

Welcome

to RSEC18 Conference

**Complexity in Research:
Researcher–Participant Dynamic Interactions**

3 July 2025

9:00 - 16:30

University House,
LS2 9JR



**UNIVERSITY
OF LEEDS**

Morning Session Presenters

- **Reflections on insider/outsider positions in participatory educational research.**

Carolyn Bradley, PGR, School of Performance and Cultural Industries, University of Leeds

- **Navigating Insider-Outsider Positionality: Reflections on Researching Mature Students' Access to Higher Education.**

Janith Jayatilake Kankanamalage, PGR, School of Politics and International Studies, University of Leeds

- **A Messy Interrelated Ecology: Situating Researcher in the Rhizome of Research.**

Samuel Lee, PGR, School of Education, University of Leeds

- **Developing best practice guidelines for research with the bereaved: Practitioner perspectives.**

Elizabeth Fair, PGR, School of Music, University of Leeds

- **Lived Experience and Its Influence on the Researcher-Participant Connection.**

Clare Copley, PGR, School of Education, University of Leeds

Jani²h Jaya²ilake Kankanamalage

PGR, School of Politics
and International Studies,
University of Leeds

**Navigating Insider
Outsider Positionality:
Reflections on
Researching Mature
Students' Access to
Higher Education**

Navigating Insider-Outsider Positionality: Reflections on Researching Mature Students' Access to Higher Education



Presenter:

Janith Prabashwara Perera,
Jayatilake Kankanamalage



18th Research Students' Education Conference

**"COMPLEXITY IN RESEARCH:
RESEARCHER-PARTICIPANT
DYNAMIC INTERACTIONS"**

Based on:

**Mature Students' Perceptions of Accessing Higher Education in England:
A Case Study on a London-based Alternative Higher Education Provider**

Journal of Equity and Social Justice in Education

Perera, J.K.J.P. and Kulappu-Thanthrige, H.S. (2024)



Journal of Equity and
Social Justice in Education

Introduction



‘Mature Students’ Perceptions of Accessing Higher Education in England: A Case Study on a London-based Alternative Higher Education Provider’



2024 Published Paper

Focus: Mature students’ access to higher education in the UK

Context: Research conducted at a London-based alternative HE provider

Framing the Study



Access as Equity: Theoretical framing



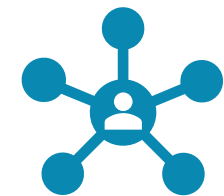
Importance of access to HE and role of alternative HE providers



1) What motivates Mature Students to access HE?



2) What barriers challenge Mature Students to access HE?



3) What support mechanisms/ networks assist Mature Students to overcome challenges to access HE?

Research Methodology



A Qualitative Inquiry: To examine the perceptions (perspectives and experiences) of mature students in HE



A Case Study Research Design: A Case Study on a HEP in London



Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):
Served as our key Research Method to
Collect data

*03 FGDs were conducted: with the participation of
06 to 09 mature learners in each.*



A Thematic Analysis: To draw
Conclusions & suggest
Recommendations

Positionality and Reflexivity Statement

- *It is important to acknowledge the positionality of the researchers in this study, as thematic analysis is inherently shaped by their perspectives, experiences, and interpretative frameworks (Jowsey et al., 2021).*
- *Both researchers possess substantial experience and knowledge in the higher education sector, both in England and internationally, having navigated these spaces as students and faculty members.*
- *Their expertise provided a nuanced lens for analyzing the collected data, enabling a deeper understanding of the participants' lived experiences while contextualizing findings within broader educational and socio-cultural dynamics.*
- *This positionality, however, also required reflexivity to ensure interpretations remained grounded in participants' narratives rather than researchers' biases, which the researchers actively implemented throughout the study.*



Researcher Positionality

Insider-outsider dynamic

- Insider: Professional experience, institutional familiarity
- Outsider: No lived experience as mature students

Researcher Positionality

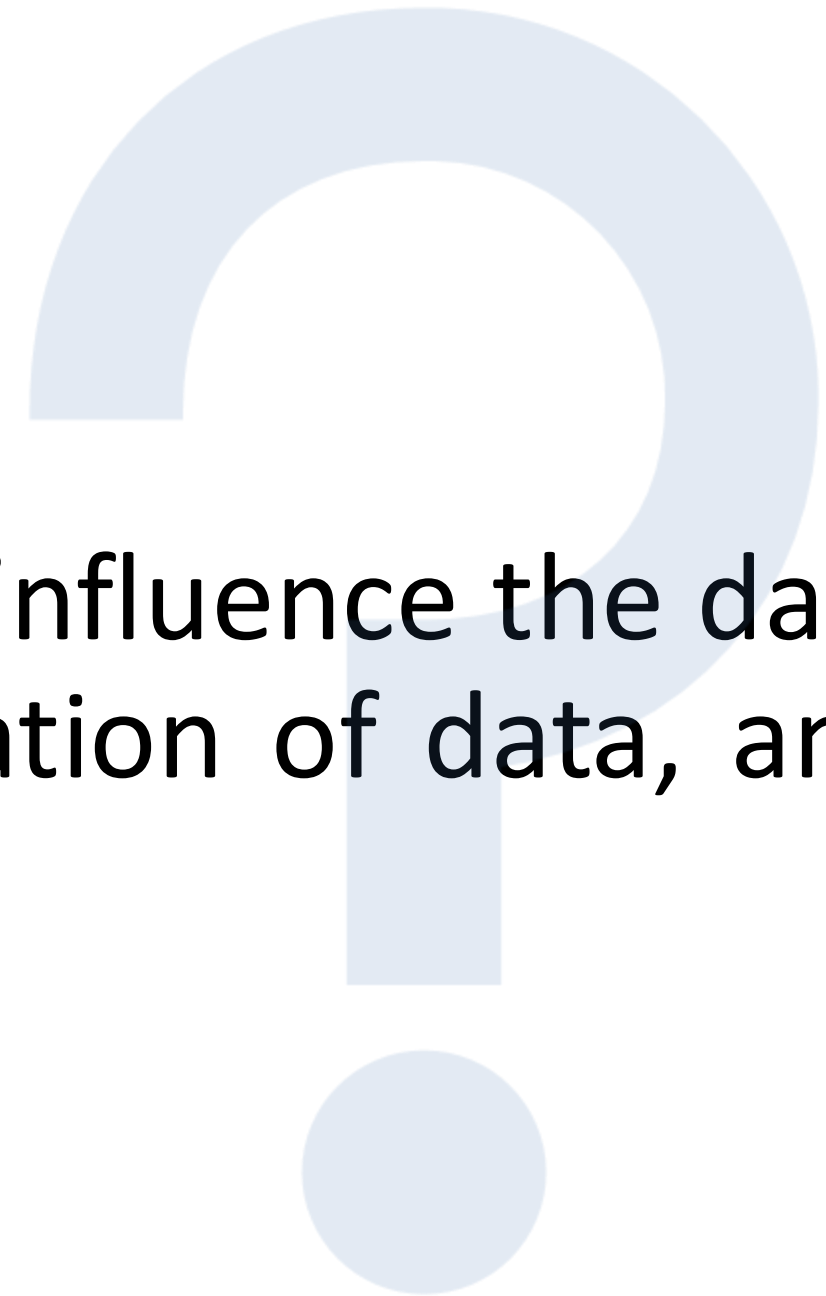
Both researchers had considerable teaching and lecturing experience with adult learners in the UK and internationally.

- **Researcher 1:** 7 years total experience, including 1.5 years in the UK.
- **Researcher 2:** 10 years total experience, including 5 years in the UK, with additional educational management experience in Sri Lanka and the UK.
- Both researchers also had experience as postgraduate students in UK higher education.
- Researcher 1 was a Lecturer at the studied institution, while Researcher 2 was a Lecturer cum Programme Manager for the BSc (Hons) Business Management programme.

Research Question



- How did researcher positionality influence the data collection process, the interpretation of data, and the overall research outcomes?



Sub-Research Questions



01

In what ways did researcher positionality shape access to participants and the nature of their engagement during data collection?

02

In what ways did the researcher positionality shape data interpretation?

03

In what ways did researcher positionality contribute to or limit the validity, credibility, or generalisability of the research outcomes?



Methodology

We developed a list of questions about our positionality and reflexivity.

We conducted a self-interview together allowing us to bring out our positionality and reflexivity together building up on each other's ideas and perspectives.

Motivations for Study

01

In what ways did researcher positionality shape access to participants and the nature of their engagement during data collection?

- Motivation stemmed from witnessing firsthand the challenges faced by mature students—particularly those from ethnic minority and working-class backgrounds—who often struggle with balancing personal responsibilities and academic expectations.
- We wanted to explore their journeys and bring their voices into academic discourse, where they are often underrepresented.
- Motivation also stemmed for the focus on SDG4: Quality Education for all, leaving no one behind. Institution is a signatory of UN PRME and therefore commitment to play a role in the SDGs.

Design of the Study

01

In what ways did researcher positionality shape access to participants and the nature of their engagement during data collection?

- Focused on motivation to access HE, barriers to access, and Support Mechanisms to overcome barriers.
- Open-ended questions in the FGDs, allowing different ideas to come naturally.
- Encouraging personal experiences

Access to Participants

01

In what ways did researcher positionality shape access to participants and the nature of their engagement during data collection?

- Both researchers had institutional access as they were working in the HE institution.
- They received permission from the institution to conduct the research.
- FGDs were scheduled on days students usually arrive to the institution. Purposive sampling of Participants (programmes/levels).
- We made in-class announcements about the research, and shared participation was voluntary and not affecting academic assessments.
- We were aware that our positions could exert implicit pressure, so we repeatedly emphasised that participation (or non-participation) would have no bearing on their academic standing.
- Participants also knew that the lecturers were 'only researchers' during the FGDs and had a shift from their professional identity. They recognized that we adjusted our roles in contexts such as social gatherings and annual student trips to align with the activity and environment.

Focus Group Discussions

01

In what ways did researcher positionality shape access to participants and the nature of their engagement during data collection?

- Researcher 2 had considerable training in and experience conducting FGDs. This was as part of PGT studies as well as professionally through British Council.
- Each session was planned with open-ended questions, ensuring ethical protocols were followed.
- He set clear ground rules around confidentiality and respect at the beginning of each session. He consciously refrained from using academic language and encouraged informal sharing, often by starting with less sensitive topics.

Focus Group Discussions (Continued)

01

In what ways did researcher positionality shape access to participants and the nature of their engagement during data collection?

- During the FGD, we were aware of the power imbalance, when some participants looked to the facilitator for validation of their ideas. The facilitator did not validate any ideas as important and instead asked other participants what they thought, signalling that we were genuinely interested to learn what everyone thought.
- Generally, participants were open, particularly as they realised the research aimed to highlight their concerns. Some shared deeply personal stories, suggesting a high level of trust, as they already knew the researchers.
- In many cases, pre-existing rapport allowed for more honest and in-depth discussions. However, we remained cautious about over-interpreting data due to relational closeness.

Data Analysis

02

In what ways did the researcher positionality shape data interpretation?

- Data Interpretation was mainly done by researcher 1, who took notes during the FGDs.
- The FGDs were transcribed, and thematic analysis allowed the themes to naturally emerge.
- Motivations, barriers and support mechanisms were predetermined classifications.
- Themes that were relevant to the experiences shared by several participants and explored in depth were listed and analysed first, followed by those based on less frequently discussed themes.

Data Analysis

02

In what ways did the researcher positionality shape data interpretation?

- Participant experiences were capitalised and researcher assumptions were sidelined.
- For instance, we assumed financial hardship as the most pressing issue. However, through the data analysis we realised it was the emotional and psychological labour that hindered access more.
- As lecturers in the institution, we have listened to several similar experiences (in confidence) from other students. This facilitated us with ease during data analysis. However, we were careful not to over-interpret our findings to ensure they are rooted in the perspectives shared during the FGDs.

Data Analysis (Continued)

02

In what ways did the researcher positionality shape data interpretation?

- The insider positionality (knowing the institutional set-up) helped us to analyse particularly the institutional support mechanisms that participants discussed. An outsider would require more information about them and would not understand the practical implementation of those easily.
- In all instances, we communicated the vocabulary of the participants, and then analysed it with more technical terms to ensure the readers can understand the nuances of positionality during write-up.

Research Outcomes

03

In what ways did researcher positionality contribute to or limit the validity, credibility, or generalisability of the research outcomes?

- We have learned that our insider-outsider positionality offered both insights and blind spots.
- While we had ease of access to participants, familiarity with students' realities, we also had to constantly interrogate our interpretations to avoid bias.
- Our day-to-day experiences helped us better understand what the participants shared and helped us to communicate it with clarity.

Conclusion



The insider–outsider positionality shaped every stage of the study—from the design to data collection through focus groups, and the interpretation of findings.



While it offered deep contextual knowledge, facilitated access to participants, and fostered trust, rapport, and understanding of participant attitudes, it also posed challenges. These included the need to mitigate bias, avoid assumptions, and navigate power dynamics.



The authors' positionalities added nuance and depth to the research. Reflexivity was essential in addressing these challenges and ensuring thoughtful engagement throughout.



We advocate for the use of insider–outsider positionalities in similar research, highlighting their potential to bridge worlds and serve as powerful intermediaries between participants, the phenomena under study, and broader audiences.

References

- Perera, J.K.J.P. and Kulappu-Thanthirige, H.S. 2024. Mature Students' Perceptions of Accessing Higher Education in England: A Case Study on a London-based Alternative Higher Education Provider. *Journal of Equity & Social Justice in Education* [Online]. 3,[Accessed 16 March 2025]. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.62889/2024/j1803>
- Yip, S.Y. 2024. Positionality and reflexivity: negotiating insider-outsider positions within and across cultures. *International journal of research & method in education*. 47(3), pp.222–232.

Thank You



Any Questions?

We hope you found the sessions
insightful and the discussions enriching.
To help us improve future events, we'd
really appreciate your feedback.

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