

# *By chance or by plan?: The academic success of nontraditional students in higher education*

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Published Version

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Wong, B. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7310-6418>  
(2018) By chance or by plan?: The academic success of nontraditional students in higher education. *AERA Open*, 4 (2). 233285841878219. ISSN 2332-8584 doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2332858418782195> Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/77563/>

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Published version at: <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2332858418782195>

To link to this article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/2332858418782195>

Publisher: Sage

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## By Chance or by Plan?: The Academic Success of Nontraditional Students in Higher Education

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*In the United Kingdom, a “good” undergraduate degree is understood to be a “first class” or an “upper second class,” which is achieved by three-quarters of students. The need to distinguish oneself from others is ever more important in an increasingly crowded graduate market, although a first-class degree is most likely achieved by privileged students. Informed by Bourdieu’s theory of habitus and capital, this study explores the educational experiences and trajectories of 30 final-year high-achieving nontraditional (HANT) students through in-depth interviews. These include working-class, minority ethnic, and/or mature students at university. We found that prior development in academic study skills and the desire to prove oneself, often in response to previous negative experiences, are key ingredients in academic success. Our HANT students also seem to find inspiration or support from significant others, an educational capital, although these resources are often by chance rather than by plan. Implications for policy and practice are suggested.*

Keywords: *high achiever, nontraditional student, educational capital, happenstance*

### Introduction

THE realization of academic success, especially at degree level, is important for countries driven by a knowledge economy. Globally, the graduate population is on the rise, mostly induced by expectations of better employment opportunities and economic prosperities (De Vries, 2014; OECD, 2017). According to the OECD (2018), over half of all adults aged 25 to 34 in developed countries such as Korea, Japan, Canada, and the United Kingdom, were degree educated in 2016. In a number of countries, such as the United States, Australia, Norway, Switzerland, and Sweden, where figures were just under 50% in 2016, the percentage is likely to surpass the halfway mark in the foreseeable future (OECD, 2018).

In the United Kingdom, a “good” undergraduate degree is now achieved by 71.5% of all students, made up of first-class and upper–second class honors degree classifications<sup>1</sup> (ECU, 2016). With this high percentage in mind, the need to distinguish oneself from others is ever more important in a crowded graduate market, both nationally and internationally (Tomlinson, 2012). A first-class degree—achieved by 24% of students in 2016—would be the highest degree outcome from an academic perspective and offer students a better opportunity to “stand out” (Coughlan, 2017). While a range of personal and social factors determines an individual’s degree outcome, available data suggest that first-class degree recipients are more likely to be from “traditional” backgrounds, which is understood as students from White middle-class backgrounds (Crawford, 2014; ECU, 2016;

HEFCE, 2013). Students from “nontraditional” backgrounds, by comparison, are less likely to achieve the highest undergraduate degree outcome.

Nontraditional students, in UK higher education and policy discourses, include first-generation university students, students from low-income households, students from minority ethnic/racial backgrounds, mature students (age 21 or over on university entry), and/or students with a declared disability. These students are also commonly referred as underrepresented or minority students in U.S. and Australian literature (Braxton, 2000; Gale & Tranter, 2011), where there are also concerns of unequal degree outcomes by social backgrounds, especially by social class and “race”/ethnicity (Brock, 2010; Devlin, 2013; Harris & Wood, 2013; Munro, 2011). This paper is interested in the educational trajectories of high-achieving nontraditional (HANT) UK university students. We wish to deepen our knowledge of their social and structural opportunities and challenges. By understanding their pathways to academic success, we can focus and potentially amplify the collective experiences that have contributed to their educational achievements for a wider range of students. In the following, we begin with an overview of the attainment issue in UK higher education, followed by a review of the sociological literature on educational success. Details of the study are then presented, along with the findings, where we argue that the high achievement of nontraditional students may be facilitated by a combination of serendipity and strategy. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our findings.



### Attainment in UK Higher Education

Unlike secondary/high school examination results, which are often front-page news, it is perhaps surprising that degree classification, or students' university grades, command few news headlines. Variations in degree outcomes are rarely reported, especially in academic research (Cotton, Joyner, George, & Cotton, 2016). UK undergraduate degrees are typically awarded from four classes, namely, first (70% or more), upper-second (60%–69%), lower-second (50%–59%), and third (40%–49%). Differences in degree classification can significantly shape employment and postgraduate opportunities. Seasonal UK graduate employers typically demand students to have a “good” degree, but there remain concerns that the “top” jobs give preference to first-class degree graduates (Paton, 2012). Although work experience is equally important for some employers (Yorke, 2017), opportunities to gain these experiences are also likely to differ by family background and socioeconomic status (Lareau, 2011; Milburn, 2012). In short, the rise in graduates (and with good degrees) is welcomed, but a closer look into who obtains a first-class raises concerns about a degree outcome inequality at a granular level.

In 1994, only 7% of students were awarded a first-class degree, rising to 11% by 2004 before reaching 24% in 2016 (Coughlan, 2017). Baker (2017) reported that the rise in first-class degrees varied by universities, with 40 universities (out of 148)—including both pre-92 and post-92<sup>2</sup> institutions—reporting double-digit percentage increases, while the majority ( $n = 75$ ) noted increases between 4.0% and 9.9% between 2011 and 2016. The latest figures (see Baker, 2018) reported that in highly selective (or elite<sup>3</sup>) universities such as Oxford, Cambridge, UCL, and Imperial, over 90% of students get a good degree (with 33.5% to 44.7% awarded a first-class).

Rising entry standards may be responsible, and statistics show a positive relationship between A-level<sup>4</sup> achievement and degree classification. Over 80% of students with AAB grades or above<sup>5</sup> gain a first- or upper-second degree, compared to 50% for those with CCC grades or lower (Smith, 2016). Yet these data vary by social characteristics, and students from nontraditional backgrounds tend to do worse. For example, 72% of White British students who entered university with BBB A-level grades gained a first or upper-second degree, compared to just 56% of British Asian and 53% of Black British students (HEFCE, 2014). In other words, minority ethnic students are less likely than White students to achieve higher degree classifications, even with the same A-level entry grades (Berry & Loke, 2011; Richardson, 2015). Available statistics indicate that older students and those from socially/economically disadvantaged areas (who are typically working-class) also achieve lower degree outcomes (and are more likely to discontinue their higher education) than younger students and those coming from more socially advantaged backgrounds (Chowdry, Crawford, Dearden,

Goodman, & Vignoles, 2013; HEFCE, 2014; Woodfield, 2014). The realities of student experiences and outcomes are further complicated by the interactions of these multiple social identities and positions (Hill Collins, 2000).

### The Construction of Academic Success (in the Field of UK Higher Education)

Studies on high-achieving university students have predominantly focused on (micro) individual factors and aptitude but often without recognition of (macro) structural influences and obstacles (HEFCE, 2015). This research, from UK and international scholars, is overwhelmingly quantitative and inspired by educational psychology. They explored various predictors of academic success, such as motivation, attendance, class preparation, learning habits, study time, geographic residence, part-time jobs, family support, as well as personality traits and self-regulated learning (e.g., Abdulghani et al., 2014; Callender, 2008; Cassidy, 2011; Kelly, 2012; Masui, Broeckmans, Doumen, Groenen, & Molenberghs, 2014; Smidt, 2015).

From a sociological perspective, it is paramount to recognize that these dispositions and attributes are shaped and socialized within complex social structures and positioning. In other words, academic success is not totally random but very much patterned, especially by social class (Abrahams, 2017; Bathmaker et al., 2016). Of course, individual choices, differences, and experiences still exist, but our educational trajectories, for example, would broadly reflect and align with people from similar social upbringings and experiences. Here, we focus on Bourdieu's (1977, 1984) concepts of *habitus*, *field*, and *capital* as our lens to interpret the educational experiences and pathways of nontraditional university students.

For Bourdieu (1977), habitus constitutes a “system of internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception and action common to all members of the same group or class and constituting the precondition for all objectification and apperception” (p. 86). As social beings, we develop and mature under specific environments and conditions, which facilitate and shape our comprehensions of and approaches to the world. These understandings, dispositions, and preferences constitute our habitus, which is developed over time, constituting our past and present (Reay, 2004). The notion of habitus recognizes that individual practices are not always rational but can be emotional or even illogical because our actions and thoughts are socially conditioned (e.g., by class and cultural backgrounds) to reflect our perceptions of normality.

While Bourdieu (1977) posits that our habitus operates at the subconscious level, it is important to stress that individual actions are not predetermined as the habitus is a “strategy-generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations” (p. 72). In other words, an individual's habitus constitutes their default position, but this can be changed. As Mills (2008) argued, habitus shapes but

does not determine choices, and under particular agents of change—which can be individuals, institutions, or other influences/resources—the habitus can be transformative rather than reproductive.

The habitus equips individuals with a set of tools (dispositions) that can be utilized in different sites, or fields, which are the structure of social relations in which individuals or institutions are located. As Jenkins (2002) explains, a field can be understood as “a structured system of social positions—occupied either by individuals or institutions—the nature of which defines the situation for their occupants” (p. 85). The field can be understood as a field of forces or struggles because “a field is structured internally in terms of power relations” (Jenkins, 2002, p. 85). In this sense, a field can be seen as the site for struggles over particular forms of capital (as dominant).

Capital refers to the resources available to individuals that can generate social advantages and is constituted within the habitus. Bourdieu (1986) identified three key types: *Economic* capital is financial resources, *social* capital represents social networks and contacts, and *cultural* capital refers to cultural competencies, which can be embodied, objectified, and institutionalized, and includes valued cultural knowledge, possessions, tastes, and qualifications. We follow Lareau and Weininger’s (2003) updated account of cultural capital, which goes beyond Bourdieu’s (1984) focus on highbrow culture, to acknowledge field-specific resources, valued cultural knowledge, and practices. The concepts of capital and habitus operate within and across fields, such as education (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Edgerton & Roberts, 2014) and more specifically, the field of higher education.

The main concern, especially in UK literature, is that access to these capitals is socially structured and patterned, typically to the advantage of White middle-class students (Reay, Crozier, & James, 2011), especially since Bourdieu (1984) conceived capital as exchangeable and symbolic resources (and often, across fields), where possession of one form, such as economic capital, can lead to another, such as cultural and/or social capital. The analogy of a card game is often used to illustrate the fundamental relationships between habitus (playing the cards), capital (the value of the cards), and field (the rules of the card game). According to Edgerton and Roberts (2014), “people’s practices or actions—their behavioural repertoire—are the consequences of their habitus and cultural capital interacting within the context of a given field” (p. 195).

In the United Kingdom, Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller (2013) explored the university experiences of working-class and middle-class undergraduates and highlighted the advantage of the latter group in terms of access to valued capital, such as securing internships and participation in extracurricular activities, as well as their dispositions to play the higher education game. The university experiences of

nontraditional students can be highly complex, and the struggles of fitting in have been a useful notion of enquiry in UK, U.S., and Australian higher education research (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Leese, 2010; Meuleman, Garrett, Wrench, & King, 2015; Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2010). These studies also discussed the difficulties and challenges of nontraditional students in higher education through the lenses of habitus and capital. In short, students from working-class, minority ethnic, and/or older age groups are more likely to feel alienated at universities (especially in elite universities) and less likely to access or possess academic resources, knowledge, and dispositions.

Higher education research has explored access and participation inequalities across university types and rankings (e.g., Russell group vs. post-92 in the United Kingdom, see Chowdry et al., 2013; or the Ivy League in the United States, see Davies & Zarifa, 2012). We should also be concerned about inequality of opportunities and outcomes *within* universities, especially low-income, working-class, and minoritized students (see Stich, 2016, in the U.S. context). We do not intend to rehearse the barriers as experienced by nontraditional university students. These are discussed extensively in existing literature (especially in the United Kingdom, United States, and Australia), such as working-class or first-generation students (e.g., Archer, Hutchings, & Ross, 2003), those from minority ethnic backgrounds (e.g., Shiner & Noden, 2015), mature students (e.g., O’Shea, 2015), and students with disabilities (e.g., Dong & Lucas, 2016). These studies have focused on concerns around transition, underachievement, retention, and dropout as well as the economic, social, and cultural challenges for students unfamiliar with the higher education environment (e.g., Crozier, Reay, Clayton, Colliander, & Grinstead, 2008; Fuller, 2014; Leathwood, 2006; Leathwood & O’Connell, 2003; Lowe & Cook, 2003; Munro, 2011; Ulriksen, Madsen, & Holmegaard, 2017). Most existing studies, quite rightly, discussed the barriers and obstacles to academic success. The latest data in the United Kingdom shows that more progress is still needed to improve the circumstances of nontraditional students (OFFA, 2017).

Fewer studies (e.g., Devlin, 2013; Finnegan, 2009; Garrett & Rubie-Davies, 2014; Millward, Wardman, & Rubie-Davies, 2016), by comparison, have prioritized the experiences of high-achieving university students, especially from nontraditional backgrounds. U.S. literature that explored the experiences of first-generation (e.g., Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005) and Black (e.g., Strayhorn, 2013) university students have highlighted the importance of personal motivation, grit, and parental and peer support in academic success. Pre-college preparation, empathetic admissions policies, and financial assistance were also noted as key factors for successful nontraditional students (May & Chubin, 2003). More recently, in New Zealand, Millward et al. (2016) explored the lived experiences of 22 high-achieving undergraduates from a psychosocial perspective, including the notion of a *growth*

*mindset*, and argued that resilience, work ethic, and self-efficacy are central ingredients for academic success.

From a sociological perspective, we will want to inquire who is most likely to possess these ingredients and how common it is for students to develop their own recipes for academic success, especially those from nontraditional backgrounds. In this paper, we explore the dispositions (i.e., *habitus*) and resources (i.e., capital) that high-achieving nontraditional students could access, develop, and utilize in the field of UK higher education. If these students are merely an “exception to the rule,” then what, if any, features do these students share, and to what extent can these features be amplified or replicated for other, lower achieving nontraditional students?

### The Study

In England, the marketization of higher education was intensified through the tripling of tuition fees in 2012, which had not only encouraged the student-as-consumer discourse (Brown & Carasso, 2013; Wong & Chiu, 2017) but also increased the pressure on students to obtain a good degree. With the saturation of graduates, the need to stand out from the crowd is ever more important, especially in post-92 universities, which may command less “symbolic” and “exchange” value (when compared to degrees from elite universities) in the employment sector. Nontraditional students are also more likely to study in post-92 rather than pre-92 (and especially elite) universities (Wyness, 2017). While some, especially middle-class students, resort to extracurricular activities as a way to strengthen their employability (Bathmaker et al., 2013), others, particularly nontraditional students, may strive for higher attainment, such as a first-class degree, as their feasible marker of difference.

This paper reports from an in-depth narrative case study of 30 first-generation high-achieving final-year university students from working-class backgrounds, which include White and minority ethnic women and men as well as mature students. We are interested in their educational biographies and lived experiences of higher education, from start to present, with a reflective focus on their pathways to academic success. We want to understand what worked for these students and the extent to which their experiences may also work for other (lower-achieving) nontraditional undergraduates.

Participants are final-year students from two post-92 universities in the broad discipline of the social sciences, who are “on course” to achieve a first-class degree—indicated by their attainments in the previous year as well as their ongoing grades. Data were collected between 2015 and 2017, with three cohorts of final-year students, all of whom are graduates of the higher fees regime. According to Woodfield (2014), the social sciences have a lower rate of good degrees graduates than other disciplines, including first-class students. The post-92 universities in our study, codenamed

Harper and Segway, are both in London, with diverse student populations in terms of age, social class, ethnicity, and entry routes into higher education. The majority of undergraduate students are nontraditional, and both universities had a single-digit percentage increase (between 4.0% and 9.9%) in first-class graduates between 2011 and 2016 (Baker, 2017). Our participants were evenly recruited from both universities and purposefully invited to participate based on their likelihood to get a first-class degree, although we acknowledge that their degree classification was still to be determined by their final-year performance.

Social science staff were asked to recommend suitable students, with the brief that students would ideally be “first-generation” and “high-achieving” or “has potential to get a first-class degree.” Students were then invited to take part by email, using the same brief, and the majority agreed to participate from the initial invitation. Our aim here is not to generalize, although we recruited students from different age groups (12 were young, aged 20 or under upon university entry; 18 were mature, aged 21 or over upon entry) and ethnicity (11 self-identified as White British, 19 minority ethnic/other students, including British Asian, Black British, White European, and Other—which includes Arab, Middle Eastern, mixed heritage, and Far Eastern), albeit with a heavier balance of women ( $n = 23$ ) than men ( $n = 7$ ). Most students eventually graduated with a first-class, although 7 students ended up with upper-second class degrees. Nonetheless, all of our students’ views were rich and insightful.

No conflicts of interest were noted between participants and researchers, although some participants may know their researcher through previous engagements in a teaching and learning context. We reflect that consent to participate was relatively quick for some invitees (e.g., within a day), who responded that the opportunity to support the research is “the least I can do” as a way to thank their department and/or staff. Participants may choose to share different information depending on the researcher, and as academics, we are inevitability in a position of authority in relation to students. Nonetheless, we are confident that the timing of our recruitment and data collection—which were toward the end of their studies—and the enthusiasms many students have shown, in the recruitment process but also in the interviews, where the average interview was 90 minutes and the longest was 150 minutes, meant that the data collected were trustworthy.

Interviews were conducted in a quiet room at each university, audio recorded, and later transcribed with sensitive data anonymized. A range of issues was probed, including family background and support, secondary school experience, detailed accounts of each academic year at university, preparation and support for assessment, and general reflections on their university experiences and aspirations (see Appendix). For verification, key points were noted during the interview and revisited at the end, where students were asked to summarize again and reflect on their respective

“key moments,” especially around academic success. To strengthen anonymity, the degree subject and university of each student remain undisclosed, alongside any details that could risk exposing their identities. As an indication, our students studied subjects including criminology, education, international relations, policies, and sociology.

Data analysis was informed by a social constructionist perspective, which understands social phenomena as socially constructed and discursively produced (Burr, 2003). Interview data were organized using *NVivo* and initially coded by emerging concepts as we move “back and forth” between the data and analyses in an iterative process through which the dimensions of concepts and themes are refined and/or expanded through the comparison of data (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). A provisional coding framework was established after the researchers (Wong and Tiffany Chiu) independently coded three interview transcripts by relevant themes, which was then discussed and compared, with any differences on the application of codes debated until a consensus was reached. While some original language from the transcripts was maintained, data in the coding framework were then summarized by key points in a process comparable to a “funnel,” where concepts became more abstract. The process of moving up the abstraction ladder was not linear as the analyses moved “both up and down the structure [as] categories are refined, dimensions clarified and explanations are developed” (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p. 213). Data summary and syntheses were iterative as themes (and subthemes), and indexed data were continuously revisited for further information and clarification (Corbin & Strauss, 2014).

These themes were also conceptually analyzed through Bourdieu’s (1977, 1984) theory of habitus and capital, with the focus on the dispositions and resources (e.g., economic, cultural, and social) that students were able to articulate in their reflections and commentaries of their academic journey and practice in the field of higher education. Here, we looked for possible examples (and counterexamples) and instances where particular social processes or experiences may have provided our nontraditional students with the tools to excel academically. If these academic tools are socially patterned and classed, as Bourdieu would argue, then it would be important to explore what, if any, shared features and resources these successful nontraditional students possess. To what extent can these dispositions or resources be replicated and amplified?

## **Findings**

Higher education is often projected as an opportunity for upward social mobility, especially for nontraditional students. With the rise in tuition fees, participation is now a more conscious or even difficult decision for many first-generation university students, who may debate whether to even begin this journey. Our 30 high-achieving nontraditional

students, of course, persevered. In the following, we discuss their pathways to academic success through three emergent themes. These include students’ prior development in academic study skills, a personal desire to prove oneself as capable, and the importance of key people, which can play a different role for different students. Where relevant, we also draw on Bourdieu’s theories for conceptual interpretations. Our analyses suggest that the academic success of our HANT students is underpinned by a mixture of plan and chance.

### *Academic Study Skills*

Consistent with existing studies, our HANT students noted experiences of transitional challenges into higher education, such as culture shock and the demand of assignments. We found, however, that personal hobby, namely reading, or their previous college/school education seem to have provided some students with resources (or educational cultural capital) that can support their degree study.

When asked to reflect on the possible reasons for their academic success, most students downplayed the role of intelligence and instead accredited their work ethic and attitude. Further to this, some students seem more comfortable or equipped in assessment preparation, and these students appear to share a passion for reading, which we suggest is an academic study skill that can be converted into an educational cultural capital that supports better degree outcomes. For example, Shirley (White British mature female) said, “I’ve always enjoyed reading and I think that sets you in good stead, doesn’t it? I know I’ve got good English, good grammar.” Similarly, Becky (White British mature female) acknowledged that as a regular reader, “I can write quite well too . . . and if you can read an article quicker, you can understand quicker and do the essay quicker.” Diego (White British mature male) explained that academic success “can be down to your ability to write good essays and it might be that you’ve got the knowledge but you’re just not able to put across as well as some other people.” While further research is merited on the importance of English competency in degree outcomes, especially for students with English as an Additional Language (EAL), it is conceivable that regular reading, even as a hobby, can benefit students in their degrees, especially in the social sciences.

A few students, including those who enrolled in an access course,<sup>6</sup> gave credit to their college education, which seems to have trained them with an educationally oriented habitus, cultural capital, and dispositions to interpret university-level work and assessments. As Bibi (Other young female) explained, “in college, we had a lot of support in essay writing and decoding reading, so it was like easier in year 1.” Likewise, Rya (British Asian mature female) believed that “the skills and knowledge I gained at college, such as referencing” were particularly helpful when she approached her university assignments.

Hence, academic preparation—either through regular reading or from college education—can be developed, by chance or by plan, to support the academic success of some HANT students.

### *Proving Oneself*

Our undergraduates, especially mature students, were not academic high-fliers in schools. Most reported average grades, and some did poorly, with occasional fails, because some confessed that education was not previously regarded as a priority. It is not uncommon for nontraditional students to experience schooling as unpleasant, worthless, and not for “people like us,” which could limit educational aspirations and encourage the reproduction of educational inequality. Yet one key driver behind the determination of our HANT students to study at university was a desire to prove to themselves or others their abilities, especially those who had negative experiences in school or work. For instance, Maggie (White British mature female) recognized that a degree certificate is an institutionalized cultural capital where she can:

Prove to myself and maybe to other people that you know, people that did know me a long time ago and kind of like thought oh well she did crap at school, she's never going to do very well at anything . . . that I have you know, I've done well here.

Several other students spoke of similar frustrations or feeling stuck, with a strong desire to respond and reclaim their worth and dignity through education, namely, a good degree. As an institutionalized cultural capital, a degree certificate would seem to offer our HANT students the “seal of approval” that can validate—to themselves and others—their academic and intellectual identity. The importance of such credential appears most prominent for students who have experienced career stagnation or the glass ceiling, which had limited progression and upward social mobility. As Janice (Black British mature female) recounted:

I had just been in a situation where I had been blamed for things I hadn't done at the workplace as a manager and I was almost in depression . . . I was on the laptop looking for what I could do then a message popped up about Harper university . . . then I clicked following the links and found it seems to be very good so I rang and started the process, within 2 weeks I was here.

Janice's trajectory into university may be opportunistic, but the obstacles she experienced were shared by many who believed that a good degree will open up new and better employment prospects. For instance, Antonio (White European mature male) realized that without a degree, “there was a ceiling which I couldn't pass if I wanted to progress further” in his previous job. Laura (White British young female) went further and acknowledged that as a degree is now relatively common, it is imperative to get the best possible degree. She explained that: “With so many

people graduating, I'm guessing, they'll [employers] look at the 1st over the 2:1s [degree classifications], maybe the 1st are seen as more motivated, more academic, compared to 2:1, just my idea.” The increasing importance of degree classifications was witnessed by Vinnie (British Asian mature female), who spoke of the struggles of her friend in the job market, who got a lower-second class (2:2), when compared to other friends with a 2:1 or 1st, who seem to have found permanent jobs quicker. A number of other factors, particularly work experience, are likely to be important as well. While a degree certificate can be an entry ticket for graduate-level employment, going to university can also be a personal ambition, especially for those with denied opportunities:

Because of family issues, I couldn't go to university back then. . . . In 2014, I finally decided that with the government cuts and everything, my job was not giving me the job satisfaction anymore. . . . I left it and I came straight to university because I've wanted this for so long. (Tara, Black British mature female)

When “second chances” were presented to students such as Tara, they were greeted with extra motivation or dedication—characteristics that are generally prized in university students. The chance to address a missed opportunity, or even feelings of injustice, may have generated educational dispositions that positively serve our HANT students. For example, Whitney (Black British mature female) recognized that “I might not get this chance again,” and she was adamant that “you have to put all your effort in and you have to believe that you can do it by using everything available to overcome the fear.” Her mission was clear, akin to *by all means necessary* in terms of energy and support. Here, Whitney's mindset is reconfigured for academic success, with a conscious effort to utilize and maximize her surrounding resources and convert them into her own educational capital and success.

In addition to self-affirmation, success in higher education is also important for those around them, especially for student parents who aspire to be living examples for their children. Catherine (Black British mature female) said she “took my daughter on campus a few times [because] I want her to see what university is like,” while Bianca (White European mature female) believed that her academic success will demonstrate to her children that higher education is a viable future option. To be a role model for her young son, Jenny (White British young female) said:

I put in extra time and I made sacrifices. I haven't really had much of a social life. . . . I just think I'm really hard working and dedicated, more than anything. . . . You always have a plan. I try to do what I have in my diary, reach certain goals.

The determination to prove—to themselves or others—their ability may be central to the academic success of our HANT students. Such aspirations can stem from previous negative



experiences but also as positive inspirations for those close to them. These experiences seem to have encouraged educational dispositions that support academic excellence.

*Significant Others*

The academic success of HANT students is also motivated and supported by key personnel, such as family members, friends/peers, tutors/staff, and members of the wider community. A reference to significant others is common within HANT students' narratives when asked to reflect on their academic trajectory and accomplishment. Commitment and inspiration to succeed in higher education can stem from particular family experiences, while access to a supportive network, particularly through peers, is also an important resource that can be converted into a form of educational capital.

Family support—from siblings/cousins, to parents/children, to partners/in-laws—plays an important role for our HANT students. For assessments, these family members can offer “helpful advice on grammar, proofreading and [whether it is] making sense” (Hilda, British Asian mature female). For instance, Jasper (Other young male) sought support from his stepparent and extended family because he recognized that “these extra things add to your discussion and knowledge” in assignments. While access to family support is probably more of a lottery for nontraditional students, most HANT students appear to have generated educational capital through peers within their respective degree programs, where specific and generic study groups were formed. Specific study groups were formed for particular assignments and typically disbanded after submission, often with mixed results. As Becky (White British mature female) explained:

I work with one or two close friends, we read each other's draft . . . we bounce ideas off each other . . . the only thing is, we used to work with another couple of girls, but one . . . girl started taking pictures of our work when we were preparing for an exam and another girl just ask so many questions, it's like, they are just taking your ideas, so there is that danger.

Unequal contribution and concerns of peer plagiarism have meant that specific study groups are mostly short-lived. Generic study groups, on the other hand, appear more holistic and longer-term, often established organically or by happenstance. As Vinnie (British Asian mature female) recalled on the inception of her study group:

It started by just being friends in the canteen, we eat together. Then some girls say they are going to the library, and I was asked if I wanted to join and so I did. We sit together . . . and study. We don't do all the same work. If I have a question, I'll ask them. . . . That's how we help each other. We meet almost every day, especially Year 3, it's like we live together!

Vinnie's study group may have emerged through a combination of convenience, shared interest, and friendship building,

but it has also facilitated a group practice where members would “sit together . . . almost every day.” These implicit but shared group expectations are central to foster and encourage a self-regulated and peer-regulated pattern of academic engagement. Similar stories were echoed by several others, such as Bibi (Other young female), who was thankful that her study group members have “force[d] me to stop talking and start studying.” Generic groups can also be formed digitally (e.g., social media apps), which tend to be more exclusive if the group only functions virtually. “We have a Whatsapp group for a group of us, around 8, we ask questions there about essays and that's where we communicate there. . . . It was started by a friend, as a social group, and became more academic” (Laura, White British young female). For students such as Laura, her online chat group evolved into an academic discussion space, probably driven by their shared focus and concerns around assignments. Further research is merited on the influence of social media on university student attainment.

Few HANT students also mentioned friends from other universities, the local community, and former workplace as inspirational or supportive figures in their degree journeys. Bibi (Other young female) said she benefited from the support of a PhD student within her community, who was a customer of her mother, a hairdresser. Informally arranged by her mother, Bibi said that “for 6 months in Year 1 she helped me to decode and understand the reading, to break it down . . . she also commented on my drafts, it was really useful.” Bibi believed that the early support she received to familiarize herself with university standards has provided her with a stronger foundation for later assignments.

Significant others can also be academic tutors and support staff, especially when they go beyond the call of duty. Mala (Other mature female) said she is indebted to the care and attention of the support staff who took the initiative to request an extension for her Year 2 exam after they noticed her hand injury:

I was ready to do my exam with this broken hand, and then Anita she saw me and said, “Oh my God, what happened to you?” They're all panicking that there are just four days left [until the exam] and they asked me that if you have an extension and I said no, I don't want an extension because it is too complicated.

Mala's reluctance to seek support may also imply her lack of confidence or knowledge in academic procedures given the application process is supposed to be student-friendly. Perhaps with less educational capital, nontraditional students such as Mala may be unaware or feel uncomfortable using their available support and provisions. For Mala, it was by chance that her injury was spotted by staff, and although one exam contributes to a small segment of her overall degree, such a fortunate intervention by staff has since provided Mala with more confidence and knowledge about her study options, which is demonstrated with her

application for an assignment extension when she fell ill in Year 3. Here, Mala's educational capital, habitus, and dispositions have broadened, exposed by initial good fortune that she absorbed and later applied when needed.

Significant others can therefore play a key role in the academic success of HANT students, as sources of motivations as well as academic knowledge, practices, and capital. Their contributions can disrupt the social reproduction trajectories normally expected of nontraditional students. Implications of the findings for policy and practice are now discussed.

### Discussion and Conclusion

The academic success of nontraditional university students should be celebrated but with caution given their underrepresentation in the wider context of good degrees, especially as first-class honors graduates (ECU, 2016). Our HANT students may constitute the "exceptions of the few" in a socially reproductive educational system (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). In this study, we identified three agents of change that may have disrupted the cycle of social reproduction. These include (a) supplementary knowledge and support in academic skills, (b) a personal desire to prove oneself, and (c) the influence of significant others, which formed as key dispositions and capital for our HANT students. However, these did not emerge systematically (e.g., due to their particular social backgrounds) but appear to have evolved through various unintended experiences or events that supported nontraditional students to be high achievers. Participants' pathways to academic success appear more diverse and unpredictable than traditional students (Reay et al., 2011; see also Goldrick-Rab, 2006; Perna, 2010; Pérez & McDonough, 2008, in the U.S. context), although the commonalities shared by HANT students can offer us empirical evidence on what worked for them and an opportunity for educators and policymakers to attest potential new initiatives to support high attainment.

A mastery of academic study skills is undoubtedly beneficial for university students. For Bourdieu (1977) and many sociologists, the acquisition of and familiarization with these skills are socially and structurally patterned, and nontraditional university students are often disadvantaged. While some HANT students possessed good reading skills, derived from their passions in English literature, access to this educational cultural capital is, on the whole, more favorable toward the middle-class (Sullivan & Brown, 2013). Supporting students in academic study skills, such as reading, is increasingly recognized by English universities with dedicated student support centers established for general and academic queries. It is not uncommon for degree programs, particularly in the social sciences, to have compulsory modules designed with study skills at its core (Chiu & Rodriguez-Falcon, 2016). Embedded study skills

workshops are also popular, alongside separate sessions and/or online support courses (Wingate, 2006). In Australia, and increasingly in the United Kingdom, universities also promote the idea of "graduate attributes" as the range of skills that graduates are expected to develop during their degrees (Green, Hammer, & Star, 2009; Tomlinson, 2012). Graduate attributes are often marketed and linked to employability, although the compatibility between employability skills and academic study skills is contested (Cranmer, 2006; Rust & Froud, 2011). Nonetheless, available data remain sketchy on the broader impact of these support provisions for nontraditional students, who are less likely to achieve a first-class degree and more likely to experience struggles and lower pay after graduation (Burke, 2015; Friedman, Laurison, & Macmillan, 2017).

Our focus on HANT students offers us important new insights, especially for raising attainment. It appears that much of their academic study skills, such as reading or referencing, began to develop prior to university, which may be a crucial factor in their academic success. Compared to other first-generation students, some of our HANT students had a head start, in a similar way to wider operations of class inequalities that benefit traditional middle-class students (Bathmaker et al., 2016). While their advantage was partially driven by chance (e.g., a hobby in reading), such practice can potentially be encouraged and facilitated by schools or colleges given some HANT students also benefited from earlier introductions to academic study skills that have eased their transitions into university (Leese, 2010). Our findings suggest that students will benefit from university-level education, namely, academic study skills, before they start university. Pre-entry short courses (e.g., online or during welcome/induction week) may be sufficient for some, but it is likely to take time, especially for nontraditional students, to immerse these new academic practices to be a part of their educational dispositions and academic habitus. As such, we call for higher education policymakers and practitioners to consider an extended or prolonged provision of academic study skills for undergraduates beyond the induction/initial period and perhaps even throughout the degree.

While traditional middle-class students are often advantaged through their family support system (from family and schools, see Vincent & Ball, 2007), it is important in the context of social justice that nontraditional working-class students are provided with the opportunity to develop and equip themselves with educational dispositions and capital that can also support academic development and success, especially in higher education. We suggest that practitioners (e.g., university outreach provisions or programs) should, in collaboration with their local schools, develop and embed academic study skills as part of their support for prospective university students. Schools should and still can equalize some of the inequalities of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and reduce the reliance of happenstance for the

emergence of HANT students in schools, universities, and beyond. A long-term policy vision and ambition would be for all secondary/high schools to actively and openly incorporate academic study skills within their regular curriculums, especially for pre-university students, which is also a form of countermeasure against the well-researched advantages of more privileged students in schools (including the hidden curriculum).

Not all HANT students had prior access to or support in academic study skills. Some relied on their personal experiences as a specific resource, which formed into dispositions of resilience due to personal or family hardships, to power their academic aspirations and success (see also Archer & Francis, 2007; Basit, 2013; Wong, 2015, in the secondary school context, for high-achieving minority ethnic students). These dispositions seem to promote a responsive/transformative—rather than a reproductive—habitus (Mills, 2008) as their renewed determination to prove themselves and challenge social barriers have enabled a very different trajectory to the common struggles of nontraditional university students (Reay et al., 2010). Some of our HANT students were on a mission, underpinned by the view—through personal experiences or by perception—that a prosperous career will benefit from degree-level qualifications. The inconvenient truth is that nontraditional students must first navigate an unequal and reproductive higher education system, which privileges the rich. Our focus on social science students at post-92 universities, which have predominantly nontraditional students, did not unveil any obvious institutional or subject-specific factors to explain the academic success of nontraditional students. We highlight, more importantly, nontraditional students' different educational pathways within universities and disciplines, especially as high achievers.

Given this wider structure is often difficult to disrupt, a feasible approach going forward is to ascertain different ways of building dispositions of resilience and determination, especially for nontraditional university students. Intervention at compulsory-age schooling appears important if we wish to socialize and foster dispositions that can strengthen an academic habitus. Rather than an acceptance of the status quo, higher education policies (and especially widening/broadening participation agendas) should encourage prospective first-generation students to recognize and resist existing social barriers. University outreach programs and practitioners could, if not already doing so, actively and openly educate and discuss with young people the current inequalities in our society, drawing on data and research, followed by interventions that better prepare students to challenge these inequalities. For example, initiatives could focus on the development of resilience or a detailed breakdown of the explicit and implicit rules of the higher education game.

Perhaps the most prominent agent of change is that of significant others. Our HANT students recalled the influence of family members, peers, and staff as a catalyst in their

successful educational journeys. Many HANT students, in one way or another, received support and/or inspirations from others, although this form of capital emerged in more peculiar ways than Bourdieu had theorized. Rather than a reflection of social class positions, the type of significant others that supported academic success varied across our students, which suggests that access to this form of educational capital is not patterned. For our HANT students, these resources appear random and opportunistic, with different degrees of use and exchange values (Skeggs, 2004). The episode on staff support for assignment extension (i.e., Mala) illustrates the challenge for nontraditional university students to develop a sense of entitlement (and dispositions) to seek available support when needed. It was by chance that a reluctant Mala exercised her rights thanks to active staff intervention, and it is important to ensure that institutional processes do not dissuade students (especially nontraditional) from entitled support. This story serves as a reminder for higher education staff of the possibilities of the ripple effect, where seemingly small or minor “interventions” (e.g., study tips) could potentially and unexpectedly trigger new practices or ideas for (nontraditional) students that can reinvigorate pathways to academic success. We highlight the potential of study groups, often formed with university peers, as an educational capital that can positively influence attainment (Eggen, van der Werf, & Bosker, 2008). Our data show that generic (rather than specific) study groups can facilitate collective academic practices that are expected of their members (e.g., regulation of study time, see Masui et al., 2014), which are then developed as an individual's educational disposition and ultimately as part of their academic habitus. Here, an academically oriented culture of practice is created and policed by study group members, which seems to promote high achievement. Should educators be more proactive or prescriptive in the setup of student study groups? Given the success of these groups (or probably other schemes, such as mentoring, see Colvin & Ashman, 2010) rely heavily on the commitment of its participants, it is difficult to assume that timetabled, planned, or prearranged groups would necessarily yield the same outcomes as experienced by some of our HANT students. In short, significant others played a key role for HANT students even though the availability of this resource varied considerably and remains largely happenstance. With this dilemma, practitioners could advise students on the importance of peer study group but also emphasize and caution that successful groups are highly dependent on the commitment of their members.

This study offered empirical insights and examples of the academic success of nontraditional university students. On the whole, our data suggest that the emergence in HANT students is grounded on a fortunate stroke of serendipity. While we appreciate the mysterious ways that luck can open or close opportunities, our HANT students appear to have

taken full advantage of their available opportunities to improve their odds of success. It is important to recognize that opportunities, when presented by chance or by plan, can also be misrecognized and missed, just as available educational capital or resources can be underutilized or neglected (Wong, 2016). From this perspective, nontraditional students in particular will benefit from an awareness of the importance to convert their available opportunities into additional educational resources, which are often scarce and opportunistic. Universities and staff must play an active role to manufacture opportunities for academic development and ensure that students fully utilize their available support. The academic success of our HANT students provides a positive platform and assurance that structural barriers and the cycle of social reproduction can be disrupted. We identified three prominent agents of change that have developed our students' educational dispositions, capital, and academic habitus in the field of higher education. These resources separated their experiences from the common struggles as experienced by nontraditional students and enabled their trajectories as high achievers. Our HANT students may have the pieces of their puzzle fall in the right places, but the next challenge would be to emulate this pattern of success for other nontraditional students.

## Appendix

### *Student Interview Guide*

#### *Introduction*

Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?

- Parental occupation and education—level and discipline
- Why did you go to university? [Mature students—what made you want to do it now, rather than in the past?]

Why did you choose to study at this university? Probe: Distance, reputation

- How far do you travel to get here?

What socioeconomic background do you consider yourself? Why?

Did you take out a student loan? Any concerns?

Are you working at the moment? Or did you work during your university study?

- Type of work/hours per week?
- How much time do you dedicate to study? How often do you come into university?
- What do you do in the weekdays, when you do not have a class?

What ethnic background do you consider yourself to be? Age?

#### *Educational background*

How did you do in secondary school or college? What kind of school was it?

What subjects did you study? What grades did you achieve? How did you feel about those grades? (Better or worse than expected?)

How did members of your family feel about those grades?

What kind of student were you?

#### *Predicted first-class degree honors*

How was the first year of university for you?

- Was it very different to secondary school/college as you remembered it? What was different/similar?

How did you do academically in Year 1? Probe grades

How did you do socially? (i.e., apart from academic)

- Did you participate in extracurricular activities? Probe: Clubs, societies, or event associated with the university? Why/why not?
- How would you summarize your Year 1?

How was the second year of university for you?

What was the main difference compared to Year 1?

How did you do academically in Year 2? Probe grades and modules

How did you do socially? (More/less time?)

- How would you summarize Year 2?

How are you getting on in Year 3?

What is the main difference compared to Year 2?

Did you ever question your decision to study at university? Or your course?

How do you think you have developed in the last 3 years as a result of higher education?

#### *Assessment*

“I am aware you have a range of assessments throughout your study”

What kind of assessment do you like most? Why?

What kind of assessment do you like least? Why?

How do you prepare for your assessments? (Probe: essay, presentation, exam)

#### *Self-identity*

How would you describe yourself in terms of your participation in lectures or seminars?

If I was to ask a tutor about you, what do you think they will say? *Why?*

If I was to ask another student about you, what do you think they will say? *Why?*

Do you, or have you ever, been involved in any peer support or study groups? *Probe*

Do you get any support from your family in terms of your academic work?

- What about in the past? (A-level, GCSE?)
- What about private tutors?
- Websites? Forums? Online resources? Library?
- Course tutors? Staff/support at university?

#### *Current and future aspirations*

What degree classification would you like to achieve when you graduate? Why?

Do you know how your degree classification is worked out?

Do you think it matters if you got a first, compared to a 2:1?

What about 2:2, or a third? In what ways does it matter?

Probe CV, future job, study

When did you start thinking about degree classifications?

Why/how/in what ways?

Do you think employers look into your degree classifications? Why/why not?

Have you ever looked at, or considered, graduate training schemes? Why/why not?

Are first-class honors student regarded as smart or clever by their peers?

Would you say you are clever, smart? Why/why not? What about academically competent (what's the difference?)

Is it hard to get a first?

Why do you think some people will achieve a first and others do not?

What support do you think will benefit students to raise their grades?

Do you think there are any systematic or institutional inequalities that prevent some students from achieving their potential?

Why do you think you are doing well (or not so well, or almost well) academically?

What is it about you, do you think, that facilitated or promoted your high (or low, medium) achievement?

- Do you think gender plays a part here?
- Do you think social class plays a part here?
- Do you think ethnicity plays a part here?
- Do you think age plays a part here?
- Do you think English competencies play a part here?

If I was to ask you to share your experiences to new students coming into university, what advice would you give them if they want to do quite well in their study, like yourself?

What do you want to do after you graduate? *Why? What about when you first entered university?*

Any other questions/points to discuss?

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#### Notes

1. A first-class degree is the equivalence of 3.67+ (out of 4.00) in GPA. An upper-second class (2:1) is between 3.33 and 3.67 (see [fulbright.org.uk](http://fulbright.org.uk)).

2. Most post-92 universities have a historical orientation toward teaching and training rather than research.

3. An elite UK university typically refers to members of the “Russell Group” ([russellgroup.ac.uk](http://russellgroup.ac.uk)), which comprises 24 research-intensive institutions.

4. A-level is an academic qualification typically taken by students aged 16 to 18 in England, which is commonly used for university application.

5. Students typically study for three A-level subject qualifications. AAB means of the three subjects, two were awarded grade A, and one was awarded grade B.

6. Delivered by colleges, the Access to Higher Education Diploma is a qualification that prepares people without traditional qualifications (e.g., A-level) to apply for university ([accessstohe.ac.uk](http://accessstohe.ac.uk)).

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