likely effects of education which persisted through the Enlightenment and into the contemporary era.

The links between mental illness and education are particularly prominent in the discourses pertaining to Victorian ideas concerning psychiatric disorder, its causes and cures. Two opposing schools of thought are documented. One school of thought, the dominant one for many years, suggested that education was detrimental to mental health and indeed could cause serious mental illness. Hawkes (1857: 514), while talking about the prevalence of insanity around him, noted:

'A higher pressure is engendered on the minds of men and with this, there appears a tendency among all classes constantly to demand higher standards of intellectual attainment, a faster speed of intellectual travelling...'

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The discourse that education represented a hazard to health was famously often applied to women's mental health problems. Feminist writers working in this area have observed that as middle-class women were beginning to organize and demand access to HE (among other things), during the period 1870 to 1910, there was an epidemic of anorexia nervosa, hysteria and neurasthenia (Bordo, 1993; Showalter, 1987). Nerve specialists were perceived to oppose women's efforts to change the conditions of their lives (Showalter, 1987). However, there was a dissenting view, promoted by some early 'mad doctors' and many (female) patients, that education, or work of an academic/intellectual nature, would assist patients in their recovery. When available, such activities were organised on a social class basis. For example as Showalter (1987) reports, at Murray's Royal Asylum in Perth, the 'better-class' patients had access to a series of lectures on 'The Natural History of Zoophytes' and 'The Authenticity of Ossian's Poems'. The less privileged patients lectured each other on galvanism, the blood, time, and economic botany. The reforming doctor John Conolly in particular, believed in educating the mentally ill, as part of his wider 'moral management' philosophy. At Hanwell Asylum, where Conolly was superintendent, illiterate patients were taught how to read and write, and classes in geography, drawing, singing, natural history and arithmetic were held (Showalter, 1987). Interestingly, some people belonging to the 'moral management' school of managing madness did believe that the intellectual limitations of the allotted female role of the time and women's restricted education were causal factors in women's mental illness, such as Browne (1837) and Conolly (1847).

This view that women's lack of education was responsible for their difficulties was not a common one among later 'nerve specialists', many of whom believed that women pursuing education and work would suffer from disorders such as anorexia nervosa, hysteria, neurasthenia and sterility. HE for women was a particularly contentious issue. The eminent psychiatrist Henry

Maudsley maintained in an essay that adolescent girls would suffer permanent damage to their reproductive systems and brains as a result of intellectual training (Maudsley, 1874). At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Clouston gravely counselled that in women:

'all the brain energy would be used up in cramming a knowledge of the sciences and there would be none left at all for...reproductive purposes' (Clouston, 1898: 582).

However, in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a small number of qualified women doctors were defending HE for women, for example, the American Mary Putnam Jacobi and Elizabeth Garrett Anderson. Lest the concerns over the positive and negative consequences of education for women appear to split too neatly along male/female lines, it is noteworthy that some women physicians, as well as men, attributed illnesses such as neurasthenia to intellectual ambition. Margaret Cleaves, (1910), attributed her neurasthenia to her academic work, as detailed in Sicherman (1977).

One reaction to the notion that intellectual work contributed to mental illness was Silas Weir Mitchell's 'rest cure' for neurasthenia, in which the patient (usually female) was confined to bed and forbidden to do just about anything, certainly reading, writing and studying (Poirer, 1983). These ideas are examined in a good deal of fictional writing of the time, particularly the feminist literature written by women considered to be suffering from psychiatric illness. Perhaps most famously, something similar is described in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper', (1892, 1913) and a few decades later, in the writings of Virginia Woolf. Both these women dreaded the infamous 'rest cure' and believed that their recovery would be aided if they undertook academic work.

It was so clear to some that education caused insanity in women that one Dr G. Fielding Blandford simply stated the cause of insanity as being 'over-

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education' on one 'urgency order' (Showalter, 1987). Interestingly enough, when British doctors were faced with the problem of treating 'shell-shocked' soldiers during World War 1, it was soon realised that the rest cure was not appropriate for them and that activity was far more beneficial. Thus Siegfried Sassoon was encouraged to publish his poems whilst in hospital. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century too, there was a growing sense that women might benefit from educational work or writing as this would induce order in their troubled minds. Anne Sexton was encouraged by her psychiatrist to write poetry, for example (Middlebrook, 1991).

There is therefore a long tradition of viewing education as either curing, or causing, mental illness. The picture is complicated by other factors, such as the prevailing culture of the time and considerations of what constituted appropriate behaviour, but the link between education and mental health has been sufficiently adumbrated as to be clear. These links have resurfaced recently and this historical introduction has sought to demonstrate how the ideas that education is a source of both succour and stress, deliverance and damage have been incorporated – almost in a Bourdieuan act of 'inclusion' – into the field of theory and practice today. It is by assimilating its history that the present field of debate can come to have a commonsensical appearance. That is, it becomes a matter which scarcely anyone would question that education and mental health are allied, and that most usually this is a positive relationship. This history itself indicates as a matter of logic that education, progress and enlightenment must function in the same direction, and that to demur from this position is surely evidence of traditionalism, misogyny and elitism.

#### Government Policy: New Labour, New Responsibilities

The inclusion of such a history within the field of policy and practice in mental health care has helped to legitimate some profound changes in Government policy in relation to both HE and mental health care since the early 1990s. In



a sense, there have been some important requirements for legitimisation. What is thinkable or unthinkable, valuable or worthless, is a product of the field of policy in the Bourdieuan sense. Moreover, as we shall see, this affects with great rapidity the structures within which ideas and policies arise and the principles of thinking which govern and legitimate their operations. This legitimisation establishes an orthodoxy or doxa (Bourdieu, 1977: 164-71) where it is entirely reasonable to suppose that education has benefits for the individual and for the nation, and that education enhances mental health and indeed, that education may circumvent the need for mental health care at all. In this way policymakers have presided over shifts in the topography of the field and 'the determinations they impose upon the occupants, agents or institutions' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 72-3).

Many more universities were created post-1992 by the transformation of polytechnics and higher education colleges into universities. Many more people have been encouraged by the Blair administration to engage in HE and the government has now set a target of 50% of people aged 18-30 to enter HE by 2010. The policy of widening participation has resulted in diverse social and cultural groups experiencing HE who have not traditionally done so (CVCP, 1998, 2000a;b; DfEE, 2000). Although much publicity has been given to the issue of lower socio-economic groups participating in HE, efforts have also been made to include more people with disabilities, including people with mental health problems, a group that were never previously considered to succeed in HE in any great number. Widening participation and the advent of mass HE have had a profound effect on the HE system, changing its ethos, its sense of purpose, and the kinds of mindset demanded of its participants.

The mental health care system has also undergone a revolution over the same relatively short period of time. Although many would argue that the provision of mental health services is far from adequate, (CHI, 2003), policymakers now seem to see mental health care very differently. The policy of moving



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people with mental health problems out of institutions and into 'the community' has existed for many years, yet it is interesting that even as late as 1991, the Department of Health, (DoH), did not consider that education was appropriate for people needing 'care'. Austin, (in Newnes, 1999: 255), quotes a communication from the DoH:

'Local health and family health service authorities are required from next April to produce community care plans addressing the needs for care services of the local population. These plans will not deal with further and adult education as this is not encompassed in the White Paper, 'Caring For People...' While I understand your view that further and adult education colleges could be said to provide some 'day services' in certain instances, the view that the D.E.S. and D.H. takes (is that it is) not appropriate to include them within the community care remit.'

By 1997 however, the climate had changed considerably:

'Specialist mental health services...need to work closely with the agencies responsible for housing, income support, education, employment, training and leisure...' (DoH, quoted in Wertheimer, 1997: 151).

The field had thus undergone a shift in the space of six years or so.

More recent New Labour policy documents, relating both to HE and mental health, reflect this change in attitude. The Government's White Paper 'The Future of Higher Education', (DfES, 2003a), talks of the role universities and colleges have to play in 'expanding opportunity and promoting social justice' (4), creating a 'more enlightened and socially just society' (10), and embracing 'social inclusion' (20). It maintains that education is 'the best and most reliable route out of poverty and disadvantage' (68), and states that institutions must attract and retain 'vulnerable students' (71). The Special Educational Needs and Disability Act, (2001), also now applies to HEIs, making it unlawful for them to discriminate against disabled and prospective

students, including those with mental health problems. It is therefore clear that the role of HE is no longer confined to educating or even educating and training – it is also a force for social change, and change in the purpose, role and identity of the people who pass through their programmes of study.

This, like any good Bourdieuan field, is cross-referenced and cross-alluded, so the various components in the matrix sustain one another. The spirit of the Blair Government's Education White Paper dovetails neatly with New Labour documents concerning mental health policy. The National Service Framework for Mental Health (DoH, 1999) talks of reducing the discrimination and social exclusion perceived to be associated with mental health problems. The DoH campaign 'Mind Out for Mental Health' ran between 4/1/2002 and 31/7/2003 and was aimed at tackling the stigma and discrimination faced by people suffering from mental health problems and promoting their social inclusion. Campaign material contained a number of references to the necessity of enabling people with mental health problems to access education.

The document 'Mental Health and Social Exclusion', (Social Exclusion Unit, 2004: 80), also deals with education for people suffering from mental health problems, both in terms of FE and HE. It is stated that 'participation in learning can have a positive effect on mental health', detailing:

'acquiring new skills, feeling more empowered and having a greater sense of purpose, being viewed more positively by others, establishing new friendships, access to better jobs, better housing and easier access to leisure pursuits'. It maintains that 'a lack of qualifications can cause and reinforce social exclusion for people with mental health problems'.

It maintains that we need to 'promote access to adult learning, further and higher education' (105) and that educational institutions need to raise awareness of mental health issues and to develop good practice and effective support for students. This logic is irrefutable. To hesitate on this helter-

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skelter is to mark oneself as a reactionary, an elitist or a harbinger of the very kind of stigma or exclusion these policies seek to obviate.

The Social Exclusion Unit (2004: 106) further counsels that:

'Further and higher education institutions will review and make appropriate adjustments to their systems for raising awareness among all staff about issues for students with mental health problems, to ensure that no student is disadvantaged in their access to learning and services.'

The Universities UK (formerly the CVCP) (2000) guidelines on student mental health makes recommendations on the development of policies and procedures across individual institutions and recommends raising awareness of relevant legal and 'duty of care' issues, as well as facilitating access to support and guidance services, the provision of training and development opportunities and the greater use of liaison between internal and external agencies. Thus, staff in universities are increasingly being made responsible for ensuring that the changes are implemented, not only in terms of institutional frameworks, but also in themselves, as they are reconfigured into hyper aware inter- and intra-institutional communicators who will secure the safety and well-being of the students.

The follow-up document about suicide prevention (Universities UK, 2002) is even more explicit about the duty of care incumbent upon universities, and their responsibility to ensure that they are health- promoting institutions rather than ones which erode the coping resources of students, and about promoting the desirability of welfare and counselling services working with statutory mental health services (18). Tutors and academic staff monitoring student attendance and studying the appearance and demeanour of students to detect any changes is recommended as good practice (17).

Thus, universities and colleges and the staff within them are seen as key players in fighting the social exclusion that people with mental health

problems face, and in keeping them on their courses and indeed in keeping them alive. New forms of scrutiny are unfolded, where HEIs are checked against their statutory and moral responsibilities and staff are encouraged towards adopting a role which involves scrutiny not only of students' academic capabilities but also of what they say, do and look like.

HE staff are thus called upon to monitor and transform the personal and subjective capacities of the students. They are, in the tradition of New Labour political discourse identified by Fairclough (2000), individualised and made responsible. Virtually absent is any consideration of structural, economic or political forces that might conspire to make people vulnerable or distressed, or reduce their material powers. These are reduced to the dichotomy of social inclusion versus exclusion, and oppression is reduced to its anodyne counterpart, 'stigmatisation'. To anyone accustomed to looking at societies as if they were structured in terms of economics, politics, power and social stratification, this might appear to be an extraordinary transformation. To such a critic it might appear that HEIs and their staff will have an uphill struggle - not necessarily because of any assumed intractability of 'mental illness' itself, but because of the sheer weight of forces ranged against those unfortunate enough to have acquired such a label. The point of mentioning this is not to suggest any simple superiority of one view over another, but to highlight how the picture of policy is artfully constructed to align itself 'naturally' with what we had always hoped to believe about 'human nature'. In other words, how, in a Bourdieuan sense it has been legitimated (Bourdieu, 1977).

#### Higher Education Today and Students With Mental Health Problems:

The Royal College of Psychiatrists (2003) noted that 'students with pre-existing mental health problems are entering universities in greater numbers', (24), that the 'number of HE students presenting with symptoms of mental ill health has increased in recent years' (6), and that 'student counselling

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services in the UK report that increasing numbers of students are presenting with mental health problems of increasing severity' (20). Although they found that 'major' psychiatric disorders are under-represented in the student population, students were found to have increased symptoms of mental ill health compared with age-matched controls. The report maintained that a number of factors combine to create an environment in which students with pre-existing mental health problems may be at greater risk of illness and even those who do not have psychiatric problems on entry to HE may become more vulnerable to them. Implications for the government's widening participation policy are also present in the findings of the report. It is noted that 'Students from less privileged backgrounds...are...more likely to suffer mental ill health', (24), and that it is 'likely that the increased intake of students from less privileged and more disrupted families and communities...will be associated with an increase in the prevalence of mental disorder' (25).

Again, there is inconsistency about whether HE helps or hinders people with mental health problems. The Report states that:

'in certain cases, entry to higher education is an important part of a patient's recovery from psychiatric illness' (11)

and that

'positive aspects of student experience are powerful factors in promoting the self-esteem, resilience and sound mental health that protects against psychiatric disorder' (12).

Yet the Report also talks of the 'well-known stresses of university life', (24), (eg. pressure for academic achievement, time management, financial constraints, social relationships, loneliness and homesickness), and notes that these increase the likelihood of breakdown in students with pre-existing mental health problems.

Mounting evidence is beginning to suggest a far greater degree of hardship and personal distress amongst students than was previously suspected. It is difficult to reconcile this with the picture of personal advancement, enhanced 'self-esteem' and social inclusion accomplished through education painted in 'The Learning Age' (DfEE, 1998). There is evidence that the stress of university life is increasing. Garner (2004) reported in 'The Independent' on research carried out at Royal Holloway College, University of London, which found high levels of stress among students, leading to anxiety and depression. The problems were attributed substantially to students' financial difficulties.

As the difficulties of student life increase, the legislative framework supporting the access of students with pre-existing mental health problems to post-compulsory education has been interpreted and implemented with growing zeal. In the late 1990s, the full implications of disability discrimination were increasingly appreciated. Wright (1998: 5) referred to:

'the changes in the legal, funding and educational frameworks (which) create a new agenda for institutions of changed responsibilities and expectations' in the context of the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act.

Rana et al (1999: 4) note that the Disability Discrimination Act

'is already perceived as increasing the numbers of disabled students entering higher education, including students with mental health problems, and this augers major changes for many universities'.

Neville Harris (2004a), Professor of Law at Manchester University, argued in 'The Times' that universities owe students with mental health problems a legal duty of care in terms of pastoral welfare, claiming that underperformance of pastoral duties by a university could give rise to contractual liability, and that students threatened with exclusion from their course when their needs prove too difficult for the university to manage, may have an enforceable right. This is believed by Harris (2004b) to be part of the broader concerns of citizenship



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and inclusion. Despite the possibly substantial ramifications of the use of litigation by students, the full implications of the Disability Discrimination Act and European Human Rights legislation have yet to be completely brought to bear on the universities themselves.

The trend then is for existing legislation to be interpreted in a way which is increasingly supportive of students with difficulties and their carers in accessing post-compulsory education. This contrasts with hospitals, GPs and psychiatrists who are increasingly exercising their options to refuse to treat patients who are perceived to be too difficult or costly, or who would put the institution at odds with the 'challenging new targets' which are imposed (Carr-Brown, 2003; Carvel, 2002; Davies 2004b).

#### Higher Education as Part of the Welfare System?

There are signs that HEIs are not simply admitting increasing numbers of students with mental health problems, but are responding to their needs in quite major ways. HEIs have for many years provided health care facilities for their students and in recent years many HEIs have expanded such facilities to include counselling services. However, now a number of HEIs have extended their provision to cater specifically for students with mental health problems. Nottingham Trent University, Loughborough University, South Nottingham College and Loughborough College have combined to create a particularly well-developed system of support for such students, funded by HEFCE and concerned with the development of transition initiatives. Workers at Nottingham Trent University support students with mental health difficulties through their studies. Other institutions also provide support in conjunction with the statutory services, for example Ripon & St John. Some HEIs are now employing mental health professionals, such as community mental health nurses. Similar trends can be seen in FE colleges, some of whom are supporting students in partnership with statutory services, for example Wigan



and Leigh College. Some of the students who have been supported in this way can then move on to HE.

In the late 1990s and early 21<sup>st</sup> century HEFCE funded a number of projects at different institutions to develop and promote what was seen to be good practice in dealing with mental health problems. This included initiatives at Nottingham Trent, Leicester, Lancaster, Teeside and Hull. The initiatives involved a number of activities including surveys and focus group exercises to determine the principal threats to well-being, the development and provision of information in leaflet, booklet and/or electronic form, as well as training programmes. In addition a great many of the schemes sought to 'raise awareness', either in terms of the identification of problems on the part of students, or of HEIs legal obligations.

However, although many HEIs are making valiant efforts to respond to the needs of students with mental health problems and there are some examples of meticulous and dedicated practice through the sector as a whole, an increasingly austere unit of resource is blighting the potential rehabilitative and therapeutic effects that these practices might have. Although individual institutions may want to support students with mental health problems, finances are now very strained indeed and academic staff, who often bear the brunt of supporting mentally ill students, are now faced with a vastly increased workload (Stanley & Manthorpe, 2001). Even if an institution has the resources to run training sessions for staff in working with students experiencing mental health difficulties, many staff will not have the time to attend such courses. Furthermore, models of mental health training used to educate mental health professionals are not commonly used to educate HE staff on such courses and the awareness-raising often employed is not adequate to create an environment for experiential learning. All too often, the reality is a mental health booklet/policy provided on the HEI intranet for any member of staff motivated to read it. HEIs are under-prepared and under-

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resourced for the task of dealing with increasing numbers of students with mental health problems. Indeed, the whole drift of this advice makes a number of assumptions about the enigma of distress and phenomenologically diverse experience, and pre-supposes that they can be addressed through an awareness-raised, leaflet-rich, protocol-driven, good practice-enhanced regime anyway. This much is often taken to be commonsensical, but, as with generic models of good practice in teaching itself, a moment's reflection suggests that these are merely assumptions which might well prove to be rather fragile in the face of critical scrutiny (Grenfell & James, 2004).

The extent of the HE sector's preparedness in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been documented by Stanley & Manthorpe (2001; 2002). The impression gained is that of educational establishments struggling to accommodate the needs of vulnerable students. The ethos of self-reliance and independence on which institutions have hitherto relied is counterproductive when students in difficulty are reluctant to seek help or are inaccessible to the help that might be available. Indeed, in some cases, for example where courses lead to qualifications in the health care professions, students may be highly motivated to evade 'help' entirely, lest it affect their career prospects (Chew-Graham *et al*, 2003).

HE staff have themselves felt ill-equipped and under-prepared for the caring role in which the presence of distressed and vulnerable students placed them. There was also concern that HEIs and society as a whole were avoiding the issue of providing appropriate care for students by means of an expansion in the pastoral role of staff, over and above the traditional role of academic guidance. As one respondent in Stanley & Manthorpe's respondents put it:

'...I find I have to do considerable 'counselling' myself and I think that the university should not put so much pastoral care onto academic staff on the cheap' (Stanley & Manthorpe, 2001: 47).

Academic staff also highlighted a lack of time in which to deal with students' distress adequately, a finding which echoes that of other surveys (Wassall, 1999). Moreover, a crucial difficulty for the sector is that there is little effective liaison between HE academic staff and other health care agencies such as GPs, community mental health teams and staff in hospitals, who, even if they can be located, are often not forthcoming, perhaps due to pressures within their own organisations or concerns over confidentiality. Stanley & Manthorpe (2001) report that contact with HEIs' counselling services was often easier to initiate, yet there were nevertheless concerns about the difficulty of discovering anything about the progress a student might be making, as a result of the need to maintain confidentiality.

Hence, the picture painted in these investigations of the preparedness of HEIs to accommodate students with mental health difficulties is that there is some considerable way to go before the services are established to an appropriate level. In many institutions, the pathways to a 'joined-up' service such that academic and mental health care services can operate seamlessly and provide care for vulnerable people, are fragmented.

Given the difficulties we have identified, it might be wondered whether there is a financial or political incentive behind the growing trend towards the containment of distress, psycho-social difficulties and 'mental health problems' in educational institutions.

Perhaps one part of the answer can be found when we scrutinise funding arrangements for students. FE and HE look cheap yet functional, especially as their funding arrangements have increasingly been reconfigured so that they do not appear to burden the public purse. Successive governments, including New Labour, have been successful in substantially reducing financial support for students. Full-time students in HE now have to contribute varying amounts to their tuition fees, which, already may exceed £1,000 pa, and are very soon set to rise considerably for many students. In an effort to combat

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hardship in a small number of cases, in September 2004 the Government introduced the Higher Education Grant, a non-repayable means-tested grant of up to £1000. To be eligible for the full amount, the household income of the student needs to be less than £15,200 pa. Students with a household income above £21,185 pa are not eligible to receive the HE grant. The only other means of support available to most students, at the time of writing, no matter how impoverished, is the repayable student loan. However, it should be noted that, along with preparing to implement 'top-up' fees, many HEIs are in the process of developing scholarships for some disadvantaged students. To be eligible for other state support, students have to demonstrate special circumstances, for example by having dependents, or disabilities. Some students with mental health problems are eligible for Income Support, Incapacity Benefit and Disability Living Allowance. Anecdotal evidence from disability advisors however, suggest that such claims from students are rarely successful, because regulations state that claimants must be 'incapable of work' or 'substantially incapacitated'. Students who are able to demonstrate that they have a disability may be eligible for the Disabled Students' Allowance from their Local Education Authority. Anecdotal evidence from some HEI disability advisors suggests, on the basis of their experience their experience with people seeking to obtain the Disabled Students Allowance for mental health problems, that this is often very difficult. Thus, in the case of mental health problems, the financial situation for students is more austere than it might be if they were either unemployed or supported through incapacity or sickness benefit.

This intersects in complex ways with other recent popular and political anxieties about the 'cost' of sickness and disability themselves. The growing numbers of people claiming long-term incapacity benefit in the UK have caused increasing concern in popular and political circles and after announcing a 'war on welfare' in late 2004, at the time of writing, (February 2005), Tony

Blair is planning moves to cut the bill for incapacity benefits, estimated to exceed £7 billion pa (Wintour, 2005). It has been suggested in a number of spirited features in 'The Daily Mail' that 'bogus' claimants have been tempted to give up work because of 'generous' sickness benefits, and journalists charged that many of these people were feigning illness (Reid, 2004; Wilson, 2005).

To a government faced with the need to address this self-inflicted political problem, education - with its much vaunted power to increase people's employability and decrease social exclusion - might be especially attractive. Whilst the process of persuading people with mental health problems to enroll in courses in educational establishments is largely done through low-level individualised intervention by their key-workers, the over-all outcome of such a policy is to lessen the number of potential claimants of sickness and disability benefits per se and transfer them into another segment of the economy where they are as yet invisible to journalists, placing a less obvious burden on the public purse.

Although some 'flagship' schemes which have been set up with extra funding in a few HEIs are supplying some students with assistance such as support workers, most institutions are not able to provide such help. Neither is there any indication that the funding which is currently being employed to sustain people on incapacity and sickness benefits will be redeployed to support initiatives within the education system.

There is also little to assess the 'success' of students experiencing mental health problems who enter HE. In many cases there is no follow-up to assess the student's outcome and in other areas follow-up is widely believed to be inadequate. However, some statutory services perceive a mental health worker as having been 'successful' if one of their clients enters HE, and at a local level this is believed to be driving the migration of existing clients into the education system. Despite a widespread belief that this is beneficial,

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there is instead, as we have seen, growing evidence of the fragility of student mental health.

Thus New Labour's policy of encouraging people with mental health problems to enter HE is encouraging them into a situation which is already demonstrably likely to lead to a deterioration in a person's mental health rather than any improvement. Despite an established tradition of policy advocating the inclusion of service users' voices in the formulation of strategy and service planning, as in the National Service Framework (DoH, 1999), there has been no discussion in public fora about the desirability of this policy. Hence, parties such as the HEIs, the statutory services and most importantly, people experiencing mental health problems themselves, have not had an opportunity to comment on the problems or anticipated success. It is almost as though this policy has been smuggled in by the Government with no open debate and very little media coverage.

However, there is another feature of the debate in the popular media and in political fora where education is at issue, and that is the concern about the possibility of a dilution of quality in the light of widened participation in the sector. The speculation concerning the presumed lowering of standards or 'dumbing down,' combined with the allegedly widespread existence of 'Mickey Mouse' degrees, became especially intense following remarks by minister Margaret Hodge and historian David Starkey. Charges of undesirable 'social engineering,' have been made as some in the HE sector express reservations about the New Labour Government's attempts to widen participation in HE (Brockes, 2003).

#### Conclusion: Policies, Consciousness, Legitimation

In what way the policies are deployed, whether through widespread reform or individual action, a number of theoretically significant features should be noted. The policies discussed here are of relatively recent origin but appear to



have a long and commonsensical pedigree which affords a degree of legitimisation. They are unapologetically identified with progress, reform, equality, modernity and with the abolition of stigma and with the acquisition of apparently desirable personal qualities. They therefore fit neatly with currently modish political discourse to the effect that individuals themselves can be re-capitalised ie. made more employable, have their self-esteem raised, their networks strengthened and their employability enhanced.

This phenomenon also demonstrates how the field in which the various actors play out the drama of mental health and illness in relation to post-compulsory education has rendered new insights. What was once private distress and personal conduct is now a matter of policy, legislation and socially, morally and legally mandated obligation. Changes in the mindset and inferential framework of HE staff are encouraged. This again is done in such a way as to appear commonsensical. After all, who could possibly disagree with helping to prevent suicide, or facilitating people with disabilities to access HE. Yet these changes have populated the educational landscape with new phenomena:

'What was fundamentally invisible is suddenly offered to the brightness of the gaze, in a movement of appearance so simple, so immediate that it seems to be the natural consequence of a more highly developed experience' (Foucault, 1975: 195).

This process of legitimisation is concerned with making it look as if we have just learned to see things clearly after years of being bound by prejudices:

'free at last of theories and chimeras', the newly enlightened professional can 'approach the object of...experience with the purity of an unprejudiced gaze' (Foucault, 1975: 195).

As Rose puts it:



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'the personal and subjective capacities of citizens have become incorporated into the scope and aspirations of public powers' (Rose, 1989: 1).

This new policy landscape, this psychologisation and individualisation of the ways in which professionals, policymakers, service users and students themselves are encouraged to think about the situation, means that Rose's words – originally written to describe the role of psychology in helping to create the forms of modern life – are equally applicable now to the post-compulsory education system. As Rose says:

'we need to trace out the ways in which psychological modes of explanation, claims to truth, and systems of authority have participated in the elaboration of moral codes that stress an ideal of responsible autonomy, in shaping these codes in a certain "therapeutic" direction, and in allaying them with programs for regulating individuals consonant with the political rationalities of advanced liberal democracies' (Rose, 1996: 119).

Footnote. Shortly after this paper was accepted for publication, the issue of students in HE suffering from mental health problems was widely debated in the lay-press, after a Universities UK conference identified a lack of support for such students from the NHS and a lack of resources to build an appropriate supportive infrastructure for them within HE. There has been no substantive government response as yet.

### Link To Chapter Three

Having explored aspects of the social construction of New Labour's redefined HE system, in Bourdieuiian terms the field, I pursue questions relating to the individual's construction in relation to HE. I am interested in whether men and women construct their experiences of HE differently and whether people believe that their passage through the HE system is 'life-changing', a consequence of HE implicit in some recent Government policy documents. Many of the participants in this study had passed through HE before New Labour began to implement change, and some before Margaret Thatcher's administration, so it was therefore possible to compare the construction of the HE experience by the individual across generations and age cohorts, as well as between the genders. Here, I employ Bourdieu's notion of the habitus, and I seek to add to, and expand, the notion of habitus. Bourdieu believed that the field and habitus interact, so work on the habitus seems the obvious sequel to the exploration of the newly defined field.

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## **Chapter Three**

## **Gender and the HE Experience: In Search of the Reflexive Self**

### Introduction

A growing body of literature has been published regarding students' experiences of HE in the UK. Much of this work has explored the experiences of students who are in a minority, disadvantaged or marginalised in some way (James, 1995; Phillips, 1986; Tett, 2000). A substantial part of this work concentrates on gender as an aspect of the HE experience, and much of it has been carried out with women (Edwards, 1993; MacDonald, 1980; Pascall & Cox, 1993a;b). Many of the women surveyed have been 'non-traditional' students, who come either from ethnic minorities or social groups under-represented in HE, or who were mature students.

Researchers in this tradition have concentrated on women's experiences of HE, often treating 'women' as an homogenous group, and gendered experience as if it could simply be 'read off' from their accounts in an unproblematic manner. In this paper we shall argue that many accounts of

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gender in relation to HE experience have, despite their feminist ambitions, served to reproduce commonsensical gender categories, and have remained remarkably unaffected by a number of key developments in theories of gender (Chilcoat, 2004) and of the self (Braidotti, 2003). In our discussion of previous work, we will be examining the implicit model of gender adopted by other authors who have tried to describe gender and HE, and will offer some new insights from recent developments in theories of identity and gender. Subsequently, in a discussion of an interview study of 40 individuals who described their HE experiences, we explore the possibilities for theorising about gendered experience in a way which reflects the diversity and flexibility of gendered biographies. It is important to address the sometimes complex and indirect relationship between gender and educational experience in participants' lives in order to transcend the crude essentialism which has pervaded a good deal of the existing literature on the subject.

The state of the field: gender as a lens and women students as a species.

Much feminist scholarship has stressed the oppressive nature of girls and women's education and how it prepares women for the division of labour (Coats, 1994; David, 1980; MacDonald, 1980; McRobbie, 1978). Yet there is a distinct lack of work on men's experience of HE, (Maynard & Pearsall, 1994) and even of the more 'privileged' or 'traditional' women students.

A critical review of the available literature on women's experience of HE reveals that a substantial amount has been published concerning the educational experiences of disadvantaged or marginalised people, and here we shall be expanding this focus via an empirical study which includes a number of people who through their participation in HE have escaped experiences of disadvantage and marginalisation, and which explores the gender specificity of the narratives they disclose by comparing equal numbers of men and women in one sample.

In previous work on HE experience, the issue of gender has been hugely influential and the critical consideration of gender has occasioned reinterpretations of many fields of inquiry (Roper, 1994; Scott, 1988).

The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English (9th edition) (Fowler, 1995) defines 'gendered' as: 'of or specific to the male or female sex'. But can the characteristics of people of different sexes be meaningfully classified in this way? In social life, a number of authors have contended that gendered practice on the part of self-aware individuals is more complex. Connell (1995: 71) describes gender as 'a social practice that constantly refers to bodies and what bodies do; it is not social practice reduced to the body'. Connell also notes that forms of knowledge about gender are connected with particular social practices and that 'the conflicting forms of knowledge about gender betray the presence of different practices addressing gender' (5). He observes that in the sociology of gender an important theme is that gender is constructed in interaction. Yet this has not prevented scholars of gender in education looking for aspects of the phenomenon which consistently and ontologically differentiate women and men, rather than for example seeing gender as being constituted from dynamic relationships.

Butler (1990a: 6) stresses pluralities among women: 'If one 'is' a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pre-gendered 'person' transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities'. Butler observes that because of this, gender cannot be separated from the political and cultural intersections producing or maintaining it. Butler also suggests that a region of the 'specifically feminine', differentiated from the masculine, presumes a universality among women. She theorises that in this manner, the specificity of the feminine is decontextualised and separated from the constitution of

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class, race, ethnicity and other axes of power relations making up 'identity', thus making identity a misnomer.

As long ago as 1949, De Beauvoir observed that one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one, suggesting that she believed that gender is constructed. De Beauvoir demonstrated that by the marking of the feminine, the masculine and universal person are conflated, thus defining women in terms of their sex, but men in terms of their personhood. Once again, we reach an essentialist view of the female, but as De Beauvoir sought to indicate, these essences are artfully constructed by a gender-dichotomous society.

From these points of view, gender is a fluid concept, intimately tied in to, and produced by, the culture that surrounds it. By contrast, an essentialist view of gender involves believing in a consistent set of features that are in essence common to the gender in question. It is this assumption, often implicit in research on gender differences, that would enable us to look at women experiencing HE and draw conclusions regarding women in general.

Previous published work that is analysed in this paper:

From the outset, studies of HE experience have sought to identify an archetypal 'women's experience' in universities, replete with the disadvantage, oppression and discrimination consequent upon their sex. Equally, from the outset, researchers have often had to look quite hard to find consistent gender differences. For example an early study by Phillips (1986) found differences in male and female student experiences, in that women tended to anticipate more problems than they actually encountered. This is rather different from a good deal of the work conducted in schools, where education for girls has been seen to reproduce women's roles of domesticity and low paid work. However, even in this sphere the overall message of feminine disadvantage has been disputed. Scholars such as Anyon (1983)



and Wolpe (1988) have challenged the idea that girls passively and uncritically imbibe messages about femininity from educational institutions.

This idea of challenging inequalities, on the face of it, is even more visible in research on women's experience of HE. For example, in Pascall & Cox's (1993a: 17) study of the experiences of women returning to HE, they state that the 'reproduction of social roles is contested' and that 'education for women has real potential for destabilising traditional notions of femininity'. Pascall & Cox found that many of their participants saw education as a means to lead them away from 'feminine destinies' of restricted opportunity in paid work and a limited domestic career. Their participants had 'fragile' positions in the job market and some saw education as the only way of 'diminishing the restrictions of their circumstances' (25). These women generally saw education as liberating and fulfilling: 'education was a personal transformation of a wholly positive kind' (31). Pascall & Cox note the contradiction between the theoretical work on women's education and the experiences of the participants in their study:

'these women's perceptions of the role of education in their lives bear much more resemblance to notions of education as opportunity' (31) rather than to ideas of education as oppression.

James (1995) draws upon Bourdieu's (1977) notion of 'habitus' in explaining the experience of students. Two of his participants, Sandra and Sophia, were from middle-class backgrounds and this was why they needed little cultural adjustment to become mature students, despite some conflict with their gender roles. Working-class students found entry to university more problematic. This tendency to somehow rebuild one's notion of self was also apparent in Davey (2003). Most of his respondents placed a high value on gaining a qualification and also enjoyed the challenge of university and extending themselves. They reported very positive personal change,

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increases in confidence, stimulation and awareness and some talked about developing wholly new identities.

Britton & Baxter (1999: 179) focus on gender difference and how this 'constructs the experience of returning to education' and see education as the 'key site for the construction of identity'. They use the idea of the 'reflexive self' (Beck 1992) and view the task of becoming a mature student as a 'continuous process of identity construction.' (180). They draw out common cultural themes from the students' narratives and define four narrative types: 'struggling against the odds'; 'unfulfilled potential'; 'credentialism' and 'self-transformation'. These narratives are defined as being gendered representations. Britton & Baxter argue that the discourse of the reflexive self has previously been assumed to be gender-neutral but is actually based on male experience and tends to assimilate women's experience into a male model. This denies the specificity of women's experience, so Britton & Baxter attempt to 'recognise women's different experience' by starting from the assumption that people actively construct their identities, narrating their lives, and producing individualised biographies. In doing this

'men and women may not have access to the same repertoire of narratives through which to make sense of their lives' (183).

Once again, they refer to the

'dominant cultural narrative of self...based on a highly individualistic conception of self which does not adequately represent women's experience' (183).

Yet even their own reported data yield some clues to the diversity and flexibility apparent. Although the reflexive self was argued to be a male- only narrative, at least two of their women exhibited an active, self aware desire to obtain credentials and change their situations, for example via voluntary work or by choosing a career step from nurse to nurse tutor.

By identifying women as being excluded from a 'reflexive self' narrative, 'women' are treated as a homogenous group, which underplays the differences that may be found, and the degree of reflexive, self-aware agency they are believed to exhibit. Here, the authors are complicit with 'a tendency to conflate identities with..."essentialist"...categories' (Somers, 1994: 605).

Britton et al's work is based on a relatively small sample, involving 21 participants, seven of whom were men. Thus it is perhaps premature to conclude that there are distinctly masculine and feminine subject positions to which men and women are anchored in any determined, essentialist manner, especially as the authors concede that the women they interviewed do not seem to have a 'central' feminine identity.

Tett (2000: 184) looked at the experiences of working-class non-traditional students in HE and examined the relationship between class and gender. She argued that people describe their experiences in a way that reflects

'how they construct feminine and masculine identities, which are not static but are historically and spatially situated and evolving'.

As Somers (1994) observed, the embeddedness of identity in overlapping networks of relations extends over time and space. Tett suggests that through questioning the discourses of class and gender, students could think reflexively about the social construction of experiences of education. Tett (2000: 185) claims that:

'gender was an important force in differentiating the way that they described their life experiences... similarities and shared experiences are mediated through the lens of gender...gender is always one core factor in understanding lived experience'.

These observations would seem to be true for Tett's participants, the women describing how they were 'held back' in their education because of their community's expectations of appropriate activities for girls. Scott (1994: 285)

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argues that 'in patriarchal discourse, sexual difference... serves to encode or establish meanings that are literally unrelated to gender or the body'. Such a discourse seems to have been very powerful in the communities in which these women grew up. The evidence of these women would suggest as Scott (1991) maintains, that the (sexual) difference does not constitute a biological essence, but is a historically created and changeable identity.

As adults, the women also encountered difficulties with HE that the men didn't, due to childcare responsibilities, which in the communities that these women came from, seemed to fall virtually entirely on the women. Tett repeats Edwards's (1993) observation that juggling home life and HE impacts more on female students than male. Tett (2000: 191) observes that the:

'stories people tell are related to the narratives available to them...through narrativity we make sense of the world and constitute social identities, locating ourselves in social narratives, rarely of our own making', and also comments that her participants are 'influenced by their understanding of what it means to be male or female as much as what it means to be working-class'.

The women in Tett's study seem to have come from communities in which the woman's role was very clearly located in the domestic sphere. As adults, Tett's participants described how their education as girls was restricted and were aware of their gendered position much more than the men, perhaps as a result of experiencing more restrictions on their activities or ambitions than men. This recollects De Beauvoir's thinking - that women are women, but that men are 'people'. Or as Tett (2000: 191) puts it:

'women have been as aware of their gendered position...whereas the men's consciousness of inhabiting the category 'man' has been minimal'.

To summarise the pattern of results reported in the previous literature we have compiled a table (see Table 1) detailing the kinds of theme attributed to men and women in relation to personal and professional issues.

Table 1 Themes in previous research on gender and the experience of higher education.

	Kind of discourse	
Gender of student	Personal repertoires	Professional repertoires
Male	Self transformation (Britton & Baxter, 1999) Self orientated (Pascal & Cox, 1993a;b) 'reflexive self' (Britton & Baxter, 1999) 'wrong track' (Britton & Baxter, 1999)	Credentialism (Pascall & Cox, 1993a;b) Instrumental (Britton & Baxter, 1999) Employment (Tett, 2000) Unitary self with aims and ambitions (Kehily, 1995)
Female	Opportunities (Pascall & Cox, 1993a;b) Non-reflexive (Britton & Baxter, 1999) Narcissistic (Pascall & Cox, 1993a;b)	Instrumental (Maynard & Pearsall, 1994)

Thus, to sum up a number of gender-related trends identified by previous authors, we might expect to find men with a well-developed sense of where the qualifications obtained would take their careers, a strong reflexive sense of self and how it might be cultivated and enhanced through the acquisition of a degree and a sense perhaps that it would get them off the wrong track and by implication onto the right one. Women by contrast tend to be presented in a far less positive light in the analysis, hemmed in by structural constraints which affect their life chances and even the ways in which they can conceive of themselves. They are perceived to be apt to see the entry into education as a result of 'opportunities' made available as a result of some outside

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agency, and are unreflectively narcissistic in their sense of personal development, with little sense of career development otherwise than as an instrumental notion that qualifications might be advantageous.

The literature on HE experience thus corresponds to a more general trend detectable in the literature about gender and language (Lakoff, 1975; Tannen, 2000) or on gender and education (van Houtte, 2004) which involves the claim that males and females inhabit distinct gendered realms, which are sometimes so different as to comprise strikingly different 'speech communities' (Wood, 2002) or 'communication cultures' (Maltz & Borker, 1982). Generally, this picture has been sustained in the literature concerning the experience of HE reviewed above, and has formed a lens through which the majority of authors view gendered experience.

This picture of gender in relation to education looks somewhat simplistic in relation to a number of strands of recent research and theory concerning gender. Despite the relatively unquestioning reproduction of commonsensical gender categories in a good deal of the literature on HE experience, elsewhere in the field of gender scholarship several dissenting trends have emerged.

The first strand of dissent from the idea of 'two cultures' has emerged from empirical researchers. MacGeorge *et al* (2004) dispute the notion of gendered cultures in communication and prefer instead to talk about the differential exercise of skills as a means through which apparent gender differences are accomplished. A second trend was set in motion by Judith Butler (1990a) who considered gender to be a kind of 'performative'. Borrowing the term from Austin's (1962) speech act theory, to say that a statement, a story or a display of gendered behaviour is a performative, is to say that it is bringing something into being. In this view, describing the hardship of looking after children, the satisfaction of career success, or the conflict between home and working life is not simply to describe a fact of male or female experience, it is to do with how the speaker is knowingly assembling an identity as a man or



woman. Butler (1990b: 270) thus offers what she herself calls 'a more radical use of the doctrine of constitution that takes the social agent as an *object* rather than the subject of constitutive acts'. Butler argues that we cannot even assume a stable subjectivity that goes about performing various gender roles; rather, it is the very act of performing gender that constitutes who we are. Identity itself, for Butler, is an illusion retroactively created by our performances:

'In opposition to theatrical or phenomenological models which take the gendered self to be prior to its acts, I will understand constituting acts not only as constituting the identity of the actor, but as constituting that identity as a compelling illusion, an object of *belief*' (Butler, 1990b: 271).

The belief in stable gender identities and gendered experiences of education is, Butler might argue, compelled 'by social sanction and taboo'.

Furthermore, Joan Scott (1994: 282) maintains that feminism needs theory which allows us to think in 'pluralities and diversities, not unities and universals'. She argues that post-structuralism suggests that in patriarchal discourse, sexual difference serves to encode or establish meanings that are unrelated to gender or the body and thus the meanings of gender become tied to cultural representations, which establish terms by which gender relations are organised and understood.

Here then, there are several important strands which have over the last decade offered a challenge to binaristic gender thinking in the social sciences which need to be taken seriously by educational studies. From empirical studies of men and women communicating (MacGeorge *et al* 2004), theoretical conceptions of gender as a performative (Butler, 1990a;b) and post-structuralist notions of gender as plurality and diversity, there are a variety of developments which have profound implications for how we consider the experience of HE in relation to gender.



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However, the impact of these traditions of work on studies of the HE experience has as yet been minimal. Predominantly the approach so far has had more in common with Lakoff (1975), Tannen (1990), or John Gray's popular 'Mars and Venus' series of self-help volumes, where caricatures of men and women go on dates and have arguments (Gray, 1992; 1996) and are disinclined to step outside their pre-formulated sex roles.

Therefore we will examine the manifestations of gender in a data set deriving from an interview study of HE participants to aid the understanding of how gender is best conceptualised in participants' narratives and to highlight points of contact and divergence from existing scholarship on the issue.

#### Method and participants

Twenty women and twenty men were interviewed. The only selection criteria used was that they had all been through the HE system and had since followed careers which could be described as middle-class. These paths ranged from vocational courses such as medicine leading to careers as doctors, to the trajectories of other participants who had subsequently become restaurateurs or outdoor sports instructors. As adults, none of the participants could be described as 'marginalised', yet a number of them reported experiencing considerable deprivation as children or young adults. A good deal of the literature concentrates on urban experience of disadvantage and much of the research has been carried out in large cities. The present sample differs, in that the respondents who had experienced 'deprivation', nearly all experienced rural deprivation. Interpreting the backgrounds of these respondents in terms of social class is also problematic. A relatively high number of participants were from rural Wales and many of them asserted that using a class system applicable to England could not adequately describe their backgrounds. However, most of these people showed features that

would, in England, be described as 'working-class'. Their parents were employed in manual jobs, or were unemployed, and were usually living on low incomes. The participants were usually the first in the family to experience HE. Their ages ranged from the late 20s to the late 50s, although most participants were in their 30s. Approximately two-thirds had attended university immediately after leaving school and one-third had been mature students. Some of our respondents considered that they had climbed out of disadvantage straight away at a relatively young age, by attending university, providing an interesting contrast to the students described in much of the literature. They were approached via a snowball sampling technique amongst people already known to the first author, who were subsequently asked to introduce other people who might be interested in the study.

As participants' responses in previous work often suggested that HE had a life-changing quality, the interviews for the present study adopted an open-ended approach which was a modified form of the autobiographical interviewing method of Chamberlayne *et al* (2000; 2004) where the researcher begins with a single question and subsequently encourages elaboration. These interviews began with the question: 'Was university a life-changing experience for you?' The interview then proceeded with the participant leading, and the interviewer seeking clarification and elaboration, seeking information as to what it was about university that had been life-changing, or whether other life events had been more influential.

The analysis proceeded in line with Chamberlayne *et al*'s (2000) recommendations, by discussion of the interviews on a case by case basis amongst the researchers with a view to identifying themes and moments of life change and whether this differed between men and women. The notes and records of these discussions formed a further layer of data which was drawn upon for analysis. The analysis was also informed by the issues raised

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in the background literature concerning the types of identities, interpretive repertoires and narrative forms which were drawn upon by men and women.

The analytic strategy was at first informed by the insight from previous literature that there might be different narratives apparent in the data which would cleave along gendered lines. That is, following Tett (2000), it was anticipated that there would be a sense of the role education played in constructing a gendered identity as a man or women, or that women might stress narcissistic aspects of the experience and that men might stress the credentials gained.

#### Results and discussion

90% of participants found at least one aspect of university experience life-changing. Of those who did not, both the women's backgrounds could be described as working-class, with one being a 'traditional' and the other a 'non-traditional' student whereas the two men who did not find university life-changing were both 'traditional' students, one of whom was working-class and the other middle-class.

#### ***Gender: representations of inequality***

Contrary to our expectations on the basis of much background literature, it was relatively rare for interviewees to attend to issues and experiences in terms of gender. However, this was mentioned on a small number of occasions, where participants indicated that for some people, gender was significant in certain contexts.

Among the self-reported experiences, a number of themes and issues occur where the experiences of men and women were markedly similar. Generally, this work did not replicate many of the results of the published studies, although interestingly enough the two people interviewed who did articulate their experiences in a similar way to the participants in published studies were both female mature students.

In the light of persistent concerns on the part of researchers, policymakers and the general public about inequality in the labour market (eg. Dench *et al*, 2002), one might expect some gender differences to emerge in participants' accounts concerning the nature of employment and their position in the labour market as a result of their HE experience.

However, in the present study it was common for both female and male participants to value their HE in terms of the contribution that either the experience, or even simply the qualification, could make to their career development.

Let us first consider the occasions where participants themselves attended to questions of gender inequality. There were only two comments in the forty interviews that identified gender inequalities as an issue. These comments were made by two women. One woman, a GP, was aware that she had the expectation to be 'reasonably' well paid, with the implication that this was unusual for her gender:

Gill: 'I'm a female and I can actually do a job that's reasonably well paid, I don't have this thing where I need to always feel that I've got to depend on a partner to support me'

Another woman had grown up in a very economically deprived household, and while growing up, had seen her mother abandoned by successive male partners, and left to bring up children on state benefits:

Corrine: 'I always really wanted to be in the position where I would be able to support myself if the father of my children left me and I guess that's the thing about going to university that was consciously life changing for me, I knew I wanted to be able to support myself as an adult'.

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'If I have children which I'd like to do, I will be able to work part time because I can earn enough money to do so and it's one of the reasons I went to university as well.'

Here education is seen as a way of avoiding a trap of poverty to which they see themselves as being particularly susceptible as women. These participants were also the only women to mention their improved financial status and it is interesting that they did this in the context of not having to be financially dependent on a partner.

The relatively minor role that a specifically gendered narrative played in the present study contrasts with much of the previous literature. For example, Tett (2000: 185) found that 'gender was an important force in differentiating the way they described their life experiences'; 'gender is one core factor in understanding lived experience'. Yet in the present data set, the quotes above were the only ones where participants themselves oriented to gender or gender inequality as a factor and both of them describe themselves transcending its limitations. Nevertheless in the present data it was just these two examples that were aligned with Tett's observation that economics is important for women because of family and personal development and for men because of employment.

### ***Self-improvement and the reflexive self***

Although we examined the material from the interviews under the categories of 'career development' and 'personal development', one striking point was how the main theme of most of the interviews whether from men or women could be described as a 'self-improvement story', often involving the discourse of 'self-confidence', a discourse that men and women have equal access to. Men and women talked about the construction of the self as an economically and socially improved entity. An idea expressed is that experience makes the interviewees what they are – again, expressed by both male and female interviewees. We can usefully employ the idea of the 'reflexive self' here,

being manifested by both male and female interviewees, growing in confidence, social skills and employability as a result of their qualifications. This has parallels with Pascall & Cox's (1993a) ideas about the emancipatory potential of education for women. Yet education is also liberating for men in the present study as they transcend previously limited occupational and social opportunities by going to university. Kehily's (1995) notion of a person's gender being an over-determining factor in their life experiences and life chances and informs the kinds of self-narratives they construct, is difficult to sustain from the present data.

i) Adding to the self-project

Participants described themselves as having been augmented by the educational process in a number of ways. Interestingly, only one male participant mentioned his improved financial status after HE, a man who had come from a deprived working-class background and had been employed in a series of very poorly paid jobs before gaining his degree:

Dave: 'I really saw university as an investment, I saw it as a way of increasing my income.'

'I had a sense of what the system was, you have the piece of paper and you know your salary goes up by 50%, so that's really what it was for me.'

The comment here is somewhat different from that of the two women mentioned above in that he does not orientate to the inability of a partner to support him. Yet even so HE is a way out of poverty and deprivation. This formulation of HE, as a way of improving one's prospects, is both instrumental and concerned with developing and cultivating oneself.

Some participants had taken vocational degrees at university and this clearly influenced their career development, as exemplified in this quote from a female doctor:

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Gill: 'I suppose because of the nature of the degree, you almost had an automatic, as well as a qualification, presumed career at the end of it ... the one certainty is that you will always get a job at the end of the day, which I suppose is quite life changing...'

Or this, from a female optician:

Penny: 'Gaining qualifications to enable me to do the job that I wanted to do.'

A female occupational therapist:

Esyllt: 'The obvious one is my career, still an occupational therapist...'

Female health care researcher:

Toni: 'It's opened a lot of doors for me, having an honours degree in law.'

Male GP:

Christopher: '...at the end of the day it was the end-product, churned out with a marketable skill that was the most life changing aspect of my university education.'

'By the end of my five years I really felt that I was trained to do a good job.'

Both male and female participants who had not taken vocational degrees talked of the positive effect their degree had on their career development, sometimes in terms of simply being a graduate:

Corrine: 'I can get into jobs, courses, partly because, well very much because I went to university at all, but particularly because I went to Cambridge.'

'In the sense of the opportunities it gave me more than anything.'



Jo: 'I think now ... I look at jobs that perhaps I wouldn't have considered myself capable of doing.'

'I can aim a lot higher...'

Janet: 'I would never have had the confidence to have gone into this without having had the experience of higher education.'

Mike: 'A complete life-change, got me off a relatively dead end career path.'

'I still have the potential for a teaching career if I want it'.

Dave: 'I'd got to the stage...of actually wanting to have a career and as far as I could see the only way to do that was to get a degree.'

'I certainly had better, more opportunities available to me by having a degree and going to university.'

These comments are especially interesting as constructions or performances. According to previous authors (e.g. Britton & Baxter, 1999) the idea of the reflexive self was a repertoire that was exclusively deployed by men, who appear to be the captains of their own ships, navigating a course through the world of work. However, in the data collected in the present study there appears to be no such gender distinction.

The idea of the reflexive self has been most famously promoted in the social sciences by Anthony Giddens, who argues that reflexivity becomes especially important in the context of 'post-traditional' settings emerging in modernity. Reflexive self-awareness provides the individual with the opportunity to construct self-identity without the shackles of tradition and culture, which previously created relatively rigid boundaries to the options for one's self-understanding. In Giddens's formulation – 'nothing is more central to, and distinctive of, human life than the reflexive monitoring of behaviour, which is expected by all 'competent' members of society of others' (Giddens 1976:

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114). Moreover, reflexive selves are 'constantly revising and reforming themselves in the light of new information or circumstances' (Giddens, 1990: 38).

In our data the self is thus described as being reconstituted through education into an economically or professionally formidable entity capable of avoiding the traps of gendered poverty or low incomes. Men and women seem equally adroit at deploying this formulation of self, in a way we would not necessarily expect from the previous work in the field. No distinct gender trend was observable. Indeed, pursuing Butler's performative account of identities, both genders seem to steer themselves away from the abject, unliveable, impoverished and unqualified realm and into the sunlight of vocational viability and prosperity.

A related theme of how the individual becomes self consciously embellished with credentials and skills which can be re-performed in vocational settings was also detectable in the data. Here, participants talked about the way the skills and experiences gained while studying for their degrees had helped their careers. Here also, participants could be seen imbibing ever more deeply of the discourse of reflexive selves.

Karen: 'I use the skills rather than the actual degree.'

Judith: 'A great deal of difference was made I think by the experience we had of composing...I think working through those tasks, trying out different techniques, trying out different styles, things that would have never have arisen normally and naturally, that sort of experience really did make a difference I think from the point of view of being a musician.'

Jo: 'I've got a whole different tool kit ... like doing research and writing reports and IT skills and all those things...'

Geraint: 'We were in a sense exposed to a kind of research really as undergraduates and having been exposed to that I think it did help one to

develop a kind of attitude toward work... I still feel deep down I'm still a mathematician.'

Rick: 'It certainly gave me a whole series of tools which I gradually accumulated over the three years – the ability to self-start, to manage a project, to conduct research, to meet deadlines, to use my brain, and all these things have stood me in very good stead in my work ever since.'

Again, there was no detectable gender trend in these self-descriptions. Generally, both male and female participants described themselves in terms of self-managed suites of characteristics - 'skills', 'toolboxes', 'toolkits', being 'self-starting' – which make them employable. Thus, like notions of the individual in contemporary policy discourses, they are identifying themselves as agents within their own biography of employment (Worth, 2003). In a sense then, both men and women are here describing themselves as captains of their own ship; performing agency, if you will.

Two participants, interestingly both men, made what could be described in the context of this study, as 'atypical' comments regarding their career development.

One man, who had felt disappointed with the academic content of his course, became deeply involved in the university rock-climbing club:

Simon: 'Here I am now as a lecturer in outdoor activities...and had that rock climbing club not had an influence on me then I probably wouldn't be here now...It influenced the way that I thought and the friends that I had and the knowledge that I had and what expertise that I had and that in the end not only moulded almost all aspects, well it has moulded all aspects of my life, including my career.'

Another participant, now a university senior manager, had been very politically active as an undergraduate in the late 1960s, and although successful academically, had remembered that:

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Arwel: 'One wasn't particularly concerned about careers afterwards.'

Perhaps this was a reflection of the values held within the student movement at that time. However, although this interviewee was not particularly concerned about his future career whilst an undergraduate, he gained a First class degree and:

Arwel: 'I received a letter from the Foreign Office asking if I would be interested in joining the Foreign Office.'

Again, perhaps this reflects the greater availability of desirable employment opportunities in the late 1960s and early 1970s. However, both these participants used the skills gained in climbing and political activism in their careers subsequently, so the same sort of progression was evident in their narratives though not so directly and self-consciously as the younger participants.

In working life then, the individuals are no longer painting by numbers; they are creating their own work of art (Adams, 2003) irrespective of their gender. Perhaps this could be accounted for in terms of their response to the loss of traditional gender roles and boundaries. This is a feature of Giddens' notion of the reflexive self and one which has appeared in the work of a number of other social thinkers, notably Ulrich Beck. For Beck, detraditionalisation removes the boundaries and navigation points by which the individual historically plotted his/her course, resulting in 'individualisation'. Individuals are released from rigid, prescribed social positions such as familial histories or gender roles and have to 'build up a life of their own', ordering their own biographies (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995: 6), perhaps, in this case, through HE.

In much of the background literature to this study, the dimensions of gender are stressed. Britton & Baxter (1999) say that narratives are gendered

representations yet here both men and women are constructing accounts from remarkably similar meanings and narrative motifs.

Likewise, Pascall & Cox (1993a;b) assume that there would be significant gender differences, and see the 'instrumental' orientation as male, 'self-fulfilment' as female. Again, this is not replicated here.

Although Britton & Baxter (1999) concede that a dichotomous approach oversimplifies patterns of gender difference in meanings of education, they argue that the discourse of the reflexive self is based on male experience. Moreover, in their view it is based on a highly individualistic conception of self which does not adequately represent womens' experience. In the present study, however, it is difficult to reconcile Britton & Baxter's view with the fact that our women participants had little trouble in displaying the notion of the reflexive self and presented the allegedly 'male' tales of strategic self-enhancement with considerable alacrity.

In the background literature the idea of unfulfilled potential is seen as being expressed differently by men and women. Men are apt to describe themselves as having gone down the wrong track, whereas women tend to say that they missed out on education. Some of our participant's stories are consistent with this idea, but a number of them are not, making it difficult to detect this gender distinction consistently. In some cases women describe themselves as 'struggling against the odds' and as having experienced downward mobility after having children (eg. Janet in the present study). The idea of credentialism – the need for formal recognition to validate and further a career – was found in Britton et al's study in two middle-class women. Our study shows this to be quite common, among both men and women. On the other hand the idea of self-transformation was found by Britton & Baxter to only apply to men. In their study this focuses on changes in the self and identity as a catalyst for returning to education, yet in the present study it can be found amongst both men and women.

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Pascall & Cox (1993a) argued that women returners gave positive accounts and saw education as opportunity. In the current study this sense of education as an opportunity is present in accounts from both men and women, and among traditional and non-traditional students. In this sense there are some strong parallels to Pascall & Cox's work in our study. They observed that: 'Education and career do not appear as an alternative to marriage...they become exactly that when marriage breaks down' (23). This parallels Janet's comments that:

'Because things went wrong on the married side of my life I was forced to make a change'

'It was pushed on me.'

Whereas no men described education as an event contingent on marital breakdown, there were a number of instances from both men and women where education offered a way of diminishing the restrictions of circumstances. Both sexes, for example, provided comments to the effect that education can lead to qualifications and effects personal change, and unlike previous work it was difficult to separate male narratives into variants of the reflexive self and female versions into variants of narcissism in any simple sense.

## ii) Personal development and the self

This sense of personal development and individual advancement was even more strongly advanced when participants spoke of personal development through HE. This was not merely a matter of getting the better of the gatekeepers who guarded the entranceways to the world of work; this was altogether a more intimate matter of redesigning the realm which Rose (1989) famously called the 'soul' under advanced liberalism. Many

participants, female and male, described developing personally at university, in a variety of ways.

For the people who went to university at a young age, this personal development was often related to the process of leaving the traditional shapers of the individual's identity, the home and family:

Penny: '...going away was important and that changed me because I had to stand on my own two feet...'

Corrine: 'I never particularly expected to even do 'A' levels let alone go to university, so my life is very much divided into before and after.'

'Before university my morals were very much that you grew up, had five different children by different rubbish men who then went off and left you on the dole with the kids and that's pretty much what I thought my grown up life would be.'

'Just going into such a different environment was really life-changing, it's made me more confident.

Particularly important was the disembedding process where the earlier constraints on the person's identity were escaped or transcended.

Sara: 'The fact that I left home and moved away from Somerset was a huge one.'

'I came from a farming, very rural background, having gone hardly anywhere, to suddenly go away to a big city was a big change'.

'Different types of people, you know I had a Lord on my staircase and you know Lady somebody else doing the same degree as me and so um there were very rich people which I had never come across before.'

'Meeting people from all over the country, you know that was massively different, because I'd lived in a small village and I'd known everybody, I was related to half of them.'



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Thus as well as leaving their homes and performing 'detraditionalisation' in miniature, a further experience which is identified by the people in the present study is that of meeting new people, hearing new ideas and seeing new cultures.

Keith: 'Suddenly here I was in this world where people occasionally had fun and there was vast quantities of alcohol and illicit drugs and women who might even conceivably want to have sex with me.'

'So here was this whole sort of not-living-at-home-in-a-dreadful part-of – the-country-world opening up in front of me.'

Eifion: 'Living in a small village in Snowdonia and going to um although Cambridge isn't a big place, academically it's metropolitan and international.'

Simon: 'What university does, it brings together a lot of changes all into a small period of time... you suddenly have access to money, to time, to opportunity, new sets of friends,...sex, drugs, rock and roll... you leave home and 36 hrs later you could be indulging in all of them...which is what makes university so difficult for some people and such a marvellous time for others...'

Such experiences had an impact because participants were exposed to different geographical areas, people from different social classes from those they'd previously mixed with, new social experiences or the fact that they had to look after themselves. When these factors weren't wholly present, the impact of university was identified as being less:

Arwel: 'Going to university wasn't such a huge deal. I met at university sorts of people who I'd already met either because they had holiday homes in the area or because of, through CND and so on. I was used to those kinds of lefty people....'

Again, women and men talked about these experiences in a very similar way, and in both genders these new experiences were presented in such a way as to make them appear to be an extension of reflexivity and individualisation. As Beck (1992: 135) argues

'Individualization of life situations and processes thus means that biographies become self-reflexive; socially prescribed biography is transformed into biography that is self-produced and continues to be produced.'

Among many of the participants who had begun university at a later age, these aspects of personal development were not attributed solely to university:

Susan: 'I'd already had that chance to develop and mature in my actual living skills...'

Many interviewees felt they had developed a very specific kind of personal resource, namely that of 'confidence'. Confidence is seen to be a vital tool of the reflexive self in late modernity. It is seen as a social asset, an academic boon and as improving one's employment chances. Both male and female participants frequently described themselves as having somehow cultivated or increased their confidence and, for some, this was tied up with increased opportunities, because of their university experience:

Karen: 'A way of proving that I wasn't stupid.'

'It gave me more confidence.'

'The biggest thing it gave me was the confidence to make a change.'

Jo: 'There's so many societies that I felt I could belong to any of them, it gave me more confidence I think...'

'If I hadn't done the degree I wouldn't have felt half as confident.'

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'It gave me the confidence to envisage myself in lots of different roles, whereas I wouldn't have been able to think positively about myself doing those things...'

Keith: 'I feel very good about the fact that I got off my arse and entirely through my own efforts gained a degree in what seems to have a reputation in being a fairly tough subject area.'

Eifion: 'I suppose it gave me, I don't know whether you'd call it self-confidence or intellectual arrogance.'

Paul: 'That does give you confidence in your own ability somewhere along the line.'

Here, the discourse of confidence was extremely prominent. As a way of interpreting and inventing oneself it has a seductive power – as if it were an unproblematically good thing. It is something that everyone wants and feels that they should develop in order to function more effectively as a person or an employee. Thus, the process of developing the reflexive self or individualisation reaches its zenith in the cultivation of confidence, the vital fragment in the jigsaw of one's interior landscape. At the same time, confidence is part of the performative identity in Butler's (1990a) sense of the term. We may believe that our subjective sense of ourselves as 'confident' or 'skilled' is the source of our actions but Butler (1990a;b) would argue that our sense of independent, skilled, self-willed, confident subjectivity is really a retrospective construction that comes about only through the enactment of social conventions about, say, skill or confidence. These supposedly internal attributes cannot be understood simply as an expression of an interior 'self'. As a performance which is performative, selves, skills and the magic ingredient, 'confidence', are an 'act', broadly construed, which like gender itself 'constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority' (Butler, 1990b: 279).

Some of the comments made about personal development by the two women we interviewed who had been mature students are much more consistent with the gendered narratives disclosed in previous published work on the experiences of female mature students. Interestingly however, another of our female interviewees who had come from a working-class economically deprived background and had trained as a nurse after leaving school, before undertaking a law degree at university some years later, did not articulate her experiences of university in this way at all. Although she enjoyed university and saw the law degree as valuable, she maintained that her experience of university had not been in any way life changing.

A further area of personal and social development which both female and male participants detailed was meeting long-term partners while at university:

Sara: 'Nowadays all my friends are from university, I really lost touch with my previous life and I met my husband there... and I've been with him ever since.'

Esyllt: 'I think one of the main things is that I wouldn't be married to I--- now if I hadn't gone to university.'

Keith: 'I met D--- who of course I subsequently married.'

People found other more idiosyncratic forms of personal development too:

Arwel: 'You read ... writers and philosophers who had contributed to modern Europe. I found that incredibly – it gave me an opportunity to read people who I probably would not have read otherwise. And I'm eternally grateful to them for that, for giving me the time as it were and the guidance to read... that was for me very exciting.'

Andrew: 'I actually found that you had to argue and that became very very important.'

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'The style of what was being taught, the fact that education is about values and not rights and wrongs and was enjoyable because therefore you could contest, argue and debate quite legitimately...'

Keith: 'My outlook on life just changed so spectacularly, very quickly, just over the course of three months.'

'A period when my life actually seemed to come together.'

Corrine: 'Massively life changing, just from the very first moment I got there...things like having a wonderful grand meal in a hall full of 3 different sets of cutlery... it was like being in a film straight away and since then my life just completely changed.'

'It's just really changed what I can do, who I can be, all aspects of my life.'

Geraint: 'In a sense, going to Oxford, you emerged from Oxford being more certain of your own Welsh identity than you were before.'

Overall then, through occupational, academic and personal development of the reflexive self, these participants, both male and female have refashioned themselves into skilled, confident and socially enfranchised members of society. On the one hand the experience of going to university represents a kind of disembedding as the participants take themselves away from the traditional certainties of family life and a more accommodating and 'open' backdrop is provided by the university experience. On the other hand just like the individualised, reflexive selves in the work of Beck and Giddens, both men and women see themselves as rational, choice-making, bounded individuals, whose rationality, skill and 'confidence' are cultivated and expanded by the educational process, irrespective of their gender. Taking these kinds of comments at face value, we thus gain a picture of the reflexive self, dominating a curiously neutered and arms-length social realm, from which it draws experiences, skills and knowledge in an individualised,

rationalised fashion (Adams, 2003). Alternative theorisations of self-identity might stress the dialogical social origins of the self more thoroughly. On the other hand, we could pursue and extend Butler's theorisation of gender so as to grasp how it is that man and women appear different in some circumstances and extraordinarily similar in others.

'The act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again' (Butler, 1990b: 272).

Thus, if gender is an act that one performs upon arriving at certain scenes, we can begin to grasp the flexibility and resourcefulness of men and women as tellers of tales about their own identity and what it is made up of. If we were to take Giddens and Beck in a strong form we might see the individual harvesting cultural resources in a knowing self-aware way. Yet even this presupposes a rational-economic core to the individual. Perhaps the notions of skill, experience and confidence with which the tales are populated are themselves elements of performance rather than enduring aspects of the person. In any event, the pictures of masculinity and femininity which emerged from earlier studies have generally not been supported in the present data. It is not our intention to suggest that the previous authors are wrong, rather that these are discourses, accounts and constructions of the self that men and women are capable of performing in response to different circumstances, opportunities and experiences. What is urgently needed in order to understand the gendered experience of HE in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a theoretical perspective which can accommodate this diversity.

It is therefore advantageous to view the study participants as not simply 'women' or 'men', or 'feminine' or 'masculine', as these are not themselves

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homogenous categories. It is appropriate, following Scott, (1988) to theorise the potential for participants to adopt a diversity or plurality of identities, as a condition of existence. The experience of difference is not something added on to our fundamental being as an individual, it is an intrinsic part of our subjective identity. Such a difference is not a biological essence but an historically created and changeable identity.

Some of these accounts of change also have implications for notions of habitus, in that it may not always be a restricting mindset or style of life that clashes with the ethos of HE. It might be transformed as men and women progress through university and, indeed or, it may well be an 'aspirational habitus', in which change is itself an expectation.



[Link To Chapter Four](#)

Although Chapter Three originated from an interest in the construction of HE between different individuals, the data suggests a phenomenon that is of particular interest in the light of Government concern regarding the low number of non-traditional students entering HE, despite the emphasis on widening participation. This is the presence in the study of a high number of individuals who could be categorised as 'non-traditional' students in contemporary parlance, but many of whom seem to have negotiated the move into HE relatively unproblematically, seemingly undeterred by the barriers alleged to hinder such students. It is cautiously suggested that the existence of an 'aspirational habitus', (an extension of the Bourdieuan concept of habitus), within such individuals may account for this.

Chapter Four continues with the theme of the individual's construction of HE, being an exploration of people's life transitions, or 'epiphanies', as a result of passing through HE, and also further investigates the concept, and the possible existence of, an aspirational habitus among non-traditional students who achieve success in HE.

**Chapter Four**

***Like a Duck to Water:***  
**Entering HE and the 'Aspirational Habitus'.**

Introduction

This chapter employs biographical analysis to explore peoples' experiences of HE. Such analysis provides a rich source of information on the benefits accrued and problems encountered by individuals' participation in the HE system. Biographical analyses also disclose the historical and cultural factors affecting the individual's perception of the meaning and value of HE.

Biographies and accounts of life transitions have illuminated individuals' cultures (Alleyne, 2000) and life experiences in a variety of fields. These include the transition from adolescence to adulthood (Raymore *et al*, 2001; Thomson *et al*, 2002), career transitions (Heppner *et al*, 1994; Robitschek, 1997), the experience of receiving 'care' when one is disabled (McClimens, 2002) or of being the 'carer' of a disabled person (Chamberlayne & King, 1997). Although a substantial body of such work now exists, little of it has focused on the HE experience.

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Work on the experience of HE has been partially addressed, but has concentrated on students from minority groups or who are marginalised in some way (Edwards, 1993; James, 1995; MacDonald, 1980; Pascall & Cox, 1993a;b; Phillips, 1986; Tett, 2000). The experience of change is arguably more pervasive, affecting the whole of the student cohort, rather than specific subgroups. Certainly, work on psychosocial development, (Erikson, 1968; McAdams, 1997), stresses the universality of transitions in the trajectory towards adulthood in western society.

The Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, (HEFCW), has made the 'student deal' a primary focus (HEFCW, 2004). It is not alone in taking the view that university education involves positive life transitions. A concern with the 'student experience' and 'student preparedness' is now at the centre of the quality debate as increasing numbers are being encouraged to enter HE, (CVCP, 1999; 2000b; DfEE, 2000). Government policy now promotes HE as a 'good thing'. These life transitions may not be as dramatic for some contemporary students as for the 'traditional' university students of thirty years ago, who left home at a relatively young age to attend university. Such places were often geographically, socially and culturally distant from the 'place' of upbringing, presenting students with a plethora of transitions in a short space of time. Although many contemporary students still fit this profile, increasing numbers of students enter their 'local' HEIs. As student numbers overall have increased, there are more 'mature' students entering HEIs and more from social groups that have not traditionally attended HEIs in significant numbers. However, these groups are still under-represented in the student body, (Thomas, 2001), and are likely to remain so unless the aspirations of school leavers are raised.

Little biographical narrative analysis work has been published relating to the experience of students passing through HE. Some studies examine related issues such as whether students are prepared for HE (Lowe et al, 2003;

McInnis et al, 1995) and the assessment of students' 'quality of life' (Audin et al, 2003) informed by interest in student retention rates (Johnston, 1994; Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998; Rickenson & Rutherford, 1995). It is both instrumental and primarily directed to short-term policy needs. This work tends to conceptualise the individual as a rather passive unit; an empty vessel to be filled with the right kinds of knowledge and HE experiences. To make sense of the role that HE plays in an individual's life, what is now needed is a broader long-term perspective, which acknowledges the creativity and active praxis through which people construct their experience.

The study of life narratives is useful for scholars of the HE experience in several ways. It allows the experience of HE to be placed in the context of the evolving life narrative and provides the theoretical and analytical tools to understand this in an historical and cultural context. We need to understand the HE experience if it is to be successfully promoted among a larger constituency of the population and the policy can be enhanced by attention to the biographical narratives of students and former students.

The UK HE system is in a state of rapid flux, so it will be some time before we can assess the impact, particularly on students' later lives, of recent changes. It is possible however to look at the biographical experiences of people who have already passed through the HE system and to 'unpick' the meaning of the experience of HE both to the individual undergoing it, and in the wider cultural context. People may use 'available narratives' in their biographical discourse, some narratives being more 'available' than others (Gergen, 1991).

Sartre (1963) anticipated the concern of many social scientists with locating the person's biography within modern society's structure and saw the individual's life as a 'project', in which the individual attempts to realise a self within the possibilities and constraints of society. He believed that to understand the 'project', it was necessary to look at the historical, cultural and biographical conditions shaping the context of these emerging 'projects'.

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The work here considers some of the events constituting the 'projects'; the life transitions, life changes, or 'critical moments', as labelled by Thomson *et al*, (2002), or the 'epiphanies' (Denzin, 1989) experienced as a result of HE. Denzin (1989: 70) considered epiphanies to be 'interactional moments and experiences which leave marks on people's lives'. He notes 'that the meanings of these experiences are always given retrospectively' (Denzin, 1989: 71). This is a salient idea here, as in this study people talk about their experiences of HE years after the event. McGittigan (1998: 10) maintained that:

'Epiphanies may be considered relatively 'truthful' moments of insight in that they are generated through a process that involves the negation of ideological controls over an individual's definition of reality'.

Another core theme developed in this paper is that of an 'aspirational habitus', an adaptation of Bourdieu's (1977: 71) term 'habitus':

'a socialised body. A structured body, a body which has incorporated the immanent structures of a world or of a particular sector of that world – a field – and which structures the perception of that world as well as action in that world'.

Habitus is not simply a collection of attitudes and perceptions, it is embodied. An individual's habitus allows transforming and restraining actions, but pre-disposes the individual towards certain ways of behaving. The concept of habitus has been applied to issues in HE, (Reay, 1998; Reay, 2004a). This paper extends Bourdieu's notion of habitus to one of 'aspirational habitus', incorporating participants' aspirations toward HE. Some interviewees were prepared for HE before they arrived at that point in their lives and the idea of an 'aspirational habitus' is used here to describe how some interviewees, often those from Welsh backgrounds, although not economically privileged

and not readily describable as 'middle-class', were encouraged and expected to enter HE by their families and communities.

To explore these ideas, I present autobiographical material originating from the personal accounts of forty individuals from mixed age, gender and social groups, who entered university and achieved at least one degree.

#### Methodology and Participants

Twenty men and twenty women agreed to be interviewed and provided material suitable for a biographical analysis of individuals' experience of HE. The only selection criteria used was that they had all been through the HE system and had since followed careers which could be described as middle-class. Participants ranged from graduates of vocational courses such as medicine, now following careers as doctors, to graduates of non-vocational courses, who subsequently found employment in diverse entrepreneurial or professional occupations such as restaurateurs or outdoor education instructors. None of the participants could be currently described as 'marginalised', although a number of them reported experiencing considerable deprivation as children or young adults. Some participants grew up in rural areas and subsequently attended universities in cities. The sample differs from other studies of people's educational experiences given that ten people grew up in rural Wales, exposed to a culture often thought to be rather different to that in many parts of the UK. This is reflected in the data. The ages of the people in the sample ranged from late 20s to late 50s, with most in their 30s. Approximately two-thirds had attended university immediately after school. One third had been mature students. They were approached via a 'snowball' sampling technique beginning with people already known to the author, who were subsequently asked to introduce others who might be interested in the study.



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The interviews for the present study employed an open ended approach. This modified form of the autobiographical interviewing method of Chamberlayne *et al*, (2000), and Chamberlayne *et al* (2004), begins with a single question and subsequently encourages elaboration. The interviews began with the question: 'Was university a life-changing experience for you?' The interview proceeded with the participant leading and the interviewer seeking clarification and elaboration, probing for information as to what it was about university that had been life-changing, or whether other life-events had been more influential. These supplementary questions moved the research towards a 'phenomenographic' approach in which a deliberate attempt is made to elicit both description and interpretation from the respondent (Marton, 1986).

The analysis proceeded in line with Chamberlayne *et al's*, (2000), recommendations, by reading the interviews on a case by case basis, along with two experienced social scientists, with a view to identifying themes and moments of life change, identifying trends and consistencies, as well as personal or idiosyncratic issues. The analysis was also informed by themes relating to life-transitions found in the background literature.

### Results and Discussion

90% of participants reported at least one aspect of university experience as life-changing, although not all experiences were perceived as positive. Of those participants who did not experience university as life changing, two were women, both with what could be described as working-class backgrounds, one being a 'traditional' and the other a 'non-traditional' student. Two were men, both 'traditional' students, one from a working-class and one from a middle-class background.

The over-arching theme of this paper is that of life transitions and I draw on Denzin's (1989) idea of an 'epiphany' or life-change. McGettigan (1998: 471) described epiphanies as:

'...the moments of stunning euphoria that are associated with the transcendence of epistemological crises: conceptual 'revolutions' that permit the transition from inadequate to newly constituted paradigms'.

Many of the interviewees described such epiphanies associated with the HE experience. The most common sort of epiphany experienced here involved a 'conceptual revolution'. The second most common epiphany described a situation in which the individual's threshold of perception changed. A small number of people, the third group, followed a 'gradualist' path, their 'epiphany' occurring as a series of small steps. Interviewees mentioned epiphanies related to other life experiences as well. Christian participants all described their conversion experiences as the biggest life-changing event that they had experienced, (Kahn & Greene, 2004). This description was universal among the Christians interviewed, both among those of no previous faith or those brought up as Christians who had reached a point of realisation that this was indeed their faith. People also talked of having children as an overarching life-change. An analysis of such epiphanies unrelated to HE is beyond the scope of this chapter, but the interviews contain many references to personal, family and community expectations, that found expression in the establishment of the University of Wales and the redbrick universities of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

To accommodate such expectations and underlying drives, Bourdieu's (1977) notion of 'habitus' is expanded into a concept of 'aspirational habitus', a phenomenon revealed by many of our interviewees from modest backgrounds. This is particularly noticeable in the recollections of those participants who had spent their formative years in Wales. These individuals had been encouraged, or expected, to enter HE, despite growing up in economically deprived circumstances. It should be stressed here that the concept of an 'aspirational habitus' was not merely invented and then searched for. It was an overarching theme, a metatheme, which emerged

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after the data was examined. Once outlined, the idea met with widespread agreement and possible causes, which struck a theme with the participants. The cultivation of such an aspirational habitus among children from lower socio-economic groups is necessary if widening participation is to become a reality.

A number of self-reported issues occur with striking regularity, regardless of participants' age, generation, gender or social background. Some of these themes are well reported in the literature concerned with the HE experience or dealing with other life transitions. The core issues that emerge in this study are: moving away from home and achieving 'independence'; the discovery of a 'new world'; a period of 'experimentation', (conceptualised by some scholars as a result of the delayed adoption of the adult role); changes in the understanding of the purpose of HE; the change in social class, life styles and personal values that occurred for some participants as a result of HE and the development of 'confidence' as a result of HE. A number of issues and perceptions also arise which are specific to individuals. The picture here is complex, the issues and themes interlinking.

### ***Experience of Migration /Leaving Home***

Chamberlayne & King (1997) referred to the 'alienating experience of migration' whilst researching the experiences of people caring for the disabled. Nearly all of our interviewees who entered HE immediately after finishing secondary school mentioned their experiences of moving away to attend university and some saw it as changing them:

Penny: '...going away was important and that changed me.'

Arwel: 'University did change me. I went away when I was only 17 to quite far away to a very different environment to that which I had been used to.'

For some, the geographical move was sought-after or positively welcomed:

Maddy: '...coming to live in the kind of place I'd always wanted to... it was amazing to suddenly be in the countryside and ...climb up a mountain and cycle to the seaside.'

Keith: 'So here was this whole sort of not-having-to-live-at-home-in-a-dreadful-part-of-the-country world opening up in front of me.'

People who had grown up in rural areas noticed the dramatic change in moving to city life:

Sara: 'I came from a farming, very rural background, having gone hardly anywhere, to suddenly go away to a big city was a big change.'

Some reported the move to university in negative terms:

Manon: 'The first thing I found was moving away from home was very traumatic, from south Wales to north Wales, so I couldn't understand people speaking um that was quite stressful and I pined really.'

Mature students for whom moving to university may not have been their first experience of migration did not mention the geographical move to university as significant, but some showed an awareness that this was part of the HE experience which was usually significant for students:

Rick: 'I saw other people on my course having brand-new social experiences – the younger the student, the more impact university life had on them, in terms of living away from home...'

Susan: '...a lot of people come to university and it's their first chance to be away and grow up as an individual...'

As well as a geographical move, going to university was for many of our participants their first real experience of living independently, involving new experiences such as planning meals and budgeting money. Sometimes this was relished:

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Maddy: 'In the first year, lived in a hall of residence, a self-catering one where we all formed a community, it was a semi-commune existence and that was very life changing, to suddenly be with a big group of people with no parental influence.'

In other cases it was seen simply as a hurdle to be negotiated:

Marie: 'It was kind of in at the deep end... by the time I came out obviously I was able to stand on my own two feet and do life stuff...managing financial stuff, deciding where you want to live...'

Flanagan *et al*, (1993), and Raymore *et al*, (2001), reported living away from home as an important transition point in a young person's development. Students going away to college develop ties to a new community (Goldscheider & Davanzo, 1986) and live independently, needing to plan meals and budget money (Zirkel & Cantor, 1990). That this is an important transition is confirmed by the responses elicited in this study, and illustrated very clearly by one of our respondents:

Paul: 'I think it actually severs home ties in a way in which you'd never go back after and I think that's quite important.'

Such are the changes in relationship with 'home' and 'family' that they underline the non-reversible nature of the transition.

### ***A Differently Enabled Adulthood:***

Fasick, (1988), and Sherrod *et al*, (1993), maintained that students tend to marry and become parents later than their non-student contemporaries. Raymore *et al*, (2001), observed that this delay in the adoption of some adult roles allows experimentation with roles and behaviour. I suggest that this part of the student experience is not so much a result of the slower adoption of adult roles, but a result of reaching a different type of adulthood. Interestingly, this is highlighted by one of the interviewees who had been involved in political activism while at university:

Arwel: 'For me, what stands out in that period, as the student experience, was the kind of student movement I was involved in, particularly the various campaigns against the war in Vietnam...'

Perhaps one factor allowing this participant to be active politically was the development of a certain type of adult role. It would probably have been more difficult for him to be politically active to the extent that he was, in the way in which he was, if he had for example, family responsibilities. He identifies the differences between the lives of his father and grandfather and himself:

'There are all sorts of reasons why that sixties generation were so, so different – we were the first generation who hadn't fought a war. I mean my grandfather was a soldier in the First World War, my father was in the RAF during the Second World War, and there I was, you know, at their age, a student, whereas, you know, at the same age, they'd been soldiers.'

This is an interesting paradox. There are parallels between being in the army and being a student. Both involve large numbers of relatively young people, often experiencing their first taste of 'independence', living communally, sharing common experiences and developing a sense of camaraderie. Yet this interviewee constructed his experiences as discontinuous from both his earlier life and from the trajectories of previous generations of his family. Arwel's activism could be viewed as part of his aspirational habitus, predisposing 'difference', encouraging 'onward and upward' movement. The skills that Arwel gained in political activism were later used by him in his career in public life.

### ***Encountering a Whole New World:***

The sense of discontinuity reported by many interviewees parallels that identified by other scholars. Raymore *et al*, (2001: 199), talk of a 'new world

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of peers, professors and experiences unique to undergraduates'. Such a 'new world' was remembered by many of our respondents. This is a clearly identifiable category in the collected responses, but may or may not be contingent on changes in self-perceived roles. Memories of encountering the 'new world':

Penny: 'You meet lots of people from different countries, different backgrounds...'

Corrine: 'Just going into such a different environment was really life changing.'

Sara: '...I had a Lord on my staircase and you know Lady somebody else doing the same degree as me and so um there were very rich people which I'd never come across before.'

Eifion: '...living in a small village in Snowdonia and going to um...although Cambridge isn't a big place, academically it's metropolitan and international.'

Janet: 'I was pushed into a completely different world.'

Esyllt: 'We lived in the middle of the Asian community and things like that just open your eyes to different cultures and ways of living.'

However, one of our interviewees found aspects of the university experience quite familiar:

Arwel: 'Going to university wasn't such a huge deal – I met at university sorts of people who I had already met either because they had holiday homes in the area, or because of, through CND and so on, I was used to those kinds of lefty people...'

Interestingly, this interviewee experienced a much bigger transition when he encountered a culture very different to his own after completing a PhD:



Arwel: '...but then I really had a life-changing experience, which was that I got a job in the University of Wales, (Welsh town), working in the coal field interviewing miners and their wives about their experiences as coalminers...and that was a huge cultural change. It was a bigger cultural change than going to university...that whole culture I was sympathetic of, I went to (English 'progressive' university) which again was a very similar milieu...and going to (Welsh town) was like going to an entirely different world...it exposed me much more to the whole community around it in the valleys...and that did change me... south Wales went from being a very male dominated culture...you know this was part of the culture shock, coming from (town in south of England) and London and so on, to find these incredibly traditional attitudes.'

Although this interviewee did eventually encounter 'different worlds', his most marked experience of this was not attending university, but the revisiting of working-class small-town and village communities. This is part of the cycle of social mobility described by Hoggart (1956) and Osborne (1956) where the protagonist is conscious of his liminal position between the working-classes and those who are more privileged. This highlights the next category where the protagonist can potentially be offered a resolution of this dilemma through the opportunities afforded by his or her education.

***Changes in the Understanding of the Purpose of HE: An Education or a Career Opportunity?***

Little, (2000: 300), believes that:

'During the twentieth century access to livelihoods has increasingly been determined by access to formal education and educational qualifications'.

Many of our interviewees felt acutely aware that as a result of HE they had been transformed into someone with a livelihood.

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Christopher: '...at the end of the day it was the end product, churned out with a marketable skill.'

Gill: 'I suppose because of the nature of the degree, you almost had an automatic, as well as a qualification, presumed career at the end of it.'

Both these respondents had undertaken vocational courses in medicine. However, many of those interviewed who didn't undertake vocational courses also believed that undertaking HE had improved their employment prospects:

Corrine: 'I can get into jobs, courses, partly because, well very much because I went to university at all, but particularly because I went to Cambridge.'

Dave: 'I had a sense of what the system was, you have the piece of paper and you know your salary goes up by 50%, so that's really what it was for me.'

The data shows that the younger interviewees, at least, have imbibed deeply from the cup of instrumentalism that has been offered since the 1980s, and strongly link the value of HE with employment opportunities. The experiences relating to career aspirations reported by participants may also arguably reflect broader social patterns in the reorganisation of occupational attitudes in the last few decades. One of the older respondents remembered that:

Arwel: '...one wasn't particularly concerned about careers afterwards.'

Although he did well academically and:

Arwel: 'I received a letter from the Foreign Office asking if I would be interested in joining the Foreign Office.'

Significantly, this respondent undertook HE during the late 1960s, in a very different political and economic climate from that experienced by the younger interviewees, at a time when student culture prioritised different issues and when the stereotypical 'good job' for a graduate was easy to find.

This was in stark contrast to the importance of career opportunities to younger interviewees. This may indicate an historical shift in thinking about the purpose and nature of HE. McNay (1992: 10) commenting on the changes in HE during the 1980s, remarked: 'Vocationalism was in...The temples of learning and their priests were derided...' In addition, the emphasis on career opportunities among younger people may reflect the less favourable employment opportunities during the 1980s and 1990s and the increased competition for employment.

Thus, there are themes in some of the older graduate's narratives that are absent from those of the younger people. We could describe the younger people's narratives using the notion of 'individualism' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001; Giddens, 1990). The younger interviewees were not apparently politically active, but many of them were engaged in a 'self-improvement' project. Foucault's (1986) early account of classical civilisations described self-improvement projects involving attention to the intellect and increased self-awareness. Later Foucauldian interpretations of self-improvement have included missions involving improving one's career prospects and life-style, marking them out as a clearly post-Thatcher, 'individual responsibility' project.

The trajectory that people describe and the terms in which they conceptualise their transitions may differ. We have the political involvement and self-development apparent in some of the older generation interviewed and the determinedly instrumental search after 'knowledge', 'skills', 'confidence' and ultimately, employment, amongst the younger people.

These may be seen in terms of a variety of social theorists' attempts to conceptualise the development of the self. Beck et al (2001) and Giddens (1990) have emphasised the break with tradition inherent in this kind of self-development. Yet, the younger participants' concerns with making themselves employable and acquiring the appropriate skills and credentials to

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succeed do not necessarily suggest a process of detraditionalisation and voluntaristic self-development in which the individual is seen as selecting from a smorgasbord of possibilities. They were attending to a familiar set of values relating to the idea of 'useful knowledge' and alluding to the tradition of self-improvement formulated by Samuel Smiles, (1882). In this we can see a tension.

The notion of aspirational habitus is useful, because it enables us to theorise the tension between continuity – in that many of the values to which the participants attended are reminiscent of much older traditions of self-help and self-improvement – and personal change. The aspirational habitus puts in place an expectation that the individual will change and grow away from their original neighbourhood and family occupations.

Epiphanies therefore do not necessarily come out of the blue, but are in an important sense ordained and anticipated as a result of an earlier inculcated habitus.

Another difference between older and younger interviewees was evident when the interviewees spoke about the academic content of their courses. Many of the respondents experiencing HE during the late 1980s or 1990s didn't speak at length about the academic component of their courses at all, even those who enjoyed their subjects. Of those that did, they tended to mention it because their experiences had been negative:

Dewi: 'I was quite disappointed by the teaching...very little philosophical discussion about issues...90% of it was completely useless.'

There was one marked exception to this, a mature female student who had experienced HE during the mid-1990s:

Janet: 'I was like a duck to water...I loved the academic side for itself, I really did.'

Yet nearly all the interviewees who experienced HE during the late 1960s and 1970s talked about the academic part of their experience much more extensively, most remembering at least some of it as particularly enjoyable:

Arwel: '...you read...writers and philosophers who had contributed to modern Europe. I found that incredibly – it gave me an opportunity to read people who I probably would not have read otherwise. And I'm eternally grateful to them for that, for giving me the time as it were and the guidance to read...that was for me very exciting.'

Judith: 'A great deal of difference was made I think by the experience we had of composing...I think working through these tasks, trying out different techniques, trying out different styles, things that would have never have arisen normally and naturally, that sort of experience really did make a difference I think from the point of view of being a musician.'

Andrew: 'The style of what was being taught, the fact that education is about values and not rights and wrongs and was enjoyable because therefore you could contest, argue and debate quite legitimately...'

We may be looking at a generational or cultural effect here, as the idea of going to university for the sole purpose of academic study was reportedly more prevalent thirty or forty years ago. More recent generations of students have often been encouraged to enter HE in order to improve their employment prospects, rather than for solely academic reasons, (McNay, 1992). Indeed, the Dearing Report, (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997), asserted that the primary purpose of HE is to prepare students for the world of work. However, most of the people interviewed for the current study who passed through HE in the 1960s and 1970s, are now employed as academics. Perhaps this explains their enthusiasm about their early academic experiences and their refusal to endorse the functional view of HE. Among the younger graduates there was

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generally less enthusiasm for the academic content of their courses, even by those who made their subsequent careers in academia, reflecting disappointment with what they experienced.

### ***Changes in Social Class and Life-Styles***

The transition into HE from a background which is not ordinarily a springboard to university admission has often been thought of as problematic. Classic accounts include Richard Hoggart's (1956) evocation of the 'working-class grammar school boy', fictional portrayals such as Osborne's (1956) 'Look Back in Anger' and more contemporary research on the experience of HE (Bamber & Tett, 1999; Tett, 2000).

The participants in the present study were all 'successful', having achieved a level of status commensurate with being a graduate. Some of the interviewees from less privileged backgrounds remarked on the change in social class or 'life-style' that had resulted from their going through HE:

Gill: 'It's enabled me to have more money to change my life-style.'

Andrew: 'I suppose inevitably it changed one's social class.'

Liz: 'I think that if I hadn't gone to university I wouldn't have met the kind of people that I mix with now. I'm mixing in a different social group.'

These interviewees felt that they had become middle-class as a result of their university education, or had at least escaped poverty and marginalisation.

Much recent research has examined the sense of discomfort that many students from less advantaged backgrounds are alleged to feel about their social elevation (Tett, 2000). This concept also features in the widening participation literature, some of this, for example, maintaining that working-class people are deterred from HE because of the 'middle-classness' of universities (Hutchings & Archer, 2001). Many of the interviewees from less



privileged backgrounds noticed the 'class difference' between them and their new peers at university:

Jo: 'They spoke very posh and I was more of a cockney then.'

Geraint: 'You were entering into a class society, so understanding that I did find it quite difficult initially – I wasn't aware of the rules of the game.'

In contrast to many accounts of the process, the accounts presented here emphasise the relative ease with which the participants report on having navigated this class divide. The construction of their accounts, in terms of lexical choice and semantic organisation, seem to actively 'discount' (Pestello, 1993) or rule out the possibility that it could be traumatic. We can see a further feature of the aspirational habitus in that the wherewithal is provided to manage the transition and neutralise potential threats arising from exposure to an historically more powerful culture. The participants can be said to be performing a process of neutralisation analogous to that described by Matza (1964). Any awkwardness identified is not attributed to the superiority of other people, but rather, as in Geraint's case above, to the fact that a 'game' was being played. The initially confusing social protocols of these new situations are merely a 'game', whose rules are confidently expected to disclose themselves in due course.

Although one of our sample, who went to Oxford from a farming background in Somerset, found the class difference sufficiently disturbing for it to blight her university years, most of our interviewees were not disconcerted by mixing with more privileged people. One interviewee encountered no problems in making the transition from a very deprived background in rural Wales to a rarified one as an undergraduate at Cambridge:

Corrine: 'I didn't feel left out or marginalised or anything because I was from a poor background.'



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One interviewee, who originated from a rural Welsh background and entered the Oxbridge system, although he was of an earlier generation, noticed that:

Geraint: '...you'd decided, found out I suppose, that people like ourselves from the hills of Wales were as or more competent than they (the others) were.'

The results here confirm that working-class people entering university were conscious – like Hoggart's (1956) famous 'scholarship boy' – of the social difference between the world that they had lived in and the world that they are entering. But, participants have adopted a more strategic approach to assimilating and naturalising the values they encounter, which the aspirational habitus has in a sense primed them to accept.

### ***Transition and Personal Values***

The foregoing is not to say that the sense of self was entirely forgotten or transformed. Robitschek (1997) notes that transition itself often heightens awareness of personal values, a phenomenon felt by one of our interviewees:

Geraint: 'in a sense, going to Oxford, you emerged from Oxford being more certain of your own Welsh identity than you were before.'

It has been suggested that one comes closer to full reflective thought 'in a communicative climate where there is space for conflicts and confrontations than...in a tradition that values consensus' (Von Wright, 2002: 409). Perhaps this explains the responses of some of the interviewees:

Keith: 'My outlook on life just changed so spectacularly, very quickly, just over the course of three months...'

This interviewee, although intellectually adventurous as a teenager, had fairly limited social and cultural experiences before university and had experienced a high degree of isolation from other people of his own age. University introduced him to a new range of ideas and life-styles.

The following participant experienced a big shift in cultures and ideas, having been brought up in a rural, north Welsh, nonconformist community, vastly different from the society that he found at Oxford:

Geraint: '...it's only when you compare with somebody else in another society that you come to understand what society you've been brought up in.'

And again, from a participant who grew up in a rural village on Ynys Mon, (Anglesey), but who moved to an English city when she entered HE:

Esyllt: 'Your feelings and views of life change from your experiences at university.'

These people came from backgrounds that could be described as 'valuing consensus', but encountered 'space for conflicts and confrontations' on entering HE.

As we have seen, Arwel did not meet values that challenged him while at university, as these were experienced as a progression or development of what was already there – again, a characteristic of the aspirational habitus. Instead, the experience of disjuncture came with his subsequent exposure to small-town and village life in the south Wales coalfields.

### ***The Development of 'Confidence'***

One particularly pervasive theme was the idea of the development of 'confidence' as a result of people's experience of HE. The 'confidence' discourse was used by many interviewees, regardless of factors such as gender, age, generation, and subsequent career choice.

A senior academic who followed a 'traditional' path to Cambridge put it thus:

Eifion: 'I suppose it gave me, I don't know whether you'd call it self-confidence or intellectual arrogance.'

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A curate who entered HE in mid-life after marital breakdown, linked confidence with her success in her chosen career:

Janet: 'I would never have had the confidence to have gone into this without having had the experience of higher education.'

A former nurse who entered HE after following what she felt was a lacklustre career:

Karen: 'The biggest thing it gave me was the confidence to make a change.'

Interestingly, the discourse of 'confidence' was also used by the two participants who remembered being unhappy at university, including one who, after describing HE as 'a horrible, horrible, horrible experience', remarked:

Manon: 'It's given me confidence I suppose...'

Thus, in a Nietzschean fashion, even when the HE experience has been unpleasant, it is still seen as building confidence. The idea that HE increased their confidence was one of the most frequently expressed notions by the interviewees. People felt that confidence had enhanced their effectiveness both personally and professionally. Indeed, as Norman & Hyland (2003), point out, the idea of confidence is intimately connected with FE and HE in the minds of educationalists, policymakers and students themselves, even though there is considerable ambiguity attached to the term. HE then, performs an intimate modification to the expressed mindset, and once more we can see how it is consistent with the overall direction of aspiration and self-improvement.

### ***University Constituting a Life-Changing Experience***

Some interviewees undoubtedly found university such a transition that it took on a life-changing quality:

Keith: '...this sudden overnight epiphany after eight years of utter misery.'

Keith described himself as having undergone a particularly difficult adolescence, resulting in isolation and distress. Although not a social scientist himself, he uses the expression that Denzin (1989) usurped or 'secularised' to describe the transition he experienced.

The perceptions of the following interviewee are striking, going to Cambridge after growing up in poverty, seeing her mother abandoned by successive men:

Corrine: 'I never expected to do 'A' levels let alone go to university, so my life is very much divided into before and after.'

'...it's just really changed what I can do, who I can be, all aspects of my life.'

'...before university my morals were very much that you grew up, had five different children by different rubbish men who then went off and left you on the dole with the kids and that's pretty much what I thought my grown-up life would be.'

Equally, other participants were keen to identify how the transition to university had made a big difference to their self-concepts and their lives more generally:

Sara: 'It was a watershed.'

'It was fairly important in terms of um my self-image...'

'It does define who I am a lot.'

'It was life-changing in that I realised how privileged you know education could be for a certain class in our society...'

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This participant was from a Somerset farming family, none of whom had experienced education after the age of 16, and who had no expectation that she would enter HE, let alone Oxford - she had rarely left the local community until she went for her university interview.

Some people found HE life-changing for particularly idiosyncratic or personal reasons. An idealistic medical student who became disillusioned with the reality of medicine:

Dewi: '...life-changing because of the subject...because I studied medicine I did come across a lot of suffering...also being quite disappointed in a way...I don't think people were as caring as you might be led to believe by the stereotype of the caring professional...'

Another participant, who was 'in the house for twenty-five years' only to be abandoned by her husband in mid-life, entered HE, and was subsequently ordained. Her life changed out of all recognition as a result of HE and her comment was:

Janet: 'Well being in the line of work I am, I look back and see the path I've walked and I'd say to you now that it was God's providence, the whole lot...'

One way in which a number of respondents perceived HE to be life-changing was through the transformation of their romantic life, particularly if it defined their future inasmuch that they had met their long-term partners at their HEI:

Naomi: 'Meeting my first husband and getting married.'

Sara: 'I really lost touch with my previous life and I met my husband there...and I've been with him ever since.'

This was sometimes considered the biggest consequence of undergoing HE, demonstrated well by Sara talking about losing touch with her previous life in the same sentence as noting that she'd met her husband at university. The

romantic and domestic changes then were also experienced and described as being part of an upward trajectory.

Such a view of the HE experience being transformative was not universally held by interviewees however:

Dave: '...going to university...I don't think it actually changed a great deal of what I was about.'

Toni: 'Going to university didn't suddenly give massive insight.'

Rhiannon: 'It's not actually been a wow sort of experience.'

Such comments from these three participants are striking. All three came from working-class or deprived backgrounds and are now in careers considered middle-class, leading life-styles very different from the people in the communities from which they originated. These accounts emphasise the ordinariness of university experience; the courses, people and institutions had flaws, and the participants were in a position to see these limitations and not be overawed by the new experience. Even in cases where people found the experience to be less than impressive, it was one that was described as being well within their capabilities. The aspirational habitus in this case acts as a kind of buffer and standpoint from which to be critical of the experience and the institutions.

### ***The Aspirational Habitus: Reflexive Accounts of Social Mobility***

Amongst the people who grew up in Wales there was a strong common theme of aspirational habitus and social mobility. Many of these people subsequently followed careers in education and many of those interviewed are now academics.

One interviewee, now a senior academic, commented eloquently on the background common to many of these individuals:

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Eifion: 'although I come from what would be economically a very deprived background, I think culturally and academically it was a very privileged background.'

It is interesting that Eifion makes a connection between this cultural background and his future experiences at Cambridge:

Eifion: '...in a sense it was life-changing, but because I had always assumed that it was going to happen and I think my parents had assumed for a long time that it was going to happen, so in that sense it wasn't life-changing you know because it had certain sense of inevitability about it.'

Arwel, now a university senior manager, was also from a rural Welsh background, was supported in his academic ambitions by his family, and commented that 'university wasn't such a huge deal'. He had already met the sort of people that he met at university and had been exposed to the ideas and values that he encountered at university.

Another senior academic, from a rural Welsh background:

Geraint: '...I went to a college which had Welsh connections – in that sense we created our own classless society within Oxford...'

In this way, some participants describe themselves as bringing personal qualities, abilities and social practices to the HE experience, so that it was not only inevitable, but they were able to adapt it to their own purposes.

This was particularly true of the Welsh participants, who, except for two, placed their family backgrounds firmly within the working-classes. All Welsh interviewees also remembered feeling supported and encouraged to enter HE. This is another facet of the aspirational habitus in as much as we can see here, that people report themselves as having been brought up to expect to go to university and once there, they are not overawed by the experience or overly discomfited by it, but seek to profit from it and add their own distinctive flavour to the institution and the experience.



## Conclusion

Much of the data analysed in this study confirms and reinforces previous published work. Individuals find leaving home, moving away to university and becoming independent a big transition (Raymore *et al*, 2001). Participants' reports of increased opportunities for leisure activities and experimentation (Raymore *et al*, 2001) are also confirmed by the data from this study. Many do indeed encounter a 'new world' for a variety of different reasons.

Students often report that they undergo a change in social class as a result of experiencing HE, although, in contrast to much of the published literature, and popular belief, most of the interviewees here did not express unease about this. In interpreting the data, the notion of aspirational habitus has to be viewed cautiously, as it could be an artefact of a self-selecting group, ie. working-class people who attended 'good' universities, and then followed academic careers. However, it has been useful in illuminating the processes, such that the HE experience is expected, welcomed and assimilated in such a way that its problems can be overcome or re-formulated so that they are not problems at all. The data reveal, for example, that people may use neutralising techniques to formulate their experiences, ensuring that they are able to cope with the experience of class difference.

Most people felt that their experience of university was 'life-changing', or experienced an 'epiphany', (Denzin, 1989), although some people had very idiosyncratic personal reasons for feeling this. There do not seem to be any factors revealed by the data here that enable us to predict which sort of student will find HE life-changing. Such a perception was not readily describable via notions of class or age and was not readily explainable in terms of the work carried out by other authors, for example on female mature students. To understand the idea of HE being 'life-changing', we need to see it in terms of an individual's biographical identity and in terms of how that individual constructs their biography, using the kinds of cultural experience

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and values that they have hitherto acquired. This will be of interest to policymakers and educationalists keen to widen participation. In the light of these concerns, it is particularly important that we understand what makes HE a successful experience for the students and staff, especially as the UK New Labour Government has embarked upon a policy of attempting to eventually include 50% of the youthful population in HE. Much earlier work has focused on difficulties experienced by students from backgrounds where it was not customary to enter HE. Here we have attempted to make sense of how people from families with no prior experience of HE have been 'successful' in the HE system. The concept of habitus has been widely used in making sense of the experience of education and how it relates to the cultural background of the student, but we have the anomaly here of people without a family history of HE, but who have an aspirational habitus – a set of cultural resources – that facilitated their adaptation to the experience.

We can infer from this work that although there are some similarities between the narratives, people's experience of HE is conditioned by the development of the historical and broader cultural context. The experience of 'going to university' is different for people in different cultural contexts. The phenomenon of student 'experimentation' for example shows a distinct historical trend. 'Experimentation' for many students in the late 1960s meant being politically active and taking an interest in the philosophies that informed such politics. Yet 'experimentation' thirty years later centred on social and individual activities. Analysing long-term biographies highlights these 'signs of the times', marking historical and cultural change.

The recollection of an 'aspirational habitus', particularly among those participants from Wales, whereby the people from disadvantaged backgrounds interviewed for this study were strongly encouraged to enter HE, is striking, although we must be aware that it may be post-hoc mythologizing. Reverence for education and knowledge has long been assumed to be a

feature of Welsh history and 'culture'. Indeed, the former University College of North Wales, now University of Wales, Bangor, was founded on this principle and was proudly established to educate, among others, the children of local quarrymen and farmers (Williams, 1985).

It is possible that the suite of generally available cultural narratives from which these accounts are constructed changes over time. One narrative freely available to the younger interviewees concerned 'career opportunities'. However, this study only provides a snapshot of people's experiences – possibly interpretation of HE experience, and what will be gained from it, like the narratives available to them, change over time.

Valuable evaluative information for policymakers can also be reaped by biographical analysis. This study shows that younger interviewees have, curiously in line with recent policy, adopted a sense of responsibility for their own 'employability', and believe that HE is there to improve it (Worth, 2003).

Such biographical analyses, and phenomenography, (Marton, 1986), could prove a useful tool both to students of the phenomenology of educational experience and to researchers interested in broader cultural trends and social theory, as it allows us to gain insight into why educational success happens and the factors that might be required of students from backgrounds where there is no tradition of participating in HE. Participants here have been active in constructing the meaning of their experiences and accounts of themselves which position them as equal to the challenges of the education system and employed interventions that set expectations of success and the value of the activity. It is this process, which draws on resources from their cultural, family and community background, which is of great interest from the point of view of successfully widening HE participation amongst segments of the population who have not hitherto been involved in this process.

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[Link To Chapter Five](#)

Chapter Four theorised the existence of an aspirational habitus among some non-traditional students achieving success in HE. If such an habitus does exist, the study of it will yield important information if widening participation is to become a reality, perhaps revealing the successful strategies that some people use in overcoming the barriers to HE that stymy so many others. I have noticed that many individuals who seem to possess an aspirational habitus spent their formative years in Welsh speaking communities in the middle part of the twentieth century. This may have simply been a manifestation of me carrying out this study in Wales, or it may have been racial stereotyping by an English person who only arrived in Wales in young adulthood. I am also aware of the belief held by some that an alleged 'Welsh culture' reveres education, but that the reality of such a Welsh culture was disputed by some scholars.

In this Chapter I consider whether it could be maintained that an aspirational habitus exists, or has ever existed, among some Welsh people and communities and if it does, or did, explores the factors that may have created it. The idea of a 'Welsh culture' is explored, but, importantly, the belief in a Welsh culture is explored, and I argue that it is just this belief that is such an important part of the creation of the habitus, as important as any tangible or 'real' factor, and extending the notion of habitus further.

## Chapter Five

## **Habitus and Homeland: Educational Aspirations, Family Life and Culture in Autobiographical Narratives of Educational Experience in Wales**

### Introduction

This chapter deals with three intersecting issues: widening participation in HE; the Bourdieuan notion of 'habitus' and its applicability to the understanding of an educational experience; and the use of this concept to illuminate the sense of national or local culture that encourages educational aspiration. This was done through a study of the life stories of a group of people who grew up in Wales, whose autobiographical narratives demonstrate how a sense of culture and history is intimately bound up with their own rationale for participating in HE.

There is a good deal of contemporary interest in widening participation and breaching the barriers that some groups experience to entry to HE. A good deal of previous work investigating the experiences and attitudes of people who, in contemporary terms, are 'non-traditional' students, has deployed the concept of habitus (although that term is not always used), to illuminate the sense of difference that was felt when the students contrasted their own

backgrounds with the atmosphere encountered in HE, (Archer & Hutchings, 2000; Bamber & Tett, 2001; Grenfell, 2003; Grenfell & James, 1998; Reay, 2004a). The genealogy of the term *habitus* can be traced to classical Greek thought (Nash, 1999) but the incarnation of the concept most widely used in educational research derives from Bourdieu, (1977), which has been elaborated as consisting of aspects relating to embodiment, agency and the complex interplay between past and present, and individual and collective phenomena in making sense of cultural behaviour and experience (Reay, 2004b).

Elsewhere, we have deployed the notion of *habitus* to explain how people who come from disadvantaged backgrounds have successfully entered and navigated their way through HE, usually being the first member of the family to do so (Baker, a, in review; Baker *et al*, 2005). As Reay (2004a) argues, this involves taking *habitus* in a flexible, non-deterministic sense, as something that facilitates the growth of individuals in new circumstances as well as something which trammels them within those that are familiar. Previously I (Baker, 2005a, in review) suggested that we might usefully extend Bourdieu's (1977) original concept and speak instead of an 'aspirational *habitus*'. That is, people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds in Wales, with parents who were labourers and homemakers, described how there was a sense in their families that education was valuable and the proper culmination of this was to go to university. Thus, *habitus* was not always a restricting mindset or style of life that clashed with the ethos of HE. Some people seem to have been prepared for HE before arriving and did not seem to have felt HE was inappropriate, despite growing up in considerable socio-economic and regional disadvantage, and having no family tradition of participating in HE.

The present chapter attempts to elucidate the characteristics or experiences shown by individuals from Wales possessing such an aspirational *habitus*, that



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may have enabled them to enter HE. Here, the aspirational habitus will be examined by means of interviews with men and women, all of whom spent their formative years in Wales, who defined themselves as 'Welsh' and who had nearly all grown up in Welsh speaking communities. The effects of this culture and the sense of history which it brought with it, represent an aspect of habitus that has not generally been explored by educational researchers, but its importance was noted by Bourdieu:

'the subject is not the instantaneous ego of a sort of singular cogito, but the individual trace of an entire collective history' (Bourdieu, 1990b: 91).

A very pervasive historical and cultural image of Wales is that of a nation which valued education and produced 'preachers and teachers'. Like most historical images in the popular imagination, there is some debate as to whether this notion is a mere recent romantic invention (Kreider, 2002; Morgan, 1986). Despite the pervasiveness of this stereotype, it is often difficult to find contemporary information to sustain this, as a good deal of university admissions data is not disaggregated to provide separate statistics for Wales. In the few recent years for which such information is available, rates of participation in HE in contemporary Wales vary enormously between geographical areas. In the academic year 1997/8, some areas, such as Ceredigion and Monmouthshire, had very high participation rates, whereas many areas located in the south Wales valleys, such as Blaenau Gwent and Caerphilly, had very low participation rates.

The 'stereotypical' image of the Welsh orientation towards education is perhaps reflected in the founding of the University College of North Wales, (now the University of Wales, Bangor), where in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, scholarships were funded by subscriptions raised from the local quarry workers and farmers, to educate their own children (Williams, 1985). This cultural valorisation of academic achievements in disadvantaged communities is emphasised also in the biographical narratives of Welsh literati such as Kate

Roberts (1891-1985). Thus, this sense of culture frequently involves accounts of individuals overcoming hardship through education. For example, the story of John William Thomas, ('Arfonwyson'), (1805-1840), who started his working life as a quarryman at Penrhyn Quarry but became an important figure at the Royal Observatory in Greenwich, involves this sense of betterment through education. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Samuel Smiles in his 'Men of Invention and Industry' (1884) provides a chapter entitled 'Astronomers and Students in Humble Life', which contains many earnest accounts of labourers from north Wales who taught themselves, attended evening classes, and eventually gained admission to universities, becoming scientists, clergy or doctors. The perceived tradition of valuing literary and cultural achievement is also manifested in the popularity of the 'eisteddfodau' and the high profile of the Welsh bards in popular Welsh history.

Given its very wide social and geographical variation, Wales continues to consist largely of relatively deprived, often rural, communities. As Evans, (2000), reminds us, its economy has been restructured beyond recognition with the progressive decline of industrial and spiritual life in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, although participants described something distinctive about 'Wales' and the 'Welsh', life in an industrial urban area of south Wales is considerably different from life in a mountain village in Snowdonia. What is important however, is that as Jones, (1992: 330), observes:

'the Welsh have for centuries sustained an identity without the protective buttressing of a state of their own. The Welsh...have survived despite...a recent history that has witnessed massive immigration and integrationist pressures'.

The origins of this sense of national identity can be traced over the last century and a half. Jones (1992: 332) argued that during this period a distinctive Welsh self-image was formulated: 'an identity rooted in a specific combination of social and economic conditions', although he does also observe

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that contemporary Wales is experiencing an 'unfamiliar pluralism' as the Welsh economic base, political tradition and cultural inheritance are altered and eroded. He concludes by describing Wales as a 'political unit' and states that 'Wales is an identifiable place, but the Welsh are hardly a people with a distinct, shared and immutable identity' (357). Neither, to the chagrin of some politicians, has it developed a distinctive institutional or civic life (Griffiths, 1999; Jones et al, 2002).

Despite the profound changes that Wales has undergone in recent years and the erosion of some of the images and identities that its people previously held, (Evans, 2000), what is distinctive is the sense of identity, history and associated habitus, (McCall, 2001), which structured family life and persisted even through geographic movement and intermarriage. Taking its cue from participants in the present study, this paper will still refer to 'Wales' and the 'Welsh'. Many participants whose formative experiences are explored grew up in Wales before the present day dilution of national identities, at a time when a Welsh 'culture' was still perceived to exist by many people living in Wales, based around labour in the mineral extraction or agricultural industries and infused with an ideological spirit of religious 'nonconformism' – a group of theologies dissenting from the established Anglican Church (Larsen, 1999).

However, there have been challenges to the notion of a distinctive and enduring 'Welsh culture'. Jones (1982: 55), refers disparagingly to 'the propagandists of Welsh culture' and maintains that during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century 'the middle-class non-conformist elite, through the agencies of chapel and press, re-defined the idea of Wales in its own image...' The image thus created intersects with important elements of the Protestant work ethic (Furnham, 1990; Weber, 1958) and has been a long-lasting, and powerful notion which still remains with many people today. Therefore this paper will explore the important contributions of these ideas to the habitus of the participants, and how they feel it constitutes a distinctively Welsh experience

which informed their educational aspirations and the importance they attached to success. As Bourdieu says:

'The habitus acquired in the family is at the basis of the structuring of school experiences; the habitus transformed by the action of the school, itself diversified, is in turn at the basis of all subsequent experiences... and so on, from restructuring to restructuring' (Bourdieu, 1972, in Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 134).

Welsh society, as well as the principality's economy and civic life, have changed a great deal as a result of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century economic restructuring (Griffiths, 1999; Jones, 2004) and with the establishment of the devolved Welsh Assembly (Chaney *et al* 2001; Deacon, 2002; Williams, 2003). Nevertheless, perhaps because of its relative autonomy from formal civic structures (Jones, 1992) the idea of a Welsh culture has proved remarkably robust in the face of material changes in economic and political life. Whilst it is entirely possible that this is, like many traditions, a carefully crafted 'invention' (Morgan, 1983), as well as containing some of the more sentimental notions of culture and images of the Welsh, it is a valuable subject of study in its own right. The images and ideas infuse the aspirational habitus that was described by many of the interviewees in the present study and which was believed to have influenced them profoundly.

In summary, the present study was conceived in order to explore the enigma of Welsh culture, to see what this has to add to the notions of habitus already being circulated in the sociology of education, to address the implications of this for some of the current issues in the debate about widening participation in HE, and how this might be encouraged.

#### Method and Participants

Twenty men and nineteen women agreed to be interviewed. The selection criteria used were that they had all been (or were currently passing) through

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the HE system, described themselves as 'Welsh' and had spent their formative years in Wales. All the participants spoke Welsh and all but two considered Welsh to be their first language. The participants included people from north, south and mid-Wales and from both urban and rural backgrounds. All the participants could be described, in contemporary terms, as 'non-traditional students', that is they either came from 'disadvantaged' social groups, families where no immediate family member had entered HE before, or had entered HE as mature students. The participant's ages ranged from 19 to 72 years. They were approached using a snowball sampling technique, beginning with people known to the author, who were then subsequently asked to introduce other people meeting the criterion who might be willing to participate in the study.

The interviews for this study were conducted as part of an open-ended approach, an adapted form of the autobiographical interviewing method of Chamberlayne *et al*, (2000) and Chamberlayne *et al*, (2004), with the researcher beginning with a single question and then encouraging elaboration. The interviews began with the question: 'Can you remember anything at all during your childhood, or school years, or even after, that you think motivated you to aim for university?' The interviews were participant-led, with the interviewer seeking clarification and elaboration in order to establish the salient influences upon the interviewee.

Analysis was carried out in line with Chamberlayne *et al*'s (2000) recommendations, whereby the interviewer (the author of this paper) discussed the interviews on a case by case basis with two experienced social scientists, identifying influences and themes and consistencies among these, particularly in terms of influences upon the individual pertaining to the desire to attend university. These themes were then examined for commonalities across particular age cohorts, gender, religious denominations, and region of

upbringing. The records of these discussions then formed a further layer of data which was drawn upon for analysis.

### Results and Discussion

Seven recurring themes were identified from the data. These were:

- 1) The influence of religious nonconformity.
- 2) The concept of going to university 'by proxy', on behalf of others who had not had the opportunity to go.
- 3) The presence of socially ambitious mothers.
- 4) Lack of other opportunities in economically deprived communities.
- 5) Influential schoolteachers or schools.
- 6) Peer pressure.
- 7) Exposure to 'cultural capital', even though living in a socio-economically deprived community.

Cutting across these themes is an eighth concern, relating to the formulation of how 'Welsh culture' was felt to have informed the process of attending university, and this yielded a further dimension of analysis, both in terms of whether participants explicitly subscribed to its existence and its influence, and whether it was present in a more occluded form, where participants mentioned aspects of life and influences that would be unusual in other parts of the UK.

Whilst the data were examined for gender trends these were not immediately apparent. Although some participants spoke of differential opportunities available to men and women in the past, they did not necessarily feel their own experience had occurred as a result of gender inequalities. More striking were the generational trends, as will become apparent, particularly concerning the explicit role of nonconformist religious experience.



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### ***The Influence of Religious Nonconformity***

In Wales, religious nonconformity emerged during the late 17<sup>th</sup> century and subsequently became a very powerful influence, one that only declined in the late 1950/60s (Davies, 1993). Davies (1993) noted the emphasis on 'self-culture' in nonconformity, involving an interest in education and the alignment of this with religion itself.

The influence of the chapel was mentioned by many participants, particularly by interviewees over fifty years old. People recollected the 'educational' and 'self-improvement' ethos of the chapel, providing a certain culture and encouraging them:

Eryl: 'the chapel was a major influence on my life and on certain members of the (school) class. The chapel encouraged reading, literary culture...it especially helped me when I had to perform and go in front of an audience, so that was part of the Welsh culture, so you had, before you got to college you had done it before and chapel was really important in that'.

Other quotes reveal a very direct pressure, or assistance, from the chapel:

Geraint: 'a person said to me in chapel 'you really should go to be a minister'.

Ceinwen: 'I could read and write before going to primary school. We were taught to read and write in the Sunday school. I remember the old lady with the blackboard and the chalk and we were taught the alphabet. I vividly remember the first lesson doing the letter A...'

Another participant felt less directly affected, but certainly sensed its presence in society:

Arwel: 'a great deal has been made and probably rightly, of the influence of nonconformity and RE and Sunday schools...in creating a literate, disputatious culture in Wales which lent itself in a sense to university



education...I did go through some of that...felt that education was a good thing...it wasn't a crucial influence...but one was certainly aware that Wales did have a lot of teachers and preachers who had had an education whereas the other people in my community had not.'

There was a notable generational difference here – no interviewee under fifty years old mentioned religious nonconformity as an influence. Even an evangelical nonconformist interviewed, who felt that God had influenced his path and who had attended a Christian college as an undergraduate, did not talk of religious nonconformity as influencing his academic ambitions, although it had clearly influenced his life in other ways.

The early religious experiences of the older participants were therefore seen as playing an important part in acquiring a love of learning and a subsequent intention to go to university. The chapel also involved them in being exposed to people in roles for which an education was needed, such as ministers and teachers. In this way, these experiences can be seen as being implicated in the kind of habitus the participants describe themselves acquiring as children.

### ***Going To University 'By Proxy'***

Some of the older interviewees (those over the age of fifty) were acutely aware that they were among the first generation, or often were the first member, of their family to attend university.

Geraint: 'in some sense, going to college on behalf of the generation previously, who hadn't been able to go to college – you're almost going to college as a proxy for other people.'

'the thought of, for example, failure at university would have been horrendous...you would not be letting yourself down, you'd be letting down a whole generation of people for whom you were there as this proxy.'

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These people also stressed that previous generations/other members of their family had possessed the ability to gain entry to university, but (usually financial) circumstances had prevented this:

Ceinwen: 'my father always said he (father's brother) was a brilliant mathematician and it was a crying shame that he'd never had that university education and the girls of the family as well, they were very, very good mathematically...they were all aware that they'd missed out on that university education...they were keenly aware they'd missed out...I had an uncle...a carpenter by trade and he never had the opportunity to go to university, in fact he sacrificed that so that his younger sister could go to university...'

The perception of this participant is that a number of members of this family, although able and valuing education highly, were prevented from accessing a university education because of the family's poverty. The interviewee herself was one of the first members of the family to go to university.

The sense of a powerful mixture of emotions being passed down through generations is evident, with some family members feeling enormous pressure to succeed, having been granted the privilege denied to their forebears, and other family members feeling cheated.

There were indications from some interviewees that this was the motivation behind their mothers' desire to see them receive a university education – some of the mothers had been successful academically at school and had then lived out their ambitions through their children:

Eryl: '...my mother had to go working to support – she was one of six and she was the eldest – I reckon she could have gone for further [sic] education given the opportunity. So that was a major factor in that my mother wanted us to go to further [sic] education if at all possible to make up for what she had to do without.'

### ***The Influence of Ambitious Mothers***

A body of literature has grown up demonstrating the importance of parental influence, particularly that of mothers, on their children's educational aspirations. Many interviewees mentioned that their mothers in particular, (and in one case a grandmother who was effectively functioning as a mother), had been ambitious for them educationally and socially. Dyhouse (2002) whilst focusing on the middle years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, noted that maternal support and sacrifice was common for boys, especially those from modest backgrounds. This is borne out by many of the comments of the older participants:

Arwel: 'I don't think I grew up taking in with my mother's milk some idea that I should go to university. What I did take in virtually with my mother's milk was this sort of tremendous aspiration she had that one should 'do well' at exams...there was great pressure on me from my mother to do well...psychological pressure.'

Eryl: 'definitely my mother was a driving force.'

'we never discussed it, going to university, but there was positive pressure to do well at school.'

These comments are also consistent with Miles' (1999) observation that mothers were 'moral guides and inculcators of ambition', desiring upward mobility for their sons and for them to aspire to more than their fathers. This certainly seems to have been true for some of our older male participants, as was Miles' (1999: 335) idea that if education could be likened to an infectious disease, 'women have acted as important carriers'. Previously, Jackson & Marsden (1962) wrote about maternal influence in education, highlighting the importance of mother's support for working-class entrants to grammar schools. Kelsall *et al* (1972) stress the importance of maternal support for HE for educational success. More recently, Trusty & Pirtle (1998) argued that

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there is a strong transmission of educational goals from both parents to their adolescent children. Mann (1998) concluded that the mother-daughter relationship favoured working-class girls' educational achievements by emphasising independence, providing emotional support and by influencing girls' values in the light of social change.

This was particularly evident for older participants, whereas younger participants mentioned parental aspirations far less. They frequently perceived that their parents were supportive, but would have been so whatever path they chose.

### ***Motivation Towards HE Because of Lack of Other Opportunities in Deprived Communities***

A number of interviewees attributed their aspirations to HE to lack of other opportunities, as a result of the socio-economic problems of their locality:

Eryl: 'it was automatically assumed that I was going to university because...in B-----, (town mainly dependent on a dying slate industry) at that time, what else do you do?'

Geraint: 'there was that feeling that you should get an education to avoid the pit, avoid the quarry.'

Ambition fostered by lack of opportunity in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Wales was chronicled by Jones, (1962), who noted the professional ambitions of many young people, the lack of opportunities for them in their communities and that education provided both escape and status. Whilst Jones (1962) could be accused by more critical scholars of being overly credulous about the idea of Welsh culture, what is significant here is the subjective sense that education will elevate those who undertake it.

### ***Influential Schoolteachers and Schools***

These were mentioned as a factor enabling access to HE by nearly all the interviewees. For some people, it was a particular teacher, or teachers, that

were perceived as helpful. For others, it was the ethos of their school generally that fostered the aspirational habitus.

Two of the older participants, both now in their fifties, gave some idea of how powerful, as well as influential, teachers were for their generation:

Geraint: 'the headteacher would really decide for you...in a sense he would have denied access if he thought that someone wasn't suitable.'

'the headmaster told you what you would do...: "maths is your poison". And that was my careers advice.'

Arwel: (at primary school) 'the headmaster...moved me up a year...it may well have been really quite important...I probably found that very challenging and I probably reacted very well to that...so a teacher, at a very young age, I think was quite important as well.'

Less overtly powerful but equally influential teachers were also remembered:

Irfon: 'only really because of that teacher...absolutely fantastic...yeah, she was very encouraging.'

Gwen: 'I think, you know, what will have had a great influence when you're at school is your teachers...absolutely...as a class we greatly admired our music teacher and that would have been a tremendous spur for us...'

One interviewee recollected clearly that although there was no academic ethos in his school in a very deprived area, the influence of one teacher in particular had been pivotal to his entering an elite university.

The influence of teachers is reflected in much classic work concerning such adults acting as 'role models' inspiring young people (Cooley, 1982; Freud, 1949; Mead, 1934; Skinner, 1971; Stryker, 1980). More recent literature also deals with role models or mentors for pupils/young people, often those perceived to be problematic in some way, and in this context there has been

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emphasis on gender and ethnicity (Zirkel, 2002). Disaffection among boys (particularly boys from ethnic minorities) is often perceived to be diminished by the presence of male/ethnic minority male mentors (McAuley, 1999; 2000; Odih, 2002). Although the interviewees in this study who benefited from the 'mentoring' of their teachers were clearly not perceived as being problematic pupils, a number of male participants mentioned the influence of female teachers. This is interesting when one considers some present day ideas about the allegedly discouraging effect on boys of feminised 'soft' pedagogies and of female teachers not being able to provide suitable role models for boys (Warner, 1999), or research suggesting that gender- (and racially-) matched mentors are more effective for young people (Zirkel, 2002).

The culture of a school was also important for some interviewees:

Eslyt: 'It's like the cycle of life really...if you do your 'A' levels, you go to university...if you'd said I'm not going to go to university, they'd have said what on earth are you going to do then?'

Although most of the younger interviewees maintained that HE entry was dependent upon ability alone, in some cases they described how, as they saw it, teachers equated social deprivation with low ability. The social prejudices imputed to some of the teachers of the younger participants were not noted in teachers by participants of the older generation. Nash (1976) argued that pupils perceived by teachers to be middle or upper-class achieved greater educational success and that teachers attached importance to a pupil's social background. Trotman (1998) found that some schools suffer a 'poverty of aspirations' for working-class pupils. Pugsley (1998) found this to be reflected in the advice given to and the options made available for pupils. Cheng (1995) found that the characteristics of a school do indeed influence the rate at which pupils stay on after the age of 16, even when adjustments are made for academic achievement. The social environment within which education takes place is thus perceived to be important in the inculcation of this



aspirational habitus. In addition to teachers themselves, of course, a significant element in the social realm of the school involves the individual's classmates or peer group, to which we will now turn.

### ***Peer Groups, Peer Pressure***

Interviewees of both genders and all ages remembered an active academically minded subculture developing amongst their peers which motivated them academically:

Arwel: 'One (influence) was my fellow students as it were at school...major influence within that was my closest friend...we certainly sparked each other off.'

'There was a number of people who went to university who, at that time, sort of encouraged each other...'

One female participant attributed her interest in university virtually entirely due to the fact that her friends were applying for HE:

Megan: 'My closest friends...from school onwards, had been to university and I think that had an effect on how I saw...I think that's what made me think...to go.'

These accounts echo a variety of academic formulations of adolescent psychosocial development which stress the role of the peer group, and some even maintain that a 'developmental task' of adolescence is to become a member of a peer group (Coleman & Hendry, 1990; Erikson, 1968). Often, 'peer pressure' has been discussed as if it were a problem, propelling the hapless youngsters away from academic pursuits and towards trouble, yet the quotes here tell a different story in as much as they suggest that an active and academically-oriented peer culture can propel youngsters towards HE. Thus, in Bourdeuiian terms, these peer group experiences help to provide what Reay (2004b: 79) calls 'a feel for the game' which is most usually a characteristic of a middle-class educational habitus. Moreover, whilst some



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socially ambitious and attainment-oriented peer cultures may be exclusionary, these reminiscences stress the acceptance of this very educational game found in the peer groups of the participants. Thus there is a marked contrast here to the overwhelming tendency of much of the literature on gender related 'peer pressure' (Kenway *et al*, 1998; Mac An Ghail, 1994; Warrington *et al*, 2000) where scholars have frequently concluded that the effect on boys has been to promote a culture of 'laddishness' and low academic achievement. In counterpoint to this, our participants here, by their own accounts, seem to be participating in a form of social life which enhances their readiness to acquire cultural capital.

In addition to peers there were occasionally more distant members of the social group who formed a historical backdrop to the individuals' stories. Three interviewees mentioned remembering hearing about individuals in the community who had gone to university previously – the boy from the same terrace who had achieved a First some years ago, an actor from the same grammar school who had gone to Oxford, the milkman's son who was doing a PhD - indicating to these interviewees that such things were not impossible.

### ***The Role of Cultural Capital***

The notion of 'cultural capital' in social life was formulated most explicitly by Bourdieu (1986) who used the term to describe a kind of non-economic capital which may take three forms. First, it may be embodied in the form of a habitus that involves self-improvement; second, it may be objectified in symbolic goods; and third, it can be institutionalised in terms of university diplomas. Cultural capital of the first two kinds facilitates access to the third, in that commitment to education, forms of knowledge, speech and conceptual development facilitate formal academic success (Dumais, 2002). Indeed, following a folk-version of this, many of our participants attributed their success in entering HE to acquiring the appropriate cultural capital.

One interviewee, an academic well-acquainted with Bourdieuan theory, clearly articulated that his own acquisition of cultural capital, through an interest in politics, may have led to his success at gaining access to university:

Arwel: (An interest in politics is) '...a very educative process...means you become a voracious reader of newspapers...a massive capital plus, a cultural plus...I listened a lot to Radio 4...plays by Arnold Wesker...so it was politics and also what in a sense flowed from that in terms of the mass media...finally there was reading...often ill at school...perhaps I learnt more sitting at home with a bad chest looking out at the rain and reading...and then talking to local people...who came into the house...I often feel that I learnt more in that informal way than I did formally at school and that does lead you to the kind of cultural capital argument...I think I would venture a speculation that actually what got me to university was the cultural capital which I had acquired largely by default...'

In describing life as an adolescent in rural Wales during the early 1960s this participant follows Jones, (1962: 102), in describing the lives of secondary school children in a Welsh market town, who observed that 'during this period of adolescence children are even more open to the influence of newspapers, the cinema and the wireless'. Thus, the door is opened up to new capital acquisitions from the wider culture. Other participants alluded to this phenomenon too:

Chris: 'The media...the Western Mail...the broadsheets...'

Ceinwen: 'That political awareness was there and culture was tied in with that, so there was always discussions of politics, of philosophy.'

'Books were everywhere in our house...it was taken for granted that education was one of the central parts of life.'

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Thus, although these people were not from affluent households, they often seemed to be acquiring 'embodied cultural capital', investing in self-improvement through learning. In terms of their autobiographical accounts, this prepared them for the acquisition of more institutionalised forms of cultural capital and prestige subsequently. Cultural capital then, following Bourdieu (1986), has an incremental quality such that the earlier, more informal varieties lead to the acquisition of more concrete forms in later life. The question of cultural capital, then, invites the question of what sort of culture, or perhaps more importantly, what sort of culture did the participants think that it was all a part of?

### ***Welsh Culture***

Many of the older participants unequivocally attributed their success in gaining access to university, to aspects of their 'Welsh culture'. This was often tied up with other factors such as the influence of religious nonconformity, but some people clearly identified a general 'Welsh culture' as a factor that encouraged education and self-improvement. For example, the Eisteddfod, as the pre-eminent Welsh cultural event, was frequently mentioned. Three people felt that success in the Eisteddfodau as children had helped them academically, and one described how success in the Eisteddfod for her uncle had compensated for him not going to university:

Ceinwen: 'He sat the eisteddfod exams to become a member of the Gorsedd and he was sort of ordained, you know, the green robes...but for a man who had sacrificed a university education for somebody else, that was very, very important...'

Another interviewee, growing up in the 1960s in a town with a livelihood based on slate quarrying, which had been decimated by that industry dying, recollected that:

Eryl: 'The quarrymen were keen to get on...that was part of the Welsh culture.'

'I'm not a historian or sociologist but maybe the Welsh did want to learn and go further.'

Such beliefs are consistent with what Jones (1982: 57) described as 'a certain mythologising about the cultural attainments of the quarrymen'. This sense that the quarry workers had intellectual tastes is also present in Samuel Smiles' accounts of labourers reading the works of Lord Macaulay and other 19<sup>th</sup> century intellectuals. The theme of these accounts is that the interests of the quarrymen were unexpectedly highbrow. The quarry has been described as 'an important cultural centre where much music was made and innumerable verses were composed' (Jones, 1982: 57). Jones (1982: 57) also describes the famous 'caban' (a sort of canteen) in the quarry, as being 'organised for educational, cultural and, at times, agitational activity'.

Another participant identified the value that the Welsh put on education and the results of this:

Geraint: 'People who didn't go to university but were manifestly qualified to do so were not in Welsh culture.'

One participant of this generation however had 'rebelled' against the notion of a Welsh culture and forwarded his theory as to why such an idea had grown up:

Ifor: 'Even the so called 'culture' which was attached to it (Welsh manual labour) which is alleged to be high-minded and rather intellectual, was a rather sad way of trying to escape from the dreadful conditions.'

Despite this

'There was a sense of aspiration back then to get out of manual labour and the same tendency applies throughout Wales.'

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Whether or not these accounts of the intellectual and aspirational interests of the quarrymen are literally true is not the point at issue. What is important from the point of view of our participants is that their habitus is freighted with these evocative images of a centuries-old literary and musical tradition, and a sense of how their forefathers kept their mercurial intellects alive during intermissions in their toil at the quarry or on the farm. All this is immanent in participants' own experience. The aspirational habitus then, in line with Bourdieu's formulation, contains an image of history as well as an image of culture. As Mary Douglas (1986) reminds us, history has little to do with the past but everything to do with the present.

#### General Discussion

Lest it be thought that the Welsh have a monopoly on 'aspirational habitus', it should be noted that research in England has shown that disadvantaged people aspiring to university perceive it as a means of escaping welfare dependency and marginalisation (Warmington, 2003), and some Scottish research has shown that (male) non-traditional students see HE as a gateway to desirable employment (Tett, 2000). However, a good deal of research in England has shown that negative images of university and students are held by young working-class people (Hutchings & Archer, 2001) and that this social group do not always 'value' HE socially or economically, making it a 'risky' and 'costly' choice (Archer & Hutchings, 2000), in direct contrast to the participants in the present study.

Consistent with the findings presented here, Hutchings & Archer (2001) found that a small number of their participants did plan to go to university, despite the perceived barriers. They were often from ethnic minorities, using discourses of upward mobility and sacrifice for long-term gain, and coming from families with a tradition of 'bettering themselves'.

One participant in the present study stressed repeatedly that there were 'no barriers' to his and his disadvantaged peers' going to university: 'I'm amazed at how easy it was'; 'we could get out of this trough - we did'. Another participant also observed that 'culturally there was no barrier' and 'I don't think there was any of this notion 'oh you're going to university, you must be a snob''. However, one interviewee did remember that: 'there was a great deal of 'it's not for people like us', echoing Bourdieu's (1990b) notion that habitus defines the boundary between what is thinkable and unthinkable.

One participant observed that there was not a class system in Wales when he was growing up, but a 'caste system'. He classed himself as a 'very poor Brahmin' – his family were 'subsistence' farmers, but he considered them 'very rich' culturally and educationally. However, it is worth mentioning here that some scholars have disputed this notion of Wales being a 'classless' society, Jones, (1982: 55), describing this as the 'main ideological achievement' of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century middle-class nonconformist elite.

The Welsh language itself may have prefigured Bourdieu, in that it already contains a concept very similar to that of 'habitus'. Another interviewee talked extensively of the Welsh idea of 'buchedd', or 'way of life'. Jenkins, (1962), chronicled the concept of 'buchedd' in some detail, detailing different buchedd groups existing in a village in Cardiganshire. One of Jenkins's buchedd groups corresponds to the background of many older participants in the present study – religious nonconformists with a pervasive respect for knowledge, from whom the disadvantaged but aspirational first generation university students allegedly came. The idea of 'buchedd' itself, of course may represent a quasi-mythical past, artfully fabricated by middle-class chapel-goers (Jones, 1992). Yet its power lies in the fact that it is itself a piece of the cultural capital puzzle – an image which aspiring youngsters can carry with them into the otherwise alien world of the university. Perhaps this aspect reflects the 'Thomas Maxim' that: 'If men [sic] define situations as



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real, they are real in their consequences' (Thomas & Thomas 1928: 572). Thus, what is important for understanding culture is not what is objectively verifiable, but what people think is real.

Both younger and older participants mentioned the importance of peer groups in constructing the aspirational habitus and both groups of interviewees mentioned the role of schools and teachers. Some younger participants recollected that teachers equated social disadvantage with a lack of academic ability. This is more consistent with contemporary accounts of disadvantaged people's alienation from education, whereas the older people's memories of barriers reflect a more pervasive sense that HE was simply 'not for people like us'. In contrast to much contemporary theorising, a teacher's gender did not seem important in relation to their effectiveness as a 'role model' or 'mentor' to the participants in this study. Entering HE because of a lack of other desirable employment opportunities was spoken about by a number of interviewees across the age range, perhaps reflecting the long-standing economic problems present in many parts of Wales.

One of the most striking features of the data presented here are the generational differences in participants' accounts, many of which are central to the notion of 'Welsh culture'. These differences were most apparent in the interviewees' accounts of the influence of religious nonconformity, the 'by proxy' phenomenon, parental influence and the role of 'Welsh culture' in general.

It may be that the lack of reference to the influence of religious nonconformity by younger interviewees reflects the growing secularisation of Wales.

Although an adherence to Bible study and the debate of popular social issues remains among nonconformist congregations, the numbers involved in this type of organised religious observance are dwindling, so it could be expected that fewer young people would mention such an influence. Furthermore, we may speculate that perhaps younger nonconformists have kept the faith, but



without the explicit allusions to a distinctive national 'culture' that has previously been associated with it.

No younger people mentioned the feeling of entering HE as a proxy on behalf of older family members who were unable to attend, although this idea was alluded to by many interviewees over fifty years of age. This may have a wider resonance with experience elsewhere in the UK for this particular generation, who attended university at a time of expansion, and this may account for the cohort-specific construction of family histories of people who always had the potential but for whom circumstances were not propitious. This variant of the aspirational habitus narrative emphasizes how 'our family' or 'our people' always had the 'embodied cultural capital', but who somehow lacked the wherewithal to achieve the institutionalised form. This also reconciles the problem of hardship with the sense of having a rich cultural heritage – the latter was always there, merely occluded by the lack of opportunity. The 'by proxy' phenomenon was not evident in the narratives of younger people who were more likely to mention worries over debt, and that their parents would have encouraged them in any venture, educational or not. This may reflect a broadening of aspirations among the younger generation's parents to include non-educational accomplishments. Nevertheless, there is continuity in the sense of an ongoing expectation of support from one's parents' generation.

Further intimations that the aspirational habitus may be differentiated along generational lines comes from the observation that it was participants over fifty years old who subscribed to the idea that it was 'Welsh culture', with its strong protestant nonconformist work ethic, that had assisted their entry to HE. Participants identified aspects of Welsh culture, or *buchedd*, that favoured acquisition of 'cultural capital', which first accrued to the participants themselves and then facilitated their acquisition of more institutionalised forms through participation in HE (Bourdieu, 1986). Two participants,

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however, maintained that although the acquisition of 'cultural capital' had played a part in their attending university, they did not believe it had originated in Welsh culture, but instead problematised the very notion of a Welsh culture per se.

As the perception of the existence and influence of this Welsh culture disappears - it is noticeable that it doesn't play a part in the narratives of younger participants - perhaps the alleged 'Welsh aspirational habitus' will disappear, or change, too. If the Welsh aspirational habitus does, or did, exist, it would be ironic if, at a time of government desire to send increasing numbers of less privileged or 'non-traditional', students to university, aspects of a society or culture that perhaps may have supplied the 'cultural capital' that succeeded in facilitating access to a university education for some of the less privileged members of its community, once finances allowed, were to be eradicated without comment. Although much research on widening participation has focused on 'barriers' preventing non-traditional students from accessing HE, scholars such as Archer are now looking at the 'aspirations' and 'identities' of such students, often from ethnic minority backgrounds, who have 'succeeded' as well as 'failed' in education.

Despite the intimations of a Welsh aspirational habitus in participants' accounts, it was widely remembered that only a small proportion of people would attend university. Even today, despite an emphasis on widening participation, in many parts of Wales very few people enter HE. Thus, the idea of a Welsh aspirational habitus is one which pertains to people's images of culture and history. Rather than offer a romantic evocation of Welsh history therefore, I would advocate instead a close attention to the operation of images of history and culture in constructing orientations to education across the generations. In a sense, the targets of these aspiring people

'thus glitter in the eye of history as signs of the labourer's conception of the nature of society.' (Reddy, 1977: 84).

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Educational researchers may choose different 'ladders' (Silverman, 1993), or different 'processes of engagement' (Morgan, 1983a), to better conceptualise the world around them. For those doing radical or critical educational studies that choice often means using frameworks derived from the works of 'modernist' and Marxian-inspired critical theorists, as we might see for example in the classic work by Bowles & Gintis (1976). Equally, this strand of work owes something to Habermas and the members of the Frankfurt School, and in the last decade or so, workers in the field have drawn heavily upon the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Accordingly, most of the analysis of people's relationship to HE in this thesis draws upon Bourdieu. This kind of theoretical perspective has proved extremely popular amongst researchers in the field of educational studies and its deployment has achieved the status of an orthodoxy in the discipline (Reay 2004a).

It is noteworthy that there have been very few attempts within the literature on educational matters to draw upon the so-called 'post' theorists, such as Baudrillard, Barthes, Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault. These theorists might be thought to be especially valuable to researchers looking for a way of making sense of the educational process and its role in society. They could not only help critical researchers focus on voices that have been marginalised or that can not be heard (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992), they would also help researchers and theorists of education to be 'reflexive,' in that this literature would help researchers consider how they may be raising themselves above those marginalised voices (Platt, 1989). Whereas Bourdieu's work provides well developed pathways for those wishing to consider how education forms a kind of cultural capital and how a nexus of ideological and practical factors may constitute a 'habitus' for a particular group of people, without a careful incorporation of Foucault's theorising, we are ill-prepared to understand how

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educational policy, power and practice can shape consciousness itself, both on the part of students and practitioners.

Like a Fish in Water

## **Chapter Six**

## **Foucault and Current Higher Education Policy**

### The Work of Michel Foucault

The popular image of Foucault is of a man who was famously concerned with the exercise of power. He analysed, historically, power relations in the penal system (Foucault, 1977), the way in which power is exerted over those deemed insane (Foucault, 1971), the exertion of power over the individual in other areas of medicine (Foucault 1975) and also the way in which individuals may exert power over, or discipline, themselves, by reference to ancient civilizations (Foucault, 1986a;b; Gauthier, 1988). Foucault interpreted changes in penal systems as efforts to ensure that power operated more efficiently, and saw the overall aim of the penal process to be the reform of the 'soul'. (I use the term 'soul' here and elsewhere in this chapter in the sense that Nikolas Rose used it.) He viewed the development of the 'human sciences' as closely entwined with the birth of a social domination that led to systematic organisation in Western societies in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Mourad, 2001) and theorised that the knowledge gained from the human sciences was used to make individuals productive, co-operative participants of modern social systems. The definition and production of knowledge are implicated in the exercise of power.

Yet for Foucault himself this concern with power was motivated by a broader concern with how we come to see ourselves as human beings. Perhaps the clearest statement of his position was provided in an interview with Paul Rabinow in 1983:

'My objective...has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects. My work has dealt with three modes of objectification which transform human beings into subjects...The first is the modes of inquiry which try to give themselves the status of the sciences...In the second part of my work, I have studied the objectivizing of the subject in what I shall call 'dividing practices'...Finally, I have sought to study — it is my current work — the way a human being turns him - or herself into a subject. For example, I have chosen the domain of sexuality...Thus it is not power, but the subject that is the general theme of my research. It is true that I became quite involved with the question of power. It soon appeared to me that, while the human subject is placed in relations of production and of signification, he is equally placed in power relations that are very complex.' (Foucault 2001, originally 1983: 326–7)

As a result of this interest in the question of consciousness or subjectivity, Foucault did not only conceive of power in terms of sovereignty and overt coercion, but also in terms of the management, organisation, orchestration and shaping of people, with the subsequent determining of their conduct, believing that the construction and ordering of groups was central to power (Moss *et al*, 2000). He talked of the use of 'observation' and 'gaze' during the exertion of power. Although in some situations Foucault saw power as productive (Foucault 1980), he also believed that one effect of disciplinary power was to produce 'docile' bodies, (Foucault, 1980), citizens that were useful for practical, productive labour.



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From the point of view of those seeking to build a critical theory of education there are many important points of contact between Foucault and Bourdieu, as Everett (2002) indicates. For example, Foucault's concern with 'disciplinary power' and how it is historically rooted in systems of surveillance and normalizing judgments (Alvesson, 1996: 98) is similar to Bourdieu's conception of 'symbolic power' (Bourdieu, 1989). However, Bourdieu sees symbolic power being rooted not in systems of surveillance but in the educational system and the family. Foucault's concern is also with language or 'discourse,' which is thought to limit, define, and normalise motives and meanings. This aligns with Bourdieu's preoccupation with 'labels, categories, and binary pairs,' which are similarly thought to delimit meaning, but which are also thought to condition individuals' access to capital, that is, to decrease the 'distance from economic necessity'.

As Everett (2002) goes on to note, both Foucault and Bourdieu have an interest in the material structure of society beyond language and consciousness itself and both recognize the importance of non-discursive or material practices and structures — and the way in which these interact with the cultural world of symbols. Knowledge is in a sense a product of a society's symbolic structures, which Foucault sees as implying power. Knowledge is seen to operate in the service of power, through its indication of what constitutes the normal. Bourdieu is similarly concerned with knowledge, but is especially interested in the common sense or 'doxic' varieties of knowledge which also tells us what is normal or 'legitimate'. It is through the processes of classification, calculation and codification (Bourdieu, 1990), and through the definition of what is legitimate, that knowledge comes to affect human subjectivity and the constitution of identity. In Foucault's terms, discourses constitute the subject; whereas in Bourdieu's terms symbolic and social structures constitute the 'habitus'.

There is thus considerable common ground between Bourdieu and Foucault, both of whose ideas reflect the need to break with the philosophy of consciousness and with the idea of an independent subject or rational actor. They also imply scepticism toward 'truth', which is a social construction for Foucault (Alvesson, 1996: 101) and an 'arbitrary' for Bourdieu.

As a result of these commonalities, although this thesis draws substantially on the work of Bourdieu, I will briefly review here how the work of Foucault may be used, and has been used by some others, to illuminate some of aspects of the contemporary UK HE system.

#### Foucault and an Analysis of the Higher Education System

Foucault's ideas have been used by many scholars in a variety of disciplines, perhaps most famously by Rose, (eg. 1989; 1999) who has a longstanding interest in 'governmentality', the process by which selves and subjectivities are made governable, through the development of theories about an interior landscape inside the head and about new social phenomena such as public opinion. Rose (1993: 60) maintains that in advanced liberal democracies, support for the marginalised or excluded is constructed in terms of 'engagement in a whole array of programmes for their ethical reconstruction as active citizens'. He also argues that the concern of liberal governments has been to 'modulate events, decisions and actions in the economy, the family, the private firm, and the conduct of the individual person, while maintaining their autonomy and self-responsibility' (Rose, 1996: 46).

This analysis will follow in the footsteps of a small number of scholars using Foucauldian ideas to make sense of recent changes in the HE system (Drummond, 2003; Peters, 2003; Selwyn, 2000).

Foucault was particularly concerned with the disciplinary process and was interested in the production of a 'docile' population, a process which can be readily explored within the UK's current HE regime. We can hypothesise that,

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just as many of the current HE students are rather different from those of previous generations, HEIs are now charged with producing a different sort of graduate. Traditionally, universities were expected to produce well-educated, cultivated people, yet as can be seen from the work presented elsewhere in this thesis, the agenda is now rather different (Harvey, 2000). There is a view held among many that the job of HE is now to produce 'employees', with 'skills' and 'competencies', responsible for their own 'employability'. In this way, HE can readily be seen as a disciplinary process, moulding and producing a certain sort of citizen, or perhaps more accurately, a certain sort of employee. Foucault believed that bodies of knowledge reinforce and interact with power and that power and techniques of punishment depend on the knowledge that creates and classifies individuals. This knowledge derives its authority from relationships of power and domination. Just as Foucault saw the reform of the 'soul' as the aim of the penal process, it can be argued that the aim of the contemporary HE system is the reform of the souls of students, and, as was argued in Chapter Two, the socio-political reconstruction of HE involves the reform of the educator as well. As well as finding parallels between Foucault's ideas of producing 'docile' bodies and current HE policy, New Labour's vision of the HE system progressively including ever greater swathes of the 'socially excluded' also echoes Foucauldian notions. Besley (2002), while interpreting Foucault (1988), describes how the disciplinary technologies pioneered through the enlightenment and into the 19<sup>th</sup> century would not allow anybody to stand outside society as 'outcasts'. Those who deviate from the norm would be reconstituted as 'docile' bodies, thus conforming and contributing to a productive economy under advanced liberalism. Clearly, one way of gaining control over the outcasts, the 'excluded', is to rein them in to an education system interpenetrated with the discourses of a new professional class of educationalists, employability champions and widening access specialists whose powers intersect with those

of the state. Foucault (1988) noted that at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, an administrative technology of government simultaneously took care of individuals while fostering the state's strength. The same philosophy is thus evident in the HE system itself.

Foucault argued that some forms of power operate as enabling, encouraging and authorising. The Australian HE system has recently undergone similar changes to those in the UK, and Luke (1997) analysed the imposition of Quality Assurance, QA, and demonstrated how the QA system imposed on a small Australian institution had resulted in an improved situation for women in the university. She argued that the QA system was a panoptic mechanism of 'making visible', but that this had led to more accountability, and new opportunities for women and other marginalised groups, who had previously experienced 'invisible' oppressions and disadvantages. Luke (1997: 438) agreed that the QA system as a whole encompasses a host of patriarchal assumptions and processes that disadvantage women and that QA constitutes an example of the mechanisms of governmentality and techniques of disciplinary society (441). Foucault maintained that institutionalised processes and social subjects are regulated, surveyed and disciplined through the mechanisms of accountability. But as Luke demonstrates, such panoptic power also brings marginalised groups into the disciplinary gaze, giving a productive dimension to power/knowledge regimes. Luke observes that global systems can have very different interpretations, practice applications and outcomes at institutional and departmental level (441) and shows how QA had a positive emancipatory effect on the systematically disenfranchised groups in the university (442), by, for example, causing the collection of data which demonstrated the inequalities experienced by these groups. Luke (1997: 446) concedes that QA is a form of governmentality and a social discipline regulating social subjects and practices, but argues that panoptic mechanisms of 'making visible' brought previously invisible and marginalised groups to

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light in ways that made them part of a new standard and set of norms. She concludes that the panoptic and internalised gaze broke the hegemonic forced consent of people who were previously victims of sovereign, individual power and exclusionary systems of formal governance.

Foucault discussed the ways in which everyday existence is regulated, normalised and disciplined. Although such considerations are now obviously very much more part of HE than they ever were before, Foucault's work is also important in education because it has urged researchers in the social and human sciences to think differently about what counts as knowledge, about how issues and research questions are formed, about how people come to know and be known to themselves and others, and about the procedures that are used to regulate and implement 'research' and assert 'truth'.

Drummond (2003) applied Foucault's ideas to nurse education in the knowledge economy. He believes that a certain type of culture in the HE sector became established in line with a certain type of economic policy, increasing the role of government in the standards and content of HE. Drummond illustrates much of his argument by reference to Foucault's works chronicling the genealogy of the ancient Greeks and the ways in which they constituted themselves as moral subjects (Gauthier, 1988). He carried out a detailed analysis of nurse education in the knowledge economy, using Foucault's (1986a: 352) idea of 'rapport a soi', the kind of relationship that one ought to have with oneself, which resulted in Foucault's use of the term 'ethics' to refer to the implications of the moral codes adopted in order to establish this relationship. Foucault identified four dimensions to 'rapport a soi', and Drummond relates them all to aspects of the nurse HE system.

Foucault (1986a: 353) argued that regimes and institutions have a characteristic 'mode of subjection', which was 'the way people are invited or incited to recognise their moral obligations'. Drummond (2003: 60-1) observes that, in the field of HE, this comes under the 'lifelong learning' remit,

and operates in various ways. As human units, students are now obliged to carry out work on themselves and this is manifested by the interest in evidence-based practice, accumulation of credits, reflective diaries, accreditation of prior learning, learning outcomes and continual professional development, resulting in continual training and re-training of people via these concepts which make visible aspects of the lifelong learning and educative process and thus represent a new way in which both they and those whose job it is to assess them can be made not only visible but manageable. Although Drummond specifically refers to nurse education, the phenomena that he writes about are now present, to varying degrees, throughout most of the HE system, in many subject areas.

Foucault's notion of 'ethical substance' is an aspect which is targeted by the 'modes of subjection', or that aspect of the self that is to be worked upon in relation to moral conduct. Drummond likens this to standard of performance, creative output and indeed 'the commodification of the self' (61).

In Foucault's theory, technologies of the self are the means by which one changes oneself to become an ethical subject (1986a;b). Drummond suggests that the equivalent in HE in the knowledge economy is the labour performed to ensure the solvency of the economic enterprise. The activities encouraged in the HE system of today have some striking parallels with these technologies of the self, in that they comprise a set of techniques that allow individuals to work on themselves by regulating their bodies, their thoughts and their conduct.

Another classical idea which fascinated Foucault was the concept of 'telos' which related to the perfection or the end point of a process. In the case of education this relates to the kind of being the students aspire to be, or indeed the kind of institution we aspire to educate them in. In Drummond's view, in the knowledge economy, the kind of being we aspire, or are incited, to become involves a disposition to sustain the cash-flow, as well as complying



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to 'outcomes', 'competencies' or other standardisations of the desired outcome model.

In this thesis the theme of HE shaping the self will be continued, as will the idea that HEIs are themselves shaped by broader economic and political processes and have a similarly re-constitutive effect on the consciousness of people who work in them. In the present project, the informants whose life stories have contributed to this thesis have studied a variety of disciplines, so the comments will necessarily not be discipline-specific. As we have seen, Foucault questioned the foundational 'truths' of disciplines and was interested in the means by which some statements, rather than others, are understood as being 'true'.

One recent change in the HE system which has involved the creation of new discursive spaces and the formulation of new 'truths' has been the enormous current focus on 'skills', 'competencies' and 'learning outcomes'. For example in the formulation of curricula, the design of syllabi and teaching practices, HEIs, their staff and students are encouraged to attend to the assessment and development of 'key skills'. Arguably, it is an effect of power to see the 'skills' putatively possessed by students as cognitive entities. One's 'skills' are in many respects related to one's ability to exercise power over the social and physical world (Smail, 1999). However, once one defines 'skills' as intra-psychic cognitive proficiencies, people perceived to be without them are usually members of less powerful groups. This is most clearly manifested by those individuals in our culture who are perceived to be lacking in 'social skills'. These, usually profoundly vulnerable, people are pathologised by the 'helping professions' that they are so often brought into contact with, simply because of their alleged lack of 'social skills'. Some of these people are sent on therapy programmes which include 'social skills training'. Strikingly, there are no therapy programmes for the rest of us to teach us to respond sensitively to people encountering such difficulties, or to enlighten us as to the



multiple oppressions that such people have often experienced. Indeed, students are assailed by the rhetoric of skills, and from the outset of these initiatives under the previous Conservative government, they were exhorted to engage with the languages of competence and transferable skills so as to yield an allegedly 'student centred' means of developing and assessing them (Holmes, 1995). In HE therefore, 'skill' has now been opened up as a pedagogic and cognitive object, not due to any necessary aspect of its essential nature, but due to theorising, thinking and policymaking.

It is possible to see parallels between 'key skills' and Foucault's technologies of the self. Foucault described the Stoics developing their technology of 'taking care of oneself' (Foucault, 1986a;b; 1988). Once that was achieved, they could begin 'knowing oneself'. Ways of doing this included self-disclosure and examination of the self. The process was long and involved, taking years of reflection. There is thus a parallel with 'key skill number three' – 'improving own learning and performance'. This too requires the development of a Stoic consciousness, leading to an individual who is self-monitoring, self-creating, disciplined and who is responsible for their own education, employability and professional development. This in turn mirrors Drummond's (2003) discussion of 'continuing professional development', which many of today's students will find themselves exposed to, particularly those entering teaching or health and social care professions. Indeed, more pervasively in the current HE climate, is the idea of Personal Development Planning where the subject is supposed to scrutinise themselves and identify skills needing improvement. In this regime it is no coincidence that when skills are mentioned they are often adjectivalised with terms like 'personal' or 'transferable', as if they were somehow internal to the individual and could be carried from one situation to another.

A further example of scholarship comes from the work of Trier (2003), who looked at Foucauldian techniques of power in teacher training, working with

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trainee school-teachers. Much of Trier's analysis refers to the techniques of power used in school-teaching, but as a result of the recent changes imposed on the HE system a similar analysis can be made here. Gore (1998: 234) noted that the 'techniques of power that Foucault elaborated in prisons (are) applicable to contemporary pedagogical practice'. These techniques include surveillance, normalisation, exclusion, classification, distribution, individualisation, totalisation and regulation. Such techniques are now found, to varying degrees, in HE for staff and students alike. Gore (1998: 237) observes that 'educating is about the teaching of norms – norms of behaviour, of attitudes, of knowledge'. It could be argued that this has always been true of the education given to children at school, but at times the HE system has been perceived as opposing such norms. The contemporary HE system however continues to embrace norms in an ever-increasing way. Moss *et al* (2000), in discussing Foucauldian notions, maintain that a climate which prioritises technical and managerial discourses and values, as HE increasingly does, is unfavourable to critical thinking. Once more, we see a substantial shift in the perceived purpose of HE as it becomes increasingly driven by protocols and manuals and its students and practitioners are evaluated in tick-box exercises.

Foucault's writings have a wide applicability to the questions raised by the use of education as a means of shaping people or drawing them out in particular ways. Moss *et al* (2000) utilised Foucault's writings to explore the discourses, constructions and practice regarding 'child care'. They note that Foucault describes the emergence of disciplinary power from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, not in terms of sovereignty and overt coercion, but in terms of the management, organisation, orchestration and shaping of people, with subsequent determination of conduct (235). The construction and ordering of groups was thought to be central to power. Foucault also believed that language shapes and directs ways of understanding and looking at the world,

and termed these ways of understanding and looking 'discourses'. He developed the idea of 'dominant discursive regimes' and 'regimes of truth', these having a disciplinary or regulatory function. They organise experience and influence ideas, thoughts and actions, excluding other understandings and interpretations (236). Foucault saw power shaping the social world:

'Power is embedded in the governing systems of order, appropriation and exclusion by which subjectivities are constructed and social life is formed...available systems of ideas discipline individuals as they act, see, think and see themselves in the world' (Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998: 19).

The pervasive power of the 'dominant discursive regime' in HE is illustrated by some informal research conducted during the course of this thesis, when during 2004, undergraduates at the University of Wales, Bangor, were asked why they had come to university, and all of them, across a range of subject areas, responded that it was to get a 'good job'. I then asked what they thought of the idea of someone going to university to study something in which they were interested. A number of them had clearly not encountered such a notion before and thought it extraordinary, but the dominant response was that it would be a waste of time and money. One student remarked that it would be nice, but nobody would ever be able to afford to do it. These students had all grown up in an era in which the 'dominant discursive regime' maintains that HE has the instrumental purpose of improving one's employment prospects. This discourse is sufficiently predominant that the suggestion of anyone doing anything else is met with incredulity. It seemed to be the only one that these students were aware of, even though they must have had older relatives who had been exposed to previously dominant discourses regarding the purpose of HE. The 'good job' discourse very effectively excluded other understandings or ways of thinking. The 'good job' discourse is itself a fragile construction. Whereas a narrowly defined set of graduate careers can boast average starting salaries of £22,000 a year

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(Taylor 2005b), it is clear that relatively few will earn this much. Taylor (2005a) revealed that 38% of graduates are working in non-graduate jobs and only 12% were in 'traditional' graduate employment. Despite the high average salaries reported in the press at the start of 2005, other evidence suggests that wages may be lower, even averaging as little as £12 - 13,000. A university education no longer guarantees higher earnings and a middle-class lifestyle (Barr, 2004; O'Reilly, 2004; Williams, 2003). The progression to a 'good job' looks increasingly precarious, yet what is significant is the conviction with which people believe they are progressing towards one. This highlights the importance of examining what the sense of HE's purpose means and how the individuals' consciousness has been successfully configured to privilege the notion of a 'good job'.

Foucault's theories can also help us when we consider what is at stake in processes of incorporation, assimilation or exclusion, in relation to the currently modish policy notions around social exclusion. For example Danaher et al (2000) applied Foucault's theories when looking at the difficulties some marginalised groups experience in accessing education for their children. Danaher et al argue that knowledge is complicit with power in privileging some individuals and groups while marginalising others and that there are often hidden close associations between education and power, such that very powerless groups, for example travellers, have less access to education. Foucault saw power as various articulations of force circulating throughout the social body, shaping people's understandings of themselves and their relations to the world. Power as a force can be fluid and productive, not merely coercive. Foucault identified disciplinary and bio-power. Mass education has entailed the articulation of the mechanics of disciplinary and bio-power within assorted forms of knowledge. Disciplinary power moulded subjects fit for productive labour. This has found expression in the emergence of disciplines of knowledge, the mastery of which credentials certain individuals into

privileged and influential positions within the system. Bio-power regulated the secure population, was most visible in schools and was located within the life of communities, and was concerned with developing children into respectable, civil subjects.

Following this line of argument we can see that the increasing need for qualifications extends the state's power, aspects of which can be detected in the current HE system. Increasing numbers of people are responding to the need for higher level qualifications and to achieve these they have to be processed through the HE system and become subject to the associated disciplinary technology, government-inspired discourses and personal record keeping and reconfiguration. This enmeshment in the mechanisms of the field of education recollects what has been termed 'linguistic entrapment' (Crawford *et al*, 1995) in the field of health care. Like the health care system over the last quarter century, education has been characterised by unstable relations of power and shifting forms of knowledge which are subject to provisional realignments as discourses such as social justice and economic rationalism struggle for dominance. Thus, an understanding such as Foucault's, where power is seen in this way, is apposite to making sense of the state of near-permanent revolution in which universities find themselves. The virtue of Foucault's work is that through it we can attempt to make visible 'workings of institutions which appear to be both neutral and independent' (Foucault, 1974: 171). We can see, as Gore (1998: 237) stated, that 'the productiveness of power would seem to be a fundamental precept of pedagogical endeavour', and that the 'functioning of power remains largely invisible in our daily practices, unless we are looking for it' (248). In a sense, it is the largely bureaucratic exercises of external examining, quality assurance reviews, research assessment exercises and other internal, statutory and professional processes which monitor the institutions and individuals within them. In some senses the rewards for compliance are

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quantifiable in that they affect how much money the institution gets, and in others there are more ineffable constituencies to be satisfied such as matters of 'reputation', 'prestige', 'profile' or 'institutional brand management'. Power is 'a productive network which runs through the whole social body'.

(Foucault, 1980: 119). The techniques by which power is applied do not form a monolithic or universal system – techniques and procedures affecting individuals are adapted and applied differently in diverse situations. Power 'applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual' (Rabinow & Dreyfus, 1983: 212), and is a technique by which

'one may have a hold over others' bodies...so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines. Thus discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, 'docile' bodies' (Foucault, 1980).

Central to Foucault's work is the notion of technology – the practice of power involving

'the government of individuals, the government of the souls, the government of the self by the self, the government of families, the government of children, and so on' (Foucault, 1984: 256).

Besley (2002) highlights the parallels that can be drawn between social and educational interventions and education, mental hygiene and disciplinary technologies, including technologies of the self, which can result in useful, docile, practical citizens through a process of identification, typification and professional practice. Whilst these are almost never successful in remedying the abnormality, they are more usually successful in neutralising its subversive potential.

To recap, in this chapter I have attempted to lay out the grounds of an appreciation of the contribution of the work of Michel Foucault to the discipline of educational studies, and its usefulness in making sense of the educational



experience. There are of course some criticisms of Foucault's work. Many of these have been well-rehearsed elsewhere (Baudrillard, 1988; Kelly, 1994), so we will concern ourselves with those issues which will have the most impact upon educational studies such as are reported in this thesis.

Of the criticisms which could be leveled at Foucault's work, many can be remedied by judicious incorporation of ideas from Bourdieu, suggesting that some merit lies in working with a combination of the two. First, Foucault's work is rarely based on the actual accounts and practices of social agents, unlike that of Bourdieu's (eg. 2000) and unlike the original data presented in the present thesis, so Foucault's abstraction and tendency to paint in broad brush-strokes can be remedied. Second, Foucault is alleged to make certain relations and aspects of relations disappear (Alvesson, 1996), such as gender, race, and class. This is certainly not the case with Bourdieu, though he may ultimately obscure them (McCall, 1991; Moi, 1991), and it is clear that these were themes which were oriented towards and discussed by the participants in the present studies and in the background literature on access to HE. Third, Foucault, through his less-than-precise references to the 'state', fails to give us any clues as to how to untangle the operation of specific central agencies, which are often articulated in Bourdieu's work (cf. 1988; 1998). However, that aspect has been addressed by a number of other authors such as Rose (1989) and in the present project through the close attention to the policy pronouncements and documents of governmental agencies and spokespersons in the thesis itself.

This then, constitutes a sketch of an over-view of a Foucauldian analysis into our present HE system. For a further extensive analysis in this vein, see Baker & Brown (forthcoming).



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## **Chapter Seven**

## **General Conclusions**

I begin with brief summaries of the chapters. Chapters One and Two are concerned with the political and social construction of HE, the 'field', and the next three chapters are concerned with the construction of the individual in relation to HE, the 'habitus'. I then include a brief overview of the changes occurring in HE, ending with a short summary of this work in Bourdieuan terms.

The analysis of the widening participation 'empowerment' literature, 'Whose Failure To Adapt? Governmentality and Individualisation in the Widening Participation Debate', showed that this often takes a different stance from sociological literature, which examines structural and political barriers between non-traditional students and HE. The empowerment literature often accepts uncritically students' accounts of unsympathetic, hostile, elitist HEIs, using these as a socio-structural analysis. It exhorts university staff to change themselves and their institutions, with sometimes little reference to the constraints that university staff operate within, who now enjoy considerably less autonomy than previously. The thrust of much of the literature is that the 'soul' of the educator, to use Rose's concept, needs reconstructing and this is often pursued with relentless individualism. Some

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of the empowerment literature's ideas proposing to make universities more accessible to non-traditional students suggest a vision of a radical transformation from the role that universities have traditionally played. Close scrutiny of this literature reveals that the vision of HE for some researchers approximates to a vision of a system concerned as much with social and welfare reform as education, to the point that some authors have suggested dispensing with virtually all academic tradition in HE, on the grounds that such tradition alienates certain social groups.

Such suggestions interested me, particularly in the light of recent Government policy documents concerning HE, some of the contemporary 'disability rights' discourses, and a personal interest in the perceived failure of the present welfare system to adequately support certain groups of vulnerable people. I thought that it would be useful to explore one of the most obvious interfaces of these areas, the notion that it is a 'good thing' for people experiencing mental health problems to enter HE.

The result of this study was 'Mental Health and Higher Education: Mapping Field, Consciousness and Legitimation', a look at how HE has been reconstructed as an area of welfare reform by New Labour and how this is consistent with the conceptualisation of politics under New Labour and the notion of individual responsibility. There is substantial encouragement from Government for people with mental health problems to participate in HE, the Government seeming to believe in various gains that such participation will confer, both for individuals and society. However, there are difficulties in the implementation of such a policy, as HEIs in reality are ill-equipped to deal with the needs of people with mental health problems. Although many HEIs have made valiant efforts to support such students, resources are simply not available – specialist HEIs mental health or counselling services are frequently grossly over-stretched, many staff are unaware of how to support students encountering mental health difficulties, and those staff who are more aware

rarely have the time for the appropriate pastoral work, due to heavy work loads. Evidence suggests that in many parts of the UK, the statutory mental health services are unable to cope with the needs of many clients, so HEIs often cannot even rely on these to support vulnerable students. Indeed, anecdotal evidence exists that, in some cases, statutory services see HEIs as a route whereby they may 'off-load' their clients.

It can be concluded from these two chapters, that the 'field' has changed considerably in recent years. Bourdieuan theory suggests that 'field' and the individual's 'habitus' interact, and I therefore carried out further work, constituting the next three chapters of the thesis, looking at aspects of the 'habitus' of the individual in relation to HE.

The exploration of the individual habitus began with 'Gender and the HE Experience: In Search of the Reflexive Self'. This began by looking at the construction of an individual's gender identity in relation to the HE experience. Men and women saw themselves as individualised, reflexive beings, after Beck and Giddens, features such as 'employability' and 'confidence' being cultivated by HE. In contrast to much previous work, the results of this study showed that identity did not usually cleave along gendered lines, perhaps reflecting a demographic 'post-feminist' trend. Participants extensively used the discourses of 'employability', 'careers' and 'confidence', many clearly seeing the 'value' of HE as giving them 'worth' in the market place. It is theorised that participants may adopt a plurality of identities as a condition of existence, contingent upon past, current and new experience, difference being an intrinsic part of one's subjective identity. Some of the narratives have implications for notions of habitus, suggesting that habitus may be transformed as people progress through university. The possible existence of an 'aspirational habitus' is postulated, in which change itself is also an expectation.

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I was interested in the possibility of an 'aspirational habitus' and '*Like A Duck To Water: Entering HE and the Aspirational Habitus*' was an initial investigation of this, via a study of the life transitions of individuals passing through HE. This study found that many people did encounter a 'new world' on entering HE, some undergoing a change in social class, but most not feeling uneasy about this. In this chapter, I cautiously develop further the idea of an 'aspirational habitus' – possessed by people from families with no experience of HE, enjoying success in the HE system. The experience of 'going to university' can be seen to be conditioned by the cultural and historical context and can be illuminated by analysing long-term biographies, although it should be remembered that participants will use the available narratives. There are implications for policy-makers here – such studies may shed light on the reasons for educational success and the factors needed for such success in students from backgrounds with no tradition of participating in HE.

While conducting the research on 'aspirational habitus', I noticed the presence of a high number of people describing themselves as 'Welsh' in the study and decided to explore whether this was a 'real' phenomenon or not, and what may have enabled these people from disadvantaged backgrounds to access HE, particularly as some had entered HE long before 'widening participation' was part of the 'field'. 'Habitus and Homeland: Educational Aspirations, Family Life and Culture in Autobiographical Narratives of Educational Experience in Wales' is a chapter in which I looked at the concept of habitus, using it to illuminate the narratives of non-traditional students from Welsh backgrounds, and considered how habitus, and thus the aspirations of these respondents, were constructed and how this enabled individuals to access HE. The influence of schools and teachers, peer pressure and acquisition of 'cultural capital' were features identified across age cohorts. Among participants over fifty years old, many people mentioned the influence of

religious nonconformity, the feeling of going to university by proxy, and presence of aspiring mothers. Many individuals of this generation also perceived that their 'Welsh culture' had played a part in their entering HE, the Welsh culture perceived to be one embracing social aspiration and valuing knowledge and learning. The existence of such a Welsh culture per se is in dispute, but I conclude that this is largely irrelevant – the aspirational habitus pertained to people's images of their culture and history. Some people who grew up in Wales during the middle decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, despite living in conditions of economic hardship, were encouraged by their families and communities to aspire socially and the society in which they lived provided them with the cultural capital, sometimes in ways less prevalent in, or even absent from, other parts of the UK, enabling them to access HE. Although this did not result in large numbers of people from Wales accessing HE, it is worthy of examination in the context of present day concerns expressed about the low number of disadvantaged students entering HE. Ironically, this limited study suggests that some of the factors that may have enabled disadvantaged Welsh people to enter HE in previous generations are largely disappearing from contemporary Welsh society.

Chapter Six is concerned mostly with the issue of power, exerted on, and by, the HE system, and briefly looks at this from a Foucauldian view. The most significant conclusion that I draw from this is that the HE system is being pressurised by Government, to an extent unparalleled previously, to produce large numbers of 'docile', 'employable' graduates. So successful has the rhetoric been, that the remit now extends to producing docility among sectors of the population who, throughout history in the West, have been seen as outside of mainstream society. In a fine Foucauldian sense, as the state exerts even more power over these people, it is done in the name of pastoral care – they are being 'socially included'.

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General commentary on the changes that HE is undergoing:

If HEIs are now to be agents of social justice and welfare reform, this could result in them leading us into a more equitable society. However, laudable though this goal is, there are serious problems in its implementation. It is undisputed that in recent years HEIs have endured a real decrease in funding per student and many HEIs now face serious financial problems. If they are to play a role in social reform by admitting substantial numbers of non-traditional students, a category which by definition will include a higher proportion of vulnerable students, many of whom will need greater levels of support than the traditional students, then increasing, not decreasing, levels of resources will be required. This is particularly important if HEIs are to admit students with social or certain health problems, as many of these students are no longer be able to access the levels of support from the over-stretched statutory services that they might have in previous years and a growing portion of this work will therefore fall upon the HEIs. Evidence also suggests that many HE staff find themselves ill-equipped to deal with the needs of some vulnerable students, even those staff sympathetic to the new agenda.

If widening participation is to be successful, more attention needs to be paid to the debate currently constructed which frequently problematises HEIs and their staff. Although work is being undertaken in the area of socio-structural inequalities and the cultural barriers that prevent non-traditional students from accessing HE, there is still a worrying tendency in some quarters to individualise the problem, and to continue to attribute the low numbers of non-traditional students in HE to the alleged hostility of unwelcoming HEIs to people in these groups. If non-traditional students are to gain from the HE experience, we need to know the very nature of the initial attraction to HE. There is evidence that such an attraction for the individual student often starts at a very early stage, with the habituses of the individual's family,



school and community. Therefore, it might be of value to study community structures (eg. families, schools, religious institutions) for the benefit of groups such as educationalists, policymakers and admissions tutors. With reference to the adage 'It takes a whole village to bring up a child', I suggest that the 'whole village' has not yet been studied. It will also be of value to pursue historical biographical analyses in this area, as this is one way of illuminating the development of habituses within the 'whole village'.

Universities today find themselves in a difficult position – they are expected to be promoters of improved social justice, involved in the fight against social exclusion, yet are also responsible for upholding the intellectual and scientific life of the nation. These roles make unlikely bed-fellows. The lay press currently reflects the widespread doubts that many have of widening participation and the role of universities as social reformers – the loss of universities as the guardians of intellectual rigour. Media accounts of 'dumbing down', 'Mickey Mouse' degrees, a 'tick box' mentality in HE and academics being pressurised into passing unworthy students, are legion. Yet other sectors of society maintain that universities, particularly those that are perceived to be 'traditional', are elitist institutions that discriminate against the disadvantaged, which has led some to suggest abandoning scholarly tradition and academic rigour.

Despite these conflicting political and social ideals and perceptions, individual students continue to pass through HE, attracted there for various reasons, each constructing their own experience. The work in this thesis suggests that the experience constructed by students over the last two decades is substantially different from the experience constructed by the generation before them. They all subscribed to a belief that HE resulted in 'self-improvement', but whereas such self-improvement for people who passed through HE during the 1960s and 1970s was largely conceptualised as a wider self-awareness and self-fulfilment, often tightly bound up with an academic or

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intellectual passion, students passing through HE more recently saw themselves in a very individualistic manner as reflexive beings, ready for the market place, having added value to themselves by means of their qualification, 'employability' or 'skills'. Interestingly, one of the few commonalities between these two groups in the way in which they articulated the values and benefits of HE was the widespread use of the discourse of 'confidence'.

The university-as-self-improvement discourse was also evident in the work presented here that examined the life transitions of people passing through HE and the possible existence of an 'aspirational habitus'.

The work investigating the possibility of an 'aspirational habitus' among certain Welsh people, revealed that most of the older participants had grown up in communities which they believed to have a culture and history valuing self-improvement, that self-improvement often being achieved through education.

In line with the change in the socio-political construction of HE that has taken place in recent years, it is clear that the individual's construction of HE has also changed considerably. Younger people conceptualise both the factors that lead to HE entry and the benefits of HE in a substantially different way from older people, consistent with the ideas of late modernity, involving an individualistic reflexive self, believing themselves to be masters of, and creating, their own destiny, frequently without the self-awareness of the features that contributed to the aspirational habitus, created by a wider community and perception of culture, so explicitly referred to by the older people.

Some concluding thoughts on Bourdieuan ideas within the context of this thesis:

Reay (2004a) argues that a person's individual history, the whole collective history of their family and their class is constitutive of their habitus and that individual histories are vital to the understanding of habitus. I suggest, that in the light of such a widespread belief in the influence of the contribution of 'Welsh culture' to a particular habitus, and in the face of debates about the historical origins of Welsh culture and the love of learning, habitus may be an 'artful construction'. In terms of the habitus constructed by the 'aspiring Welsh', it was not the reality or not of a Welsh culture that mattered – it was that people believed that it was real. The essential factor here was their choice of habitus, or 'the art of inventing' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 55).

Bourdieu, (in Wacquant, 1989: 44), describes the bi-directional interaction between field and habitus:

'field structures the habitus...habitus contributes to constituting the field as a meaningful world, a world endowed with sense or with value, in which it is worth investing one's energy.'

This interaction may be seen within the HE system as illustrated by the issues covered in this thesis. As the field (social and political agenda of HE) changes, we see the habitus of the student structured differently, (exemplified here by the differences between students of the 1960/70s and 1990s/21<sup>st</sup> century), although the habitus still has limits – groups of people for whom HE is 'unthinkable', still do not enter HE, even presently, as the field is changing. Perhaps this explains the limited success of widening participation among certain social groups. The long-term interaction between the field that New Labour is creating and the habitus of future students, and the transformations that it produces in both, will make an interesting study.

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Perhaps the findings of the work presented in this thesis may be best summarised in the words of the latter day popularisers of habitus themselves:

'social reality exists, so to speak, twice, in things and in minds, in fields and in habitus, outside and inside social agents and when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a 'fish in water'; it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 127).

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