

‘I don’t make out how important it is or anything’: Identity and identity formation by part-time higher education students in an English Further Education College

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Policymakers in England have recently, in common with other Anglophone countries, encouraged the provision of higher education within vocational Further Education Colleges. Policy documents have emphasised the potential contribution of college-based students to widening participation: yet the same students contribute in turn to the difficulties of this provision. This article draws on a study of part-time higher education students in a college, a group whose perspectives, identities and voices have been particularly neglected by educational research. Respondents’ narratives of non-participation at eighteen indicated the range of social and geographical constraints shaping their decisions and their aspirations beyond higher education; whilst they drew on vocational and adult traditions to legitimate college participation, their construction of identity was also shaped by the boundaries between further education and the university. These distinctive processes illustrate both possibilities and constraints for future higher education provision within colleges.

Keywords: vocational higher education; HE in FE; class; adult learning; learning in life and work transitions

Introduction

Policymakers in several Anglophone countries have sought in recent years to imitate the short-cycle higher education widely provided in American community colleges, encouraging similar provision in vocational institutions outside the universities (Moodie et al, 2009). Thus, in England, where Further Education Colleges (FECs) are best known for their advanced secondary provision belonging to a ‘Learning and Skills’ sector distinct from universities (Green and Lucas 1999), they also teach nine per cent of UK-domiciled undergraduates (Rashid et al. 2011). This previously neglected provision became central to New Labour government policies aimed at widening higher education participation (Parry and Thompson 2002), particularly following the introduction of Foundation degrees in 2001:

these were frequently taught in colleges but their quality has been managed through partnerships with universities (West 2006). The formation in 2010 of a Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government led to greater emphasis on colleges as teaching-only institutions, within a competitive higher education market (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills [BIS] 2011).

A central feature in discussion of this provision has been the distinctive contribution to higher education made by colleges' attraction of 'marginal' students. It is claimed that colleges attract students from less privileged backgrounds, whom universities have been unable to reach (Pye and Legard 2008). Rashid and Brooks (2009) found that, whilst courses in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) had higher numbers of students from less deprived and high-participation areas, non-franchised college provision had roughly equal proportions for all areas. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) found similar differences among mature Foundation degree students (HEFCE 2010). An earlier report noted some distinctive characteristics of college-based students:

HE students in FECs are more likely to be over 25, more likely to study part-time, and more likely to come from areas with low rates of participation in HE than students in HEIs. (HEFCE 2006, p.9).

However this contribution carries its own burdens. Scott identified difficulties for colleges whose students:

... sometimes struggle to complete their courses, often have higher failure rates and generally receive a reduced rate of return on their higher education in the employment market (Scott 2009, p.410).

Thus, the very students who provide the basis for colleges' claims to contribute to diversity and expansion also contribute to 'unease and ambivalence about offering lower-status qualifications to lower-income students in lower-ranked institutions' (Parry 2009, p.325). Yet

there has been little empirical study of how and why these students participate in such institutions, especially the part-time, adult majority who are increasingly the target of policy.

HEFCE (2006) identified colleges' contribution specifically with their role as local providers of further education: in other words with their location on the boundaries of higher education:

... the particular place that FECs occupy in their communities and the nature of the FE curriculum on which the HE provision is often based (2006, p.9).

This in turn raises questions about the identity of students in colleges as 'authentic' higher education students. For part-time, mature students, who make up the majority of higher-level students in colleges, the question of identity is more complex still. Part-timers constitute a group distinct from the younger, full-time HE students in colleges, who are normally aged around 18 to 21 and have often progressed within colleges from vocational programmes for 16-19-year-olds. Foundation degree data contrasts a majority of young, male full-time Foundation degree participants to the female, older majority of part-time students (HEFCE 2010). Their experience in and orientation to work roles, distinct from the continuing engagement with academic study that might be expected of full-time students, frequently provides the impetus for their studies but may imply further conflicts and competing identifications.

This article draws on an earlier study of part time HE students' construction of identities within a college setting. It examines the competing traditions within colleges that provide the background to HE policy and participation, before explaining the significance of identity for part-time higher education. The methodological approach of the empirical study is then set out. Two key aspects are then examined: the patterned diversity of participants' narratives of their earlier non-participation illustrates how questions of social and

geographical location shaped their choice of institution and constrained the possibilities beyond study. Secondly, their 'adult' and work-related identities are shown to be influenced by the boundaries of higher education constructed by policy and popular discourse.

Colleges as sites of vocational, adult and higher education

English Further Education Colleges (FECs) offer a wide range of post-compulsory education, of which their higher education provision usually constitutes a small part, though this varies across institutions. Their experience of HE provision had long been closely linked to their core purpose as providers of vocational education and training (Cantor and Roberts 1979). Thus, the part-time Higher National Certificate (HNC) was introduced in 1921 as a progression from the advanced secondary Ordinary Certificate (Foden 1951). The full-time Higher National Diploma (HND) followed in 1938 (Jenkinson 1971). Additionally, colleges provided professional programmes which have been generally regarded (and funded) as lying outside mainstream higher education (Clark 2002).

A succession of policies from the 1960s tended to undermine the position of colleges as vocational higher education providers. The 1964-70 Labour government's creation of the polytechnics provided strong centres of locally funded 'advanced further education' (AFE) distinct from the remaining colleges. The Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 confirmed this division by allocating the two types of institution to different sectors (Bathmaker et al. 2008). Meanwhile, academic studies at A-level and access routes into higher education became widespread in colleges from the 1980s, with both routes providing significant second-chance routes into higher education for adults (Green and Lucas 1999). Colleges increasingly came to be regarded as sites of preparation for higher education rather than sites for its provision (Parry 2005).

Yet colleges survived as HE providers and Martin Trow continued to argue that ‘mass’ higher education required the diversity of students to be found in community colleges:

many of whom are older, work part-time, are less well prepared, less highly motivated, with higher rates of attrition (wastage), taught less intensively, and to lower standards of achievement (Trow 1987, p. 269).

For Trow, the UK’s FE colleges retained sufficient distinction from the universities to be able to provide this role, whilst the polytechnics, adapting to higher education norms, had quickly reduced their part-time and short-cycle provision in favour of full-time bachelor degrees (Neave 1976; Pratt and Burgess 1972; Trow 1969).

The Dearing Report (National Council of Inquiry into Higher Education 1997) suggested a distinctive mission for colleges as providers of short-cycle qualifications was. Policymakers were invited to follow the experience of America, where the transition from ‘elite’ to ‘mass’ and ‘universal’ levels of participation (Trow 1974) had been achieved with short-cycle qualifications taught in open-access community colleges (Dougherty 1994; Clark 1960). The short-cycle foundation degree, introduced in 2001, provided a new opportunity for colleges; although, rather than providing the level of differentiation that Trow had suggested, these required university validation and quality assurance (West 2006). Over the following decade the numbers of HE students in colleges failed to grow, or even declined as a proportion of all higher education students (Parry 2009), suggesting difficulties with this blurring of the further/higher divide.

Both the persistence of colleges as centres of higher education and their failure to contribute to its growth on the scale of American community colleges partly reflect their contradictory traditions. These traditions, which vary across the country, provide a complex background to applicants’ perceptions of ‘higher education’ and ‘further education’

institutions, which problematises essentialised notions of authentic ‘student’ identity. White (2009) describes these sectors as administrative categories rather than fundamentally different forms of post-compulsory education. However, the stratification of higher education systems in England and internationally (Meek et al. 1996) contributes to popular notions of higher education hierarchy, placing HE in FE either on the boundary of or ‘outside’ higher education. The study was designed to show how these boundaries are constructed in practice by adults making sense of their contradictory position through notions of identity and identity formation. The following section explains how these constructs have been used in higher and adult education research: later, a discussion of methodology shows how these were operationalised in the study

Problems of Identity

The construct of identity, widely used to make sense of both young people’s and adult participation in higher education, has found some currency within research on HE in FE, as well as more widely. Bathmaker (2007) described an ‘HE in FE’ identity constructed by students from disadvantaged backgrounds, who think of HE as ‘hard’ and seek progression within culturally limited contexts. Morrison (2009) ascribed this to ‘institutional habitus,’ with some schools and colleges reinforcing the dispositions of working-class and ethnic minority applicants, identified in earlier studies of ‘choice’ (Reay, David and Ball 2005, for example) to apply to lower-ranked institutions. Some of Archer and Leathwood’s (2003) respondents:

... subverted notions of ‘changing identities’ by constructing particular fractured spaces within higher education (such as particular institutions, courses, modes of study) as ‘working class’, where ‘people like us’ can participate without damaging or changing valued working-class identities (Archer and Leathwood, 2003, p. 178).

These spaces may well include local colleges: and such participation may be characterised as a weaker engagement with higher education. In this vein, Reay, Crozier and Clayton's (2009) study of working-class students found that:

... where the students have to manage competing demands of paid work and family responsibilities with being a student, the students only partially absorb a sense of themselves as students. (Reay Crozier and Clayton 2009, pp. 8-9).

Such 'competing demands' are common among the part-time, adult students who have historically formed the majority of higher education participants in colleges. However, the relationship between classed identities and studentship is complex. Whilst mature students include higher proportions from intermediate or working-class backgrounds (Egerton and Halsey 1993), these have frequently achieved some upward mobility before resuming study (Tight 1991). At the same time static definitions based on economic activity fail to capture the shifting, unstable basis of social class as a process experienced in relation to inequality and to identity (Lawler 2005; Walkerdine et al. 2001).

The study of adult routes into higher education, for example on access programmes, has frequently approached identity in relational terms. Identities are in many senses defined by difference (Hall 1996), just as Barth's (1969) seminal work on identity moved the focus from the cultural content within ethnic groups to the boundaries, emphasising the role of self-identification and external ascription in determining identity. Thus, Warmington (2002) described a 'celebratory' discourse based on the othering of full-time students. Baxter and Britton (2001) reported the tensions arising when mature, mainly working-class students became more assertive and confident as a result of 'acquiring new forms of cultural capital through education' but then found themselves less able to communicate with others around them. These relationships may reinforce several contradictory identities and be characterised

by power, inequality and hierarchy: as Shah (1994) put it, ‘As subjects we are constructed kaleidoscopically within networks of power’ (1994, p. 268).

Thus, identity can be used to explore how students variously locate themselves and are located on the boundary between further and higher education. This boundary location of HE in FE, which has attracted attention in regard to various difficulties of policy and practice (Bathmaker et al. 2008; Burkhill et al. 2008), may lead students to draw not only on notions of undergraduate identity but also on the various traditions of further education institutions described above. The following section describes the methodology by which this study endeavoured to discover and analyse something of these processes.

Methodology

The study described in the following sections drew on a long tradition of exploring identity through qualitative methods (Strauss 1992). It took place in a Midlands college with around six hundred, mainly part-time, HEFCE-funded students. In contrast to earlier studies of college students at the point of entry to HE, the participants were honours-year students, able to reflect on what it means to be a student in a college, and having established relationships of trust with a researcher who had taught them at various times during their studies. Seven were female and five male; ages ranged from twenty to forty-eight at the time of the initial interviews; ten were white and two of South Asian descent. They were drawn broadly from the business area which constitutes the biggest single group on HE in FE programmes. All had grown up in families and communities shaped by local employment in manufacturing or primary industry; most had also made some progress into technical or lower managerial employment roles, although most lived in households where manual work was also an important source of income.

The study's design flowed from a conceptualisation of identity as a product of social structure yet allowing for agency; and as dynamic rather than as a fixed, essentialist construct. Because identity is relational and constitutes a 'bridge' between agency and structure (Ecclestone 2007), the research design sought to provide opportunities for participants to interpret and negotiate their own experiences; yet also sought to discover patterns that would explain their relationship to broader social phenomena. It was conceived within a critical realist perspective, recognising a reality that exists independently of human consciousness and socially determined knowledge but which can only become known from the accounts of social actors, which in turn have significance in shaping practices (Bhaskar 1997). Thus, data collection began with one-to-one individual semi-structured student interviews, providing structure for comparability whilst allowing respondents to answer on their own terms (May 2001). The interview schedule covered personal expectations, experiences and ascriptions of identity: but also covered the way participants presented themselves to others and the responses of others to their student roles and activities.

These relational aspects of identity also featured in a second phase of data collection, with two focus groups that explored themes emerging from early analysis of the interview data. These drew on Kitzinger and Barbour's (1999) characterisation of focus groups as 'distinguished ... by the explicit use of group interaction to produce data,' (1999, p. 4), as well as meeting Guba and Lincoln's (1989) criterion for judging the adequacy of interpretive research of credibility, by checking findings with those who participated in the research.

The research design also drew on contemporary views that identity is dynamic rather than fixed or essential (Jenkins 2008), so that the interview schedule attempted to capture changes in role or perspective during the respondents' studies, rather than to discover the presence or absence of an essentialised studentship. However, during the interviews,

narratives of identity formation emerged that were constructed around the processes by which students came to participate in higher education. Prior educational experiences had not been included in the interview schedule; yet, from the first interviews, participants began to offer reasons for their non-participation at the ‘normal’ age for higher education. This area was later incorporated into the interview schedule.

Interviews were taped and transcribed in full, to meet Silverman’s (2001) ‘low-inference descriptors.’ Transcripts were analysed according to predetermined codes related to the core themes in the interview schedule and this provided a range of findings covering such areas as institutional choice, relationships within family groups and the workplace, and future aspirations. Additional codes were generated during study of the transcripts, notably because of the data about prior experiences. The initial findings generated by the coding process were summarised at the focus groups, which broadly confirmed a number of key observations put forward.

Although the analysis of data did not include a search for a single ‘axial code’ (Corbin and Strauss 2008), a striking pattern emerged during data analysis, in that the narratives appeared to fall into three different patterns. Codings to confirm these patterns were developed and, although there was some overlap between these categories, they enabled the participants’ accounts to be classified into a pattern of three narrative types. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the narrative types corresponded to patterns in their biographical data. The explanations respondents offered for their ‘failure’ to go to university at eighteen may be seen as ‘compensatory’ narratives: they also provide evidence of the variety of pathways by which adults move into higher-level study. These diverse patterns are set out in the following section.

Narratives of transition

The first of these three narrative types was offered by participants who had grown up in small communities formerly dominated by primary and heavy industry, where university attendance was exceptional. Respondents conforming to these traditions were labelled as offering ‘narratives of conformity.’

Pervez: Out of our entire year... I can't recall a single person that was going, or wanted to go to university. ... It just wasn't even on the cards to be doing that. Everybody went out to work, simple as that.

Bob: Quite a few people went to the college - I think they had a sixth form [i.e. at his school] but they stopped it - but you could see a lot of people going to college because they were too bone [idle] to get a job: they'd probably tell you as well... I can't think of anybody I know who went on to get a qualification.

Despite the decline of traditional industries with well-paid semi-skilled work, participants from these areas still constructed higher education as ‘not for us.’ Whilst the numbers going to university from such communities have increased in recent years, younger participants also reflected these traditions, for example through family:

Paula: My family's not really into education or anything else like that, so when I got my GCSEs it were never a very big deal or anything, even though I thought I did really well. ... But she [her mother] never asks about it, I don't think she sees me as a student. ... She sees that I'm at college and that I'm doing it for work.

The description of study as something ‘for work’ emerged repeatedly in the study but occurred most frequently within this category. This group did not simply oppose ‘student’ to ‘work’ identities: they echoed the ‘risk discourse,’ through which non-participating working-class and ethnic minority respondents have rationalised their choices in earlier studies (Archer and Hutchings 2000, for example), which have drawn on Beck’s (1992) proposition

that 'risk' is a central characteristic of modern life, implicated in social inequality. For those with structurally riskier positions, higher education offers no guarantee that the social and economic gains would compensate for the loss of time, money, relationships and identity entailed.

Bob: One of my older cousins, he'd just done a degree, science and something on those lines, he ended up in a factory. He couldn't get a job, so he'd gone through all that and couldn't get a job... he'd not got any experience.

Jayne: Some of them got into debt at university and a lot of them aren't even using those degrees. They're doing jobs completely unrelated... And I know definitely two of my friends that have got degrees, and good degrees, they're not earning any more money than I am, we're sort of on an even keel really.

For this group, studying part-time at college represented a reduction in the economic risks associated with full-time study. In working-class communities where even now there is little knowledge of different institutions, the choice to study part-time in colleges also reduced the risk of tensions with others in families, work and local communities that might be generated by other higher education choices.

However, a second group of narratives put forward entirely different reasons for studying at college. These participants described higher education as natural for 'people like us': their own non-participation was exceptional, based on individual circumstances which prevented them following 'normal' routes. For Brian, an eye condition required time off college; others offered more dramatic reasons:

Jas: From my junior years, the four formative years of my life, I was beaten by a particular teacher every single day at school. So by the end of the last year in junior school I had disengaged with the educational process... I left school without even learning to read.

Lauren: My dad died. He died at New Year's Day, in the year I took my A-levels. And I had three months out of college at the time, so then I had to take the decision: we couldn't afford for me to go to university.

Whilst they described their own non- participation as exceptional, these respondents were also unable to draw on the resources available to students from more middle-class backgrounds with family traditions of university education (Reay, David and Ball 2005). Instead they made reference to traditions of manufacturing industry that validated education and training as appropriate routes. Lauren's account of her father hinted at a recognisable career path in that field:

Lauren: He was at technical college, or something, different education system at the time, he went and did an apprenticeship, he was in the drawing office [in a major local engineering firm]. He ended up as transport manager at [a second major engineering company in the town]. He was probably more my motivation.

All members of this group had grown up in engineering towns, with fathers employed in that industry. This theme was explored in the first focus group and participants agreed on its importance, referring to friends who had progressed from apprenticeships into professional roles. Thus, for this group, colleges' roles as vocational providers appeared to be significant.

A third pattern, described as 'narratives of transgression,' described the experience of failure to integrate in schools focused on academic achievement. Two of the three respondents in this group had moved from local, community-based secondary schools. These were highly individuated accounts, describing the difficulties of fitting into particular learning communities; yet they are in some ways the most conscious of the structural issues that shaped all three types of narrative. Jo, the only participant whose parents were professionals, grew up in a former mining village and recalled a past in which girls 'were not

expected' to go on to higher levels of study. Emma described 'working-class values' of hard work and honesty as the basis of her actions.

These narratives represent complex identity work in the face of competing demands and identifications. Their differing patterns indicate something of the range of prior experience that may lead adults to higher-level study in colleges. These were not simply the accounts of marginalised adults unable to take on authentic student identities.

Differences in the future aspirations of these participants appeared related to these narrative types. The geographical location of their studies, inevitably intertwined with social locations, had significance for their 'imagined futures' (Ball et al., 2000). The three participants offering 'narratives of transgression' predicted limited prospects beyond their studies, even though all of this group had been academically successful in their studies. Jo compared her opportunities, constrained by the need to be close to elderly parents, to her sons' studies in Manchester, which had led to better-rewarded roles. Emma described a realisation that any promotion as a result of her studies would be difficult to take up because of her responsibilities:

Emma: It was initially about getting that qualification, probably getting promotion. ... Looking after a child with some learning difficulties, you know you've got to put your priorities right, really. So I'm particularly limited geographically.

These choices partly reflect the constraints of adults with responsibilities. But those offering narratives of conformity were also constrained in their choices. Even for younger participants, the idea of moving away was ruled out in advance:

Paula: Looking back now, I probably wouldn't have left where I live: I probably wasn't adventurous enough to do that... Where a lot of my friends live in different places now, because of where they went to university and everything. I

look back now and think I wish I'd done something like that, because I still live in the same village, same town, probably just for that reason. ... Choosing what you want to do is the hardest thing... where I work now I'm safe and... I take an easy route. It's like university all over again.

Thus, whilst older respondents, such as those offering 'narratives of transgression,' offered practical reasons for remaining in the area after completing their studies, this participant explained her choices in terms of 'risk.'

Those offering 'narratives of exception,' who claimed to have been prevented by accidental circumstances from moving away to university, showed more enthusiasm for broader horizons. These students talked of moving away from the area, or indeed out of the country, and of developing business ventures. The contrast between these approaches was perhaps best summed up by the conflict that Lauren anticipated (accurately, as it turned out) might develop with a husband from one of the heavy-industrial communities where others in the study had grown up:

Lauren: [He] left school at 16, they talked him out of carrying on with his education. What do you want with education, go and work in a factory... He wanted to stay on and go to college. And they talked him out of it, you don't need to go to college, just go and get a job. Typical mining sort of family background. and I don't mean that in any sort of derogatory sense... I think it's just different: different backgrounds, different views, different dreams. [For them], anything outside the town is miles away.

The various ways in which this relatively small number of participants drew on their past indicates the diversity of individuals and groups who come to study higher education programmes part-time in college institutions. However, the study also revealed significant features in terms of their own construction of identity and others' ascriptions: these are dealt with next.

Statements of identity

For the participants in the study, identity was constructed not in terms of the ‘completeness’ or otherwise of an integrated student identity but in terms of identified differences, of age, mode and location of study: by describing themselves variously as ‘adult’ ‘mature’ or ‘part-time’ students. Sometimes their accounts asserted these differences by identifying themselves as working adults and citing others’ approval. At other times, they reported more hesitantly the interactions through which they encountered a popular discourse of higher education hierarchy.

Like adults in earlier accounts of returning to study, they frequently asserted that their studies represented something superior to those of full-time students. Such accounts have variously emphasised two dominant themes, one describing adult study as a ‘struggle,’ (Leathwood and O’Connell 2003) whilst the other has presented affirmative, even ‘celebratory’ accounts of their differences from young, full-time students (Warmington 2002). Both of these discourses involve ‘othering’ younger students and this was a popular theme in the focus groups. They also significantly validated their identities by citing the approval of others, notably work colleagues, who were:

Bob: ...surprised that you're doing some kind of degree part-time on top of your job. And they respond pretty positively to it, I think a lot of people who have done degrees in the past know that it's kind of tough. If you're doing it part-time as well, they respond quite positively.

Brian: ‘There's a certain aura about people... who are working and at college doing it.’

Participants distanced themselves most confidently from traditional norms of studentship in their frequent references to their part-time role, to adulthood and work. Significantly, most

participants - all but one of those attending the focus groups - had already studied vocational courses or A-levels at college: having previously found the identity of college student acceptable, they re-enacted this on a higher level, minimising differences with others in the workplace and elsewhere. Two participants who had experienced professional training at university constructed colleges as a suitable environment:

Jas: ...more accessible to people like me... because I'm able to learn with... people who are a similar age to me... they sometimes can have dialogue about their experiences, so that you can have an involving, learning act.

In addition to notions of adult study, other comments reflect the smaller scale of the college experience and the humanistic traditions associated with participative and adult learning.

Bob: You have that stereotypical [idea of university], being in a big kind of room, having a lecture, and really not being able to put in that much. So you have more actual input, which is good.

However, these expressions of approval were expressed with some reservation to friends and colleagues with other HE experiences:

Paula: I usually say 'college,' so I don't think people who talk about it really realise or know what level I'm sort of at, 'cause some people say, 'What course are you on?' I just go, 'Oh, just business at college,' so I probably play it down a bit... I don't think people would actually take the college as higher education. So I'd probably say, I'm doing business at college. Or, if I said I was doing a degree, they'd go 'What, at college?' and they'd go, 'No, she's not.' Maybe.

Phil: A college student, I say... Other people might interpret it that because I'm not studying at the university it devalues it. So I take that step out of it and say, I'm just studying at college.

Clare: If anyone was to ask me what you're doing, I'd say I'm doing higher education. If they say, what are you doing, I'd say I'm doing a degree. People don't see me as a student at all, they see me as a working person.

These ambivalent statements appeared to reflect a need to defer to, or avoid, discourses which would locate colleges 'outside' higher education. Webb (1997) has explained how the 'traditional' full-time, 18-21-year old university student remains the norm against which all other categories of student are measured, to be pathologised as 'non-traditional' and unequal. Thus, the same respondents who chose college as a location providing 'legitimate' forms of identity within their own families and local communities may encounter problems of 'authentic' identity in other settings. In the interviews, participants routinely understated the responsible positions they held in the workplace, which might reflect similar hesitancy about their identities as students and graduates. One participant described this in terms of personal interactions with friends who had attended universities:

Paula: They don't really ask me a lot of questions about it, or what I'm studying, whereas they're always talking about when they were at university, you know, things they had to hand in and work they had to do. But they'll never ask me. So they obviously don't think that's what I'm doing. Probably I'm not describing it right. But they'll talk about dissertations and stuff they've had to do, did you have to do this, did you have to do that, it's a bit of a clique. You know, they'll talk about it together but they'll never ask me. ... Even on a Wednesday, you get invited out, I keep saying no, I'm at college on a Wednesday, no one even remembers. Sometimes if I have got some work to do, I think they don't really take it that seriously. So I don't make out how important it is or anything like that. So I don't think I'm viewed as a student whatsoever.

Rather than failing to take on board student identity and commitments, this account captures a reluctance to present oneself as a higher education student because of others' perceptions. Identity here is shaped by personal ascription related to the various 'hierarchies' of higher

education providers, reinforced by ‘league tables’ and legitimated by the policy separation of sectors.

Conclusion

The narratives described here are not offered as a comprehensive depiction of the processes by which adults experience part-time study in higher education in colleges. But they serve to capture issues for a group whose voice has been unheard in discussions of this field. If the scale of the study was limited, the range of perspectives among its participants indicates the diversity of those undertaking such studies. Their location on the boundaries of higher education is determined not only by policy but by complex traditions and social forces. This suggests that Further Education Colleges make a contribution that is distinctive within higher education. Its continuation is not bound to take place at the expense of universities but may draw in:

important social groups reluctant to access higher education even in the most inclusive post-1992 university (Scott 2009, p. 417).

The study described here has at least indicated something of what these groups may be and suggested dimensions along which the identity of students in this area may be measured. It also suggests that the way these students engage with higher education is neither automatic nor to be taken for granted. The existence of these distinctive groups does not prove the viability of colleges as mass providers of higher education on a significant national scale. Future patterns of policy and practice emerging now within FE institutions can only benefit from a clearer understanding of the nature of HE participation in colleges.

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