

# **RADICAL STATISTICS ESSAY COMPETITION 2014**

## **SECOND PLACE: STUDENT COMPETITION**

### **Yearning to Earn or Yearning To Learn?**

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#### **Background and context**

In the United Kingdom, the last two decades have witnessed an increase in students entering higher education from socioeconomic and educational backgrounds not traditionally associated with the field. These students continue to face structural inequalities that impact negatively on their experience of HE and they lack the cultural and social capital required to fully engage at this level. This Masters study explored expectations, aspirations and experiences mobilising a theoretical framework provided by Bourdieu (1977) to analyse primary data collected in relation to non-traditional students' views of higher education at a post-1992 institution 'Western'.

The political commitment to widening access to higher education has expanded the student body and focused an attempt to remove barriers that have historically maintained the university as an institution populated by the socioeconomically and educationally privileged. However, restrictions on access remain, and higher education continues

to show levels of exclusion and stratification (Gallagher, 2005). Greater consideration of these barriers is required to support socioeconomic groups underrepresented in higher education (Ward and Steele, 1999) and to address inequalities that maintain an advantage for those students already privileged by their educational capital (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003; Lynch and O'Riordan, 1998).

In Scotland, the commitment to widening access has led to a dramatic rise in the number of students accessing higher education over the last two decades (Gallagher, 2005). Issues remain regarding barriers to access that are still experienced by students and potential students from less privileged socioeconomic and educational backgrounds (Andrews and O'Mahony, 2013; Porter, 2013). This institution receives 98.7% of its entrants from state schools and colleges (well above the national average of 86.7%). In 2012, 67.2% of students were enrolled full time, with 32.8% studying on a part time basis (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2013). Twenty-three percent of Western's students come from geographical areas defined by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) as deprived (this can be compared with a figure of 4.1% at the University of St. Andrews) (Scottish Government Statistics, 2010). Students who come from households where neither of their parents, or guardians are university graduates account for 74.7% of the student population (Clark, 2011). The Scottish Government's recent Bill intends to widen access to higher education and targets all under represented socioeconomic groups targeting individuals from the most deprived areas (Scottish Parliament, 2012), but fair access to education can be influenced by any number of factors such as socioeconomic deprivation or the behavioural norms, or habitus, of different groups.

Bourdieu's (1979) description of habitus (where agents are predisposed to certain actions, thoughts and behaviours instilled by the family and early socialisation) offers a framework for examining the actions and choices made by individuals and how they find their place in society. Individual actions and choices are not always conscious, they have to varying extents been socially embedded as being the appropriate thing to do, think or feel in given situations. These actions and choices are influenced both by established practices, institutional procedures, societal influences and common experiences. Social hierarchy is built upon capital where power and position is determined through financial assets. Capital is described as resources that can be acquired, accrued and transferred. Other forms of capital determine status by measuring the amount of cultural, social and symbolic resources an individual possesses. These forms of capital are regarded by Bourdieu as sources of status and domination that help legitimise social inequalities (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Bourdieu and Passeron identified the

education system as one institution used to legitimise the unequal forms of capital by validating the capital of the middle classes.

## **Participants and sample**

Western's student population consists of 17,020 students: 13,060 fulltime and 3960 part time. It has an approximately 30% male /70% female ratio (HESA, 2011). From this student population (see Appendix 1 for breakdown), 814 students self-selected and responded but only 594 students fully completed the questionnaire (73%) and these are the responses used for analysis. Those who completed the survey included 203 males (34.2%) and 385 females (64.8%) (6 preferred not to state their sex). Respondents were mainly from white ethnic backgrounds (90.3%). Students responded from all schools. There were 136 (22.9%) responses from Social Sciences and also 136 from Health, Nursing and Midwifery. The School of Education had least response (4.4%). Participants stated ages ranging from under 18 to 64 years. Full time students accounted for 79.6% of the sample with part-time students making up 20.4%. This was an overall response rate of 3.49% of the total number of students (2.77% of the full-time population and 3.06% of part-time population).

## **Methodology and Findings**

Data were collected and analysed using standard non-parametric test of association (for quantitative data) and thematic analysis (for qualitative data). All students in all years on all campuses and studying at all levels from undergraduate to postgraduate (approx. 17,000 students, including face to face, online, lifelong and distance learners) were invited to participate via email.

Understandably, undergraduates in first year reported that they felt anxious about coming to university (68.7%). Students in the age bracket 35-44 (56.8%) agreed, but this group also reported that they found university as they expected it to be (69.1%). This is an example of some of the conflicting evidence given in response to quantitative questions and qualitative comments supplied by respondents. The reasons stated for anxiety were those which could make any student question their habitus in a new field (Bourdieu, 1979; Clark, 2011; Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009, 2010; Toman, 2010). These anxious feelings however, are often ameliorated by the relationship with lecturers (Thomas, 2002) who are described as being relaxed, approachable, friendly and supportive. In general comments (309 responses), students mentioned

the support and interest from academic staff that they did not expect and had previously not known was available which helped them to adjust (24.1%). Opportunities exist here for the institution to provide more in depth information to prospective students with regard to the amount and level of academic and non-academic support that will be made available.

Over 95% of students reported adjusting well to the academic demands and over 75% to the social aspect of university but commented on a mismatch between expectations of workload and content. They are developing skillsets and dispositions, useful in both personal and employment settings, by increasing their social, educational and economic capitals (Andrews, 2012; Clark, 2011). They can still socialise with non-university friends and find it easy to discuss their university life with friends and family, corroborating previous findings in relation to non-traditional students in non-traditional universities (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009, 2010; Thomas, 2002). Almost 80% of students have invested in material capital in the form of a computer to which they have sole access; this might be seen as a necessary investment (given the socioeconomic demographics) to enhance their skills and future chances. They also reported cultivating other capital through cultural activities and discussions even when household members were not readily participating, exhibiting a desire to expand their overall knowledge (Noble and Davies, 2009).

**Many students** at this institution had researched their options before deciding to study here; they believed they had prepared themselves and were aware of the challenges which would face them. In reality, they were unprepared or less well prepared than traditional students would be. The lack of family and community role models with experience of HE is a distinct disadvantage. It is unrealistic to expect that students with no experience of the system can be adequately prepared to participate in it and to extract full advantage from it.

## **Expectations**

Bourdieu describes how culture is to be found in habit and in individual or group practices, the way in which groups behave and how they are formed (Grenfell, 2004). An individual's identity is created in accordance with their particular personal, financial, sociocultural and psychosocial experiences and provides a base for beginning to understand the concept of habitus and reproduction (Bourdieu, 1979). The theory of educational reproduction can be simplified to suggest those individuals who have a degree of cultural capital and prior educational attainment will succeed and those who don't will increase their vocational and

applied skills as an alternative. For the latter it may be difficult to expect or foresee any kind of route towards social mobility. However, social class and the possession of appropriate capital are relational and can be altered through interactions and tempered by relationships, past and present, which influence future expectations (Atkinson, 2012b).

Postgraduates' expectations of university are higher since they have been involved in the system for longer (playing the game and learning the rules). Undergraduates mainly report that university is as they expected it to be (63.1%) and interestingly, students in qualifying exit years have a higher percentage reporting finding it not to be as they expected. Perhaps they are questioning their academic abilities or have not truly appreciated what is required of them. Students coming near to the end of this part of the game may not be sure if they have successfully acquired the appropriate amount capital. They now face entering another field which may be alien to them which could cause a feeling of hysteresis or insecurity about the future.

Nevertheless, students attending Western arrive with what appears to be realistic expectations of the university field. The quantitative findings were corroborated and given substance with regard to the prior expectations students had of university. Students did not describe entering an alien habitus; instead, in comments (309) they felt they were entering familiar territory and knew what to expect (26.2%). A few however, did not really know what to expect (4.5%) and some described the knowing, yet not really knowing, what to expect. At the same time, 58.1% overall, reported feeling anxious about coming to university. Unsurprisingly, most were in the under18-24 age group (64.9%) however the next highest group (56.8%) were in the 35-44 range (who reported earlier that they found university as they expected it to be). This could be seen as an underlying or unacknowledged sign of hysteresis where there is a possible change of habitus and some insecurity about the future.

As expected, the number of those feeling anxious drop as students continue through the years. This might signal that students are increasingly becoming aware of 'the rules of the game' and are happy to play it (*illutio*), assuming a new habitus or consolidating their existing habitus and accumulating the necessary capital to proceed. For some the prospect of entering a new field was exciting and for others it was a return to a familiar field where they had tried before. Some undergraduate students commented on the newness of attending university when describing their anxieties but postgraduate responses were more concerned with the level of study. Others were still worried about not knowing what to expect or anxious they might find the course

difficult. These are similar concerns likely to be found in any other institutions amongst a minority of students (Ipsos Mori, 2010; NUS/HSBC, 2009). The quantitative findings do describe an association between age and being anxious coming to university with over half in the 35-44 age groups feeling this way.

Students showed that they had a good awareness of the amount of counselling, financial and other non-academic support available to them although 25% were unaware of academic support. Students generally agreed that their expectations matched their experiences well with regard to academic demand (77.6%), their workload (69.3%) and course content (66.1%) and described that they had prepared well for university but found being in the situation was different. The students' existing habitus provided their expectations but since they had no knowledge or experience of the new field they could not be adequately prepared. These new experiences could now be integrated and could develop an evolving habitus.

## **Aspirations**

Over half (57.8%) believed students aspired to do their best with only a few (12.8%) believing they aimed to excel. These figures confirm the findings of previous studies by Sodexho (2010, 2012) that students from Scotland are less likely to undertake independent study and are less concerned than others about their final qualifications grades. Almost three quarters of Scottish students also report their primary reason for studying at university is their motivation and desire for knowledge in a subject area that interest them confirming Sodexho findings (2010, 2012). Nearly half (44.6%) of the respondents in this study intend to embark on further study and have aspirations of undertaking a postgraduate qualification however, 50% have not decided yet. Perhaps the latter do not have the confidence (or capital) to see far enough ahead or they already assume that they will not succeed because of their existing habitus (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977).

Undergraduate year 1 (64%) reported the highest aspiration to do the best they can and to excel in their studies, by year four this dropped to 54.1%. Students in their first year may lack capital and be overly optimistic about their abilities and underestimate the academic skills they might need but postgraduate students are better used to playing the university game and may realise the stakes are higher and adjust their aspirations accordingly.

Almost half of first year undergraduates intend to undertake postgraduate study however, almost as many are not sure. This

presents an opportunity for the university to embrace students early in their academic journey and give them support to participate and progress. As expected, postgraduate students are already engaged and as they get to year three half of them say they are intending to undertake further study. This could mean that students are getting 'a feel for the game' and can recognise the value of their educational capital. The accumulation and possession of educational capital can be later transformed into economic capital and most students believe that they will be doing the job that they most want to do in ten years' time.

Those in the age group 45 and over are less optimistic they will be in the job they most want to do in ten years' time (72.3%). All other age groups have high aspirations in this area, the highest being in the 25-34 age groups (92.9%) and more females (85.8%) than males (78.2%) believe they will be in the job they most want to be doing in ten years' time. Employment aspirations are influenced by both habitus and actual or perceived possession of capital. A university education can be useful in a variety of ways; for some it may simply be an enhancement or extension of their present position and for others it can be an opportunity to move into a new field (Paterson and Ianelli, 2007).

In qualitative comments (479), students described their goal as simple and it was to be employed in a field they were familiar with; only 4.5% were unsure of their goal. Other goals are explicit and tailored toward employment in particular areas. Some are prepared to take their accumulated capital and branch out further into the field of academia with goals of teaching and lecturing (7.5%); they are refining their game and moving to the next level. A few will use their experience and capital accumulation to enter another new field where they can experiment with their new skills in business (3.5%). Other goals described are more general and are common amongst students in any university i.e. non-specific work, travel, volunteer or really don't know what to do yet (22.3%). Students are also aware that they must have a personal commitment to help them succeed highlighting how lecturers (and family) have a part to play in their future success.

In the current economic and financial situation which faces them, students have discovered that the way to get ahead is to utilise their own capital and to call upon others who can help when they need assistance (through networking). Making connections and associating with others in this manner allows people to take advantage of the capital that others possess and helps increase resources and transmission of knowledge between them. This is an example of Bourdieu's *illusio* (where students have bought into the game) and *collusio* (where they encourage others to join in). They are increasing their social and

intellectual capital through bridging (across networks) and bonding (forming new relationships).

The majority of students (74.8%) disagreed about wanting to do the minimum amount of work that they have to, but agreed that they need feedback to motivate them and find feedback helpful. However, when given opportunity to reflect on what might help them succeed, feedback was rarely mentioned.

Using education to get a good job is one way of increasing economic capital and often non-traditional students face obstacles in their pursuit of higher education and employment. Even with qualifications, they may not be afforded the same recognition and opportunity as others (Bowl, 2003; Reay, 1998; Reay, David and Ball, 2005). Students agree that studying at Western will increase their job prospects (88.1%). They also agree that their university studies are helping them develop employment skills which are necessary to enter today's labour market at a higher level (70.4%). New skills are being developed which can later be transferred into employment attributes. These new skills and attributes can be added to the existing habitus and can be used to either transform or consolidate the students' social position through increased capital.

## **Experiences**

Personal development can influence and, or, change the original habitus and sometimes these transitions can be difficult to accommodate (Bourdieu, 1979). Reay (2001) and Toman (2010) describe how the building of new (social) networks and being part of a group with mutual interests and support will increase the possibility of students becoming more engaged and therefore less likely to dropout. These factors help students feel they belong and will help to ameliorate any feelings of discomfort and resulting hysteresis. Students at Western report that they believe they have adjusted well or very well to the academic demands of their course (87.6%) and to the social aspects of life at university and their actual experiences matched their expectations.

Bourdieu describes how habitus is personal and structural. Reay (2001) and Thomas (2002) explored the concept of an 'institutional habitus' but this is a contested concept which questions the institution's position in the field (Atkinson, 2012a, 2013). Atkinson does not deny that institutions (structures) are comprised of individuals (agents) and he argues it is the habitus of the individuals which pervades. This is clearly evidenced in comments provided throughout the study where



students show appreciation for support from staff who help with their transition. As they negotiate their journey through the Western environment, students continue to report that they find it pretty much as they expected it to be and most are satisfied with their experience. Satisfaction was high with 76.4% undergraduates and 80.4% postgraduates reporting they were satisfied or very satisfied with their overall experience.

## **Conclusion**

Obtaining labour market skills could be one way of reproducing habitus but, optimistically, it could also mean that students are aware that they need to build capital to exchange at a higher rate. Many aspire to further study and accessing necessary information, skills and interventions early, could help improve their current trajectories and life situations. There is no (obvious) outward sign of Bourdieu's (1988) hysteresis between the original and evolving habitus here but a real discrepancy exists in understanding the system. Although they have entered an alien field, students can increase both social and educational capitals for the future.

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## **Appendix 1 Demographics**

<b>Sex of respondents</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Male	203	34.2
Female	385	64.8
Prefer not to say	6	1.0
Total	594	100.0

<b>Age of respondents</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Under 18	14	2.4
18-24	282	47.5
25-34	128	21.5
35-44	82	13.8
45-54	66	11.1
55-64	18	3.0
65 or above	1	.2
Prefer not to answer	3	.5
Total	594	100.0

<b>School of study</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Business	99	16.7
Computing	60	10.1
Creative & Cultural Industries	42	7.1
Education	26	4.4
Engineering	33	5.6
Health, Nursing & Midwifery	136	22.9
Science	62	10.4
Social Sciences	136	22.9
Total	594	100.0

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