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

Submission deadline: 31st March 2024

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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). 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. Once adult learners had accessed higher education, for example, it was assumed that they were on an equal footing with younger students. The push to get adults to return to learn in adult education more generally and vocational education was also for economic reasons. Research at this time mainly looked at how adults managed to access education as well as the barriers they had to deal with during this process (Cross, 1981). In the 1980s and part of the 1990s educators and researchers used the term second chance but is rarely used now. Over the years research and literature on adult access broadened in scope and moved beyond access issues as some researchers began to ask the question 'access to what?'

Research interest, therefore, began to explore the learning and educational experiences of adults in various educational settings such as community education, adult education and further education, although the focus was very much on higher education and still is (Merrill, 1999; Osborne, Gallacher & Crossan, 2004, Monteagudo Ballesteros Moscosio, 2014, Fragoso et al, 2015). Researching experiences of learning highlighted issues of inequalities in relation to class, gender, race, age and more recently disability. In Europe and beyond research began to centre on issues of gender and class such as the work of Bron, Reay, Skeggs and Tett. Later studies also began to explore a 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, 2018).

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 Reay (2003) points

out it 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. 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 obstacles 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.

Historically it could be argued, however, 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.

Over the past two 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. 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 may have caused a deep loss as social relationships and social networks play an important in the learning trajectories of adult students (Finnegan et al, 2014; Raaper, Brown & Llewellyn, 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 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).

Research on access and adult students was initially quantitative (Woodley et al., 1988; Fulton et al., 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). More recently the pandemic has also affected the way in which researchers have been able to research issues of access, learning careers and identities due to confinement and distant learning.

In this thematic issue we wish 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 want 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. We invite papers that critically engage with the theory, practice and policy of access from the perspectives of adult students and adult educators in a wide range of educational settings. How does learning as an adult impact on their identity, family and community? How does class, gender, race, age and disability shape their learning experiences? What have been the effects of the pandemic? How did relational and personal processes change during the pandemic? How did the constraint/opportunity to remain at home generate effects and how did they impact on existing gender and class inequalities? How has research helped us to understand these issues? Which avenues for future research and support are flourishing? What new threats are impending the improvement of equal access and social justice in higher education and other adult education settings? How have qualitative methods been employed to deal with these new constraints and context?

Papers should be submitted through the online system no later than 31st of March 2024.

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