



CREID Seminar: Relationships Matter

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Context

- Mature students in an 'elite' Scottish university
- Coming from further education colleges with HNC/HND qualifications (regarded as 'non-standard' in this university) into degree programmes within humanities and social sciences (HSS)
- Invitation to all entrants to HSS with 'HN' qualifications in 2004 and 2005 to take part in a study of their experience



Research design

- A longitudinal study using semi-structured interviews and questionnaires
- Interviews with 45 in 'Freshers' week; at the end of 1st semester; then annually until graduation and 1 year later. Whole cohort contacted 10 years after entry and 15 were re-interviewed
- All interviews were transcribed and analysis used the constant comparative method where themes were identified and then independently checked by two researchers to ensure that they were internally coherent, consistent, and distinctive



Research questions

First study asked: How did those students fare?

Follow-up study asked:

- What do 'non-traditional' students perceive as the main challenges to their participation and retention?
- Do relationships play a role in students' gaining confidence in their own abilities?
- What impact have their university experiences had on their later personal and professional lives?



Relationships in FE – different views

- 'anything you wanted to know ... you could call the tutors up or you could go in. ... They were always available' (22)
- But...
- 'You're sort of petted at college' (01)



Relationships in HE – changing perceptions over time

- Accessing support was seen as difficult because 'you didn't actually know any of them ... [so] it was just like a number on a door' (25)
- But...
- 'staff weren't as stand-offish as I thought they would be' (07)
- 'He gave you the confidence to share your ideas and everything' (41)



Relationships in HE – role of staff in protracted transitions

- 'My youngest daughter went completely off the rails... I'd passed the 1st semester and then the 2nd semester ... the first 3 essays I had extensions on them all and x said at the time, "You're going to struggle. You're just going to constantly be playing catch up. You've got to think about it". The staff at the time were supportive of me taking the year out, sorting out my daughter and then coming back, And then when I did...well, I passed everything else after that, so it was the best decision' (12).



Relationships – the role of peers

- Peers were important for academic as well as social matters, & often the first 'go-to' place ...
- 'we still had our own wee community with our own students, we'd take ourselves off to the pub at night after the class and we'd have, you know, we'd get study groups going together' (39).



Conclusions: relationships matter!

- Both with academics and peers
- But they cannot be assumed – they need to be built in and supported
- 10 of our cohort of 45 did not complete the degree programmes they had enrolled on – this is a much higher non-completion rate than the uni as a whole with 93.8% success
- IF HEIs are going to attract 'non-traditional' entrants, they need to do more to support them when they come... relationships are key to this



References

- More information about our research and links to all 7 journal articles that emerged from the first phase of the From FE to HE project can found here:
- http://www.socialwork.ed.ac.uk/research/grants_and_projects/current_projects/from_fe_to_he_study_ten_years_on
- There is also a link here to the journal article that discusses the changes to admissions introduced at this university in 2004



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