



Mature students' stories: a study investigating the complexity of interpretation

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Today we will:

- Explain the aims of the study
 - To provide a critical understanding of the impacts of government and institutional admission policy on particular group of students in regards of applying and enrolling to HE.
 - To find out if, through narrative enquiries, whether the application and admission policy best suits the needs of this 'group' .
 - Demonstrate the subjectivity of interpretation of the data.
- Context
- Methodology
- Findings/Conclusion

What we know – the context

- Recent evidence (UCAS, 2013) shows that in terms of participation, students over 20 years old are under-represented in Higher Education.
- Leathwood and O'Connell (2003), state that non-traditional students require and seek more guidance in regards to the application process to HE.
- Attainment – poor attainment in secondary school is more important in explaining lower HE participation rates amongst students from disadvantaged backgrounds than barriers arising at the point of entry into HE' (Chowdry et al., 2010)
- All full time students requires to apply through UCAS.

Wider national policies

- The Higher Education Act 2004 – enabled universities to set their own fee from 2006 and 2007
 - Prior to this - Robbins Report 1963; Dearing Report 1997; Browne Report 2010
- Widening participation in higher education: creating opportunity, releasing potential, achieving excellence introduced by DfES, 2006b
- Higher Education White Paper ‘ Students at the Heart of the System (BIS, June 2011) - set out the vision for how the HE sector in England should become more diverse and responsive to the needs of students

BUT

- ‘Only the best informed applicants and advisers are able to optimise UCAS applications and there is undesirable divide between those applicants who receive effective advice and those who do not (UCAS, 2011).’
- “... I remain concerned about participation among students aged 20 and over, who are statistically more likely to come from under-represented groups. It has declined greatly in recent years and remains below what it was five years ago.” (OFFA, December, 2013)

The tabloid...



Mature students feel the chill as fears rise over higher fees
Critics claim steep rise in tuition fees is putting off potential undergraduates and checking their ambition

Mature students are the first casualty of higher tuition fees

Applications from older students are in decline as fewer people feel able to risk their future on a course that can cost thousands

LSE's Professor Craig Calhoun and mature students: first or fail?

This week, the London School of Economics gets a new director, but university applications from mature students in the north east have had a worrying drop

The  INDEPENDENT

Are universities doing enough to include mature students?

Big fall in mature students comes as shock to universities

Universities blame the economic crisis for an alarming 40% drop in older and part-time learners

The aim of this study was:

- To provide a critical understanding of the impacts of government and institutional admission policy on particular group of students in regards of applying and enrolling to HE.
- To find out if, through narrative enquiries, whether the application and admission policy best suits the needs of this 'group' .
- Demonstrate the subjectivity of interpretation of the data.

Data collection

- Through text which was submitted electronically (e-mail)
- The task:
 - Please, write down your experience about the application process to the Foundation Degree in Childhood Study in a reflective account format. We are particularly interested in which kind of emotion(s) you have experienced when you were trying to complete the UCAS application form. Please, do not hesitate to record anything you wish from the very beginning when you decided to study, to the end, when you actually got the student ID card. This task does not have a word limit and it will not be assessed. If you applied by completing the generic university application form, then you should reflect on this process.

Thank you very for participating.

Participants

Number of students asked	34
Number of students replied	31
Direct application form used	19
UCAS form used	15
For the purpose of this presentation analysed	10

ANDRE - analysis

- Considered 'themes'
- Empathised with student circumstances
- Reflection of own experience of applying to university
- Discourse between applicant and Admissions Tutor
- Social class/ cultural background

Respondent	Comments	Emotion
1	<p>'Due to circumstances...I just couldn't join university.'</p> <p>'I had never heard of UCAS before.'</p> <p>'unaware of how to complete the form'</p> <p>'...after the interview I felt reassured.'</p> <p>'...this has been the best decision of my life.'</p>	<p>Delayed ambition</p> <p>Confusion</p> <p>Relief</p> <p>Optimism</p>
2	<p>The admission process: 'I found quite complicated.'</p> <p>The interview: 'I would have liked longer to talk about my experience...'</p> <p>I was so excited, relieved and proud to find out I had got a place on the course.'</p> <p>'I am now enjoying the course'</p>	<p>Confusion</p> <p>Optimism</p> <p>Confidence</p>
3	<p>'I was lucky to have a supportive tutor at the college...'</p> <p>'I found writing the personal statement quite intimidating'</p> <p>'Despite having a good experience on the course, I would be in favour of a more flexible application process.'</p>	<p>Need for support</p> <p>Threat</p> <p>Anxiety/ relief</p> <p>Doubt</p>
4	<p>'I was terrified and scared that I am not going to meet the expectations of the university.'</p>	<p>Lack of initial self confidence</p>
5	<p>'...UCAS. I don't even know what on earth this is!'</p> <p>'Being unconfident on computers put a big barrier in the way...'</p> <p>'I felt stupid and incompetent.'</p>	<p>Fear</p> <p>Lack of confidence</p>

6	<p>'UCAS. I had never heard of that before.'</p> <p>'Then I met my classmates and was surprised to see more mature students.'</p>	<p>Panic</p> <p>Relief</p>
7	<p>'I had left school with limited options due to a lack of motivation to study and a lack of parental support.'</p> <p>Children asking questions about how mum, who was poorly qualified , could apply any pressure for them to fulfil their potential'</p> <p>'I set the wheels in motion tentatively researching bursary amounts and places of study.'</p> <p>'I realised that anxiety was an issue for me....'</p> <p>'I was so excited but deep down lacked confidence.'</p> <p>'The day of the interview came and the fear seeped out of my pores making me feel sick and fearful that I may let myself down.'</p> <p>Completing the UCAS application after interview made it easier</p>	<p>Rationale</p> <p>Family pressure</p> <p>Caution</p> <p>Apprehension</p> <p>Self esteem</p> <p>Doubtful</p> <p>Relief</p>
8	<p>'I never managed to apply through UCAS and I never made any attempt. If I was not offered a place at interview, which was very positive, I would never have joined the course.'</p>	<p>Faith in interview process</p>

<p>9</p>	<p>'UCAS....always a sign of unpleasant or uneasy experience.'</p> <p>'What does "undergraduate" mean?'</p> <p>'I am forty and starting university later in life can be very daunting and every single obstacle can affect my confidence, self-esteem and motivation causing stress.'</p> <p>'My first approach to my future academic experience (the entry interview) was crumbling and left to some online external judgement.'</p>	<p>Doubts</p> <p>Self-doubt</p> <p>Anxiety</p> <p>Lack of confidence in online application</p>
<p>10</p>	<p>'I applied by completing the generic university application form, rather than UCAS...'</p> <p>'Not really sure what the "pathway" I was supposed to be applying for. I was not sure about....the bursary forms....were all part of the same application.'</p> <p>'The whole process had me very worried....outstanding Ofsted reports but now I was made to feel that somehow I was no longer considered good enough for my own job.'</p> <p>'It is with this low opinion of myself that I set off to look for university education, wondering if I was a fraud for even considering it. I cried, I was panicked.'</p> <p>'How was I to go to university if I could not understand all of the boxes I had to fill in for the application?'</p> <p>'It was in the second semester of the final year that I finally felt I was a student and I had a right to be there.'</p>	<p>Doubt</p> <p>Anxiety</p> <p>Self confidence</p> <p>Self esteem</p> <p>Anxiety</p> <p>Relief</p> <p>Positive self-regard</p>

Andre - analysis

Recurring themes:

- Self-doubt
- Anxiety
- Need for support of personal interaction
- Lack of confidence
- Threats to self-esteem

Eva – analysis

- Policy discourses
- Divided the narratives into NON UCAS and UCAS
- Proposed changes in local policy – application process

Eva analysis

	Before the interview	After the interview	Reason for stud.	Various Reflection
UCAS	<p>The forms were so badly designed. There was only enough space for tiny writing to go in the boxes. Even with the help I received on the phone the form was not filled in correctly and it was returned asking me to complete it correctly without telling me which bit I had got wrong.</p> <p>I applied to university via UCAS, I was lucky to have had a supportive tutor at college who answered many questions and queries as well serving as one of my references. I also worked (and still worked) in a nursery setting where there were two other staff members who had prior experience of UCAS and were very helpful.</p> <p>Overall I had a reasonably good experience of UCAS and found it easy to use, however I have fairly good ICT skills and had the support of others and I think this helped.</p> <p>The whole process had me very worried. I am a nursery manager with two "Outstanding" Ofsted results. The nursery since it opened received the best results, however now I was made to feel that somehow I was no longer considered good enough for my own job. [because of the complexity of application form]</p> <p>My memories about UCAS application form: to me this has always been a sign of unpleasant or uneasy experience. I had to apply on line filling numerous questions and I remember that some of the words were not clear to me ...</p>	<p>I remember clearly about my first ever interview in April 2012 by the Lady that guide me on the requirement needed for the foundation degree, and the topics and subjects expected to study.</p> <p>After the interview I was excited but deep down lacked confidence. I did not understand why I would be deemed capable of completing an academic course, when previously I had failed to comprehend the importance of academic qualifications when making life choices.</p>	<p>Now I feel it was a best advice from my manager. I love learning. I struggled with the computers and with the library especially with the electronic resources but no regret.</p>	<p>I noticed that there was a college in G, cheaper than other options and with hours that may suit me. I decided against the college as an option as I wanted to attend a University. Perhaps deep down I knew that a college degree was not what I wanted, I wanted to go to University as my friends had.</p>
Non UCAS	<p>I went to the interview after submitting my application and sobbed through the whole thing. Luckily XY was very understanding. She seemed to get that I felt that I was in the wrong place and out of my depth.</p> <p>How was I supposed to go to University if I could not understand all the boxes I had to fill in for the application?</p> <p>I had been out of education for 17 years and I am usually the person doing the interviewing due to the role I have in the nursery!! I was terrified and scared that I am not going to meet the expectations of the university.</p> <p>I never applied through UCAS. I don't even know what an earth is this!!!</p> <p>I am a mature student with very little knowledge of how to use ICT. I never managed to apply through UCAS and I never made an</p>	<p>[after the interview] I was so excited, relieved and proud to find out I had got a place on this fabulous course.</p> <p>But after the interview I felt re-assured that I can do it! It was a very good feeling. I completed a form straight away, and I was very happy that I don't have to do the UCAS business.</p> <p>When I phoned XY I was told that I need to apply through UCAS. I never heard that before. I panicked. But then XY told me to come for a chat which I did. She gave me a form to complete and told me that it is going to be OK. I was worried and felt stupid and wanted to give up straight away...</p>	<p>It was a parent who persuaded me to go back to complete my studies when I was told about the graduate incentive. If this had not been there I would maybe not have gone back to my studies.</p>	<p>It was in the second semester of the final year of my foundation degree that I finally felt I was a student and I had a right to be there.</p> <p>With being a mother, I found that working and going to university very tiring.</p>

Eva analysis

- Themes
 - Lack of confidence and knowledge how to complete the application form
 - Other commitments (work and family)
 - Concern about age

Conclusion

- Despite both having the same aim to support mature students, our reflection on the study shows the complexity of the interpretation of narratives due to:
 - our (researchers) cultural capital,
 - different perceptions about hierarchy between people and policy

BUT

- not about our gender and role.
- Alvesson and Deetz (2000) argue that **“no research can be free from the taint of the researchers’ own knowledge”** (p.113) and that the data is affected by the construction of the researcher.

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