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## A hope to trust. Educational leadership to support mature students' inclusion in higher education: an experience from Surrey, England

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### ABSTRACT

This article discusses a Transition Programme to support the inclusion of mature students in Higher Education. The Transition Programme was designed and it is currently provided by a Higher Education institution in Surrey, South-East of England. An outcome of innovative educational leadership, the Transition Programme' successfully solved the paradox of selection for admission to Higher Education programmes, in particular with regard to mature students. The English Higher Education system offers an interesting case for discussion, being caught between the principle of inclusiveness within a 'widening participation' agenda and the contrasting selective principle of 'recruiting with integrity'. The article is motivated by two main aims. The first aim is to contextualize sociologically, within a discussion on the related concepts of hope, trust and risk, the motivations underpinning mature applicants' choice to enter Higher Education. The second aim of the article is to argue for the capability of educational leadership to generate positive change supporting mature applicants' trust in hope for a successful inclusion in Higher Education.

### Introduction: the aims of the article

Selection to access HE is caught in a paradoxical position, between the principle of *inclusiveness* and the contrasting principle of *recruiting with integrity*. The negative effect of the paradox particularly affects mature applicants, because while *inclusiveness* promotes hope, *recruiting with integrity* imposes restrictive criteria based on academic skills and knowledge that usually represent the weakest aspect of mature students' profiles when they access HE from vocational backgrounds. This article discusses a project of pedagogical innovation, the 'Transition Programme' (TP, designed and delivered by Higher Education (HE) institution in Surrey, South-East of England). The article focuses on how the TP succeeded to solve the paradox of selection and inclusion in HE. In particular, the TP has been designed and implemented within a Foundation degree (FdA) in Early Childhood Studies. FdA stands for Foundation Degree Associate, a name that links to an old form of two years HE Diploma called Associate Degrees, offered by some UK institutions in the first

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half of the twentieth century. In the British HE system, honours degrees are the most common undergraduate courses. However, they are not the only way to achieve a higher education qualification. Students can also complete a FdA which lasts two years and combines academic study with workplace learning. A FdA is a combined academic and vocational qualification in higher education, equivalent to two thirds of an honours bachelor's degree, introduced by the government of the United Kingdom in September 2001. It is always possible for students to return to their studies at a later date, because there is no time limit on topping up a FdA with a third year of study, towards the achievement of a Bachelor's degree.

In the HE institution where the TP has been implemented, concerns had been raised regarding the potential impact of academic skills-based selection on applicants whose unique profile could not be fully measured or appreciated. The problem that the TP was designed to solve is that mature students deciding to re-enter education were at risk of being deprived of hope and harmed in their trust in education. However, the importance of the TP goes far beyond the solution of organizational dilemmas concerning the management of recruitment. The TP offers applicants who do not fully meet 'traditional' academic standards as defined by the HE sector and professional bodies, extra-provision to advance their academic profile and skills before they access HE. Mature applicants' transferable skills, agentic thinking and capability are acknowledged to support the offer of a place, whilst the TP secures the academic skills necessary to succeed in HE. The goal, both academic and ethical, of the TP is to offer mature applicants the possibility to transition and undertake academic progression building on what they already know and can do. This is in stark contrast with an approach based on a deficit approach of educational assessment that focuses on *what* mature applicants *do not do or do not know* (for an assessment of the 'deficit approach' see Snyder, Ritschel, Rand, & Berg, 2006).

The article is motivated by two main aims. The first aim is to contextualize socio-logically the motivations underpinning mature applicants' choice to enter Higher Education within a discussion on risk. Risk is discussed in its relationships with possible negative implications of selective processes for mature applicants' trust in the Higher Education system. The culture of modernity has conceptualized risk as the link between decision-making in the present and possible negative outcomes of that decision-making in the future (Beck, 2013). Risk therefore entails responsibility and accountability, at least at the level of self-reflection, for the decision-maker. Negative outcomes of selective processes may not only harm the academic career of the applicants, but also their well-being, self-esteem and happiness. Connected to the risk of failure generated by selection, the pivotal function of trust and hope as a support for students' risk-taking behavior is discussed. The second aim of the article is to argue the capability of educational leadership to generate positive change supporting mature applicants' hope. The TP is discussed for this scope, exploring pedagogical innovation and creative leadership that successfully transformed educational selection into an opportunity for recognition and celebration of applicants' diverse identities, experience and skills. The decision to access HE is an important event that shapes complex narratives of the self in the professional, academic and personal dimensions; negative consequences of the decision can damage not only academic careers but also self-esteem, self-perceptions of individual value and trust in hope. The TP is considered an important pedagogical

and organizational innovation and a good example of the impact that education leadership can have, well beyond academia. The TP aims to empower applicants by reducing the risk generated by selection while equipping them with academic skills that protect from subsequent failures in the academic journey.

## Literature review to build a conceptual framework

### *Conceptual framework 1: a sociological discussion on hope and risk*

‘What happens to declined applicants?’ ‘What happens to their hopes and desire to progress in their lives and careers?’ These were the questions that provoked one of the two authors of the article, who was at the time the newly-appointed manager of the Foundation Degree, to review rejected applications over a five years period. This was a decision and a process driven by concern for the harm that a rigid form of selection could do to the well-being of mature students aspiring to enter HE. There was a need to re-establish social connectiveness and support (Idan & Margalit, 2013). The outcomes of the analysis were used to design a 12-weeks program aimed to provide academic skills to applicants who would have been otherwise rejected, notwithstanding their motivation and professional experience. The TP was born; since the inauguration of the TP, applicants who would have been unable to progress academically due to ‘not meeting a set of academic-based criteria’ have been offered the opportunity to have their professional skills recognized and acknowledged, whilst enhanced by academic skills provided by the TP. This article argues that the TP positively engages with mature applicants’ risk-taking attitude, their perception of themselves as a learner, as well as their self-esteem, resilience, trust in the system and that peculiar perspective on the future called ‘hope’.

Hope is a requisite for risky decision-making, in situations where the outcomes of decisions are most uncertain (Coleman, 2017). The decision to access HE without the support of a standard academic background is a good example of a positive attitude towards risk, because applicants add uncertainty to a life-world that otherwise would be connotated by relative safety of well-known professional routines. Without hope and hopeful thinking, it is unlikely that mature applicants would choose to venture into the exploration of HE. Hope, as well as trust and faith, support risky decisions and motivate to challenge the familiar world of ordinary experiences (Kwong, 2019).

Like trust, however, hope is susceptible to disappointment because, unlike faith, hope does not operate in counterfactual ways. Milona (2019) convincingly argues that hopes are composed of a desire and a belief that the object of the desire is possible, reinforcing the theoretical position that counterfactual thinking does not fall within the realm of hope. For instance, failure can invite us to revoke hope, maybe to retreat to more familiar worlds (Stockdale, 2017). Individuals fluctuate between low to high levels of hope (Snyders, Ilardi, & Cheavens, 2000) determined by blueprints of behavior formed during life experiences and realms of reality that influence how outcomes of risky decision motivated by hope are reacted to (Ratcliffe, 2013). Individuals more inclined towards high hope are found to respond more positively to challenges using their resilience to ‘bounce back’ faster in comparison to individuals inclined to have low hope (Martin, 2011). Higher levels of personal hope motivate positive outlooks and self-perception so that

change, expectations and achievements are managed within a ‘can-do, do-do and will-do’ attitude.

Hope is both individual and social; individual because it can support individual decisions in situation of uncertainty and risk, social because like the decision to trust hope is influenced by personal experiences, contexts and interaction with others (Luhmann, 2005). It is here argued that the TP empowers hope by offering an alternative to the restrictive principles of selection on access to the FdA. Instead of being rejected, applicants can access the FdA even if they do not fully meet academic requirements, and the TP will prepare them before the beginning of the main taught program, the FdA in Early Childhood Studies. By reducing the risk of failure on access to HE, the TP makes risky personal projects more credible and supports applicants’ trust in hope. Trust in hope can be also conceptualized *as rationalization of hope*: as the likeness of the hoped-for outcome, in this case, success in HE, goes up, hope is transformed in rational foundation for decision-making (Schleifer McCormick, 2017).

For this reason, it is believed that the design, implementation and development of the TP are an example of progressive educational leadership that deserves to be discussed. Even the most successful academic journey starts with the shock of leaving familiar life-worlds (*displacement*, see Giddens, 1991) and inherited identarian labels (Fass, 2004, 2007) to enter a largely unknown territory such as HE (Risquez, Moore, & Morley, 2007). For mature applicants returning to education, the goal is to reach a destination from where it is possible to claim an empowered identity (Fleming, Loxley, Kenny, & Finigan, 2010), returning to the familiar world with the confidence and resources needed to reshape it (*re-territorialization*, see Deleuze & Guattari, 2004). Hope is here defined as a capability to project oneself in the future with some degree of indifference towards the risk of failure (Milona, 2019). Hope is therefore particularly necessary for mature applicants who leave safer, more familiar, life worlds (Taylor & Harris-Evans, 2018) to move into the unfamiliar, where their social networks are often unable to offer protection or support (Koranteng, Wiafe, & Kuada, 2018). However, hope can be harmed from the beginning of the journey, when the selection for accessing HE is not designed to value the skills and knowledges of mature applicants if they do not meet academic standards (Ramsey & Brown, 2018). From a perspective centered on the applicants’ subjective experiences, the TP can be understood as a leadership-driven innovation that transforms selective access to HE from a social situation where hope is challenged to a different social situation, where hope is celebrated and reinforced through support offered to applicants to strengthen their academic profile. This latter point is probably the core message that the article aims to develop in the next sections, not before some further conceptual clarifications.

### ***Conceptual framework 2: a sociological examination of selective access to higher education provision***

This article develops a discussion on the interplay between hope and organizational procedures, arguing that such relationships are not necessarily conflictual, as demonstrated by the TP. The TP is part of the professional experience of one of the authors as a tutor, manager and leader of a degree program in Early Childhood Studies (ECS), characterized by a sizeable population of mature applicants. Associated to the ECS undergraduate

provision, a Foundation Degree Programme (FdA) is also offered, representing the program of choice of mature learners working within the Early Years sector.

Most applicants who undertake the FdA are often the first in their family to enter HE, who may not have possessed entry qualifications or opportunities to access HE as a school leaver. The selection of applicants is based on the evaluation of a minimal set of academic skills and professional qualifications as well as experiences of working with young children, assessed through documentation presented by the candidate at interview and upon application. As for all selective processes in the education system, making selection to access the FdA an object of sociological analysis allows a rich variety of intellectual stimuli to emerge. The selection of FdA applicants is a regulated decision, enshrined in organizational procedures. Three sets of criteria define the general framework of the selection. Firstly, the selection must meet the requirements of 'recruitment with integrity' (applicants should be recruited only if they meet the minimum requirements to undertake the program of study). Second, selection must at the same time secure the principle of 'widening participation' (HEFCE, 2014, 2015, 2017). Already at the level of the most general criteria, it is evident that widening participation and recruitment with integrity can coexist only in a paradoxical relationship.

As selection must be implemented, two contrasting forces clash. Widening participation entails adjusting, often lowering, the threshold for admission, particularly regarding academic skills (Evans, Rees, Taylor, & Wright, 2019). On the contrary, recruiting with integrity means that applicants who are not expected to possess minimal skills or experiences to succeed should not be admitted onto the program of choice. The paradox is generated in the combination of an inclusive force, widening participation, with a selective force, recruitment with integrity. The necessity to solve such a paradox was one of the main drivers for the design of the TP as an instance of pedagogical and organizational innovation. The third set of criteria consists of the subject benchmark statement for Early Childhood Studies in England and Wales. The subject benchmark defines the expected Early Years professionals' competencies in terms of knowledge and skills (Early Childhood Graduate Practitioner Competencies, 2018; Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education [QAA], 2014). The subject benchmark clarifies what professionals must know as well as what professionals must be able to apply in practice (Lumsden, 2018). The benchmark contributes to profiling the persona of an *ideal* Early Years professional. By doing that, the subject benchmark allows to measure the similarity between the empirical applicant, in this case to the FdA, and the idealized professional, and from that to assess the credibility of the candidature. The subject benchmark therefore represents another selective factor which is added to the recruitment with integrity principle, limiting the scope of the widening participation approach.

Due to contrasting forces and the somehow contradictory nature of guidelines, the position of applicants to the FdA is most uncertain. Facing a binary decision is surely expected by the applicants, because the success/unsuccess distinction is so intrinsic in modern society that any selection process with either outcome appears natural and unavoidable. The paradoxical relationship between widening participation on the one hand, and recruiting with integrity and subject benchmarks on the other hand, is

a Gordian knot. Cutting the knot can be a practical and philosophical aim for educational leaders, a motivation for professional and personal engagement.

### ***Conceptual framework 3: a sociological analysis of the function of trust in decision-making processes***

The decision of entering HE necessitates hope, and hope necessitates a minimum of trust. Applicants to the FdA need to trust both the specific institution and the HE system. The applicants do not need to trust specific individuals, as much as a passenger does not need to trust the engineers who design airplanes. The applicants need another form of trust, directed to the functional elements of the system, for instance, trust in teaching, trust in student services, trust in assessment procedures. No applicant can consider all the complexities of the unfamiliar world of HE, therefore knowledge cannot support decision-making; rather, applicants will engage with teaching, student services, assessment or any other social situation and institution based on their trust in the system. It is agreed with Luhmann (2005) that trust in the system is easier to acquire than trust in the person. A great majority of individuals cannot trust expert systems in order to participate in basic social activities. It is an attitude of trust that transcends personal decision-making (Faulkner, 2015). Trust commitments towards expertise are a necessity for inclusion in social processes that are often made opaquer by hyper complex technology and organizational arrangements (Hawley, 2014). Trust in the system, differently from trust in the person, it is a necessity for participation in most social contexts (Giddens, 1991).

However, it is also true that the system of HE occupies a peculiar position. Differently from other systems, for instance, healthcare but also compulsory education, trust in HE systems is not imposed by dependence, that is, by the fact that the subject has no credible alternative to trust the system he or she must participate in (Baraldi & Corsi, 2017; Luhmann, 2005). Access into HE, and this is particularly true for mature students who might be otherwise living in a stable familiar world, still represents a risky decision (Trowler, 2015). A decision that is perceived as even riskier because is not necessary (Beck, 2013; Luhmann, 1991). With support from D’Cruz recent research (2018), it is here argued that trust must be thought as domain-specific, and trust in HE is intrinsically fragile and always revocable (Boronski & Hassan, 2015). The application and admission process for entering the FdA program is therefore considered an interesting example not only for the development of more inclusive and refined selective processes, but also as a window with a view to an important social situation such as selective interviewing. Selection is the first point of access to the HE system for many applicants and the first point where trust in the system of HE can be lost or reinforced, making hope towards academic progression more credible. This statement deserves more discussion.

The selective interview that applicants to the FdA face is the intersection between trust in the system and experience of participation in the system. Interactions during the interview and its outcome will impact on the applicant’s well-being, but also on the system. Giddens’ theory of trust (1991) is particularly helpful here, with the concept of *faceless commitments*. Faceless commitments are a product of modernity and depend on trust in the system. Giddens argues that any subject must trust systems, because it is

simply impossible to return to a situation where familiarity, that is, full first-hand knowledge, extends to all experiential domains.

HE is accessed through a system that is largely non-transparent for the applicants (as well as for the professionals working in it!). Participation in a selective interview demands trust based on faceless commitments. However, the interesting aspect of Giddens' theory is that it does not underestimate the connections between trust in the system and trust in personal trust. The selective interview is a situation where an applicant who vastly ignores most aspects of the system nevertheless encounters the system face to face. The selective interview is thus an empirical example of an intense interaction that either reinforces trust or reinforces skeptical attitudes towards systems. Giddens calls these situations *access points*, where the trusting relationship between the individual and the system becomes real or, using the vocabulary of Idealistic philosophy, where the relationship is *actualized*. Access points are situations where the individual evaluates the trustworthiness of the system (O'Neill, 2018). The applicants' trust, or distrust, towards the HE system, is not indifferent to lived experiences of selective interview, because trust is necessarily relational and level of trust depend on specific life-experiences; Domenicucci and Holton describe the interactive expansions or retreat of trust as a *two-place relation* (Domenicucci & Holton, 2017). If the perspective of the system is taken instead of the applicants', still access points are crucial spaces, characterized by a tension between the system and lay skepticism that make the system vulnerable.

Entering the interview room, the candidate has a limited knowledge of the system's culture, expectations and procedures. This applies both the HE system and to the specific HE institution as a local system, because each individual organization has specific sets of rules and procedures that differentiate it from the social environment surrounding it (Luhmann, 1982). The interviewer represents the expert system that the applicant must trust in exchange to his/her inclusion in it. During the interview, the interaction can either strengthen the applicant's trust or alternatively awaken suspicions and distrust. During selective interviews, emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983) is invested by the interviewee and the interviewer who manage their emotions and feelings in accordance with organizational expectations. Hochschild offers us a sociological understanding of emotional labor inviting us to consider i) how emotions are regulated and expressed by individuals ii) how the organization relates to roles, responsibilities and interactions. A selective interview, for instance, differs from a medical interview. Whilst the patient is not assessed (at least not primarily assessed) regarding the quality of his/her 'patientness', the applicant to the FdA is indeed assessed as a future student and a potential qualified professional. The selective interview is the access point to HE and the HE institution where experiences are made that will impact on the applicant's trust in the institution, on the applicant's trust in the HE system and on the applicant's trust in her/his own possibility of participating in HE. The selective interview has implications for the credibility of trust in hope.

#### **Conceptual framework 4: who is non-traditional? The semantics of mature students as they transition into higher education**

Hope supports the risky decision to enter HE, trust is needed to participate in HE from the first contact with the point of access on the selective interview. However, neither hope nor trust can change organizations until they are enshrined in decisions.



The second section of the article discusses how educational leadership can promote mature applicants' trust and hope. Like hope, selection leans to the future; like trust, selection looks back to the past and relies on expectations. The academic and professional biographies of the applicants represent the influence that the past holds on the selection process from the institutional point of view and this is probably as much important as the influence that the past holds on the motivations and decision of the applicants. After all, the aim of the widening participation agenda, that is, to overcome 'dispositional barriers' formed during previous education and/or life experiences (Department of Employment and Learning, 2010) connects hope in the future with decisions made in the present and past experiences. Moreover, the professionals at the access point to HE may be influenced by the past, for instance by inherited categorizations or established procedure and criteria that limit the possibility for decision-making. Such factors contribute towards expectations and projections on encountering the applicants during selective interviews (Snyder et al., 2000).

The acknowledgment of the importance of selection as the access point to HE imposed to one of the authors in her role of manager and educational leader to pay a great deal of attention towards the cues, often to be found in language, for categorizations and stereotypes about the applicants that could affect their experience of the access point to the institution. An example of her attention to the empirical cues for categorizations that can obscure the unique, multi-dimensional person of each candidate consists in her challenge to the label of 'non-traditional' attached to applicants to the FdA. Words do not only mirror but constitute social reality; moreover, the meaning of words is always a two-sided coin: one side what the words signify, on the other side, what the same words signify-not. This applies to 'non-traditional'; the meaning of non-traditional cannot be separated from the reference to what 'non-traditional' is not, that is, 'not non-traditional', 'traditional' and, with a small semantic leap, 'normal'. Subsequently, words hold meaning whilst at the same time project inherited cultural beliefs and dominant structures that are value-laden. Bakhtin's double-voiced discourse (1994) illuminates how words and dialog embed and reinforce power, conforming both consciously and unconsciously. For instance, the term 'non-traditional' is used to categorize a group of students entering HE mainly via vocational routes as opposed to traditional students progressing into HE from school education. The polarisation between traditional and non-traditional generate social semantics, such as a deficit model for those students/applicants who are non-traditional, as opposed to the 'normal' traditional students. A deficit model is the matrix to produce knowledge on non-traditional applicants, for instance, their need to catch up or make good, the need to reform themselves, the very idea that they are defined by their condition of need.

Alternative to this semantic field, another perspective is based on the idea that an applicant's decision to enter HE is an eloquent claim of empowerment, hope and trust. This perspective clearly invites new language to refer to the applicants, new words that do not entail a semantics of deficit, inadequacy, inferiority (Eraut, 1994). In her role as a manager and leader, the author chose the term 'mature' to replace 'non-traditional' in the planning and implementation of selection to enter the FdA.

### **Conceptual framework 5: mature students and the risk of moving to unfamiliar worlds**

The decision to access HE entails risking some degree of security regarding professional identity, emotional safety and self-esteem (Mallman & Lee, 2016). The acknowledgment of the delicate position of the applicants has been already presented as the ethical drive for one of the authors as an educational leader to implement the innovation of selective procedure for the access to the FdA program. Security refers to continuity of their self-identity throughout time; security is produced, and produces, what Luhmann (1988) defines the world of familiarity, 'one's haven and space'. A sense of undisputed reliability of persons and things is pivotal for security. However, the sense of reliability clearly depends on repetition and stability and it is therefore hindered during the movement towards, and immersion into, HE, which represents a highly unfamiliar world (Markle, 2015). Indeed, it is pertinent to wonder what does motivate applicant to make the risky decision to trade the *familiar known* for the *unknown*?

In previous sections, selection and trust have been discussed in a genuine sociological fashion, that is, they have been explained with regards to their function, in the classic sense of their ability to solve a social problem (see Radcliffe-Brown, 1952; Parsons, 1957). However, some more conceptual work is needed. Selection describes how the process works, trust accounts for the basic conditions of applicants' participation in the HE system. What is missing is a concept to explain what underpins the decision to apply for the FdA. In other words, there is a need for a conceptual tool to explain applicants' *motivation*. *Hope* lends itself for that important function. Like the concept of selection and the concept of trust, hope is discussed from a sociological perspective. In a social world that is too complex for any observer to compute, in a social world where any choice is made from a position of partial ignorance with regard both to its presuppositions and its consequences (Luhmann, 2005), hope is a basic need. Where there is hope there are increased possibilities for experience and action, because hope constitutes an effective support for risky decision-making. Complexity and uncertainty create the need for hope (Snyder, Rand, & Sigmon, 2002).

In many situations, of course, one can choose whether to hope, or not. But it is argued here that a complete absence of hope (hopelessness) would prevent participation in a complex society molded by risks (Beck, 2013). Hope can be used to describe an attitude or *disposition* (Dunn, 1994) towards risk-taking. Gilman, Dooley and Florell (2006) consider how hope dispositions can offer an insight into risk-taking attitudes. It is true that a gulf between the intended outcomes of purposeful action and the empirical reality of unavoidable uncertainty can be addressed through rational choices in the form of planning. This is the case for organizational behavior (Hernes, 2015). Planning is the reconstruction of an unknown future as a horizon of limited possibilities linked to choices, a horizon limited enough to be fully embraced by rational thinking. In other words, planning is a tool to create an artificial future-in-the-present, where uncertainty and risks can be reduced. However, planning does not provide motivation to run a risk in situations where other options would be available such as remaining in a more familiar world. '*If we always do what we always did, we will always get, what we always got*' is an eloquent adagio to motivate risky decision-making, but what about when what we got offers us relative safety?

This is an important point for discussion. The applicants to the FdA could remain within the boundaries of a familiar world, where the need for risky decision-making is limited (Mitchell, Kensler, & Tschannen-Moran, 2018). Utilizing the tools offered by phenomenology, familiarity can be defined as a subject's general view of lived life. In the familiar world, which is full of 'facts' that support expectations, trust is not problematized, and the need of hope is greatly reduced. However, the modern condition is one where the achievement of a totally familiar world is impossible. Participation in society forces risky decisions to be made. Familiarity is not built to reduce complexity, it is an alternative to complexity that appears to play a residual role in social contexts characterized by new possibilities, dependency, intransparency and lack of integration.

In their movement from a familiar to an unfamiliar world, planning might have helped some applicants to rationalize their decision to apply to the FdA. However, whilst planning can support decision-making it cannot motivate risky decision-making. This is the function of hope. The paralyzing uncertainty of an unfamiliar world where applicants are to sail uncharted waters cannot be reduced by planning, because planning is not credible within a largely unknown environment. Uncertainty is particular higher within HE, where complexity is reproduced at the level of the individual organizations (Latta, 2019). However, when uncertainty cannot be reduced by knowledge, still it can be reduced by hope. Hope allows some degree of indifference towards risks that cannot be erased because they do partially depend on the subject's choices.

From another angle, hope can be understood as support to decision-making in situations of risk that generate further cycles of risk-taking. The applicants to the FdA are obviously aware that possible negative consequences of the decision to apply would not have arisen within their familiar world. Hope supports the acceptance of unnecessary risks in situations where the alternative offered by the security of the familiar world seems to make the risk almost unacceptable. Underpinning an applicants' need for hope there are self-produced risks forcing them to make new decisions that were not necessary in their somehow smaller familiar world. This article conceptualizes hope within a modern society that is characterized by contingent structures and changing conditions (Luhmann, 2005).

In absence of hope, individuals' lives in a complex society would be led to, and led by, feelings of dissatisfaction and alienation. The absence of hope reduces the range of possibilities for rational action. Without hope, the subject does not have the attitude that enables him/her to take unnecessary, but potentially rewarding, risks. Generated through a robust theoretical discussion, this statement is considered as an effective way to present the relationship between hope, the decision to enter HE and the position within the HE system of the applicants to the FdA, at once robust and fragile.

## **Promoting mature students trust in hope towards inclusion in higher education. An experience from Surrey, South-East of England**

### ***Methodology***

Building on interviews with applicants as well as on the analysis of reflective observations in personal journals compiled by students during their academic journey,

the second section of the article develops a conceptual framework to enable the transfer of experiences and knowledge matured in the implementation of the TP to other similar situations. Data consist of 24 application interviews and 24 reflective journals. Interviews were audiotaped upon permission granted by the applicants, as specified in the ethics section. Reflective journals, which represented and still represent a requirement of the FdA program for students to record and interact with their thinking, experiences and challenges during the learning activities and independent study. Through reflective journals, professional and academic areas of daily life were used to reflect on, learn from and link to theory. Although reflective journals were discussed during classroom activities such as workshops and peer-reflections, a specific request for the use of the journals as sources of data for research was advanced to the students at the beginning of the TP, with a clear indication that denying permission or subsequent withdrawal were not going to have any impact on the student's learning journey and personal academic progression. A copy of the reflective journal of each participant was collected at the end of the TP.

Participants in the researches were adults, age between 25 and 51 at the moment of data collection and outside of institutionalized education for at least 5 years. The great majority of the participants, with the exception of one, were female. This unequal distribution by gender reflected the nature of the Early Childhood workforce at the time of data collection, and still reflects it. Characteristically for FdA applicants, no participants had completed a HE program of studies at the moment of the interview. Due to the vocational nature of the FdA, all applicants, and participants in the research, were employed in the Early Years sector in registered nurseries, in schools nurseries as teaching assistants, or as registered childminders. For the applicants, a FdA, and possibly a subsequent full degree presented an opportunity for professional progression towards managerial positions, as well as towards teaching qualifications.

Two non-probabilistic sampling methods have been used in the research. The first one was purposive sampling. The research discussed here is limited only to mature prospective students who applied to the FdA program in ECS offered by the HE institution where one of the authors was working as program manager. The nature of FdA programs contributed to the exclusion of younger individuals taking a traditional progression route from post-secondary education, as those subjects apply to an ordinary undergraduate program. The second sampling method, connected to the first, was convenience sampling. For this research, participants meeting the selection criteria of the purposive sampling were approached asking for the permission to use their application interview and their reflective journals as sources of data for possible future research, and their inclusion in the research depended on their willingness to accept that.

The research was based on a methodological choice, that is, to consider applicants, and students, narratives as a pivotal resource to allow a phenomenological description of the semantics of participation in HE. Narratives are conceived as social constructions, in which the observed reality is interpreted and presented at once through series of stories that express knowledge and constitute the context for the production of knowledge, including knowledge about the self. In line with previous research on the narrative construction of identities (see for instance Amadasi & Iervese, 2018) the production of narrative is approached as a form of agency towards the construction and negotiation of identities through personal stories (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou,

2008). In particular, two types of narratives appear to be tightly intertwined in the production and socialization of identities through stories. 1) narratives of personal life concern pivotal events that define personal biographies underpinning 2) narratives of the self, concerning opinions, emotions and relationships (Somers, 1994).

Narrative analysis is an extension of the interpretive approaches within the social sciences. Narratives lend themselves to a qualitative enquiry in order to capture the rich data within stories. Narrative analysis takes the story itself as the object of study; thus, the focus is on how individuals or groups make sense of events and actions in their lives through examining the story they produce (Riessman, 1993). This approach to study is not new to qualitative sociology. Sociology has had a history of ethnographic study including the analysis of personal accounts. However, with ethnography it is the events described and not the stories created that are the object of investigation: language is viewed as a medium that reflects singular meanings.

Under the narrative movement and criticisms of positivism, the question of textual objectivity has been challenged by social constructionism (Gergen, 1997), encouraging many to approach narratives as social constructions, that are social in the sense they are exchanged between people. Narratives constitute rather than represent reality. As such, life stories are a linguistic unit involved in social interactions and are therefore cultural products, in their content and form (Linde, 2001). Language is therefore seen as deeply constitutive of reality, not merely a device for establishing meaning. Stories do not reflect the world out there, but are constructed, rhetorical, and interpretive (Riessman, 1993), lending themselves to a phenomenological analysis. Linde's concept of life stories as cultural products and Riessman's interactive rhetoric allow to approach interviews as a product of a dialog co-constructed and continuously re-interpreted by the researcher and the participants. The narrative approach to the analysis of interviews and reflective journals applied in the research hereby presented is posited to have the ability to capture social representations 'in the making'. Narrative analysis is well suited to study subjectivity and identity largely because of the importance given to imagination and the human involvement in constructing a story (Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992).

This research was underpinned by a robust and sound ethical framework. The research was approved by the Colleges Ethics Committee, based on the provision of information sheets and informed consent forms to applicants to the FdA at the moment of their interview. Consent was sought relating to collection and processing of data produced through application interviews and reflective journals and collected in written form. Participants involved in the research were fully informed about any possible future use of the data. Ethical practice will prevent any opportunity of participants being singled out as individual. The informed consent contained an explicit request to agree with the use of video to disseminate the result of the research, specifying the level of dissemination. All research activities were undertaken ensuring there is no harm to participants and data was stored securely adhering to the Data Protection Act 1998, which was the most updated data protection regulations at the time of the research. However, upon examination, it is evident that the storing and protection of data would be fully compatible with the new EU General Data Protection Regulation, promulgated in 2018.

Research requires sensitivity regarding power and vulnerability that relates to social relationships; this research is based on data collected within an ethical framework that

can be described as doing ‘research with’ participants, rather than ‘research on’. All participants were offered the opportunity to ask about the implications of the use of data for possible future research. The consent to the use of application interviews and reflective journals as data was completely voluntary and applicants were informed that the refusal to allow their interview or reflective journal to be used as data was not going to be detrimental for the outcome of the application.

Any potential breach of confidentiality and data protection in relation to research data were minimized using protected storage. The audio-recorded interviews and copies of the reflective journals, collected at the end of the academic year, were stored in a locked cabinet within the college’s facilities only accessible by staff. Raw data were accessible only by the researcher, and processed data does not include any reference to personal data, in order to prevent identification. All references to participants or third parties have been completely anonymized in the data presented as part of the discussion within this article or any other event of public dissemination.

The discussion of data is organized in two sections. In the first section, the paradoxical coexistences of the principles of inclusiveness and recruitment with integrity will be discussed in its relationships with applicants’ ascribed identity within the largely unknown environment of HE. Applicants’ expectations, reflections on risk and hope will be discussed also considering current literature on the position of mature learners in education. Transcripts from the application interviews will be chiefly used as sources of data. In the second session, students’ experience of the TP will be analyzed based on the reflective journals they had compiled during the TP. In line with the pioneering work of Risquez et al. (2007), as well as in light of the methodological framework underpinning the research presented in this article, the analysis focused on the narrative construction of students’ identity as they moved into HE.

### ***Results and discussion 1: cutting the knot. Combining selection with inclusiveness***

FdA programs were introduced in 2001 as a pillar of the ‘widening participation’ agenda of the Labour government. FdA are equivalent to the first two years of an honours bachelor’s degree; their scope is to enable those working in a specific sector to progress academically, professionally and personally by systematizing and exposing to critical reflection their experience, skills and expertise. On completion of two years of full-time studies (always organized to allow employed people to attend the lectures and seminars, for example, by scheduling them one evening a week and one Saturday a month) students can choose to undertake a top-up year towards an honours degree.

While governments’ policies over the best part of two decades have been recognizing the need for more inclusive HE to support social mobility, the paradoxical nature of the selection processes has often failed in creating the conditions for inclusion. Cutting the Gordian knot at the intersection of inclusiveness and selection was the scope of the innovation discussed in this article to combine: 1) effective delivery with positive outcomes for student achievement and experience (according to the ‘recruiting with integrity’ principle, see also UK Quality Code by the Standing Committee for Quality Assessment, 2018); 2) inclusiveness to empower and celebrate applicants’ hope and trust. The selection process is the point of access where applicants’ hope encounters the reality of organizations with a dramatic impact on their trust. How was the Gordian knot cut?

The solution developed was to bypass the unsolvable dilemma between selection and inclusion by *incorporating inclusion into selection*. Incorporating inclusiveness into selection was underpinned by an understanding of the selection process not as a gatekeeper but as the first step in the learning journey. Selection not the nemesis, but as the celebration of hope. The combination of inclusiveness and selectivity has been achieved through the design and implementation of the ‘Transition Programme/ TP’. The TP was planned as a compulsory short course to applicants who did not fully meet the academic standards at the point of their enrolment. The first challenge for the TP was that the majority of FdA mature applicants had not undertaken previous academic study, often without GCSE in core subjects identified by HEFCE (2017), by the Children’s Workforce Development Council (2010) and by the QAA (2014). The severity of the challenge was clear to the applicants as well. This is suggested by the following comments shared by applicants on their reflective journals. Reflective journals are a requirement of the FdA program for students to record and interact with their thinking, experiences and challenges. Professional and academic areas of daily life were used to reflect on, learn from and link to theory. The comments from the reflective journal also suggest the dynamic coexistence of hope (otherwise the applicant would have never moved towards HE) and negative expectations based on reflective narratives of past educational experiences.

- I never thought I would be able to undertake a degree
- No one in my family has ever been to college or university
- I don’t know if I can do it, am I clever enough?
- What happens if I fail my first assignment will I get chucked out?
- I’m not very good at maths and never will be
- I’m not very good at writing or English
- What happens if I don’t get onto the program, what else can I do? Is that

When asked why she wanted to access the FdA program an applicant commented, during the interview:

I never had an opportunity to continue studying at 16, there was never any other expectation other than getting a job. University was never on the landscape for my parents or me. In fact, even at school I never had any conversation about the possibility of going to university. Those children that did were high flyers, in all the top classes and sets. They had an air about them that we all knew meant they wouldn’t be working at 16 like the rest of us ... it was unsaid ... or just expected

The comments and the excerpt from an interview indicate that not only the culture of HE, but also applicants’ self-identities were focusing on deficit from the past, rather than hope for the future. Penn (2005), Ben-Ari (1996), and Wolf (1990) refer to forms of acculturation to account for the power of negative expectations and their influence towards risk-avoiding behavior.

I want to go into teaching and see this as a route where I can continue earning money whilst I study. I like the idea learning with those in practice so I can learn from them to develop my thinking. I am not a great writer, I can say something clearly, present my ideas

but writing it down into a structured construct is challenging for this has put me off applying, because I think I might not pass

What emerges from the excerpt is a battle between hope and expectation of negative outcomes of a decision based on hope. The applicant is pointing to what she could not or had not, rather than what she has achieved in her profession. There is hope, there are aims and goals, but what is missing is the empowerment and confirmation of hope based on the celebration of the things that applicants are good at (Mezirow, 1991). Career progression is an important factor of motivation for mature students, particularly if the access to HE is integrated in a detailed and timed life-career plan (Wong, 2018). The importance of professional development for progression is clearly presented by applicants as a determinant of the risky decision to enter HE; this is explained by Smith (2018) as the pursuit of social and cultural capital in order to align self-identity and aspirations with the position in the professional settings.

I will learn a great deal by doing a degree to develop my skills much more ... that is my inspiration ... to learn more and be acknowledged financially and professionally for what I do and who I am.

However, mature students can be very sensitive to what they feel as a mismatch between hope and the reality of their position vis-à-vis academia (Ramsey & Brown, 2018).

I have high personal expectations of myself although pressure from life at times has prevented me to reach my goals. Also, my high expectations put fear into me which prevents me from moving forward

Differently from many 'bridge programmes', the TP is not only, and not primarily, designed to provide academic skills to mature students to enable them to achieve their ambitions; rather, the TP challenges the narratives of the self-constructed by applicants, valuing their existing knowledge and experience as part of their academic progression, developing teaching and learning activities on case-studies related to them.

An applicant, when invited to present something positive about herself to capture her strengths to match selective application criteria, was particularly negative about her profile. As one of the authors asked in her role as admission tutor

So, with all of those barriers you have self-assessed and identified, what influenced you to still apply for this programme? What inner strengths do you have inside you that took no notice of those barriers and got you to this stage of your progression?

The applicant looked at her unable to answer and after one minute tears rolled from her eyes. The question was about hope, but the applicant could not translate her hope in confidence, finding it easier to focus on her challenges. Such an emotional response communicates that previous educational experiences have been negative; at the same time, the same response communicates that the applicant knows that there is more to her than the label she identifies herself with (Ashforth, 1995). Prensky (2001, 1) reminds us that 'our students have changed radically. Today's students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach'. Yet, the need to label and measure continues. Not narratives of the self that position students in a disadvantaged position in HE, but also expectations concerning the HE environment can disempower mature students, as suggested by Katartzi and Hayward (2019)



I have only realised after all this time that full time at uni is not Monday to Friday, 9 to 5. My idea of university was that I had to attend full time, attend class every day, and learn something from scratch. My perception of what a university student should be did not match who I am. I didn't think my profile or past experiences were good enough or 'right'. I didn't think I would fit in, belong or connect with those studying at Uni

As suggested by the excerpt, entering HE for mature students with a solid professional position implies the movement from an established position within a familiar lifeworld to an unfamiliar world; this generates an acute sensitivity for risk. Interestingly, the expert also displays an expectation concerning HE disregard for the applicant's existing professional and vocational knowledge and skills. '*Learn something from scratch*' suggest the idea that professional knowledge and experiences are not relevant in HE. As explained in the first section of the article, one of the TP aims is to challenge such assumption, valuing what the mature applicants could bring into the FdA from the first contact between applicants and HE, the selective interview. It is believed that this is one of the innovative and unique aspects of the TP: combing the provision of academic skills, as many other programs do, with the recognition and celebration of the diverse knowledges that mature students bring with them. Academic skills are provided through workshop and exercises that are linked with the professional experiences of mature students, rather than prescriptive 'how to study' handbooks.

The stories of colleagues who have undertaken HE studies can contribute to make the unfamiliar more familiar, reinforcing hope and motivations.

I want to learn more about what I do with children and why I do it. I really enjoy my job and I like impacting on the lives of young children although after undertaking a Diploma and starting work I have not studied further. I have some colleagues at work who are doing a degree and they have inspired me. They talk about what they do and I would like to do that. They moan about assignment deadlines but when they talk about what they are studying and doing, I like the ideas they bring back to the nursery and I think they are good ideas

However, not many applicants seemed to be included in professional or personal networks that offer example of successful transition into HE. In most cases, applicants' narrative concerned an individual and often solitary struggle between prescribed identity and ascribed identity. The excerpt below, taken from an application interview, suggests that the gulf between the identities can be a source of motivation (Mallman & Lee, 2016), even if the decision to enter HE can generate some instability in the construction of self (*Now I don't know myself fully, really*).

I want to look at myself differently, differently from how I am seen by my family, friends and particularly work colleagues. They all think they know me and know what I can do, but they really don't seem to know me fully. Now I don't know myself fully really. I want to do this, and I am making the opportunity for this to happen not. I have found the right time in my life but also in my head

In some circumstances, applicants narrate their decision as a challenge not only to prescribed identities but also to unfair practices that they experience. HE can be an instrument to force management to acknowledge the voice of the applicant as a professional.

Recently, I planned parent engagement meetings and our nursery home visits and during the welcome meeting it was the teachers who were acknowledged by the Head during the welcome introduction and I was not even mentioned or considered for organisation which I feel was totally poor practice

An instrumental approach to HE is not at odds with issues of self-identity; unfairness in the workplace relates both to economic treatment but also to the lack of acknowledgment of the applicant's professional status. HE can be an investment in view of financial returns (Tomlinson, 2017) but it is also the starting point of a narrative of rebellion against prescribed identity that do not match how applicants see themselves.

To be honest, I run the nursery in school and I am training staff on double my salary (or more) who haven't got a clue about early years and learning through play. This is probably a big motivation for me to apply. They have a degree and are getting paid so much more than me, for having less skills, experience or creative ideas of how to engage with children. I really don't mind training them up. I enjoy it although it irritates me that I have to do a degree to be acknowledged for what I do, for what I know. Those people managing me have no idea at times!

The commitment of the TP to value and celebrate the existing skills and knowledge of applicants is therefore not only addressed to challenge situations of low self-esteem and fear; the TP also aims to present HE as an environment where self-narratives of high professional stature are acknowledged. This is connected to research that invites to conceptualize mature students' transition to HE utilizing Deleuze and Guattari's idea of *de-territorialization*: the established professional finds him or herself surrounded by an environment where knowledge and experiences developed in other environments seem not applicable (Taylor & Harris-Evans, 2018). Based on this analysis, and although the de-territorialization effect cannot be prevented as related to an ontological shift in the life-story of the applicant, the TP was designed to contain the negative effect of de-territorialization by presenting an image of the new territory, that is, HE as a territory where previously developed skills and knowledge still had value and could be used. The TP is an example of educational leadership transforming HE into a *habitable* territory for mature students, and an example of the potentiality of innovation at the level of pedagogical practices as previously discussed by Uslu and Arslan (2018). In the case of the TP, pedagogical innovation that generated change at organizational level consists in the provision of academic skills based on the discussion and reflection on the professional experiences of students (see Figure 1).

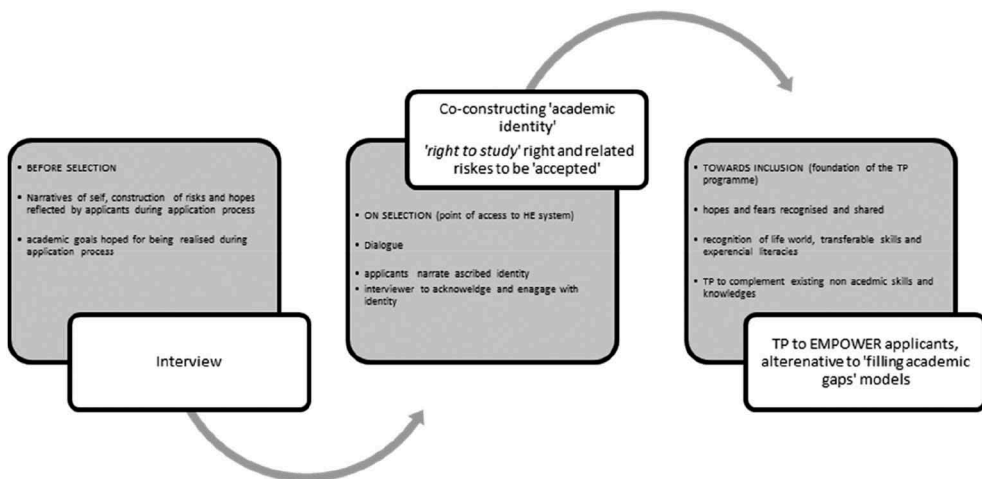


Figure 1. Selective process as an opportunity to empower mature applicants.

## **Results and discussion 2: 'working with students, not probing applicants'. The organization of the transition program**

The architecture of the TP was based on the idea that instead of setting mature applicants up to fail by measuring their academic profile at the point of access through the selective interview, it is possible to tackle personal and academic barriers (considered to be intertwined, see [section 2.2](#)) during the FdA program, that is, from inside HE. McKenzie's (1990) reflective framework was utilized to transform the selective interviews in data to inform the development of the TP that was designed as a program of transformational learning, where the development of knowledge and skills support change in the student's self-identity (Mason, 2018).

To implement a transformational learning framework, the TP devises three strategies: 1) to offer extended time to complete the two years program; 2) to identify short courses or training opportunities to support skills deficit; 3) to strengthen the relationship between academic mentors and employers to offer work-based learning. Analysis of vocational and academic skills during recruitment enabled leadership to open a progression route constructed specifically to meet mature students' needs, without neglecting the institution's statutory duties. Over a decade, the TP has been offering applicants a bespoke program, transforming selection from a barrier to the first step *inside* HE, therefore into a celebration of hope. In other words, the TP transformed potentially inadequate applicants to be excluded from HE into students to be supported from *within* HE.

The evaluation of interview records from previous cohorts of applicants and the review of online level two tests that applicants are required to take before the interview takes place (in English HE level two corresponds to the academic standards for successful completion of secondary education or equivalent) suggested to the leadership of the FdA that underpinning the lack of academic qualifications was the need for support regarding spelling, grammar, essay structure, ICT, online research, how to use library resources, speaking in front of peers, difference between descriptive and evaluative writing. The results of the evaluation of interviews records and review of online tests align with similar results produced in other contexts (Faulkner, Fitzmaurice, & Hannigan, 2016; Hay, Tan, & Whaites, 2010; Smith, 2018). The TP was developed as a modular and sequential provision; modular because the academic barriers are challenged by tutors and students through specialized modules; sequential because the TP is organized to allow the use of newly achieved academic skills as a tool to overcome further barriers. The sequential organization of the TP is influenced by Skemp's (1989) relational learning theory of purposeful deep level learning to support the identified skills deficit.

The delivery of the modules is largely guided by Fowler and Robbins (2006) idea of mentor-mentee cooperative reflection where perspectives and outcomes are challenged, guided and provoked to consider other possibilities. The choice of looking at the delivery as a social situation involving a mentor and a mentee rather than a teacher and a learner was quite innovative with respect to the culture or the institution; however, the idea of cooperative reflection entails something more: according to Fowler and Robbins, whilst the mentor's expertise has the responsibility to offer a framework of support, the mentee and the mentor learn from each other.

Cooperative reflection is therefore an alternative to the well-known scaffolding model, because the mentor is prepared to ‘dance with the mentee’ following the mentee lead, for instance utilizing mentee’s reflection on personal and professional experiences as a foundation for learning. Learning becomes a cowritten and always changing textbook (Schön, 1987). Within a cooperative reflection model, pedagogical leadership supports students’ self-efficacy and self-determination; learning and teaching is directed to empower students’ capabilities, ultimately making their hope more credible as they progress into HE.

The excerpt below, taken from a reflective journal entry that a student wrote at the end of the TP illustrates its empowering effect, fulfilling the aim of working to enrich, not to erase, students’ self-identities.

Constructing a development plan that focuses on things I want to get better at or things that I am not doing so well at is so powerful to make me much more aware of my values and belief system. The reflective self-auditing process provoked me to unpick layers that build up and contribute to outcomes, enabling me to not see everything as one outcome but rather there are many contributing challenges that make up that an outcome. To reflect on those things in my personal, professional and academic life it exhausting and invigorating, I am more proactive in my thinking things through to make changes rather than expecting thing. Plus my confidence is stronger now!

The TP represents an alternative to traditional bridge program that operates within a ‘filling the gap’ framework. Rather than looking at what the students do not have. The TP looks at what the students have, and link academic development to the knowledges that students brings to the classroom: academic success is pursued through, and not despite mature students’ identities. The TP adapts and implements for and *with* mature students in HE the work of self-efficacy models with younger students’ in secondary education (Gannouni & Ramboarison-Lalao, 2018). The rationale of the TP and its ethical drive is to empower applicants at the point of access into HE, in order to create a situation where hope is associated with success, therefore reinforced. TP secures the development of the required academic skills in the course of the FdA working with students after admission, as opposed to the established selective procedure that would ask applicants to demonstrate academic skills as a condition for admission. It is a program aimed to support mature students in building cultural capital (academic skills) and social capital (participation in HE), that are recognized by recent research as the main motivation for the risky decision to enter HE (Smith, 2018). The excerpt below is a reflective journal entry that suggests the multidimensional impact of the TP both on the construction of cultural capital (self-reflection) and in the construction of social capital (interacting with peers).

Talking with peers about my concern and lack of confidence when engaging with parents has enabled me to realise how other people also feel quite similar but in a variety of ways or in different circumstances. I thought it was just me who becomes so nervous. Somehow talking it through and using SWOTs to analyse my own barriers has boosted my confidence. I have now tried so many ways to try out new approaches and mind set. I now state my point, argue if I don’t agree and have a firmer understanding that often there isn’t right or wrong but merely different opinions. The TP enabled me to break challenges down much more, linking theory to understand what makes me so nervous and what my fears were. This has been liberating, not only at work, but personally as well

As suggested by the excerpt, building cultural and social capital is not only related to career profession (Tomlinson, 2017) but also to the development of communication skills and possibly more active forms of participation in the public debate, outside the professional context. See also the reflective journal entry below

I didn't realise how many forms of communication there are. Rather than just talking, it's the emotional literacy, the language and power or words that are used pragmatically to control or limit. This topic has totally opened up so much opportunity, and so much insight

The TP may be approached also from a perspective focused on its positive impact on social justice which is one of the most discussed points in the debate around innovative educational leadership (DeMatthews, 2018). A broader concept of social justice, for instance, includes students' capability to renegotiate their position within inherited structures towards self-realization and construction of more complex and dynamic identities (see also Mason, 2018). This is what the excerpt below suggests

Family said they would support me whilst I do a degree although in hindsight we didn't know how much things would change. I am not at home as much so others have to pick up cooking, cleaning, shopping etc which they didn't want to. This has caused a lot of challenges. And at work, at work I have to leave earlier one day a week and my manager is making it very difficult for me. Hence I have developed negotiation skills, argument and use of language to move things forward whilst being able to relate these points to psychology and sociological theory

*Working with students, not probing applicants* could describe the innovation brought by the TP. As a 'bridging course' between academic levels, the TP offers a solution to the paradoxical coexistence of selectivity and integrity in recruitment on the one hand, and inclusiveness and empowerment of mature students on the other hand. Hope can be damaged by negative outcomes of decision based on it; however, hope can be reinforced when decisions based on it prove to be successful. Like trust, hope can be a learnt experience after experience, until it becomes a structure that orientates social behavior. Since its inception, funding for the TP has been provided by students' fees as well as by local stakeholders and boroughs aiming to upskill the workforce. Once the TP was designed, a first cohort of 18 students were contacted after their interviews offering them a place in the FdA Early Years on condition of undertaking a 12-weeks course designed to support their academic skills. In a nutshell, this is the solution to the paradox of selection and inclusivity that innovative educational leadership brought to the fore: embedding inclusive practices (the TP) into selection (conditional admission). Twelve students who previously would have not been accepted onto the program agreed to undertake the TP.

From the first year, the face to face delivery of the TP has been scheduled to meet the needs of students who are employed, running from 6 to 9 pm in the evening. The organization of each session (with a high degree of flexibility to accommodate the personal input from the student) is based on a first part focussed on induction to the use of computer and to library and college resources; a second part is devoted to reflective professional and personal skills. During the second part of the session, students undertake SWOT analysis to identify personal, professional and academic Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. Academic skills are then introduced

through reflection on activities and case-studies and dialog is fostered within a community of practice framework that promotes participation (Fleer, 2003). Both parts of the sessions are designed to help develop a learning community which, as suggested by UNESCO (2003), is considered vital to provide students with the skills to function effectively in a dynamic, information-rich and continuously changing environment.

The TP is careful to not introduce an ideological contrast between academia and employment, between knowledge and skills. On the contrary, the TP looks at how students already analyze, evaluate, argue and synthesize within their personal or professional life, building on academic skills from that. The aim of the TP is to enable students by translating already applied skills from life experiences and practice into academia. An example of this pedagogical strategy concern the empowerment of students' reflective skills through the inclusion of others' perspective, towards the development of dialogical intelligence. Dedicated session where facilitation of dialog is implemented. Presenting students with role-models within a participatory and collegial framework for reflection. An entry from a reflective journal highlights the wide-ranging impact of facilitated dialog

Conscious and unconscious theory along with my own thinking has probably been one of the biggest challenges for me on this course. Exploring that others do not see things in the same way as me was an eye opener. It actually made me angry, emotional and at times in disbelief that others thought so differently or could be so flexible. I smile looking back at how inflexible or green I was at the beginning and when I reread my journals I cringe a bit but smile and love how much I have grown. This learning impacts on my well-being as well as my practice and personal role as a mum and partner

During the delivery of the TP, the teaching staff gather data and feedback from students asking them to explain what challenges they experienced and felt could prevent progression. Anonymized questionnaires are distributed monthly to allow students to evaluate the TP in light of their needs. Combined with the reflective journals, evaluative questionnaires allow a continuing analysis of what students may want from the program, in line with student-centered pedagogies in HE (Katartzi & Hayward, 2019; Markle, 2015; Wong, 2018). Continued students' feedback allows reflection on action to be undertaken (Altrichter & Posch, 2000; Dewey, 1966; Gannouni & Ramboarison-Lalao, 2018; Moon, 1999; Schön, 1987), enabling what Loughran and Berry (2005, 2) define as a 'developing pedagogy', that is, a pedagogy

organised with a curricular focus based on explicitly modelling particular aspects of teaching so that we can unpack these aspects of teaching with our students through professional critiques of practice

One example of developing pedagogic for transformative learning was the inclusion of time-management skills in the TP, following students feedback through reflective journals; for almost a decade now, time-management is a core component of the TP, with a positive impact on students beyond academia, as suggested by the excerpt below

Time management has been a challenge for me to ensure work, family and University commitments are met. Reflection and the use of SWOT analysis has enabled me to look at how I utilise my time (or not) and how 'time thieves' take my time or how I let them.

Based on feedback on observations, translation between academic and professional life has become the main tool for teaching, proving to be extremely effective and supportive in establishing hope, realizing ambition and increasing student recognition of what they were already able to do and would be able to build upon in the future.

### **Conclusion: a paradox in higher education solved through innovative leadership**

On conclusion, and upon reflection, the authors would suggest that the article fulfilled its two main aims. The first aim was to contextualize sociologically the motivations underpinning mature applicants' choice to enter Higher Education within a discussion on hope, trust and risk, presented as three interrelated concepts. The article provided conceptual clarification to enable the reader to use hope as a tool to contextualize sociologically the motivations underpinning mature applicants' choice to access Higher Education by approaching that choice as a movement from the familiar world to a more complex world, characterized not by repetition of patterns and behaviors but characterized by risky decisions. The second aim of the article was to argue the capability of educational leadership to generate positive change supporting mature applicants, and students', hope. This aim was achieved by presenting the Transition Programme, a project of pedagogical innovation designed to promote inclusiveness while securing recruitment with integrity into Higher Education. From an institutional perspective, the Transition Programme is addressed to transform a selective process from a stressful and potentially hurtful clash between applicants' hope and institutional rules into a celebration of mature applicants' hope. However, and the authors believe most importantly, the Transition Programme has been, and still represents, an investment to preserve and celebrate applicants' trust in their own hope. The importance of this aspect cannot be underestimated because, linking back to the theoretical discussion in the first part of the article, hope is a necessary tool to support decision-making in complex, unfamiliar and therefore uncertain environments. Since its inception, the TP has been delivered to many cohorts of students. The most interesting piece of data refers to the observable correlation between less restrictive selection at the point of access and increased levels of retention and progression from the FdA to a full degree. An apparently impossible coexistence of inclusiveness for wider participation and selectivity entailed in recruitment with integrity was secured by the Transition Programme, protecting applicants' hope from the *Moloch* of bureaucratized selection. When applied in organized and resourced strategies, educational leadership can successfully implement a more inclusive and more empowering education.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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