

# STUDYING THE EXPERIENCES OF NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS IN TEACHER EDUCATION

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## Abstract

Recommendations arising from the *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008) see universities aiming to increase enrolments of school leavers generally and those from low socioeconomic status backgrounds particularly. Similar trends in other countries have had mixed success. Enrolments of students from less advantaged groups have remained largely static in recent decades, both in Australia and elsewhere. Research suggests that students attracted to university study due to these 'widening participation' initiatives are more likely to attend some institutions than others, and to enrol in some courses than others. Students from less advantaged groups experience higher education differently from their more advantaged peers, and face additional challenges. Using Bourdieu's theoretical concepts of *habitus*, *field* and *capital*, this study will examine the experiences of non-traditional students enrolled in a teacher education program. Through a longitudinal design, the student experience over the full course of the university program and initial years of the teaching career will be studied. The study aims to contribute to an understanding of the factors affecting the success of non-traditional students in teacher education specifically and university generally. This paper presents an overview of the study.

## Introduction

Higher Education (HE) has traditionally been a realm dominated by the middle and upper classes in society. For decades there have been attempts to improve the opportunities of less socially advantaged groups for accessing higher education in Australia. Due to the emergence of the global economy, a number of international governments have been keen to pursue increased rates of higher education to maintain a suitably skilled workforce, and thereby remain competitive. In both cases, the desired outcome is often termed 'widening participation'. Policies and practices for achieving this outcome have been implemented in various ways and with varying degrees of success. Australia appears to be on the verge of a new era in widening participation. Recommendations arising from the *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008) have been accepted by the federal government and will be legislated and implemented over coming years, with some changes already underway.

Research has shown that non-traditional students face challenges not experienced by their more traditional colleagues (for example Burke & Johnston, 2004; Crozier et al., 2008; Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003). Considering this, it seems likely that altering the characteristics of the student body at university (for example by increasing the number of low socio-economic status [SES] students) would lead to changes in attrition rates (as found in some studies – for example Jetten, Iyer, Tsivrikos & Young, 2008) and factors contributing to attrition (Crozier et al., 2008; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). Such effects would be more obvious in programs where more of the targetted students (those previously unlikely to have enrolled in HE) enrol. One such program is likely to be teacher education (Bradley, et al., 2008). It is seen by many from lower SES backgrounds as providing stable employment (Snell, 2008), and has (at some institutions) lower entry requirements than many other programs. Also, the Australian Government intends to increase funding for places in teaching and nursing programs, and to reduce HE debt for teaching and nursing graduates (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). Whether it is wise to encourage wholesale increases of enrolment in teacher

education programs remains to be seen. Currently only a very small percentage of graduate teachers are offered permanent employment. The effects of increased numbers of non-traditional students on teacher education programs, as well as the effects of these programs on the students may not have been fully considered. Additionally, whilst increasing enrolments of non-traditional students presents an initial challenge for HE institutions, success in that aspect leads to a further challenge: ensuring that these students graduate with success equal to their more traditional peers. It is with this in mind that the proposed study has been developed.

The study outlined here aims to determine the factors contributing to non-traditional students' success or attrition in undertaking a primary teacher education program in an era of widening participation. It will follow a number of non-traditional students as they progress through their program, collecting information about their backgrounds and experiences in pursuing university studies and teaching careers. It will examine a wide range of possible contributors including student demographic information, socio-economic background, university entry level, support and disposition to determine how these affect student outcomes. Outcomes will be examined in terms of program completion, time to complete, grades achieved and career aspirations. Academics teaching on the program will also provide data about student cohorts and course adaptations. The study will also seek to determine university practices that may increase these students' success.

The study will seek to answer the following questions:

- How do non-traditional students experience teacher education programs?
- What factors contribute to success or attrition for these students, before, during and after university?

## **Widening Participation**

Not every school leaver will access further education, for a variety of reasons. Some have no desire to do so (dispositional factors), whilst others are prevented by situational or institutional factors (Gorard, Smith, May, Thomas, Adnett, & Slack, 2006). Internationally, the engagement of greater proportions of the population in HE is seen by many as desirable both from a social justice standpoint and for economic reasons. Those interested in social justice will applaud attempts to improve HE accessibility for previously under-represented groups as an opportunity to redress social inequality. Others may echo the sentiments of Dawkins (1988), Australia's Education Minister (1987–92), whose aim in increasing the participation of low SES groups in education was primarily to benefit the economy. Similarly, many nations acknowledge that in order to function effectively within the current global economy, their populations must be suitably educated. This has led to policies in a number of countries aimed at increasing the percentage of populations entering post-secondary education.

Widening participation policies evident in a number of countries have often resulted in mass higher education - when 15 to 50 per cent of the relevant age group has access (Osborne, 2003; Wan, 2011). For example, initiatives related to widening participation in HE are documented in research and policy from the United Kingdom (UK), various European nations, United States (US), Israel, Hong Kong and Australia. Generally speaking, these documents indicate an acknowledgement that some groups are under-represented in HE and that an increase in HE participation is beneficial for both individuals and economies.

In the UK, the former Blair government was active in instigating widening participation initiatives. A target was set to have 50% of all 18 to 30 year olds entering HE by 2010 (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003). Early indications from new policies of the current UK government suggest a move away from such initiatives, with support remaining in theory but financial support reduced. In the US, sentiments supporting the notion of widening participation have been voiced, with the Governor of Michigan in 2004 pronouncing that by 2013 she wanted all students in that state graduating from college (Burke & Johnston, 2004). Some US HE institutions actively seek non-traditional enrolments, but such

comments and actions belong to isolated individuals and institutions, rather than being a systemic drive. When considering various attitudes and approaches to widening participation internationally, it must be noted that there is a distinct difference between talking about students *entering* HE and talking about them gaining qualifications through successful completion. Recognising this, the original UK target was modified to relate to students remaining enrolled in HE after 6 months (Gorard, et al., 2006), acknowledging that enrolment alone would not guarantee the desired outcome. Implications arising from differences between enrolment and completion will be explored in the section on student attrition.

Another notable difference between international policies relates to the type of HE referred to. In UK policy it is considered to be any type of post-compulsory school education that may lead to qualifications (Gorard, et al., 2006), and rhetoric in the US identifies college graduations as the goal (though there is a hierarchy existing within that HE system and others which will be examined later). Regardless of the country, policy, or initiatives instigated, little progress has been made in increasing low SES participation in most HE systems (European Group for Research on Equity in Educational Systems, 2003; Gorard, et al., 2006), with most increases in enrolment coming from the middle classes (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003).

Concerns exist about the impact of increasing HE enrolment in a number of countries. The reforms are seen by some to emphasise quantity rather than quality. In Europe, the institution attended considered to reflect the quality of a graduate's degree (Brennan & Tang, 2007). In the UK, concern around the maintenance of standards and 'dumbing down' of programs has accompanied the era of widening participation (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003, p 597). In countries where social status is closely linked to qualifications, increasing the number of graduates may be seen as detrimental to graduates (Wan, 2011). In attempting to meet widening participation targets, some institutions have circumvented their own procedures. Entry criteria have been ignored in some Hong Kong (Wan, 2011) and US (Speigler, 1998) institutions. Such occurrences can lead to public distrust of some universities (Wan, 2011), underlining the importance of quality control in HE.

How does the current situation in Australia compare with international perspectives? Many changes are evident in the Australian HE landscape in recent years. In 2007 the Australian Federal Government signalled an interest in HE equity when it announced that it would form the National Centre for Student Equity which opened in 2008. That same year, the *Review of Australian Higher Education: Final Report* (Bradley, et al., 2008) was published, including as two of its recommendations that the Australian Government set national targets for the year 2020 of 'at least 40 per cent of 25- to 34-year-olds having attained a qualification at *bachelor level or above*' (my emphasis) and '20 per cent of higher education enrolments at undergraduate level are people from low socio-economic status backgrounds' (p. xviii). Similar to other countries, the percentage of low SES enrolments in Australian HE has remained at around 15% for over 15 years (DEEWR, 2009). Since this group makes up 25% of the general population, it is clearly under-represented in HE. These recommendations have been accepted by the Australian Commonwealth Government (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009), though the target date for bachelor qualifications was revised to 2025. So, Australian targets focus on completion rather than enrolment, relate to bachelor level or above, and cite specific percentages of those from low SES backgrounds. Gale and Sellar (2011) suggest that low SES is 'newly privileged in higher education policy discourse' (p 2), having subsumed concerns about gender, disability, Indigenous and rural communities. This focus is also evident in the establishment of the Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program (HEPPP) in 2010, replacing the former Higher Education Equity Support Program. The goal of HEPPP is to increase low SES participation in HE by providing funding to universities working toward this goal and working with other institutions to raise the aspirations of low SES populations (DEEWR, n.d.).

This occurs at a time of restructuring in Australian HE. In 2011 the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) is being established for regulation, standard setting and quality assurance in HE institutions. This will incorporate tasks previously completed by state bodies and AUQA (Lomax-Smith, Gibson, Watson & Webster, 2010). A demand-driven entitlement system (currently in

the transition phase) will see approved HE providers setting their own entry requirements and enrolment limits for domestic students (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009), although the government maintains the power to regulate enrolments where they see fit. Changes for teacher education have likewise been underway. The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) was established in 2010 with responsibility for national professional standards, teacher professional development and liaising with various professional groups. This will absorb what have until now been responsibilities undertaken by state bodies such as the New South Wales Institute of Teachers. Some interpretations of the AITSL standards for accreditation of teacher education programs (AITSL, 2011) suggest that in the near future entry to teacher education programs may be restricted to the top third of school leavers or equivalent. This may be sensible, as currently far more teachers are trained than there are jobs available, especially in primary teaching. Such changes may affect the characteristics and motivations of pre-service teachers.

## Non-traditional students

Historically, HE has been the realm of able-bodied males from middle-class backgrounds who are independent learners, unhindered by familial responsibilities or financial concerns. Whilst this stereotype reflects the realities of previous centuries (Priest, 2009), current discourse about HE and institutional practices suggest the image persists in many quarters (Ruddick, 1996). Many countries including the UK and Australia have acknowledged continuing inequalities in post-compulsory education participation. Those members of society least likely to participate in HE have one or more of the following characteristics: low SES, mature-age, low literacy, disability and those with criminal records (DfEE, 1995). The type of school attended, parental occupation (DfEE, 1995), gender and race (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003) are also predictors of HE participation. Students less likely to undertake HE are variously referred to as 'non-traditional', 'marginalised' or 'new' students. Many of them also fall into the category of 'first-generation' students, a term often used in US research. This refers to the fact that no members of their family in previous generations attended higher education. First generation students are often at greater risk than others of alienation in HE, due to their parents' lack of experience with academic practices and processes (Penrose, 2002). Parents who did not attend HE are less likely to be able to guide their children through complex institutional policies and procedures. Working class students and those previously excluded from HE due to other factors can struggle with HE structures and processes as well as academic demands, having had little preparation for these at home or high school (Burke & Johnston, 2004; Crozier, et al., 2008).

The quality of HE students entering teacher education programs as well as the program quality is of importance to all with an interest in education. The quality of teachers and their practices is an important factor in determining learning outcomes for students (Hattie, 2003; Rowe, 2003), and teacher quality can be affected by individual qualities as well as the training received. In Finland, where excellent educational outcomes are attained as determined by PISA, teacher education programs attract high-achieving school graduates (Lingard, 2010). If TE programs in Australia change enrolment practices to increase HE enrolments, it is important to ensure that graduate quality will be maintained. A discourse about lowering standards already exists around non-traditional students (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003), and this must be challenged.

## Using Bourdieu's Tools

It is acknowledged that students entering tertiary education through widening participation initiatives experience HE differently from more traditional, middle-class students. Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus*, *field* and *capital* (Bourdieu, 1990) have been used by many researchers to explain some of these differences (for example Brennan & Osborne, 2008; Crozier, Reay, Clayton, Colliander & Grinstead, 2008). Bourdieu's theoretical lens will contribute the major theoretical framework for this study.

Bourdieu (1986) explained *habitus* as a person's background context and influences, and the outlook these influence through ways of thinking, feeling and behaving. These become seemingly natural



tendencies or 'dispositions', which then predict behaviours in any social situation. *Habitus* does, however, provide an individual with a range of possible actions to use in any situation. Whilst formed by an individual's history, *habitus* is also influenced by the history of their family, social class and gender. As an individual progresses through life, and various experiences are assimilated into their *habitus*, a range of outcomes is possible (Reay, 2004). *Habitus* can be replicated or transformed. This assumes the possibility that a person's living conditions may change drastically (or slightly) over the course of a lifetime, depending on an individual's responses to situations encountered. Education can increase a tendency towards a cultured disposition, allowing initial social conditions to be transcended. The correlation between level of education and income (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008) demonstrates the potential of higher education for transforming *habitus*. In selecting non-traditional students to participate, it is anticipated that some similarities in *habitus* will exist between participants, though as a matter of course there will also be considerable differences. As they progress through university, the ways in which *habitus* influences behaviours will be examined. Simultaneously, possible changes to *habitus* influenced by the HE experience will be monitored.

Bourdieu's use of the term *capital* was based on a broadening of the word as it is used in the economic arena (Moore, 2008). In his framework, it referred to the resources or assets possessed by an individual or institution that have value in a particular *field*. *Capital* is a form of power, in that its possession confers advantage on the owner; in this way it facilitates social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1997). Bourdieu considered that *capital* could take both economic and symbolic forms, with the latter category including cultural and social *capital*. Bourdieu considered formal education as an institutionalised form of *capital*. It favours a particular *habitus* and is capable of agency. In the context of higher education, cultural *capital* encapsulates knowledge about and skills relevant to the practices and processes of the institution. This includes, for example, navigation of online resources and academic writing skills. The linguistic and cultural competence which forms the cultural *capital* required by educational institutions is less evident among disadvantaged groups (Dumais, 2002).

Social capital is the benefit one receives as a result of their social networks (Bourdieu, 1977). For university students this may include relationships both within and outside the university. Students may develop beneficial relationships with academics, other staff and fellow students (consider study groups). Likewise, family and friends may provide encouragement and other forms of support (such as home duties) which indirectly assist the student in their studies. However, Bourdieu (1979, 1980 cited in Lesser, 2000, p4) considered relationships with family members as part of cultural rather than social *capital*. Economic, cultural and social forms of *capital* are all relevant to this study. The effect of economic *capital* in terms of HE funding and the impact of students' financial situations on their studies will be considered. Cultural *capital* relates to the attitudes and skills brought to HE by the students, and valued by the institution (including academic staff as its representatives). The use and gain of cultural and social *capital* by students during their university experience will be considered.

Bourdieu's development of the concept of *field* followed his other key concepts of *habitus* and *capital* and is inextricably linked to both. He suggested that individuals operate within social settings, with the structure of a social setting termed the *field* (Bourdieu, 1977). *Fields* may be considered as structured spaces built around certain forms or combinations of *capital*. Bourdieu (1977) argued that *fields* are structured to form what we know and how it is that we come to know it, thereby limiting knowledge production. Through this system, the existing social order (or power relations) in the *field* are maintained (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Agents in a *field* usually act to maintain the existing status of the *field*, while challengers more often employ subversive strategies (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). All acting in a *field* share implicit knowledge that the struggle is worth engaging in, and the *field's* structure requires particular types of struggle (Bourdieu, 1991). In this study the *field* is HE generally, and a teacher education program more specifically. The ways in which non-traditional students (as agents) engage in the *field* will be examined.

## What we know about non-traditional students

Outcomes for non-traditional students are affected by a number of variables, including background,

financial, personal and institutional factors. Non-traditional students are more likely to attend an institution where they perceive they will 'fit in'. Once there, they are more likely than other students to struggle with financial and other commitments. Academic skills may also cause difficulties, partly because they may not have received adequate preparation in their high schools. These challenges may lead to higher rates of attrition for non-traditional students.

### ***Choice of institution and program***

The HE prospects of non-traditional students are not only disadvantaged by their unfamiliarity with the practices of HE institutions; they are also more likely to attend less prestigious institutions. This can be related to entry requirements, limited financial capacity, geographical constraints and/or psychological comfort (Reay, Ball & David, 2005).

Students prefer to attend a university where they perceive there are other people similar to themselves (Reay et al., 2005). In the UK, students from working-class and ethnic-minority backgrounds are more likely to enrol in post-1992 universities: previously known as polytechnics, and designated universities by the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992. Post-1992 universities tend to have less status than elite universities (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003), and often have fewer financial resources, larger classes and lower staff/student ratios (Leathwood & Hayton, 2002). Non-traditional students are also often restricted to attending institutions close to their homes to avoid the costs of living away from home and to maintain familial responsibilities.

Some UK universities have been more successful than others in attracting non-traditional enrolments. Those UK universities most successful in widening participation unfortunately also have the highest rates of student attrition (National Audit Office, 2007). A similar situation exists in the US with marginalised students more likely to attend 'commuter' and community colleges in proximity to the family home. In Australia, the prestigious universities known as the 'Group of Eight' have the lowest enrolments of low SES students (Priest, 2009).

Non-traditional students may also be more likely to enrol in some programs than others, with teacher education being one likely choice due to familiarity with the profession, attainable entry requirements and the perception that it provides stable employment (Snell, 2008). The Australian Government seemingly intends to promote this direction, having signalled that it will act to reduce HE debts for those studying teaching and nursing (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). The students may not be adequately supported in such programs, as education programs have lower staff/student ratios: Education (1:38) compared with the Natural and Physical Sciences (1:14) or Health (1:24) (AARE, 2011).

The mention of characteristics shared by teaching and nursing (both used as vehicles for social mobility and recently attracting increased financial support from the government) raises necessary consideration of gender issues relevant to the proposed study. It was noted earlier that females have historically been under-represented in higher education enrolments, but there are exceptions. Teaching and nursing have been two professions, and therefore university programs, where the usual gender imbalance is reversed. Blackmore (1999) notes the domination of teaching by women dating back to the nineteenth century, where it was one of few acceptable female occupations. Although the percentage of males in both professions has increased in recent decades, the vast majority remain female. For teaching, this is particularly evident in the primary specialisation; therefore this study will present results from a mainly feminine perspective.

### ***Retention and attrition***

Student retention and attrition rates are important from both moral and financial viewpoints. From a moral perspective, if non-traditional students are encouraged to participate in HE, they should then be given the support needed to succeed. This viewpoint was expressed in a speech by Estelle Morris, in her role as UK Secretary of State for Education (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003). Attrition and retention rates in HE are also important to institutions from a financial viewpoint, as they affect funding and therefore resourcing (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). Additionally, attrition and retention

rates contribute to ranking on league tables in countries which currently publish those, such as the UK (for example, University Guide 2012: Education, 2011), thereby affecting institutional status. Australia is following this trend – TEQSA will evaluate performance of HE institutions nationally. This year the MyUniversity website ([www.myuniversity.gov.au](http://www.myuniversity.gov.au)) has been established, where universities can be compared by prospective students and other stakeholders.

Despite the importance of retention rates, institutes enrolling marginalised students may offer little effective support to bridge the cultural and academic gap experienced by these students (Crozier, et al., 2008) and some programs specially designed to help them have low success rates (Burke & Johnston, 2004). Student achievement, retention and attrition in HE can be linked to a range of variables. Factors linked to attrition/retention can be a combination of personal, institutional and financial reasons (National Audit Office, 2007). They include high school achievement, family commitments and paid work (Burke & Johnston, 2004). First generation students have come under particular scrutiny, as they are at greater risk of attrition than subsequent generations (Martinez, Sher, Krull & Wood, 2009; Penrose, 2002), though the reasons are mostly the same as for other students. Attrition rates are highest in the first year of study (Horn & Carrol, 1998), leading to particular research attention. According to an Australian study, achievement levels in first year HE are affected by similar factors as attrition, including parental education and occupation, high school achievement and school attended (Win & Miller, 2005). Tinto (1993) found that academic failure was less likely to cause attrition than was dissatisfaction.

### *Academic skills*

Success in university education requires specific literacy skills including the ability to read long, complex texts, synthesise information and determine inferred meanings (Snell, 2008). Students from disadvantaged backgrounds may struggle with the demands of academic literacy, particularly those required by assessment tasks. These students may have been poorly prepared for the demands of academic literacy by high schools (Burke & Johnston, 2004). In the US, Snell (2008) apportioned blame to declining reading, where only 12 per cent of 19-24 year olds were found to be proficient readers (the level necessary for university) by the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (2006). Snell (2008) claimed that literary reading rates were lowest for those from low SES backgrounds.

Literacy difficulties experienced by those from low SES backgrounds have been examined by Bourdieu, Passeron and Saint Martin (1994), who found such students more likely to find academic language unfamiliar. Reviewing literature from countries including France, Australia and the US on language and learning support needs of low SES students, Priest (2009) suggested that these students experience a disconnect between their home/culture and academic discourses. On a positive note, Penrose (2002) in the US found that although first-generation students perceived their literacy skills differently from other students, their overall college performance was not different. This may be due to them studying more in order to avoid failure, as suggested by Bui (2002).

Literacy support programs are provided in many universities. In the Australian context, Bradley et al. (2008) claimed that low SES students were heavy users of such services, but Zipin and Brennan (2006), discussing pre-service teachers, contradicted this. They stated that such students were unlikely to follow advice to access literacy support programs. These contradictory views are difficult to reconcile, and neither authors offer empirical data to support their claims. Whilst it may seem logical to assume that low SES students would benefit more than their more advantaged peers from support services, there may be barriers to their uptake. For example, non-traditional students may be unaware of support availability. They may find it difficult to avail themselves of services due to other demands on their time such as paid work (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). Finally, they may be disinclined to use these services as they may not wish to be seen as in need of additional help, just as some students with disabilities do not use services provided as this is contrary to the student identity they are constructing (Fuller, et al., 2009).

Researchers in the US studying academic success from an engagement perspective have emphasised the actions of individuals and institutions which can increase student involvement in HE. Bean (1985)

and Tinto (1993) suggest that academic engagement is reflected in student activities such as time management, help-seeking behaviour and interactions with teaching staff. Handelsman, Briggs and Towler (2005) found that college success was related to academic effort, as measured by class attendance, reading completion and studying. They found that student actions related to courses affected their success. Completion was not related to age, gender, race or entry level, but final GPA was. Engagement was shown to be a modifying factor on the influence of entry level.

## Where to next?

Few studies related to non-traditional university students in Australia have been published. In particular, there is a lack of studies which follow students through the entirety of their university enrolment. Qualitative studies providing rich data would be most useful, as it has been noted that there are many factors contributing the successful completion of university degrees, or to the abandonment of such studies. At a time when the Australian government has signalled its commitment to widening participation in higher education, studies will need to examine the experiences of non-traditional students. Of particular interest will be which factors lead to success for these students – another condition for successful attainment of the government's stated targets. Such studies will be relevant for the government, as it seeks to encourage more such students into HE, to universities who seek to attract and retain the students, to the students themselves as they seek to negotiate the somewhat foreign landscape of HE, and to the employers who will ultimately assess the success of widening participation initiatives.

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