Teaching in Higher Education

Mature and younger students' reasons for making the transition from further education into higher education

Velda McCune[a]; Jenny Hounsell[b]; Hazel Christie[c]; Viviene E. Cree[d]; Lyn Tett[b]
[a] Learning and Teaching Centre, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK [b] Department of Higher and Community Education, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK [c] Skills and Learner Development, Edinburgh Napier University, Edinburgh, UK [d] Department of Social Work, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Mature and younger students' reasons for making the transition from further education into higher education

Velda McCune[a]*, Jenny Hounsell[b], Hazel Christie[c], Viviene E. Cree[d] and Lyn Tett[b]

[a]*Learning and Teaching Centre, University of Glasgow, Southpark House, Glasgow, UK;*
[b]*Department of Higher and Community Education, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK;*
[c]*Skills and Learner Development, Edinburgh Napier University, Edinburgh, UK;* [d]*Department of Social Work, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK*

This paper reviews findings from a longitudinal study of students making the transition from FE to an ancient university. This paper compares the younger and older students' reasons for higher education study. Our analysis of the quantitative data suggests that the older students had different reasons for entering university. We use the qualitative data to investigate the meanings participants attributed to higher education study in order to make sense of the patterns in the quantitative data, drawing on Wenger's perspectives on identity development as encompassing participants' trajectories in relation to communities of practice. The findings show a positive picture of the motivations of the whole cohort but the mature students seemed to have a particularly rich understanding of the meaning and relevance of their studies. The study therefore has implications for policy-makers and teachers as they seek to make use of the positive aspects of greater diversity.

Keywords: higher education; further education; widening participation; transition; age

Introduction

This paper is based on a longitudinal study following a group of students making the transition from further education into an 'elite' Scottish university (Christie et al. 2006, 2008). The analysis presented here investigates the similarities and differences between the accounts given by younger and older students of their reasons for entering higher education. While we would not wish to suggest that mature or younger students could be understood as homogeneous groups, mature students are likely to have had more varied and fragmented learning careers shaping their relationships with higher education (Gallacher et al. 2002) and are more likely to have work experiences and family commitments which may frame their reasons for study in particular ways. The quantitative data for our study based on a questionnaire from the ESRC-TLRP funded Enhancing Teaching–Learning Environments in Undergraduate Courses project (http://www.etl.tla.ed.ac.uk/) – provides some initial insights into how the different groups of students explained their choices. Data from individual semi-structured

---

interviews are then used to provide a more in-depth analysis of the students' perspectives on their participation.

This significance of our study lies partly in the atypical sample; the students have entered an 'elite' institution directly from FE. Scotland has high participation rates in HE but it is important to note that a fifth of all HE students are studying Higher National courses in FE colleges and it is the colleges that have been most successful in attracting 'non-traditional' students (Scottish Funding Council [SFC] 2008). Transition from FE to HE is not always a straightforward matter and most students who move from FE into HE enter post-92 universities (Gallacher 2006).

The analysis of the qualitative data was informed by Wenger's notion of 'learning trajectories' which form part of learners' identities. A learning trajectory is the learner's sense of how they are placed in relation to a particular community of practice and how they see their future in relation to that community. Wenger (1998, 154) notes that:

> To me, the term trajectory suggests not a path that can be foreseen or charted but a continuous motion – one that has a momentum of its own in addition to a field of influences. It has a coherence through time that connects the past, the present, and the future.

Wenger argues that an individual's sense of where they are going in relation to particular communities helps them to decide what is important for them and what they may incorporate into their developing identities. We would therefore expect that students' learning trajectories would have strong implications for the quality of their engagement with their academic work. As our sample includes a high proportion of mature students who are seeking qualifications which relate to their prior work experience, one possibility is that they will have a richer understanding of their intended trajectories which may be beneficial for their motivation.

Beaty and her colleagues provide a mapping of students' reasons for higher education study based on identifying the main variations in students' interview accounts. These 'learning orientations' are not seen as descriptions of individual students, but rather as idealised accounts which can be used to illuminate the variation among students. An individual student will espouse a variety of reasons for study and these may change depending on the context (Beaty, Gibbs, and Morgan 1997). The questionnaire items used in the ETL project and the present study to explore students' reasons for higher education study are based on Beaty and colleagues' research. Learning orientations have been shown to relate to the quality of students' learning in both qualitative and quantitative studies (Beaty, Gibbs, and Morgan 1997; Entwistle, McCune, and Hounsell 2003).

Given the ways in which students' wider life experiences give meaning to their studies, it is perhaps not surprising that the literature on mature students in HE suggests that they often have high levels of intrinsic motivation for their studies and are less likely to enter HE simply for instrumental reasons or because they were not sure what they wanted to do (Blaxter, Hughes, and Tight 1998; Reay, Ball, and David 2002). Reay and colleagues' (2002) interviews with mature students on an access course identified a broad range of positive reasons for study which went beyond those provided by an imagined career trajectory. They reported that most of the school leavers in their sample espoused instrumental attitudes to their learning.

Findings from the ETL project suggested a more positive picture of young students' motivation, as these students often identified with intrinsic reasons for study, but they did show slightly lower scores on questionnaire items relating to intrinsic interest than the older students (Hounsell 2005).

Perhaps related to their well developed reasons for participating in HE, there is also some evidence that mature students are more likely than younger students to approach their learning in ways which emphasise a search for understanding (Richardson 2005). Our study aims to explore the relevance of these findings for a particular group of students entering an 'elite' university by an unusual route. More specifically, our research questions are as follows:

(1) What differences are there between the younger and older students' scores on questionnaire items relating to their reasons for HE study?
(2) What similarities and differences are there between the younger and older students' interview accounts of their reasons for HE study?
(3) Does the notion of 'learning trajectories' provide an effective theoretical framework for making sense of the meanings the students attribute to their studies?

Methodology

'From FE to HE' is a longitudinal study over the course of four-year undergraduate degree programmes and into the year beyond. The study uses in-depth, semi-structured interviews and standardised questionnaires. This paper draws on the data from the first questionnaire and the first semi-structured interviews collected at the start of the students' first semester at university. In this first interview the students were asked, among other things, about their reasons for entering university, for choosing their subject and their expectations of being a student.

The sample comprises 45 students who came to the university with HNC and HND qualifications directly from FE colleges and were studying social science or humanities subjects. As can be seen from Table 1 most were mature students and 82% were female. For the purposes of this paper we split the students into three groups based on age, 17–20, 21–30 and 31 or older. These groupings differ from the common division made in the research literature where the split is often made at 21 years. The groupings made in the present paper were chosen because these seemed to represent important differences between the students in our study in terms of caring responsibilities, lifestyle and reasons for study. Our choice of groupings also meant that the three groups were more even in size; our cohort only included five students in the 21–24 age group.

Table 1.   Age and sex of informants.

Age at start of course	Female	Male	Vocational	Non-vocational	Part-time study
17–20	7	3	6	4	0
21–30	7	4	5	6	2
31 or older	24	0	21	3	11
Total	38	7	32	13	13

All the students over 30 at the start of their course were female. In this oldest age bracket, all but three of the students were studying directly vocational courses (e.g. Social Work, Childhood Studies, Community Education and Primary Education) while among the younger mature and traditional-age students the numbers are more evenly balanced between those taking directly vocational and non-vocational courses. Seventy-nine percent of the students described themselves as working class, and 82% were the first in the family to attend higher education. Twenty-one of the oldest group and three of the younger mature group were parents, of which eight were single parents. Most of the students in each age group worked either full- or part-time and most of the mature students had to commute to university from outside the city.

Findings

Questionnaire responses by age

The students who completed the questionnaire were asked what they expected to get from their experience of studying at the university by responding to the items listed in Table 2 on a scale of 1–5 (1 = disagree very strongly–5 = agree very strongly). Figure 1 shows the percentage of students who agreed either fairly strongly or very strongly with the items. The results are shown by three age groups: 'traditional' age students (those aged under 21 at the start of their course), younger 'mature' students (aged 21–30) and older 'mature' students (aged 31 or over).

Almost all of the students in each age group agreed that they were keen to develop knowledge and skills they could use in a career, and fewer were mainly interested in gaining a qualification. All the students claimed they wanted to develop and to broaden their horizons and more than 80% in each age group were hoping that their experiences of higher education would make them more independent and self-confident. Only in the youngest age group (those aged under 21) was an active social life and/or sport seen as a strong reason for entering university.

The oldest age group (those aged 31 or over on entry to university) were more likely than the other two age groups to see higher education as a natural next step from success in further education. They were also more likely to want to prove their capabilities to themselves or to others. All the students in this age group were keen to study the subject in depth, while less than 80% of students in the other age groups

Table 2. Items asking students about expectations of higher education (Learning and Studying Questionnaire (LSQ)).

a. I want to develop knowledge and skills I can use in a career.
b. I hope the things I learn will help me to develop as a person and broaden my horizons.
c. I'm focused on the opportunities here for an active social life and/or sport.
d. I hope the whole experience here will make me more independent and self-confident.
e. I'm mainly here because it seemed the natural thing: I'd done well in my HN studies.
f. I want to learn things which might let me help people, and/or make a difference in the world.
g. I want to study the subject in depth by taking interesting and stimulating courses.
h. I mainly need the qualification to enable me to get a good job when I finish.
i. I want an opportunity to prove to myself or to other people what I can do.
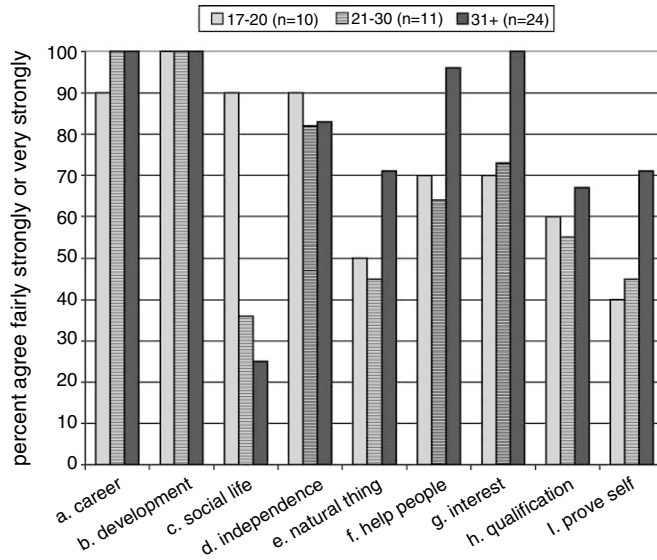
Figure 1.   Reasons for higher education study, by age group.

agreed with this statement as a reason for studying at university. The oldest group were also the most likely to want to learn things which might let them help people or make a difference in the world. However, this may be because a greater percentage of the oldest group were taking specifically vocational courses.

We calculated Spearman's rank correlations between age and students' expectations of higher education. Four of the correlations were significant at the 0.01 level. Age was positively correlated with: wanting to prove to themselves or others what they could do ($\rho = 0.50$; $p = 0.001$); wanting to study the subject in depth ($\rho = 0.43$; $p = 0.003$) and with natural progression to HE based on doing well at HN studies ($\rho = 0.40$; $p = 0.007$). It was negatively correlated with wanting to develop a social life at university ($\rho = -0.56$; $p < 0.001$).

There were too few male students in our sample to allow a quantitative analysis relating to whether gender might partly explain the patterns identified in this analysis. We will provide details of the participants' gender and other aspects of their identities within the qualitative analyses which follow and return to this theme in the discussion. Looking at the responses across vocational and non-vocational courses suggested that there may be an interaction between course choice, age and reasons for higher education study.

The analysis of the qualitative data

All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed in full. The first step in the analysis was to identify the broad themes which related to the students' reasons for HE study. These themes were then discussed among the research team. Next, one member of the team completed an initial analysis of how these themes were represented across the groups. Vignettes were then created for each student, bringing

together their questionnaire scores and all of the parts of their interviews where they spoke about their motivation for HE study. Another member of the team used these vignettes to make a final check on the findings.

In developing the analysis, weighting was not only given to the themes according to the frequency with which particular issues were identified within groups but also to the strength of the students' comments. Careful attention was given to the ways in which particular themes were expressed in each group. Counter-examples to the general trends were carefully noted. The overall perspective taken on the analysis relates to the work of Charmaz (2003) which argues for rigorous empirical analysis of perspectives and meanings without the assumption that this identifies objective universal truths.

Accounts given by the students aged 31 and above of their reasons for HE study

Most of the oldest group of students were taking vocational courses and for some, this vocation was something they had been planning and working towards for some time:

> I worked in a school part time for eight years [. . .] I like working with children and loved the job and I thought, 'I would like to help some of these children and some of these families', but knew I had to be qualified. (14[1]; female, vocational course, working class)

Students in this group spoke of a rich sense of the relationship between their studies and their trajectories in relation to the communities of practice in which they had worked and in which they often planned to continue working once their studies were complete. For some, there was a sense of the limitations of their current role, which they felt might be transcended through higher education study. Others were more concerned with the relevance of what they were learning for the activities of their workplace communities:

> I'm not doing this because I want to change my job. I'm not doing this because I think it's going to get me any more money, I'm doing it because I want to learn. [. . .] It's all very good at nursery going bramble picking, making bramble crumble but then 'Why am I doing this?'. (32; female, vocational course, working class)

Not all of this group of students had such clear ideas about their future; for a few students there was simply a more general wish for a better future with a more interesting and better paid job.

The significance and meaning of higher education for these students did not, however, lie solely in the relevance of their studies for their working lives. Several of the students had experienced critical incidents in their wider lives which had led to shifts in their self-perception which supported their preparedness to re-engage in learning, such as a divorce or the death of a close relative:

> The crunch came near the end of my HNC, my brother had died tragically and it really changed my perspective on life. I felt from then that life was too short and if I wanted to make any changes in my life I needed to get my finger out. (40; female, vocational course, social class not stated)

Some of the students also drew on their personal experiences as an explanation for the purpose of their studies by talking about the wish to help others who were like them. Other students in this group described the meaning accorded to higher education in relation to how it would have an impact on significant relationships in their lives. One student described the importance for her of proving to her father and ex-husband that she was not 'thick'. Another felt uncomfortable being the only member of her family without a degree.

Only a few of the oldest group mentioned developing a social life as a reason for coming to university or as something to which they were looking forward. Those that did tended to talk about meeting like-minded people or those with similar career interests rather than simply socialising. For others, the enjoyment of learning or intrinsic interest in the subject was the driving motivation. Gaining self-confidence and developing as a person were also mentioned as important by some of this group:

> That growing, you know? The self-development. I'm thirty-six and sometimes I feel sixteen, so I'm looking to help my own maturity and my own self-confidence. (39; female, vocational course, working class)

Accounts given by the students in the 21–30 age group of their reasons for HE study

For the younger mature students, career was also described as a driving motivation, although fewer of this age group were already working in the subject which they were going to study, or had experience of the field. Their sense of their future trajectories generally seemed less developed than students in the oldest group:

> That's why I went to college because [. . .] I had a full-time job that I didn't really like [. . .] I did well at Law, you know, I quite enjoyed the Law kind of thing so I wanted to get into *that*. (52; male, professional course, middle class)

University was seen either as opening up more general opportunities for them to progress into graduate careers or as a route into a specific job.

While this group of students did not mention specific critical incidents which affected their choices, some of them did talk about how their life experiences and personal relationships gave meaning to their studies:

> My father was an alcoholic and I didn't have the best upbringing. So I thought I'd use my experience as a kid to help others. (27; male, vocational course, working class)

The students in this group said more about social reasons for university study than the older mature students. The focus within this younger mature group seemed to be more generally about meeting new people, although some did indicate that their were particularly looking to meet others within the same field. In quite a similar way to the older mature students, some members of this group spoke of the enjoyment of learning and interest in the subject. Personal development also came up as a theme with these younger mature students:

> I think just for my own motivation to improve myself and learning. I love learning and expanding my mind. (27; male, vocational course, working class)

Accounts given by the students in the 17–20 age group of their reasons for HE study

The younger students also indicated that they were motivated to participate in higher education in order to develop their careers, but had had less time to think through the options for their lives. They were less likely to talk in detail about their choices or to relate them to previous experiences of relevant communities of practice, although some of those taking primary education courses had had experience of working with children.

Students in the youngest age group also talked about wanting to study interesting courses, although they tended to be less voluble about it than the older students:

> I don't really know what I want to do in the future so I thought just go with what I'm interested in. (23; female, non-vocational course, middle class)

For some, going to college had helped them become interested in a particular subject or in taking their studies further.

A number of the participants in this group spoke of a wanting to broaden their horizons either by meeting a wider circle of people, developing new interests or expanding their career opportunities. Seventy percent of these traditional-age students were living away from home in order to study and this aspect of developing independence was important to them:

> Being away from home is a good thing. I'm looking forward to it. (9; female, vocational course, social class not stated)

The younger students were more likely to see socialising as a central part of being a student, and to give it as the first thing they were looking forward to at university:

> I really like music and stuff. I want to get involved in that somehow. I was thinking about like one of the societies, doing something with refugees or charity or something like that, just to experience a new type of life. (2; male, non-vocational course, social class not stated)

Discussion

Although the focus of the analyses presented in this paper was the impact of age on students' reasons for entering higher education, it is clear from the findings that mature students cannot be considered as a single type or 'species' (James 1995; Waller 2006). Nonetheless, there were certain themes within the students' explanations of the meaning of their studies for which age seemed to be significant. The older students in the sample typically had much greater experience of paid work, which coloured their views about how studying at university might change their lives. A particularly high proportion of the oldest group had chosen to pursue vocational courses which related strongly to their current working roles. This seemed to give them a richer understanding of the relevance of what they were learning. The quantitative data did not show any significant differences between the mature and younger students on the career-related questions but this is likely to be because all of the participants in the study were generally interested in 'developing knowledge and skills they could use in a career' and this question could not address the finer nuances of the students' experiences.

The older groups of students were more likely to have caring responsibilities, to be negotiating their learner identities within fragmented learning careers (Gallacher et al. 2002) and to have experienced life events which disrupted their identities in ways which sometimes opened up new possibilities for learning. It is not surprising, against this background, to note that it was mainly the youngest group of students who were able to value university for the new social opportunities made available to them. Similarly to Reay and colleagues (2002), we found that the older students were typically too caught up in balancing study, domestic responsibilities and paid work to make this possible for them. This is the most likely explanation for the significantly lower scores that the older students gave on the questionnaire item 'I am focused on the opportunities here for an active social life and/or sport'. The younger students were also more likely to have moved away from home to study and to focus on the implications of this change for their personal development. While the samples in our study are small, the findings are broadly consonant with the wider literature and open up valuable avenues for future research.

While our analyses for this paper focused particularly on age, it is important to bear in mind that other aspects of the students' identities will have been significant for their learning experiences and some of these interacted with age. Leathwood (2006) notes the ways in which students' gender and cultural backgrounds impact on how students engage with the dominant discourse of the 'independent learner' in higher education. Crozier et al. (2008) draw attention to how students' expectations of what they might gain from university study are shaped by their 'sociocultural locations' (167) which include gender, class, age and ethnicity.

All of the oldest group of students in our sample were women, many of whom had children. The majority of the other two groups of students were also female. None of the students in the youngest group mentioned having children. Most of the students in all of the age groups identified themselves as working class, or did not state their class and most were first generation in their families into higher education. For the older students we saw the interaction between age, class and gender where some of the students spoke, for example, of how it would not have seemed acceptable to them to be out of the home for study when their children were young, a similar finding to that of Tett (2000).

Wenger (1998) emphasises the ways in which learners' trajectories in relation to particular communities of practice frame what is relevant and meaningful for them. The findings from our study suggest that those mature students who have worked in areas related to their programmes of study are likely to have a richer understanding of possible trajectories. This is a useful addition to a literature where little emphasis is placed on how individuals find their way to particular communities of practice (Merriam, Courtenay, and Baumgartner 2003). This trajectory may be one possible explanation for research which has suggested that mature students are more inclined to engage meaningfully with course content (Richardson 2005). Perhaps having a greater sense of the relevance of topics under study and of the importance of the programme to aspects of their identities enhances the quality of mature students' engagement with their academic work. Of course, such experiences need not be exclusive to mature students. A similar connection between greater commitment to active learning and a richer sense of trajectory has also been identified with younger students who have experienced work placements (McCune 2009).

Although the vocational relevance of course content was significant for many of the students in our cohort, the participants also spoke of other factors which were highly salient for them in explaining why they were studying in higher education. For the mature students, the significance of their studies was sometimes framed by narratives about disrupted learning trajectories and the ways in which this interacted with their relationships with significant others. Some of the oldest group of students spoke of how personal circumstances had prevented them from taking up higher education study when they were younger. This meant that some were now in the position that significant others, including their children, had now achieved degrees, which might help to explain why the oldest group of students scored most highly on the item 'I want the opportunity to prove to myself or to other people what I can do'. Gaining the approval of family members or proving wrong their negative judgements was also a theme in the older group. Interestingly, the younger students in our sample did not speak about family expectations as framing their reasons for HE study.

Our findings therefore echo some of Gallacher and colleagues' (2002) research with mature students in which these authors emphasised the often fragmented nature of mature students' learning careers and how this has an impact on students' commitment to the role of learner. Gallacher and colleagues also emphasise the importance of critical incidents as triggers for mature students to re-engage in learning and this was relevant for some of our participants. It may be that big life changes disrupt students' existing identities opening up new possibilities for taking on the role of learner in higher education.

The analyses indicated the value of combining Lickert style questionnaire items with interview data. While such questionnaires have undoubtedly proved useful in investigating broad relationships between students' aims, intentions, beliefs and learning processes (Entwistle and McCune 2004; Heikkilä and Lonka 2006) it seems that similar student responses to these questions may relate to quite different underlying narratives about the meaning of higher education. A high score from a mature student on the item 'I want to develop knowledge and skills I can use in a career' may be underpinned by a much richer understanding of that career and a stronger identification with that career path than would be typical for a younger learner who also gave a high score on that item. Looking at the item 'I am mainly here because it seemed the natural thing: I had done well in my HN studies' raises further questions. This item was originally intended to tap into more extrinsic motivation, where a student simply carries on with their education because this seems like an obvious move, rather than because they have a particular interest in the subject. Looking at the oldest group of students who scored most highly on this question suggests it is not being interpreted in this way. For some of these students the natural progression was to do with long-term career plans and was not an unthinking move to the next obvious step. On the other hand, the questionnaire pointed up differences between the groups on the item 'I want to study the subject in depth by taking interesting and stimulating courses', which were not particularly clear in the interview data.

Conclusions and implications

Overall our findings present a positive picture of the motivations for study of this whole group of 'non-traditional' students. The students indicated that their reasons

for HE study were more to do with learning that could be used in a (helping) career, personal growth and interest in the subject. As a group they were less likely to espouse instrumental reasons for study. Within this broad picture the mature students did seem to differ from the younger students, although there was also considerable diversity within these broad groupings. On the whole, the mature students offered richer and more sophisticated accounts of the significance of their studies for their careers and wider lives. This may help to explain research findings which suggest that mature students are more likely to engage actively with their studies.

These findings highlight the possible positive benefits of admissions policies which are supportive of non-traditional and mature students. In the context of general concern about student engagement in HEIs in Scotland (Quality Assurance Agency [QAA] 2009) it is encouraging to see the positive responses of this cohort of students. That said, other analyses of data from our cohort of HN students indicate that they were typically most successful in part-time programmes which were more tailored to their needs and experiences. Where they were participating in full-time study the mature students in particular seemed to experience more disruptions to progression than would be expected in this institution. Previous research has shown that mature students often withdraw for reasons external to the course and institution such as family or financial problems (McGivney 2004) and HEIs need to consider how they can support students to succeed in the face of these competing demands.

Our findings suggest the value of Wenger's (1998) notion of learning trajectories for helping to make sense of the different quality of motivation described by some of the mature students who had rich experiences of participation in relevant communities of practice in relation to their studies. This was not sufficient, however, to account for all of the differences between the groups of students in their reasons for higher education study.

Acknowledgements

Note

1. This number is the identifier for an individual student.

References

Beaty, L., G. Gibbs, and A. Morgan. 1997. Learning orientations and study contracts. In *The experience of learning*, ed. F. Marton, D.J. Hounsell, and N.J. Entwistle, 2nd ed., 72–86. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press.

Blaxter, L., C. Hughes, and M. Tight. 1998. Education, work and adult life: How adults relate their learning to their work, family and social lives. In *Adult learning: A reader*, ed. P. Sutherland, 135–47. London: Kogan Page.

Charmaz, K. 2003. Grounded theory: Objectivist and constructivist methods. In *Strategies of qualitative inquiry*, ed. N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln, 2nd ed., 249–91. London: Sage.

Christie, H., V.E. Cree, J. Hounsell, V. McCune, and L. Tett. 2006. From college to university: Looking backwards, looking forwards. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education* 11, no. 3: 351–65.

Christie, H., L. Tett, V.E. Cree, J. Hounsell, and V. McCune. 2008. A real rollercoaster of confidence and emotions': Learning to be a university student. *Studies in Higher Education* 33, no. 5: 567–81.

Crozier, G., D. Reay, J. Clayton, L. Colliander, and J. Grinstead. 2008. Different strokes for different folks: Diverse students in diverse institutions – experiences of higher education. *Research Papers in Education* 23, no. 2: 167–77.

Entwistle, N.J., and V. McCune. 2004. The conceptual bases of study strategy inventories. *Educational Psychology Review* 16, no. 4: 325–45.

Entwistle, N.J., V. McCune, and J. Hounsell. 2003. Investigating ways of enhancing university teaching–learning environments: Measuring students' approaches to studying and perceptions of teaching. In *Powerful learning environments: Unravelling basic components and dimensions*, ed. E. De Corte, L. Verschaffel, N. Entwistle, and J. van Merriënboer, 89–108. Oxford: Elsevier Science.

Gallacher, J. 2006. Blurring the boundaries or creating diversity? The contribution of the further education colleges to higher education in Scotland. *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 30, no. 1: 43–58.

Gallacher, J., B. Crossan, J. Field, and B. Merrill. 2002. Learning careers and the social space: Exploring the fragile identities of adult returners in the new further education. *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 21, no. 6: 493–509.

Heikkilä, A., and K. Lonka. 2006. Studying in higher education: Students' approaches to learning, self-regulation, and cognitive strategies. *Studies in Higher Education* 31, no. 1: 99–117.

Hounsell, J. 2005. Undergraduate mature students' experiences of their teaching–learning environments. Masters diss., University of Edinburgh.

James, D. 1995. Mature studentship in higher education: Beyond a 'species' approach. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 16, no. 4: 451–66.

Leathwood, C. 2006. Gender, equity and the discourse of the independent learner in higher education. *Higher Education* 52: 611–33.

McCune, V. 2009. Final year biosciences students' willingness to engage: Teaching–learning environments, authentic learning experiences and identities. *Studies in Higher Education* 34, no. 3: 347–61.

McGivney, V. 2004. Understanding persistence in adult learning. *Open Learning* 19, no. 1: 33–46.

Merriam, S., B. Courtenay, and L. Baumgartner. 2003. On becoming a witch: Learning in a marginalised community of practice. *Adult Education Quarterly* 53, no. 3: 170–88.

Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for Higher Education. 2009. *Quality enhancement themes: the first year experience. Overview of the enhancement theme 2006–2008*. Mansfield: QAA.

Reay, D., S. Ball, and M. David. 2002. It's taken me a long time but I'll get there in the end': Mature students on access courses and higher education choice. *British Educational Research Journal* 28, no. 1: 5–19.

Richardson, J.T.E. 2005. Students' perceptions of academic quality and approaches to studying in distance education. *British Educational Research Journal* 31, no. 1: 7–27.

Scottish Funding Council (SFC). 2008. *Learning for all: Second update report on measures of success*. Edinburgh: Scottish Funding Council.

Tett, L. 2000. I'm working class and proud of it – gendered experiences of non-traditional participants in Higher Education. *Gender and Education* 12, no. 2: 183–94.

Waller, R. 2006. I don't feel like 'a student', I feel like 'me'!: The over-simplification of mature learners' experience(s). *Research in Post-Compulsory Education* 11, no. 1: 115–30.

Wenger, E. 1998. *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.