

**Accommodating diversity within occupational therapy education: exploring the experiences of non-traditional students.**

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Marking the intersection of the fields of higher education (HE) and professional practice, pre-registration occupational therapy (OT) education in the UK is subject to various government agendas, including an ongoing commitment to widening participation in HE and to diversifying the health and social care workforce to reflect modern social cultural. With 67% of the 2005 intake classified as mature (COT, 2007) and increasing numbers entering with non-traditional academic backgrounds, the OT student population in the UK is changing. Compared to more 'traditional' students, the skills, prior experiences and expectations of students with non-traditional academic backgrounds may generate particular challenges in negotiating the transition to, and persisting and succeeding within HE (HEFCE, 2002; Walker et al., 2004). Students from such backgrounds who graduate from OT programmes are as academically successful as traditional school-leavers (Howard and Jerosch-Herold 2000; Shanahan 2004), but there is little evidence offering insight into how they actually experience and negotiate the demands of their programmes of study.

This paper considers the educational experiences of OT students from a range of non-traditional academic backgrounds. Thirteen volunteer participants were recruited to a longitudinal exploratory case study centred in one of the UK's research intensive universities, and data were collected via focus groups, reflective diaries and semi-structured interviews over the course of participants' studies. Theoretical thematic analysis of data was underpinned by Bourdieu's key conceptual tools of habitus, field and capital. The findings reveal the complex nature of participant's engagement with HE, highlighting a number of key issues including the high-value status of linguistic capital, its relationship to understanding the rules governing practices within the learning environment, the processes via which students manage to adapt to or even resist the dominant culture of the educational field, and some of the barriers to finding a legitimate position within it.

This study illuminates student experiences in a powerful way, highlighting that failure to acknowledge the pervading culture inherent within individual HE institutions and to recognise the often unspoken demands that define legitimate presentation of knowledge and understanding is likely to impede efforts to diversify the graduating student body and the OT workforce.