

Workshop on Life History Interviews with Students

University of Dar es
Salaam,
Tanzania, February 2007



Locating life histories within the research methodology

Widening participation in higher education in Ghana and Tanzania



Research Methodology

- Quantitative and qualitative methods
- Quantitative methods:
 - international, national and institutional statistics
 - equity scorecard
- Qualitative methods:
 - analysis of policy documents
 - life history interviews with students
 - interviews with staff

Differing interview methods, purposes & data

● Interviews with students

- life histories method
- unstructured interviews
- focus on life experiences of students
- locate participation in HE in social and historical context
- rich data on enablers & barriers to participation, but also on social identities.

● Interviews with staff

- semi-structured interviews
- focus on policies and policy implementation
- experienced of staff, and their perceptions of students' experiences of policies
- locate policies in institutional contexts
- rich data on enablers and barriers to participation in HE

Analysing the data and exploring connections

Data collected through different methods will be analysed to explore connections between:

- policies in higher education
- institutional practices
- learning programmes
- students' identities and experiences
- social, political, economic, cultural processes
- widening participation in higher education and poverty reduction

Student life history interviews

What is a life history interview?

- **A life history is a life story told to another person who records it.**
- **A life history is more than a description of a discrete experience.**
- **It includes giving an account of how and why a lifecourse took the form it did.**

Why are we using a life history approach?

- Participation in HE can be influenced by **long-term factors** in students' lives.
- Inequalities in participation in HE are evident throughout the **lifecourse** of participants and non-participants.
- Opportunities in the **early stages** of education can play a key role in whether HE is an option.
- Life history interviews can deepen our understanding of how disadvantaged learners overcome barriers to participation, and how they negotiate their **identity** as learners in HE.

(Gorard et al. 2006; Reay et al. 2001; Archer and Hutchings 2000).

Making Connections

- **A core principle of a life history approach is that all aspects of life interact with, and have implications for, each other.**
- **In working with participants to gather their life histories, researchers seek to understand connections between different aspects of life (Goodson and Sikes 2001).**

Some connections could be:

- **gender and education**
- **parental education (social capital) and expectations/aspirations**
- **access to basic education and geographic location**

Margins and Mainstream

- **Life history research is a valuable method for including marginalised voices in research processes.**
- **The method has been widely used in feminist research, social class history, holocaust research, reminiscence work etc.**

Relevance to the WP in HE Project

- **WP in HE is often presented in quantitative terms e.g. targets, quotas and statistical under-representation.**
- **Researching life histories of non-traditional students will bring:**
 - ✓ **voices**
 - ✓ **experiences**
 - ✓ **interpretations****into the research process.**
- **It will enable us:**
 - ✓ **to reconstruct our understanding of the social relations of higher education**
 - ✓ **to locate these within historical, economic and cultural contexts.**

How we can use life histories

- **We can explore:**
 - ✓ **how learners negotiate their self-identities, including their identities as learners in HE;**
 - ✓ **how learners experience, create and make sense of the rules, roles and norms of the social world in which they live;**
 - ✓ **dynamics of power between different groups within a society, and within an educational institution.**

(Goodson and Sikes 2001)

Revealing the (micro)political processes

- The aims of the life history interviews in this study are to enrich our understanding of:
 - ✓ access
 - ✓ retention
 - ✓ achievement.
- To tell the stories behind the statistics.

How to do a life history interview

Workshop, Tanzania
2007



How do we do a life history interview?

- The purpose of the interview is to enable the interviewee to tell the story of their life in their own words
- The role of the researcher is to **facilitate** and **support** the process, and **encourage** the interviewee to share their experiences
- The interview is based on a few key topics that are the focus of the research
- Talking about these topics can take time, it might need more than one meeting

Key topics for the life history interviews in this project

- Early years and family life
- Early education
- Secondary education
- Decisions to go to university and influences
- Expectations of university
- University experiences
- Experiences of the transition to university

Discussion

- How do you think a life history interview should be conducted?

Consider...

- the interview style
- the interview questions
- the venue
- ethical issues - consent, confidentiality, disclosure;

Then compare your ideas to Handout 1

The life history interview schedule

- Your comments on the interview schedule
- Your comments on the consent leaflet

Life history interview role play

Use the interview schedule, consent leaflet and Handout 1 to help you in this activity.

- Nominate one team member to carry out a life history interview with another member of the team.

Evaluating the life history interview

- What were the strengths of the interview?
- How could we improve on it?
- Are there any points raised in Handout 1 that we need to think more about?

What would you do if....

- Consider the scenarios suggested in Handout 2.
- What would you do?

How will we evaluate the quality of our life history work?

- self-evaluation
- co-evaluation within country
- co-evaluation with Sussex

See Handout 3, as well as Handout 1

The student life histories sample

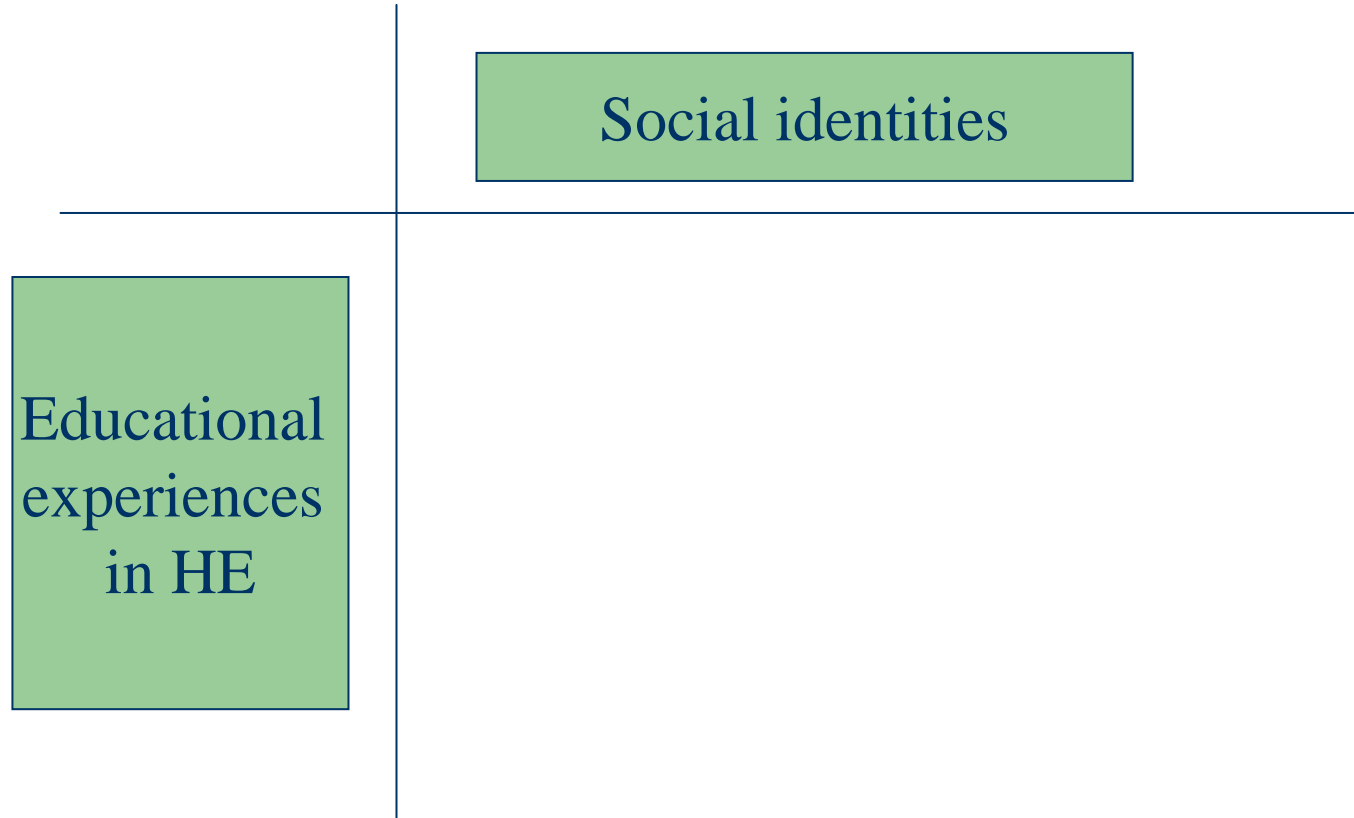
Tanzania, Feb 2007



Whose lives?

- Life history interviews with 50 students from each case study institution (i.e. 100 per country)
- Choose our 50 students through purposive sampling - sample constructed to address our research questions
- Construct sample based on the social groups and education opportunities that inform our quantitative work
- Sample frame will be informed by patterns in the statistics
- **BUT** life history sample goes beyond the limited priorities we have selected for the scorecard

The Sampling Frame



How will you identify and select students?

From a range of social backgrounds:

- socio-economic backgrounds
- gender
- age
- disability
- ethnicity
- religion
- regional background
- and.....

How will you identify and select students?

With a range of education backgrounds

- degree students
- professional programmes
- over-represented programmes
- under-represented programmes (other than professional)
- main campus, colleges, satellites
- different access routes into university

Design the sample frame

- Handout 4
- How will you identify students in under-represented groups?
- How will you approach them for interview?

Plan the work

- Use Handout 5 to help plan the work....
- minimum 12 interviews by July
- Transcripts to be sent by email to Sussex as soon as they are complete and confirmed by student
- Please keep sending transcripts in steady flow
- Maintain the data management forms