Main Report

- **Background**

Our research has taken place during a period of policy driven Widening Participation in Higher Education and, both in the UK and globally, when there has been concern about breaking down the exclusivity of university education (McDonough and Fann 2007; Blanden and Machin 2004) . In spite of the relative success in increasing participation in higher education generally, concerns remain about the social class gap in entry to higher education (HEFCE 2005). There exists an apparent polarisation of types of university attracting working class and minority ethnic students (Sutton Trust 2000; 2004; 2007) and considerable concern with student retention. The universities with the most success at Widening Participation have the highest drop-out rates (HEFCE 2006) which has suggested a causal relationship and a tendency therefore to construct working class students as problematic (Leathwood and O'Connell 2003) and a risky investment for HEIs. Our research presents a very different picture of resilience, commitment and success.

Whilst there has been substantial research on retention (eg. Yorke and Longden 2004; Tinto 1993, 1996) issues and increasingly the processes of university choice (Harvey et al 2006; Gorard et al 2006; Reay et al 2005, Nora 2004, Modood and Shiner 1994) there is limited UK research on student experiences once at university (Archer and Hutchings 2000; Harvey et al 2006) and especially working class students: both the focus of this study.

There is a tendency in the policy discourse to use terms such as 'non-traditional' often conflating the experiences of mature, minority ethnic, women and working class (Gorard et al 2006). Our research focuses primarily on working class students' experiences but recognises the multiplicity of identities. The intersection of gender, 'race', ethnicity, age with class is therefore central in order to discern and unpick the specificity of the students' experiences.

Archer and Hutchings (2000) study in one modern university, discussed constructions and concerns of risk, costs and benefits of university participation. Our research has explored how students manage the academic in relation to their social selves across four very different types of institution. We were concerned with how they navigate and relate to the university both academically and socially in order to develop 'academic ability' and accrue educational knowledge (cultural capital) which they can turn into 'success'. Lave and Wenger (1991) present a socio-cultural theory of students' engagement with their learning, demonstrating the importance of the social as well as the learning contexts. However, their understanding of power relationships and structural concerns is limited (Fuller et al 2005). In order to develop our understanding of student experiences and interrelated processes we have preferred to employ Bourdieu's (1990a) concepts of habitus, cultural and social capital and also field and aspects of Bernstein's (1996) pedagogic device.

Aims and Objectives

The overarching aim of the project was to explore working class students' experiences of higher education; the impact of these on their learner and socio-cultural identities and the implications for their progress and to explore the extent to which these experiences are gendered and 'raced'.

More specifically the research sought to:

- compare and contrast the social and cultural experiences of working class students in different types of universities/higher education institution
- examine the impact of these experiences on their learning and academic progress primarily from their own perspectives but also if possible those of their tutors
- discern the impact of the university experiences on the constructions and re-constructions of the students' identities and explore the processes of compliance or resistance with which students engage in order to position themselves as effective learners
- contribute to the theoretical understanding of social class and learner identities within the higher education context

Details of how each objective has been addressed and met are presented in the results section.

- **Methods**

Our focus was on undergraduate students 18 years and above from working class backgrounds including white and minority ethnic women and men, accessing them initially in years 1 and 2 of their degree course. We also collected data from middle class students in order to situate the perspectives of the working class students (appendix 1).

Mixed methods were employed in two stages, across four institutions comprising an elite (Southern), a civic pre-1992 (Midland), and a post 1992 (Northern) university and a college of Further Education (Eastern), located in three different geographical areas (appendix 2). These different types of institutions were chosen in order to discern a cross section of student experiences in institutions that represent different missions and success in widening participation.

We focused on different disciplinary areas but where possible the same subjects in all of the universities (given the hierarchy that exists between subjects (Bourdieu 1988). Problems in achieving this were met either because we did not get the necessary cooperation from the staff or because we could not access sufficient numbers of working class students in the subject area. The subjects were: History, Law, Engineering English, Economics, and Chemistry. The Foundation subjects delivered in the FE college were: Performing Arts, Early Childhood Studies and Arboriculture.

We included the FE College since Higher Education (HE) in FE is a central strategy of the government's Widening Participation policy (Hodge 2002) and were thus interested to compare the experiences. Our intention was only to interview these students during the first two years of their Foundation Degree, however we did follow one student as she progressed to a third year BA pass degree at the University on a part-time basis. The

data we have on the FE-HE student experience is therefore limited but does stand in contrast in a number of ways to the other research sites.

The social class of the students was defined by employing the Office of National Statistics Social and Economic Classifications (Rose and O'Reilly 2000). With respect to the working class students our focus was on L7-L14 and middle class L1-6. We refined our sampling through the interview process and thus gathered information about parents' educational profiles and ascertained whether these students were first in their immediate or extended families to go to university.

In stage 1, 1209 questionnaire (see appendix 3) responses were received from Y1 and Y2 students across these institutions in the identified subjects. The questionnaire data provide generalisable information about aspects of a cross section of student experiences in a representative sample of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) but more importantly act as the context for the subsequent case study data. The questionnaire was also crucial in identifying students for follow up interviews.

Ethnographic semi structured interviews (appendix 4) were used in order to probe and illicit in depth responses reflecting individual meanings and perspectives (Atkinson et al 2003). We interviewed 89 students: 48 middle class and 41 working class, in groups and one to one. Eight were from Minority Ethnic backgrounds; 51 were women and 38 men. Accessing black and minority ethnic students was difficult in part because of limited numbers of these students in the elite universities and in the Northern institutions.

In stage 2 we identified 27 working class students and followed them across two academic years – year 1 and 2 and year 2 and 3 (see appendix 5). We interviewed the students at key decision making moments (Ball et al 2000) such as the beginning and end of term or start of a new module; before and after assessment periods, and kept in contact with them through e-mail and informal meetings. We aimed to gain insights into the students' perceptions of themselves and whether this changed over time and whether and how this impacted upon their attitude to their studies. We sought to access the social and psychodynamics of student relationships with their institutions and to gain insights into their views and feelings about their university experiences, friendships, learning experiences and their motivations. We spent some time with the students in their environments to contribute to what Skeggs (1994) describes as the "geography of positioning and possibilities" (p72) in this way we aimed to map their cultural and learning experiences, both direct and indirect, and within the time scale of 12-18 months, chart their academic trajectories. We collected data from the students on their progress and asked them to draw a 'mind map' of their social and academic networks.

We undertook a total of 159 interviews: 143 student and 16 tutor, admissions officers and widening participation officers. In addition we observed 12 lectures and seminars in order to contextualise the interview data.

The quantitative data were analysed descriptively but cross-referenced in order to make comparisons regarding gender, class, ethnicity, age, subject discipline, year of study and type of HEI.

The qualitative data were coded according to a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1990) utilising the Atlas.ti software to manage the data. We complemented this

by drawing on a number of theoretical frameworks including Bourdieu's and Bernstein's concepts as indicated above.

 Names of place, institution and individuals have been anonymised as agreed with the participants. The researchers have abided by the BERA and BSA ethical guidelines as well as their own institutions' requirements.

Results

- **Different Learning and Social Contexts: the four HEIs**

The four very different HEIs embody different institutional missions and thus attract different types of students in terms of wealth, social class qualifications, age, and ethnicities, although gender seems to be more evenly balanced across the universities. Expectations and delivery of programmes differ across the HEIs and subjects together with unequal material conditions: unit of resource, collateral, endowments, research funding; together with different histories, traditions and perceptions of worth and status locally, nationally and internationally. All this impacts on pedagogy and students' social, cultural and learning experiences (Bastedo and Gumport 2003). These 'fields' in Bourdieu's (1990a) terms- the social and material arena in which the students are studying and competing for scarce and highly desirable resources, are complexly differentiated.

Our data suggest that 'an institutional effect' or institutional habitus (Reay et al 2005) which acts as an intervening variable, providing a semi-autonomous means by which class processes are played out in the HE experiences of students.   The HEIs in our study have institutional habituses in which their organisational culture and ethos is linked to wider socio-economic and educational cultures. Hence there are greater differences between the university experiences than between the students' experience in each university or subject. These differences are described briefly below (see also Output 1).

Eastern College where the HE students undertake vocational foundation degrees, mainly on a part-time basis, is situated in an economically disadvantaged area devoid of the usual attributes of a university town: for example, there are no bookshops or theatres. The students tend not to go to the partner university (Northern) to avail themselves of the learning resources there and nor do they identify as university students. Tutor support varies across the subjects and is influenced by student numbers and tutor personalities.

At Northern University the majority of students live at home (70% of questionnaire responses) and work in part time employment between at least 10 and 20 hours per week (64%). Whilst there is a range of University support addressing study skills, finances, health and counselling, there was no structured tutorial support. Through a system of on-line learning whereby students were encouraged to access lecture notes and related learning materials, frequently eschewing the need to attend the university, Northern students were increasingly left to their own devices.

At Midland the type of support was similar although more module and personal tutor contact seemed to be available. Also only 10% of the questionnaire respondents lived at home, and 30% had some limited part-time, weekend employment.

At Southern they have to live on campus at least in the first year and are forbidden to take jobs during term time. Most are young and tend not to have other family commitments. Once accepted into the university, resources are targeted to ensure individual success for all. Each term students receive detailed feedback on their progress which happened variably elsewhere. They are immersed in their subject and the academic culture and the college system provides a personalised student support network.

Eastern College and Northern University essentially offer their students a resource to enable them to improve their position in the labour market, suiting the needs of local 'non-traditional' students. Southern draws the students into what is effectively an exclusive club where they are 'bound in' as life-long members. In between these extremes Midlands draws on a more diverse student intake in terms of geography and ethnicity, and provides an environment in which social and cultural opportunities are promoted alongside the academic aspects of the university experience. The implication is that the students' lives revolve around their HEI to different extents, with the degree prioritised in different ways in the light of other concerns and commitments.

- **To compare and contrast the social and cultural experiences of working class students in different types of higher education institution**

Habitus is the embodiment of history, "internalized as a second nature…[it] is the active presence of the past of which it is the product." (Bourdieu 1990a p56). Having the kind of history that matches the present conditions facilitates one's engagement with that present reality. All middle class students to varying degrees had more preparation (cultural capital)for university life and what to expect than all the working class students in our study. Most were given advice by parents or family members with many of these having been to university themselves and were groomed by their schools (see appendix 6).

Widening Participation has helped working class students to overcome to some extent that sense of place that leads to self exclusion from places that they do not feel that is rightly theirs (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992 p72). However, on going to university working class students are faced with middle class worlds and need to devise strategies of engagement or at least coping. It is clear from the questionnaire responses, all students' understandings of what to expect on going to university varied enormously but the more preparation or cultural capital they had the clearer they were about what they wanted to accrue from their experience and how to effect this.

Hence, our findings show the importance of conveying not merely information about the course programme but also the importance of ensuring students develop an understanding of the 'invisible' pedagogy (Bernstein 1996): the rules of 'the game' (Bourdieu 1990b) and expectations. Becoming 'bound in' is one means of achieving this. At Southern University, it was an overt process and some working class students were overwhelmed and intimidated by it (Output 2). At Midland the process is more implicit and in part is perpetrated through the system of clubs and societies. It is also apparently generated through the students' residential experiences of halls of residence

in the first year. Here they are drawn in to the comfort of the social environment. But it is also through the association with students who bring a range of classed experiences and high value capitals themselves, that pedagogical ethos and academic expectations are propagated. Northern and Eastern students, both women and men, overwhelmed with paid employment, and family commitments, continue to live at home and socialise with home-based friends, hence there were few such opportunities. The more students withdraw from the 'field', either intentionally or not, the less access they have to the means (habitus and cultural capital), or opportunity (social capital) to acquire it, to compete for scarce resources.

Thus we can see the interplay of the structural with the personal, the familial and social and academic experiences that constitute the histories of these students and comprise the " system of structured structuring dispositions" (Bourdieu 1990a p55) .The middle class students have learned dispositions which fit with the context of the university and are thus enabled to generate further habitus through a range of social interactions. The working class students may also do so in different ways across the different institutions but on balance they have fewer such opportunities.

- **To examine the impact of these experiences on their learning and academic progress primarily from their own perspectives but also if possible those of their tutors**

Therefore we have students across these different HEIs variously 'integrated' (Tinto 1993). These personal experiences and histories gave rise to a spectrum of learner behaviours in the HEIs which combined with the institutional habitus had a powerful impact on how the case study students developed as learners over the research period. At one end the College and Northern where for the students, jostling work and family commitments with doing a degree, the development of student learner identities was not central. For mature students and younger women their learner identities, stemming from previous school experiences, remain relatively fragile and unconfident. Women students often expressed strong self doubt about their worthiness of being at the University at all but as Leathwood and O' Connell (2003) and Bartky (1990) argue, this is less about personal inadequacies and more to do with systems of oppression and social relations.

Students at Southern and to a lesser degree Midland, had been identified as high achievers from early on in their school careers, equipping them with confident learner identities. Enveloped in a highly competitive, learning intensive environment at Southern and captured by the social but also academic ethos at Midland, being a student becomes the individual's main source of identity. This in itself becomes generative of success. At Southern being an academically successful student becomes an all-consuming preoccupation.

The powerful influence of the institutional cultures can be seen in the students' reference to the pressure on them to excel at Southern or feelings of not being challenged, articulated by some Northern students (appendix 7). At Northern exceptional students stood out and had to rely on their own motivation and self-regulation (Vermunt 1998) whereas at Southern they competed for the 'exceptional' status.

The structure of the pedagogy in particular had a strong impact on the students' ability to make sense of and navigate their way through the learning process and to acquire in Bernstein's (1996) terms the 'realisation and recognition rules'. These structures are, for example, tightly 'framed' (ibid) at Southern facilitating this acquisition, and weakly framed at Northern, thus impeding it. At Northern where students were not required to attend lectures, were permitted to hand in work late and could re-sit failed assessments several times and where relationships with tutors were informal, they also lamented being left to their own devices and desired more structured discussion of ideas.

At Southern with its stronger framing and intense 'pacing', seminars and tutorials are explicitly about mastery and competitiveness. The norm is to be extremely hard working to the point of not being able to switch off. Working class students at Southern, notwithstanding their social anxieties, are enabled to succeed. At the other institutions the process is more complex and convoluted. There are tensions between the academic rigour and requirements and desire to accommodate a diversity of personal experiences and commitments as explained by the tutors we interviewed, particularly at Northern and Eastern. The research shows that unintentionally, this often has a counterproductive effect.

'Belonging and fitting-in', a central theme in Widening Participation discourse (Read et al 2003, Archer et al 2003), often attributed as a barrier to university access or access to learning is more complex and nuanced than hitherto thought. It is not, in our view, a unitary experience but applies both to learner and social identifications. At Northern and Eastern, the working class students fitted in socially with some ease but as learners several of the Northern students who felt passionate about their subject, were committed and hard working, felt at odds with their peers who tended to be more laid back learners (Reay et al forthcoming). On the other hand, working class students at Southern, whilst at times anxious and overwhelmed by the social aspects, are much more like fish in, rather than out of, water, academically. On going there they find, in a sense, the coming together of their academic/learner identities, surrounded by others intellectually like them in contrast to their school experiences. For Midland students there is more diversity in all respects and therefore more opportunities for the students to find their niche, and people with whom they can or want to identify.

All of the students in our study succeeded academically (including for example three firsts and several going on to postgraduate study) displaying significant levels of commitment and resilience at times against the odds. For all students studying is challenging, angst ridden work: but for some it is made easier than for others.

- **To discern the impact of the university experiences on the constructions and re-constructions of the students' identities and explore the processes of compliance or resistance with which students engage in order to position themselves as effective learners**

As we have already indicated the students to different extents in the different HEIs experienced competing identities which impacted on their social involvement but also academic behaviour. However, we found no evidence of the disidentification Skeggs (1997) writes of in her study of working class women. Rather a strong sense of class pride amongst the case study students especially in their own achievement at having got

to university (Crozier et al forthcoming) was asserted. But whilst there was little attempt to seek middle class respectability (ibid) in an overt sense, it became clear the students' identities were challenged by others or by their perceptions of how others saw them in a negative and conflictual way.

Although at Northern the working class students felt socially comfortable blending into the 'expressive order' (Bernstein 1975) some expressed the anxiety of potential rejection on leaving this apparent comfort zone such as Kylie who had applied to an elite university for postgraduate study. At Southern students experienced 'the shock of the elite' which meant they could take nothing for granted (Output 2) and at Midland both white and Asian students talked about seeking out people 'like them' rather than being forced to fit into social networks with which they did not feel comfortable. This defended behaviour did compound a certain marginalisation as Nasir gradually realised when he reflected on only knowing 'other' Asians.

While middle class students are located in a familiar social field, working class students experience a disjunction between their habitus and field experience and they find they are forced to engage in acts of reinvention; for them habitus is 'being restructured, transformed in its make up by the press of the objective structures' (Bourdieu 2005 p47). Although none talked about proactively changing in order to access requisite capitals to progress academically there is evidence of the need to change an accent or ways of presenting themselves in order to be taken seriously, as one young male Asian student at Midland put it. Classed and ethnicised masculinities frequently emerged as an issue when students referred to their experiences in the university. At Midland male, white and Asian, students were often constructed by their middle class counterparts as 'threatening' and 'unrefined'. One South Asian student mused on whether with was class or ethnically based or indeed both. Another male student at Southern talked about the contrast between his " drunken antics…having a laugh…" with friends at home whilst at Southern you need to "tiptoe" around people, and "watch what you say " for fear of offending them or in case the sentiment is misunderstood.

However, the working class students are not merely adapting to or managing their social and cultural identities in the university, they have to do something similar in their home communities. Not only do they need to 'code switch' between different sites and social milieu but more than that there are other possibly more challenging or complex strategies required such as turning away from old friends with whom they find they have nothing left in common, a concern expressed particularly by male students. Also Bhavesh for example, at Midland, had to deal with accusations of "acting white" (Fordham and Ogbu 1986) as a successful academic student, from his peers at home which confronts him with a dilemma as to who he is.

For the women students identity conflicts most often manifested themselves in these latter respects, with the challenge to the gendered expectations of mother, daughter, sister and so on. The students' families seemingly relied heavily on them and there were often tensions between university and family competing demands. As Edwards (1993) has noted these are greedy institutions but unlike her we found that it wasn't only mature students who were affected.

Consequently the students move in and out of different identity constructions between university and home, marked out by class, ethnicity, masculinities and gendered

expectations. Their identities are thus fragmented and often contradictory: a "lived identity" (Grossberg 1996 p91) formation akin to " a kind of disassembled and reassembled unity" (Haraway 1991 p74 cited in ibid). Some embrace this change but most dip in and out and occupy the twilight space of identity, or what Bhaba (1996) calls "the in between space (in Grossberg 1996 p91). They are hybrids but this hybdrisation is not a bringing together of equal parts. It is the struggle over unequal differences that is troubling and disruptive.

- **To contribute to the theoretical understanding of social class and learner identities within the higher education context**

Existing research in relation to HE student success indicates that in the UK there is an emphasis on the importance of prior educational experience (Mussellbrook and Dean 2003, Wingate and Macaro 2004) whilst in the USA there has been a greater concern with 'integration' (Tinto 1996, Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). Utilising the concept of habitus and institutional habitus (Reay at al's 2005) we have shown how in related but different ways both of these aspects are important for the development of effective learner identities. Our data reveal the powerful influences of prior learning experiences and dispositions but also the dynamic between these and students' academic contexts as well as university strategies to 'bind in' the students. However, there are also problems with the strategy of 'integration' with the emphasis on the student to change rather than the institution and its inherent practices; these as we and others (eg Bowl 2006, Leathwood and O'Connell 2003, Stewart 2008) have shown are classed, raced and gendered. In particular through this comparative study, we point to the significance of structural inequalities that exist between the universities and how these impact on the experience of the students.

The mechanisms by which such inequalities have been perpetuated in the learning situation, albeit frequently unrecognised by tutors, have been explained, in part, by utilising aspects of Bernstein's pedagogic device (1996). Strong framing (Bernstein 1996) of teaching is associated with social control and reproduction. Once the student has been accepted, Southern University, protecting its reputation, has to ensure that s/he succeeds. Tight control over the learning experience is thus a prerequisite. The strong framing provided clear sequencing of work and led to clarity of expectation – a visible pedagogy. Based on a clear and informative structure the working class students who whilst initially were unprepared for what to expect, were enabled to develop strong confident learner identities and behaviours leading to success.

At Northern the loose framing intended as a supportive approach in many ways, has been seen to compound students' lack of cultural capital and confusion. For them the experience is frequently fragmented and the lack of intensity unintentionally conspires to undermine the efforts of those who are ambitious and passionate about their subject. Students' anxieties about what they do not know and the implications of this for their progress, is at times palpable. This renders them dependent learners, craving tutor contact and the desire to be told what to do. Where students start their university careers without the 'realisation rules' (Bernstein 1996) then loose framing (usually associated with creative possibilities) rather than liberating student learning, would seem to have the opposite effect.

We have also shown the necessity of separating out learner from social identities, and the need to understand the varying extent to which individuals are able to move in and out of different identity positionings. So, for example, our Southern students are increasingly able to be recognised as highly successful learners rather than as working class young men and women. In Eastern and Northern however, class identities are more fixed and fixing.

Working class students as we have shown can benefit from the institutional effect of a privileged university. However for all working class students to different degrees there are psychic costs involved in the identity struggles as learners in middle class milieu. For some the process is more about finding themselves than changing and are thus liberatory. Although the students are confronted with their own difference and do at times adapt and reformulate their identities accordingly this is not a passive capitulation. Whilst the process can be troubling following, Bhaba (1996) and Bakhtin (1981), we argue it can and for most of them has been, agentic. Universities traditionally have not been places for the working class. Here we demonstrate how the working class students navigate their way through, at times inhospitable but frequently unknown, waters, making or appropriating the space for themselves and hopefully 'others like them'. In these ways as others (Goodwin 2006) have found the working class students develop resiliency in the journey towards success.

- **Activities**

We held a national dissemination event in April 2008 attended by 60 delegates including academics, Aim Higher, HEA, Million+, NIACE, Widening Participation Officers.

We have presented 28 papers at 22 conferences and seminars (see appendix 8 for details).

Future conferences include a proposal to AERA 2009

- **Outputs**

To date we have two publications (refereed journal: Research Papers in Education Crozier et al 2008; by invitation: Research Capacity Building 2007 Crozier & Clayton). We have a further four papers sent for consideration (to Sociological Review; Sociology; BERJ and Oxford Review (appendix 9); contracts for two book chapters in publications for Sage and Routledge Falmer and we will be seeking a book contract for a monograph

We have also: written three working papers; have set up a web site http://education.sunderland.ac.uk/our-research ; have published an interim report on project web site and HEA and TLRP web sites and uploaded conference papers on the TLRP D Space.

Through TLRP we have published and distributed a Research Briefing and an interim summary report

We have submitted our data to the Data Archive

Impacts

National dissemination event April 2008

TLRP and Widening Participation in HE conference with policy makers including HEFCE and DIUS June 2008

The project had an Advisory Group comprising representatives from the participating institutions, NIACE, HEA, Aim Higher, a Students' Union and also Baroness Estelle Morris.

Media coverage includes: THE 15 May 2008; TES September 2007, local newspapers in the NorthEast, BBC web site March 2006; Radio 4 2006 .

We were invited by the HEA to give an interim report to a conference attended by Widening Participation Officers, HEA members, Aim Higher as well as academics; and to give Keynote to ESCALATE annual conference 2008.

We have been invited to give a dissemination report to the Executive at one of our institutions.

- **Future Research Priorities**

The black and minority ethnic student experience
The middle class student experience
Working class graduate future trajectories

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