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'I Don't Feel Like 'A Student', I Feel Like 'Me!': The over-simplification of mature learners' experience(s)

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Many studies of mature students within further and higher education portray them as a distinct social category with particular shared characteristics (eg. Woodley et al., 1987; NIACE, 1993). Such representations are sometimes sub-divided further along lines of social division. For instance, attempts to determine 'types' of mature learners have variously identified class (Tett, 2000), ethnicity (Gilchrist et al., 2003), gender (Betts, 1999) and age (Baxter and Hatt, 1999) as being of key importance.

This paper examines the utility of such attempts to categorise older learners by drawing upon data from a longitudinal study of students on a further education 'Access to HE', and subsequent university courses. It demonstrates that mature students are a diverse and heterogeneous group, with the 'reality' of their experience(s) being too complex, too individually situated, for meaningful representation otherwise.

Background

This paper seeks to re-engage with themes raised by, amongst others, James (1995) and Webb (1997), who rejected over-simplistic representations of older university learners under the all-encompassing heading 'mature student'. Pollard (2003, p.167) recently acknowledged the growing 'diversity amongst individual learners' following what Field (2003) suggested was the *increasing*, if not *widening*, participation in post-compulsory education during the last few decades. But overly simple generalisations still underpin academic literature, the work of practitioners, and the rhetoric of policy makers alike. However, as explained below, each of these constituencies has their own motivations for promoting such simplistic representations, and each benefits differently.

The paper concludes that the term 'mature student' has limited value beyond mere institutional convenience, or in assessing attempts to attract 'non-traditional' learners back into formal education. It does so by reference to evidence from a longitudinal study of Access¹ students that followed their progress through further-and, where applicable, higher education (HE). The mature learners whose stories are outlined were all in the same further education (FE) college *Access to HE* programme, but their stories reveal little by way of either common educational backgrounds or shared experiences of returning to study. Interview data are used to explore narrative themes amongst students' accounts of their experiences of the re-engagement with formal learning and its impact upon their wider lives.

Through the approach adopted I demonstrate how the range of experiences are too complex, diverse, and individually situated to be meaningfully understood – or accurately represented – otherwise. As other recent longitudinal studies (eg Ball et al., 2000) have highlighted, personal stories behind educational transitions are seldom straightforward for those whose position is summarised by harsh statistical figures. Several previous studies of Access students employed biographical research methods to better understand the affect of – and effect upon – adults returning to formal education, for example West (1996), Bowl (2003) and Burke (2002), but without explicitly challenging the simplistic representation of that experience.

The case for studying experiences of a student cohort is compelling not just for academic interest, but for policy considerations too. For example, evidence is growing that 'marginal social groups', amongst whom the older, frequently working class, Access students are counted, are both under-represented in HE, *and* more likely to drop-out or withdraw (Quinn, 2004). Field (2003, p. 26) suggests that 'non-traditional' students 'risk entering an academic ghetto', which *at best* produces outcomes carrying lower status and value post-graduation compared to students from 'more conventional backgrounds'. Purcell (1999; 2002) found similar with more lucrative careers for those attending 'traditional' or 'elite' universities. But perhaps counter-intuitively given these tendencies, mature students *en masse* do as well, or better than, younger, middle class peers in final degree classifications, providing they survive the higher attrition rates (McGivney, 1996).

Many early studies of further and higher education (eg. Woodley *et al.*, 1987; NIACE, 1993), portrayed mature students as a distinct social category with shared characteristics, as outlined below. Such representations within research literature are often reinforced by practices of mature students and college staff alike. Avis (1997, pp. 83-4), for instance suggests attributes of 'maturity, motivation and commitment' are key elements of a 'preferred and celebratory Access discourse', whilst more recently Sinfield *et al.* (2004, p.148) suggested that 'the teaching and learning process is itself facilitated by the interest and motivation' of 'non-traditional' students. Much literature cites the *mutual* 'othering' of younger and mature students too. Warmington (2002, p. 591) for instance suggested mature students, unlike their youthful counterparts, approach academic studies like a 'surrogate career', characterised by 'the discursive production of commitment, maturity and peer support'. Such differences are often the cause for 'celebration' as Avis and Warmington suggest; or alternatively, remedial action to make good a perceived deficit. Wakeford (1994) for example reports mature students starting university and transforming their appearance through diet, hairstyle or clothing, to 'blend in', chameleon like, with younger peers. These so-called *young-identified mature students* (12% of her sample) often regretted not undertaking degree studies at what they considered 'the right time', that is, as 18 or 19 year olds, more than the other two sub-groups Wakeford identified, the *self-identified mature students* (85%) and the *natural mature students* (3%). Some within my cohort also expressed this opinion, although such views are seldom held *consistently* between interviews or even *within* a given interview, and are frequently a source of tension and contradiction for individuals, as explained below.

In 1994, Webb *et al.* criticised studies of mature students within HE that demarcated them by other social characteristics, and such representations still persist. Examples from then and more recently include: age of the 'mature students' (Wakeford, 1994; Baxter and Hatt, 1999); age and gender (Maynard and Pearsall, 1994; Betts, 1999); ethnicity (Archer and Hutchings, 2000; Gilchrist *et al.*, 2003) and class (Tett, 2000; McFadden, 1995). Webb later contributed to Williams's (1997a) edited collection seeking to further challenge shorthand forms of representation as overly deterministic and essentialising. James (1995) also criticised the manner in which researchers distinguish 'types' of older learners referring to the 'social species' approach to mature students where they are differentiated *en masse* from 'traditional' middle class 18 or 19 year olds starting university, themselves presented as a homogenous group in an over-simplistic manner. Studies including Hodkinson *et al.* (1996), Ball *et al.* (2000), and Power *et al.* (2003) have since demonstrated the limitations of this unproblematic construction, highlighting how even these 'traditional' students commence HE with a gamut of dispositions towards, and experiences of learning. They are not necessarily all, as Bourdieu suggested, 'like fish within water' at university, so portraying them accordingly is too simplistic. And such discourse

reaches beyond academic literature and into educational policy – underlying recent legislation concerning the funding of HE for instance (DfES, 2003), in terms of assumptions about the length of working career students could enjoy post-graduation (Davies and Williams, 2001), (Egerton and Parry, 2001).

Ideas around the representation of people within literature do not occur within a vacuum, but are influenced by developments in wider social theory. For instance, early research by Britton and Baxter (1994) sought to classify mature students by five discrete, structurally positioned components of their identity, including *gender*, *age* and *class*. Social theories wax and wane in popularity, being adapted and adopted with varying degrees of enthusiasm by commentators. In subsequent work, Britton and Baxter (1999) propose four themed *narratives*, including *struggling against the odds* and *self-transformation*, in drawing upon public cultural discourses employed to represent what Kehily (1995) called ‘storied’ lives. This later approach, stressing the role of agency in constructing actor’s responses to structural positions and educational experiences, opposes the economically deterministic models sometimes applied (eg. Willis, 1977; Charlesworth, 2000), a representation that considers resistance towards, and rejection of, formal education *the* (most) legitimate working class response.

Britton and Baxter’s changing focus between 1994 and 1999 reflects what writers including Chamberlayne *et al.* (2000) suggest is the *biographical turn* within social sciences, privileging subjective experiential accounts over objective categories (here, of (mature) ‘studenthood’). It is evidence of the growing influence of broader social theories – including postmodernism and notions of biographical trajectories (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). Such theories underpin later work by key writers within the post-compulsory education research literature, including the valuable idea of *learning careers* (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000), in turn influencing the likes of Crossan *et al.* (2003), and Warmington (2002).

I explore below mature learners’ accounts of a number of narrative themes explicit within their individual testimonies. For some mature learners, the very label ‘student’ is problematic in terms of self-definition because of class and age connotations. Some consider it appropriate when describing what they consider the (frequently) privileged youth associated with HE, rather than themselves, with the university itself seen as somewhere ‘local people may go to work, but not necessarily...to study’ (Stuart, 2002, p. 77). Tett (2000) writes of working class students from communities where their classed identity was positively *valued*, and careful self-policing of behaviour and ‘middle class pretensions’ took place (see also Burn and Finnigan, 2003; Reay, 2001). For these learners *class*, rather than *age*, is the key factor informing their experience.

The research study

This paper reports aspects of a longitudinal project into mature students’ experiences during a one-year, full-time Access course, and subsequent transition into university. In September 2001 the students joined a multi-pathway *Access to HE* course in an urban English FE college. Semi-structured interviews took place, up to five times with each respondent, termly during the FE course, and at the start and finish of the first year at university. Students whose studies went as originally intended are, at the time of writing, in their final year at university, having completed the Access course in June 2002. Whilst the themes addressed recur amongst the wider cohort, the findings here are from four of the 20 respondents.

The twenty people in the bigger study were chosen to reflect the diversity of their Access cohort, rather than to construct a representative sample from which

generalisations could be attempted. Bertaux (1981) refers to the notion of 'representativity', and recommends researching until we have sufficient information to understand the pattern of 'sociostructural relations' making up people's lives. Bourdieu, amongst others, built upon this idea in demonstrating how individual actors carry wider histories and social contexts, including class, *habitus* and dispositions. Bourdieu (1984, p.104) also proposes a relationship between chronological age and educational capital, suggesting one is 'merely a transformed form of the other'. Such a position ignores the impact of someone engaged in formal learning as an adult since mature learners on an Access course are clearly and deliberately in the process of amassing educational capital, *almost regardless of their age*. In this paper I compare older peoples' experiences of education with those from their childhood, enabling an exploration of tensions Crossan *et al.* (2003) suggest are embodied by adults occupying roles associated with 'youthful dependency'.

As accounts of events and developments in mature students' lives, those presented are not unique. I also realise that, in terms of my epistemological positioning, the stories have many possible 'correct' interpretations, leaving me between two extremes. The first involves proposing a highly theorised account, risking 'rendering the complexity of the lives of (my) subjects less and less visible' (Hodkinson *et al.*, 1996, p.158), and the second simply letting the accounts and the data 'speak for themselves', encouraging the reader to construct their own understandings and meanings (Barone, 1995). I have attempted to develop an accommodation between either ends of this continuum, in suggesting a framework for understanding contributory factors and the impact of such experiences upon the individuals concerned. Whitty (1997, 2002) offers an image demonstrating the usefulness of detailed biographical information in highlighting wider social and/or policy issues. Drawing upon the *Sociological Imagination* of C Wright Mills (1959), he likens this methodological approach to a vulture's eye, which can apparently focus upon a distant image whilst *simultaneously* retaining a view of the whole, wider landscape. Ignoring any reservations we may have about comparing ourselves as educational researchers to vultures, this is a useful analogy. Perhaps a higher-tech equivalent would be the display screen of a 'shoot 'em up' computer game, where the player, whilst viewing the scene immediately before them, can see on-screen information about the terrain, number of lives lost and ammunition reserves etc.²

The four interviewees here were chosen to reflect the range of previous experiences and structural positions of the wider intake, although as already mentioned, no attempt was made to ensure generalisability, since to do so contradicts the thrust of this paper. Many accounts from the larger cohort could have illustrated the themes discussed, which all arose during the open-ended discussions. In fact, consideration of the whole group of 20 would have demonstrated the diversity of mature student experience, but constraints prevent including further testimonies. I focus upon four people, a small enough number to generate a manageable quantity of data, yet large enough to illustrate the key arguments. Like many Access students the four are all in their 30s, but apparently have little else in common. By the time of starting the course, all four had attained, through career achievements in non-manual roles, an objectively 'middle class' status, although some were more comfortable with that idea than others as outlined in later sections. The class position ascribed in their childhood is outlined in the vignette below along with other brief biographical details³:

- **Akhtar**
Previously worked in financial services. Has one child, but is single, having separated from her mother. Mixed white British/Asian heritage. Inner-city, working class upbringing. Hopes to teach adults eventually.
- **Jim**

Before course was self-employed in electronics industry. One child, but separated from her mother and now single. White Scottish. Lower middle class childhood. Aims to be music technician.

- **Michaela**
Previously self-employed business executive, now 'financially secure'. No kids. Married. White British. 'Comfortable middle class upbringing'. No clear career aims, but 'seeks fulfilment through education'.
- **Meg**
White British. Married to middle class graduate. No children yet but wants them 'one day'. Oldest of six siblings of poor, single parent family. Left school with few qualifications, but subsequently worked in financial services industry. Wanted to become a forensic scientist.

The experiences of students on an Access to HE course

For the purpose of this paper, key themes were identified to illuminate the breadth and variety of experiences of the Access students. Effectively open to anyone aged over 21, such programmes were essentially progressive (Avis, 1991) in seeking to redress social injustice by offering a route into HE for under-represented social groups (Parry, 1996), although recent work challenges the extent to which this remains the case. Burke (2002), for instance suggests Access courses are increasingly tied to a politics of vocationalism and individualism, and more about competition than cooperation. However, despite this they continue attracting people from a wide range of backgrounds to study within an FE setting (Reay *et al.*, 2002; Ross, 2003).

There is also growing evidence suggesting 'non-disadvantaged' groups are using Access courses to enter HE. For instance, of the 20 respondents in my study, nine would probably be ascribed middle class status from their childhood family background. Some from working class backgrounds now have middle class partners, and 12 or 13 were in non-manual work immediately prior to joining the Access programme. Six had begun, and usually achieved, level 3 qualifications that could have secured a university place without the Access certificate, and one already had a degree and postgraduate professional accreditation. They generally reported undertaking the Access course to improve confidence, transferable skills and subject knowledge, and were aware it is easier to gain university admission from an Access course than as a mature student who had not formally studied for a while.

Whilst the students here, given their achieved middle class status, were not really examples of the *types* (or 'categories') of people for whom Access courses were established (Parry, 1996), they are from an increasingly significant, but under-researched, minority of 'non-traditional' Access students. Such evidence supports Ball's (2003) contention that the middle classes eventually dominate any form of public service. In Bourdieu's terms, they have the necessary forms of capital to ensure this, and notoriously have the loudest voices and sharpest elbows when the scramble for limited resources ensues. This has obvious policy implications at national and local, college-centred, levels for broader debates around social justice and opportunities for widening educational participation.

I seek here to test the utility of early attempts at characterising mature student experience by reference to a number of narrative strands from the interviews. Those chosen are instances of many possibilities. I could for example have chosen instead to interrogate the data under alternative themes – commitment; guilt; sacrifice; risk; opportunity; autonomy; joy; or regret, since all regularly appeared in the testimonies of many of the study group. Here I focus upon other components of an individual's biography, aspects we can employ as filters or lenses through which to view

someone's life (Brine and Waller, 2004). These lenses often overlap and reinforce one another, and, to extend the metaphor, move in and out of focus at different times.

From the many possibilities available to me I have chosen to examine three themes emerging from the data: characterisations of school experience; the timing of the return to study; and discourses of mature studentship (James, 1995). These areas of focus highlight both similarities and differences between the cohort, and as such serve the needs of this paper well. I draw upon four respondents' testimonies in examining how accounts of experiences under these thematic headings can be compared and contrasted. This demonstrates how the breadth of personal backgrounds and social positions are so diverse as to render bracketing together people under the supposedly unifying heading 'mature student' almost meaningless. I further highlight how the four respondents' different social positioning regarding to class, age, gender and relationship commitments etc. *informs* – but does not *determine* – their access to and experiences of, further and higher education.

Characterisation of school experience

This section begins by considering brief extracts from the first meeting with three of the respondents:

At my school, if you weren't a high flyer, you were left to get on with it.

Michaela 1st interview, December 2001

There was no desire to learn when I was at school to be honest. It wasn't down to a lack of confidence or ability, just that, like a lot of youngsters, I wanted to get out of school as soon as possible...

Jim 1st interview, December 2001

I didn't go to school a lot, especially in the last couple of years because I was quite easily distracted, and a bit of a rebel...there were a lot of problems at home. If you get distracted by that and there's no support, nobody motivating you, you just 'bunk-off' school, because you think it's just great to hang around with your mates... So I don't remember much, apart from not going, leaving, and then thinking 'oh my god, I haven't done anything!'

Meg 1st interview, December 2001

There are superficial similarities between the accounts of each, most of the wider cohort, and much of the published research into mature students too, for instance McFadden (1995), who considered Access courses a prime example of 'second chance education'. The narrative of being un-motivated by school is common, as it often is even for the contemporary, 'successful' 'traditional' middle class younger students with whom the cohort came into subsequent contact at university (see for example Power *et al.*, 2003).

Akhtar is perhaps more direct than his three peers in criticising his experience of formal, compulsory education:

I enjoyed school, but never applied myself, *and was never made to apply myself*. I'm angry with my teachers in a way, looking back on it. I knew I had the ability, but I wasn't able to take responsibility for myself, *and they never made me either...*they let me get away with so much because I was very good at rugby. As long as I was at school for rugby, they didn't care.

Akhtar 1st interview, December 2001

Akhtar is suggesting his teachers were at least partially responsible for his lack of application at school, a fairly common position amongst the mature students in my

study. However, whilst frequent amongst stories of childhood educational experiences, such an account would not sit comfortably with many theories of *adult* learning, for instance in the early work of Malcolm Knowles (1980). The traditional discourse is of mature students taking greater responsibility for their studies than school students, an assumption of the pedagogic principles underpinning Access courses (eg. Avis, 1997). Akhtar's experience of being *permitted* to take a lax approach to his studies 'in exchange' for exercising his sporting prowess finds echoes in other educational research. For instance Connolly (1997) highlighted pupils' disruptive behaviour being tolerated by some teachers since they played for the school football team. Akhtar thinks he was treated leniently to prevent alienation from school, and suffering racially motivated bullying further distinguished his time in compulsory education from other in the cohort. These school experiences inform his current learner identity and resultant disposition towards education as an adult, setting him apart from the other mature students under consideration here. Akhtar is seeking to remedy earlier academic failings and social injustices via a re-engagement with formal learning more explicitly than the other three, and this is part of his (possibly greater) drive to succeed. He thus exemplifies McFadden's (1995) 'second chance education' better than Meg, Jim or Michaela.

The timing of, and reasons for, returning to formal study

Barone (1995) writes of an *epiphanic* insight into the future direction one's life should take. For mature learners, this may have been prompted by events in their individual lives, or be a response to events in the wider world. For others, returning to formal education may have been a long-standing desire, its timing determined by factors including a dependent child reaching school age, or being made redundant from work. Examples of reasons mentioned by the four respondents here include:

- Akhtar, Jim and Meg each reported being 'bored', or 'unfulfilled' at work
- Michaela 'took stock of life' whilst travelling abroad
- Jim and Michaela both suffered bereavement of close family members
- Akhtar and Jim had both recently split from their partners

The precise combination of factors determining the timing of a return to study for adults is highly individualised, and consequently difficult to typify satisfactorily. It also usually requires bigger life changes than for younger students who have never left formal education, progressing to HE straight from school or college. Many interviewees, including all those cited here, *sometimes* expressed regret at not having gone to university at 'the proper time' (that is, aged 18 or 19) as mentioned above, but often contradicted this position with statements concerning their own 'immaturity' at that stage. This recurrent tension, is illustrated by Meg:

I've now got a clear direction on where I'm going...But all those wasted years! I feel like I don't know where they've gone, and I should have done this years ago...*But I didn't know what I wanted then.*

Meg 3rd interview, July 2002

Meg's comments epitomise succinctly a dilemma facing many adult learners. On one hand, they wish they had *known* when younger what to do with their lives, to avoid the 'wasted years' (Waller, 2004), Yet on the other, many acknowledge that they were *not ready* for such a decision earlier, that they didn't have the 'life experience' necessary to inform their choice⁴.

During an early discussion, Akhtar revealed he had enrolled on an Access course during his early-20s, but quickly realised it was too soon in his life. Looking back after his first year at university, he put that time into perspective:

I don't wish I'd done it earlier, because I don't think I was ready for it, but it's an experience that I'm glad I'm having now.

Akhtar 5th interview, July 2003

Jim's decision to return to study followed the death of close relatives resulting in a stark re-evaluation of his own life:

The loss of close family members has played a major part in changing my lifestyle all together. I just want to put all that behind me and start again...I *could* have done the course a couple of years earlier, but I had to feel the time was right for me...I wanted a complete change in lifestyle...to get up on a Monday morning and *relish* the prospect of going to work. Job satisfaction is more important than (money).

Jim 1st interview, December 2001

He revisited this theme in a later discussion:

It's probably the sort of thing I *could* have tried 10 years ago, but it wouldn't have happened, it wouldn't have worked...It's a frame of mind thing, (last year) I was in the right frame of mind to get off my butt and do something about it.

Jim 3rd interview, July 2002

Michaela also 'took stock of her life' after the death of close relatives:

I've had two family bereavements over the last two years, and this really did change my priorities...I didn't have the opportunity before, when I was at school, it wasn't expected that I would go onto university at all...But I'm not doing the course for career reasons, but for pleasure...I'm at that stage in my life where I can afford to take time out of work. I've built up a business with my partner...now I can sit back and do something more pleasurable, and the bereavements made me focus on other things.

Michaela 1st interview, December 2001

Michaela's comments particularly, and some from Jim suggest that Maslow's hierarchy of needs is of relevance – having fulfilled material wants, there follows a desire for self-actualisation through educational attainment. Other mature learners are driven meanwhile by instrumental requirements for long-term financial security, albeit via short-term financial cost and/or risk (Brine and Waller, 2004; Davies and Williams, 2001). The socio-economic position of learners can be understood as *informing* – though not *determining* - their disposition towards, and motivation for, formal education, again rendering attempts to stereotype *all* mature learners as highly questionable.

Discourses of mature studentship

Popular representations of 'traditional' students' lifestyles revolve around a hedonistic quest for drinking, casual sex and recreational drug use. Whilst there is an element of truth for some in this, the reality is probably some way from this for most. However, such discourses feature in official university publications including undergraduate prospectuses, themselves a source of alienation for those not conforming to stereotypes around age, class and ethnicity (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003; Webb, 1997). Akhtar's comments in an early interview indicated his anticipation of differences between mature and younger students. Like many in the study, he accepts the dominant discourse informing research literature and the practice of staff and fellow students – 'young' and 'old' alike. That is, of *older* learners in particular being prepared to make sacrifices to achieve what they want from the education system. Williams (1997b, p. 43), for instance writes of mature students 'constructed as the ideal student, enlivening dull seminars, the saviour of many tutors struggling to motivate 18 year olds'. Akhtar suggested:

We're all aware that we're older, and that might be a barrier within us, rather than the way we're viewed by the 18 year olds...They've moved away from home, and just want to enjoy it. At first they're probably not too happy with the mature students, who remind them of mum and dad. We've got to accept that. We're supposed to be the *mature* students; I don't think that we should be too hard on the younger kids really.

Akhtar 2nd interview, December 2001

Akhtar's suggestion that younger students perhaps see some older learners as an authority figure, in that they could 'remind them of mum and dad' is an interesting one

not addressed in the wider literature. Unfortunately, constraints prevent me from doing so here too.

Jim contrasted his current disposition to studying with that from his own youth. Although not explicitly stated, there is an implicit reinforcement of the popular discourse of academically committed mature studentship in Jim's account:

Twenty years ago I don't think I'd have been as determined. I'd have probably given up if the going had got as tough as it has...I'm quite pleased I've left it as late as I have.

Jim 5th interview, July 2003

And Michaela's comments reveal similar divisions and tensions too:

I feel it's very different being a mature student...If you're going in as a teenager...it's the whole 'social structure'...mixing with other people for the first time, away from home. When you're a mature student it's different. I have network of friends, so don't mix with other students...But I do feel more *isolated*, because there aren't other mature students I can relate to, and I'm at home on my own studying a lot of the time.

Michaela 4th interview, December 2002

The manner in which these mature students *construct themselves* by simultaneously constructing *the other*, the younger idealised 'student' is a recurring theme in the accounts of the whole cohort.

Michaela's closing comments in the above extract reveal the isolation she feels as a mature student, one of 'only two older people out of about 65' (Michaela, 3rd interview) on a highly academic course in a 'traditional' university. This is a dominant theme within her account of HE, in marked contrast to those at the local 'new university' where numbers of mature students are significantly higher and the environment generally considered to be more supportive of them. Different levels of institutional and personal support available further damages the authenticity of homogeneous accounts of university experience for older learners. Other writers have profitably explored this area, including drawing upon Bourdieu to develop an idea of a university's *institutional habitus* (eg. Reay *et al.*, (2002) and Leathwood and O'Connell, (2003)).

Akhtar's talked in the interviews of feeling 'like a fraud', and of 'acting' or role playing as a mature student, revealing further inner tensions and turmoil, contradictions that influence *his* experiences, but which are by no means universal amongst the cohort. However, the following extract from a discussion at the end of his Access programme indicate how he is accommodating the issue. It also reveals how, whilst apparently condemning the practice elsewhere, he is prepared to represent mature students as fundamentally different or 'other' to younger, 'traditional' ones, inevitably resulting in older learners being seen as 'deficit' in some way or other:

I don't feel out of place now if I go to the central library, as I did at the beginning of the course. I was an *impostor*...sitting there trying to do GCSE Maths equations, next to some girl training to be a doctor!...I don't see myself as an archetypal student, because I'm so much older than the majority...I call myself a *mature* student, and that one word makes all the difference, not because I'm old, but because of people's perceptions of what you are as a mature student...First thing you think about of a student is a layabout who doesn't wash, is always out drinking, that sort of thing...whereas a *mature* student...makes a conscious decision, not because the choice was 'go to university or get a job' but is someone who thinks 'I will do this, and I will do it to the best of my ability'...that's what sets us apart.

Akhtar 3rd interview, July 2002

Conclusion

Early attempts to categorise mature students as a discrete and homogenous group or series of linked sub-groups, were understandable in the historical context of low participation of older learners in HE. However, the situation *then* was too complex

and reliant upon the particular circumstances of someone's life for any list of discrete positions around age and class etc. to be fully inclusive. It is all the more so now given the numerical expansion of this nevertheless still under-represented section of the population. The subtleties and nuances of personal experience lead to very different outcomes for something as complex as an individual's learner identity. There are infinite possibilities, each as unique, elusive and difficult to accurately capture, comprehend and represent as the myriad possible images generated by a kaleidoscope (Shah, 1994). Some *degree* of broad characterisation *may* be possible, for instance in terms of assessing levels of participation, but as Webb *et al.* (1994) argue it will always be problematic to attribute people to a *genus* or 'type' of student. Mature students *en masse* are not the homogenous group portrayed in much early research, and nor can they be satisfactorily further into a series of discrete categories or sub-groups.

Little merit exists in trying to classify people as though stuffed, labelled and on display in a museum. As James (1995) argues, attempts to apply a 'species' approach when studying mature students were for institutional convenience rather than to try to aid the understanding of narratives of *experience*, as I am seeking to. And as other authors including Britton and Baxter (1994), Williams (1997a) and Webb (1997) have suggested, in the process of conceptualising 'the mature student experience', its context and subtle nuances have been hidden through over-simplification.

I prefer instead approaches privileging the discovery of individual stories, and mapping them onto wider policy agendas. For instance, Bloomer and Hodkinson's (2000) suggestion of an individual 'learning career' is useful since it assumes a (learner) identity in a state of flux and under constant (re-)construction. Crossan *et al.* (2003, p. 59) develop this further by suggesting learning careers are 'frequently contingent and associated with rather fragile and experimental changes in identity' as opposed to a necessarily 'lasting and unilinear change'. This recognition that 'learning careers', can go both forwards and *into reverse* helps us understand the experience of Meg here and others in the wider study, now with a weaker learner identity than before joining the course by virtue of having dropped out.⁵ As West (1996) suggested, academic success and confidence is not simply a matter of linear progress, but can wax and wane in reaction to experience. (For a more detailed treatment of this, see Brine and Waller, 2004; or Davies and Williams, 2001).

Ideas of 'learning careers' acknowledge too that the (frequently contested) process of constructing learner identities is highly complex, since as Burke (2002) and Chappell *et al.* (2003) remind us, mature learners are 'multiply positioned' in terms of class, gender, ethnicity and other social factors. Privileging *age* or any one of these other characteristics will not account for someone's experience as an adult returning to formal learning, because of the sheer complexity of personal situations, as demonstrated here. The task for biographical researchers is to offer policy makers a direction for widening participation or social justice initiatives, at local and national levels. To do so we must combine Bertaux's (1981) aim to understand 'sociostructural relations' underpinning mature students' lives and experiences, with Whitty's (1997, 2002) 'vulture's eye' model enabling us to move between micro-, meso- and macro-levels of educational provision and policies. We can then assess the impact of all of this on individuals too.

Within this paper, Akhtar best represents McFadden's (1995) 'second chance education', whilst Meg's primary motivation in returning to study is to redress the imbalance between her structural position or *habitus*, having married a middle class graduate, and her relative lack of educational capital or credentials. To an extent this

is true of all four people here, given their achieved middle class status before joining the course. Jim and Michaela both cited their primary motivation for returning to learn as seeking what Maslow called self-actualisation, albeit from different positions of fiscal security.

The data presented here demonstrates that the individuals highlighted are not simply 'cases' of 'mature students' *per se*, rather instances of social phenomena and carriers of wider social histories. Their previous lives and range of structural positions occupied set any group of learners apart from one another as much as they merit similarity treatment. The category of 'mature student' maybe useful for helping institutions or policy makers to count numbers of people studying, but does not lead to clear policy guidelines for how to attract or aid the learning of older people *en masse*. Maintenance grants, increased nursery places or additional study support may help some people, but I would therefore recommend treating sceptically any claim for a 'one-size-fits-all' panacea to improve the lot of mature students. This is due to the highly individualised routes this diverse group have travelled in arriving at where they are now, and where they still hope to travel to in their ongoing learning careers.

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¹ Access courses are a 'fast-track', usually full-time, course for people aged 21 and over with few or no formal academic qualifications. They offer a combination of compulsory generic core skills and optional subject specialisms. Their aim is essentially to equip a student for, and facilitate admission to, an HE course of study.

² I am grateful to my colleague, Jonathan Simmons, for suggesting this idea during a discussion on the topic.

³ The students' names are their chosen pseudonym. One or two minor biographical details have occasionally been changed to further disguise their identities.

⁴ This assumes they actually know *now*, a position contradicted by the relatively large numbers altering study plans whilst on the Access course and/or at university itself. Seven of the 20 in the bigger study have done this, including Meg and Akhtar here. The statement

is also predicated on the idea that *younger* students in HE *do* know what they want to do, which again is challenged by the numbers dropping out or switching courses.

⁵ Although she successfully completed the Access course and started university as planned, Meg left within a month, uncertain she had embarked upon the appropriate degree course (see 4 above). She returned to FE and started an A level programme, to both try new subjects and buy more time to decide what she wanted to study. However, she then joined the police rather than recommencing degree studies.