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# 'Becoming' and 'Being' a student: understanding the educational journey of social work students on work-based learning degrees in universities

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**ABSTRACT**

Based on a PhD study, this article explores the experiences of students living in Cumbria and North East England who were undertaking one of two work-based learning social work degrees, one at a local face-to-face university the other at a national distance learning university. Whilst there is a long history of universities in England providing work-based learning routes in social work education, 2010 witnessed a revitalisation with the introduction of graduate schemes followed by apprenticeships in 2018, all situated within local authorities. The article focuses in particular on the significance of identity for work-based learners during their educational journey of '*becoming*' and '*being*' a student. By drawing on identity theory, the article analyses how identity is an important concept in understanding the challenges and opportunities for this group of students on their educational journeys into and through higher education. This includes learning for social work education providers about understanding the particular experiences of work-based learners and how to deliver social work education effectively for this group of students. The findings are relevant beyond England particularly as universities move to a more socially distanced mode of delivery as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

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Work-based learning; social work education; student identity; structural symbolic interactionism

## Introduction

Work-based learning in social work education has undergone a revitalisation in the last decade with routes to qualification now being delivered within local authorities adding to the developing mixed economy of qualifying programmes. These routes are in contrast to the traditional university-based routes in England, the majority of which are full-time undergraduate and postgraduate (PG) degrees, with some universities also offering work-based learning routes for staff seconded by social work organisations. The total number of work-based learning routes and students undertaking them, however, is not known. This article, based on a small-scale PhD study, involved 20 work-based learners in North East (NE) England and Cumbria and explores their experiences of *becoming* and *being* a student with the aim of identifying some of the challenges and opportunities they faced.

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In scoping the work-based learning provision in the geographical region of study, participants were recruited from the only two undergraduate work-based learning routes available to students in the NE, one campus based and one distance learning degree.

Structural symbolic interactionism is the theoretical framework underpinning this article. This theory recognises the significance of identity and role in 'identity change processes' (Stryker, 2008, p. 21) which are central to understanding the meanings the work-based learners attributed to their experiences of higher education (HE). This theoretical approach is based on the premise that society is comprised of groups and institutions producing patterned interactions and role relationships that have a capacity to reproduce creating durable social systems and structures. Stryker (2008) conceptualises roles as a set of expectations and norms attached to particular positions and performed through interactions with others. Identities, tied to these roles, are the internalisation of these role expectations and form the basis of how people understand who they are (Stryker, 2008). In a modern society people have multifaceted lives with multiple roles and shifting and complex identities (Stryker, 2008). Roles as well as identities were highlighted by all the participants in their narratives of 'becoming' and 'being' a student.

## Work-based learning in higher education and social work education in England

Social work education has undergone considerable development in the last twenty years. Moves to professionalise social work at the turn of the century included the title of 'Social Worker' becoming protected (under the Great Britain Care Standards Act, 2000) meaning that the title could only to be used by appropriately qualified professionals. A further development was the introduction of the social work degree in 2003. Prior to this qualification the Diploma in Social Work (DipSW) was the recognised award from 1991 superseding the Certificate of Qualification in Social Work which had been in place since 1975. All of these awards were validated and delivered by higher education institutions (HEIs) with some including work-based learning routes.

Work-based learning in higher education has developed as a result of HE policy diversifying the scope and aims of universities over the last four decades in order to meet the need for mass education (Boud & Solomon, 2001; Leitch, 2006; Merrill, 2012). This 'repositioning of the academy' as Boud and Solomon (2001) describe it has meant that HEIs have now become skills providers thereby contributing to the economy and increasing the competitiveness of the UK globally (Thunborg et al., 2013). This shift for HEIs required the fostering of relationships between employers and HEIs to navigate '*the cultural bridge between learning and work*' (Nixon et al., 2006, p. 5).

A number of definitions have been offered to describe the encompassing term of 'work-based learning'. Eraut suggests that this includes learning for work, at work and through work (2004), a definition that captures the diversity of provision across the higher education sector. Lester and Costley suggest that any definition of work-based learning '*logically refers to all and any learning that is situated in the workplace or arises directly out of workplace concerns*' (2010, p. 562). In the Higher Education Academy's report by Nixon et al. (2006) examining the nature and extent of work-based learning in

higher education, a broad description of work-based learning was used describing it as '*learning which accredits or extends the workplace skills and abilities of employees*' (2006, p. 11).

The typology of work-based learning created by Nixon et al. (2006) considers the pedagogical approaches to work-based learning arguing that the challenge is in recognising and valuing the difference between the two domains of learning, those of the academy and the workplace. Nixon et al. (2006) suggest that these two domains of learning can be better aligned to create a shared domain that shapes a work-based learner's development both academically and in terms of competence. The two work-based learning social work programmes in this study took different formats although all the student enrolled on these work-based learning programmes were seconded by their employers. The campus-based programme required only part-time attendance at university in the first year, followed by full time attendance in years two and three with one placement, usually in their final year, completed in their seconding organization. The distance learning programme required part-time attendance at module workshops throughout the three levels of study whilst students remained in work, with one of the placements also being completed with their employer.

As was discussed by Hamilton (2019), the long tradition of work-based learning in social work education has provided social work agencies with a means by which they can develop unqualified staff to qualified social workers, with what have sometimes been described as '*grow your own schemes*' (Dunworth, 2007; Harris et al., 2008). Work-based learning routes have been recognised as meeting a range of stakeholder needs with employers having newly qualified staff being able to 'hit the ground running' and HEIs benefitting from stronger relationships with employers. For work-based learners, their experiential understanding can enhance their own learning as well as that of other students, with these routes to qualified practice giving security of tenure and maintenance of income whilst undertaking a degree in addition to support with fees. Some participants in Hamilton's (2019) study stated that work-based learning routes were their only route into HE and/or undertaking a social work degree.

Government scrutiny of social work education, in particular, over the last 20 years, has been fuelled by concerns regarding the standards of social work programmes and the suitability of their recruits and resulted in the publication of a number of reports since 2008 (Berry-Lound et al., 2016; Croisdale-Appleby, 2014; GSCC, 2008; GSCC, 2009; Harris et al., 2008; Narey, 2014; Maxwell et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2013; Social Work Task Force, 2009; Social Work Reform Board, 2010). These reports have resulted in growing interest in reforming the governance of social work education through Teaching Partnerships introduced by the Government in 2015 to formalise strategic collaborations between local authorities and HEIs with the aim of improving the design and delivery of social work programmes. To date, 23 have been formed in England (Interface Associates UK Limited, 2020). In addition to this, the government have also facilitated the development of a range of work-based qualifying routes (Smith et al., 2013) including fast track PG schemes and apprenticeships. The fast track PG schemes (ranging between 12 and 24 months) were rolled out by some local authorities in England beginning in 2010 with Step-Up to Social Work and followed by Frontline in 2014, both for children and families social workers, and finally Think Ahead introduced in 2016 which was a longer two year programme for mental health social

workers. These PG schemes were aimed at academically high performing graduates (with a minimum 2:1 qualification) motioning a shift from widening participation initiatives in social work education. The graduate apprenticeship introduced in 2018 provides yet another avenue for qualifying as a social worker via a work-based learning route in participating local authorities creating a wide choice of routes to qualified social work practice.

Whilst it has been argued that the evolving relationship between HEIs and local authority partners increases the likelihood of engaging people in the process of learning rather than alienating them (Flint & Jones, 2011), there is some dissent about the type of learning opportunities available through WBL routes. Preston-Shoot (2000) suggests that social work education risks losing its criticality placing it in danger of being reduced to no more than preparation for practice, an argument echoed by Fenton and Smith who state that social work often involves '*issues where there are no formulaic or easy answers*' (2019, p. 9). There is, as Nixon et al. (2006) argue, an important difference between the two domains of learning, those of the academy and the workplace for work-based learners. Whilst work-based learners gain '*operational competence*' (Watts & Waraker, 2008, p. 108) from their workplace, this article provides insight into how the academy provides these students with particular opportunities and challenges to develop as learners in readiness for social work practice.

## Method

### *Research design*

This article is based on a small-scale PhD study of students undertaking work-based learning undergraduate social work degrees at two universities, one regional face-to-face and one national distance learning for students residing in the NE of England and Cumbria. An invitation to participate in the study was sent to all 115 students and graduates in their first year of post qualifying practice who undertook either programme within a particular period of time, with 20 agreeing to participate. Of the participants there were 15 women and 5 men with an age range of 31–50 years and with between 5 and 27 years of experience in social care. There were 12 students from the distance learning university and 8 from the face-to-face university, spanning the experiences of students from the first year of study through to graduates in their first year of practice. Six participants already had first degrees and had decided to undertake a second degree as a means of gaining a social work qualification. Ethical approval for the study was granted by both universities and all names have been anonymised to preserve confidentiality.

The regional scope of the study may be considered to limit the generalisability of the findings however, the aim was not to produce a study that was necessarily generalisable. Henn et al. (2009) suggest that generalisability is not a standard against which the credibility of qualitative research should be judged. Instead through the use of narrative inquiry and methods of data collection including focus groups and interviews, the aim was to provide '*thick descriptions*' (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 4) to reveal '*nuance and ambiguity*' (Bathmaker, 2010, p. 2) thereby reflecting the complex nature of human experience and create rich insights into the experiences of a number of individuals

(Bathmaker & Hartnett, 2010). Furthermore, this research approach provided work-based learners the opportunity to share their lived and told experiences of becoming and being a student that can be made more visible to stakeholders in social work education.

### Data collection and analysis

Data were collected initially via three focus groups involving 17 participants, followed by 20 individual first interviews, and 15 second interviews 6–12 months later. The dynamic nature of the focus groups highlighted areas of consensus and gave participants an opportunity to reflect on their own position in relation to issues raised. The same questions were asked in the focus groups and first interviews allowing participants to develop their answers further following the focus groups. Repeating the questions also ensured some consistency with participants who did not participate in the focus groups. The author undertook a thematic analysis of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This was an iterative process and following the first interview initial themes were identified from the data including the significance of identity. This became the focus of the questions in the second interview including 'Did anything or anyone inhibit/enhance your identity as a student social worker, if so what or whom?'. Squire et al. (2013) argue that the social nature of interpretation cannot be neutralised by techniques of analysis so careful application of the analytical model and reflection by the researcher was necessary to exclude bias. As this was a PhD study it was not possible to employ inter-rate reliability. The final four themes were identified focusing on the participants' experiences of 'becoming' and 'being' a student:

- *Becoming a student: a transition into higher education for work-based learners.*
- *Placements: the challenge for work-based learners.*
- *The academic learning environment: why it is significant.*
- *Learning Communities: what they offer work-based learners.*

## Results

### Theme one: 'Becoming a student: a transition into higher education for work-based learners'

Becoming a student involved a process of transitions for work-based learners involving a negotiation and renegotiation of identities with 'learner' and 'student' identities being central to this. In making a distinction between a 'learner identity' and a 'student identity', I have drawn on Thunborg et al's definitions (2013) from their Swedish study of student identity and motivation. The term 'learner' is used to reflect the individual's social and previous educational experience and the term 'student' being more context specific reflecting the participant's position within higher education.

All of the participants in this study were mature students and as such reflected one of the categories for 'non-traditional' students (Merrill, 2012; O'Shea, 2014). Of the 14 participants without first degrees, the impact of prior social and negative educational experience shaped not only their decisions to undertake the degree but also continued to influence perceptions of themselves as learners as well as students during their higher

education journeys. Diane's identity as a 'non-achiever' on leaving school contributed to her initial anxieties in relation to the role of a student, in particular, the undertaking academic assessments saying she thought '*maybes I'm a fool to myself, maybes I can't do this, maybes, I've gone that bit too far*'. She went on to describe the significance of early positive feedback in relation to her confidence as a learner:

> When I come to do my first paper I thought 'oh my Lord what have I let myself in for' and then when I submitted it and I got a good mark for it I thought 'actually I can do this, it's just writing in a total different way' but I can do it.

Positive feedback made Diane feel that higher education and a professional qualification was a more realistic goal and suggests that success in this first academic task was an important '*turning point*', as O'Shea described in his Australian study of identity formation for students within universities (2014, p. 140).

In contrast, Valerie's narrative of educational experience, like the other participants with degrees, signalled that she had sufficient cultural capital required for higher education and had begun the degree without concern regarding her academic capabilities, '*I thought, well academically I'll be able to pull this off*'. This suggests that Valerie began the social work degree with an existing '*viable learner identity*' (McSweeney, 2012, p. 366), validated by academic achievements.

For some participants becoming a student whilst still occupying a position at work was accompanied by feelings of vulnerability and a fear of failure and exposure, factors that can contribute to a sense of what has been referred to as '*imposter phenomenon*' (Chapman). Petra worked in a multi-agency setting with qualified professionals and had undertaken the degree in order to gain professional credibility amongst her colleagues by being able to lay claim to professional credentials:

> It was so public, it was so out there everyone in the team knew about it. . . . I thought, if I fail or anything like that a lot of people are going to know about it.

Undertaking a course meant for Petra success or failure was very visible and made her susceptible to scrutiny by her colleagues with a lot at stake for her professional reputation. Having been a confident practitioner but lacking formal social work qualifications, becoming a student meant putting herself in a position where she felt there was a risk of losing rather than gaining credibility.

Developing a student identity is shaped by context and for some work-based learners this was also reliant upon the types of opportunities presented by universities to learn. Morag suggested that having an authentic learning experience contributed to her sense of being and becoming a student by being introduced to areas of knowledge relevant to her role that she was unfamiliar with:

> There's a lot of sort of value-based stuff that I've got there in my little toolkit already . . . Yeah, didn't stretch me but then there was some really fantastic stuff where I did feel like a student 'cos I didn't have a clue and I was like, 'wow, this is fantastic'.

Whilst Morag's student identity was enhanced when she felt she was learning new things she felt that teaching that covered familiar ground due to her extensive practice experience offered her nothing new and thereby lacked authenticity as a learning experience.

### *Theme two: 'Placements: the challenge for work-based learners'*

For work-based learners familiar with the context of practice, being on placement was particularly challenging and caused confusion over roles and associated identities. Work-based learners often undertake placements in their current place of work, a common practice on social work degrees in England. Brian stated that being on placement in his current place of work impeded his ability to be a student and he contrasted this with his experience of a placement in a different practice context. When on placement in his workplace he said

> You're writing about stuff you do every day and you don't feel like a student there really . . . Now this year . . . with a placement and a **total** different feel . . . and this felt like being a proper student.

By maintaining a role within his original place of work, the boundaries between the role of worker and student were blurred. Being on placement in a different context of practice gave him something new, creating what he perceived to be an authentic learning experience thereby emphasising his role as a student.

The familiarity of the practice context and how this impacted on the role and associated identity of participants created new challenges as well as opportunities for participants. 'Knowing' or 'not knowing' about the practice within particular contexts was a key to a number of participants' experiences and their ability to redefine their identity. Whilst for some participants 'not knowing' created anxieties, for others this was a positive state. Lois said:

> It gives you permission to be somebody else . . . When I'm at work people expect me to know everything and I don't know everything all the time . . . I went on placement and I was allowed to be somebody that didn't know anything and start again . . . and I learned so much.

Being a student moved Lois from being encumbered with expectation in a position of 'expert', to '*somebody that didn't know anything*' a liberating experience that she felt facilitated learning and enabled her to redefine herself.

Returning to her place of work for her placement, where she had existing relationships with colleagues, Morag found that there was a lack of recognition of her 'student' role which created problems for her in fulfilling the university's expectations of her. Morag identified the continued expectations colleagues had of her as a worker suggesting that her 'worker' identity was considered salient by others:

> It was really difficult to get (colleagues) to recognise that I was just a student . . . and I had to actually sit down with my supervisor and remind him that I was a student.

Even as a seconded student, instead of Morag's employers and manager affirming her student status, it was left to her to negotiate space in order to establish her role as a student within the organisation. For Morag, there was a lack of coherence between these dual roles which appeared to be conflated by colleagues on the basis of organisational and managerial need, with an expectation that work would be prioritised.

Like Morag, Hannah's experience of being a student was dependent upon context and, when away from her place of work, being a student was a preserved and protected position. In the extract below Hannah identifies what being a student meant to her, contrasting this with being a practitioner within an organisation:

> The only time I actually really felt like an actual student was when I was away from work and on placement . . . you had to have I think an hour and a half of weekly supervision . . . and discuss your values and all those sorts of things which I didn't do any of that when I was in my normal workplace you just got on with the job.

For Hannah *being* a student was reinforced through interaction with her supervisor and the allocation of specific resources (time, supervision, a focus on values) which she saw as shaping expectations and also as privileging the student role but this was only evident whilst she was on placement and not forthcoming in her role as a student within her normal place of work.

Placements offer an important learning environment for social work students but require clear expectations from others about roles and resourcing these with interactions either reinforcing or undermining student identities.

### *Theme three: 'The academic learning environment: why it is significant'*

The educational environmental factors identified as being significant by participants included being in classroom settings, accessing a campus library, being campus based and being in a shared space with other students. For the two programmes, one a face-to-face and one a predominantly virtual environment with some face-to-face dimensions, student experiences were at times different.

Keith talked about the significance of place at a time in his life that was characterised by challenging transitions. He had become a parent for the first time just as the course began so was managing other transitions whilst also becoming a student. Keith highlighted the contrast between being a student with only occasional attendance and being a full-time student and campus based:

> I wanted . . . a much more real concrete feeling to being a student and being immersed in it . . . the difference was quite significant when (campus based) . . . the academic side, the library and being in here (university) spending time with other students.

This signals the significance of the environment and the impact this had on *becoming* and *being* a student for Keith reinforced by his physical attendance, relationships with other students and access to higher education resources such as a library. This also gave him an opportunity to relinquish the encumbering competing demands of work when he was juggling the roles of student and worker.

For participants who undertook the national distance learning university degree, their experience of university meant attendance at taught face-to-face sessions approximately once per month over the course of their studies as well as engaging in digital learning contexts. When they did attend face-to-face sessions, the venues for these were local centres, some being a building belonging to the university and therefore having a university environment, and some being general community resources. For Donny on this programme *being* a student was also linked to environment but he, like other

participants on the distance learning programme, often foregrounded the significance of the virtual rather than the physical context. Donny signals blurring of boundaries between domestic and educational domains:

> You're not actually going to an establishment or building to go and learn, you're doing it at home on your settee or in your study at home . . . in some ways I didn't feel like a student in that respect because I wasn't going to University.

The blurring of boundaries between domestic and educational domains failed to provide the clear distinction in contexts that Donny appeared to require which impacted upon the development of a student identity which was echoed by other participants on this programme. This blended learning mode of delivery lends itself to more '*asynchronous learning*' (Martin et al., 2014, p. 204) which might be experienced by some students as isolating.

### *Theme four: 'Learning communities: what they offer work-based learners'*

'*Learning communities*' (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 29), and the opportunities for establishing relationships with other students, were a significant factor for many of the participants at both the national distance learning university and the local face-to-face university in shaping their experiences of higher education. Work-based learners are already part of particular '*communities of practice*' (Wenger, 2010) in their places of work and join new ones when they enter higher education. Wenger (2010) suggests that people engage with a multiplicity of communities and need to identify with each community, negotiating their place within it.

Work-based learners in their first year at the local face-to-face university were taught separately as a group only joining the full cohort of social work students in the second year. Consequently, participants in this study felt they had already formed a distinct social group identity prior to merging with the larger group '*a lot of us had the same experience . . . so we just bonded really tightly as a group*' (Morag). Students on the national distance learning programme had online forums that they belonged to and were encouraged to participate in as well as attending monthly tutorials/workshops although students' attendance was only compulsory for some of the modules. The national distance learning degree was also modular, facilitating individual pathways which meant that students were not part of a fixed group and were not necessarily with the same students on each module.

The presence of stable relationships was a significant factor in the experiences of participants in this study who talked about their relationships with their peers in terms of the importance of being part of identifiable groups or learning communities and the support these offered. These groups also offered support in managing the transition into higher education for work-based learners as well as managing the academic requirements of the programme. Morag placed emphasis on group cohesion and how the relationships with other work-based learners were interdependent.

> Well I personally relied on the group for everything . . . we'd sit together in lectures, if when we went to the seminars I would gravitate again to any other work-based learners that were in that seminar group. Lunch, we'd all lunch together so . . . we moved as a group as much as

> possible and that made things a lot easier because we had gelled as a group . . . So I think it helped me feel like a student . . . I think I would have found it difficult if I didn't have a little work-based identity.

This social identity as a work-based learner was particularly important to participants at this time of transition, binding individuals together to create a homogenous group. However, the importance of support from their peers was not as prevalent amongst participants from the national distance learning university with only six of the 12 identifying this as a feature of their educational journey. However, peer support was still important to this group and for some was seen as being integral to the student experience, reinforcing their student identity. Laura found that digital forums on the programme offered opportunities to engage in a learning environment that was less threatening than traditional face-to-face mediums:

> I liked the forums because you could sort of hide as well behind the laptop and test the water and nothing was too stupid . . . Maybe in a lecture I wouldn't have put my hand up and said, 'I don't understand'.

Digital forums enabled her to develop confidence whilst minimising risks and avoiding feeling exposed and vulnerable. Once she had gained in confidence Laura became a more visible member of peer groups and online 'learning communities' both programme led and '*bootlegged*' (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 28) which were closed groups and student led. Membership of these learning communities reinforced a social identity for Laura with the educational journey becoming a shared experience which was mutually understood and supportive, '*the only person who knows what it's like to be doing the . . . social work degree is somebody else putting in the same amount of work as you*'.

However, other participants on the national distance learning programme enjoyed the more solitary journey that could be steered on this programme. Hannah, who already had a degree, identified why she opted out of a support network comparing it to the first time she was at university. She found that being part of a support network was sometimes overwhelming when other students needed support, '*I don't need this I'm stressed about my own work I don't want to be thinking about yours as well*'. Hannah's experience suggests that there are also disadvantages to learning communities due to the demands placed on her by other participants. As a student with a first degree, she appears less dependent on a student group to manage the challenges of higher education and as a work-based learner on the national distance learning degree she was able to tailor the experience of higher education this time round to meet her individual needs.

Learning communities were a feature of the participants' experiences of higher education, with belonging to student groups being identified by most as important in their educational journey. Whilst learning communities were evident in both programmes, the programme design impacted upon the opportunities for the formation of these and how students engaged with them.

## Discussion

Undertaking the social work degree for all participants meant adapting to a new context and accommodating the new role of 'student' which, as Watts and Waraker argue, requires '*some measure of identity change*' (2008, p. 107). A key finding in this study

was the way in which work-based learners positioned themselves in relation to higher education and other traditional students, as they perceived them, both prior to undertaking the degree and during their educational journey. For participants in this study without a first degree, university was considered remote and to some alien. For those with first degrees, their academic confidence had already been validated. However, for some participants entering higher education meant challenging existing learner identities that had been shaped by prior educational experiences. These experiences had often served to reinforce their concept of higher education as an elitist educational provision.

The data also indicated that there was a dissonance between the public narrative of a 'traditional student' (Harris et al., 2008; Merrill, 2012) and participants' own experiences of higher education. The public narrative of 'a traditional student' presents students as having a particular set of characteristics that differed significantly from work-based learners' experiences of higher education. Their student journey was characterised by time poverty and managing a set of competing familial as well as occupational responsibilities (Hamilton, 2019) which created a range of challenges for them *being* a student. This range of contrasting characteristics to those of a 'traditional' student highlights the lack of 'shared meaning' associated with this role. All of the participants were over 31 when the research began and were categorised as mature work-based learners. Age was raised as an issue by participants in relation to *being* a student and how this contributed to their feelings of being atypical students. This also contributed to the notion of universities as alien environments with experiences of '*imposter syndrome*' (Chapman,) shared by 12 of the 14 participants without first degrees, although for none of the participants with prior degrees. Identity theory offers a way of understanding how social structures are important sources of identity:

> 'the content of and the meanings derived from experiences are shaped by where the persons are located in the social structures of class, ethnicity, gender, age' (Stryker, 2008, p. 24)

Markers of 'non-traditional' students such as age have shaped participants' experiences of being students and the meanings they associate with these. Terms reflecting their student status that reinforced their practice experience, such as 'work-based learner', were often preferred by participants as they gave recognition to '*operational competence*' (Watts & Waraker, 2008, p. 108), a valued attribute which participants found was undervalued by HEIs. This lack of recognition of their experiential understanding impacted on the provision of learning opportunities that they found lacked authenticity which weakened the process of forming new identities and their commitment to these.

Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1991) also provides insights into identity and how higher education requires a process of adaptation. Bourdieu developed the concept of 'cultural capital' referring to the cultural, material and symbolic goods that are valued in society such as language, skills, educational attainment that contribute to structural inequalities. O'Donaghue, in a study based on mothers' experiences of education in the Republic of Ireland, borrowed from Bourdieu's work arguing that, '*we do not come neutrally to the education system'* (2012, p. 191) echoing the notion of structures as defined in identity theory. This approach is helpful in understanding why some participants made reference to their social and educational backgrounds to explain the challenges they experienced in becoming and being a student. Past social and educational experiences were identified by some participants as a barrier to undertaking the social

work degree impacting upon when they entered higher education as well as on the transition into higher education. There were notable differences between two groups of participants (those with and those without previous degrees) in their identification of social and educational backgrounds as significant factors in becoming a student. All of the participants who did identify social and educational backgrounds as significant did not have prior degrees. In contrast, none of the participants with prior degrees mentioned this as significant in their decision to undertake the degree nor in their experiences of higher education. This could suggest that students with degrees had acquired cultural capital aligned to higher education positioning them within social structures in ways that did not present barriers to their participation in the same way as students without prior degrees instead it was a case of re-establishing their student identities.

Prior educational experiences also appeared to be an indicator of risk for some participants. For participants who did not have experiences of a traditional higher education trajectory returning to education for many meant '*returning to a site with past associations of marginalisation and truncated progress*' (Warmington, 2002, p. 584). Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital (1991) is also helpful in understanding the contrast between participant's childhood educational expectations and aspirations with those of their current position in higher education. Previous negative experiences of education and lack of attainment continued to be significant and shape experiences including the formation of identities as learners. For participants in this study a feeling of alienation in higher education and experiences of '*imposter phenomenon*' (Chapman). For some, this was accompanied by a heightened sense of vulnerability and fear of exposure amongst colleagues as 'not being good enough'. Whilst striving to gain credibility as a 'qualified' practitioner, participants risked losing credibility by failure to achieve.

Lack of academic confidence was also expressed by a broader group of participants including eight of the ten participants with either prior degrees or recent educational experience who expressed anxieties about their ability to manage the academic requirements of the social work degree and/or failure to live up to their expectations based on prior achievements. Acquiring the academic skills required for higher education marked a transition for some work-based learners in this study. Furthermore, success in academic assessments appeared to signal a transition or '*turning point*' (O'Shea, 2014, p. 140).

Data in this study suggests that as participants developed a student identity, and they became integrated into the academic environment, feelings of difference to other students that had previously informed identity were less pervasive. This was affected in part by their integration into the university as a learning community. This was both evident in the meanings participants attached to their relationships with other students, which tended to be stronger when these were other work-based learners, and in the meanings attributed to learning environments. This reflects what Stryker describes as 'affective commitment', the emotional attachment that people have towards others in their network (Stryker, 2008). Stryker and Burke (2000) found that students entering higher education sought relationships that confirmed existing identities. For participants, 'learning communities comprised of other work-based learners often reinforced existing and valued 'worker' identities making these identities within higher education more salient. Whilst support of other work-based learners was really valued by most of the students on the face-to-face programme, for online learners support from other learners did not

feature as strongly in their narratives of experience. The data, however, suggested a more mixed experience for them with some liking the opportunity to be more independent whilst others found the asynchronous learning to be more isolating.

Entering higher education required a repositioning of identities in a number of ways with work-based learners straddling a number of domains adding to the complexity of their experience. The conflict between identities of a 'student' and a 'worker' was evident within participants' workplaces in their substantive posts as workers and also when on placements within their organisation as students. Interactions with colleagues foregrounded participants' identities as 'workers' with the marginalisation of their student status meaning that some participants were often expected to return to their 'worker' role whilst on placement. This sometimes involved the prioritisation of workload over student requirements resulting in what participants perceived as unreasonable expectations in terms of workload and leading to resentment by participants. When interactions with colleagues that meant their 'student' and/or 'learner' identities were recognized, this was highly valued by participants. This was particularly so when recognition of their 'student' identity was accompanied by the resourcing of it including a reduced 'student caseload', opportunities for reflection and study time which participants felt reinforced their student identity and transition from 'a worker' to 'a student' in higher education. Identity theory proposes that identities are formed when people are assigned positions as social objects by others and then internalize that designation (Stryker, 2008). When others such as colleagues failed to assign a new position of 'student' to participants this impeded the development of a student identity despite participants' efforts to renegotiate these positions.

## Conclusion

This study contributes to the understanding of the experiences of work-based learners in higher education that can encourage HEIs to consider the broader range of student needs. As Gale and Parker argue in their review of HEIs in Australia, USA and UK, university provision needs to respond to work-based learners with a '*curriculum that reflects and affirms marginalised student histories and subjectivities*' (2014, p. 738). Higher education policy and university mission statements continue to commit to widening participation. Some work-based learning programmes, including the two in this study, offer a real opportunity for mature students and 'second chance' learners to undertake higher education and to broaden the pool from which the social work profession draws its workforce thereby reflecting local populations. However, programmes continue to circumscribe participation and engagement with institutional frameworks that reflect and perpetuate structural inequalities (O'Shea, 2014). If 'non-traditional' learners, and/or students who are bound by other commitments, are to be given realistic opportunities to participate in higher education and professional qualifying programmes with opportunities to access this at various points in their lives, work-based learning could move away from prescribed student trajectories.

This article highlights the need for universities to consider how they support work-based learners to access higher education, navigate transitions and negotiate/renegotiate multiple identities across a variety of domains. Whilst some of these experiences may also be shared by other students on traditional routes, such as mature students, work-based

learners drew what they perceived to be an important distinction between themselves and other students on traditional routes. Further research is now needed to compare the experiences and learning outcomes of the diverse range of students on work-based learning programmes, including those provided by both HEIs and local authorities. This would also include considering the design of programmes along the spectrum of distance learning to face-to-face provision to facilitate access and participation. By engaging with this re-evaluation of provision, HEIs could consider the challenges and opportunities for each approach, ensuring that provision is informed by what it means to students from diverse backgrounds. With the emphasis in higher education being on '*work-readiness*' (Daniels & Brooker, 2014, p. 65) this article provides a closer scrutiny of what it means to be a student and the importance of 'learner identities' for work-based learners.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

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