Experiences of struggle: findings from a longitudinal study

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A growing body of research suggests that 'non-traditional' students face particular and additional difficulties and barriers to successful study in higher education, reflecting educational and other inequalities related to class, ethnicity, gender and age (Bird 1996, Allen 1997, Bamber et al. 1997, HEFCE 1997, Britton and Baxter 1999, National Audit Office 2002, Archer et al. 2003, Read et al. 2003). Drawing on data from a longitudinal study of undergraduate students that is being conducted at this university, this brief paper focuses on students' constructions of their experiences at university [1]. As Reay et al. (2002) discovered, for many 'non-traditional' students, studying in higher education is characterised by 'struggle', and this was something that has emerged as an important theme in the research reported here.

The Research

The study has been tracking undergraduate students from their enrolment in 1999 on four courses/programmes (psychology, business, computing and film studies) at what is now the North Campus of London Metropolitan University (formerly the University of North London) [2]. A large quantity of data has been gathered through questionnaires, focus groups and individual interviews. 310 students completed an initial questionnaire during their first year induction, and the progress of these students continues to be tracked. Focus groups (126 students in total) have been conducted during each year of the study, and 18 students were selected (using purposive sampling) as case study students to take part in a semi-structured interview each year enabling us to follow their progress in more depth. The emphasis has been on gathering data from the students themselves about their experiences, learning and progress to inform policy and practice.

The findings

The research findings, and what could be called the meta-findings that have arisen from the research process itself, all point to a very diverse cohort of students moving through, and sometimes into and out of, their degree studies at varying rates, with different levels of attachment and/or marginalisation at different times. The study challenges any simple notion of a straightforward linear developmental path through their degree courses, and conveys a strong

sense of students struggling to succeed against the odds. Data at the end of year 3 indicated that of those on 3 year programmes who potentially could have graduated, only 23% had done so, with another 31% still continuing their studies, 10% intermitting/prospective returning students, and 36% having withdrawn, been excluded or failed. As we have been monitoring the progression status of these students over the three years of the study, it has become clear that the same students may be recorded as having been excluded (for example for tuition fee debt) in one year, only to find they have returned at a later stage. Similarly, students may move between full and part time study. These figures are therefore constantly changing, not simply because some students leave whilst others who have intermitted return, but also because in some cases, the *same* students move in and out of their studies. What these figures do indicate, however, is that for whatever reason, undertaking and successfully completing undergraduate study is not easy or straightforward for many of these students. Although many students spoke very positively about their university experiences, a key theme that has emerged across the three years of the study is one of students struggling 'against the odds', and it is this theme that forms the focus of this paper.

A major source of struggle was financial, and the need to work during term time increased the pressure for many. Some were also managing child care responsibilities. Other research has indicated the impacts of financial concerns on many students and potential students, in particular those who are working class, mature, Muslim, from minority ethnic groups, and those with family responsibilities (Archer et al. 2003; Callender 2002; Van Dyke and Little 2002). Many students in this study expressed concerns about the level of debt they had accumulated and the impact of term-time work, with some final year students feeling that they had no choice but to reduce their hours or give up one of their part-time jobs in order to complete dissertations and final assessments. Others felt that they would be achieving higher grades if they did not have to work, a finding borne out by Van Dyke and Little (2002): '*I'm thinking things like financially if I had a rich family it would be so much easier and my grades would be much better because I would spend that time studying instead of just working*' (Renate, White European, female, 22-25, working 25-35 hours), whilst others were struggling to combine work, study and childcare. In addition, some students who had previously expressed a desire to go on to post-graduate study were now saying that they needed to get a job in order to pay off their debts.

A second major area of struggle, articulated mostly by women, was that of confidence in their ability. This often bore little relationship to how well the students were actually doing, although it was exacerbated for some students by poor grades or negative feedback. Bartky (1990), in discussing the apparent lack of self-esteem amongst some of her women students, refers to 'a pervasive sense of personal inadequacy that … is profoundly disempowering', a description that could also be applied to a number of the students in this research for whom lack of confidence appeared to be long-standing:

> *I didn't think university was for me to start with. I thought I was thick. I just thought I couldn't do it. … I'm one of those people that are never happy with what I do. I am. I can never do good enough as far as I'm concerned* (Alice, Black Caribbean, female, 31).

Like Bartky, however, I conceptualise 'confidence' not as an individual trait (and hence yet another failing of that individual), but sociologically in terms of the systematic positioning of some groups in society as of less or more worth or value than others.

The third major area of struggle identified in the study is related to the institution itself, including students' struggle to find their way around a complex and not always 'user-friendly' administrative system and to find lecturers who had the time to help them. Dominant themes in focus groups and interviews across the three years of the study to date have been the difficulties of finding information and dealing with organisational and administrative systems, and a perceived lack of contact and support from teaching staff. These findings reflect the difficulties of studying in an under-funded and 'mass' system of higher education, where academic staff are under tremendous pressure to support more and more students, but also point to specific areas of concern for the university, with potential implications for student retention and achievement.

The study has consistently highlighted factors that students' feel contribute to their learning and achievements, with contact with and support from teaching staff; lecturers and seminars which are clearly structured and facilitate interaction between students and lecturer; and detailed, constructive and timely feedback on assessments all being raised repeatedly. Students have also stressed the importance of good learning resources (especially library and computer facilities) and work placements, whilst many have identified the diversity of the student population as an important asset of this university.

When we asked those who have graduated how they felt about graduating, many spoke of relief at having 'survived', indicating again the experience of struggle which has been articulated. They also spoke of their and their parents' pride in their achievements, something that was particularly marked for the many students who described being the first in their families to get a degree.

Ongoing research

The study is continuing to gather data from students who are moving more slowly through their studies, as well as those who are now in their final (forth) year following a year-long work placement. We are also continuing to track students after graduation, with the focus now moving on to their entry into the labour market and the ways in which they feel their degree studies relate to their experiences of the workplace.

Notes

[1] For a discussion of these constructions in relation to national policy discourses of widening participation, see Leathwood, C. and O'Connell, P. 'It's a struggle': the construction of the 'new student' in higher education, *Journal of Education Policy*, forthcoming.

[2] The study was not designed to produce a representative sample of the university's students, but to track specific cohorts of students through their studies. The courses were selected to include one from each of the old faculties, with sufficient numbers of students to cope with the attrition rates of a longitudinal study, and where the course leader/director was interested in participating in the research.

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Biographical note

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