Fitting in or cooling out? Vocational learners in a traditional University – moving beyond the triad of interview, theory and background information

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Introduction
This paper draws on the early stages of a research project about ‘vocational learners’ and their interactions with staff and systems in the setting of a ‘traditional’ university in the UK.

The paper opens with an overview of the theoretical and policy context and presents the rationale for our research, examining the potential offered by two case study sites for the exploration of the different ways that the ‘vocational’ learner is constructed. The research seeks to understand the experiences and networks of influence involved in the decision-making processes of vocational learners as they progress into a traditional academic university. In part, the research looks at the extent to which these vocational students have to ‘fit in’ or are ‘cooled out’ (don’t fit in and leave or fail); or whether institutional culture changes in response to the widening participation agenda.

Building on previous research into mature and non-traditional university entrants we argue that the learner experience is a gateway to understanding their history and influences, and therefore there is a methodological need to snowball out from the adult learner into their various networks of influence, for example family, friends, work colleagues, admissions and course tutors. We argue that a multi-method research design is needed, which moves beyond a simple triad of interview, theory and background information and embraces a range of methods, including visual data collection techniques. We argue that the adoption of such a methodology allows us to illuminate effectively the experience of vocational learners in traditional university settings and to understand the ways in which history, culture, politics and economy are embedded in the everyday practices of University life.

The final part of our paper presents a reflexive account of our initial empirical findings based on a survey of students within two departments in the
University who have entered through vocational and work-based routes. Analysis of this data allows us to examine the institutional construction of the vocational and work-based learner. It also allows us to reflect critically on the way we have constructed the object of study and research design in relation to the question – what counts as evidence when evaluating widening participation strategies at both a national and local level?

**Background**
This research project has two starting points. Institutionally this project is located with the University of Sheffield (TUOS) but is funded by Higher Futures. Higher Futures is a Higher Education Funding Council of England Lifelong Learning Network whose aim is to broaden access into and through Higher Education. The network involves collaboration between Sheffield Hallam University, who are the lead institution, TUOS and Further Education Colleges from across South Yorkshire and bordering areas. Together they are working with a range of employers and other education and training agencies to establish supportive pathways into University, curriculum development, transition, and information, advice and guidance for vocational and work-based learners. TUOS’s involvement in this enterprise is important. As we will explore later, as a ‘Russell Group’ University, widening participation is not part of its ‘core business’ in the way that it might be for other higher education institutions. TUOS’ participation in the Lifelong Learning Network presents the University with challenges to its self-understanding as a leading research-led institution. Therefore, the research project, while not being an evaluation of TUOS’ involvement in Higher Futures, does offer an opportunity for critical self reflection. Theoretically and methodologically this project began life in a pilot project conducted by two members of the team (Warren & Webb 2007; Warren & Webb 2009; Webb & Warren 2009). That project critically investigated the emergence of an object of policy – ‘the responsible learner’ as part of a policy response to globalisation that was seen to refashion the kinds of skills and knowledge perceived as necessary for economic growth and competitiveness (see Brown & Lauder 1992; Coffield 1999; Department for Education and Employment 2001; Department for Education and Skills 2005; 2006; Department for Trade and Industry 1998). In particular, globalisation is seen as introducing new risks and uncertainties, disrupting traditional patterns of transition into and through employment (Department for Education and Skills 2006; Field 2000; 2001; Strain & Field 1997). Methodologically the ‘responsible learners’ project explored how structure and agency could be conceived as simultaneous moments in the lived experiences of learners. Importantly, it sought to break with much contemporary research in the field that constructed the individual learners as the object of study. It offered a particular approach to narrative-based research. This will be discussed below.
Defining our focus of inquiry

Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs) were launched in England in 2005, within a four-year programme of national government funding for partnerships between further education and higher education providers at local and regional levels. They form part of an array of current UK government initiatives which seek to improve collaboration across sector boundaries and to increase the numbers of people gaining university-level qualifications (Watson, 2005). In particular, these initiatives have set out to increase HE participation levels among social groups who have been seen as under-represented to date, including young people and adults with ‘vocational’ rather than ‘academic’ qualifications.

Within this short paragraph there are a number of questions that problematise the apparently simple notion of the ‘vocational learner’: where do we place the boundary between ‘vocational’ and ‘academic’, and what do we mean when we describe the university under consideration here as ‘traditional’? For the purpose of this study, we have adopted the definition (Little et al. 2008) provided in a recent national interim evaluation by the Centre for Higher Education Research & Information (CHERI) for English Lifelong Learning networks:

...... vocational learners are broadly conceived as i) those whose post-16 educational pathway leads to qualifications other than A levels, ii) work-based learners and iii) adults already in the workplace.

How the vocational learner is constructed in policy and through institutional practice is a focus for our research. We have decided not to completely accept the policy definition of vocational learners but seek to explore how policy and institutional definitions create the conditions that make for students to ‘fit in’ or ‘cool out’. Our reference to locating our study in a ‘traditional’ university signposts a different but related set of issues. Although there is no longer a formal distinction between more ‘vocationally-oriented’ polytechnics and more traditionally ‘academic’ universities in the UK, the HE sector is still characterised by informal divisions that reflect a history of polarisation between academic and vocational emphases. Thus the ‘post-92’ universities (the former polytechnics) have a stronger track record in recruiting vocational learners than the ‘old’ or ‘traditional’ universities, which commonly also refer to themselves as ‘research-led’ – thus reinforcing the polarisation in some respects. As in many traditional or ‘pre-1992’ universities in the United Kingdom, the numbers of students entering TUOS through vocational routes are low when compared to entrants who hold the post-16 qualifications normally gained at school or college (typically ‘A’ levels or the International Baccalaureate). For example, in 2007 a total of 62 students were accepted into the university on the basis of the vocational ‘BTEC’ qualification, compared to 3622 via the A level route. This is only one illustration of the overall pattern, however, since not all ‘vocational’ learners who transfer to
university do so via the BTEC route. We return to this point below, in the discussion of our sampling strategy.

**Vocational learners in a traditional university**

This paper is, in part, the culmination of ‘thinking sessions’ in which the team has attempted to place under critical scrutiny the taken for granted terms of ‘vocational’ ‘academic’ and ‘traditional university’. An examination of the relevant literature and policy documentation has revealed the ‘fuzziness’ of attempted categorization in this field, not least the differentiation between ‘vocational’ and ‘non-traditional’ learners. Schuetze and Slowey (2002) identify three criteria as central to the definition of non-traditional learners: educational biography, entry routes and mode of study.

We will investigate how far these factors are central to the definition of vocational learners at TUOS. Using the CHERI definition as a guide, we found that central admissions staff can easily provide information on some ‘vocational learners’ - for example those holding BTEC diplomas - because data from UCA confirms learners on the basis of entry qualifications. Indeed, TUOS, as with other English universities, use the HEFCE definition of vocational learner which is framed, as we said above, by entry qualification. This is a highly normative criterion which is premised upon the assumption that ‘normal’ biographies (Ball et al. 2000) that is those who come to TUOS through the traditional academic A Level route, are the assumed university entrants, those who enter with non-A Level qualifications being an ‘other’. However, as Nixon et al (2006) have highlighted, current systems do not facilitate any more detailed identification of learner pathways into HE. We are working with admissions staff to find ways of identifying - for example - those undergraduate learners who are full-time and who may be supported by their employers, as well as part-time students who may be work-based. In addition, mature learners and those who have entered TUOS via access routes can also be identified. At the time of writing this paper, data was being prepared to include all these identifiable categories for 2006, 2007 and 2008. This data will enable the team to map the location and specific entry qualifications of vocational learners within TUOS and to select a sample of study participants.

In addition to seeking clarification on who might be included in the study, we also sought to answer the question ‘where should we site the research activities?’ Which faculty, which departments, which courses should be included? As a first step, we looked at data on BTEC entrants, the largest easily identifiable group. An initial analysis of the BTEC data suggested that the Faculty of Engineering and the Medical Faculty could provide two locations where vocational learners might be constructed in very different ways. A further rationale for selecting these faculties is that they contain courses relating to the Higher Futures priority sectors and, as such, they are
engaged in developing progression routes and support mechanisms for vocational and work-based learners.

The intuitional construction of the vocational learner as ‘other’ immediately raises issues about how we understand their experience of entry into, and passage through TUOS. So, what kind of evidence counts when inquiring into vocational learner entry to ‘traditional’ research universities? Where should we focus our gaze? We will try to address this through a discussion of our methodological approach.

**Inquiring into the ‘vocational learner’ as object of policy and institutional practice**

While the institutional data allows us to understand how the vocational learner is constructed through entry requirements, we want to explore the learning trajectory of a sample of learners through a systematic process of iterative analyses, moving backwards and forwards between subjective account and structural context. To explore these learning trajectories the project is focusing on two dimensions:

- Institutional focus
- Learner focus

**Institutional focus**

The institutional focus will explore the ways the case study Departments arrange their internal and external environments. Here we are informed by the approach taken by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded project, *The Impact of Policy on Learning and Inclusion in the New Learning and Skills Sector* (Coffield et al. 2008).

Internal environments – here we want to look at how the management of vocational entry routes sit within the Departmental structures and strategies, and relates to their teaching and learning strategy; at the role of progression managers, admissions tutors and other University service departments such as Student Services, etc.

External environments – here we want to look at the way the Departments arrange their relations with employers, professional bodies, and in particular the FE colleges. Part of the external focus will be to explore the learning cultures of the colleges similar to those where the sample learners came from

**Learner focus**

Exploring learner trajectories involves four stages:

1. Questionnaire - a questionnaire has been sent to all learners who have entered these Departments through ‘vocational routes’ to collect information on previous education, social characteristics, family participation in higher education and aspects of their learner trajectory.
2. A theoretical sample of learners has been selected. We have currently identified 10 students.

3. Each of these learners will be involved in two in-depth interviews:
   a. The initial interview will explore their learner trajectory – motivations, experience, etc. This interview is a vehicle for identifying not only their experience but aspects of the different learning cultures in college and the University Department, particularly those aspects that support/inhibit progression. We will also need to identify key people in their networks of influence.
   b. The return interview will share our initial analyse of the first interview in light of the institutional focus and interviews with the learner’s networks of influence. This will allow us to test out with the learner our hypotheses and to generate new understandings (for more information on the role of the second interview and snowball sampling see Warren & Webb 2009).

4. Snowball sampling – through the first interview we will identify key people in the learner’s networks of influence who could help us understand other social, cultural and institutional influences on them as learners, and where being a learner fits into their wider social world. In particular these might include people who have been particularly important in supporting them through difficult times in their learner trajectory.

5. In addition the learners will be asked to make a visual record of aspects of the learning environment (key visual clues related to their experience) – this will be conducted between interviews 1 and 2.

The entry data allows us to both map the ‘vocational learner’ in TUOS, help us to focus our empirical work, and critically examine the institutional construction of the ‘vocational learner’. The initial interview with the learner, which is where much research begins and ends, is a starting point for us. The methodological task is to link the personal narratives with policy narratives at both government and institutional levels, and with the narratives emerging from friends, family, colleagues, and tutors help us build up a discursive montage. This approach of bringing together different kinds of ‘narrative’ is similar to Bourdieu’s notion of a ‘discursive montage’ that enables us to empirically investigate the construction of the ‘vocational learner’ as a special case ‘in a finite world of possible configurations’ (Bourdieu 2003: 2).
What kind of evidence?
In order to make a final comment on the nature of evidence and its relation to policy production and effects we will now briefly look at part of the initial data emerging out of the project, the questionnaire sent to vocational learners. 815 entrants were contacted. We received 107 responses, of which 22 agreed to further involvement in the research. The analysis we present here is tentative, but forms the basis for producing critical comments on the nature of evidence.

The questionnaire was partly designed to construct a profile of ‘vocational learners’ in the two case study departments, and to help us select a sample of students. We have noted above that in part qualifications act as proxies for the social distinctions between different groups of students. So, what are some of the characteristics of those students who entered the two Faculties primarily through Access courses, BTEC, and A level. Those students who primarily gained entry with an Access to Higher Education or a BTEC qualification gained this while attending an FE college. This contrasts with those who gained entry with A levels who mostly gained the qualification at secondary school or sixth form college. Informed by previous research on non-traditional entrants to HE we wanted to see if there was any correlation between entry through vocational qualifications and previous family participation in HE. The limited data only allows us to generate further questions for inquiry. Those respondents who said other members of their family had attended university predominantly attended school or sixth form colleges, whereas those without previous family participation in HE attended further education colleges.

The data suggests that entry is organised by a basic binary division between two circuits of education and training, a traditional circuit comprised of those schools and sixth form colleges offering A Levels, and a circuit comprising school and further education colleges offering ‘vocational’ qualifications. Measuring entry by qualification may not be enough. We also need to ask whether the different circuits prepare students differently for participation in a ‘traditional’ university and how the university responds to such difference. Is this difference further reinforced or does the institutional response challenge the structural barriers to successful university participation?

We argue that the learner experience is a gateway to understanding their history and influences, and therefore there is a methodological need to snowball out from the adult learner into their various networks of influence, for example family, friends, work colleagues, admissions and course tutors. What counts as ‘evidence’ has to go beyond accepting the category of ‘vocational learner’ as a given defined by entry qualification. We have to examine how the category is constructed through policy and institutional
practice, and to critically scrutinise how structural distinctions, such as those based on different circuits of education and training, are embedded in institutional practice.

References
Endnotes

i. For full details, see the national and regional websites: http://www.lifelonglearningnetworks.org.uk/ and http://extra.shu.ac.uk/higherfutures/about/index.html

ii. BTEC National qualifications (Award, Certificate, Diploma) provide an alternative to A-levels in England and Wales for the 16-19 age group, and were first taught in 2002.

iii. A-level qualifications are the conventional entry route into HE and focus on traditional study skills. They normally take two years to complete full-time in school or college.

iv. The ‘national universities and colleges admissiona service’ which processes applications for HE entry.

v. Foundation Degrees are degree level qualifications designed with employers; they commonly combine academic study with workplace learning.

vi. That is, those aged over 21 at 1st October in their year of entry to HE.

vii. Access to HE courses offer a route into higher education (HE) for those who do not have the educational qualifications which are usually required for entry to HE. These courses provide the underpinning knowledge and skills needed for university-level study, and lead to the award of the Access to HE qualification, which is of an equivalent standard to Level 3 qualifications, such as A levels.

viii. We had hoped that the dataset would exclude A level entrants. However it was not possible to completely exclude A-level entrants from the sample. This apparent anomaly does allow us to conduct some tentative comparisons between A level and non-A level entrants.

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