

Article

# Mature Students Matter: The Impact of the Research Development Fellowship in Accessing Art and Design Education

Samantha Broadhead 

Research Department, Leeds Arts University, Leeds LS2 9AQ, UK; sam.broadhead@leeds-art.ac.uk

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**Abstract:** In the United Kingdom, the number of mature students studying in higher education is diminishing. This is also the case within the subject of art and design. This article reports on a project “Mature Students Matter,” a study that aims to widen participation in art and design education within a small specialist university. The approach was developed from a Research Development Fellowship, which provided a model for the project. A case study is used as a method of inquiry through which the project is described and evaluated using a form of narrative inquiry. The study found that the principles of Joint Practice Development (JPD) underpinning the design and development of the project enabled practitioners from different parts of the university to work together and to share similar aims, objectives and values in their research. Drawing some tentative conclusions, the project also found that the wider institutional context was important in the success of the project.

**Keywords:** mature students; art and design; post-compulsory education; education; access; widening participation; practice-focused research; joint development practice; student life cycle; educational practice

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## 1. Introduction

In the United Kingdom, the number of mature students studying art and design in higher education is diminishing. This article reports on a project “Mature Students Matter,” a study that aims to widen participation of mature students in art and design education within a small specialist university. It asks if developing collaborative relationships between researchers and widening participation practitioners is a viable strategy for promoting the value of mature students in higher education. Fielding et al. [1], James and Biesta [2] and Coffield and Williamson [3] have all argued for the importance of practitioners carrying out their own research. This can have benefits for the individual educator, their students and the wider institution. Can close-to-practice research (sometimes referred to as practitioner research) have an impact on the achievements of mature students?

This article offers a reflective account that considers the impact a Research Development Fellowship (RDF) project had on widening participation in further and higher education in England in programs of art and design and, more widely, on the close-to-practice research culture operating in a small scale and specialist institution, which is referred to here as “the University.” A case is made for developing collaborative relationships between researchers and widening participation practitioners as a means of promoting inclusive practices and research in further and higher art and design education. The argument is made by describing the guiding philosophy of the RDF, which is informed by the principles of Joint Practice Development (JPD), and by exploring how this approach could be applied to various educational contexts. The RDF programme facilitated various collaborations between further education (FE) or work-based learning practitioners, and Sunderland University Centre of Excellence in Teacher Training (SUNCETT). Participants were mentored by experienced educational researchers

affiliated to SUNCETT supporting them in the conduct of small close-to-practice research projects. The article is based on a case study that evaluates the RDF project based on the experiences of an Access to Higher Education (HE) course leader and a widening participation practitioner and their joint development of a project called “Mature Students Matter.” The effectiveness of the JPD approach when applied to an initial project and then later to “Mature Students Matter” was analysed, along with the longer-term impact that this activity had on the research culture of the University.

### *Context*

The Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) and the Institute for Learning (IfL) initially funded the original RDF programme that was delivered by the SUNCETT team. SUNCETT has continued to develop and improve iterations of the RDF programme that were then subsequently supported by the Education and Training Foundation (ETF). The RDF is now being expanded and developed into the current Practitioner Research Programme (PRP). The author engaged with the RDF as a participant when the author was working as an Access to HE course leader in a small specialist Arts University (Access to HE courses enable mature students to progress to higher education) [4]. The author undertook the RDF programme alongside other FE and work-based learning practitioners from across the United Kingdom. The fellowship mentored practitioners so that they were able to carry out small research projects. Ultimately, the aim was that the projects would have positive impacts on teaching, engagement, learning and assessment. The SUNCETT team acted as critical friends for the participants as well as providing support through workshops and lectures at three residential events throughout the year. There was also an opportunity to hear from guest speakers who were at the forefront of research in their fields of research in post-compulsory education.

When the RDF programme first began, the author’s own institution had a limited research culture made up of a small number of interested lecturers who had a personal commitment to close-to-practice-research. The University had, over the past 160 years, contributed significantly to the development of art education in Britain, having pioneered new ways to teach and to structure qualifications in creative subjects. From the 1950s to the 1970s, there was a reappraisal of art education, largely based on ideas developed at the University, where a Basic Design course was established on the ideas from the Bauhaus [5]. The Bauhaus was a German art and design school that promoted the experimentation with processes and materials before students specialised in a particular discipline, such as textiles or metalwork. In 1960, the University began to offer courses that encouraged an open-ended, creative and flexible approach, leading to a new art education philosophy nationwide. This shared historical context was one that influenced the way in which staff thought about their own teaching and creative practice.

Currently, the University comprises two main campuses, one focused on further education and another providing undergraduate and postgraduate education. It delivers a range of specialist and general art and design further education courses at one site, which is mostly self-contained and separate from the other. The second site houses the resources, workshops and course areas that service the University’s higher education. Many of the teaching staff work solely on one campus or the other, but rarely on both. There are limited opportunities for staff from the two sites to meet together, although there are times when staff development and training activities for both sectors occur. The separation of further and higher education teachers has led to two distinct cultures being developed on each campus. Consequently, when issues occur arising from internal progression of students, from the Access to HE course to higher education, for example, then these issues are more challenging to address collaboratively. During the last five years, the numbers of Access to HE students progressing within the University to study their degrees in art and design have declined. At a national level, the numbers of mature students entering higher education continue to drop [4]. There are many reasons for this such as the decline in part-time study opportunities, the introduction of student loans, and the decline of adult and continuing education opportunities. There could also be an impact from new learning technologies such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs).

The author undertook the RDF programme in 2010 concentrating the research on the transition of students from the Access to HE course to higher education, initially focusing on those who continued to study at the University. The Access to HE courses are aimed at older people who have not been in conventional education for at least a year and do not have the conventional entry qualifications for art and design higher study [6,7]. These mature students range from ages 20 to 70 and upwards. They often come from diverse backgrounds and have previous life experiences [8,9]. Entry to art and design higher education can be achieved by gaining accreditation at Level 3 (pre-degree) but also by the preparation of a portfolio of creative work which is often discussed at an interview as part of the application process [10]. An important aspect of Access to HE courses is the support they give to students as they prepare their portfolios and practice talking to others about their work. In their role as an Access to HE course leader and tutor, the author wanted engagement within the RDF programme to lead to an improvement in the transition of students from the Access to HE course to the next stage in their learning journey.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Joint Practice Development

Calucci-Gray et al. [11] argue that research has had an increased impact on educational policy and that this has been unsatisfactory. They contend this because the research had been carried out by universities on teachers in schools and colleges rather than with them. This led to research that practitioners did not engage with, and a gulf grew between research findings and educational practices in the classroom (or, in this case, the art studio). In order to encourage educational practitioners to become more engaged with scholarship and research, the RDF programme sought to develop participants' research skills and encourage critical thinking through a respectful and collaborative process.

The RDF programme modelled an approach called Joint Practice Development (JPD). This was a response to the criticism of the cascade model of staff development [12]. JPD starts with the premise that good practice cannot be easily passed on from one group of practitioners to another for two main reasons. Firstly, cascading good practice can be seen as divisive because it promotes the idea that one group of people has good practice and another does not. This underpinning assumption potentially creates an unequal and perhaps resentful working relationship [12]. Secondly, the context in which practice is performed is not always deeply considered; what is good practice in one area may not be suitable in another. It could be proposed that all educational practices need to be constantly modified to fit contexts that are constantly evolving [13]. JPD offers a framework where practitioners and researchers can work together to improve their research practices in their particular fields. Rather than passing or cascading research practices to and from colleagues, a more sustainable process needs to be considered; a process that develops relationships and trust between two or more groups of professionals. Through these relationships, ideas can be explored together in depth and over time [1,12]. Many factors need consideration when undertaking a JPD project. These include practitioner and institutional identity in practice transfer, learner engagement, and an understanding of the time needed to engage successfully with the process [1]. JPD can be understood as a move towards the ideal of democratic-professionalism that proposes co-operation between practitioners and other partners as an alternative way forward to the market model of education [3].

JPD is a process where relationships between bodies of staff, who may not work together on a day-to-day basis, are developed. Firstly, the participants' values, aims and objectives are shared. If there are any differences, then these are openly acknowledged by participants who wish to develop their practices collaboratively in the spirit of being open and transparent. Stoll et al. [13] write about the "practice creation" that is driven by a reciprocal exchange between two members of staff (or two bodies of staff) where one is the "originator" and the other a "receiver." However, in practice the process is more interactive than this suggests because both parties can possibly contribute to the skills, experience and knowledge exchange. The two parties aim to create new practices that are informed by their

dialogic encounters [1]. Secondly, the two groups of staff observe and discuss each other's practices. Thirdly, based on the discussions, improvements in practice are decided and implemented whilst considering the particular contexts where they will be performed. Finally, both groups of staff evaluate the success of the changes that have been made. This was the approach employed by SUNCETT to develop the research skills needed to investigate Access to HE students' experiences of transition and progression to HE. The SUNCETT team modelled JPD; the author then applied this approach with colleagues within the author's own institution. In particular, the JPD processes provided the Access to HE teaching team with a means of working with HE staff in order to improve the transition of Access students within the University.

Further developments led to collaborations with a wider range of professionals to support the progression of students such as the widening participation team, the Student Union and higher education staff.

## 2.2. Case Study and Narrative Inquiry

### 2.2.1. This Qualitative Research Study has been Drawn Together in the Form of a Case Study

Yin [14] would define this study as a single, embedded case study model, where many cases (those of mature students, widening participation practitioners and Access staff) are contained within one main case. Such an approach allows for findings, conclusions and recommendations to be contextualised within the "Mature Students Matter" project, while also potentially being applicable to other institutions and contexts. This is what Shenton [15] qualifies as transferability, rather than generalisability. "Trustworthiness" is another quality of the case study [16,17].

Bassey [17] argues that the case study approach is very suitable for research in educational settings due to the complex nature of educational contexts and interactions between people within the educational process. He stresses the importance of constructing a case study method underpinned by both trustworthiness and an ethical respect of the person. He describes the outcomes of case study research as "fuzzy generalisations" in that rather than seeking to find an absolute truth or law, the research aims to say what happened within a particular context and that it *could* happen within another one. In other words, claims derived from case study research refer to what is possible, likely or unlikely [17]. The construction of a detailed and rich description of the context is an important contribution towards trustworthiness, as is providing a coherent and chronological narrative account of events and processes [17].

Stenhouse [18] describes the case study approach as being different to research conducted using samples from which generalisations are made. This is because case studies depend on descriptive verisimilitude or close interpretation of complex relationships between subjects and contexts.

Elliott and Norris [19] explain Stenhouse's critique of the dualism between theory and practice and his conceptualisation of practitioner research as corresponding to Aristotle's phronesis, which was about considering the best course of action in a particular situation for the common good. From this perspective, an accumulation of cases can inform the exercise of phronesis or practical wisdom. Stenhouse goes on to say that studying one's case as one lives the case could be based on the case study tradition where, "the objectives of education and the study of education can be fused in action" [18] (55).

Bassey [17] regards case studies as theory-seeking or theory-testing; story-telling and picture drawing and evaluative. The "Mature Students Matter" case study draws upon the theory-testing and story-telling aspects of the case study approach.

### 2.2.2. Narrative as Part of the Case Study Approach

Chase [20] identifies five approaches that are based on narrative inquiry. These are used by: narrative psychologists who examine how stories influence people's lives; narrative sociologists who are interested in the role of narrative as a means of constructing the self; sociologists who use interviewing to see how people construct meaning from language use narrative; anthropologists who

construct ethnographic accounts and narratives to explain their engagement with individuals or small groups, and finally, auto-ethnographers who use narrative dialogue and memory to study their own experiences. Butler-Kisber [21] adds another strand of professional researchers who used narrative, referring to the work done in education by Clandinin and Connelly [22] who use narrative to explore experience. They draw upon Dewey's [23] pragmatics and the belief that experience/thought comes from the continuous interaction with the environment.

Clandinin and Connelly [22] write that education is a form of experience and that narrative is the best way of representing and understanding it. They go on to say that narrative is both the phenomenon and method of researching educational processes. Narrative inquiry is therefore a way of understanding experience. The lenses of narrative inquiry are based on Dewey's concept of situation, continuity and interaction. They represent the personal and social (interaction), the past, present and future (continuity) and the place (situation). This means that a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space can be constructed [22].

### 2.2.3. Data Collection and Analysis

Clandinin and Connelly [22] write extensively about the process of narrative inquiry starting with data collection in the form of "field notes." In the case of "Mature Students Matter," this comprised of photographs; written observations; testimony from participating staff and students; email correspondence and evaluation. From the field notes a narrative case study is then constructed that aims to provide a descriptive verisimilitude that is trustworthy and ethical.

Clandinin et al. [24] stress the need for relational ethics that are considered over time throughout research and beyond, where careful attention is given to the potential future impact of narratives on the lives of others. Nichols [25] argues that practitioner research should be done 'in anguish' where internal questions about what the best way to proceed should be asked so that participants are protected while their stories are told to improve practice for others.

The researcher has a privileged position within narrative inquiry in that they do not simply relay the stories of others but represent and interpret them [26]. A commitment to academic integrity entails a responsibility in telling the research story whilst acknowledging the positionality of the researcher.

The case study narrative based on the "Mature Students Matter" project is analysed in order to test Fielding et al.'s model of Joint Practice Development [1]. The discussion and tentative conclusions are to some extent contingent on the contexts in which they are produced, but they can be transferred as "fuzzy generalisations" to new contexts by and for researchers and practitioners.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Initial JPD Project in the University

The initial project was instigated by the team of Access to HE tutors, including the author, by sending out an invitation to HE colleagues asking them to take part in cross-sector activities designed to improve the transition of Access to HE students to higher education. From this call for collaborators, three higher education lecturers from three different degree programmes expressed an interest. After meeting and discussing the project with the higher education staff, it was agreed that working together to develop studio critiques would help students' transition between the sectors. Studio critiques are a signature pedagogy of art and design education, and there is a growing body of research that has been developed in this field [27]. The shared understanding of art and design pedagogy was something that the two groups of staff could build upon, as they shared a common legacy of innovative art school practices. A schedule of shadowing was then proposed and agreed. Three Access to HE tutors were selected to shadow and observe the higher education teaching and learning in action within the studio. Two members of the Access to HE team were part-time and would have usually had few opportunities to network with colleagues in higher education. This project provided motivation for these relationships to be initiated and maintained. The JPD structure enabled

a diverse range of staff from further and higher education to work together whilst developing their own teaching practices. The Access to HE teachers were responsible for arranging a time when they could shadow a HE studio critique session. They made notes after the observed session about what they had seen, and discussed their findings with both further and higher education colleagues.

One of the studio critiques was delivered by the BA (Hons) Art & Design interdisciplinary course in order to promote a sense of ownership of the learning process. The HE lecturers and the Access to HE teachers had the opportunity to share their observations and insights about studio critiques. After the sessions took place, possible strategies for developing Access students' confidence were then formulated.

A group of mature students from the Access to HE course were also able to observe the studio critiques. They were able to talk to HE students about what their experiences in the degree course were. The mature students found that the process helped them to feel confident and believe that they were ready to progress onto higher-level study. They were able to discover if progressing to higher education was the right course of action for them. Undergraduates and recent graduates later brought their portfolios into the Access to HE studio and were asked to share their work and discuss their own progress, which was well received by the Access to HE students. Further and higher education teams were able to learn about each other and from each other.

The immediate impact of the project was that the two groups of professionals identified common professional values and understandings of art and design pedagogy. The structure of studio critiques were refined and tweaked in relation to the context in which they were delivered. Ultimately, 'buddy' systems and summer schools were set up especially for mature students so they could become more confident in presenting and talking about their own art and design work.

An insight into other professionals' positions within art and design education brought to light differences and similarities in what was valued within the educational process. The exposure to other educators' perspectives through observation and discussion influenced teacher identities through the stories professionals told each other as well as in their other communications. Expressions of cultural values, norms and structures were also passed on through discussion [28,29]. The exchange of ideas with other art and design educators led to a deeper understanding of the issues mature students face when they progress from Access to HE courses to higher education, with particular reference to the studio critiques.

Colleagues from SUNCETT acted as mentors throughout the project and encouraged the Access to HE team to disseminate their reflections on the JPD approach through poster presentations at the British Educational Research Association (BERA) annual conference and the LSIS Research Conference in 2012. These public and national presentations also made the small project more visible to the University's academic leaders. This recognition had a big impact on the Access to HE team's sense of professional identity because that they began to see that close-to-practice research could be an important part of their academic role.

### *3.2. Continuous Legacy*

The RDF project continues to have a longer-term impact on the wider research culture of the University and on the author's professional career. From 2012-13, the author was asked to undertake a research advocate role within the University. The author was able to establish a research cluster comprising further and higher education academic staff from across the institution who were interested in researching teaching, learning and assessment, as well student transitions. There was also growing interest from the University's widening participation team. By working collaboratively and flexibly, and by following the JPD approach, the cluster facilitated regular opportunities for the dissemination of close-to-practice research and supported people in developing their own projects and practices. At the same time, more staff from the University began working with SUNCETT on the RDF programme.

A number of research clusters grew within the University. In 2016, there were four research clusters that investigated ideas pertinent to an arts institution such as, pedagogy, crossing borders, technology

and curatorship. The function of the research clusters was to support staff in their own scholarly and research interests within a participatory and collegial framework that was also cost effective. The long-term impact of this work has been threefold: individual professional development, improved student experiences and the development of communities of practice. The growth of the research clusters coincides with evolved thinking at the senior management level about the role of scholarship and research within the University. This was clearly articulated through the University's strategic plan, which aims to: "Support our staff and help them to develop their research practice; encourage internal collaboration; and, through external networks and meetings, enhance subject-specialist knowledge (especially as it relates to teaching and learning)."

### 3.3. Mature Students Matter Project

The "Mature Students Matter" project developed from the pedagogy and widening participation research cluster. It was a collaboration between the author as a researcher, an Access to HE tutor and a widening participation practitioner, based on shared interest in issues around widening access and participation in the arts. The team met together and recognised that they shared common values around the importance of widening access and participation in art and design higher education. Through their professional experiences they had shared understandings of the capacities mature students can bring that potentially can enhance the student experience for everyone.

The aim of the project was to demonstrate to a wide audience (policy makers, community groups, other widening participation professionals and educators) that mature students bring capacities such as organisational skills, resilience, resolve, practical wisdom (*phronesis*), strategic thinking, and being open to opportunities. The positive impact a good education can have on the individual can also be extended to the communities from which the mature students come.

The three collaborators planned a "Mature Students Matter" event where artists who had once studied on an Access to HE course in the past were invited to present their creative work to an audience of other mature students, widening participation practitioners, policy makers and educators from outside the University. The participants were also asked to recount narratives about their educational experiences and what happened after they finished their formal education. These stories were filmed and placed on the "Mature Students Matter" pages on the University website.

There were examples of mature students leading collectives, exhibiting in groups, and providing services for local areas or communities. Two examples are the stories told by Jake and Eliza.

Jake was someone who had studied using a part-time Access course in art and design and, because of his previous experiential learning, was able to undertake postgraduate study, achieving his Master's in 2016. Then with his partner set up "Art School," which held regular art workshops for young people after school and evening adult creative courses. In addition, there were regular weekend day courses that explored drawing through stitch, printmaking and life drawing. Jake (2018) claimed, "My sense is that the arts in schools is at an all-time low but there is a seed change. Access and undergraduate study needs to be defended...the only available route for many at the moment."

Jake went to talk about how some of the students had used the sessions to prepare a portfolio so they could attend an Access to HE course themselves. Thus, a progression route had been made into formal education for those who needed it.

Eliza, another person who had previously studied on an Access course, finally completed her undergraduate education and then went on to postgraduate study where she was able to take part in an international residency. This turned out to be a critical incident in Eliza's story leading her to make the courageous decision to take time off from her paid work to develop her own creative practice outside the United Kingdom.

As part of an Erasmus+ project with a social design collective (Brave New Alps, 2019) Eliza travelled to Rovereto, a city and commune in Trentino in northern Italy. Once she had established herself there, she set up sewing workshops for female refugees and migrants. Using her textile skills

Eliza (2019) aimed to, “find out what their future is e.g., stay in country or return if possible, what they want their future to be and how they can make this happen?”

She aimed to, “capture these questions/thoughts through visuals – by writing, mark making or drawing on fabric. This would then be embroidered and eventually ‘gifted’ back to the women.”

Eliza worked on her project for three months, which has motivated her to develop more projects that used sewing as a means of instigating social change.

This work had an impact on the policy of the institution where the research has led to a change in practice by the widening participation team and the Student Union undertaken to support and encourage mature students through the student life cycle.

#### 4. Discussion

JPD was an effective approach in bringing different groups of staff together who would not normally have worked together collaboratively. This model allowed them to develop their practices so that the transition of Access to HE students to art and design higher education could be improved. It was significant that the studio critique on the Access to HE course was selected as an area of common interest between creative educators. The project led to a means of developing students’ confidence and critical thinking, so they were better prepared for higher study. Access to HE staff felt invigorated in their teaching practice and this was brought about by learning from their colleagues in higher education. The interactions between people tended to be collaborative rather than adversarial so the process encouraged a sense of mutual respect and understanding between groups of staff. The JPD model encouraged staff to believe in their own agency and wisdom when improving their practices.

This approach did have one particular problem, in that it required staff time when they reported being very busy. To solve this, the funding allowed Access to HE staff to take time out of their teaching timetable in order to undertake the observations and discussions. Normally this would have been very challenging because the teaching workload of FE staff can be very demanding. Also, structural and cultural differences between the sectors threatened to disrupt the initial project. For example, the different ways in which the academic calendar and teaching days were structured meant that identifying opportunities when Access to HE educators and widening participation staff could work together was very difficult. In addition, some members of staff within the University perceived the development of research and scholarship as problematic because they did not see this kind of activity as part of their professional identity. Research practice was associated with the ‘otherness’ of higher education and “not for the likes of them.”

There were problems with extending the initial project and scale-up to include more participants. Projects remained modest in scale and reach, focusing on issues that were relevant to those particular staff. However, even small-scale projects can have far-reaching impacts (Broadhead, 2015) [30]. The JPD project, which was supported by the RDF programme, was a catalyst for future development. The author continued to work with SUNCETT and became interested in developing own research interests through a doctoral study into the experiences of art and design Access to HE students over three years. The author was then able to change roles and was charged with helping to develop the University’s wider research culture. This has seen the growth of the research clusters and ultimately the “Mature Students Matter” project.

Staff from different areas of the University are able to support each other in their own research interests; however, managing teaching commitments, outreach work, resources and research activity continues to be a challenge.

The RDF showed that staff from different sectors could work together towards common goals. This continues today, where staff from Access to HE education and the widening participation team come together through the research clusters to tackle common projects and issues. However, it must be acknowledged that this is also possible because it is in the University’s strategic plan to develop research as a means of improving teaching and learning. A developing research culture needs many



factors for its continued success, including individual engagement, resources, infrastructure and a strategic vision.

This case study of a particular RDF project supports the notion that collaborations between different groups of practitioners can be successful where there is mutual trust and understanding between the two parties. Knowledge transfer and research skill development can provide a catalyst for further ambitious projects and a change in University research cultures. Insights from practitioners with particular experiences of educational processes can also be of benefit to university departments. In addition to this reciprocal relationship, the JPD process identifies those aspects of practice and the underpinning values that all educators share. Data from this study shows that this commonality can be the basis for creativity and innovation through dialogic exchange within and across institutions.

The results concur with authors Fielding et al. [1], James and Biesta [2] and Coffield and Williamson [3] where they argue that when practitioners carry out their own research the benefits can be seen by the students and the institution, promoting democratic education. Practitioner research can have an impact on widening access for mature students; however, such impact is not immediate. Narrative inquiry that reflects on events over time is an effective means of seeing the connections between early practitioner research activity and longer-term impact on students.

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