

“Everybody gets one or two chances in life, this is my second!”: Risk and the construction of (mature) students’ biographies

Richard Waller

Faculty of Education, University of the West of England, Coldharbour Lane, Frenchay, Bristol BS16 1QY.

This article presents preliminary findings from a PhD study that began in September 2001. It seeks to outline provisional thoughts as to how the notion of risk influences the construction of biographies for mature students on an Access course at a Further Education college in the South West of England. Extracts from interviews undertaken with students are used in an effort to ground the theory in personal experience. The fear of failing the course thus reinforcing previous negative experiences of the education system and further damaging an already low self-esteem are paramount for some of the cohort. Others meanwhile express worries over how non-academic issues including family or monetary pressures and uncertainty about the future may jeopardise their chances of success.

Introduction

Much recent government policy in respect of Higher Education has focused upon increasing student numbers, particularly from traditionally under-represented groups (HEFCE 2000a, HEFCE 2000b). As Baxter and Britton (2001) suggest, this is seen as being both desirable for society in terms of economic and human capital needs, and empowering for the individual in terms of opening up employment opportunities and aiding self-development. Mature students are central to this planned expansion, and Access courses at Further Education (FE) colleges are the most likely route for many of them. Such courses are often presented as routes to the certainty of greater long-term economic and social rewards. This certainty is the very opposite of risk, and, as this article illustrates, is far from the actual experience of those undertaking such academic programmes.

For Shah (1994) returning to education as an adult “...is a public exposure of one's ignorance” (p. 261). This exposure is a form of risk, one that I am seeking to explore in this research. My own return to full-time studies at the age of 36 and with “family responsibilities” has involved major changes to my life and a careful assessment of risk. However, in contrast to my experience of having left fairly secure employment as a lecturer to become a research student, most of the Access group within this study are undergoing even greater exposure to uncertainty and changes in identity. They have ceased to

be full-time workers, family carers or unemployed persons, and are now full-time students, in most cases for the first time since leaving school. As Elizabeth acknowledges of her peers, “(w)e’ve all come (to education) and *given up things...everybody is here for a reason*”.

This article is a provisional report on a work in progress. It is based on a doctoral study initiated in September 2001 that focuses on mature students and their experiences of the transition from an FE Access course onto university. The findings here are drawn from an analysis of half of the first two sets of 20 semi-structured interviews, three sets of which are being conducted for two consecutive years.

The 20 were chosen as a sample from across all Access pathways in the college. They all began their full-time studies in September 2001. The ten, all of whose ethnicity is self-identified as “white”, “British” or “white UK”, unless otherwise specified, are as follows:¹

Aktar is a 34 year old Asian man, son of first generation immigrant parents from Pakistan. He lives with the mother of his 11 year old daughter. Before the Access course, Aktar had a well-paid job in marketing. His aim is to study Economics at university.

Beatrice is 29, and has just moved in with her partner of 6 months. She is from a Romany family, and grew up in a small town in northern England. Due to a combination of lack of family support and severe bullying she suffered a traumatic and disrupted schooling. She plans to study Drama at university.

Elizabeth is a middle-class woman in her mid-20s with a strong family history of participation in HE. She is now on the Access to Teaching pathway, having tried a succession of short-term (usually non-manual) jobs since leaving school. She spent most of her schooling abroad.

Geraldine is 36. She was originally from a poor council estate in the city, and has only worked casually in low-skill, poorly paid jobs since the birth of her child, a daughter, now aged 16. Geraldine wants to work caring for animals, but at a higher level than she has before.

Jim, in his early 40s, grew up in Northern Ireland. As a child, he enjoyed a stable middle class family background. He is estranged from the mother of his son, and has had a range of jobs in the computing industry. He is on the Access route into Engineering.

Lyndsay, a 30 year old woman with mixed cultural heritage is studying on the Access to Law route. Her parents were shop-keepers, and she herself had been self-employed before the course began. She is married with two small children to a businessman some 20 years her senior.

Maria is 50. A middle class woman with two children at university, she lives with her engineer husband in a wealthy part of the city. She left a career in computing to pursue her long-standing dream of becoming a nurse via the Access course.

Max is an ex-milkman in his late 20s, and had grown up in a large working class family. He is separated from the mother of his two pre-school children and is now studying on a Humanities programme. He lives in a house with university students.

Sarah is just 21, the minimum age for entry to an Access course. She still lives with her working class parents and has effectively never left full-time education. She had

aspirations of being a ballet dancer as a child until she grew too tall by the age of 16. Her aim now is to become a psychotherapist, which she describes as “her *second* dream”.

Sasha is a single mum in her 30s with a rather unconventional educational background in that she went to a ‘free school’. She has travelled and worked abroad quite widely and held a variety of jobs in the UK, including most recently a period of self-employment. Like Geraldine, Sasha too is a single mother, and on the Access to Science pathway.

According to Giddens (1991), the process of reflecting upon one’s changing sense of self is an inevitable aspect of contemporary life. Yet while many are struggling to come to terms with the identity change involved in becoming an FE student, they have already been made to consider “the next step” - university - and the contingent risks that this entails, as mapped out below. Because of the timing of the university application cycle coinciding with these interviews, the students’ minds were focused on two important questions: “Where do I want to go to university?” and “What will I study?”. Inevitably this involves an assessment of whether applying for one university or course rather than another will involve greater levels of uncertainty. For example, would going to the University of Bristol be “riskier” than joining the University of the West of England? Would they feel comfortable, that they would “fit in” where there is less of a tradition of mature students? Will studying say, Drama, as Beatrice intends to, lead to a job upon graduation? Would it exacerbate their alienation from relationship networks to a greater extent than a more vocational degree, such as Maria’s Nursing course might?

The notion of “reflexivity” is often associated as being a response to risk in contemporary western societies. Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992), especially focus upon this aspect of risk. Reflexivity, or what some, Beck in particular, call “reflexive modernisation” does not mean simply mere “reflection”, but self-confrontation – how people respond when they are met by risk. The process of what Beck calls “individualization” is a key component of reflexive modernisation. This is the transformation in, and freeing of, accepted social roles such as gender, ethnicity and social class. Mass education, participation in which is the primary goal of my study cohort, is one of the contemporary social phenomena encouraging this process.

Ball, Maguire and Macrae (2000) suggest that such reflexivity, which can have both short and long-term components, is something that people approach with varying levels of enthusiasm. Furthermore, as Douglas (1992) notes, perceptions of risk, whilst - or possibly because - they are socially constructed, vary from one individual or social group to another. They are not therefore *objective*, as rational choice theorists would tend to claim, but *subjective* in a manner informed by social factors, including the influence of power, especially perhaps in the economic sphere. These are concepts central to an individual’s sense of self-identity and their assessment of the effect of gender, class, ethnicity, family or relationship status and indeed all other aspects of social stratification.

For *all* students then, some process of self-evaluation and assessment of the likelihood of success of any chosen course of action is necessary. Bloomer

and Hodkinson (1997) remind us that (“young”) people are forced to address “who they are” *when entering* FE. My thoughts at this juncture are that the mature students in my study have, to a large extent, done this *before* entering FE, since their decision to do so inevitably requires a greater element of reflexive evaluation than it does for, say, the vast majority of school-leavers. This is because for school-leavers, entering college is possibly one of a more limited set of choices. But, for the new students on the Access course, the impetus to dramatically alter their lives had generally been too strong to be ignored. As Giddens (1991) suggests:

“(t)aking charge of one’s life’ involves risk, because it means confronting a diversity of open possibilities. The individual must be prepared to make more or less a complete break with the past, if necessary, and to contemplate novel courses of action that cannot be simply guided by established habits. Security attained by sticking with established patterns is brittle, *and at some point will crack.*” (p. 73) (emphasis added).

For the students in my study, I am interested in what causes the 'cracking' of this (ontological) 'security' – what led the individual to make the decision to return to study?

Ball et al (2000) distinguish between “active” and “inert” choices to enter Further Education. Many of the teenage study group in their book were “guided”, either by parents and/or teachers at school into “staying-on”. By contrast, most Access students meanwhile made the decision to *return* to education, in some cases after a “break” of decades, themselves. They may have had an “epiphanic” moment that led them to study again, or they may have been waiting for the appropriate time to return to it. The “trigger” for this could well be changes to family circumstances - a child starting school or leaving home for instance (Geraldine and Maria here), a break-up of a relationship (Max), the death of someone close (Jim), or simple frustration at the lack of employment opportunities (Elizabeth and Sasha particularly, but all of them to varying degrees, except probably Maria and Aktar). The reason(s) that people joined the Access course *now* is one focus of the interviews, and will be reported on at a later date.

What risks are most relevant?

Beck (1992) refers to the increasing encroachment of “the culture of individualism” and “economics of individualization” in contemporary society. It is this increasing individualization, arising at least in part from the fragmentation of the working classes with respect to employment situations that I am looking to focus on first. Traditional working class communities based around manufacturing and heavy industries are virtually a thing of the past in the South West. Those from such backgrounds, particularly the men, often struggle to find meaningful employment in a rapidly changing world dominated by the growth of the service sector and forces of economic globalisation. In terms of Hutton’s (1995) “thirty, thirty, forty society” (p. 105), many Access students are from the disadvantaged “low skill-no skill” groups, those most at risk in terms of the vagaries of the market economy. From those

selected for consideration here and outlined above, all but Jim would probably be classified thus.

Most Access students recognise the need for decisive action in the form of embarking upon a course of study to enable this “problem” to be addressed. Jim for instance suggested he sought “...a complete change in lifestyle, a complete change in direction in my life...”. In a sense, they are often seeking to avoid being exposed to excessive future risk or uncertainty in the job market, but in order to do so, they have entered into a *whole new area* of risk and uncertainty, albeit for a limited, but not insignificant, period of time. And some of course risk not only their own situations, on a variety of levels, but those of their family too – especially in terms of time and money. Accordingly, four areas of risk will now be briefly considered, the importance of which is already becoming clear in my research: financial, academic failure, damage to relationships, particularly partners or other family members and fear of the unknown, including (potential) future regrets. These were the most cited sources of concern in the interviews.

Financial risk

In respect of future economic rewards, Davies and Williams (2001) claim that students tend to consider the decision to return to study in a fairly instrumentalist manner, as a form of “private investment”. For many mature students, study on the course is usually seen as a means to change - and hence improve - their lives, especially in terms of bettering their position in the job market. Underlying this is a general belief that the “return” on such an “investment”, usually in terms of greater career choice and earning potential, is high. Sasha, for example, sees her future without the course as doing “soul-destroying jobs that I don’t like, simply because I need the money”. Geraldine also “wants to use (her) brain...(and)...to do something with a bit of job satisfaction”. Both feel a degree to be the best means of achieving a more enjoyable working environment. In the sample of the interview cohort chosen for consideration here, greater job satisfaction was generally rated above increased earning potential in terms of reasons for seeking to undertake a degree course. From the interviewees as a whole, there was a strong desire to “put something back” into society, and most sought public sector careers as longer-term goals.

However, in terms of government policy formulation, these factors do not really feature highly. The whole system of student funding is geared towards an individual being motivated to study *in order to earn more money*. However, none of the interviewees particularly expressed this as a priority. Where this *is* the case, as Davies and Williams (2001) maintain, the apparent confidence of policy makers in their funding regimes is not usually shared by the students themselves. As Egerton and Parry (2001) have highlighted, assumptions underpinning policy decisions relating to student finance and other areas are generally founded upon notions of younger graduates who can look forward to a longer working life. In addition to this, Davies and Williams note that there are further consequences in terms of uncertain outcomes arising from

participation in HE. These include the subsequent fiscal and other implications particularly relevant to mature students. For example, they earn less on average than other graduates, are more likely to find subsequent employment in the public sector, are more likely than average to go to a new university and, perhaps of greatest relevance in the short term at least, are likely to have greater opportunity costs in the form of loss of earnings. Any “investment” in terms of time, effort and money spent studying then is likely to be less secure, to be of greater short term cost and carry more economic risk than for younger students.

Academic Failure

Davies and Williams (2001) have claimed that fear of academic failure is probably less common for younger students than mature ones such as my Access cohort. This is perhaps because A Level passes, especially if at high grades, are frequently seen as validating their presence at university. Qualifications such as the Access certificate are perhaps compared unfavourably against this A Level “gold-standard”, and not just by the more “traditional” universities. To quite a few Access students, being seen as “not good enough” is a real fear, and one that itself often has its roots in an unsuccessful academic history. Confidence is central to a student’s biographical construction, how they see themselves. Even so, confidence and success outside an educational setting does not guarantee the same inside it. As Peters (1997) suggests, whilst mature students may be “powerful people...outside the academic institution” (p. 199), they may experience disempowerment, often resulting from a lack of confidence or perceptions of “risk”, upon entering it. For many, the potential for failure is chancing more harm to an already low self-esteem. Sasha for instance, a woman who has enjoyed success in other areas of life, suggested:

I've always convinced myself that I'm thick...I want to prove to myself that I can do this...(the course) has bought up all that (negative) stuff from school...the “failure feeling”...I think I have to work twice as hard as anyone else. So even if I pass, I think it's not normal...it's confidence problems really...I'm quite scared about the effect it will have on me if I don't (complete) the course...it took quite a lot of guts for me to do this. I'm petrified I'll fail. It took me a long time to pluck up the courage really - to risk failure...it would be really difficult...where would I go next?

Max meanwhile was perhaps a little more positive about the possibility of being unsuccessful academically, claiming: “I feel I would have still gained a lot, even if I fail (the course)”. He clearly sees the benefits of going to university: “I want to be more intelligent...I want an education”. On the other hand, Geraldine is apparently doing it as much for other people, to challenge their perception of her, as for her own sense of self-worth:

If I can complete the Access course anyway, whether I get to university or not, at least there's something down on paper to say I'm not stupid...'cos I get really angry at people who think that, because I've got a Bristolian accent, I must be quite stupid...I'm 36 years old and people still talk to me like I'm a little girl.

Perhaps these contrasting approaches could suggest that Max and Geraldine have less at risk in terms of potential damage to a fragile self-esteem. Maria acknowledges this issue too when she suggests

I'm risking my own self-esteem if I don't succeed, yeah, definitely, but does that really matter at my age? Maybe when I was younger...I don't think that (not being 'good enough') would worry me so much now...compared to 20 years ago...If I wasn't good enough it wouldn't be the end of the world, but some of these people, their whole future depends on this, being younger.

Personal relationships

Many Access students are concerned about the impact of studying upon their family and existing social networks. The responsibility of children particularly complicates the position for many of them. Elizabeth, for instance, demonstrated an awareness of the potential costs to family life when she claims: "I'm quite lucky that I haven't got children. I can't imagine how difficult it would be if I did have". Speaking of her long-standing social circle, Sasha suggested, "(a) lot of my friends are quite threatened by me doing the course, and would probably rather that I wasn't doing it." And Max claims, "I struggle to fit everything in. I've got children who I see at the weekend, and a part-time job...if there's much more work (at university) then I'm going to have plenty of difficulties". For Wakeford (1994), such concerns, focussing as they do upon potentially negative consequences, embody reflective notions of "social risk". As she suggests: "(T)he dominant experience for interviewees was that entering an Access course and progressing on to higher education led them to identify certain hazards or dangers to their social relationships" (p. 246).

This point is perhaps best illustrated by Lyndsay, who by the end of the Access year was experiencing marital difficulties which she put down to changes since starting the course. She referred to a friend who had been "forced" to leave the course at Christmas time:

I knew one girl (sic) last term who left because her husband was "getting on her case", because she was devoting so much time to Access that she was neglecting the family, not doing the ironing, not doing "proper teas" and had her head in a book all night when her husband wanted her to sit on the sofa and watch EastEnders with him and make him a cup of tea, and it caused friction, so she left Access for that reason. My husband moans at me a bit, but I just ignore him...He works late and he comes back in and says "I see you've got your head stuck in a book again, I expect you'll be like this for the next six years really", and I say "yeah, yeah, carry on." And he sits in the front room and I sit in the dining room. It depends what sort of relationship you have I suppose, doesn't it?

By way of a contrast, Beatrice puts her very presence on the Access programme as being down to her (relatively new) partner:

I met somebody, it was unexpected, and I fell in love, and I changed my whole life to be with him. He is incredibly supportive, and he recognised something inside me that needed to be bought out, because I was being...caged in the life that I had, and I was not free to explore the things that I wanted to do in the environment that I was living in. He encouraged me to "do education".

However, being on the course meant Beatrice moving away from her family hometown, and as such has caused damage to older relationships with family and friends. However, she feels this to be a price worth paying.

In her study, Wakeford (1994) found that the biggest actual area for change and renegotiation of relationship is, perhaps unsurprisingly, between spouses and partners, especially where it is the woman who has become the student. "Traditional" roles of "housewife" and/or "mother" are frequently jeopardised by changes in status or sense of identity. Notions of where priorities should lay - with studies or domestic duties - underpins much of this. For many, this probably becomes an area of increasing difficulty as academic studies progress and the 'honeymoon period' of the first year at college ends.

Fear of the unknown and the "what if monster"

There was evidence of some of the students being concerned about taking another leap into the dark as far as entering the unknown. Beatrice for instance suggested that:

I was very unhappy with the life that I was living, and I didn't know how I was going to change that. I think fear is a great boundary that you place around yourself, and I think fear of change and fear of failure stop you from doing things that you want to do, and you become comfortable within an existence that you're familiar with, no matter how unhappy it is. It takes great courage to move away from that and make a decision to leave which is one of the things that most Access students have as similarities between them...that the decision to leave an existence took great courage.

Meanwhile, Aktar is confronting his fears about going on to university, where he anticipates meeting a much younger student cohort, and a learning environment that does not offer as much support as he has available to him on the Access programme:

It's fear of the unknown. I'm scared I'll go to uni and it's totally different, and I'm not prepared...you have to keep in mind that everyone says once you've done the Access course you'll be OK at uni...I'm conscious of being older...of having (negative) views of students as I do.

On a related point, Sarah, the youngest of the cohort at just 21, fears looking back later in life having not taken the opportunities available to her now:

I can't see trying university as being negative in any way. The only thing that could be negative possibly is if it doesn't work out, and I'm in debt, that's the only thing...that I've got to lose...I'd be more annoyed with myself if I didn't try it, long term, I'd be much, much, much more annoyed with myself if I didn't give it a go. It's the "what if monster"...if you sat there in 20 years time, "if I'd gone to university, or what if I'd gone, I wonder what I'd be doing now". I don't want to be like that. Like, just go, try it, if it doesn't work out, come home. If it works out, great...it would be like my second dream come true.

But we should remember that Sarah is talking as a 21 year old with little in the way of commitments. Many of the other, older, students in the cohort see things rather differently, Sasha, for example, as outlined above.

Conclusion - Just how 'risky' is it to study on an Access course?

Ironically, for some of the cohort, studying on such a programme is actually seen as a way of reducing a possibly greater risk – that of failure at university. I asked all of the interviewees whether they would have accepted a university place if it had been already offered before joining the Access course. Most said that they would not, that they did not feel ready. The Access programme is seen as a way to re-acclimatise to education. Elizabeth for instance talked of “developing herself” before going on to university. Peters (1997) writes of how supporting activities within a pre-HE writing skills course provided students with “scaffolding” activities to assist their further academic development. An Access course has such a role as a primary purpose, in terms of the formal curriculum, with the “core activities” of study skills, numeracy and communications. There are also the course aims of increasing students’ confidence and encouraging generic skills such as time management, handling study-related stress and working effectively in groups. Many of the interviewees suggest that this aspect of the curriculum is important to them, and that they chose the course partly because of such transferable skills it offered.

Clearly, the precise nature and level of risk or uncertainty faced by a mature student embarking upon (or as some describe it, “investing in”) a course of academic study varies from one person to another, and cannot be quantified, *even by the individual themselves*. As Giddens (1991) claims, “(t)he calculation of risk...can never be fully complete, since even in relatively confined risk environments there are always unintended and unforeseen outcomes” (pp. 111-2). Its impact upon the construction of the actor’s biography is therefore evident, but varies over time and is difficult to evaluate fully at any given moment.

The categories chosen for discussion here do not necessarily determine where risks *actually lay* for people, but where they are *perceived* to be. That said, for the Access students here, in the role of risk in terms of biographical construction, the old adage that “a thing defined as real will be real in its consequences” is appropriate. If a “risk” is understood as a product of perception and cultural understanding, then to draw a distinction between “real” risks and “false” risks is inappropriate, since both lead to forms of action, and both would contribute to the construction of an individual’s biography.

The individual student needs to frequently reassess the level of risk or uncertainty that s/he faces. At the same time, the individual constructs their biographical narrative, what Giddens (1991) called “the self as a reflexive project” (p. 75). As he suggests, real levels of risk are not necessarily *greater*

for people today, but the impact upon identity is more profound. Students will possibly feel very differently about these issues next academic year, when they are at university. Giddens (1991) wrote that “(t)he reflexivity of the self is continuous, as well as all-pervasive...the individual becomes accustomed to asking, “how can I use this moment to change?”” (p. 76). And it is these decisions around changes that impact upon our notion of selfhood and indeed its construction. He suggests that “(i)t is *the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography*” (p.53). (emphasis in original)

Thoughts from Jim illustrate this point. When asked why he was doing the course, he, like most others in the study, claimed he “sought a change in his life”, and wanted more of “a challenge” through his work. For Jim and the rest of the student cohort, despite all the inherent uncertainty and risk that it led to, the Access programme followed by a university degree was the chosen way of achieving it. However, he is all too aware that this route is full of potential hazards, partly due to the inevitable changes to the rest of his life when embarking upon a fulltime course of study:

Being a student *can* be considered more difficult than going to work everyday...(there), once you're into a routine and understand your job, it becomes second nature to you, whereas things are *forever changing* when you're doing “academic things”.

But how free are the likes of Jim and the others in my study to determine their life’s trajectory? Individualization for both Beck and Giddens puts a requirement upon an individual to produce their own biography themselves. As such it assumes agency, the ability to shape one’s destiny through self-determination and identification. For some critics, it down plays the role of social structure too. Lash (1994) for example, who sees “reflexive winners” and “reflexive losers” (p.120), questions just how reflexive a single mother in an urban ghetto, Geraldine for instance, really can be.

Studies such as “Choices, Pathways and Transitions post-16” by Ball et al (2000) demonstrate how for many young people in particular, this notion of freedom to determine their own life trajectory irrespective of class, gender or ethnicity is rather naive. Perhaps they’ve bought into the notion of a meritocracy all too willingly. My own research, albeit at an early stage, suggests that many of the Access students in my study are rather more circumspect, more realistic in terms of the limitations of both wider social structures and their own positions regarding relationships etc. Lupton (1999) suggests that “the notion that one is personally responsible for the control of risk seems to be acculturated very early in life” (p. 107). The work of Ball et al (2000) would seem to support this, but my research supports the idea that at least most of the Access students that I have looked at have either avoided this “acculturation” (perhaps through their being older than those in Ball et al’s study), or have “unlearned” it, through experience.

As I suggest above, for each of us, *some* changes to our lives, and our subsequent “biographical narratives”, are actively sought. Others meanwhile “happen to us”, often against both our will and our ability to predict or control them. As John Lennon wrote, (ironically just prior to his death) “life is what

happens to you when you're busy making other plans". So, whilst we are not free to wholly determine our life course, we do have *some* degree of choice, of influence, over our futures. This is demonstrated by the decisions of the study group to become students – it was *their* choice after all (and mine).

Miles (2001) proposes that, "(i)n contemporary society an individual effectively treads a tightrope between risk and opportunity" (p. 132). The general rapidity of changing circumstances experienced for people today is a further complication in this "balancing act", one that is especially keen for the Access students in my study, given their choice of a particularly risky course of action. I have decided to follow them, so that I might document and analyse the impact it has on their lives, the construction of their biographical narrative, and their sense of "self". And I am keeping a careful note of just what it is doing to me too.

Bibliography

- Ball, S., Maguire, M., and Macrae, S. (2000) *Choice, Pathways and Transitions Post-16: New youth, new economies in the global city*. London: Routledge/Falmer
- Baxter, A. and Britton, C. (2001) Risk, Identity and Change: becoming a mature student. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 11 (1), 87-102
- Beck, U. (1992) *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. London: Sage
- Bloomer, M. and Hodkinson, P. (1997) Moving into FE: the Voice of the Learner. London: Further Education Development Agency. In: Ball, S. et al *op cit*
- Britton, C. and Baxter, A. (1999) Becoming a Mature Student: gendered narratives of the self. *Gender and Education*, 11 (2), 179-193
- Clarke, J. (1998) The Role of Social Theory in Action Research: Working for Change in a University Adult Education Department in a Multi-Cultural City. In: Preece, J. et al (eds) (1998) *Beyond the Boundaries: Exploring the Potential of Widening Provision in Higher Education*. Leicester: NIACE
- Davies, P. and Williams, J. (2001) For Me or Not For Me? Fragility and Risk in Mature Students' Decision-making. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 55 (2), 185-203
- Douglas, M. (1992) *Risk and Blame*. London: Routledge
- Egerton, M. and Parry, G. (2001) Lifelong Debt: Rates of Return to Mature Study. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 55 (1), 4-27.
- Giddens, A. (1991) *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Oxford: Polity
- HEFCE (2000a) *Widening Participation: special funding proposals 1999-2000 to 2001-02*. (August) Circular 00/35. Bristol: HEFCE
- HEFCE (2000b) *Funding For Widening Participation In Higher Education: New Proposals 2000-01 To 2003-04*. (November) Circular 00/50. Bristol: HEFCE

- Hutton, W. (1995) *The State We're In*. London: Cape
- James, D. (1995) Mature Studentship in Higher Education: beyond a "species" approach. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 16 (4), 451-466
- Lash, S. (1994) Reflexivity and its Doubles: Structure, Aesthetics, Community. In: Beck, U., Giddens, A. and Lash, S. *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order* (pp. 110-173) Oxford: Polity
- Lupton, D. (1999) *Risk*. London: Routledge
- Miles, S. (2001) *Social Theory in the Real World*. London: Sage
- Peters, H. (1997) An Exploration of a Group of Mature Students' Perceptions of and Approaches to Writing at University, Carried Out on a Twelve Week Pre-Entry Course. *Journal of Access Studies*, 12 (2), 198-211
- Shah, S. (1994) Kaleidoscopic People: Locating the 'Subject' of Pedagogic Discourse. *Journal of Access Studies*, 9 (2), 257-270
- Skeggs, B. (1997) *Formations of Class and Gender*. London: Sage
- Waller, R. (2002) 'I Want to Prove to Myself That I Can do This!': Risk and Uncertainty in the Construction of Personal Biographies for Access Students. *The Redland Papers*, 9, 51-60. Bristol: University of the West of England

Notes

¹ The interview sample were encouraged to provide their own pseudonym. A few minor biographical details such as age or gender of children have been altered too on occasion to further disguise the identity of the students in question.

Acknowledgements

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Auto/Biography annual conference (2002), and I would like to thank participants for their interest in my work and their useful suggestions. I would also like to thank Jacky Brine, David James, Andrew Sparkes and the anonymous reviewers of Auto/Biography for their help.