Swimming in the deep-end: an e-mentoring approach to help mature students' transition to higher education

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Abstract

This paper reports findings from research into the benefits of e-mentoring for mature students (21 years old and above) preparing for university study through taking Access courses. The research was carried out at Kingston University in the UK in the context of current policies of widening participation in higher education (HE). It was aimed at adding to student satisfaction and retention in university, particularly for those from families without a background in HE. Previous studies suggested that good pre-entry preparation and support improves students' chances of success in HE. This paper describes how an e-mentoring scheme, called eAccess, was developed to prepare students taking Access courses for learning at undergraduate level. The research showed that eAccess supported students in three ways: learning about university life, helping with the HE application process and developing confidence and effective learning strategies. The paper identifies the potential of e-mentoring schemes to enable students to prepare better for HE through the development of social capital which enables them to tap into 'hot knowledge' – an un-codified and un-institutionalised form of knowledge available amongst mature undergraduates at university.

Keywords

Mature students in higher education, e-mentoring, social capital, 'institutional habitus', 'hot knowledge', social capital.

Context and introduction to the paper

Studies of undergraduate students' satisfaction, academic performance and retention in higher education (HE) identify the critical importance of the first year for shaping their attitudes and approaches to learning. A substantial portion of students (up to 20 per cent) encounter difficulties adjusting to the academic and social demands of university life, managing the workload and becoming independent learners (Lowe & Cook, 2003). Poor transition into university life and inability to handle the academic and social demands of HE result in underachievement and drop-out (*ibid.*, p. 53). One in six students entering HE in 2001 was likely to withdraw from their courses (House of Commons, 2001).

The HE experience of learners from non-traditional backgrounds raises further concerns (House of Commons, 2001): students from poorer backgrounds are more likely to drop out regardless of the entry qualifications; mature students are likely to drop out more readily than younger people; and universities recruiting students from poorer backgrounds have the lowest completion figures. Haque (2001) identified differential achievements of HE students based on their social class background. A general profile of a student at risk of non-completion and withdrawal can be summed up as: being older than 21 years of age; having family responsibilities; living at home or non-university accommodation; and working part-time (Benette, 2003; Farwell, 2002; National Audit Office [NAO], 2002; Walker, 2000).

Addressing the issues of student dissatisfaction and non-completion should be a key priority for universities wishing to expand access to HE. As Walker, Matthew and Black (2004) stressed, attracting students from wider socio-economic backgrounds is insufficient if their completion rates are not improved.

This paper focuses on mature students on Access to Higher Education courses in England as potential HE participants, and on their HE experience and preparation prior to enrolling in HE courses. It begins with a literature review of issues related to students' satisfaction with, and retention in, HE which identifies how these issues are particularly relevant for mature students and those from families without a HE background. Most interventions to support students' preparation for HE are based on face-to-face methods aimed at developing learning and study skills. This paper reports a study exploring the potential for providing pre-entry support for mature students based on learning technology to help them prepare for undergraduate studies. The programme concept, methodology and outcomes are discussed.

Factors contributing to satisfaction and retention in Higher Education

Research on factors contributing positively to students' HE experience and the likelihood of completion of their courses identifies two main clusters of variables: first, the interaction between student background factors and the institutional environment and cultures; and second, students' level of preparedness for HE. Spady (1970) showed that students' previous educational experience and values and the quality of their interaction with the HE environment influence attrition rates. Tinto (1975; 1993), following a similar line of inquiry, found that a student's decision to withdraw is a long process, initiated by an incompatibility between a student's background and institutional factors, resulting in poor integration of the student into the institution, both academically and socially. Background variables such as a student's previous educational qualifications, family HE history and academic ability influence a student's personal values and attitudes, academic intentions and commitment to learning (Tinto, 1993).

As the House of Commons (2001) observed, students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds are particularly at risk of non-completion and withdrawal. The Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE) also considers students over the age of 21 as 'medium' and 'high risk' categories in allocating widening participation funds to universities (HEFCE, 2004). Unlike their traditional counter-parts, the majority of students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds are less likely to have parents who attended university (Cooke *et al.*, 2004). This lack of family HE background can be a crucial disadvantage. A study of 1395 students by Cooke *et al.*, (2004) showed that students from disadvantaged backgrounds experience more difficulties at university, such as having to work part-time due to financial concerns and having less time for

non-academic, social activities.

A second main cluster of factors contributing to a successful HE experience and completion is students' level of preparedness for HE, and their awareness of HE and institutional cultures (Boyle, Carter & Clark, 2002; NAO, 2002; Ozga & Sukhanandan, 1998). Lowe and Cook (2003) identified undergraduates' misconceptions and levels of unawareness of academic and social aspects of their studies including: modular options available in the first year, assessment procedures, placements, hours of classes and private study required, and the size of lecture and other teaching sessions. One third of the students surveyed expected the teaching at university to be similar to that at school. Byrne and Flood (2005) also found that many students begin HE with low expectations and underestimate the commitment required of them, resulting in poor time management and under performance. Comparable findings by Cook and Leckey (1999) identified lack of study skills and awareness of cultural aspects of HE such as private study, note-taking, time management, interactions in large groups, team and project work, and IT competence.

Lack of preparedness is common among, and in some cases serious, for non-traditional students. For many students from families without a HE background university can be an alienating place; the academic aspect can be daunting if they do not know what is expected of them. Yorke and Thomas (2003) noted that non-traditional students lack the 'cultural capital' that would help them to know what is expected of them. Cultural capital, according to Bourdieu (1986), is an asset accumulated by families with access to knowledge, language and culture; unequal access to cultural capital by different social groups determines the different achievements of children from various social backgrounds (Archer, 2003a; Robins, 1993).

Laing, Chao and Robinson (2005) identified a student's ability and preparedness to participate in the teaching and learning processes as key factors determining their level of success. Lowe and Cook (2003) called for HE institutions to provide appropriate academic, attitudinal and social preparation for their new students with non-traditional backgrounds. These students require support in developing the necessary academic study skills (Thomas, 2002a; Yorke & Thomas, 2003).

A student's ability to complete an undergraduate course depends on his or her academic ability and on personal circumstances (Farwell, 2002). Mature and non-traditional entrants are at risk from family influences and class-oriented conceptions of HE as a middle class territory in which they expect to feel alienated. They face significant barriers as students from non-traditional backgrounds (Archer, 2003b). Their lack of awareness of and preparedness for HE can lead to an unsatisfactory HE experience and attrition. The current study explored the potential for providing pre-entry support for mature students to help them prepare for undergraduate studies. The programme concept, methodology and outcomes will be discussed following a brief review of similar schemes.

Initiatives in preparing 'non-traditional' students for Higher Education

Walker *et al.,* (2004) reported an evaluation of a 'Top Up' programme developed by a Scottish university which provided a four-month mini-HE experience for students who were completing their secondary level education (which ends a year earlier than in England). The programme was comprised of both in-school and on-campus sessions that gave the potential HE applicants a taste of first year undergraduate studies. Knox (2005) described a similar programme for Further Education students entitled 'Next steps at university', provided by a Scottish university. This was a credit-rated, generic module within a Higher National Certificate programme, conducted face to face to help students to familiarise with teaching and assessments at university. Evaluations of these and other similar programmes (e.g., Kemmer, 2004; Tait & Godfrey, 2001) showed positive results: participants had an easier transition from school to HE than their colleagues and valued the programme's timeliness and usefulness for HE preparation; they were less likely to consider leaving university than non-participants. Beneficial effects on students' progression, retention and performance have also been identified.

The limitation of these programmes are that they are short-term based, and are mostly offered after participants have completed an HE entry course. As identified from studies on students transition outlined above, preparation for HE is a complex process and new approaches need to be explored. The present paper is based on a technology-based approach that explored the potential of using peer support for HE preparation over a one-year period.

Methodology

eAccesswas developed by Kingston University in the UK to provide pre-HE entry support for students without HE backgrounds who were on Access courses. The University's other HE preparatory initiatives were 'shadow student programmes' and 'student ambassador schemes' which provide an opportunity for current undergraduate students to share their experience and expertise with potential applicants, on matters such as choosing universities and courses, and preparing for all aspects of university life. These initiatives, and most of the programmes reviewed above are, however, either short-term or offered after potential students complete their HE qualifying courses. With the importance of pre-HE entry preparation in mind the staff developing the eAccess programme hypothesised that long-term HE preparatory support would be more beneficial for the non-traditional applicants without a family HE background than short term initiatives.

eAccess provided for interaction via Blackboard (the university's e-learning platform) between about 320 such applicants, drawn from Access programmes in Nursing and Social Work, Humanities, and Information Technology at seven FE colleges, and 16 mature undergraduates from the university, who acted as e-mentors. In addition to supporting communication among students and their e-mentors, the Access staff used Blackboard to deliver selected core Access learning modules and to facilitate tutorial support.

The key aim was to explore how much eAccess helped mature students to: (a) learn more about HE and its culture; (b) negotiate the HE application procedure; and (c) become confident and effective learners.

Questionnaires and interviews explored student and staff experience of using Blackboard and having e-mentors, and asked them how helpful eAccess was. Research evidence was collected via a background questionnaire to 277 students at the start; an evaluation questionnaire completed by 86 students at the end of their Access courses; personal interviews with 14 students; group interviews with 35 students who progressed to HE (in four groups) and personal interviews with ten tutors on participating Access courses. Students' participation in the eAccess programme and data collection activities were voluntary. Threaded discussions on Blackboard and the research team's field-notes based on observations and visits to colleges, also contributed to the analysis.

Overall, 37 of the 86 students who completed the final evaluation questionnaire indicated GCSE or equivalent as their highest educational attainment; 17 had A Levels; and 12 claimed a vocational or professional qualification (such as secretarial). The remainder had neither school-leaving nor vocational qualifications. Based on the background questionnaire, 83 per cent of the 269 students had said they were the first in their families planning to go into HE. Hence, for the majority of these students, taking an Access course was an important step towards HE.

Findings

Perceptions and awareness of university

Students' intentions of taking Access courses varied. The interviews revealed a considerable proportion of participating students, when deciding to enrol in an Access course, had not considered university as their destination:

> *I just thought I'd come back to college and see where that leads me to. When I first started the course I didn't actually think I'd go on to university, I just didn't think I'd get that far. (Frankie)*

Another student mentioned that she enrolled in the Access course in order to comply with her UK residency requirements:

> *I didn't realise the whole process, UCAS and all the rest of it, ... all I knew was that [the Access course] satisfied my requirements for [a student] visa. (Maureen)*

Comments from students show that students may enrol in an Access course not knowing much about HE. They require additional support in preparation for learning at university.

Interviews also highlighted that during the 10-month Access course, students were worried about the uncertainty of their future at university. One student reflected:

> *We had conversations where people were like 'I don't know if I can be bothered now'; 'I don't know if I'm going to go on'; 'I don't know if I'm going to achieve getting into university'; 'If this [Access study] is only two days a week how am I going to cope with five days a week [at university]?'. (Daisy)*

Focus groups with students revealed students who 'didn't even think they'd finish the Access course let alone apply for university places.' For some, these uncertainties continued even after they had been offered a place at a university. One student who was about to start her undergraduate course said:

> *I'm just getting very nervous now... I just want to know what's going to be expected, what your average day will be, you know, all of that... (Cathy)*

Similar views were also recorded in Blackboard discussion forums:

> *I was wondering if uni was a really dramatic change from this? To be honest I'm really nervous about going, and have heard loads of horror stories from the nurses at work. Is it really stressful? (College B student posting)*

The aim of eAccess was to provide additional support for students with similar concerns, to help them prepare for HE. The research data showed how e-mentoring helped them to learn more about university and about the HE application process, and to develop effectiveness and confidence as learners.

Learning about university life and studies

Students said that the online conversations they had experienced with mature undergraduates helped them to understand more about life at the university:

> *... it was helpful - talking about the first year of university... Reading the messages and asking questions... about what life at university's like... . (Claude)*

> *I actually asked what their first year in the university was like, and... they said that in the foundation year, everyone's together, and then it is not until the second year that you get split up into certain branches. (Frankie)*

For Frankie 'the university was such a big thing' and the online interactions with the mentor had provided the reassurance required. Others reported that they had had more focussed discussions with mentors, such as about doing assignments at university:

> *It did actually [put my mind at rest], because when I heard that the first assignment was only a thousand words I thought that "We've done that, we've done like 3,000 words", so... it didn't feel so bad. (Frankie)*

Choice of university courses was another focus of online discussions. A student described how one of her peers benefited from e-mentors' advice:

> *Fred in my class, asked about combined degrees... [such as] "Do you think it's better to do a single honours or a combined", etc., and [the mentor's] answers actually were quite helpful... (Maureen)*

Students felt that their e-mentors, being current undergraduates, were well-placed to advise on course-related issues and issues concerning mature students:

> *I'm a mature student too, and would like to know what it's like beinga wee bit olderat university!!! Do mature students tend to stick together?!!! (College D student posting)*

Considering time-management demands at university, students were concerned about how they might juggle their studies, personal life and work. As one student pointed out, students were keen to hear from e-mentors who had similar experiences:

> *We asked them "How do you manage to study five days a week and then work"? Some said "you can work but because it is so demanding you find it a bit difficult [to work], because you need to do your research, do your assignments and at the same time you have your family side, so it will become a bit difficult". (Delia)*

Reflecting on online interactions with the e-mentors, Delia pointed out that she learned the importance of being well organised and being able to 'set priorities' to be successful in the university.

Future work placements (as part of the courses) were another aspect of university studies that featured in online discussions. Students had posted questions related to duration and locations of placements, which were going to have an impact on their family and work commitment in the future. Students valued receiving this information prior to starting their university courses:

> *I didn't know that you could pick a first and second choice of what hospitals you'd like to work in. I thought the university would just pick a place for you... It was nice to hear that you could get a choice. I can... pick hospitals that are local to where I live. (Frankie)*

Interviews also revealed that undergraduate e-mentors tried to instil, amongst their would-be counterparts, a sense of belonging to their future profession.

> *They [the e-mentors] would say: "Nursing is lovely, the staff are very good, placements are very good, just wearing the uniform is great, it makes you feel like a nurse."... It is just those kinds of things... (Gene)*

Answers to the evaluation questionnaire corroborate these findings. A significant number of students reported that they had used Blackboard for learning about university. Of 47 who responded, 35 (74 per cent) students indicated that the e-mentoring system was helpful in finding out about university life; 21 (51 per cent of 41 respondents) students indicated that e-mentors had provided useful guidance on practical aspects of the university, and 27 (54 per cent of 50 respondents) said eAccess had made their views on HE more positive.

The HE application process

Applying to study at university is a complex process. Students begin their applications soon after they enrol on an Access course. As one student put it: 'you start and then next thing, you are doing personal statements.' Most students must complete the relevant application forms (UCAS, NMAS, etc.) by the end of the first term, or early in the second term. Many students stressed the difficulties of an application process that involved taking decisions affecting their lives for the next 3-4 years:

> *... what I found really difficult about choosing universities was you were at college, say, at the end of September; then come December the 15th your UCAS form has to be in. Well, ... you have to make a decision in about six weeks that's going to affect the rest of your life. (Jane)*

eAccess helped them in the application process. One college tutor said that the Web-links on her Blackboard site had encouraged students to visit university websites. These virtual visits had added to students' awareness about university when they were preparing their application forms:

> *When they first accessed it, they were desperate to go into the [university] site and have a look around every thing... the library, etc. ... Somebody wrote a personal statement and said that Blackboard has helped [her]... to see for herself what life at the university is like. (Access tutor, College B)*

The Access tutor from College D provided an example of how, during the HE application process, interactions with an e-mentor had helped one student to discuss support needed for his learning difficulty:

> *Tom [had] quite a lot of dialogue with [the mentor], and that was helpful. Tom is severely dyslexic, and he had a lot of issues, and he asked [the mentor], "How can I tell my intended university that I need dyslexia support?" And he's done that, and the university ... has given him lots of support already for that. (Access tutor, College D)*

According to the tutor, online discussions on Blackboard helped this student to seek advice from a mature undergraduate.

Students reported making more pointed inquiries in preparation for the HE application process. Nursing students attended an interview, as part of the university admissions process, where they were expected to speak about their ability and commitment to the nursing profession, drawing on their learning at college and their work and life experience. Many students were anxious about these interviews. The threaded discussions on Blackboard contained a variety of questions that students had asked their e-mentors to gain a better understanding of the application procedure:

> *I have my interview at [the University] next week. Are there any tips, ideas that you can think of that may help? I have no idea what to expect!! (College C student posting)*

> *I am a little concerned that I don't have any relevant experience yet, I am still waiting for a youth work job to start. Do you have any ideas of ways round this at interview? (College C student posting)*

Although the college had prepared the students for admissions interviews, students indicated that online interactions with their mentors had given an extra dimension of support for their preparations:

> *They gave us advice, how to go about it ... to prevent yourself [from disaster!]... I had a lot of advice from these mentors... By the time the interviews came we were confident that we were going to do it, we were prepared. (Delia)*

Students valued e-mentors' advice, since it came from those with recent experience of applying to universities. The e-mentors also helped students to relieve their anxieties, especially when they were waiting to hear from the universities. In one college, a group of students did not hear from the university, while their peers had already received invitation letters for interviews. The anxious students posted messages on the discussion board, asking for advice from the e-mentors. Students said that the e-mentors'

replies helped them to stay calm and to follow up the progress of their applications.

Answers to the final evaluation questionnaire also supported these findings. A significant proportion of students used Blackboard for the HE negotiation process. Of 47 respondents, 25 (53 per cent) stated that it had been useful for getting information on the application procedure; a similar proportion declared that it had been useful in preparing for interviews. Getting information related to the particular needs of mature students was deemed equally important; 55 per cent indicated that they had used Blackboard for that purpose. A significant minority of students mentioned that they received advice on travel to university (47 per cent), on childcare (37 per cent), and on bursaries (38 per cent). A much lower percentage of students reported that the e-mentoring scheme was useful for completing university application forms, advice on loans, bursaries and dyslexia support.

Developing confidence and effective learning strategies

College tutors recognised that interaction with peers and contributing to group work are important skills required in HE. One tutor described how a student who had 'difficulty fitting into the group' had become more confident and forthcoming after a period of using Blackboard:

> *... [he] loves Blackboard, ... and he will come and say "haven't you seen it?" or "Didn't you know – it is on Blackboard... It is under this, it is under that". So for him, it has made him feel a lot less anxious, and he is achieving his levels, so therefore, the rest of the class are now looking up to him. (College A tutor)*

Another tutor observed that Blackboard had boosted the confidence of a student, making him more participatory in online discussions:

> *There was one particular student ... [who] didn't say much in the classroom, but had quite forthright views, via the discussion board, which I think is good. (College D tutor)*

These examples show that the online environment had helped some students who were not confident in face-to-face sessions to express their views and to engage in the social aspects of learning and studying, which are important for students' satisfaction.

A student with a learning difficulty claimed that interactions with his e-mentor via Blackboard had enabled him to be more self-confident about his ability to learn at university. He talked about taking additional courses, as part of preparation for studies at university:

> *I'm going to [take] a bridging course before I go to uni. So, it's things like that; it has given me more confidence now... I think the information that [the e-mentor] has given us ... made me more relaxed. (Tom)*

The tutor from College A mentioned that those who had used her resources on Blackboard showed a marked improvement in how they carried out academic work, such as in preparing their assignments:

> *The people using Blackboard, it shows in the assignments. The information that they need [is up there]. You can tell somebody who hasn't even looked on it. So yeah, a big impact on lots of students. (College A tutor)*

Improvements in approaches to researching and adopting an analytical stance were other outcomes, which this tutor attributed to the use of Blackboard resources:

> *They are thinking a lot more. I think they might have gone into past exam papers, and things like that. (College A tutor)*

For some students, learning how to use Blackboard had been a steep learning curve. However, when they had persevered, they felt more confident of their ability to master a difficult task:

> *The more I go about it the more confidence I get from it, because I have been there about four times now. I now know where to go. It's not like I am blind anymore. (Delia)*

Messages posted by students on the discussion boards also showed how students perceived their development of IT skills through the process of taking part in the e-mentoring scheme.

> *I am now able to get into Blackboard and now hope that this will help me in doing the assignments. (College B student posting)*

> *I have gained confidence in using the computer to communicate with other students and my e-mentor. (College A student posting)*

Using email, sharing information and resources with peers, and checking assignment deadlines were other technological skills that students reported they had learned.

Acquiring the ability to use online discussion forums raised the confidence of these students. These views were confirmed by their Access tutors:

> *They are feeling more confident, they are more able to communicate, they do feel more able to use it as a tool, they do think it will be advantageous when they get to [university]. (College B tutor)*

> *They do become more effective learners when they communicate more with each other. It will help them later on... they will be better placed than other students who have never used [Blackboard] before. (College G tutor)*

Knowing that they could use a learning technology available in the university also boosted students' confidence:

> *When I went to an open day at [the university] they did mention Blackboard, ... I now know how to go onto Blackboard and find my assignment, and find any links and search for information... it's nice to know that when I go... to [university] in September, that it's something that I already know, it's not a new thing... (Frankie)*

One student described how the technological skills learned through the e-mentoring scheme became useful within the first week at university:

> *...they gave us a presentation to do. I did mine on depression... on the computer. First I had a look at eAccess and did a research on there and then after that I did [the presentation] on Blackboard, and they were like, "How did you know that!", because obviously in other colleges they didn't have ... [eAccess]. (Gene)*

Evidence from the final evaluation questionnaire indicated that eAccess helped students' development as effective and confident learners. In response to an item on the usefulness of e-mentoring in developing confidence, 28 (60 per cent) of the 47 who responded to this question confirmed that the scheme had been useful; four were undecided, while five students claimed it had not been useful. Ten students said they had not used it for that particular purpose. In response to a further item, 25 (55 per cent) stated that e-mentors had provided them with tips and advice on how to study more effectively. However, nine were undecided, while five students said it was not useful. Seven students said they had not used it for that purpose.

The interviews with students provided a glimpse into their world during the ten-month period at college and, in particular, their confidence in their ability to complete the Access course, coping with the volume of academic work and uncertainties about life at university. The focus group sessions with students who progressed to university confirmed concerns that they had had about university: coping with the work-load; being out of place in the university, and university being more stressful than the Access course. These concerns all support our rationale for requiring additional HE preparation by students from non-traditional backgrounds.

The interviews showed that eAccess helped the participants in three ways in their HE preparation. Firstly, it helped raise the students' awareness of HE. They learned about life and studies at university: assignments, course choice, issues facing mature students, organisational aspects of studies, placements in nursing and preparation for belonging to a professional community. Secondly, eAccess helped in the HE application process: students said they received encouragement to research widely on universities and courses in preparation for admissions interviews, to discusspersonal and specific needs at admission interviews, and to receive advice on selecting institutions and courses suited to personal circumstances. Finally, the interviews with both staff and students demonstrated that eAccess had helped students to become effective and confident learners. Reticent students developed confidence to engage more in face-to-face discussions and contributed more to discussion boards. Students also improved in how they tackled academic tasks such as assignments and research, as well as learning ICT skills.

Discussion

The results achieved in the programme are discussed from three perspectives:

- the nature of knowledge generated from the programme: 'hot knowledge'
- the approach and the achievement of the programme: bridging the gap between the 'institutional habitus' and 'person's habitus'
- the process of creating 'social capital' to the benefit of mature students.

The nature of the knowledge - 'hot knowledge'

The knowledge and information that the Access students tapped into by participating can be examined using the concepts 'hot knowledge' and 'cold knowledge' advanced by Ball and Vincent (1998). Hot knowledge refers to 'the socially embedded' knowledge prevailing in networks and social groups such as among close friends, family, relatives and neighbours. Cold knowledge, conversely, originates from formal and official sources such as career services, published literature (e.g., leaflets and brochures) and university websites. Connor and Dewson (2001) and Hutchings (2003) found that potential HE applicants from some social and class backgrounds (e.g., without HE family backgrounds) rely on sources of hot knowledge rather than printed information. Sources of hot knowledge are those who are perceived as 'having no personal interest, and no axe to grind' – the people who are generally referred to as 'people like me' (Hutching, 2003, p. 110). Interviews with students and postings on Blackboard showed that the e-mentors acted as sources of 'hot knowledge' for the Access participants. The latter thought the e-mentors were from backgrounds similar to their own; the ten-month interaction created a trusting social network.

eAccess approach - bridging the gap between the institutional habitus and a person's habitus

eAccess had the capacity to address factors contributing to students' satisfactory HE experience and retention. Tinto (1993) and Yorke (1999) developed models of student satisfaction and retention that identify a link between compatibility of student background factors - their values, understanding and attitudes towards HE - and institutional cultures, and likelihood of student retention. A less compatible relationship between student background variables and institutional factors is likely to result in a student's poor integration with the academic and social environment, and possible eventual withdrawal. eAccess provided preparatory support for potential HE applicants from backgrounds without HE.

The eAccess approach can be explained using the concept of 'institutional habitus', deployed by Reay, David and Ball (2001), based on Bourdieu's work on 'habitus' (Thomas, 2002a, p.430). Institutional habitus is the values and practices of cultural or social groups that are embedded in, and mediated through the culture of an institution (Reay, David, & Ball, 2005). Thomas (2002a, p. 431) uses the notion of 'institutional habitus' to explain student retention in HE. 'If a student feels that they do not fit in, that their social and cultural practices are inappropriate and that their tacit knowledge is undervalued, they may be more inclined to withdraw early.' A student from a privileged social background would have a contrasting experience. Such a student 'encounters a social world of which it is a product, it is like a 'fish in water': it does not feel the weight of the water (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p. 127, cited by Thomas, 2002a, p. 431). A student in HE from a non-traditional background may feel like 'a "fish out of water", and thus returns to their family habitus.' (Thomas, 2002a, p. 431).

Preparation for HE is not only completing the course requirements; it is also about understanding HE and its institutional culture(s) – the *institutional habitus*. eAccess was essentially an attempt to bridge the gap between institutional habitus and a person's habitus. While universities need to change their institutional culture/institutional habitus, some way of bridging the gap between the two habituses is likely to help student retention. As Baxter and Hatt (2000) noted, a misalignment of student expectations of HE and the reality of it is a crucial factor contributing to non-completion. Programmes such as eAccess can help

students to be familiar with the institutional habitus.

Creation of social capital

The e-learning platform can be considered as helping to facilitate the dissemination of 'hot knowledge' amongst the eAccess participants to help bridge the gap between institutional habitus and a person's habitus. The Access students and the e-mentors in eAccess were unknown to each other beforehand. The social network that emerged from the scheme can be considered as a form of social capital.

As Thomas (2002b) identified, much of the research on social capital is based on the work of Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1998) and Putnam (1993), amongst others. While these social commentators' perspectives on social capital vary, the concept generally emphasises the beneficial effects, both personally and collectively, of participating in social networks.

Bourdieu conceptualised social capital as 'the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of ... institutionalised relationships ... , to membership in a group – which provides each member with the backing of the collectively-owned capital' (Bourdieu, 1986, p.248). Bourdieu's perspective on social capital highlights that social networks may not naturally exist and that that they can be created deliberately for the long and short term benefits of the participants. This view of social capital is particularly useful for the eAccess approach which deliberately created a social network amongst Access students and mature undergraduates where such a relationship did not exist before. Therefore the development of the e-mentoring scheme is a deliberate investment strategy 'oriented towards the institutionalisation of group relations' (Portes, 2000, p. 45), usable as a reliable source of benefits for its members.

Coleman's (1998) focus on social capital emphasises the important role it plays in educational attainment. As Schuller and Field (2003) noted, Coleman's perspective on social capital complements that of human capital, which helps explain variations in the levels of human capital in the society. High levels of human capital tends to emerge when individuals are able to draw on resources embedded in 'family and in community social organisations' (Coleman, 1994, p. 300). While Coleman comments on the learning of children and adolescents, the implications can be equally important for the learning of adults. Most of our eAccess participants (83 per cent) were the first in their families planning to study at university. For this cohort of students, family networks were not available as a source of knowledge and information to help prepare for university. eAccess participants highlighted that the programme was a useful source of information for their preparation for HE. The programme acted as a mechanism to generate social capital to compensate for the lack of cultural capital. Interviews showed that for some students eAccess meant being able to establish a long-term association with someone - a mature student - from the university, with a similar background.

Conclusions and implications for practice

Access courses provide a pathway for individuals from non-traditional backgrounds to enter into HE. These HE preparatory programmes are particularly aimed at mature students who have missed HE opportunities through a traditional route. Enabling this cohort to re-enter formal education is an important step in widening participation in HE. Mature students and students from families without HE backgrounds are particularly likely to have unsatisfactory HE experiences and drop out. Without proper HE preparation, even after successfully completing an Access course, they may start an undergraduate course without much understanding of HE, its demands and its culture.

This study of eAccess demonstrated how support, built in an e-learning environment, can help mature students to prepare for HE. eAccess fostered a form of social capital among mature learners from families without a HE background. The social network generated in the e-learning environment enabled the Access students to tap into mature undergraduates' knowledge and experience – hot knowledge.

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