**Women learners: second chance, second choice or empowered agents**

The numbers of adult learners in the UK Further Education sector have been diminishing rapidly since 2012 as a result of significant funding cuts; this reflects the dominant educational discourse towards reducing youth unemployment (NEETs). Unfortunately this decline has disproportionately affected the 1.8 million women learners who were participating in education in the FE sector until recently, who are denied the opportunity to gain qualifications without significant debt. (AoC, 2015). Previous research emphasises the multiple benefits women learners’ gain from participating in Further Education provision (Brine & Waller, 2004; Merrill, 2000; Wright, 2013).

This paper draws on a small-scale pilot study using a narrative approach; it considered the values and aspirations of adult women learners’ on vocational courses in FE colleges. The sample was drawn from a variety of vocational courses from elementary to advanced levels (level 1 to 3). Although the women learners in the study were diverse in terms of their race, ethnicity and social background they all identified themselves as ‘second chance’ learners. This discourse has been propagated by the state in a rhetoric that lifelong longing offers adults a chance to enter education again or gain new skills (Grummell, 2007). Analysis of the data obtained through unstructured interviews and life grids (refs), challenges the notion of having been given a ‘second chance’. The narratives are used to explore the values respondents placed on their ‘first chance’ education and to what extent these opportunities were equitable and genuinely realisable. The learners in this study internalised their lack of success in first time education as a personal failure. Similarly returning to education as an adult was credited with helping them to get ‘their life back’; this was in spite of some learners already having overcome other major personal difficulties in adulthood. The narratives remind us that the everyday lives experienced by these learners as women, mothers, partners, carers, employees and civilians makes achieving their aspirations from ‘second chance’ learning difficult. Despite these difficulties there were many examples of women learners using their agency to resist the multiple inequalities in their lives so that they could achieve or even exceed their aspirations.