

## Editorial: Reflecting back to the past, present and future: The changing nature of research on access, learning careers and identity

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Historically it could be argued that issues of access were apparent in the late nineteenth century with the University Extension Movement in the UK and Ireland which offered education to working class men. And later in Scandinavia with the Folk High Schools as well as the work by Rubenson (1979) in the 1970s on recruitment to education. Early research in the 1980s and 1990s in the field of access focused on the process of adults accessing and participating in education and much of the literature centred, and continues to centre, on higher education (Williams, 1997), at that time educators and researchers used the term “second chance” but is rarely used now. This mirrored policy concerns on the need to widen access and participation by policy makers at national and European levels. There was little research on the lived experience of adult learners once they enter the system as the key concern was to get adults to return to learn, largely for economic reasons to enhance the skills of the workforce in a competitive global world. This tension was connected to the rise of the neoliberal paradigm that oriented the uses and meanings of the lifelong learning endeavour in an instrumental and linear direction (Barros, 2012; Milana, 2012).

Once adult learners had accessed higher education, for example, it was assumed that they were on an equal footing with younger students, research at this time mainly looked at how adults managed to overcome the barriers both at the beginning and during their learning itinerary (Cross, 1981). Over the years research and literature on adult access broadened in scope and moved beyond access issues as some researchers began to ask the question ‘access to what?’.

Research interest, therefore, began to explore the learning and educational experiences of adults in various educational settings such as community education, adult education and further education, although the focus was very much on higher education



and still is (Fragoso et al., 2013; González-Monteaudo & Ballesteros-Moscio, 2014; Merrill, 1999; Osborne et al., 2004). Researching experiences of learning highlighted issues of inequalities in relation to class, gender, race age (Bron et al., 2014; Reay, 2002; Skeggs, 1997; Tett, 2000) and more recently disability (Fragoso, 2020). Later studies also began to explore a wider range of inequalities and the intersectionality of these (Finnegan et al., 2014) as well as taking into account concepts such as identity, agency, structure and learning careers. Research in this area also moved into the areas of informal learning, workplace and vocational learning (Mégret & Eneau, 2019).

Accessing education and engaging in learning has the potential to change identities and transform lives. It is a biographical learning experience. Once the learning journey has begun it may not always be an easy one and some may struggle with external and inner constraints while others will be determined to keep going on using their agency to develop a positive learning career. In many educational institutions, particularly higher education, non-traditional adult students are expected to adjust and adapt to the system rather than institutions changing their policies and practices to meet their needs. And as Reay (2003) points out this can be a risky business. The transitional space of an education institution may enable an individual to reflect back on their past and present biography while also imagining a future biography of who they want to become (West et al., 2007). At the same time, in some educational institutions such as higher education, adult students may experience inequalities (class, gender, race age and disability) as they are seen as being the 'other' in a context where the cultural and social capitals are different to theirs (Finnegan et al., 2014). These experiences may have a panoply of effects: some non-traditional students will become more aware of developing their agency in order to better participate in a social struggle for recognition (Honneth, 1995) while others will be discouraged and lose their opportunities for personal transformation (and in certain cases even dropping out from the institution). Research indicates that drop out may include a range of reasons such as financial issues, feeling that they cannot cope with their studies and juggling studying, work and family caring. However, some adults who choose to drop out state that they have benefitted from their learning experiences (Finnegan et al., 2014) in general, these processes represent deep existential challenges and many authors highlight the need of developing dedicated support.

Research on access and adult students was initially quantitative (Woodley et al., 1988; Fulton, 1989) and provided data and statistics about who the adult students were, which institutions they were studying in and the type of courses they were undertaking. With the 'turn' to biographical methods in the social sciences (Chamberlayne et al., 2000) there was a major shift towards qualitative methods and biographical approaches in particular. Such an approach gave 'voice' to adult students and an in-depth understanding of their learning experiences and the complexities and nuances of learning as well as highlighting inequalities in their daily lives. Biographical methods, therefore, became dominant in European adult education research (West et al., 2007).

Over the past five years adult education has been experiencing a new crisis and a time of change as a result of the pandemic and new challenges to access, teaching and learning. COVID 19 has also brought with it an increase in inequalities and poverty and adult education has a role to play in alleviating and challenging this situation. In particular, it has made accessing education more difficult (Aristovnik et al., 2020). Also the move to teaching remotely online from face-to-face has significantly changed the learning and teaching experiences of both adult students and adult educators in all adult education contexts. On the one hand remote learning may have helped adults with children at home, disabled students or those who are working and studying to better coordinate their different activities, as attendance at university and adult education

institutions was stopped, or the opportunity to watch recorded lessons or share online teaching sessions when it was convenient for them. On the other hand, the loss of face-to-face interactions and learning and the possibility to have a real university experience, or experience in another adult education context, may have caused a deep loss as social relationships and social networks play an important role in the learning trajectories of adult students (Finnegan et al., 2014; Raaper et al., 2021). Attending academic spaces, meeting people, making unexpected encounters and learning and social experiences are all processes at the base of a wide (and to some extent non-instrumental) socialisation processes which are an important resource for the development of new social capital (Field, 2000/2006). The rhythms of higher education institutions represent a challenge for those who have to coordinate work and family arrangements but, at the same time, these constraints may force adults to take a proper and exclusive time and discover the right of enjoying a personal space of transformation (Dakka & Smith, 2019). In this sense it is fundamental to reason on continuities and discontinuities that are produced along the encounters with the academic world (Merrill et al., 2018).

In this thematic issue we invited authors to explore how the conceptual and theoretical understanding of access, learning careers and identity has changed over the years and the recent affect of the pandemic and future directions. We also wanted to examine methodological approaches which have been used over the years and how these may represent a useful strategy for future research in understanding the access and learning experiences of adults.

The present issue includes five papers that engage critically with diverse aspects (theory, practice and policy) of this complex theme from the perspectives of adult students and adult educators in a wide range of educational settings.

In the paper ‘Experience and Sociological Imagination: Transforming the Researcher’s Learner Identity’, Ted Fleming used two research projects to explore the experiences of mature students’ access, progression and drop-out in higher education, relying first on Habermas and Honneth for sensitising concepts. But the paper moves beyond these references to the critical theory of Negt and Kluge as a source of new sensitising concepts. Their work on experience, its dialectic nature, “imploitation”, obstinacy and a sociological imagination are explored to identify possible new avenues for researching adults returning to higher education.

José González-Monteagudo, Teresa Padilla-Carmona and María Tenorio-Rodríguez’s article (Perspectives, aspirations and perceived support students with low economic and cultural capital in the university in Spain and Dominican Republic) investigates the characteristics and material and emotional costs of upward social mobility through higher education in Spain and the Dominican Republic. This is a comparative qualitative study based on biographical-narrative interviews, which reports on the experiences of students from an economically disadvantaged background. The results show the nuanced social mobility experiences and expectations of the participants and their families. The conclusions highlight the perspectives built by the participants and the critical role of structural dimensions in understanding their experiences in the university context.

The third article is titled ‘‘I feel different...’’: learning experiences and identities of African students in Higher Education’. Using biographical methods, Catarina Doutor and Natália Alves explore African students’ learning experiences in higher education and how they shaped their identities. The findings resulted from a content analysis of interviews that connect two analytic dimensions: biographical learning experiences and identity transformations. The authors show that African students gained new knowledge and skills

and became more independent, autonomous and self-confident. The students' experiences in higher education contributed to the formation and transformation of their identity.

Samantha Jane Broadhead and Sharon Hooper conducted a case study on 'How can arts-based methods support narrative inquiry into adult learning?' This article considers an arts-based project aimed at capturing the experiences of adults who have returned to arts study. The project evaluates the narrative inquiry and digital film-making hosted on YouTube and discovers which themes the participants considered important to communicate to an imagined, virtual audience. The analysis of the process outlines the ways in which the aesthetics of the videos/films interconnect with the lived experiences of the participants. The editing process offers a means of analysing the content of the films that is analogous to the approaches associated with qualitative research.

The last paper of this thematic issue (The representation of mature students in governing bodies of a Portuguese university: 'We are all equal, but some are more equal than others'!?) is authored by José Pedro Amorim and Felismina Viterbo. The authors investigate how mature students are represented by and in the governing bodies of higher education institutions. Their results show that student representation does not really represent all students, at least fairly and equitably. Mature students are still perceived as a source of 'difficulties' and 'needs' and, among other underrepresented groups, they seem to be made invisible. Moreover, the functioning of these bodies tends to be known only by the students who participate in them.

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