

The sociocultural and learning experiences of working class students in Higher Education

Project grant holders: Gill Crozier, Diane Reay

Aims

The research will explore working-class students' experiences of higher education; the impact of these on their learner and cultural identities and the implications for their progress and retention. Specifically, the research aims to:

- compare and contrast the social and cultural experiences of working-class students in different types of universities/higher education institution (HEI)
- explore the extent to which these experiences are gendered and, where possible, 'raced'
- discern the impact of the university experiences on the constructions and re-constructions of the students' identities and explore the processes of compliance or resistance with which students engage in order to position themselves as effective learners
- contribute to the theoretical understanding of social class and learner identities within the higher education context

minority ethnic backgrounds the majority are likely to be white working class. Unlike 'race', away from the traditional arenas of class struggle, as in academia, social class is a more hidden and less fashionable form of oppression. Foregrounding class discrimination and its implications for students' learning is one of the key purposes of the research. However, social class and identity formations are complex. Many working-class students currently in English universities are mature women. Minority ethnic students also tend to be mature students. The intersection of gender, 'race', ethnicity and class is therefore central to our research.

The project addresses an area which is under-researched and will therefore make a vital contribution to knowledge that could have implications for both future quality of experience and outcomes and for student retention.

Research design

The research is a mainly qualitative study but will also employ quantitative methods. The HEIs will comprise an elite, a 'red brick' and a post 1992 university and a college of further education. We will focus on three disciplinary areas and if possible the same ones in each institution. Our focus is on undergraduates 18 years and above from working-class backgrounds.

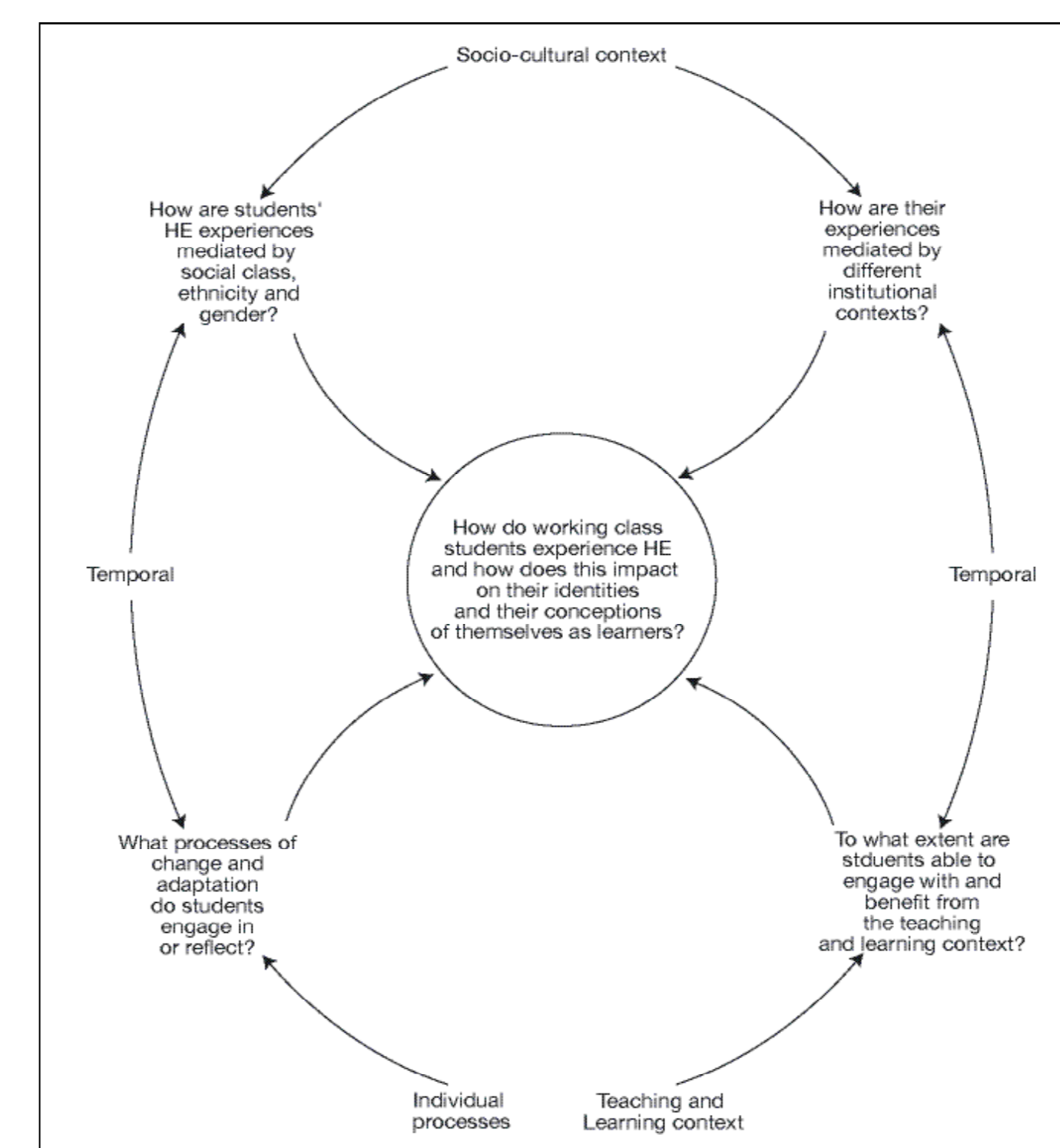
Questionnaires will be employed initially to find basic information about, for example, demographics, reasons for choice of university and subject of study, career aspirations, and major challenges facing them on coming to university and through their time there thus far. These data will provide information about a cross-section of student experiences in a representative sample of higher education providers and will therefore provide data from which to generalise on certain facets of student views and experiences. We will also use these data to identify students for follow up group interviews.

The group interviews will enable us to gain more in-depth insights into their experiences and attitudes to their institutional social, extra-curricular and pedagogical experiences; to the institutions themselves and their courses and whether they feel their needs are being met.

The main source of data collection will be through student case studies. We seek to access the psychodynamics of student relationships with their institutions and to gain greater insights into their views and feelings about their university experiences, friendships, and learning experiences. We will follow Year 1 and Year 2 students from approximately April in one year to June the following year, thereby traversing parts of two academic year experiences. In this way we will gain insights into their progress and whether they stay the course; the students' perceptions of themselves and whether this changes over time and whether and how it impacts upon their attitude to their studies. We want to find out whether these students strive to reproduce their identities in an act of resistance or whether they merely seek validation for who they are.

Subject to student and tutor agreement, we will also carry out some observations of teaching situations and to interview a sample of tutors.

Research questions



Significance

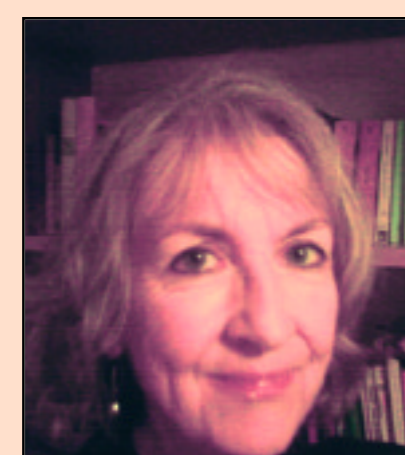
Whilst increasingly there is research into the processes of choice amongst working-class entrants to university, there is still limited UK research on their experiences once at university.

The research will take place across three geographical areas and in different types of HEI. Both of these points are important given that cultural experiences are influenced by geographical context and the institutions represent different missions and success in widening participation. This will enable us to compare the social and cultural experiences of working-class students in order to identify similarities and differences and the impact of these on the students as learners and on their identities.

Whilst some of our sample will be from black and

Research team

Professor Gill Crozier
University of Sunderland
School of Education and
Lifelong Learning



Professor Diane Reay
University of Cambridge
School of Education



Partnerships

The research is to be conducted as a partnership between the University of Sunderland, School of Education and Lifelong Learning and the University of Cambridge, School of Education. In addition a third university and college of further education will participate in the research. A tutor from the FE college will be a member of the research team and undertake data collection and analysis. An advisory group will be set up to include representation from relevant user groups, student groups and academics.

Dissemination

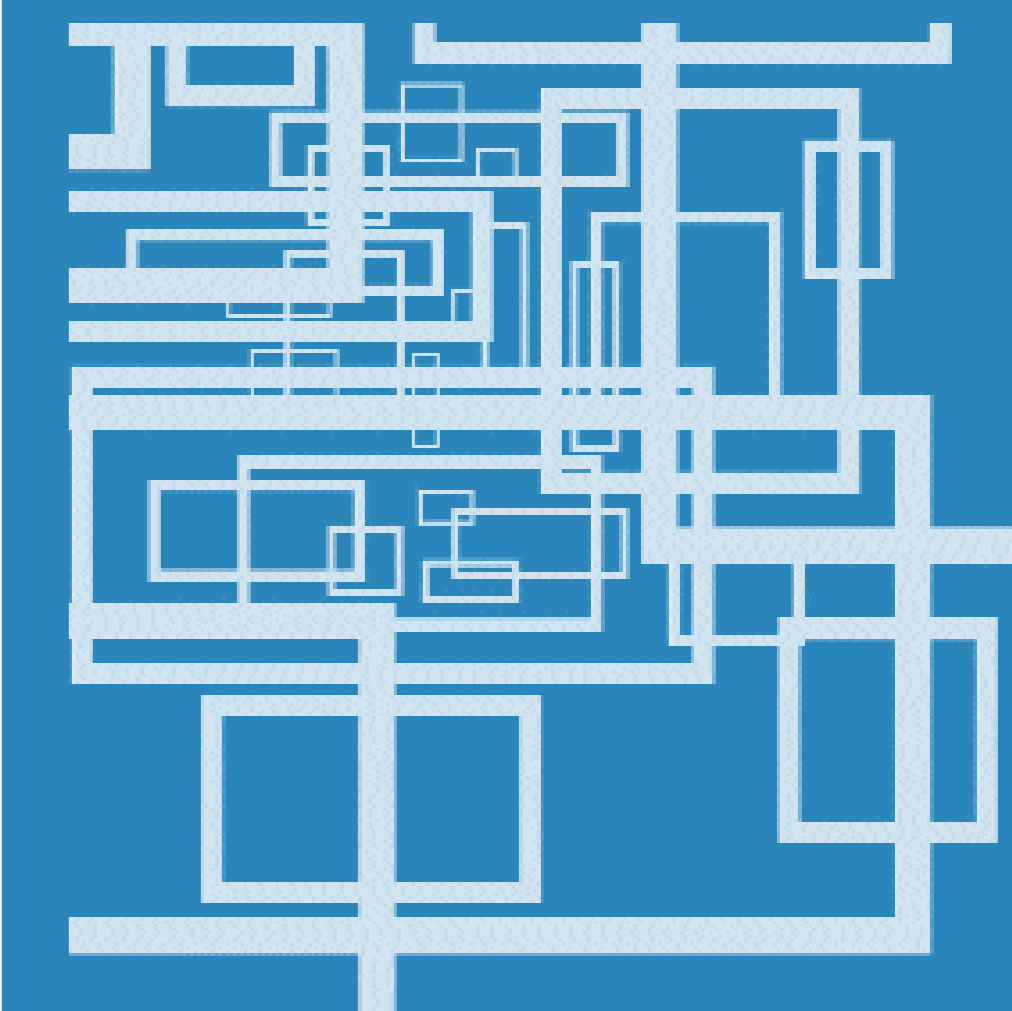
We will hold a half-day dissemination conference for the participants, representatives from the academic community, the student unions, user organisations such as NIACE, and policy makers. We will set up a project website; produce two interim research bulletins; publish academic papers and a book. We will also utilise UCET, BERA, EERA, the HE unions and the NUS and other networks to disseminate findings.

Contact details

Professor Gill Crozier
University of Sunderland
School of Education and Lifelong Learning
Forster Building, Chester Road
Sunderland SR1 3SD
0191 515 2364
gill.crozier@sunderland.ac.uk

Professor Diane Reay
University of Cambridge, School of Education
dr311@cam.ac.uk

Teaching and Learning Research Programme



TLRP involves over 30 research teams with contributions from England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Work began in 2000 and will continue to 2008/9.

Learning: TLRP's overarching aim is to improve outcomes for learners of all ages in teaching and learning contexts across the UK.

Outcomes: TLRP studies a broad range of learning outcomes, including the acquisition of skill, understanding, knowledge and qualifications and the development of attitudes, values and identities relevant to a learning society.

Lifecourse: TLRP supports projects and related activities at many ages and stages in education, training and lifelong learning.

Enrichment: TLRP commits to user engagement at all stages of research. It promotes research across disciplines, methodologies and sectors, and supports national and international co-operation.

Expertise: TLRP works to enhance capacity for all forms of research on teaching and learning, and for research-informed policy and practice.

Improvement: TLRP develops the knowledge base on teaching and learning and policy and practice in the UK.

TLRP Directors' Team
Professor Andrew Pollard ■ London
Professor Mary James ■ London
Professor Alan Brown ■ Warwick
John Siraj-Blatchford ■ Cambridge
Professor Miriam David ■ London
Professor Stephen Baron ■ Strathclyde

TLRP Programme Office
Sarah Douglas ■ sarah.douglas@ioe.ac.uk
James O'Toole ■ j.o'toole@ioe.ac.uk

TLRP
Institute of Education
20 Bedford Way
London WC1H 0AL UK
Tel: +44 (0)20 7911 5577

