DRAFT

“Fitting in” or “standing out”: working class students in higher education

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BACKGROUND

The latest statistics from the UK Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) show 24.72% of those accepted to university were from the four lowest socio-economic groups in 2005. The year before the figure was 25.61% (Shepard 2007). Our research is taking place at a time when in the UK and globally, there is concern about ‘widening participation’ and breaking down the exclusivity of university education. In addition there is concern about retaining students and ensuring progress. In the UK, the universities with the most success at widening participation also have the highest drop-out rates (HEFCE 2006). Whilst universities are reporting success in widening participation there exists an apparent polarisation between those universities attracting working class and minority ethnic students and those attracting the traditional university constituency – the white middle classes (Reay et al 2005; Sutton Trust 2000). So we see significant differences in participation by social class at different types of university. For example, 16% of
those admitted in 2000 by the 19 Russell Group universities\(^1\) were from the three social classes covering the most disadvantaged groups, compared with the Higher Education Funding Council for England’s (HEFCE) benchmark figure of 19 per cent. As the benchmark already takes account of prior attainment levels, these figures show that prior attainment cannot be the sole factor in patterns of entry to higher education. Even where young people from disadvantaged groups have obtained the appropriate qualifications for these universities, they are less likely to go there.

A similar result emerged from a study by the Sutton Trust of the top 13 universities as measured by press league tables. Of the 300,000 of the nation’s schoolchildren from less affluent social backgrounds, only 4,200 (just over 1%) get into one of the top 13 universities instead of the 5,100 who might be expected to. Of the 200,000 who live in poor areas, 2,100 (just over 1%) get in instead of the 2,600 expected. There are similar concerns in the US where, in the year 2000, students from families in the bottom 50 percent of the income distribution made up 10 percent of first years at Princeton and 12 percent at Harvard, two of the US elite universities (Karabel 2005).

However, in the UK context even the universities that are apparently successful at widening participation, those in the post 1992 sector, are only relatively successful. In 2006 the proportion of state school pupils and those from low-income families at university across the entire HE field dropped to its lowest level in three years, despite government pressure to increase their numbers. (The Times 20\(^{th}\) July 2006)

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\(^1\) The ‘Russell Group’ universities are Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham, Oxford, Sheffield, Southampton, Warwick, Imperial College, London, Kings College, London, London School of Economics and Political Science, and University College London
THE RESEARCH STUDY

Our research focuses on undergraduate students 18 years and above from working class backgrounds including white and minority ethnic women and men. Their social class location is the Registrar General social class categories IIIm, IV and V. We have employed mixed methods across four HE institutions comprising an elite, ‘red brick’ and post 1992 university, and a college of Further Education, located in three different geographical areas. We have selected these different types of institutions in order to discern a cross section of experiences by working class students. We also initially selected three different disciplinary areas - Law, Chemistry and History but in the more elite university we had to extend our History category to English and replace Chemistry with Engineering in order to access enough working class students, while in the FE College we were constrained by the subjects offered at degree level. As a consequence our working class undergraduates there are studying performing arts, early childhood studies, and arboriculture.

A questionnaire was distributed to all Y1 and Y2 students across these institutions in the identified subjects in order to find basic information about their qualifications, social class, ethnicity, gender, motivation for choice of university, subject, career aspirations; views on their university experience both academic and social; and major challenges facing them on coming to university and through their time there. The information gathered allowed us to generalise on certain facets of student views and experiences (Crozier et al 2007). We also used this questionnaire to identify students for follow up group interviews with students from a range of class backgrounds but more importantly to locate our target group of working class students. These working class case studies (24 in total) were followed from April in one year to June the
following year, thereby traversing parts of two academic year experiences. We have interviewed them at key decision making moments (Ball et al 2000) such as the beginning and end of term or start of a new module/course; before and after assessment periods, and have also kept in contact with them through e-mail and online dialogues. In total we have carried out approximately 100 face to face interviews with these case study students, focusing on their perceptions of themselves and whether this changes over time and whether and how it impacts upon their attitudes to their studies and their sense of self. We wanted to find out whether these students strive to change and conform to the institutional milieu or to reproduce their identities in an act of resistance or whether they merely seek validation for who they are; to discern to what extent they fit in or stand out.

Students tend to choose the university with which they feel most comfortable where there are “people like us” (Bourdieu 1986; Reay et al 2005). Given this and students’ dispositions for ‘choosing’, there is a greater tendency for working class students and students from minority ethnic groups, to go to post 1992 universities which tend to have more open access and encourage diverse applicants, and for middle class students to attend pre-1992 universities which tend towards more elitism (Power et al (2003), Sutton Trust 2000). As Reay et al argue, what appears to have emerged is a polarised mass system of HE. It is unsurprising therefore that the class profiles of the four institutions are very different. Whilst working class students are not a majority in any of the three universities (the College demographic profile is unknown as the College doesn’t keep these statistics. However amongst our questionnaire sample of Foundation students just over 50% are working class), the largest percentage of
working class students are at Northern, then Midlands, with a small minority at Southern University.

Also, although all of our case study students are working class, there are differences between them which in turn impacts on their experiences and learner identities, for example they include:

- mature and non-mature students with families or other domestic/caring commitments
- students at differing academic levels
- those who find themselves in poor socio-economic circumstances today and are really struggling financially and those who have enough to get by reasonably comfortably
- those who saw university as the logical next step in their careers and those who never thought they would be at university

INSTITUTIONAL HABITUS: FOUR VERY DIFFERENT INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXTS

Our interview and observational data suggest that ‘an institutional effect’ - what we call institutional habitus (Reay et al 2005) - acts an intervening variable, providing a semi-autonomous means by which class, raced and gendered processes are played out in the HE experiences of students, and provides the parameter of possibilities in terms of identity work and the range of learner identities. All universities and colleges, including the four in our study, have identifiable institutional habituses in which their organisational culture and ethos is linked to wider socio-economic and educational cultures through processes in which universities and the different student
constituencies they recruit mutually shape and reshape each other (Reay 1998; Reay et al 2001). In other words the type of HE institution these working class students attend exerts a powerful influence on how they see themselves and are seen by others in terms of both their learner and class identities. This is particularly so for the ways in which their learner identities evolve and develop. In the FE College although the students are taking degree courses they lack access to the normal range of university resources and although they are entitled to use university facilities very few do because of pressure of time and geographical constraints. Nearly all the students still live with their families and cited a combination of location and financial reasons for choosing to study a degree at the FE College rather than the more distant local university. So one of our case study student explains:

I would have went to New College or Duxton College but then it was the whole issue of transport and getting there which was what put us off. So I said ‘Oh well there’s Eastern College’ I mean it’s right on my doorstep. I can get there relatively easy and quickly and it’s something that’s right there.

In Northern, a post-1992 university in an economically deprived urban area, students tend to live at home or off campus. Nearly all work part-time, or in a few cases full-time, whilst studying. However, while academic staff are of the view that most students are working class, according to HESA data (2004/5), only 39.5% are from SEC groups 4 – 7. At Northern while seminars are compulsory lectures are not, students could request tutorials but there was no formal timetabled tutor time. Although there are a minority of students among our sample who feel passionate about learning and have an enormous commitment and love of their subject area, a
majority are operating with lower levels of commitment. In fact one student asserts in relation to Chemistry:

   The majority of the people on the course never wanted to do it, a good majority, and there are people now who don’t even attend, I know one particular person and he has not, he’s been there a few hours all year and he is in the library now revising, I’ve just seen him but he just doesn’t attend.

Mary Owens, a working class law student at Northern, talks negatively about what she sees as pervasive instrumental attitudes to knowledge and learning:

   The amount of people who think that they can just look at their notes and understand it and not come to seminars is unreal. They are not going to understand it by just reading about it, it’s impossible….there are a couple who I talk to and I’ve actually said to them a few times, why are you even here? Because they’re just not bothered at all and they’re like, oh I don't know, I just thought I’d come here. I said, do you actually want anything out of it? And they’re like yeah a degree and like well. I don’t know, they just don’t seem to really care and you just don’t think they are ever going to be actually able to come out with anything worthwhile.

Midland in contrast is better resourced. A majority of students live in halls, especially in the first year, and less than half work in term-time. But the biggest difference between Midlands and both Northern and Eastern is that Midland students seemed to be much more integrated into the life of the university and to have a stronger sense of
themselves as university students. At Midland University there is a spectrum of commitment to learning. Bradley, one of the working class students, describes very varied attitudes to learning among his peers at Midland in which:

A lot of people will write out notes constantly and constantly and constantly, just keep repeating themselves and some people will just do problems, and some people just don’t bother at all, some of them just go out and get drunk and just forget about it and try and block it out from their memory.

Similarly, Sarah Jones, also at Midlands, describes a range of learning dispositions from ‘laid back’ to ‘studious’, asserting that on the whole “it’s very easy going here, you do what you want and then all they want is for you to put the work in and that’s it”. Students also describe a degree of instrumentalism and strategic attitudes and actions in relation to learning, particularly regarding the first year assignments and exams which do not count towards the final degree. As a result three out of the six working class case study students are taking or have taken re-sits.

In contrast to all three other institutions Southern has a culture of intensive, highly academic teaching and learning supported by regular one-to-one or one-to-two supervisions and tutorials where the expectation is that students make substantial contributions and are challenged and questioned by both their peers and teachers. Weekly assignments and stringent academic demands mean students could not engage in paid work even if they need to, although most come from families affluent enough to provide some financial support. Neither do they have the option to be ‘laid back’. Rather the culture and ethos is one in which, in Bernsteinian terms, ‘there is strong
classification and framing’ and an expectation of total commitment not only to the work but to the collegiate system. Such powerful processes of institutional socialisation, and the strong academic and social guidance and channelling that underpins them, both cuts across and overshadows class differences. Sarah’s spectrum of learners does not exist at Southern where nearly everyone is seen to be studious. As Jamie comments “sure we have different groups of students here – geeky, geekier and even more geeky”.

These four very different institutional habituses were reflected in the survey questionnaire responses² to how intellectually challenging were students’ courses. In Southern 93% of students rated intellectual challenge as either 5 (high) or 4. The comparable percentages at Midland and Northern were 56% and 39% respectively.

STUDENT IDENTITIES

There is a very clear spectrum of the experience of being a university student with at one end the College and Northern University where the experience of being a student is only one small aspect of an individual’s identity. For the most part students at Eastern College do not develop an identity as a university student, and our case study students’ primary sense of identification is as local, working-class and ‘at college’. At Northern, students have a number of competing identities as university students, but also as local and working class. They are jostling work and family commitments with doing a degree, and often the first two overwhelm and take precedence over studying. So one male mature working class student at Northern rued the fact that:

² 1,204 questionnaires were completed by students in the target disciplines; 292 in Southern, 597 in Midland, 277 in Northern and 33 in Eastern College.
I’m terrible with deadlines, I find practically every module, for one piece of work I’ve always got to hand it in late, and that’s because I’ve got to go to work and you know family things happen, people die and people get married and you know you’ve got to drop your work sometimes to suit that you know.

In contrast, at Southern and to a lesser degree Midland university, being a university student becomes the individual’s main source of identity to the extent that at Southern being a student often fills the whole of the individual’s life –every aspect of life, both work and social activities, revolve around the university. The result is widely disparate experiences of being a university student ranging from the FE college students who for the most part don’t even recognise themselves as undergraduates to the students at Southern for whom the university, its social activities, in particular those organised around their college, and their degree course literally fill their whole life.

Identities mobilise both personal biographies and group histories (Brah 2007). We need to make sense of how our students’ learner identities, constituted within the context of schooling and now being reconfirmed or reshaped in the more recent context of HE, harmonise or conflict with social identities of class. As Parekh (2007) argues identities can overlap, interact and shape each other, but particularly when we put working class background together with schooling the different dimensions of identity can be seen to be in conflict with each other (Willis 1977; Skeggs 1997). Thomas and Quinn (2007) argue that ambivalence is generated when different cultural narratives about what it is to be educated and working class collide. We can glimpse
a level of ambivalence in what Linsey, in her 3rd year at Southern, says about her mother’s continued reaction to her daughter attending an elite university:

I still don’t think my mother really approves of me going to Southern. It’s not what her daughter should be doing so I don’t really mention it when I go home. It’s kind of uncomfortable to talk about it.

Clearly many working class parents, including those of our case study students, want their children to go to university but there remain underlying fears that the move may result in “abandoning the family and its norms and values” (Thomas and Quinn 2007: 63). Yet despite continuing ambivalences among both the students and their families, for the most part our working class students at the two more elite universities have worked on and begun the difficult process of reconciling the disjuncture between working class background and academic dispositions long before they arrived at university.

Previous research has argued that academic success for working class students requires breaking with class practices and distancing from family and home community (Connell et al 1982; Demarchelier 1999; McDonald 1999). However, that was rarely the case in our study. Our students’ experiences raise interesting questions in relation to Bourdieu’s notion of working class students as ‘fish out of water’ in educational contexts. At Eastern College and Northern University they appeared to fit in and feel at home. Although the two most enthusiastic and committed learners did talk of having to dissemble and play down the amount of academic work they did:
If my friends at uni knew how much work I did, I would never, ever tell them I loved history, because I would just like have no friends, and sometimes I come in and say, oh yeah, I haven't done the reading, when I have, I've done three times as much as I should have done. It’s just to fit in, I suppose. I’d start my assignment straight away …..and they’re all panicking two hours before the deadline and I've already finished mine. But sometimes I say: ‘oh yeah I haven’t done mine either’, just to sort of fit in. I know that’s really, really stupid and I should have the courage of my convictions but I don’t know, I just want to fit in I suppose. Like with my dissertation so I think that’s absolutely stupid to start it at Christmas, but I’ll probably tell them I'm going to start mine at Christmas as well but [Laughs]. If I went in and said I spent the whole summer, like it would be funny, it’s certainly not bullying, I don’t want you to get the impression it’s bullying, it’s very implicit, it’s like I don't know, I just do it to fit in which is really, really stupid but…..I really don’t want to be the clever one or the swot, do you know what I mean?

(Kylie, Northern)

In the quote above we see the power of institutional habitus in the form of a student learning culture defined by ‘laid-back’ attitudes and a casual, last- minute approach to academic work. Kylie mentions her desire to fit in with her student peers three times and it is obvious that she feels her enthusiasm for learning needs to be tempered, at least in front of other Northern students. Her situation also highlights disjunctions and potential rifts between learner and social identities. As she states very clearly, ‘Socially, yeah, I fit in totally here, I just don’t fit in academically’.
Kylie is applying to a Russell Group University to do a Masters course and points out that there she will ‘fit in fine academically but wont fit in at all socially”.

Kylie’s words touch on an irony for working class students in HE. At Midlands and Southern where the working class students should have had the greatest problems in developing a sense of belonging there was the paradox of fitting in in terms of learner orientations. Most of the case study students had similar learner identities to their middle class peers, and particularly in Southern, where being ‘bright’, academically orientated, and ‘geeky’ is foregrounded in learning contexts, class background becomes relatively unimportant, although it resurfaces in social contexts, and for some in political commitments.

It is here perhaps that the main differences emerge between our working class students. These differences do not lie in social identities, for the most part our students at Southern and Midlands do not come from more privileged fractions of the working classes. Their parents are neither more financially secure nor credentialed than parents of students at Northern and the FE College. While recent American research found that high levels of cultural capital were an important predictor of attendance at elite rather than non-elite universities (Kaufman and Gabler 2004), the students’ families do not appear to possess higher levels of cultural capital. Neither have these students rejected their class backgrounds or even begun a process of distancing themselves from family and school friends. They were no more intent on masking their working class backgrounds than students at Northern and Eastern. In fact one of the most surprising findings was the regularity and enthusiasm with which working class Southern students invited family members to come and stay.
with them in College. Rather, like the students in Goodwin’s (2006: 98) study ‘family held considerable importance in the lives of students’ across all four institutions. The crucial difference then lies more in the learner identities that students bring to the HE context than in differing identifications and social identities. Students at Southern, and to a lesser extent at Midlands, have developed a strong sense of themselves as successful learners – they have discovered that ‘they do academic and do it well’ often from an early age and often in contrast to the majority of their peers in the predominantly working class schools they have attended. There are examples of taking solace in learning, and a number of case study students talk about the discomforts of being different from the majority of their working class peers very early on in their school careers. In this sense the working class students at the two more elite universities have been standing out as serious and committed academic learners for a long time. They already know how to deal with the discomforts of difference because they have prioritised academic success over peer group popularity from primary school. In contrast, a majority of the working class students at Northern and the FE College have learner identities that are more fragile and unconfident:

I: Is there anything that stops you from fulfilling your potential do you think?

Sarah O’Connor (a Northern Law student): My own self doubt really, unfortunately my experiences of school always taught me that, I mean I was always a late learner, I never caught on particularly quickly but when I did it was always slightly later. So I was always brought up with the attitude that oh Siobhan will never amount to anything and actually my head of sixth form tried to prevent me from doing law.

And:
I’m not a brain box or anything, I’m not a very, I’m not a gifted and talented person, I’ve just got to do my work, I’ll only pass if I put in the effort otherwise I cannot, nothing’s a breeze for me. (Fatima)

Sarah mentions her negative school experiences but another contributory factor was that the College, Northern University and to a lesser extent Midlands, did not have the personnel and resources to regularly put students in challenging learning situations. Compounding such institutional influences, their students’ complex and often over-loaded lives, especially at Northern and Eastern, meant neither were students in a position to challenge themselves academically.

Our working class students are complexly and multiply positioned on a number of cross cutting spectrums in relation to their learner identities – the highly independent to largely passive learner; the highly committed who are passionate about their subject to the largely instrumental learners who are simply studying in order to get a good job; the confident to the unconfident. These different types of learners are not identified neatly across different types of institution and some students find themselves in the wrong type of university: not just in terms of social class but in terms of learner identity – what they want out of their learning and how they want to get it. Northern has ‘passionate committed learners’ but these seem to be ‘fish out of water’ among a prevalence of more ‘laid back learners’. However, the tendency unsurprisingly is for the independent, committed and more confident working class students to be in Southern and to a lesser extent Midlands. So two law students at Southern talked about reading around the topic:
I find it difficult just to learn one book. I find it difficult to learn about 3 books, because of the volume, but it's easier to understand what's going on. So if there’s time, then that's what I'd try to do. (Linsey)

And:

I always tried not just to do the basics at school but to read around the subject, just think around the subject even if it didn't mean getting much feedback or developing my arguments with a teacher or even other students. (Jamie)

While Bradley at Midlands elaborates a deep learning orientation in relation to Chemistry:

I find it really interesting because you get to explain stuff that people usually can’t and you get to look at things and are able to see why things happen and you get more and more understanding until eventually you feel you can explain almost anything.

Such simultaneously expansive and deep approaches to learning was rarely mentioned at either Northern or the FE College. So the important thing to stress is the heterogeneity of our working class sample and in particular the range and diversity of learner identities among them. The working class students at Southern share with their middle class peers there a strong positive sense of themselves as successful learners. This is shared but to a lesser extent by the Midland students. In contrast, at Northern the working class students have often had negative school experiences and as a result, as their quotes illustrate, their learner identities are more conflicted and unconfident.
WORKING CLASS HABITUS AND THE RELATIVE REWARDS OF RESILIENCE

Larry Goodwin (2006:12) found that the American working class students graduating from elite universities in his study succeeded above all because of their ‘drive, persistence and resiliency’. What all the working class students in our sample also have in common is resilience and a capacity for dealing with adversity, but this gets played out very differently in the four institutions. In Southern, as I have already mentioned, the students have developed a propensity for dealing with the discomfort of being ‘fish out of water’ – a number since they were in primary school:

Linsey: I had nothing else to do but work in lessons, and I was pretty badly bullied as well. It was really not nice.

Diane: Was that by other girls?

Linsey Yeah. Just everyone. And I remember telling my teacher once, and she was like “Well be like everyone else, and do that kind of thing,” And I didn’t. I mean, I’ve always been….I don’t know, I’m not a cool person. My mum was still putting me in knitted jumpers.

For Linsey Southern provides the comfort and consolation of a critical mass of like-minded learners.

Resilience and coping with adversity are all qualities that are far more associated with working rather than middle classness but in working class contexts are taken-for-granted and often read as stoicism, ‘making the best of a bad situation’. However such qualities become more productive resources for our working class students in the
middle class contexts they have moved into, – they become both notable and noticed:

There's a lot of rubbish going on at home, my mum's had quite difficult relationships, but that's why it's nice to have somewhere to get away, I don't know, it's good being at Southern as well. I really struggle to think whether I could be happy anywhere else, because although I have to do loads of work, and at the moment I'm completely stressed out and it's an absolute nightmare, and I'm not going to do anything like as well as last year, I'm just hoping that I do ok. It's just such a wonderful opportunity. And people care. It's like, I'm not lost in the masses...

When this resilience is combined with a strong and positive learner identity as it is for students, particularly at Southern and Midlands it becomes especially generative. The 2006 HEFCE Report found that when working class students go to university they tend to do very well. Two of the four case study students in their third year at Southern got first class degrees. The other two both got 2 Is. The Southern and Midlands working class students like many of their middle class counterparts are often extremely determined, passionate about their subject area, and single minded. But the major difference between them and the majority of their middle class counterparts is that they have had to struggle against the odds to even get to University. And they have done this from backgrounds largely lacking in external support and resources. As a consequence, they have developed an impressive array of internal resources. As Donald, a History student at Southern, asserts:
If I’m struggling with something, or needed some advice on anything I doubt I would go to anyone here. But that’s partly because of my personality, um, I was brought up in a context of individuals, I’d always been taught that the only person who can help you in yourself.

Donald’s words encapsulate notions of the independent learner but the irony is that in Southern there is far more support for learning than in less resourced universities like Northern. Northern is suffering from the conditions that Blackmore (1997: 92) writes about in which “the under-resourcing of teaching has meant a shift from ‘fat’ to ‘lean-and-mean’ pedagogies, with reduced tutorials, increased tutorial size, and less student contact”. Paradoxically, it is in Northern that students talk about having to rely on their own intellectual resources rather than learn in collegial, experiential and often more challenging ways:

I would have preferred more classroom contact, maybe that’s because I don’t particularly like just total independent learning, I like feedback and maybe that’s because I’m not err, I wasn’t fully, how can I put it? I was worried about my ability to do work on my own, whether I was going in the right or the wrong direction, I wasn’t sure and I find that I would like more contact with lecturers within the module. I find that a lecture and a seminar isn’t enough. ……I think the more you talk, the more you learn you know, so on a personal angle, when I leave my lecture or my seminar and I go home, it’s just sort of me. I’d like to go home and talk about it or come out of my lecture and go into the café and talk about what we’ve been learning, but most people don’t want that. (Arthur, History student, Northern).
Arthur’s words resonate with the findings of Leathwood and O’Connell (2003) and Read et al (2003). Both studies found that working class students in post-1992 universities felt strongly that they were expected to be independent learners early on in their university course but without sufficient supervision and guidance.

CONCLUSION

The rewards and recognition of being a university student are powerfully differentiated across the HE field. Fitting in has hazards for Eastern and Northern students. Conformity to the norms of the field brings relatively little return. While standing out as ‘sad’ and ‘nerdy’ is clearly uncomfortable, fitting in can also be problematic. The contrast with Midland and Southern universities is stark, in terms of both institutional and personal resources. As a consequence it is Midland and Southern university students like Bradley and Linsey, managing a productive tension between ‘fitting in’ and ‘standing out’, who most successfully deal with the challenges of being a working class student in higher education.

However, beyond the very different and inequitable experiences of the students are the enduring inequities of the HE field. McDonough and Fann (2007) map the stratification across the field of Higher Education in the US, outlining the resulting inequalities it generates. Very similar inequalities persist in the UK context, and the success stories of the very few working class students who make it into our elite universities, whilst welcomed, have little impact on the broader picture of continuing classed and racialised inequalities.
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