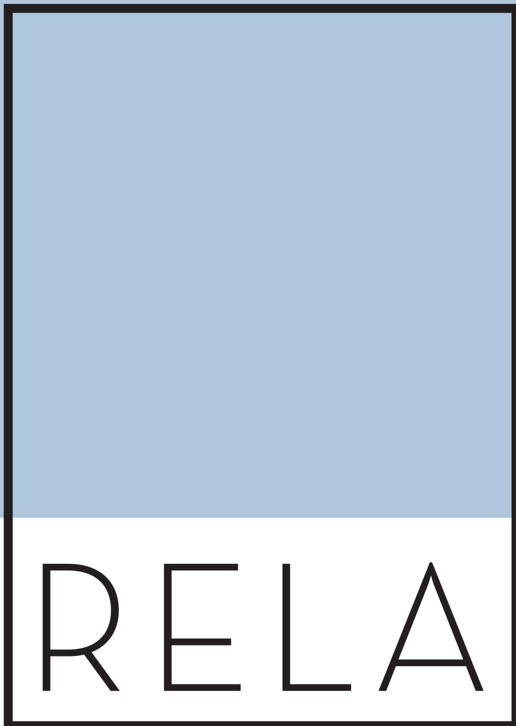
Reflecting back to the past, present and future: The changing nature of research on access, learning careers and identity



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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

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and still is (Fragoso et al., 2013; González-Monteagudo & Ballesteros-Moscosio, 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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Experience and sociological imagination: Transforming the researcher's learner identity

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Abstract

Two research projects undertaken ten years ago explored the experiences of mature students' access, progression and drop-out in higher education, relying on Habermas and Honneth for sensitizing concepts. This paper explores the implications of undertaking this research today adopting a different set of sensitizing concepts and in the process transforming the identity of the researcher. To this end, this paper moves beyond Habermas and Honneth to the critical theory of Negt and Kluge as a source of new sensitizing concepts informing a reimagined researcher and research project. Their work on experience, its dialectic nature, imploitation, obstinacy – as an alternative to resilience – and a sociological imagination are explored in order to identify possible new sensitizing concepts for researching adults returning to higher education. Implications for transformative adult education will be identified.

Keywords: experience, imploitation, public sphere, obstinacy, sociological imagination

Introduction

The task of this paper is to explore and re-imagine how the researcher as learner may, many years later, inform earlier research projects differently by relying on different sensitizing concepts. This approach acknowledges the temporality of a learning life and career (see Alhadeff-Jones, 2016). The original research projects explored the experiences of adult students accessing and returning to higher education (HE). The theory of transformative learning (TL) is used to inform what is understood as adult learning – it too shall be transformed in the process. Jack Mezirow's (1978) researched adult returners to college while he and colleagues relied on sensitizing concepts (Mezirow & Marsick, 1978) grounded in the works of Fingarette (1963), Dewey (1966), Freire (1972), Kelly (1963), Kuhn (1962), Marx, (1964), Schutz (1970) and indeed many more

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(see Kokkos, 2020). Grounded theory researchers approach data with a set of what I call sensitizing concepts (Thistoll et al., 2015) for interpreting data.

During the original research projects work has been done highlighting how qualitative data was analysed (Finnegan, 2021; Finnegan et al., 2011; Murphy & Fleming, 2013). Sensitizing concepts were used when approaching the data as researchers rely on concepts that they bring to the research process – their epistemological position (Glaser, 1978).

The original research had three dimensions. First, the experience of the participants. Second, the context or environment provided by the educational institution and the public policy framework within which adults navigate their learning journeys. Third, the often-neglected frame of reference of the researchers and the clarity with which this is articulated. This third dimension, as it evolved since these research projects concluded, is the focus of this paper.

Two research projects are involved in this temporality inspired rethink. One is known as 'College Knowledge' (Murphy & Fleming, 2013). This Irish government funded project explored ways in which adult students experienced the power of the institutions as they navigated through HE. It explored the experiences of power, the power of the institutions and that of the students – their agency. The findings show that questions of equality and disadvantage in the university are not only about access, but also about accessibility – the experience of mature students as they progress through HE. It interprets students' experience as a conflict between the common-sense knowledge of students and the college knowledge of the academy in a way that identified the potential for collaborative and democratic discourse that provide possibilities of transcending the dichotomies of common versus college knowledge. Habermas' theory of communicative action provided a framework for this task, and the case was made for linking HE and adult education with the quest for democracy and a more just and caring society. Though HE institutions are indeed powerful in multiple ways, students are not without power and not without knowledge – common knowledge and experience.

The second project was the EU funded Research of Access and Retention of non-Traditional Learners in Higher Education across seven countries (RANLHE) that identified international patterns of retention whilst clarifying different understandings and contexts of access and retention (Fleming & Finnegan, 2014). The Ireland research unit identified the struggle for recognition as a sensitizing concept for interpreting interviews (Fleming, 2016).

Both research projects relied on Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth for sensitizing concepts. Habermas (1975, 2003) understands distorted communications as current social pathologies and proposes a theory of communicative action. Honneth (1995) identifies misrecognition as the current social pathology and describes a 'recognition turn' in his critical theory. His subsequent made an 'emancipatory turn' (2014). These turns acknowledge the temporality of their work providing precedents for making, what I call, an 'experiential turn' in critical theory. I explore this relying on the critical pedagogy of Oskar Negt (2010). It is his 'experiential turn' that led to my rethinking of the interpretive frames of reference utilized in previous research projects.

The plan

This paper maps a transformed set of sensitizing concepts by outlining concepts such as experience, its dialectic nature, obstinacy, imploitation and sociological imagination grounded in the critical theory of Oskar Negt. I will maintain the centrality of transformative learning as a potential framework within which adult learning may be

understood in, HE (Fleming, 2020) identifying in the process some implications of Negt's work for TL.

Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge

Oskar Negt, who previously worked with Habermas, is a close ally of the Frankfurt School, an academic and active adult educator contributing to workers education in Germany. Alexander Kluge (2020), is a film maker and friend of Adorno. He explores the political and economic conditions of working-class life. He rethinks the importance and nature of experience; a study of obstinacy; their pedagogical method that they call exemplary learning that involves teaching with a sociological imagination. Before I build on the work of Negt (1971; Negt & Kluge, 1993) and Kluge (2017, 2020; Kluge & Negt 2014) I assert that we live in the age of experience. Never before, I think, has human experience been so central to how we operate in society and understand adult learning (Fleming, 2020). The previous research projects explored the experience of adult students in HE and Negt and Kluge offer new insights on the nature of experience – and its role in learning. I shall explore these insights before teasing out the implications for re-imagining research.

Experience and education

John Dewey called for a 'sound philosophy of experience' because education needs to understand experience (Dewey, 1938, p. 91). Today experience plays a significant role in public life and in adult education. Peoples' experience is expressed in the public sphere frequently through new social movements. Public protests raise the experience of citizens to the level of a public statement intended to express the demands of citizens so that matters of public concern can receive a public policy response. Street protests are a form of democratic politics from below in which workers, students, or other citizens express their experience. They express the voices of counter publics. Through protesting epistemologically marginalized people attempt to trigger a crisis among the socially and economically powerful – potential disorienting dilemmas for the political system and that may lead to TL. These activities area central and a necessary component of democratic systems, and it is difficult to imagine democracies without active and vibrant public spheres.

The theory of TL identifies experience as central, especially the experience of disorienting dilemmas - the starting point for TL. Experience is central to Negt and Kluge too, so much so that the slogan borrowed (inaccurately) from *The Communist Manifesto* of Marx and Engels (2006) saying 'Workers of the world Unite!' has been adapted and used to describe how Kluge and Negt (2014, p. 464) highlight experience: 'Experiences of the world, Unite!'

John Dewey (1966) defines education as 'that reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience' (p. 76) and this includes 'organizing, restructuring and transforming' experience (p. 50). For Dewey experience is in *continuity* with previous experience. In pursuing meaning, new experience is modified or integrated with previous experience. For Mezirow (1978) 'a meaning perspective refers to the structure of cultural assumptions within which one's new experience is assimilated to - and transformed by - one's past experience' (p. 101). For Dewey, experience is also in *interaction* with one's broader environment (Dewey, 1938). Learning involves becoming aware of these 'interactions and continuities' (Dewey, 1966, pp. 76-77).

Oskar Negt (Negt & Kluge, 1993) identifies the adult education of workers as a way to eliminate injustices in the sphere of work. The injustices/humiliations that workers experience, he says, involve the absence of material resources (redistributive justice) and the denial of recognition. The experience of workers is the starting point for learning, teaching and developing his social theory and the experiences of workers (learners) are infused with the contradictions of capitalist society. The experience of workers as a source of 'resistance to capitalism' (Kluge & Negt, 2014, p. 31). His concept of exemplary learning describes his pedagogy and this involves exercising the sociological imaginations of workers (learners) so that they come to understand these issues, take social action and alter the condition of workers (and learners). I call this recognitive justice - asserting the rights of workers to be recognised. Even though Negt and Kluge emphasise the impact of neo-liberalism their argument could be elaborated by including other social, political and economic pathologies - racism, ageism and sexism.

Experience is dialectical

In reinterpreting Hegel, Negt emphasizes the dialectical nature of experience so that then the connections between current experience and past experience are dialectical. So too are the connections between experience and broader social environments. TL builds on Dewey's insights about experience and forefronts the experience of adults as the trigger for learning. However, both Dewey and TL ignore the dialectical nature of experience. Peter Alheit (2020) uses an example from Erving Goffman to illustrate how the dialectic operates in society. In contrast, I suggest that soccer may be more productive example than that used by Goffman. Soccer teams are usually owned by organizations (or individuals), played by individuals, regulated by FIFA and supported through television and gate receipts of supporters. The rules of the game are changed in response to how the players and/or supporters react to these rules. If supporters get restless or bored, regulators may change the rules to make the game more satisfying for fans and/or players. Players react and adapt to the changes raising the possibility of further rule adjustments. The interactions between all participants are dialectically connected. Bored fans trigger rule changes, as with VAR, and these impact on the experience of fans in a dialectical interaction. Rules are not the only such mechanism as money, satisfaction, and even unconscious notions of pleasure or fair play may operate behind the backs of any participants.

Mezirow and much adult education theory has allowed this dialectical understanding of experience to escape their grasp. Experience is dialectical. This may have been a missed opportunity for TL theory that does not grasp this fuller understanding of experience as do Freire and Negt. In contrast, by relying on Roger Gould (1978) and other exponents of psychoanalysis, the opportunity to make TL more than an individual phenomenon is delayed. Habermas asserts that psychoanalysis is a methodological model of 'personal ideology critique' where self-reflection helps 'dissolve the pseudo-otherness of his [the patient] symptoms, which controlled him as if they were externally determined' (Jay, 1984, p. 479). The social dimension of TL and the dialectical nature of experience are misconstrued, and not only by TL.

Experience and its environment are also connected dialectically. An early phase of transformative learning involves making connections between one's own individual problem and broader social issues. This connection is dialectical and not only is the personal political (as feminists have long asserted) but the political is personal too. This fundamentally alters TL theory. A number of the phases of TL must now be reinterpreted (Fleming, 2022b).

Critiques of transformation theory focus on the way the social dimension of learning is misconstrued. We can now define this issue differently. Individual problems are connected dialectically with broader social issues. The political is personal – dialectically. This makes understanding one's problems or dilemmas and the search for solutions more complex than previously understood and one's problems are not comprehensively understood unless they are understood as dialectical. Connecting with broader social issues becomes an essential dimension of understanding experience. The actions one takes as the essential final phase of TL I now propose is also a dialectically interconnected set of actions at personal and social levels (Fleming, 2022b). Any research that focusses on the experiences of learners without making these dialectical connections is liable to misunderstand the notion of learning and in particular TL.

The process of re-thinking everything we inherit, defines TL. Thinking in this way, critically thinking, involves engaging with experiences of one's inherited world view, or lifeworld (Bauman, 1995; Jarvis, 2004). The educational task for each individual or indeed a learning society is to engage in problematizing (Freire) what has been taken for granted. Deep critical reflection requires that we learn to read the world in order to understand how personal and social experiences have been shaped by power. It requires that one perceives that internal oppressions and external injustices operate dialectically (Freire, 1972). I suggest that this is a critical 'reconstruction of the experience' of oppression, inequality, exclusion, and misrecognitions – all sorts and not just of workers, but of women, refugees, homeless, poor, etc.

Experience and the public sphere

If Dewey and Mezirow outline an understanding of learning that involves a reconstruction or transformation of experience, Negt and Kluge articulated how adult learning, when properly understood, has an essential link to social action. Their work on how the public sphere is socially and economically constructed, leads us to see experience as a more complex phenomenon and more difficult to transform. The public sphere has its own mechanisms for exclusion and an ability to hide its contradictions and exclusions. This applies to the public or discursive spaces created with learners in HE also.

As experience is of interest to adult educators so too is the public sphere and here, we make explicit the connection between experience, the public sphere and democracy. Adult students are political beings, active in the economy (as workers or preparing to work) and in the expression and formation of public opinion (Finnegan & Fleming, 2023). According to Negt and Kluge critical reflection on lived experience is fundamental to democracy and the public sphere. Negt argues that 'democracy is the only politically conceived social order that has to be learnt over and over, every day into old age' (Kluge & Negt, 2014, p. 452).

Negt and Kluge (1993) argue that the concentrated ownership of mass media, the manipulation by state and corporate actors of media and the products of the culture industry based on consumption and entertainment undermine the public sphere as a space for critical dialogue. This involves the commodification, individualization, and trivialization of social experience. New social media act as the public sphere in the world today. Negt and Kluge assert that uncritical immersion in these commodified media may be leading to new forms of subjectivity, leeched of the characteristic of obstinacy – to which I will return later.

A vibrant public sphere is essential for democracy and adult education has a powerful role in developing the 'communities of publics' that engage in forming public opinion (Rasmussen, 2021, p. 15). The public sphere has changed significantly since Habermas

(1989) wrote his groundbreaking work in 1974. It is now digital, commodified and globalized (Habermas, 2022). There are counter publics representing gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity and public debates are influenced by globalization and the commodification of the media. Democracy cannot survive in the current digital world without an inclusive public sphere and a deliberative process for the formation of public opinion. 'The public sphere is the site where struggles are decided by means other than war' (Negt & Kluge, 1993, p. ix). The HE to which students are given access promises many of the skills and insights that are important for engaging in vibrant public spheres. These ideas would inform new transformed sensitizing concepts in a re-turn to the original research data at the core of this paper.

Kluge and Negt (2014) in *History and Obstinacy* outline a political theory, using fragmented notes with a clear concern for and interest for teaching and learning. They attempt to account for the fragmented nature of the public sphere as well as the emergence of new counter publics. I suggest that lifelong learning and adults returning to adult education may form such counter publics. Negt and Kluge are interested in learners making these connections and learning to make such connections, by providing learners with the 'experience of learning to organize their own experience' (Pavsek, 1996, p. 141). This echoes Freire's idea of the student coming to know what they already know but in a different way. Or it could be described as experiencing their own experience, but at the level of political activity.

In their earlier work (published in 1972), *Public Sphere and Experience,* Negt and Kluge (1993) propose a programme for engaging with social institutions. It is what Fore (2014, p. 15) calls a 'spirited broadside' targeting the cartels that own and run the media. Fore (2014) links the media with a 'stupefaction of the populace and gross ideological distortions' that can only be addressed by 'reintegrating systemically distorted aspects of lived experience, such as labour and family, production and intimacy, into the public sphere' (p. 15).

Capitalism invades the Self: imploitation and obstinacy

Negt and Kluge (1993, p. 22) are concerned with the extent to which neoliberal capitalism exploits 'the inner resources of the living subject' and inserts itself into the identities of individuals. Capitalism targets the inner resources of the subject even though that realm seems to lie 'beyond the formal bounds of the workplace' (Kluge & Negt, 2014, p. 19). Kluge and Negt call this collapse of the inner world of the subject an 'imploitation' (2014, p. 19) and that the 'colonization of the lifeworld' accurately captures the meaning of imploitation (Kluge & Negt, 2014, p. 20). This may have been a useful sensitizing concept for re-informing the College Knowledge research and would involve exploring the agency of students as subjects of imploitation. In contrast, obstinacy might better illuminate student agency and see students as active participants, making history, their own history, and indeed in the process possibly re-making the history of the HE institutions.

History and Obstinacy (Kluge & Negt, 2014) is a form of critical archaeology of capitalism within us, and echoes Raymond Williams insight: the most important thing workers produce is their own self (Fore, 2014, p. 22). As Negt and Kluge explore how capitalism inserts itself into the self they (Kluge & Negt, 2014) go on to 'extend this analysis all the way down to the lowest strata of unconscious thought and cellular light' (p. 22). Exploring the human psyche using phenomenology, systems theory, evolutionary science, and psychoanalysis they identify how the outside world governs the inner world and establishes powerful forces of motivation and feelings. But in spite of these negative

consequences there is a basic obstinacy that does not get imploited. This has implications for interpreting student interviews. The researcher might now use or explore, as sensitizing concepts, the obstinacy of returning students who gain access to HE.

The insights of Negt emphasise the capabilities of humans and how these are channelled, subsumed, and constrained in any given sociohistorical context. Kluge and Negt (2014) also argue that a theory of capitalism is required that will help understand the current situation, and grasp how labour capacities are being developed, repressed, and fragmented. Today 'there is no remnant of humanity in capitalism' (Negt as cited in Knödler-Bunte et al., 2014, p. 60), and capitalism has migrated into the depths of our inner lives (Finnegan & Fleming, 2023). The intensification of this instrumental logic has created greater material abundance, but with less control over it (Knödler-Bunte et al., 2014).

Negt and Kluge, have concluded that people have a capacity for self-regulation and collaboration in everyday experience that has explosive potential. This is not unlike Honneth's struggle for recognition. Kluge and Negt (2014) are interested in obstinacy that 'develops out of a resistance to primitive expropriation' (p. 390) and workers (adult learners) in capitalist systems meet every process of violent expropriation with what they call acts of intransigent wilfulness, that is the basis of resistance, subversion, and creativity. They call this obstinacy. This is capacity to assert human value in the face of exploitation and misrecognitions and is the basis for a pedagogy of unblocking. It is a way of asserting (post Honneth) that in adult education the learner, in contact with their own experience, may be able to grasp the possibilities of learning transformatively (Fleming, 2022a). This is not easy. This is echoed in the title of Kluge's (2017) book *Drilling through hard boards.* But it keeps alive the possibility and hope that there is a human capacity capable of emancipatory actions. This task is equally challenging for adult educators and researchers who must learn not only to engage in communicative action but develop (learn) the ability to explore history, political economy, psychoanalysis and indeed the theory of capitalism.

Pavsek (1996), in his study of the redemption of work, defines obstinacy as 'the resistance which labour power exerts against its reductive constitution as commodity' (p. 147). It resides in the power of the collaborations of workers which are ways of overcoming the dislocations of the social and involve combining skills, desires and identities that arise through cooperations. These resulting new forms of relationality can be interpreted as preconfigurations of utopian ways of relating (Pavsek, 1996, p. 153). This involves learning. In addition, it is possible that forms of racism, sexism may also trigger new forms of solidarity and relationality that prefigure more liberating ways of being in the world.

Obstinacy could be a form of will-fullness, self-will, dogged determination, or a myriad of other phrases that express basic stubbornness. These synonyms scarcely capture the obstinacy that Kluge calls 'the guerrilla warfare of the mind' (Kluge & Negt, 2014, p. 36). Grimm's shortest tale, *The Obstinate Child* is told by Kluge & Negt (2014, pp. 292-294). The obstinate child whose God got no pleasure in her, falls ill, dies and is buried (see Kluge, 2015). However, the child continues to raise their arm above the grave indicating how stubbornness continues in and through the afterlife 'defying the authority and will of the society that seeks to repress them' (Kluge & Negt, 2014, p. 37). Kluge is known for producing movies with female characters who portray obstinacy. This reservoir of resistance and agency was not explored in College Knowledge.

Rethinking the research agenda

I have identified a new pallet of sensitizing concepts that could have replaced those borrowed from Habermas and Honneth in approaching previous research projects. The idea of a university, the understanding of what is meant by adult learning, as well as the pursuit of recognition all served the previous projects well. Without retelling that narrative, I now suggest, without undermining the previous research, a new set of ideas. In addition to the theory of TL there are now powerful concepts from Negt (and Kluge) including their understanding of the public sphere, imploitation by capitalism as well as the counter balance of obstinacy.

The College Knowledge research might have explored the experiences of students or staff as workers in HE. The labour of staff and students was previously relegated to the arena of individual choice, students selected their own careers but within parameters pre-defined by the provider, government policies, and the economy. Two aspects of these new ideas are relevant for re-interpreting previous research. One is the potential to explore the deep colonization as experienced by students (and staff). How might it arise in interviews? How could the impact of the neo-liberal university be discovered in the experiences of students? The same institution that promises critical learning, that promises to teach how to think critically and how to make the world a better place, may be unable to deliver these very promises as it is colonized or imploited as it attempts to create public spheres and seminars. Are there possibilities for interpreting interviews with students who may be part of counter publics, within or outside universities? Other obvious pathologies of society such as racism and sexism could be explored also. This may result in a stronger sense of the barriers to learning and TL.

The RANLHE (Merrill & Johnston, 2011) research project could also bring different sensitizing concepts to the data. HE facilitates the process of bringing previously private issues into the public sphere. This is not easily accommodated in HE that has traditionally obstructed, denied or devalued this view of learners utilizing abstract and impersonal language in students' writings as well as administrative ways of assessing students. That is the genesis of the concept of college knowledge. Teaching methods and assessment requirements of college may block the learning potential of experience. Unblocking would offer a critical insight into the ways in which the inner person may be decolonized from the system. A rethought-out research project might look for experiences where students found or were taught how to find spaces of authentic critical thought, insight or action. It might explore how students from their own history carried the elements of obstinacy through their access journeys and studies. What stories would they tell? Would they be heard (interpreted) differently now? With the assistance of Negt and Kluge the private worlds of subjects become political and the political (social, institutional) is exposed as a weight on the personal. Hidden realms of production may be revealed that are in need of exploration and unblocking through student interviews. The unblocking might be connected to the impact of TL experiences or the critical pedagogy of Freire. In a more eloquent passage Kluge and Negt (2014, p. 20) outline the depth of the issue:

> In the same way that the Western mindset of the early nineteenth century thought that 'empty' continents inhabited by indigenous peoples were all that was left on earth to colonize, today, the enormous continents within the subjective landscape of the human appear uncultivated and unpopulated. (Kluge & Negt, 2014, p. 20)

The research might today explore two other aspects of this re-think. One involves the extent to which capitalism is within each student. The second is the empirical foundation for obstinacy. How do students succeed? Our research found in students a determination

to search for recognition, to overcome adversity (financial) and make up for opportunities lost at school and in a gendered society.

Capitalism is understood as taking up residence in the inner space of learners, establishing new locations in the mind and psyche of learners (of staff too). If this were a sensitizing concept for research one might find in the narratives of returning students the extent to which they are part of this narrative and find in university, the confirmation of a capitalist mindset and values. The same system of education that offers access to learners, the teaching of critical thinking and really useful knowledge may block exactly the freedom it was designed to offer. But all is not lost. Kluge and Negt identify a deeply hidden but nevertheless powerful obstinacy in the human person. The research of College Knowledge interpreted this as resilience. The complicating factor of Marx's insight about the thoroughness of alienation should also not be forgotten (Marx, 1964). It can be argued that nothing – mind, heart, unconscious – escape the process of colonization.

But today it might be interesting to suppose there is an obstinacy that feeds the conviction that in spite of messages delivered through the culture, through the dominant economic apparatus, through family and gendered experiences, learners may have hidden capacities to find motivation from a different place – a place hidden in one's bones so to speak. Their obstinacy!

Broader implications for re-framing learning theory

In this age of experience Kluge and Negt assert that experience takes shape through a 'series of necessary distortions' (2014, p. 31). Adult education accepts this in broad terms but the depths of the invasion (or imploitation) escape the attention of many theories of learning, e.g., Mezirow. Emancipatory power as understood by Freire and Mezirow is invested in experience and critical reflection. It may be a great deal more complex. For Kluge and Negt, experience is always distorted, even when used as a basis for learning – 'It is not given but hard-won, assembled through labour' (2014, p. 31). One has to become a worker for one's own emancipation in a world where the very potential of work has been distorted. Of course, learning and teaching are forms of work too.

Habermas is a neglected contributor to how we understand learning in society. In addition to writing (1970) about the role of universities in society he adopted the basic theorem that 'subjects capable of speech and action, who can be affected by reasons, can learn – and in the long run even, "cannot not learn"' (Habermas, 2003, p. 8). He holds that

> the fundamental mechanism for social evolution in general is to be found in an automatic inability not to learn. Not learning, but not-learning is the phenomenon that calls for explanation at the socio-cultural level of development. Therein lies, if you will, the rationality of man. (Habermas, 1975, p. 15)

Kluge adds: 'Nobody can learn not to learn' (as cited in Langston, 2010, p. 281) – a restatement of Habermas saying that we cannot not learn. Habermas built on intersubjective dialogue; Honneth on intersubjectivity with recognition; Kluge and Negt assert the primacy of the individual thinker whose experience is dialectical and obstinate (Langston, 2010, p. 285). Learning may be an expression of obstinacy! *History and Obstinacy* (Kluge & Negt, 2014) is a fragmented presentation of many ideas, but the authors insist that there is a 'natural ability to think' (Langston, 2010, p. 286) – to learn, to transform. The positive outcome from the perspective of the researcher can highlight the learning worker, the agentic learner and the working learner – the person always learning.

Toward a pedagogy of social imagination

Unlike transformation theory, Negt proposes a curriculum or list of competences that are essential for his concept of exemplary learning. There are competences involved; Identity; historical; social justice (or awareness); technological; ecological and economic (Negt, 2010, pp. 218-234). His curriculum (Zeuner, 2013) links the learners' individual experiences (including misrecognitions and injustices) with broader social issues; investigates and explores the interconnections in order to see how individual experiences and structural issues in the social environment are connected – dialectically. For example, the experiences behind the Black Lives Matter movement's objections to police brutality are connected to systemic, historical, economic racism and slavery – forms of systematic/social/historical misrecognitions undermining individual and social self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem (Honneth, 1995). This meta-learning and along with dialectical thinking are of 'fundamental importance' for a Negt's critical pedagogy (1993, p. 661). By accepting these ideas, a different set of sensitizing concepts emerges with which one might explore the knowledge, skills and competences offered to students by universities and how it is experienced by learners. When experience is understood as dialectic and influenced by social structures there is then the possibility of what both Paulo Freire and Maxine Greene call break-through moments. These moments can, by exercising one's sociological imagination, lead to social transformation (Negt, 1971; Negt & Kluge, 1993).

Negt and Kluge systematically present materials and suggestions as to how their ideas might be utilised in learning situations (Kluge & Negt, 2014; Negt & Kluge, 1993). They use science fiction, and a range of innovative materials to support and enhance the social imagination of learners (Negt & Kluge, 1993). When a transformative pedagogy of learning is discussed, whether thinking of struggling with a global pandemic, racism or climate change, we benefit from extending transformative pedagogy by adding their dialectical process. Using science fiction, satire, fragments of literature, film, and documentaries Negt encourages critical intelligence and a sociological imagination. Kluge and Negt (2014) collect a visual archive of pedagogical methods for facilitating the exploration of how things could be different, building on learners' obstinacy and utilizing their sociological imagination.

How can we teach with a sociological imagination? Without repeating insights most often associated with Alfred Schutz (1967, 1970), C Wright Mills (1959) or Negt and Kluge (Fleming, 2022b), my response is to borrow a number of ingredients and create what I term a *Pedagogy of Social Imagination* and propose in a tentative way an approach that highlights the subversive power of imagination – a sociological imagination. It involves being wide awake.

> By the term "wide-awakeness" we want to denote a plane of consciousness of highest tension originating in an attitude of full attention to life and its requirements. Only the performing and especially the working self is fully interested in life and, hence, wide-awake…. This attention is an active, not a passive one. Passive attention is the opposite to full awareness. (Schutz, 1967, p. 213)

It involves being wide awake and paying attention to life and what is going on around one and exercising one's imagination. Imagination is the key ingredient in what I am proposing as an educational response to the pedagogical issues raised in this paper. It involves being wide awake and in empathy with others. Imagination makes empathy possible and we teach students to resist thinking that lacks empathy and teach to resist the monopoly of technical thinking. Transformative educators must care about the lived

experience of learners and their worldview and help imagine moving beyond what are familiar ways of understanding the world.

To look at art or read a novel such as *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood, 1996) is to explore highly political possibilities of dystopian or utopian dimensions. It allows accurate insights into the way things may be, as well as the way they might be imagined as better. To open eyes and ears and imagination to art will enable us to pick up the signals deep within us as individuals and as a community that knows that a better world is possible (Greene, 1973) – obstinately possible. There is no critical reflection without imagination.

There may be a crisis of imagination in the educational system that is preoccupied with instrumental and economically useful learning and managerialism's agendas. As a result, we can see how that system limits what is explored (Aronowitz & Bratsis, 2005). Imagination is needed to break from what is taken for granted – the project of transformative learning. In contrast to most of the literature on TL with its much-criticized focus on critical reflection, imagination is the ground for transformative learning. Imagination allows people stand on the edge of society and to think beyond the ways that power is exercised now and to at least begin to experience ourselves and 'know ourselves as more, much more that pawns in a game where the rules are already set' (Freire, 2004, p. 109). Such sensitizing concepts would lead to different perceptions of adults returning to HE and the possibilities that might emerge.

Conclusion

This project requires an integrated theory of critical reflection on experience that seeks to tackle inequality, exclusions and misrecognition, mindful of the dynamics of capitalism and alert to the extraordinary nature of human capacities — including, of course, obstinacy – including how to engage in conversations in the public sphere. I suggest that Negt, and Kluge offer useful mooring points for such an approach, for such a pedagogy – a pedagogy introducing and inducing perplexity, curiosity, thinking, critical reflection and lead to students who are wide-awake and active agents of social and personal transformation. The researcher seen as learner and exercising a sociological imagination can benefit from the pedagogic programme of Kluge and Negt – set of new or transformed sensitizing concepts.

All research is conducted with a set of sensitizing concepts and theories. As time passes, researchers acquire new and hopefully more relevant frames of reference. In this paper the possibility has been explored that a different frame of reference might have led to different conclusions and even different pedagogies. The idea that the political is personal is important. What may be new is the dialectical nature of their connection. And this should prompt new research findings, even looking at old data through a new lens.

Many of the ideas presented here are not new. With an eye on ways in which new ideas can be found in unusual places that may in turn be useful for engaging in a pedagogy of sociological imagination I note these words from an unlikely source. Bruce Springsteen, writes songs, performs his own music and has written an autobiography (2016). He captures in eloquent words the core of his motivations and interests. He says 'Dylan had deftly melded the political and personal in a way that added resonance and power to both. I agreed the political *is* personal and vice versa' (Springsteen, 2016, p. 327). In a more detailed statement he asserts:

> In my writing I was increasingly interested in the place where 'This Land is Your Land' and 'The River' intersected, where the political and personal came together to spill clear

> water in to the muddy river of history…. I thought perhaps mapping that territory, the distance between the American dream and the American reality, might be my service…. I hoped it might give roots and mission to our band… (Springsteen, 2016, p. 294)

The identity of the researcher is that of a learner – always learning, changing and seeing through different lens. The process of being a researcher may be always fluid, in transition, transforming and addressing different historical, policy and social contexts. The worker identity of the research may be in transformation, seeing things not previously seen or visible with eyes and sensitizing concepts transformed by the relentless progression of their own learning careers and lives, and in the process changing their learner identity, their worker identity. Nothing stays the same.

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Perspectives, aspirations and perceived support students with low economic and cultural capital in the university in Spain and Dominican Republic

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Abstract

This paper investigates the characteristics and both material and emotional costs of upward social mobility through university education in Spain and the Dominican Republic. A comparative qualitative study has been carried out, based on biographical-narrative interviews, with a sample of 6 Dominican students and 9 Spanish students coming from an economically disadvantaged background. The results show the social mobility experiences and expectations of the participants and their families, with different nuances in the two contexts. The need to combine study with work is one of the main costs of university. The primary coping strategy in both countries is material and symbolic family support, but additional coping mechanisms to persist in studies are also evident. The conclusions highlight both the perspectives developed by the participants and the critical role of structural dimensions (social background, national context, recent history, economy, social values, culture, religious beliefs) in understanding their experiences in the university context.

Keywords: social mobility, non-traditional students, university, Dominican Republic, Spain

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Introduction

The access of non-traditional profiles to universities is a characteristic feature of the mass university of recent decades on a global scale (Andreu, 2023; Marshall et al., 2016). In this scenario, the idea of university education as a social elevator has been a widely used metaphor to describe the aspirations and dreams of students from the working classes. However, universities are finding it very difficult to respond in a relevant way to the increased expectations and needs arising from the growth of new non-traditional and underrepresented audiences (Romito, 2022). Non-traditional university students is an umbrella term, related to several profiles: first generation family at university, students from working class or socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, working adults, women with inequalities, people with disabilities, people with a migrant background (Marshall et al., 2016; Andreu, 2023).

This paper investigates specifically students' perspectives with low economic and cultural capital concerning social mobility at university (Thompson, 2019). Using a biographical-narrative approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with Dominican and Spanish university students. Our focus is placed on the difficulties in their university trajectories that derive from their families' low economic and socio-cultural levels, as well on the coping strategies, resources and mechanisms the students use to compensate for the obstacles they encounter. What barriers do these students face and how do they overcome them to achieve their university degree aspirations? To what extent do they and their families trust that this degree will give them access to a better working future? What are the material and emotional costs for them to study at university? What resources do these students develop in order to access university, persevere in their studies and complete their university degree?

Two national contexts, Spain and the Dominican Republic (DR), have been taken as an element of comparison. There is a shared history between the two countries, as well as linguistic, cultural and religious similarities. Likewise, the recent history of the DR and Spain is characterised by a dictatorship and a civil war. The access of the masses to the university began simultaneously in both cases, around the 1970s. The democratisation process in both countries and the improvement of their economies led to an increase in the demand for university places, as a reflection of the aspirations for social progress of less well-off families. At the same time, there are marked differences between the DR and Spain, and between their university education systems, related to different geographical areas, level of economic development and level of modernisation, which provides an appropriate context to better explore the main objective of this research.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework is based on contributions from theories of social and cultural reproduction (Bourdieu, 1986; Martínez, 2013; Andreu, 2023), critical theory (Fleming, 2016), the sociology of educational trajectories (Castejón et al., 2020), and approaches to good practices and policies on social and educational inclusion in university contexts (Zamacona et al., 2021; Field & Kurantowicz, 2014).

The sociology of social reproduction and inequality has made relevant contributions, showing the structural and systemic nature of social inequalities and the limits of upward social mobility through university education (Bourdieu, 1986; Brown & James, 2020; Langa-Rosado & Río-Ruiz, 2013). The intergenerational reproduction of educational inequalities is one of the most striking features of historical evolution in the twentieth century (Moreno-Mínguez, 2011). Low economic, social and cultural capital is a

significant obstacle to access to university, the development of successful university careers and insertion into the skilled labour market. Study grants for vulnerable students have been reduced in many countries, making it more difficult to continue and complete university education (Langa-Rosado, 2019). Educational pathways are becoming less desirable due to increasing academic demands and the lack of economic resources (Langa-Rosado & Río-Ruiz, 2013).

In this context, the dropout and delayed graduation of students from lower classes increases. Moreover, in the cases in which they continue their education, these students are forced to work and study simultaneously (Langa-Rosado, 2020; Marte-Espinal & Lamec 2021). The traits of contingency, precariousness and intense pressure for achievement are evident in non-traditional students, in a context of neoliberal policies that have weakened the public education system (Díez-Gutiérrez, 2016; Andreu, 2023).

The contributions of Bourdieu (1986) and other sociologists are not limited to identifying the factors that constrain social actors, since the ultimate goal of the sociology of social and cultural reproduction is to offer tools to subaltern groups so that they can develop a social agency that transforms and overcomes the conditions of domination existing in the societies of cognitive and neoliberal capitalism (Giroux, 2015). This perspective is highly relevant for interpreting the educational careers of vulnerable and unequal groups, including university students, overcoming the potential risk of a biased, deficit-based perspective.

The habitus and cultural capital of the family have a significant influence on the pathways of access and career development at university. The influence of the institutional habitus of secondary schools, as a preparatory environment for university entrance, has also been investigated recently. Understanding these processes is necessary to identify the barriers and limitations faced by working-class first-generation students, with the ultimate aim of proposing educational policies and practices that help to overcome these factors of exclusion and inequality (Romito, 2022; Reay, 2022).

The social capital and support networks of low-income students are essential dimensions, which can act as facilitators or barriers to educational career progress (Field, 2017). Four categories of social support provided by informal networks of family, friends, neighbours, and work or study colleagues can be distinguished: economic, instrumental or tangible, information or advice, and social validation (Contreras-Tinoco & Hernández-González, 2019).

Social capital in low-income students has an important family component. Family support is a facilitating factor for successful educational careers (Yuksel & Onur, 2020; Martín-Lagos López & Luque-Suárez, 2020; Rodrigo & Palacios, 2005). Figuera et al. (2003) distinguish two types of family support: effective family support, which includes the perception of intellectual interest, commitment and social participation, and affective family support, understood as self-perception of receiving emotional support based on concern, trust and interest in relationships.

From a macro-structural point of view, family participation and support can be differentiated according to different regimes or modalities. Martín-Lagos López and Luque-Suárez (2020) have proposed four regimes of welfare states in Europe: Anglo-Saxon, continental, Nordic and Southern countries. This last model -referred to Spain, Greece, Italy and Portugal- is characterised by familism, understood as strong family support for children by women (Sánchez & Bote, 2009). In Latin America, this familism is even more relevant than in southern Europe (Naciones Unidas & Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe, 2006).

Research contexts: the Dominican Republic and Spain, two sides of the same coin

In this section, an overview is presented of the national contexts of Spain and the DR to better contextualise the presentation and comparison of the results of this research.

Spain is integrated into the European Union and the neoliberal global economy. After the dictatorship of General Franco (1939-1975), the country experienced a solid economic development and went from being an emigrant-sending country to a receiving country of a large number of immigrants. As a result, Spain has high indicators of quality of life, human development, but, at the same time, it presents a growing social inequality, which in some Spanish regions are among the highest in the European Union (Martínez, 2013).

Dominican history in the last century was dominated by the dictatorship of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo (1930-1961) and subsequent authoritarian governments (1966-1978). Throughout the last few decades, the DR has been trying to overcome the problems of authoritarianism, corruption, clientelism and lack of democratic culture (Castillo de la Cruz, 2015). The country has a medium level of development. Almost half of the population lives below the poverty line. The informal sector is estimated to absorb between 50% and 60% of national jobs (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2012). The majority of the population declares itself Catholic, which is reflected in many aspects of daily life and the values of Dominicans.

The university systems of the two countries have grown significantly in recent decades. In DR, the university is characterised by important shortcomings: low funding, precariousness and low teacher training, little internationalization, and a scarcity of educational policies aimed at vulnerable students (OECD, 2012; Cedeño, 2019; Sánchez-Costa, 2017). In 2021 there were 51 universities in the DR, of which only nine were public. Fifty-seven per cent of students were studying in private universities and 43% in public universities, with a predominance among the latter of the Autonomous University of Santo Domingo. The quality indicators of the Dominican education system are poor (Amiama-Espaillat & Mayor-Ruiz, 2017), and the percentage of university completion stood at 25% (OECD, 2012).

Although the cost of credit at the Dominican public university is very low, there are many factors that limit the academic success of non-traditional students: high cost of transportation, food and study materials; need to combine study with work; systemic violence and citizen insecurity, making it difficult to commute between home and university; lack of access to new technologies; low level of educational spending in the country, including scant attention to scholarship policy; low level in pre-university academic preparation; gender inequality; and scarcity of resources and educational policies to support non-traditional students, such as first-generation, disabled, immigrants, adult workers and women dedicated to family care (Marte-Espinal & Lamec 2021; Figuereo-Matos, 2016).

Spanish universities have also seen a significant increase in the number of students that has led to the massification of classrooms, producing a diversification of new university audiences, with a greater presence of students from working classes (Langa-Rosado, 2019). During the last few decades, there has been a progressive improvement in educational practices and policies to boost and accompany the academic success of non-traditional groups, including students with low economic capital. But this process was slowed down as a result of the economic crisis that began in 2008, which has had a very strong negative impact on non-traditional groups. Indeed, the university education reform promoted in 2012 by the conservative government led to a significant increase in fees and a restrictive reform of the scholarship policy. The result was very negative for

lower-class students, contributing to dropout and delayed graduation (Langa-Rosado & Río-Ruiz, 2013; Langa-Rosado, 2019).

The analysis of the two national contexts shows that working class students face structural conditions that make it difficult for them to access university and complete their studies. This demonstrates the need to investigate the perspectives of these students and proposals for improvement to favour social and educational inclusion in university contexts. In this context, this study offers an original contribution to this field, taking into account the following issues: (a) it is a qualitative and comparative study between a Southern European country and a Latin American country, an under-researched area; (b) it explores the perspectives of first-generation and working-class students on their family contexts, material and symbolic supports received, coping strategies and resources put in place to favour access, continuity and completion of university studies; c) it presents an interdisciplinary perspective, integrating contributions from sociology, psychology, cultural anthropology, and educational studies.

Method

This article draws on data from two previous studies on university access and progression for non-traditional students in the Dominican Republic and Spain. Both studies adopt a qualitative approach and focus on understanding the experiences and perspectives of the participants. Specifically, these are two biographical-narrative studies (Blakely & Moles, 2017), in which in-depth biographical interviews were conducted, focused on the social context of origin, academic and personal trajectories, and experiences at university. While the original studies explored the university experience of various groups of non-traditional students, for the purposes of this paper, only those participants who came from a family background with low socio-economic status were selected. The identification of social class and traits related to non-traditional students (first generation in the family, working class adults) was made by the participants themselves in a form prior to the interview and confirmed during the interview.

Given the limited number of participants, this study has an exploratory character, although it is also intended to develop a comparative approach, as a starting point for future research with larger samples. The study sample consisted of 6 Dominican and 9 Spanish students.

Table 1. Participants' profiles

Country	**Participant**	**Features**
Dominican Republic	Alberto	Male, 21 years old History Student First-generation
	Tami	Female, 22 years old Industrial Psychology Student
	Adrian	Male, 24 years old Medical Student
	Carolina	Female, 22 years old History Student First-generation Two children
	Yajaira	Female, 31 years old Psychology Student First-generation One child

	Cristina	Female, 21 years old History Student First-generation Two children
Spain	Álvaro	Male, 24 years old Business Studies Student
	Magister	Female, 24 years old Teacher training student (Primary Education) First-generation
	Cristi	Female, 23 years old Student of Pedagogy One child First-generation
	Noa	Female, 20 years old Teacher training student (Special Education) First-generation
	Fran	Male, 32 years old Student of Pedagogy
	Maria	Female, 18 years old Teacher training student (Nursery Education)
	Hernán	Male, 25 years old Journalism Student First-generation
	Lidia	Female, 21 years old Student of Pedagogy First-generation
	Lola	Female, 24 years old Teacher training student (Special Education) First-generation

Difficulties were encountered in obtaining a larger sample in the RD, due to the disadvantaged profile of first-generation Dominican students from working class backgrounds, characterised by the need to combine university studies with long working hours and the great distance between the place of residence and the university, which implied considerable travel time. These circumstances were not present in the Spanish sample. In order to balance the number of participants from the two countries, it was decided to select a limited number of cases in Spain. A combination of purposive and snowball sampling was used to identify and recruit participants. Participants were recruited through the researchers' connections at first; subsequently, interviewees suggested new candidates for interviews based on their own personal contacts. The Spanish participants come from one of Spain's largest public universities. This institution has an important presence of non-traditional students. It is located in Andalusia, a region in southern Spain that has a weaker productive fabric than the rest of the country, lower weight of industry and a greater weight of seasonal activities. In turn, Dominican students were selected from the largest public higher education institution in the country, which has campuses in the capital Santo Domingo and in different regions. This university is characterised by a predominance of working-class students, with a large presence of first-generation profiles, informal economy, precariousness, poverty and rural population (OECD, 2012; Cedeño, 2019). Given that Andalusia is one of the poorest regions in Spain and also in the European Union, a comparison with the Dominican Republic is relevant, as this country has medium economic development indicators. However, the students' narratives presented in this paper are not assumed to be representative of the totality of working-class students in the DR and Spain, but only illustrative of the cases under study.

Despite this, there are numerous coincidences with previous studies in the Spanish and Dominican context (López et al., 2009; Marte-Espinel & Lamec, 2021).

The technique used was the biographical-narrative interview, in the format of an in-depth life history, conducted on the basis of an open-ended guideline, which allows for a broad understanding of the students' educational, family and everyday experiences. The interview guideline was initially created, implemented and validated in the context of a large transnational European research project. Subsequently, it was adapted for this study, including the following topics: social and family background; learning and formal education; access and adaptation to university; experiences, learning and relationships in university contexts; personal and educational identity; role of the family as a symbolic and material support structure; work experience and economic issues; resources and strategies to favour access and continuity at university. The interviews were conducted in a conversational format on the aforementioned topics, favouring the expression and freedom of discourse of the participants. The average length of the interviews was approximately 75 minutes. The shortest interviews lasted approximately 50 minutes, while the longest were close to two hours. All interviews were conducted before the covid 19 pandemic.

The interviews were transcribed and coded. The interviews were analysed in two successive phases. The first phase involved an exploratory analysis of the data, carried out by a team of seven researchers, members of the research projects within which the interviews were conducted. This team included the three authors of this study. Subsequently, in a second phase, the three authors developed a qualitative analysis of the transcripts of the interviews, generating the following emerging categories: economic deprivation and working class family background; identities, expectations and value of university; costs of studying and coping mechanisms; material and symbolic support from the family; and resilience versus religiosity. The literature review helped to generate analytical perspectives on these dimensions to deepen the reflective and critical approach of the study. The process of data analysis was iterative and recursive, and involved multiple readings of the transcripts and constant comparison between them. All names are pseudonyms chosen by the students to preserve anonymity. At the time of the interviews there were no ethics committees or similar structures in place in any of the universities to which the participants belonged. All students signed an informed consent form.

Results

The presentation of results follows the aforementioned categories, focusing on the perspectives and voices of working-class and first-generation students about their social and family contexts, the value of university studies, the costs of education, family support, and the resources and strategies developed by participants to foster successful educational careers. It should be clarified that in the participants' narratives, testimonies emerged about their pre-university histories, formal schooling and other issues, which are not addressed in this study.

The same family context in Spain and the Dominican Republic? Economic deprivation and lack of resources

Despite certain differences, the socio-economic context of the families of all the participants is characterised by precariousness and significant economic deprivation. In almost all families, even if both parents work, the purchasing power is very limited.

In the interviews in Spain, a frequent pattern prevails in working-class families, typical of the historical moment of General Franco's dictatorship. The parents had to leave the educational system at an early age, in order to be able to help with the family economy.

> The education my parents received was elementary (...), so they had to go to work, selling fruit in the street (Cristi, Spain).

> As you can deduce, my parents have not been able to study, as they had to start working at a very early age (Noa, Spain).

These ‘failed’ educational trajectories are at the basis of the parents’ aspirations for their children, because they link education, including access to university, with social advancement and success in life. Parents attribute their precarious living conditions to the lack of education that would allow them to ‘prosper’. Hence, they aspire for their children to break the cycle of poverty in which they were trapped.

> Since we were little, our parents have instilled in us that studies are very important and working hard to give us a good future (...). They have always explained to us that they have those jobs because they didn't want to or couldn't study; and that they don't want that kind of life for us (Cristi, Spain).

In the case of participants from the DR, this historical progress towards greater social and economic well-being is not so clearly perceived. The differences between the living conditions of parents and participants are not as marked. Although university education can lead to greater economic well-being, poverty is more widespread. A certain level of parental education does not guarantee more favourable conditions on a permanent basis. This is the case for Tami, who cannot fully afford her studies, despite the fact that her mother works in a grocery store and that her father also works. In this context, moonlighting and the informal economy are very common practices.

> (Regarding his father's work) Right now, he is distributing goods, but he is also self-employed. In my house, we have opened the business. My mother has a beauty salon and also a grocery store (Alberto, DR).

> My father has a stand selling empanadas. My mother is a housewife; she does her housework and has a small business (Carolina, DR).

The value of the university: Identities and expectations

The value attributed to university education is, in the first place, its potential to open up a ‘better future’. However, a ‘better future’ translates into getting out of the job and economic precariousness, and not necessarily in obtaining wealth.

> I wanted to grab hold of something safe in the job market, careers where there were more job opportunities. In the end, I opted for a degree in Business Studies (Álvaro, Spain).

> The truth is that I don't know if my life will change much or little when I finish my degree; what I am sure of is that I will be more protected and with more possibilities for the future, when it comes to opening new work horizons (Fran, Spain).

In the case of Spain, these and other testimonies are a reflection of parental aspirations, but also of the prevailing conception in Spanish society that the university is a powerful social elevator, the necessary means for upward social mobility. However, the students question this premise more implicitly than explicitly.

> My parents have always instilled in me the importance of education, and above all of training for a profession, as if a degree was a guarantee of finding a job (Maria, Spain).

The times in which students live have changed compared to the times of their parents. Today, a university degree is no guarantee of a better job. That is why, when asked what the university brings them, the answers of the participants are directed towards other types of 'gains', referring to personal development and recognition.

> It makes you look at the world from a different perspective, and going to university opens your mind; it's amazing (Hernán, Spain).

Dominican students, however, do trust that the future university degree will produce an improvement in their work and economic situation. Their testimonies refer above all to expectations of economic progress, insisting on personal and vital gains.

> And working in my area, with a position, with a good salary, because not only a job, but also a good salary... (Tami, DR).

Costs of being at university and coping mechanisms

Studying at university has significant financial costs. As mentioned above, the participants and their families do not have sufficient finances to meet the costs of education. These financial requirements go beyond the payment of tuition fees, as they also include the purchase of books and materials, transport and meals away from home.

> It is already a myth; not a myth, a fable, I don't know; it seems to be that a university, which is public and very cheap, that it is free, but it is almost like a private university, because it also costs money; there are many collateral expenses: in transportation, food, and teaching expenses for books, materials… (Adrián, DR).

State aid, in both countries, is very limited and tends to be focused on the payment of fees. In addition, to get a scholarship and keep it, it is necessary to be a full-time student to meet the academic requirements. In the case of many adult students or students with dependent children, it is impossible to meet these grants' requirements.

> The scholarship and aid system is focused on the traditional student (...). But for those who are different ... for example, students with children, what happens, that you are going to demand the same credits as someone who does nothing? (Fran, Spain).

This is why the participants find themselves in need to implement numerous strategies that allow them to overcome difficulties and deal with complex situations through the most diverse mechanisms, ranging from small survival tricks (volunteering in the library to have preferential access to books) to complex family reorganizations.

The main cost of studying at university for these working-class students lies in the constant need to reconcile time and responsibilities. Even as recipients of state scholarships, this income does not cover university expenses. For this reason, they have to work, either permanently or temporarily. The need to combine work and study makes it more difficult to obtain a good academic performance. As the level of commitment to studies is very high, this means that sometimes participants have to delay their itineraries, or make constant readjustments to work and achieve a good academic performance.

> That's how I got my first job in a supermarket. On the one hand, it was very good for me to have some extra money, but on the other this job made it very difficult for me to get my

> degree. It was very hard for me to get my university degree and it took me 6 years (Álvaro, Spain).

> I went to university for the first time in 2001, but I had to drop out at that time because our economic situation worsened (Cristina, DR).

In some cases, the family's economic situation improves and university costs can be met. This gives rise to non-linear itineraries, periods in which the usual academic course is followed, combined with periods in which progress is slower, due to the need to combine study with work.

> The first and second year I was working so that my parents didn't have to spend so much money (...). In the third year, seeing that it was difficult for me to combine my studies with the jobs I was doing, I decided to focus on my studies and my parents supported me in my decision (Cristi, Spain).

But when it is not possible to resort to family support, a dilemma arises for the student, who has to assess the best options to ensure the continuity of academic progress.

> I don't mind working; what's more, I want to work, but I know that if I do, I won't dedicate myself fully to psychology; and this doesn't seem fair to me, after all that it has cost me to get there. I want to be the best and I want to continue as I have been (Noa, Spain).

And it is here that numerous strategies are deployed, with little impact on academic performance, aimed at defraying university costs. This pattern is more evident in Dominican students, since the amount of state aid is considerably lower than in Spain. We illustrate it here with the cases of Adrián and Alberto.

Shortly after entering university, Adrián, a medical student, realised the high cost of his studies and his difficulty in paying for them. He discovered tutoring (an option offered by the university to students with good performance) as a way to compensate for his financial needs.

> I didn't know anyone who could help me. So, I began to identify a way to deal with my difficult situation. And one way is to be an assistant instructor (...). So, students with good grades are chosen to help the professor. These students are given a financial allowance and other benefits... So, I saw this and I said: 'I'm going to be an assistant instructor' (Adrián, DR).

A similar case is that of Alberto, a history student. In addition to his studies, he contributes to the family economy, but he has difficulty accessing books and study materials. His way of resolving this situation is to volunteer at a university association, because this allows him access to books for photocopying, thus avoiding major costs.

> Well, I wouldn't do it in the sense of being a volunteer, but the benefit of being a student here at the university, because sometimes I don't have the resources to buy a book. If the book is in the Association, then I borrow it and photocopy it, at a lower cost (Alberto, DR).

However, despite the ingenuity and efficiency of these strategies, it is clear that they continue to take time and dedication away from study, especially if we take into account other vital conditioning factors that some of these students experience, such as motherhood and the need to collaborate in the domestic economy. In this precarious context, the interviews in the two countries show that organised and controlled use of time is a necessity for the university.

> To become something in life, you have to get organised first. You have to organize yourself first, and layout the plans. That is, as if we were an engineer, to put the plans on the table... (Alberto, DR).

> I often make plans and schedules to organize my time (Maria, Spain).

> Both [her children] are at school in the morning and I get up in the morning, dress them, give them breakfast... Then, when they leave, I go to work (...). Then they arrive at noon (...) When I arrive at noon, I cook and leave them bathed... Then, I leave for the university, and a neighbour takes care of them until I arrive... (Cristina, DR).

Without this organizational and planning capacity, vulnerable students would not be able to persist in their studies.

Family support: Symbolic and material value

In order to cover the lack of state aid, the main point of support for students in both contexts is the family. There are numerous references found in the interviews that abound on the multiple ways in which the family supports the academic activity of the participants. It is evident, therefore, the Latin and Mediterranean familism, that reveals the preponderance of the family as a protective agent and procurer of well-being.

> Today I am still waiting for the scholarship to be granted, which I am eagerly awaiting, as it is one of the supports along with my mother's salary that help me to finance myself (María, Spain).

> I think that if my mother wasn't here, I wouldn't be able to continue studying... (Yajaira, DR).

> Even during exam time my mother tries to leave me alone, so that I can study or she takes the housework away from me, as I often seem overwhelmed or worried (Maria, Spain).

As can be seen, material family support consists not only of economic help, but also of care, time and other tasks to facilitate study. An outstanding example refers to the students with children, who need someone to look after their children, particularly when the students are mothers, according to several participants.

A differentiating aspect of the two contexts is the bidirectionality of material support observed in Dominican students. While family support is in both countries a key element to ensure continuity in studies, Spanish students do not need to support their families in turn. In the DR, however, the support relationships within the family are more complex, since the students collaborate more decisively in the family's economic activity. Alberto's testimony is very clarifying. His mother runs two businesses at home (a beauty salon and a shop), so her help is essential.

> We organize ourselves in the following way: If, for example, a lady arrives for the beauty salon, my mother leaves the grocery store and I stay with it and she stays in the salon. When I have time to study and if she has not finished in the salon, I take the notebooks to the grocery store and I study little by little, until she finishes (Alberto, DR).

In turn, the Spanish cases present a particular element that is not perceived in the interviews with Dominican students. It is a form of support that is not material, but affective and motivational, which ends up having an important influence on individual decisions, being a protective factor against dropping out. Those parents, who were not able to study and who associate university with social progress, are proud of their

university-educated children. This, together with the material support they also provide, ends up becoming the motive that drives university students to persist, even to become a new reference model in the family.

> I thought I was privileged to be the first granddaughter, niece, sister and daughter of the whole family to go to university, that I would be an example for my cousins and my brother to follow (Lidia, Spain).

> My family, on both my father's and mother's side, really appreciate the fact that I am the only member of the family studying at university; they are very excited and proud that I am finishing my studies (Lola, Spain).

In any case, this family support, both material and symbolic, is the pattern that appears most frequently in the interviews, although it cannot be generalised to all the participants. In a small number of cases, the family appears as a neutral element, neither supporting nor hindering:

> With respect to how they value my studies, yes they value them, but perhaps not enough. My mother hardly asks me anything about it, because I think she doesn't know what to ask either, and she has her mind on things that demand more of her attention. My father doesn't even know, most of the time, what I am studying (Noa, Spain).

> I think my family doesn't value it, or doesn't value it as much as I would like. My brother doesn't even know what degree I'm studying; and my mother often tells me, jokingly, that I'm going to retire studying. My mother has never told me to stop studying, … for her it's something neutral. (Magister, Spain).

In some cases, family attitudes can become an obstacle to academic development:

> Also, in my house they don't respect that I'm studying. If I'm in the living room, and my brother plays the music too loud, nobody calls his attention to it. If my mother is watching TV and she likes something, she calls me to go and watch it... Don't they understand that I'm studying? Those things make me lose concentration (Magister, Spain).

The testimonies of the participants show that the universities where they study continue to have a traditional organisation of educational time, which considerably hinders the educational itineraries of students with working class profiles or in vulnerable situations.

Resilience versus religiosity: Elements that differentiate Spanish and Dominican students?

Studying at university has a high cost in terms of time and money, as well as sacrifices and readjustments. Although the interviewees subscribe to the notion that a university degree helps them to progress in life, they are also critical (especially the Spaniards) of the benefits they expect to receive from their time at the institution. What motivates them, then, to make this investment, if the outcome may be somewhat uncertain?

In the Spanish case, in almost all the interviews there is a clear awareness that the life conditions of the participants imply that university studies involve twice as many difficulties compared to traditional students.

> (For a non-traditional student) you have to contribute more to achieve the same thing; that is, you have to do twice as much to achieve the same thing (...) in order for me to do the same as someone else does, I have to do twice as much, that's my conclusion (Fran, Spain).

But that does not mean that they give up studying. On the contrary, there is a strong personal engagement that helps them to overcome all the barriers and difficulties they encounter.

> Yes, they are all obstacles, but you have to overcome them. Trying is not enough, trying if you fall behind is not enough, you have to overcome them (Hernán, Spain).

> Well... that everything that a person proposes can be carried out, if they are in a circumstance like this... they should fight, shouldn't they? That he should do whatever he has to do but that he should not forget and that if his dream and his illusion is to enter the faculty and study anything, he should do it (Magister, Spain).

> I am where I am because of my efforts, my eagerness and my desire to study and train, not because I have been encouraged to do so (...) I am the one who encourages me and motivates me to continue (Noa, Spain).

These testimonies show an intrinsic engagement, related to the individual person and their personal desires. However, in some cases, extrinsic factors are also evident, but related to the family and people close to them, referring to not disappointing the expectations created for the participants.

> Of course, expectations are created; that motivates you to say: ‘I can't fail’ (...) when you involve your family in this project, you not only fail yourself, you fail the teachers, you fail your family. For me, the family issue is very important (...) how would I dare to tell my family that I'm quitting, I'd be ashamed (Fran, Spain).

In a sense, many of the Spanish participants are destined to fulfil the aspirations and dreams of their ascendants; they are the children of parents who were unable to study. They have to satisfy the expectations that weigh on them, even more so when the whole family makes efforts to support their studies. Their university careers may be non-linear, with periods of abandonment, or with slower rhythms, but they have to conclude successfully, in order to give meaning to the sacrifice and expectations.

In the Dominican case, this element of individual implication is also present in the interviews. This is what seems to justify the long working days, the hours of study, the numerous family responsibilities, and the long transport times to the university, which can be up to an hour and a half. However, the testimonies do not emphasize individual factors so much, perhaps because this is taken for granted. Instead, religious convictions appear as a regulating element of individual life and decisions.

> (Important elements in her life) First of all God; then my children and my parents. (Carolina, DR).

> INTERVIEWER: Which is more important to you: profession or faith? TAMI: Which is more important? Well, I know that God first and foremost is indispensable, so it would be difficult for me to choose. I don't know which would come first. But God first and foremost (Tami, DR).

Despite the fact that Spain is a country with relevant religious tradition, in any of the Spanish interviews it is found the recourse to God or religion to narrate individual trajectories. On the other hand, in all the Dominican interviews the expression ‘if God allows it’ appears frequently. Although it is an idiom, it shifts part of the responsibility to an external entity. When Carolina (DR), for example, talks about her professional and life goals, she says ‘I ask God that they be true. Let's believe in God!’. A good example of how divine intervention can explain individual results is found in Alberto's testimony:

> I depend a lot on my Christian values, and sometimes, in order to do things, I present them to God before I do them. That is to say, God, if You want this to happen, then let it be Your Holy Will. Now, if You don't want it to happen, let it also be Your Holy Will, because You brought us into the world and we are here for a purpose (Alberto, DR).

Despite the apparent difference in the values of both groups of students, a common element can be seen in these two worldviews. Instead of questioning economic and social inequalities, individual capacity (in the Spanish case) or an external entity (in the Dominican case) is used to explain and accept university achievement. This analysis ignores the lack of state aid and support, and ignores the lack of responsibility and measures on the part of the state. As Hernán says in the following quote, 'if you want to, you can', which implies that, if you do not achieve, it is because of your lack of individual effort.

> My experience can simply be summed up in one sentence: 'who wants to, can'. I wanted to study, and everything indicated that I would not study, but I studied, with hardly any economic or moral resources, but I studied: having to work in the mornings, but I studied... I studied because I wanted to (Hernán, Spain).

Or, as Alberto suggests, we are what God chooses us to be.

> I live very aware of what God is in my life and of all the wonders He has done with me. For if He had wanted to, when I was eight years old, He would have taken me when I was still an innocent child. But if He left me here on this earth, it is for a purpose, which will end on the day of my death (Alberto, DR).

Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative study has been to describe, understand and value the narratives of students with low economic capital, about their experiences and itineraries at university, with a focus on inequality, the challenges they face, the support networks available and the resources students develop to undertake successful educational itineraries (García-Andreu et al., 2020; Thompson, 2019; Reay, 2022).

The participants' testimonies have shown the many and varied forms of inequality, precariousness and difficulty they face in continuing and completing university education (Andreu, 2023; García-Andreu et al., 2020). Beyond individual stories, the analysis of the results has shown the key role of structural characteristics such as social origin, national context, recent history, economy, social values, culture and even religious beliefs (Field & Kurantowicz, 2014). This is coherent with recent research undertaken with VET students by Aldinucci et al. (2021), that has argued students' aspirations are high as a strategy of adaptation to the labour market and neoliberal society. Nevertheless, these aspirations are not fully realisable, due to structural constraints and inequalities (Reay, 2022).

The idea of the university as a social elevator, which largely articulates the aspirations of participants, has evidence to support it. Indeed, the possession of university degrees is associated with higher levels of quality of life and higher salaries (Cunninghame, 2017). Moreover, social origin has a mediating effect that helps to explain the different options for post-compulsory education (Castejón et al., 2020).

Students' narratives have shown the relevance of social capital and informal support networks (Field, 2014; Santos-Anaya, 2018). In particular, the crucial role of family support as a facilitator of participants' educational careers is confirmed. The accounts collected evidence that this support is deep and continuous, reflected in economic

collaboration, the dedication of time, provision of care of all kinds and emotional support (Contreras-Tinoco & Hernández-González, 2019; Sánchez & Bote, 2009).

The results of this research show that this family support adopts different characteristics in the two countries studied. In Spain, the children receive this support from parents. In contrast, in the DR, the support is two-way: the parents support the children and the children, in turn, offer important collaboration to the parents, including economic contributions, dedication of time and various forms of care. In addition to possible cultural and religious reasons, this difference between the two countries stems from the very different level of development, since in the DR there is more poverty and precariousness, as well as a much weaker supply of public social services, which means that working-class parents are less able to provide support for their children.

On the other hand, the level of parental expectations and aspirations for their children is also a distinctive feature. While in Spain working-class parents (who do not usually have a university degree) tend to consider their children's university education as highly desirable, in the Dominican Republic parents initially do not have a high level of aspiration for their children, although this does not prevent them from supporting their children's educational careers.

The cases discussed show the prominence of personal initiative and resilience in developing successful learning careers (Aldinucci et al., 2021; Ambrósio et al., 2016). The participants are very active and resilient individuals, who try to create and implement appropriate strategies to complete their studies, overcoming economic scarcity, job insecurity, lack of time and scarcity of institutional supports. In order to overcome all these difficulties, the participants highlight the value, both material and symbolic, that the university has for them. On the one hand, they aspire to achieve a qualified job, including an adequate salary to improve their quality of life, in relation to their parents' generation. These results are consistent with studies that found a higher degree of resilience in non-traditional students compared to traditional students (Chung et al., 2017).

On the other hand, in the interviews, the recognition of university studies by the family and the local community is positively valued (Field, 2017). Recognition constitutes a central dimension for the participants. This recognition is related to the effective promotion of equality, within the framework of the right to participation and the social visibility of the experiences and voices of underrepresented groups, which have been historically excluded and marginalised (Field, 2017; Fleming, 2016). These intangible benefits of the recognition of university training pathways are a powerful driver for participants in the prospect of completing the degree and subsequently competing for a qualified job.

The high percentage of university dropouts requires specific political, institutional and pedagogical measures if the dropout rate is to be reduced (Chalela-Naffah et al., 2020; Marte-Espinal & Lamec, 2021). There is a need for more support measures, more services and greater allocation of economic resources, in relation to the cost of fees, accommodation, food, transport and educational materials (Zamacona et al., 2021).
Some specific strategies to favour the educational pathways of students with non-traditional profiles are: (a) promoting a greater presence of non-traditional students in degrees that have greater value in the labour market, as a strategy to improve the salary and professional expectations of working-class students; (b) exploring strategies to involve the families of non-traditional students from family engagement approaches, beyond a more restricted perspective, based on the traditional idea of participation (Marquez Kiyama & Harper, 2018); c) strengthen the social, cultural, community and institutional integration of students in the university, both in curricular and extracurricular

activities, as this integration prevents dropout and contributes to educational success (Chalela-Naffah et al., 2020).

The voices of the participants highlight the difficulties for the development of successful university careers when there are structural factors of inequality, low economic capital and family contexts far removed from the university habitus. These testimonies also show that universities, in the two national contexts studied, continue to be institutions that adapt slowly and in a limited way to the needs of new university publics. In this sense, the analysis of the data produced in this research offers some indications of possible improvements that should be implemented, among which are mentioned the following: making the organisation of educational and curricular times more flexible, in order to facilitate the reconciliation of working class students with work; making the profiles of non-traditional, vulnerable and unequal students visible in the university, to favour the recognition of these groups; the development of educational policies of material and symbolic support; and the training of lecturers and managers to accompany processes of educational inclusion in relation to these non-traditional students.

This research has two main limitations. It is an exploratory study, within an area under-researched in Spain and the DR, which aims to document the perspectives of working-class students on their educational pathways at university in two countries. In addition, the sample of 15 participants is relatively small, due to difficulties in obtaining participants in the Dominican Republic, as previously explained. Nevertheless, this paper offers an original comparative research proposal, focused on vulnerable university students, which could be the starting point for more ambitious and in-depth studies in the future. In this sense, the following topics are proposed for future research: exploring the role played by the social capital of non-traditional students and the way in which this capital can be expanded; documenting good practices and educational policies in university contexts to favour the inclusion and educational success of students with low economic and cultural capital; and delving into the strategies developed by working-class families to offer material and symbolic support to their children in their university itineraries.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship or publication of this article.

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‘I feel different…’: Learning experiences and identities of African students in Higher Education

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Abstract

Accessing higher education is a biographical learning experience for all students, which can promote transformations in individuals' identities. This article aims to investigate the implications of biographical learning experiences on the students' identities. We will explore African students' biographical learning experiences in Portuguese higher education and how they shaped their identities. Biographical learning and identity theoretical perspectives were adopted. This is a qualitative study that used biographical interviews with 22 African students enrolling at Portuguese higher education. The content analysis carried out has been organized into 2 themes: biographical learning experiences and identity transformations. The results of the study show that African students gained new knowledge and skills and became more independent and autonomous. They develop their self-confidence and open-mindedness through a new way of seeing the world. Thus, African students' experiences in higher education contributed to the formation and transformation of their identity.

Keywords: biographical learning experience, identity, African students, higher education, Portugal

Introduction

The transition to higher education (HE) is an important biographical event in young people's life course and a significant biographical learning experience. According to several researchers, accessing HE is considered one of the most significant transitions in students' lives since it implies transformations in their identities (e.g., Almeida, 2013; Field, 2012; Hultberg et al., 2008; Ingram et al., 2009; Merrill, 2011).

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Transition to HE entails an adjustment to new roles and responsibilities (Devlin & McKay, 2014) and, consequently, (re)constructing new identity aspects and a sense of belonging (Arneaud et al., 2016; Christie et al., 2016). In this vein, academic experience involves new acquisitions, which have effects on the students' cognitive and psychosocial development (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). This transition is accompanied by personal and social transformations, such as the development of autonomy, construction, and reconstruction of identity, and assumption of new roles and new meanings in life (Azevedo & Faria, 2001). Despite the increasing academic interest in biographical learning (Alheit & Dausien, 2002) and the identity of individuals (Dubar, 2006), there is still little research on the implications of biographical learning experiences on the identity process of HE students (Bron & Thunborg, 2011; Christie et al., 2008), and especially for those who leave their country of origin. If the transition to HE is a complex process for the vast majority of students, it is even more so for those who are displaced from their home country. Such is the case for students from Portuguese-speaking African countries such as Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique and Saint Tome and Principe, which are former Portuguese colonies. The colonial past still plays an important role both in migratory flows and in former colonies' organization (Augusto et al., 2022; Mains et al., 2013). Most African students choose Portuguese HE due to historical issues, the shared Portuguese language, the prestige of the universities, and the presence of relatives or friends in the country, among others (Doutor & Alves, 2020; Kishun, 2011). Coming to study in Portugal corresponds to a transition not only to an unknown learning environment but also to an unfamiliar country and culture. Adaptation to a new environment both academic, social, and cultural implies new life experiences and learning and can entail a deep transformation of identity. According to Merrill (2015), experiencing and coping with life transitions is a biographical learning experience. Therefore, biographical learning promotes identity transformations through life experiences and new knowledge (Bron & Thunborg, 2011).

This research aims to investigate the implications of biographical learning experiences on students' identities. More precisely, we will explore African students' biographical learning experiences in Portuguese HE and how they shaped their identities. To achieve these two aims we used data from PhD research of the first author (Doutor, 2021) on the biographical transitions of African students to Portuguese HE. This was a qualitative study based on biographical interviews (Delory-Momberger, 2012) with 22 African students enrolled at a Portuguese university.

The paper is organised as follows. First, the concepts of biographical learning, biographical learning experience and identity will be discussed in the theoretical framework. Afterwards, we present the methodological approach. In this section, the biographical method, as well as the procedures adopted in this study will be presented, namely the techniques used, the description of the participants of the study and the content analysis. The next section is dedicated to the presentation and the discussion of the findings. The paper ends with the final considerations.

This study intends to contribute to a better understanding of students from Portuguese-speaking African countries' learning and identities in the context of HE through a biographical approach. Moreover, the data will help the scientific community to understand the students' identity transformations that can occur during this process.

Theoretical framework

Biographical learning experience as a process of identity transformation

In the last years, biographical learning has become a relevant concept in adult education (e.g., Alheit & Dausien, 2002; Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Dominicé, 2000; Hallqvist et al., 2012; West et al., 2007). There exist certainly different definitions of the concept. For example, according to Peter Alheit and Betina Dausien (2002), biographical learning refers to the capacity of individuals to reflexively organise their experiences of giving coherence to identity and, consequently, imparting significance to their life history. Biographical learning is related to individuals' social backgrounds and experiences, which are constructed and reconstructed in everyday life. This theoretical perspective acquires more relevance when individuals deal with and learn through a transition in their life trajectory. Furthermore, the learning process refers to real experiences in life. Thus, this concept can help understand the biographical learning experiences of African students and how they affect their identities. The transition of students from Portuguese-speaking African countries to HE represents a challenge for them and contributes to awareness of their experiences of learning.

Individuals' experiences are:

> constructed itself biographically. And this biographical construction of experience is per se learning, since individual mobilizes the biographical resources acquired in their previous experiences to seize what the circumstances of life raise and integrate it into the constructed system of their representations and biographical knowledge. (Delory-Momberger, 2011, p. 342)

Also, Merrill (2011) states that the learning experience is a life transition that transforms the *self* and identity. In fact, 'biography itself has become a field of learning in which transitions have to be anticipated and managed, and personal identity is possibly just the result of difficult learning processes' (Alheit, 2022, p. 9).

Biography is, according to Alheit and Dausien (2002), linked to learning. Both are connected since biography depends on learning processes. According to Alheit and Hernández-Carrera (2018, p. 629), we are 'lifelong learners' since all learning is, in a certain way, biographical learning. In a context of transition, individuals reflect on themselves and, therefore, on their biography. They can reflect on their biographies, create new meanings for their lives and assign meaning to their past experiences, as well as to future ideas or dreams (Malec-Rawinski, 2019). It is in a certain sense a construction of new knowledge. It points out a 'reflective look at one's own life' (Alheit, 2022, p. 11).

Connected with biographical learning is the concept of biographicity (Alheit & Dausien, 2002). Biographicity means that people produce knowledge based on their one's experiences and, consequently elaborate new and different ways of defining themselves (Hallqvist, 2022).

Throughout life, individuals face new experiences and constructions of the world. When dealing with a new context, individuals develop new ways of understanding their lives and the world in which they live. According to this perspective, the learning process influences not only the way individuals understand their relationship with themselves and others but also with the world. In this way, biographical learning underlines a sociability dimension, since the reflective learning process is related to individuals and their relationships, communication and interaction with others (Alheit & Dausien, 2002). Therefore, it is a biographical, individual and, consequently, a learning process.

So, their biography undergoes a modification or even several modifications, giving rise to biographical constructions. These biographical constructions are reflexive processes (Evans, 2014) and have a transitory character (Dausien, 2007) because they presuppose a reflection not only on social events but on the individual himself. Noticeably, it is a process that generates coherence and personal identity. Another description indicates that telling their own stories is an important process of biographical learning since storytelling produces learning (Tedder & Biesta, 2009) and, consequently, allows their identity construction. When individuals tell their own stories, they attribute meaning to their actions and their lives. In this respect, Brockman (2010) states that the biographical learning process underlines the importance of learning experiences – informal or non-formal – to the development of an individual's identity. Biographical learning promotes identity transformations through new experiences and knowledge (Bron & Thunborg, 2011).

Identity as a biographical and a relational process

Given the transformations that occur in society, identity has been, in the last years, a main topic for several researchers (Ecclestone, 2007; Dubar, 2006). Ecclestone et al. (2010) state that identity is 'constructed through complex interactions between different forms of capital (cultural, social, economic and emotional), broader social and economic conditions, interactions and relationships [developed] in various contexts, and [also in] cognitive and psychological strategies' (p. 9). Bron and Thunborg (2017) stress that identity means how people see and present themselves in relationships.

Dubar (1997, p. 13) defines identity as a socially constructed process and, at the same time, an unfinished one since 'it is constructed in childhood and must always reconstruct itself throughout life'. During his/her social trajectory, the individual incorporates beliefs, values and norms, principles and behaviours, which allow him/her to assume different identities at different moments. Thus, the production of identities emerges from the convergence of the biographical and relational processes. Identity is conceptualised by Dubar (1997) as a transactional process between a biographical process that allows individuals to define themselves and a relational one that is at the origin of how they are defined by others. Identity results from the socialisation process. Social interactions and learning experiences shape identity. Taking into account the interaction with institutions and community, individuals construct identity during their life path.

Therefore, identity refers to the representations that individuals have about themselves and those that are attributed to them by others. In this vein, identity is conceptualised as a reflexive project of the individual. This means that individuals should restructure their past experiences and project future goals. Since identity is one issue that influences students' biographical learning experiences in HE (Alhawsawi, 2015), identities are constructed and reconstructed throughout the several phases of an individual's life and, therefore, are subject to diverse transformations. There are also perspectives about identity work and biographical work which relate to biographical learning and identity formation/transformation. To understand non-traditional students' life transitions, Bron and Thunborg (2017) used the biographical work theory, which explores identity formation and transformation from a biographical learning perspective. Their theoretical approach refers to how individuals construct and reconstruct their biographies and how they form and transform their identities throughout life.

Becoming a university student: biographical learning experiences and identity

The identity of a student influences his/her vision of the world, the way he/she learns and how he/she experiences learning. Becoming a university student is a complex process, in which students have to 'find their place' (Wilcox et al., 2005) since they have left behind family, home, and friends. The study developed by Moore (2006) looks to know the process of 'becoming' a university student, as well as the identity transformations as a result of academic experience. Moore (2006) highlights the increase in the students' confidence due to their academic experiences. These experiences transformed the way students saw themselves and how saw others. According to Gu and Schweisfurth (2015), students who live and study abroad find this experience to promote a 'profound identity transformation experience' (p. 947). They became more confident, and self-efficient and developed more positive attitudes. In addition, students highlighted intellectual transformations, such as the broadening of their way of thinking and worldviews. Moreover, biographical learning experiences are characterized by constant negotiations and reproductions of their social and cultural identities. Byrom and Lightfoot (2012) suggest that identity transformation is not as intense for students who continue to live at home with their families as it is for students who decide to study abroad.

Becoming a university student is related to how students relate themselves as agents taking into account their social background and previous learning experiences in a new educational institution (Thunborg et al., 2012). In the particular case of African students, it is important to mention colonialism and how it is perpetuated. Augusto et al. (2022, p. 1) refer to the coloniality of power and 'its enduring influence over the racialisation of skill[s], education, culture and language'.

According to Peter Alheit (2022), personal identity can be 'the result of difficult learning processes' (p. 9). In this context, students need to construct an identity and learn to act, in an autonomous way, as university students (Fazey & Fazey, 2001). Otherwise, they can feel like a 'fish out of the water' (Tranter, 2003). Also, Johnston and Merrill (2005) argue that 'studying a degree is a means of changing identity' (p. 42). In fact, 'studying for a degree as an adult transforms, for many, their identity: he/she becomes a changed person' (Johnston & Merill, 2005, p. 43). In the next section, we will describe the methodological assumptions used in this study.

Methodological approach

In this paper, we are particularly interested in exploring and analysing the implications of the biographical learning experiences and identity transformation of Portuguese-speaking African countries students, who are enrolled at one Portuguese university. As mentioned before, we intended (1) to explore these students' biographical learning experiences at university and (2) to understand their implications on identities. To achieve these goals, we used a qualitative methodology (Flick, 2004). The biographical method is a significant tool for understanding the impact of learning on a person's identity. As mentioned by Amado and Ferreira (2017), biographical studies allow us to capture an individual's interpretation of his or her life path, as well as the diversity of experiences that occurred in different contexts or life circumstances. It is also important to take into account the collective deeply structural nature of these experiences.

The biographical interview was a useful method since it is an in-depth interview where the interviewee tells his/her life story. Furthermore, it allows access to the biographical experiences of the interviewees, as well as to the way they experience and

(re)interpret each life experience (Caetano, 2014). In the biographical interview, the interviewees are called to tell their life story, in particular the lived experiences in Portugal and HE. Participants were asked to tell their experiences of studying in Portuguese HE. As a space for dialogue and reflection (Merrill, 2020), a biographical interview promotes a dialogue or a communicative interaction between interviewer and interviewee. And involve interest, respect, empathy and trust relationship between both.

All interviews were transcribed and a content analysis was carried out (Bardin, 2009) based on the following categories: biographical learning experiences and identity transformations. Ethical considerations have been taken into account. Before each interview, all students were informed about the aim of the study and their rights as participants. All participants signed an informed consent form. The names of the students used in this paper are fictitious to ensure their confidentiality. As researchers, we assumed the role of guide and active listener throughout the process. During the interviews, we gave space and time to students to express their lived experiences and feel comfortable.

We conducted 22 biographical interviews according to Delory-Momberger's proposal (2012). We interviewed 12 male students and 10 females, aged between 18 and 23 years old and from Guinea-Bissau (10), Cape Verde (8) and Mozambique (4). The students were selected taking into account their gender and country of origin. They were bachelor's degree students. Concerning their field of study, nine students were studying Law, three Public Administration, three International Relations, and others Political Science, Mathematics, Computer Science and Engineering, and so on. The interviews took place over the first and third years of their bachelor's degree. In the next section, we will present and analyse some findings.

Findings and discussion: African students' learning experience and identities

In this section, we will focus on the biographical learning experiences identified by students from Portuguese-speaking African countries and their identity transformations.

(1) The biographical learning experiences

Transition to university and engaging in learning is a biographical learning experience, since it can transform identities and lives. For African students, this transition means that they have to leave their country, their family and friends. This biographical event promotes new experiences and learning but also many challenges. They considered this transition as a notable biographical learning experience.

Acquisition of new knowledge and skills

This theme describes the students' learning in terms of acquiring new knowledge and skills. It includes several categories:

Academic knowledge and skills

To all of them, the acquisition of scientific knowledge at university has a positive meaning. Many students value the learning and knowledge acquired. For example, one student highlighted feminism as an important learning for her life:

> I have deepened my expertise on Feminism in one lecture, in which we started to speak about Feminism and Human Rights. It was the best class that I had in my life. I liked too

> much. Now I am learning a lot about Portuguese politics, an issue that I didn't understand. (Ariela, 18 years, Cape Verde)

Another student highlighted Constitutional Law as an essential learning in his degree:

> Constitutional Law is linked to politics. For me, it was the most interesting issue of the degree and was the issue that I liked. I feel that I have a large domain in this issue. Even last year I gave explanations about Constitutional Law to my peers that arrived at the university. (Ezidoro, 22 years, Guinea-Bissau)

Becoming an HE student was seen as a rewarding experience through which they had the opportunity to learn new subjects and expand their knowledge (Nielsen, 2020). Some students stress the acquisition of academic skills, specifically concerning the search for information: 'I learned a lot of things and I have to be able to search for more information to increase my knowledge' (Nayma, 19 years, Mozambique).

Language skills

Mastery of language, both written and spoken, is of crucial importance for academic success at all levels of education. However, this competence takes on even greater relevance in HE. Here, adhering to the rules of spelling, syntax, and semantics is not enough. In HE, it is also essential to master the codes of academic writing, often not taught but always required. If language mastery and the codes of academic writing are a challenge for many domestic students, it is even more so for students from Portuguese-speaking African countries. In these countries and outside the elite circles, Portuguese often takes on different forms than the Portuguese spoken in Portugal, which is considered the only legitimate and accepted version in academia, posing difficulties for some of these students (Doutor & Alves, 2020; Lima, 2018). In addition to this situation, there is the fact that, despite Portuguese being the official language, native languages, such as Creoles, are often used in everyday communication. The linguistic challenges that some students face are evident in Djalo's words.

> I learned the language. In language, I know more now than before. Before I could not speak because my Portuguese was weak and I could not express what I wanted to say. Now I can do, almost everything. I am more comfortable. (Djaló)

New values and behaviours

The acquisition of new values and behaviours is also mentioned by some participants. For example, one student stressed: 'I am learning to like being with people. I believe that is to learn to be a more social person. Beyond colleagues, I can meet more people' (Inussa, 19 years, Guinea-Bissau). Transitions can be seen as an opportunity for behavioural change (Elder et al., 2003). So, relationships in an academic context are essential to socialisation and integration as well as to academic success (Tinto, 2006; Wilson et al., 2014). Another student identified communication, socialization, and the establishment of new friendships as important learning experiences for her well-being and produced an identity transformation:

> I learned to socialize with people. I learned to be more expressive, and more communicative. This experience improved my communication and expression with others. I am better now because I was very shy. (…) I learned to communicate with all people and which are the expressions that I should use to speak with persons of different ages. It was that that I learned. (Nayma, 19 years, Mozambique)

In interpersonal relationships, it is also possible to stress the capacity to respect, understand, communicate and value peoples' opinions: 'I improved my capability to better understand people. I learnt a lot. I learnt to value the person's opinion even when is not valid. I have to listen to people's opinions. Always. I have to respect people' (Ezidoro, 22 years, Guinea-Bissau).

Transitioning to Portuguese HE means, for many students, the acquisition of life skills and learning. In this regard, one student highlighted: 'By the way, it was not just learning from the course it was real life learning! Cooking, shopping, cleaning the house and I also have more freedom. It's slowly adapting, but it has been good' (Jair, 19 years, Cape Verde).

Money management

Another skill mentioned by students refers to money management. It is, clearly, synonymous with a reduction in family dependency and, consequently, an increase in responsibility. This independence results in the need to make decisions by him/herself, which promotes the management of financial resources. In this sense, one student reveals:

> Here I have to pay my bills, I have to be attentive to light and water. The cost of life is very different. Here I can only count on myself. Here I learned to make the bills to know where I can spend my money (Shaira, 19 years, Mozambique)

Time management and organization

The acquisition of organization and management of time is an important biographical learning experience and skill to face personal, academic, and professional responsibilities that impact on the way students perceive themselves:

> It was a personal change in the way that I now organize better my things and it allows me to have more time to enjoy others' things. Now, I am more organized in my responsibilities, which are studying and working (Ezidoro, 22 years, Guinea-Bissau).

Furthermore, individuals sharing their experiences and life stories have shaped their biographies and, consequently, transformed their identities (Nielsen, 2020).

(2) The identity transformations

Identity transformation refers to the representations of African students about themselves. It includes the following categories:

Becoming independent

Transition to HE is a biographical and complex event that involves a broad range of learning, for example, in the way individuals see themselves. Thus, the transition process promotes new experiences, challenges and identity changes: 'I became more independent and here makes a person grow up because it's very different from my country and being with my parents. Here I have to deal with responsibilities' (Shaira, 19 years, Mozambique). In fact, the absence of relatives and the lack of their support played an important role in becoming independent (Casanova et al., 2020; Nielsen, 2020). Another student states: 'I changed a lot! I became one person more independent in terms of money management. I know what can I spend. So, that is independence. I gained independence here' (Kelly, 18 years, Cape Verde).

HE is seen as a positive learning and rewarding experience (Kurantowicz & Nizinska, 2013). The experiences told by students seem to affect the formation of student identity (Thunborg et al., 2013).

Becoming autonomous and responsible

Students mentioned that they became more autonomous and responsible. When students leave their homes to enrol in HE it is common for them to make decisions, define goals and become more autonomous in the academic context (Nielsen, 2020; Ferreira et al., 2013). The following narrative underlines this issue:

> Related to university, I developed a lot. The academy has consequences in our personal lives and it shifts many things. It was a big shift, today I have more maturity. They are difficult things to explain but it was a big shift in my personal life. The academy helps me a lot. (Djaló, 20 years, Guinea-Bissau)

It looks like their identities were reconstructed throughout their life experience:

> Now I feel like a woman. I am not a girl. Now I have another kind of concern, I have a house and I have to buy food. (…) Now I think more about my future than I thought last year. I feel that I have grown up since I came here [Portugal]. I have responsibilities. (Shaira, 19 years, Mozambique)

Both quotations support Merrill's (2014) assumption that university can be seen as a transitional space in which occur learning transitions, encouraging students to reflect on past and present identities. In the context of biographical learning experiences, the reflection both about the events and themselves is crucial. This process generates both personal identity and coherence (Alheit, 2022).

According to Costa and Oliveira (2010), the acquisition of autonomy influences the academic adaptation of students. The next statement underlines this issue: 'University changed my mentality. I am feeling that I became a person with maturity. Now I spend my time studying. So, it changed me, now I am a hardworking student' (Ismael, 20 years, Guinea-Bissau).

Kurantowicz and Nizinska's research (2013) also stresses that becoming a student involves interrogating previous assumptions and routines. The transition to HE constitutes a 'turning point' in life trajectories since puts into test the resources and levels of maturity of students (Gresham & Clayton, 2011).

Becoming self-confident

Our findings indicated that African students became more confident in their academic skills: '(…) it influenced a lot my life because I changed. Here I started to feel more confident' (Nayma, 19 years, Mozambique). The mastery of academic skills has particular influences on students' self-esteem and agency. The study developed by Tett and Maclachlan (2007) stresses the impact of HE on the trust and self-esteem of students. When students feel they have learnt, they present high levels of self-esteem, agency, and confidence in several situations and aspects of their lives (Turner & Tobbell, 2018).

> I believe that it increased my skill of thinking and my way of seeing things changed. It gave me more strength to fight for my dreams and never give up. To give up is always my last option. Now I have that in my mind. So, we must fight for what we want. (Ismael, 20 years, Guinea-Bissau)

Previous research, such as the study of Bron and Lönnheden (2004) points out that mature students view their experience of HE as a democratic process since they gained self-confidence in their life and learning. The same seems to happen with these students.

Some participants indicated that their communication skills and the ability to respect the opinion of other persons are a result of this biographical learning experience:

> Even the way of communicating changed. Ever since I have been here [Portugal], my mother and I can talk about many subjects. Now, we already discuss the situation of the world when before I stayed in silence. I was always quiet and accepted all the things that people said to me. Now I have an opinion and even one day when I was talking with my brother and questioned the reason for something he told to me: - Now you have to stop to discuss with me. Before you used to be quiet! (Dilson, 22 years, Guinea-Bissau)

This awareness of new learning and knowledge is shared by another student who is proud of herself for the fact that has more knowledge when talking with their parents: 'I feel different in terms of knowledge. Now I can have a conversation with them [my parents] with more knowledge' (Kelly, 18 years, Cape Verde). All these statements corroborate the results of several researches that show the role of HE in promoting self-confidence and intellectual, academic and interpersonal skills (Bron et al., 2014; Nielsen, 2020; Silva et al., 2017).

Becoming open-minded

Some students mentioned that became more open-minded because they expanded their worldviews. After the HE, they have a new way of looking at the world:

> I have grown up, now I see the world differently. I grew up as a person, daughter, student, and woman. I grew up a lot and I'm only 19 years old. Today I have a different worldview. Now I know how to achieve things, how to get things. I realize that I want to be independent soon. (Sadjo, 19 years, Guinea-Bissau)

Our findings are similar to the results of Nielsen (2020) about the change in the way Erasmus students see the world. In addition, this experience in Portugal can 'become a change to an individual's way of looking at oneself and the outside world' (p. 12). Some students also mention a different way of thinking:

> Well, many things changed. My way of thinking also changed a lot. The way that I obtain my knowledge, the way that I obtain the information that is given to me. In other words, my brain is being educated. It is that. The way I saw things is not the same. I believe that is it. (Larisse, 19 years, Mozambique)

This statement illustrates what Maldonado-Torres (2007) labelled the coloniality of being. The coloniality of being refers to how people, and in this case, African students internalise the oppressive power structures produced by colonial history. This reflects the awareness of former colonial individuals of the Portuguese education system.

The confrontation with a new context, such as an academic context filled with new information and experiences entails, naturally, new ways of thinking or acting in students (Dalcin & Freire, 2019). This new way of thinking shows clearly the development of agency (Munford & Sanders, 2014). Agency refers to the way individuals think about the circumstances they are facing, and how they react on emotional and social levels. So, agency is connected with social structure (Ecclestone et al., 2010) and without awareness of the structural constraints, there is no agency.

Becoming more social

Some students highlight the development of sociability. For example, one student mentioned: 'Now, I do not feel shy. Now I am more sociable because I relate and interact with people easily' (Ezidoro, 22 years, Guinea-Bissau). Another student identified communication, socialization, and establishment of new friendships as important learning experiences for her well-being and, consequently, identity: 'This experience improved my communication and expression with others. I am better now because I was very shy' (Nayma, 19 years, Mozambique). These examples illustrate how students constructed and reconstructed their perception of themselves in a different social context and support the idea that transitions and biographical learning experiences can lead to a change in behaviour, values (Elder et al., 2003) and identities (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015; Johnston & Merrill, 2005).

Our findings also indicated that biographical learning may have significant effects on African students' identities. Through the analysis of student stories, we saw how identities were transformed (Bron, 2020). In summary, African students' identities were shaped through biographical experiences. Living and studying in a different country, students learn to manage money, pay their bills and organise their lives. In their words, they became independent. Students learned to deal with challenges, define goals and make decisions, which means becoming more autonomous. Connected with autonomy, they also acquire maturity through biographical learning in HE. Through the acquisition of academic knowledge and skills, students develop self-confidence in their knowledge. Few students highlight that HE contributes to a new way of looking at the world. They becoming open-minded. Another transformation is related to sociability. These biographical experiences allowed them to acquire and develop Portuguese language and communication skills. They defined themselves as more sociable due to this life transition.

To the assigned identity (Dubar, 1997) of HE students, participants claim a biographical identity defined by predominantly psychological traits. These traits are indicative of a personal development process stemming from new life experiences, where an adult identity seems to begin taking shape.

Final considerations

Taking as a starting point that the biographical learning experience transforms the identity of individuals (Bron & Thunborg, 2017; Merrill, 2011), we were interested in understanding how the biographical learning experiences of students from Portuguese-speaking African countries reshaped their identity.

African students highlighted several biographical learning experiences. For them, the transition to HE was essential to the development of autonomy (Azevedo & Faria, 2001; Nielsen, 2020). In this sense, responsibility, sociability, and independence are some of the biographical learning experiences mentioned by students. Therefore, access to education as a biographical learning experience is experienced by these students as a life transition that transforms their learning and identity (Merrill, 2011; Thunborg et al., 2012). Identity must be seen as a continuous process of experience (Kondrup, 2014). Overall, this awareness of biographical learning experiences is an evident sign of agency in individuals' lives. Related to this issue, Berger and Luckmann (2010) reinforced the idea that identity is shaped and reshaped by social relations. This is what happened with these students who according to their representations became more sociable and communicative individuals.

Our findings also show that their biographical learning experiences enabled students not only a new view of the world but above all a new and different view of themselves (Ecclestone et al., 2010). The transition of these students to Portuguese HE cannot fail to take into account the specific situation of their home countries, all former Portuguese colonies. The common Portuguese language, in spite of the problems mentioned above, the availability of study grants, and special schemes for the entry of students from Portuguese-speaking African countries in HE may have underlying forms of neo-colonialism. Furthermore, several studies with African students in Portugal have reported economic and social difficulties (Doutor & Alves, 2020; Lima, 2018) and various forms of discrimination (Doutor et al., 2018; Kilomba, 2019). The colonial past as well as the covert prejudice against Portuguese-speaking African communities affects the way Portuguese society looks at African students (Vala et al., 2008), shaping their life experiences.

Biographical learning experiences can transform students' identities (Bron & Thunborg, 2017). The biographical learning experiences reported by the participants led them to claim an identity for themselves marked by attributes conventionally assigned to adults. It is as if the transition to HE, and the biographical learning it provides, accelerate the transition process to adulthood and the assumption of a new identity. At this point, other questions arise, demanding further research. Among them, we emphasize the importance of analysing the transition to HE of non-native students, including those from Portuguese-speaking countries, by employing an intersectional approach (Hancock, 2007; Walby et al., 2012). This approach will enable us to understand how multiple forms of discrimination like classism, sexism, and racism overlap and intersect in the making of their biographical learning experiences and identities.

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How can arts-based methods support narrative inquiry into adult learning in the arts? A case study

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Abstract

This article considers an arts-based project, Learning Returns (2023), *that seeks to capture the experiences of adults who have returned to arts study after some time away from formal education. The aims of the project are twofold: firstly, to evaluate the combination of narrative inquiry and digital film-making hosted on YouTube as a method of investigating adult learning and secondly, through an analysis of the Learning Returns content, to discover what themes the participants considered important to communicate to an imagined, virtual audience. The findings suggested that the aesthetics of the videos/films interconnect with the lived experiences of the participants. The participants were able to give an account of their experiences spontaneously, and at the same time communicate messages of hope to prospective adult returners. It was also discovered that the editing process offers a means of analysing the content of the films that is analogous to the approaches associated with qualitative research.*

Keywords: arts education, adult learners, arts-based research, narrative, experience

Introduction

Researchers have employed qualitative methods to investigate the experiences of adult students (Reay et al., 2002; Crozier et al., 2008; Fowle, 2018; Broadhead & Gregson, 2018). Approaches include autoethnography, life-writing, biographical and narrative inquiry (Chamberlayne et al., 2000; West et al., 2007; Nelson, 2008). At the same time there is an emerging trend where researchers draw upon arts-based methods to capture

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narratives of experiences in formal and informal educational contexts (Larsen, 2010; Farenga, 2018; Dickson, 2020; Dickson, 2021; Broadhead, 2021). Qualitative approaches such as narrative inquiry could be understood as being part of a continuum that includes arts-based methods, but the relationship between qualitative and arts-based research is not straightforward (Butler-Kisber, 2010) nor is there a consensus that they should or should not be positioned as separate epistemological paradigms. Originally Leavy (1975) in, *Method Meets Art: Arts-Based Research Practice* conceived arts-based research as a subsection of qualitative research. However, by the second edition Leavy's thinking had developed to a point where arts-based research was understood to be a distinct and alternative paradigm from qualitative and quantitative research, '…I am going to write about ABR as its own paradigm (while acknowledging it is understood by some as a set of methodological tools used in qualitative research)' (Leavy, 2015, p. 6). Qualitative research is associated with the use of words; arts-based methods can also utilise words to construct stories and poetry. However, along with verbal and written scripts, arts-based methods can employ still and moving images and/or processes of making and performing. Butterwick and Roy (2018) commented that the forms of creative expression associated with arts-based research continue to expand. Leavy (2015) recognised a potential 'synergy' between arts-based and qualitative research, where the two approaches complement one another. Janesick (2001) conceptualised both approaches as 'crafts' or techniques which researchers could draw upon 'to ultimately tell a story' (p. 7). The position taken in this article is that arts-based research is distinct from qualitative methods. However, there are some commonalities; for example, qualitative research can also involve story-telling. This article explores how narrative inquiry and digital film-making can work together when researching the experiences of adult or mature students.

In order to explore these questions, an arts-based project, *Learning Returns* (2023), is presented as a case study. The project was created to address the invisibility of adult learners studying the arts and the devaluing of arts education in UK educational policies by showing how much the learners themselves valued arts education. *Learning Returns* aimed to capture the experiences of mature students who had returned to education to study the arts after a period of time away from formal education. Their initial re-entry into learning was through informal arts study in galleries or museums, short community courses, Access to HE (in the UK this provision prepares adults without formal qualifications for higher level or undergraduate study) or occasionally direct entry onto arts degree courses. The arts subjects they studied were varied (textiles, printmaking, sculpture, creative writing, calligraphy, participatory and fine art). Initially the project was devised during 2020 as a response to the dramatic changes that occurred in people's working, leisure and learning lives due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Butcher & Clarke, 2022). *Learning Returns* explored the possibility that a video-sharing website could be a fruitful space for developing narrative inquiry and arts-based research. Broadhead's (2021) interrogation of film-making as a method for researching mature graduates before the pandemic was a precursor to this work.

The aims of this article are twofold: firstly, to reflect on the combination of narrative inquiry and digital film-making hosted on YouTube as a method for researching the experiences of adults and secondly, through an analysis of *Learning Returns*, to discover what themes the participants would consider important to communicate to a virtual audience.

The research is very close to and informed by digital story telling where students select images, clips of video, music and texts, and then collage them together to create their own story (Eisenhauer, 2012). However, there were some slight but important differences. Firstly, rather than the participants creating their own digital films, *Learning*

Returns was a collaboration between many contributors who all had an input into creating the outcomes. There were a professional graphic designer who had been an adult returner themselves, a research team (digital film-maker, and a researcher), a technician and the participants. Leavy (2015) and Foster (2015) have argued that collaboration between practitioners and participants can maximise the technical, aesthetic and authentic aspects of the work increasing the likelihood that the outcomes will reach their intended audiences.

Secondly, the aim was for the participants to tell their stories that were then represented within a consistent *Learning Return's* frame. All the films had a shared audio-visual identity that would be recognisable when it was broadcast on social media and video-sharing platforms. The imagery, music, typography and film-making were designed for *Learning Returns* in particular rather than the individual stories.

Context – Adults returning to study the arts – double devaluation?

In the UK it could be argued that adults learning the arts are subject to two detrimental policy trends. Firstly, the government does not prioritise the arts in compulsory and post-compulsory education. Secondly, adult learning and the needs of adult students in particular are often invisible within policy at national and institutional levels.

Ashton and Ashton (2022) pointed out that in Europe education, arts and culture are central in policy and practice, citing Finland, France and Germany as examples where arts and culture are strategically developed. However, in the UK with the exception of Scotland, the value of arts and arts education has not been prioritised. Ashton and Ashton (2022) went on to show how arts state education has been systematically undermined during the last 20-30 years. The value of art education has been measured in terms of to what extent it can lead to employment in the creative industries. However, the role of education in developing a critical appreciation of the arts as part of living a good life (InSEA, 2021) has not been recognised as being important and nor do the benefits the arts have on health and wellbeing, social engagement and communities inform governmental agendas relating to arts education (Broadhead et al., 2022).

Policy directions rooted in neoliberal ideology have narrowed curricula so that they focus on sciences to the detriment of the arts (Broadhead, 2022). Accountability measures and funding cuts have contributed towards the erosion of the arts' teaching profession. This in turn has impacted on the numbers of students studying subjects like music and the visual arts (Bath et al., 2020; Clarke & McLellan, 2022). The introduction in 2011 of the English baccalaureate certificate (EBacc) in schools has also had a negative effect on the arts (Johnes, 2017; Fautley, 2019; Neumann et al., 2020; Thomson et al., 2020; Bath et al., 2020). This is because 'both students and schools are assessed by examination in given subjects, this standards-based model contributes to an imbalance in the status of different curricular subjects' (Lilliedahl, 2021, p. 2). It could be proposed that as young people are discouraged from studying the arts in school and later at university because they are perceived as being 'low value' and not leading to employment (Fazackerley, 2021), then more adults may consider returning to study them later in life. Broadhead and Gregson (2018) have noted that adult art students were often dissuaded from studying arts at school and wished to return to study them when they had more control over their lives. However, the opportunities for adults to study the arts later in life may be decreasing. Ashton and Ashton (2022) identified a loss of influence over education in local authorities resulting in increased centralisation that has led to detrimental inequalities in how people can access the arts.

Banks and Oakley (2016) argued that UK art schools (once an alternative educational route for working-class students of all ages when courses were funded by local authorities) have been assimilated into multi-faculty universities where, especially in the prestigious ones, the class profile has shifted toward the more privileged. They went on to point out that much of the post-compulsory education in the arts is linked to a public policy agenda of the 'creative economy' which not only marginalises working-class people, but also people of colour. Furthermore, some aspects of the cultural industries are highly gendered (Allen, 2013; Milestone, 2015; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2015; Banks, 2017; Brook et al., 2020).

In the United Kingdom there have been declines in adult education generally (Fowle, 2018). When considering adults returning to study, it can also be seen that their needs have not been prioritised in UK educational policy. Butcher (2020) pointed out that there had been a 61% drop in the number of adults engaging with higher education over the previous ten years (Tazzyman et al., 2019). The near-disappearance of part-time mature learners, in particular, from conventional university study, is rarely addressed in institutional Access and Participation Plans (OfS, 2019). Part-time adults remain almost invisible in national widening participation policies (OfS, 2020). There has been some recognition from the UK government that people need to learn throughout the life course, suggested by their announcement of the Lifetime Skills Guarantee in 2020. The Lifelong Learning Entitlement from 2025 aims to bring more flexibility and choice for adult students at level four through to six (UK undergraduate levels). Whether or not these interventions will diminish the barriers adult students face when studying the arts is open to question.

Butcher and Clarke (2022) noted that barriers to studying the arts are compounded for adult learners, who often need flexible routes into higher education, such as through Access to HE courses. Adult returners (defined by HESA as aged over 21), often have limited time and financial support while managing their learning alongside work and caring commitments. Therefore, for those adults returning to study the arts it could be perceived as a risky endeavour as it requires much personal investment that may not lead to stable employment (Broadhead & Gregson, 2018).

On the other hand, many people do return to study the arts later in life because they believe that being creative is a significant part of their identity. Butcher and Clarke (2022) have argued that the voices of part-time mature students are rarely heard in research around the arts. The transformative aspects of lifelong learning in the arts need to be further elucidated to institutions and policy makers. *Learning Returns* sought to explore and make visible the attitudes and experiences of this group of 'doubly devalued' students.

The arts-based approach to inquiry

This project drew upon the participants' stories about their experience through a form of narrative inquiry that also had a visual element. Butler-Kisber (2010) placed narrative inquiry within a qualitative paradigm. The associated processes of reflection on past events, telling, listening and retelling are suitable for those inquiries that wish to capture experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Butler-Kisber, 2010; Rolling, 2010; Farenga, 2018). These accounts constructed by researchers and participants are conventionally captured through the transcription of verbal story-telling and/or through writing.

However, this project also drew upon arts-based research where the narratives were filmed and broadcast on the *Learning Returns* (2023) channel. Arts-based methods comprises a range of strategies or approaches that can draw upon one or more of the arts

in the inquiry (Butler-Kisber, 2010). In this instance the participants' stories were conveyed through film-making and broadcasting via YouTube. McKay and Sappa (2020) argued that the arts can enable individuals to adopt multiple languages other than verbal language or writing, communicating in a multi-sensorial fashion that is not limited to cognition but can evoke feeling.

Arts-based methods are centred in the belief that experience, understanding and meaning are multifaceted (Rolling, 2010). The arts offer ways of knowing derived from sensory perception leading to emotional, aesthetic and intellectual responses to the world. These different ways of knowing can potentially enhance a researcher's comprehension of complex human interactions. Arts-based research is relevant to adult learning because it is, 'research that uses the arts, in the broadest sense, to explore, understand, represent and even challenge human action and experience' (Savin-Baden & Wimpenny, 2014, p. 1). McNiff (2008) considered artistic expression as an important means for both researchers and participants to reflect on and examine their experiences.

When ascribing quality to arts-based research outcomes and processes, it is problematic to depend on those associated with science-based research. Sinner et al. (2019) asserted that criteria such as validity, significance, reproducibility, reliability and exportable generalisations can be seen as irrelevant when evaluating arts-based research projects. Piantanida et al. (2003, p. 187) suggested that as arts-based research is still an emerging field, the means of judging quality may not yet have been determined.

With a view to establishing quality indicators Leavy (2015) identified authenticity and truthfulness as important tenets of arts-based research that help distinguish it from quantitative and qualitative paradigms although it could be argued that qualitative methods can also be political, consciousness-raising and emancipatory (see Table 1).

Table 1. The main tenets of quantitative, and qualitative and arts-based research. (Leavy, 2015, p. 295).

Quantitative	**Qualitative**	**Arts-Based**
Numbers	Words	Stories, images, sounds, scenes sensory
Data discovery	Data Collection	Data or content generation
Measurement	Meaning	Evocation
Tabulating	Writing	Re(presenting)
Value neutral	Value Laden	Political, consciousness-raising, emancipation
Reliability	Process	Authenticity
Validity	Interpretation	Truthfulness
Prove/convince	Persuade	Compel, move, aesthetic power
Generalizability	Transferability	Resonance
Disciplinary	Interdisciplinary	Transdisciplinary

'Authenticity' is increasingly being recognised as an indication of quality in arts-based research. Eaves (2014) discussed strategies for optimising the authenticity of representation and of interpretation within arts-based research. Eaves argued that the art forms or media used should be carefully considered in terms of the needs of the participants so that they are not restrictive but facilitate accessibility, polyphony and authenticity. Research projects should be designed so they are underpinned by transparency, discipline and reflection (Mitchell et al., 2005) as well as epistemological, theoretical and methodological coherency (Eaves, 2014).

The aesthetics of the outcome are connected to its authenticity so they have power and meaning for the audience (Hervey, 2004; Imus, 2001). Leavy (2015) wrote that the aesthetic aspect of arts-based research has a power to catalyse an emotional response in the audience and this indicates the usefulness of the approach. To do this, 'an artistic rendering must get to the heart of the issue and present that essence in a coherent form in order to achieve aesthetic power. In order to achieve these ends, one must pay attention to the architecture of the form.' (Leavy, 2015, p. 278). So, for example, the crafting of the *Learning Returns* films' aesthetics was carefully constructed to provide a coherent frame for the stories the participants were telling so that the audience would respond at an emotional and cognitive level and believe the representation of experience was truthful and authentic (Chilton & Leavy, 2014).

Furthermore, the inquiry and aesthetic encounters resulting from arts-based research are present as part of everyday life (Dewey, 1934). Dewey's important text, *Art as Experience* (Dewey, 1934) examined the aesthetics of pragmatism. He argued that art and life are intricately linked to each other. Medvedeva (2019) followed this line of reasoning when arguing that media aesthetics can and should be applied to art and everyday life. They are not only interconnected, but also interdependent,

> Media has become a part of our daily life a long time ago, but this daily routine also has its own aesthetics, its own creative laws, according to which they influence and emotionally influence us. (Medvedeva, 2019, p. 969)

The viewing of the films on YouTube contextualised them within a space outside of academia that was closer to the viewer's every day existence. Dickson (2021) argued that arts-based research was an effective way of capturing experiences, but also a means of disseminating the research to different, non-academic audiences. By creating a distinctive visual identity for *Learning Returns* the films could be more easily discovered, recognized and remembered within the context of YouTube where other content vies for audience attention. The aesthetics are mostly experienced as fleeting 'bite-sized' flashes of moving image, framed by the white background and grid structure of the platform. The architecture of the YouTube channel as well as the individual films help evoke emotion and construct meaning (Foster, 2015). Aesthetics evoke a response in the audience that could be emotional, spiritual, physical and cognitive. The audience could be awake to these aesthetic responses or they may not be conscious of them.

Closely aligned to the notions of authenticity and truthfulness is the value of trustworthiness. Butler-Kisber et al. (2003) and Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed a notion of trustworthiness as an alternative validation of the research, where processes were open and transparent. Rolling (2010) developed this notion further,

> the indirect sources of arts-based outcomes may require a kind of interpretive validity. Interpretive validity in arts-based research might invoke each of the multiple readings within a research study to serve as a criterion for trustworthiness. (Rolling, 2010, p. 110)

Bassey (1999) contended that notions of trustworthiness were appropriate for research in educational settings due to the complex nature of the context and interactions of people within the educational process. The outcomes of research could be framed as what is possible, likely or unlikely rather than claiming one truth or a certainty. The constructing of a detailed and rich description and a coherent narrative account was, for Bassey, an important test of trustworthiness.

Method

Learning Returns aimed to capture the experiences of adults who had returned to education to study the arts and to evaluate how the resulting stories could communicate meaning to a virtual audience. It also evaluated to what extent a video-sharing website (YouTube) could be an appropriate platform for developing an arts-based research project. Within this article 'film' and 'video' are both terms referring to digitally created moving images.

Outside the field of education Pink (2007) has been influential in embedding film within a research methodology. Pink (2007) created the 'video tour' where the researcher, with the participants, walked around their homes, filming the discussions that took place. There have been other similar examples of research that have employed digital-film to capture stories of educational experience (Walsh et al., 2013; Mumtaz, 2015; Duckworth & Smith, 2018). *Learning Returns* (2023) sought to portray experience through narrative and film-making but then to curate the films as part of a YouTube channel. The video-sharing site has been used as a means of promoting informal and formal learning (Wilson, 2003; Staikidis, 2006; Duncum, 2011). The analysis of YouTube videos has also been undertaken as a research method (Kousha et al., 2012).

Recruitment of participants

The participants were drawn from those who had returned to study the arts as older learners. Many had come from the Access to HE routes. In order to initiate the project adult returners to education in the north of England were contacted. They were asked if they would consent to being filmed telling their stories that would be uploaded onto the *Learning Returns* (2023) channel. In the first instance four participants, Gemma, Hafifa, Terence and Frances volunteered to take part. Later when these four films were shown six more participants came forward after finding out about the project through the informal networks of adult learners. Participants also were asked to suggest others who could potentially be part of the project. It is anticipated that the number of participants will grow as *Learning Returns* becomes established.

From an ethical point of view the wellbeing of contributors was the priority. The researchers were very open and transparent about the public nature of YouTube so that participants understood that they would be visible to a world-wide audience. They were given an information sheet and consent form that explained the aims of the project, the reasons why the research was being undertaken, what participation entailed and the right to withdraw at any time. A participant could request that their film be removed from the YouTube *Learning Returns* (2023) channel and the research team would comply with their wishes. It was stressed that the participant should think carefully about the public nature of YouTube before consenting.

The project gained ethical clearance from the University's Ethics Sub-Committee and at this point there were no issues identified. Nevertheless, the ethical aspects of the

project were reflected upon by the research team, throughout the process, as unanticipated ethical dilemmas could arise at any point. The 'journey' that the participant would take as they contributed to the project was imagined by the researchers with the aim of anticipating issues that might arise. Trustworthiness and authenticity were aims that the project worked towards. The participants' stories and the meanings they conveyed were captured and the processes by which this was done were also reflected upon throughout the project. At this point it must be clarified that the stories were inevitably co-constructed with the researchers as meaning was mediated by how stories were told and researchers could not promise a disinterested objectivity.

The reflection took place in practice as an iterative act at key points, during the filming, reviewing the uncut footage and viewing the final films before and after they were posted to the *Learning Returns* (2023) channel. Through the reflection the team needed to be assured that the participants were represented in a respectful way and that the content would not cause harm to themselves or other people.

In order to limit the intrusion into the lives of participants their geographical location or the places where they studied or worked were omitted as were their full names. Many of the participants were practising artists and designers who wanted to talk about their creative practice; this was allowed as long as sensitive information was not revealed. As a compromise the participants' social media, linked to their artistic work, were shared if they requested it.

The participants who agreed to undertake the project showed no signs that they were uncomfortable with the filming but to alleviate any concerns they may have had the research team carefully explained the technical aspects when the microphone, camera and lighting were set up.

All the participants were shown their films so they could ask for changes or decide whether or not to withdraw at that point. After the films were posted they were monitored by the research team on a regular basis or when alerted by the YouTube notifications system. Any comments posted in relation to the films would be considered by the research team and if perceived as offensive or hurtful, they would be deleted. Participants could also ask for inappropriate comments to be removed. The *Learning Returns* project is intended to run for three years during which the content will be added to as other adult returners consent to participate; currently there are 10 participants. After that time the project will be reviewed and if it is deemed not to be sustainable, the *Learning Returns* content would be stored on an institutional repository and the channel deleted.

The process

Participants were asked to prepare themselves for talking about their educational and life experiences. They had control over the kinds of topics they felt it was important to share with a virtual audience.

Filming days were planned to fit in with the schedules of the participants. Backgrounds and lighting were designed to frame the contributors as they were speaking and to give a visual continuity to the films.

There was no rehearsal time – the participants were able to talk straight to camera. They could do this with confidence because they were told that anything they were not happy with could be edited out.

Curation of the Learning Returns Channel on YouTube

A *Learning Returns* visual identity suitable for YouTube was created so that audiences would become familiar with it and recognise that the films were part of one project. This was an aspect of the project that differentiated it from digital storytelling methods (Rossiter & Garcia, 2010; Eisenhauer, 2012). The aesthetics of YouTube and the *Learning Returns* channel were important in constructing meaning. A graphic designer was employed to design a series of coherent 'assets' that could be used on the project's YouTube channel. Assets are visual designs that can be used as banners, titles, and idents. Typography and labels were also designed that could be used in the individual videos. The visual style was designed to be non-threatening and engaging.

The designer's response to the brief was negotiated with the research team. It culminated in a style of type and colour palette chosen because it would signify a slightly nostalgic mid-century animation. Characters were designed based on different animals to evoke a sense of diversity. They were depicted engaging in a series of activities such as reading, examining and measuring to suggest that learning is not a passive activity. These assets were then used for constructing the YouTube pages and in making videos for the *Learning Returns* (2023) channel.

Editing and analysis

The editing process was undertaken between the researchers and a technician and was a means of identifying, developing and consolidating the themes. The research team was struck by how intertwined the acts of editing and analysis are. Butler-Kisber (2010) cautioned that the arts-based research process can appear to be linear and in clearly defined stages, for example, collecting data, carrying out the analysis and then writing up the findings. In practice, processes were fluid and iterative or cyclic and entailed a de-contextualising and re-contextualising cycle (Duckworth & Smith, 2018).

The analysis and editing were undertaken almost simultaneously in three main stages. The first stage examined the raw footage (which was gained from 30 minutes of filming for each participant). Repetitions, false starts and technical issues were edited out so that the key stories about the participants' experiences could be determined. This led to films of initially 10 minutes' length. On viewing it was noted that ideas were often repeated and significant points were lost in some of the descriptive explanation. It was also suspected that the attention span of a YouTube audience may be shorter than 10 minutes.

The second stage was where the films were broken down even further to two/three minutes, a conventional length of time for video stories (Rossiter & Garcia, 2010). It may seem drastic to make this cut; however, it actually made the stories clearer and the key points could be covered in that amount of time. The two/three-minute films were sent to the participants for their approval. This was considered by the researchers as the conceptual and interpretive stage. At this point the researchers drew upon reflective practice and experience to interpret the stories that were being told whilst identifying important themes that needed to be represented in the shorter versions.

The third stage of analysis and interpretation was to identify themes that ran across the stories. The results were then written up where the researchers aimed to provide an account that comprised, 'transparency, inclusion of participant voice, aesthetic qualities, verisimilitude and utility' (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 31). Through the process of editing the

themes became distilled and were used to structure the final versions that would be uploaded onto the *Learning Returns* (2023) channel.

It could be argued that the analysis went on throughout all the stages depending on what the researchers brought to the process from their reflections and discussions. The editing process proved to be very important because it identified themes that could be revisited and reviewed.

Findings

There are two aspects to the findings of the project, firstly there is an analysis of the content of the films to discover what themes were important for the participants to communicate to a virtual audience about their learning experiences. The second reflects on the arts-based method.

Table 2 collects the narrative elements discussed by seven of the participants which have then been arranged by themes. These were discovered through the editing processes mentioned above.

The elements identified in the stories show that the participants recounted memorable past learning experiences that had stayed with them. They also recognised that they were older learners and identified as being creative. They strongly advocated studying in the arts and proudly talked about the creative work they had undertaken outside of formal education. It has been argued that UK policy makers do not value arts education, yet from their comments this group of people clearly do. The findings indicate the importance arts education has on the lives of the older learners and that they wish others to have similar experiences.

Table 2. Cross-cutting themes from the content of the films

Narrative elements from the participants' stories	**Cross-cutting themes**
• Ecology and used clothes • Learned that need to make things for a purpose • Connection to the groups sharing through group crits, very helpful. • Learned skills • Find out about participatory arts • Education got ideas flowing • I thought I would be a fiction writer, but I have written poetry and a script. I have covered a lot more than I expected to. • Skills to make prints, but also realising how narrow my world view had been. • Scared and excited to begin the course.	Significant/memorable learning experiences

• Full time work since 1979 apprenticeship technical • Engineering background making moulds for glass bottles • Did not have opportunities when younger. • 18 years old interested but dissuaded from art into the sciences. • My art practice is Arabic calligraphy • Wanted to be in the arts but degree too expensive and therefore decided to do an MA • As a mother of two - education is not your place • Had a family, tried to get back into work but found it hard • With age it's sometimes hard to call yourself a writer. • Unfinished business with art and design • I was a careers advisor but always had an interest in fashion. • I was a manager so I know how to deal with people	An understanding of own positionality
• Realised already had the skills to make and do something. • You can do it • Encouragement to return to education • Others should 'jump in'. • Experienced no difficulties or prejudice in education due to age. • If unsure, just try it. • It's empowered me. • Just do it, if you have got that itch, just scratch it. Life is too short. • Just do it, more you put into it more you get out of it, need to be sure you can devote time to art education. • People do have transferable skills • Just do it - just knock the barriers out of the way. • Artist is not a proper job – that's rubbish I have met people who make their living in the arts.	Encouraging others
• Move away from technical digital project management to organising creative projects • 'Unbolt the door' to the art world • Working with a group of older South Asian women who are isolated, bringing them together through art. • My main purpose is to make art that reflects life. • I have been doing work at festivals and in exhibitions for some years now. • I am a textile artist telling people's stories	Future projects undertaken after formal education
• Need Evening Access and Education courses for developing confidence • Older people give it 100% • Passion and curiosity - education as affirming • Art keeps you mindful and giving joy. • Through networking on my course, I am able to collaborate on commissions. • The course has given me the confidence to say 'I am a writer'. • Bringing your life skills to education takes you to a totally different level.	Valuing returning to education

Significant/memorable learning experiences

The participants were able to share memorable or significant moments from their learning experiences with confidence. These learning experiences were often linked to their identities as creative people. There was a combination of acquiring skills alongside learning to think differently about their practices. There was also a sense that they enjoyed

discovering practices and topics which were new to them. There were signs in the tone of voice and facial expression of the enjoyment they had in sharing their memories and stories in the films which would not have been gained in the same manner from a textual account. It was interesting that the participants chose not to share negative experiences about learning, which they were free to do if they wished.

An understanding of own positionality

The participants chose to describe themselves in various ways, but often their identities were linked to their creative practice or their previous careers. Parental status was also an important element of the identity some wanted to promote. The accounts they gave of themselves were linked to lack of opportunities to study the arts when younger and in some cases being dissuaded from doing so. They constructed a particular identity for themselves and for their imagined audience, which was why they focused on those associated with being adult learners in the arts.

Encouraging others

One of the striking findings of the research was how many of the participants chose to encourage people in their imagined audience who may be considering going back to learning. 'Jump in', 'Just do it', 'Try it' and 'Life is too short' were phrases used by the participants. Encouraging people to take the first steps, to take a risk, seemed to be a common thread in the films. The participants had some empathy and understanding with their audience, perhaps pre-empting some of the fears and concerns they may have about returning to education. So, they spoke about how people had skills already that they could apply to their education, that they had not experienced any prejudice due to their age in their learning context and that people had careers in the arts after study.

Future projects undertaken after formal education

Some of the participants had either a plan for future work in the arts using their creative skills or were actually already engaged in projects. Most of their creative practices had a socially-engaged perspective to them, using their skills to work with others. One of the participants was active as a sculptor and this was in sympathy with his previous work making industrial moulds. Another was a textile artist using their skills to initiate story telling.

Valuing returning to arts education

The participants reflected on the value of returning to an arts education. It had given practical benefits, such as developing networks and social capital as well as acquiring skills. They recognised the benefits for cultivating well-being, curiosity, engagement and confidence.

The contributors to the YouTube films could construct coherent stories about their own past experiences and weave in their thoughts about the value of arts education and, in some cases, their plans for the future. It was notable that they could do this with no rehearsal time and these were stories that seemed to 'come from the heart' (Meadows, 2003).

The participants' performances were framed by the editing process so it must not be forgotten that these stories were also constructed by the interpretations and values of the researchers. However, there was an awareness tacitly held by the participants that can be 'read' in the films about the audience, about their imagined concerns and desires. It was this that led to the encouragement that was freely given by the speakers.

Reflection on the method

The reception and interpretation of the *Learning Returns*' outcomes were subject to a tangle of aesthetic influences that all contributed towards constructing meaning. The YouTube platform itself has its own visual style and brand. The viewing of the *Learning Returns* films was inevitably part of a complex bricolage (creation from diverse things/ideas/artefacts/images/styles/genres) of adverts, notifications and other YouTube content. This can be received as a discordant and clashing realm of competing messages, ideologies, values and voices. However, this, it could be argued, is the pragmatic aesthetics of social media, a very particular landscape of audio and visual material that is part of many people's daily lives (Medvedeva, 2019).

The aesthetics of the project created through the banners, typography, colour palette and music associated with the *Learning Returns* project was also an important lens through which to view the films and interpret their meanings. The designed visual identity ensured that *Learning Returns* was recognisable within the ocean of material found on YouTube. One critical reflection was that it would have been beneficial to have had input from the participants when creating the visual brand with the designer. This would have made it a much more participatory arts project.

There is also the aesthetics of film making, the choice of lighting, contrast, background colour, pacing and sequencing, point of view, framing – many decisions that influence the style of a film.

Another important layer of aesthetics came from the choices made by the participants themselves. Their choice of dress, tone and expression of voice, the emphasis given to certain words and phrases, the manner in which they made gestures - all contributed to the aesthetics of their films. Choices in colour and style of type, titles and labels were driven by what the participants brought to the filming sessions.

The processes of editing as part of a film-making practice seemed to be in synergy with the 'analytic process'. Narrative elements that were communicated through audio visual elements were considered through a cycle of decontextualisation and recontextualisation, that is sequences were split apart and re-joined again to make a coherent but trustworthy narrative. Decisions on which element were important were made based on the cues given in the film footage. How the participants spoke and acted suggested which aspects of what they were saying were important.

Unlike participants in methods that involve recording and transcription, these contributors seemed to have a tacit understanding of an audience beyond the group of researchers or a wider academia (Dickson, 2021). They were addressing the research team in the first instance, but also an imagined audience of people who might be considering returning to education. This potentially could be anyone with access to YouTube. It was the generosity and positivity with which they shared their stories and their encouragement that was captured by the arts-based approach. One of the strengths of this method is that it humanises the participants. The meanings that were constructed were in part understood from seeing and hearing them reflect, speak, remember, argue and propose ideas that sprung from their learning experiences.

These experiences were also contextualised within their life stories and their identities as creative practitioners.

Unlike the linear nature of some research projects, there is an element to *Learning Returns* that is open ended and asynchronous. The researchers are quickly able to revisit the films and to view new interactions and feedback. The audience, also, can view or come across the films at any time in any place. It is anticipated that a deeper interaction with the audience may take many months and possibly many years to develop due to the unpredictability of social media.

It must be noted that there are limitations when employing a public interview that will be broadcast as a research method. The positive and encouraging nature of the comments aimed at potential students might be a function of what the participants believed a YouTube video was supposed to do; namely to advocate for arts education to prospective adult students and present only its positive aspects. They are less likely to reveal any experiences of struggle during their learning experiences if they know it will be seen by a public audience.

Conclusion

The project highlighted the importance of aesthetics, a particular concern of creative practitioners. YouTube functions as a melting pot of many aesthetic realms, that of popular culture, everyday life as well as personal style and modes of communicating. The researchers, the graphic designer, the technical support, the participants and the YouTube platform all influenced the aesthetics of *Learning Returns* and this in turn effected the interpretive aspects of the research.

The participants were confident and generous in sharing their stories that linked their past learning experiences with future aspirations related to their creative practices. They also sent out positive messages about the value of adult learning in the arts. They made passionate entreaties to prospective adults returning to arts education to 'just do it', 'make the leap' and 'have a go'. The initial findings are that aesthetics intersect with the lived experiences of the participants in the videos to communicate messages of hope for aspiring older artists.

The participants were very positive about the project and wished to encourage and motivate other prospective learners. The participants were able to give an account of their experiences spontaneously, without any practice or previous planning. The ability to communicate through the camera could be partly due to the personalities of those who volunteered to take part in the project. But it could also suggest that learning in the arts can lead to confidence, active participation and being socially engaged (Thomson & Maloy, 2021).

Sequences of moving image were deconstructed and reassembled to construct coherent narratives that have visual, audio and emotive aspects that create a particular set of meanings. The relationship of editing and analysis needs further exploration. The editing process offered a means of analysing the content of the films that is not the same as but akin to the analysis in traditional qualitative research.

The *Learning Returns* project was designed to address the lack of visibility of mature students studying the arts and to challenge the ways they seemed to be devalued by institutions and policy makers and to show how the students themselves valued their own learning experiences. It did meet some of its aims in that it does capture the learning experiences of adult students and it does address an imagined audience of prospective adult learners with an air of encouragement.

As to whether it actually reaches that audience directly is open to question. As the films have high production values they are not made quickly and the research team does not have the time to create content on a regular basis. To grow a loyal and interested audience, new films should be uploaded every week but in actuality this happens once a month.

Adult and open learning departments and widening participation teams from other universities have declared an interest in using the *Learning Returns* (2023) channel with their students. Perhaps this is the best route by which the intended audience could engage with the films.

Even though there are challenges in sustaining the project, the participants generously gave their time to it and this indicates that they think their role in advocating for an arts education is important.

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The representation of mature students in governing bodies of a Portuguese university: 'We are all equal, but some are more equal than others'!?

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Abstract

With this text, we try to understand if – and if so, how – mature students are represented by and in the governing bodies of higher education institutions. With a theoretical framework that values above all the institutional dimension, we carried out thirteen semi-structured interviews with students and faculty members who are part of the various governing bodies with student representation of a Portuguese higher education institution. The data show that (i) the functioning of these bodies tends to be known only by the students who participate in them, (ii) the bodies usually react to, rather than prevent, the problems that arise, (iii) mature students are perceived as a source of 'difficulties' and 'needs', and (iv) student representation in governing bodies does not seem to fairly and equitably represent all students, and some specificities of mature students (among other underrepresented groups) seem to be made invisible.

Keywords: mature students, student representation, student participation, higher education, justice

Introduction

Widening access and participation in higher education: this is a frequently repeated expression in the literature, which reflects a growing diversity of the student population and an increase in the presence of underrepresented groups in higher education, namely

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mature students, who are the focus of this work. Nevertheless, this participation may have very distinct meanings, such as being enrolled, going to classes, having the same opportunities as so-called 'traditional' colleagues, participating in the governing bodies of higher education institutions, being able to represent oneself and other fellow students on these same bodies, being part of the numerous decision-making processes that affect the life of the institution and of those who work and study there, being represented by peers who seek to advocate for mature students' specific interests, will and needs, among many others.

This work focuses on a specific form of student participation through their membership in governing bodies of higher education institutions, in which they represent themselves and other colleagues. There are, however, two aspects that need to be clarified.

Firstly, this does not mean that participation is restricted to representation. There are other forms of participation. See, for example, an engagement framework developed by Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland (sparqs) in Scotland (Varwell, 2021). It is a student partnership staircase, with four roles that correspond to increasing levels of involvement: in the first, the student is a mere 'information provider' (p. 115), who provides information through questionnaires, class discussions, emails, discussion groups, among others; in the second, the 'actor' (p. 116) collects and analyses contributions (e.g., the 'Course reps'); in the third, the student is recognised as 'expert' in learning (p. 116); in the fourth, the 'partner' participates in an 'authentic and constructive dialogue' (p. 116).

Secondly, representation, or the presence of students in governing bodies, does not necessarily constitute full participation. If deeply unequal power relations are maintained, favouring teachers to the detriment of students, the involvement of these students is merely tokenistic (Taylor & Robinson, 2009).

Even so, in the institution where we carried out this research, student representation, associated with belonging to governing bodies, is an aspect that deserves attention for reasons that we hope this text can highlight.

Research on the participation of mature students in governing bodies of higher education institutions and their representation in these same bodies is limited. In this journal, for example, several works have been published about the presence of mature or non-traditional students in higher education (e.g., Ambrósio et al., 2016; Field et al., 2012; Fleming, 2016; Lucio-Villegas, 2016; Padilla-Carmona et al., 2019), but we did not find any with the specific focus that we propose.

The literature that we know of with this focus is scarce. The one that exists does not include any work related to Portugal and tends to justify the lack of participation of mature students in governing bodies with their lack of time (McStravock, 2022), difficulties in combining work, family and study (Klemenčič, 2011), among other practical and cultural, social and emotional barriers (McStravock, 2022).

Despite the importance of ensuring 'that students with particular needs such as part-time students, mature students and international students are represented' (Rodgers et al., 2011, p. 259), it is as if participation and representation of mature students in higher education were between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, they 'are far less likely to run for election if they have no visible role models with whom they can identify' (McStravock, 2022, p. 5). On the other hand, if 'they only represent a specific cohort of students, [this] further [disincentivises] participation amongst those from other groups.' (p. 5).

The political nature of their presence – and potential impacts – is indeed a 'hard place' in such a way that it is possible to find in the literature an essential tension (sometimes with contradictions) between the politicising or depoliticising effect of the

presence of mature students in higher education. Let us start with depoliticisation. Martin Trow (1973) stated that adults 'tend to be less highly politicised and have a more exclusively academic or vocational interest' (pp. 46-47). A similar but more developed idea was presented by Manja Klemenčič (2011):

> A diverse student body is welcoming and enriching to the HE community in many ways. In view of student representation, however, diversity poses a challenge: a more fragmented student body with weaker common bonds has more difficulties to come to consensus on common interests and speak with a united voice. Non-traditional students not only have major obligations outside the academic environment (i.e., work and family), but also tend to have a stronger vocational orientation. Thus, larger share of these students potentially adds to the de-politicisation of the student body and its representative organisations. (Klemenčič, 2011, p. 3)

In more recent work, the author reinforces this idea: 'Student movement mobilization potential has been profoundly affected by the increasing diversity of student body, which makes it more difficult to establish a collective student identity, shared grievances and shared emotions.' (Klemenčič, 2014, p. 403).

Chirikov and Gruzdev (2014) also refer that:

> recent studies have shown that growing enrolment in Russian higher education has resulted in a more diverse and less motivated student body, decreased student engagement, and a lack of student participation in university governance (Popov 2009; Titaev 2012; Froumin and Dobryakova 2012). (Chirikov & Gruzdev, 2014, p. 455)

This perspective is disconcerting. Why and how do non-traditional students contribute to depoliticisation? To the decrease in student engagement? Isn't politics precisely the attempt to find consensus among the diversity of opinions, interests and perspectives? To discover 'unity in diversity', a *sine qua non* condition for improving and constructing 'a substantive, radical democracy', as Freire said (1999, p. 154, our translation). Why is a more homogeneous student body more politicised?

However, both Trow (1973) and Klemenčič (2011) contribute arguments that seem to point in the opposite direction – meaning that diversifying the student body can increase politicisation. According to Klemenčič, the involvement of minority students, through 'diversified, accessible and affordable' methods (p. 10) that effectively reach all students, 'may moderate potentially negative effects of such groups on the cohesive nature of the university environment' (p. 9). We agree, except for the verb 'may' reservations. We do not doubt that these possible adverse effects can only be counteracted through the participation of these students and all the other students.

Trow's (1973) perspective, this time, is more complex. In elite higher education institutions, says the author, governance tends to be the responsibility of 'senior professors', while in 'mass higher education' student participation gains centrality (p. 16). In the latter case, 'students, drawn from more diverse backgrounds and affected by radical political currents, challenge many of the traditional values and assumptions of the university' (p. 17). Interestingly, this radical policy constitutes a severe institutional risk: 'The breakdown of institutional governance arising out of value dissensus and fiercely politicized conflicts of values and interests tends to weaken the autonomy of an institution' (p. 18). It seems to us that more research is needed in this regard.

Simplifying and even exaggerating, we are faced with arguments of two types. First, mature students 'do not participate because they do not want to' 'or can't' – the result is the same. From this point of view, it seems that nobody prevents them. Second, as they

have other things to worry about, mature students are not involved in the academic environment, contributing to the depoliticisation of the student body.

Strongly rejecting these two types of arguments, we argue that we should not take it for granted that nobody prevents them and that they depoliticise the university and the student body. This is for two reasons: one of a more practical nature, the other more theoretical, but both dialectically interconnected, as Freire (1972) defended.

The first reason stems from the experience lived by one of the authors of this text as a mature student with a great desire to participate at various levels in the institution's governance – and with very few adequate opportunities to do so (Viterbo, 2022). And who felt that her colleagues, who were members of the faculty and university governing bodies, hardly represented her. It is a reason as fragile as it is robust. Statistically, it may not have any meaning. As a life experience, it is worth everything, 'wet' as it is with feelings, desires, dreams (Freire, 1997, p. 17).

The second reason is our theoretical position (which is also practical): what matters to us is not so much recognising and validating the specific identity of a group (e.g., mature students) nor just class stratification (Fraser as cited in Dahl et al., 2004), but the 'parity of participation', i.e., the possibility or not of 'participating as peers in social life' (Fraser, 2010, p. 16). We are not interested in the 'mental attitudes' of mature students, nor in justifying their reduced participation with their lack of time, but rather in understanding how injustice is institutionally generated (Fraser as cited in Dahl et al., 2004, p. 377). Thus, 'Overcoming injustice means dismantling institutionalized obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others, as full partners in social interaction' (Fraser, 2010, p. 16).

According to Fraser (2010), 'participatory parity' encompasses three dimensions: (economic) redistribution, (cultural) recognition and (political) representation. The third aspect has received the least attention in Portuguese universities (as in many other countries). See, for example, the most recent Bologna Process Implementation Report (European Education and Culture Executive Agency [EACEA] & Eurydice, 2020): Portugal records a positive result regarding measures to support the access of under-represented groups to higher education (p. 116) and the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning (p. 118). It does less well, however, on measures to support the retention and completion of students from under-represented groups (p. 120). Although these are not specific data on the representation of mature students in higher education (which, as we said, are scarce), one can see the effort to promote access to higher education among underrepresented groups and even the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, but less so with success in higher education. This is something that the literature has highlighted: access and success are different aspects, as well as increasing and widening participation (Osborne, 2003).

If we had to summarise the state of play in just one idea, we would say that research has also focused mainly on these students' access to higher education. The over-23 policy, for example, has promoted, since 2006, the access of mature students to higher education, albeit with differences between institutions, areas of study and prestige of institutions (Amorim, 2018). Despite these differences, an effort to recognise experiential learning can be admitted: the entrance tests include a curriculum assessment, an interview, and a written test. Also, there are institutions that more or less appeal to the life experience of the candidates (Tonin, 2018).

This does not mean that redistribution and recognition are resolved; far from it. As far as we know, the social class of students who attend higher education has yet to be precisely known, nor is the possible impact that the over-23 policy has had at this level (Amorim, 2018). Little is also known about the recognition of prior learning, either when

these students are selected (through exams defined by each institution) or throughout their courses, in lessons and at assessment times. Even so, representation is the aspect that has received less attention. So far, we have not found any study in the Portuguese context that refers to it.

Returning to Fraser (2010), representation is par excellence the political dimension of justice. The other dimensions also have a political nature, so much so that the first model defined by Fraser was only two-dimensional, composed of redistribution and recognition. The author later realised that the political constituted, even so, a dimension in itself, making her model three-dimensional, i.e., adding representation to the previous dimensions.

According to Fraser (2010), representation encompasses three levels, which correspond to an equal number of levels of 'misrepresentation', understood as 'political injustice' (p. 18). At the first level, 'representation has the straightforward sense of political voice and democratic accountability' (Fraser as cited in Nash & Bell, 2007, p. 76). At this level, when the 'political decision rules wrongly deny some of the included the chance to participate fully' (Fraser, 2010, pp. 18–19), 'ordinary-political misrepresentation' (p. 19) occurs.

At the second level, 'representation is a matter of social belonging' (Fraser, 2010, p. 17), i.e., who counts as a member? Who is included and who is excluded? The corresponding injustice is called 'misframing,' which means that 'the community's boundaries are drawn in such a way as to wrongly exclude some people from the chance to participate at all in its authorized contests over justice.' (p. 19).

The third level is meta-political and refers to democratising the 'process by which the frameworks of justice are drawn and revised.' (Fraser, 2010, p. 26). At this level, injustice is called 'meta-political misrepresentation', with the effect of excluding the 'overwhelming majority of people from participation in the meta-discourses that determine the authoritative division of political space.' (p. 26)

Therefore, based on the perspective of teachers and students who are members of a Portuguese university's governing bodies, this work aims to understand the representation process of mature students. Although it is fundamental to understand the perspective of mature students, this study privileges the institutional perspective, i.e., the way governing body members see the topic. This option has at least three justifications: the first is the experience of one of the authors of this text, as we said before, which shows us the difficulty of participating, despite her desire to do so, and the feeling of not being adequately represented by and in the said governing bodies. The second has to do with the fact that this research was carried out as part of a Master's degree, so the time available required making choices and focusing on what we wanted to know the most. The third is theoretical: like Nancy Fraser (as cited in Dahl et al., 2004, p. 378), we argue that 'justice pertains *by definition* to social structures and institutional frameworks. It follows that individual problems become matters of justice if and when they cumulate into a pattern that can be traced to a systemic cause.'

Inspired by this author, we could ask at least one question related to each of the three levels of representation: 1) Do the existing procedures and mechanisms 'accord equal voice (…) and fair representation in public decision-making to all members' (Fraser, 2010, p. 18), namely mature students? 2) Do the 'boundaries of the political community wrongly exclude some who are actually entitled to representation' (p. 18), i.e., in our case, mature students? 3) Is it democratic or is it being democratised 'the process by which the frameworks of justice are drawn and revised' (p. 26), i.e., 'new democratic arenas for entertaining arguments about the frame' exist or are being created (p. 26)? These are our research questions, which we will try to answer based on our data.

Methodology

This is a first exploratory study, of a qualitative nature and with a critical approach. It was submitted and approved by the Ethics Committee of our Faculty and took place in a Portuguese higher education institution. The selection of the governing bodies obeyed only one criterion: to have student representatives in their constitution.

To better understand the topic, and after the signature of the informed consent and clarifying any doubts that might exist, we conducted semi-structured interviews with thirteen governing body members: eight students and five faculty members. These bodies are all those that, in this institution, have student representatives.

The script included a set of questions about student representation in higher education. We asked if every student is represented or if subgroups of students 'may not feel genuinely represented – in all bodies, namely in the one to which the interviewee belonged. We also asked them to share perspectives on the 'over 23' policy, student workers and the concept of 'mature students'. Finally, we questioned how to improve the student representation process.

The interviews were fully transcribed, and the names of people and institutions (including governing bodies) were anonymised. This loss of clarity and detail is unavoidable, nevertheless, to ensure that reversing anonymisation is not possible. For this reason, we cannot provide additional data, either on the organisations or on the interviewees, such as gender, age, and study area.

We coded the name of each interviewee under the following logic: the designation 'University' indicates faculty members and students included in the constitution of two governing bodies. In turn, the expression 'Faculty Body' includes faculty members and students of four governing bodies of one Faculty. The designation 'student representative' is used for students included in these governing bodies and two student associations. The codes for the 13 interviewees can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Interviewees codes

1. University_Representative
2. University_Student Representative
3. Student Association_Student Representative 1
4. Student Association_Student Representative 2
5. Faculty Body 1_Representative
6. Faculty Body 1_Student Representative 1
7. Faculty Body 1_Student Representative 2
8. Faculty Body 2_Representative
9. Faculty Body 2_Student Representative
10. Faculty Body 3_Representative
11. Faculty Body 3_Student Representative
12. Faculty Body 4_Student Representative
13. Faculty Body 4_Representative

Data analysis and discussion

Our analysis was inspired by the thematic analysis proposed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006). We began by transcribing, reading and re-reading the interviews, identifying the main ideas; coding the text and collating extracts related to each code; organising the codes into potential themes and sub-themes; reviewing themes and sub-themes; and producing our narrative based on the data, the research questions and the theoretical framework, with particular attention to the aspects with which the interviewees showed disagreement and agreement.

Next, we present the analysis of four themes: knowledge *vs.* lack of knowledge about the functioning of governing bodies, functioning logic of governing bodies, mature students: conceptions and preconceptions, and non-mature representation of mature students.

Knowledge vs. *lack of knowledge about the functioning of governing bodies*

Most of the participants revealed that they were generally familiar with the structure of a higher education institution and distinguished the institutional bodies provided for in the Legal Regime of Higher Education Institutions (*Regime jurídico das instituições de ensino superior*, *Lei n.º* 62/2007, ruling namely the composition, functions and organisation, functioning and competence of higher education institution bodies) and student representative bodies, such as the Student Associations of each faculty. These Student Associations are generally affiliated with Academic Federations; some are part of the university's Senate, an advisory body.

> There are the representative governing bodies established by law and, outside these institutional bodies, there is the Student Association, which is the body par excellence for student participation that best represents the student community and plays an important role in academic life. (Faculty Body 4_Student Representative)

Among the students, the discomfort they felt while answering was evident because, although they were members of a governing body, they recognised that they did not know the governing bodies in which they did not participate: 'I can tell you about the body in which I am a member, I don't know as it is in others' (Faculty Body 1_Student Representative 2). This data is critical, given that access to information is, according to Klemenčič (2011, p. 13), 'the basis for all subsequent levels of participation'. If this does not happen, student participation is expected to be compromised. Moreover, the institutional framework is only known by those who have the opportunity to be members of governing bodies. In that case, it is expected that most students and even some staff, who do not have this opportunity, are unaware of such a framework – which most likely constitutes a significant obstacle to broader participation. In comparison, the faculty members tended to be more confident about the definition of the competencies of the governing body in which they were participating, as well as to expose an overall vision regarding the various governing bodies of the institution.

Although the organisation and its governing bodies are presented, as usual, on the institution's websites, two faculty members mentioned that higher education institutions should have a more active role in promoting this organisational knowledge, contrary to the current scenario in which, according to them, more and more students go to the Faculty to take classes, not showing much interest in participating in the extracurricular activities that the institution promotes. This is, moreover, a problem often described in

the literature. It should be said that student participation is reduced, not only among mature students but among students in general: 'the majority of students rarely get politically engaged in student protests or student governments, even if this involves only casting a vote in student elections.' (Klemenčič, 2014, p. 399).

Among the obstacles to student participation (not only mature but also young), interviewees mentioned above all the lack of knowledge about the functioning of governing bodies, the difficulty of reconciling study with extracurricular activities and the absence, markedly neoliberal, of a culture of student participation. 'Our young people were born into neoliberalism and are not used to collective participation. Students do not want to participate in these activities' (Faculty Body 2_Student Representative).

Most participants believed there could be greater student participation in governing bodies, if institutions were more proactive about this lack of knowledge about such a complex organisational structure and sought to find strategies to mitigate this lack of knowledge. Two examples have been suggested.

One would be the early and regular holding of clarification sessions on the existing governing bodies, their functioning, competencies and the importance of students being part of some of these bodies, such as the Council of Representatives, the General Council and the Pedagogical Council, which is the only parity governing body, i.e., it has an equal number of faculty and student representatives. 'The Pedagogical Council is a body where the presence of students is very important (...) and where pedagogical issues are discussed a lot and where very important decisions are made for the lives of students' (Faculty Body 4_Representative). To clarify the doubts that often exist about the electoral process, we think that it would be essential that these sessions occur before each election so that students are motivated to participate, either as voters or as candidates for student representatives.

Another example would be, within the scope of academic integration activities promoted by the Students' Association, raising awareness of the participation of all students in various aspects of academic life: electoral processes, student representation bodies, filling out pedagogical surveys to evaluate teachers and courses, research communities of practice, various initiatives of the University for communication with the surrounding community, among others. As mentioned by most participants, the participation rate of students in electoral processes for the constitution of governing bodies is relatively low: 'The participation rate is almost zero on the part of students. As much as the governing bodies want to streamline this issue, they cannot oblige students to participate. Students do not realise their importance and influence' (Faculty Body 1 Student Representative_1).

Functioning logic of the governing bodies

Regarding the functioning of the governing bodies, difficulties were mentioned in finding available times to bring together teachers and students, aggravated by everyone's work overload. Most interviewees view participation in governing bodies as extra work. 'The attendance that should exist in these joint meetings is soon impaired due to the overload of the professors' academic work and the workload of the various courses that the students have' (Faculty Body 3_Representative).

It is not surprising, therefore, that the governing bodies act according to a reactive and emergency logic, i.e., reacting and trying to solve one or more problems that have been reported: 'When there are problems, one acts like first-line firefighters who act in the immediate to put out the fires, so that the problem can also be solved immediately'

(University_Representative). The bodies remain passive if they are not informed that the students face one or more problems.

All participants also recognised that the COVID-19 pandemic led to better knowledge among students of these representation structures and their importance due to the numerous difficulties that disturbed daily academic life at a pedagogical and financial level. 'There was much concern for students, especially during the pandemic, because, in the face of the various problems that were arising, it almost forced the students to know which governing body they should refer to' (University_Student Representative).

We argue that the governing bodies' performance should be more active, favouring a preventive logic. However, for that to happen, other conditions would have to be verified, namely the work overload of teachers and students. Information could be more actively sought not only on existing problems in the student community, namely among underrepresented groups of students, but also on what is done well and what is worth being known and recognised. Instead of waiting passively for this information, activities could be organised to reach students more effectively, such as questionnaires or interviews with students, face-to-face or online, opening a suggestion box, setting a time such as 'coffee time' to allow students to talk informally about a wide range of academic subjects. As Day (2012, p. 40) points out, 'The "hyper-diversity" of the student body means student leaders are looking at new ways of engaging student opinion, through informal forums, surveys, focus groups and reaction [through] new media.' This 'consultation' is a fundamental level of participation (Klemenčič, 2011, p. 13).

Mature students: conceptions and preconceptions

More or less explicitly, the interviewees often saw mature students as burdened with difficulties and needs. The examples of what they supposedly lack are many and varied: adaptation, social integration, time for work, family and university, understanding curriculum content, relearning academic language, attendance at classes, participation in group or peer work, study and work habits, time devoted to autonomous work. Below, we present two excerpts, among many others that could serve as examples:

> The over 23 [students] find it difficult to integrate themselves in the face of the demands placed on them by entering higher education, and sometimes there are many difficulties. But these are my perceptions. (Faculty Body 2_Representative)

> Re-entering an academic life requires a double effort to reconcile family, work, and academic life. The relearning of another academic language, which is required in academic life from undergraduate students, makes these students reframe what they know through everyday experience through other concepts and perspectives, etc. The availability of mind and time to dedicate themselves to the academic cause is very different from that of a full-time student. (Faculty Body 3_Representative)

We agree that this group of students generally has some characteristics, of which some difficulties and specific needs are examples. However, the various deficits in the interviewees' speech outweigh the positive aspects. More than that, people not only have these deficits but also become these deficits (Amorim & Mallows, 2020). In its complexity, their identity is reduced to the 'minority' characteristic. In the interviews, disadvantages were incomparably more valued than maturity, experience, and intrinsic motivation. Interestingly, there are several examples in which even praise (or what seems to be it) is associated with reinforcing prejudice and stereotypes about mature students.

> Knowledge is not hampered by having a few more wrinkles. This public may have more difficulty concerning operating memory, working memory, but this is part of the ageing process. Higher education is only adapted to ordinary students of a particular age group and needs to change urgently. (Faculty Body 1_Student Representative_1)

In the interviews, discrimination and prejudice sometimes appeared more or less disguised, even by those who defended an urgent change in higher education. Note the power of the scientific 'order of discourse' (Foucault, 1971/1999), i.e., how scientific constructs are brought as an argument of authority. We doubt that the differences between mature and non-mature students' 'operating memory' and 'working memory' are evidence-based. And even if it were, how much negative impact does a stereotype have if we can only point it out (based on what?) without doing anything to make it less disadvantageous?

Very present in these speeches is the notion of inadequacy and non-compliance... Isn't this a prejudiced view? Could it be that the difficulty of complying with 'academic rules and habits' has reasons other than idiosyncratic aspects of an individual nature? In these interviews, difficulties and needs are usually attributed to the person – to their identity as a 'minority' ('over 23', 'public', 'new public', 'these students'…), which is thus essentialised – and rarely to structural, social aspects.

> Let's put the difficulties on two levels: first, the sociability that I have witnessed in the relationship that is not always very positive between the so-called traditional students and those that appear in contests for those over 23; secondly, often these new publics, because they had a different training path, it happens that in an initial phase they have some difficulties in adapting their activities, what they produce and even their performance to academic rules and habits. I notice this difficulty. However, the academic success of some students is evident. (Faculty Body 1_Representative)

One of the most frequent examples of difficulty experienced by mature students has to do with time management and scheduling compatibility. As we see it, this structural constraint does not result from incapacity or personal inadequacy but rather from the need to combine work and family with academic life. Thus, some interviewees suggested the creation of post-work schedules in higher education institutions to promote the participation of these students:

> I believe there are currently many more student workers than in the past. I would like to see a more active intervention by these students, perhaps it is time to create an after-work schedule, to adjust the situation of this public. (Faculty Body 2_Student Representative)

Even when valued by some interviewees, the students' biographical paths were seen from a particular individual perspective, with no clear examples of awareness ('*prise de conscience*') – which is the first step in the '*conscientização*' process, as Freire (1994/2015) mentions – regarding the collective, common aspects to the diverse, unique and unrepeatable individual stories.

> These students enter a new world with very different study methods. They have already lost the habit of studying, the habit of concentrating on listening, but on the other hand they have the added value of having a greater life experience, which in my perspective it makes perfect sense to be mobilised in any area. (Faculty Body 4_Student Representative)

From our perspective, this prejudiced view of mature students, highlighting their difficulties and needs, is an aspect that deserves attention, given that this assumption of various deficits does nothing to help think about the participation and representation of

mature students in higher education. If they are perceived as less 'capable', it is likely that they will end up being made invisible.

Although less frequently, we also heard in the interviews a very different perspective of recognising what 'over 23' students bring positively and how they can enrich academic life. 'These students, after having gathered life and professional experiences, constitute an asset in enriching the diversity of the student public' (Faculty Body 1_Representative).

Non-mature representation of mature students

In the interviews, we perceived the strangeness and/or resistance with which this theme was received by the interviewees, either because they had never thought about it or because they believed that it is up to the existing mechanisms to ensure the representation of all students or even because the solution could be somewhere… in a particular institutional limbo, as we shall explain. Although the diversity of the student population is recognised, as we saw before, the responsibility is attributed to the student representatives, given their extraordinary qualities and characteristics (the discourses continue at the individual level). It is up to them to reach everyone equally.

> When the year's representatives are elected, it is always reiterated that this person must have specific characteristics and qualities: attention to the other, a relationship with the other, empathy, active listening, etc. (…) This year's representative represents the diversity of all colleagues. (Faculty Body 3_Representative)

Blaming student representatives poses several problems. We highlight two: it constitutes, firstly, an attempt to exempt the institution from that same responsibility since the issue is resolved based on the superpowers of these chosen students; secondly, it is hardly credible that these superpowers exist, that a few personal qualities are enough actually to represent all students, in their diversity.

> When I contact the year representative, I assume that he [*sic*] is there representing all the students, but I don't know if, in fact, there is more attention to some than to others. I'm thinking about this for the first time. These representatives are elected by peers, so from the beginning, they should represent the entire student population. I am thinking that a representative, a regular student who has completed his [*sic*] formal career without a break, might not be as sensitive to the needs of other types of students. (Faculty Body 2_Representative)

In the case of mature students, it is often a matter of representation by non-mature students. We intentionally reverse the usual logic, according to which these students are designated by what they are not, i.e., 'non-traditional', as if they were less than younger, 'traditional' peers who come straight from secondary school. Now, as mentioned by McStravock (2022, p. 9),

> Recognising this diversity means ensuring that mechanisms are in place to capture the experiences of all members of the student community and avoiding tokenism or one size fits all approaches that often favour the voices of more dominant student groups.

We could hear, however, another proposal, this one of a more collective and institutional nature, which would involve the creation of a transversal association, bringing together representatives of 'minority' students from the different faculties of the University.

> These students should unite and form a kind of transversal association, which would be constituted as a pressure group and could have the rights and duties of a student association.

> All faculties have a student association, a transversal group could be set up to commit to mobilising this public. In each faculty, there is little adult public, a group of student representatives could be created at the University level to defend the interests and difficulties of these students, as by law I doubt that this will ever be done. (University_Representative).

As we understand it, this proposal is based on a set of assumptions worth underlining. First, the responsibility remains with the students: it is up to them to unite and organise themselves. The institution remains exempt from responsibility. The professors too, to such an extent that, according to some interviewees, mature students should be interviewed instead of professors who are members of governing bodies. Secondly, if it is necessary to create a transversal association to represent these subgroups of students, it is because the student representation that currently exists does not really defend the interests of all students. Furthermore, even if it is necessary to create a new representation body, it is because it is understood that the existing ones cannot, or eventually do not want to, welcome representatives of the so-called 'minorities'. Thirdly, this association above faculties would run severe risks of hovering in an institutional limbo. It should be remembered that, in this institution, the different faculties present incomparable situations regarding the percentage of 'over 23' students. They are different contexts, so it is unlikely that this supra-institutional structure could impact each faculty.

Given the high abstention of students in the various elections and the reduced adherence to activities carried out by student associations, as stressed by the interviewees, it is not clear how this transversal association, outside the institution where they study (and having to reconcile the agendas of other students, equally overloaded) could facilitate the participation of mature students. Is this not also a question of a discriminatory solution? Instead of bringing underrepresented students to the centre of the discussion, there would be a risk of marginalising them, limiting them to their 'minority' and not promoting dialogue between these students and the rest of the student population.

This proposal deserves deep reflection. It seems to constitute an 'affirmative' policy, 'which aims to valorise devalued identities' (Fraser as cited in Dahl et al., 2004, p. 376). Fraser criticised this approach for essentialising differences between groups. Instead of 'identity politics', she defended 'status equality', since

> In some cases, claimants may need to affirm devalued aspects of their identity; in other cases they may need to unburden themselves of excessive 'difference' that others have foisted on them and to emphasize their common humanity; and in still other cases they may need to deconstruct the very terms in which common sense differences are typically elaborated. (Dahl et al., 2004, p. 377)

Would this structure guarantee equal rights to all students? Or would the political division put 'minority' students at a disadvantage? Would they run the risk of 'political death', being transformed into 'non-persons with respect for justice', becoming 'objects of charity or benevolence' (Fraser, 2010, p. 19)? In another excerpt, it is possible to perceive this paternalistic logic underlying this transversal structure: the 'minority' students should organise themselves to bring their 'difficulties and needs' (again) to the University, which will do something for their 'benefit'.

> This public should organise itself, and together with the governing bodies, it should claim and summarise these difficulties and needs so that the university can do something in favour of this public. It would be more interesting to interview members of this public rather than professors. (Faculty Body 4_Representative).

Student movements are characterised by their concern for defending the interests of all students (Klemenčič, 2011). In practice, and often, representation does not guarantee the fulfilment of the will of all students but rather that of a majority. The concepts of minority and majority also deserve critical analysis. According to Freire (1999), the true minority is the elite that remains in power, reserving, among others, the power to nominate others, namely as 'minorities':

> The so-called minorities, for example, need to recognise that they are actually the majority. The way to assume oneself as a majority is to work on the similarities among themselves and not only the differences and thus create unity in diversity, outside of which I do not see how to improve and even how to build a substantive, radical democracy (Freire, 1999, p. 154, our translation).

From this point of view, by gathering all the 'minorities' discriminated against by one or several factors – social class, 'race' and 'ethnicity', gender, and age, among others –, we obtain a majority, unitary in its diversity. Usually, and without this effort to unite, the 'minorities' do not perceive themselves as the majority they really are (Freire, 1994/2015, p. 277). In other words, if we consider not only age but other factors of discrimination, the composition of the majority and minorities will likely be mixed up.

In higher education, mature students are often 'minorities', but if associated with other 'minorities', they are likely to constitute a new majority. Examples of other 'minorities' are the following: student workers, ethnic and migrant 'minorities', disabled students, women, first-generation students, LGBTQIA+, working-class students, among others.

Final remarks

Throughout the research, we noticed some resistance – for example, in some of the interviews we did – and faced the criticism of colleagues, according to whom we should have been more concerned with participation than the representation of mature students in higher education. We accept that this criticism is only fair partly and allows us to clarify our point of view. It seems clear that participation is broader than representation. Therefore, several dimensions related to these students' participation must be considered, for example in the student association, classes, research groups, and volunteering, among many other initiatives. Furthermore, and we hope to have made this clear throughout this text, our idea is not to propose a reinforcement of the representation of mature students (among other underrepresented ones) in their absence, i.e., only non-mature students representing them in the different governing bodies of higher education institutions. We believe that it is here, moreover, that the criticism becomes unfair. We do not see participation and representation as binary either/or dimensions. On the contrary, in our institutions, representation is a very significant form of student participation in the governance of institutions. It is potentially one of the most powerful, if the experience goes beyond a still 'important symbolic integration' (Rodgers et al., 2011, p. 250) and allows them to express their opinion, discuss, vote, participate in successive decision-making… So, why are there practically no mature students with this power to represent themselves and other students (namely mature, but not only) in governing bodies? What is the reason for ignoring them, for the resistance?

We agree with Fragoso et al. (2016, p. 98, our translation) when they say that the 'over 23' policy and the consequent population diversification constituted 'a very important step towards the democratisation of higher education in Portugal'. Our data show, however, that many other steps must be taken towards democratisation. Examples

are (i) the promotion of a *de facto* knowledge of the higher education institutions and their governing bodies, (ii) a more preventive functioning logic and more diverse and appropriate forms of consultation, (iii) the demystification of prejudices concerning mature students and the fight against ageism and any form of discrimination, as well as (iv) research, reflection and discussion of student representation, without forgetting the possibility (and the obstacles) for mature students and other under-represented groups to participate as peers in university life.

It is true that, as this is an exploratory work, it has several limitations, among which we highlight two that seem most important. The first has to do with the volume of data we collected. Even though we cannot guarantee that we have reached the saturation point, they seem, even so, data worthy of attention. More research is needed on this topic, collecting more data from other institutions and listening to students (namely the under-represented).

The second (which stems to some extent from the first) concerns how much remains to be explored regarding the heuristic power of Fraser's (2010) theoretical model for understanding this topic. At this point, it is important to return to the three research questions with which we closed the introduction to this work. First, we asked whether mature students have 'equal voice' and 'fair representation' (Fraser, 2010, p. 18). With some confidence, we can say that the existing mechanisms and procedures do not accord equal voice and fair representation to mature students.

Second, we asked whether the boundaries of the political community exclude mature students. We can say mature students are wrongly excluded, although they are supposedly 'entitled to representation' (Fraser, 2010, p. 18). Nonetheless, it is unclear how boundary-setting contributes to this, as this exclusion is often justified by the mature students' lack of time, making it impossible for them to attend meetings, for example. Nor is it clear whether they are denied 'the chance to participate fully' (p. 19) (being victims of ordinary-political misrepresentation) or, more than that, whether they are excluded 'from the chance to participate at all' (misframing).

The third question concerned the more or less democratic nature of the processes for creating and revising the frameworks of justice, as well as the existence or not of spaces to think about and discuss the framework itself (Fraser, 2010). This question leaves us with even more doubts. See the example of the proposal to create a transversal structure. If it fails, for the reasons we explained earlier, what would it take to constitute a transformative movement that would demand the creation of 'new democratic arenas for entertaining arguments' about 'the process by which the frameworks of justice are drawn and revised' (p. 26)? As we said, these can be arenas other than the governing bodies.

Paraphrasing George Orwell's (1945/2011, p. 81) 'Animal Farm' famous principle, we would say (finally justifying the subtitle of this work) that we are all equal, but some are more equal than others. Mature students have some characteristics that are different from other students: age, experience, regime through which they access higher education, work… As we noted earlier, based on Freire, the 'minorities' together constitute the majority. So, what matters is not so much recognising differences (if that means ghettoising those who are different) but ensuring that everyone can fully participate (or is at least properly represented), has the opportunity to represent other students, and all are truly part of the political community that the university constitutes. This would benefit not only the underrepresented students but also the other students and the community, which would become more democratic and fairer.

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Aims & Scope

The European Journal for Research on the Education and Learning of Adults (RELA) is a refereed academic journal creating a forum for the publication of critical research on adult education and learning. It has a particular focus on issues at stake for adult education and learning in Europe, as these emerge in connection with wider international and transnational dynamics and trends. Such a forum is important at a time when local and regional explorations of issues are often difficult to foreground across language barriers. As academic and policy debate is increasingly carried out in the English language, this masks the richness of research knowledge, responses and trends from diverse traditions and foci. The journal thus attempts to be linguistically 'open access'. Whilst creating a forum for international and transnational debate, contributions are particularly welcome from authors in Europe and other locations where English is not the first language.

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