HE: Transforming lives through life-wide learning?
Good transitions: A case study into local Students’ transitions between further and higher education 7
Dr Amanda French and Michelle Kempson

The higher education field academy: the impact of a skills-focused approach to widening participation in higher education 11
Professor Carenza Lewis

Learner Transitions – Exploring the learning careers of access students 16
Anthony Hudson

Adding value to access to HE: The challenges and triumphs of building in professional accreditation 21
Julie Farmer, Jean Scrase and Emily Ross

A Welsh perspective: Widening access for adults through community outreach, open educational resources and distance learning 25
Gayle Hudson, Hannah Pudner and Eleri Chilcott

A framework for initiating HEI/employer engagement bespoke work-based learning courses 26
Dr Madeline Fisher

Alternative routes into HE: Preparing adults for HE success: The pre-entry jumpstart course 27
Fiona Chapel

Young applicants in school scheme (YASS) – taking the Open University into the classroom and the challenges of reaching students from WA backgrounds 29
Kitty Chilcott

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) as an alternative route into higher education 30
Laura Gower

Impacting lives the college student experience 31
Joan Thomson

A learner journey approach to facilitating access and positive transactions 35
Rhona McComiskie

Using journalism to inspire year 3 pupils in areas of deprivation 36
Joanna MacDonnell
MOVING FROM ACCESS TO WIDENED SUCCESS 37

Being and becoming a university student first generation students in higher education: A model of transition 38
Dr Julia Hope

A collage of transitions: Uncovering personal histories and portraying transitions into university of non-traditional learners 42
Stephane Farenga

(Re)conceptualising ‘Disadvantage’ in UK widening participation policy: Possibilities for transformation? 48
Dr Colin McCaig and Professor Jacqueline Stevenson

Peer assisted learning: What counts as research in WP? 52
Cathy Malone

How universities in England engage with research to support BME student experiences in their access agreements: Getting out of the gap 56
Alex Wardrop

Exploring how to use student-student mentoring to increase student success amongst widening participation students in a distance learning context 62
Dr Troy Cooper, Tina Forbes and Joanna Robson

A novel approach to researching the student experience across the higher education lifecycle: Using interpretative phenomenological analysis to explore ‘widerning participation’ students’ aspiration and academic resilience 67
Edward Bickle and Elizabeth Gauntlett

New students, new support: Moving from access to success 71
Professor Michele Fleming and Dr Kim Walker

Longitudinal approach to summer schools: An ongoing case study of good practice 78
Dr Patricia Harris

Examining the role of academics in supporting widening participation 80
Kim Ridealgh

First generation scholars scheme 81
Gino Graziano
Improving success and retention for widening participation students in an experienced based programme 82
Stephane Farenga

Reflections for change: Transformative education and skill development in a widening participation university 84
Jennifer Randall and Sian Jones

The E108 working with young people student ambassador project 85
Gaynor Gardner and Stephen Harrison

FLEXIBILITY AND TECHNOLOGY 86

Revisiting barriers to participation 89
Pete Cannell

Open educational resources and widening participation: is there a new pathway to HE? 93
Dr Laura Hills, Hannah Gore and Dr Jonathan Hughes

Opportunity through online learning improving participation and success in online higher education in Australia 99
Dr Cathy Stone

Rethinking student engagement for part-time and distance learners: Using technology to create community 100
Karen Foley and Dr Liz Marr

The Big Red Button: A video toolkit for open education 101
John Casey and Will Gregory

PART-TIME AND MATURE LEARNERS 102

The perils of disregarding older learners in higher education 103
Dr Natalia James and Dr Vanessa Beck

Mature students in art and design higher education: How can we ensure parity of the student experience for part-time with that of full-time? 108
Samantha Broadhead

Navigating the knowledge sets of older learners: Exploring the concept of experiential capital amongst first-in-family mature age students 112
Professor Sarah O’Shea
EMPOYABILITY

QMUL Careers And Enterprise Programmes
Rachel Sara Roberts and J P Morgan

Understanding university employability initiatives using figured world theory Findings from a post-92 university
James Rattenbury, Hannah Holmes, Fiona McEwen and Yvonne Rennison
ACCESS AND ALTERNATIVE ROUTES INTO HIGHER EDUCATION

THEME LEAD: RONALD MCINTYRE¹

‘On day one the alternative routes into HE features theme has three papers, one exploring the concept of a Good Transition from French and Kempson, and what does good mean in the context of moving from FE to HE, a space where the personal often comes up against organizational and political pressures to promote efficient transitions. Transitions are temporal and spatial, they happen across our lives. We hear from the Open University in Wales (Hudson, Pudner and Chilcott) about how Open and Distance Learning organisations support them, and the use of free and open educational resources in creating routes from the informal to the formal. When we talk about life-wide learning then transitions often start in the workplace, indeed when one is learning at for or through work then notions of being a learner or a worker start to dissolve, and we hear from Fisher about interesting work being done in this space.

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Good transitions: A case study into local Students’ transitions between further and higher education

DR AMANDA FRENCH AND MICHELLE KEMPSON²

Transition is a contested concept (Gale and Parker, 2012) which plays out very differently for different groups of students. Whilst there is no ‘one-size fits all’ solution this paper argues that it is important that both FE and HE work together to create flexible and responsive strategies and effective models which facilitate effective transition (Knox, 2005, Leese, 2010). In particular we believe that all transition models need to challenge the ‘derogatory discourses’ (Burke, 2009; French, 2013) that often inform discussions around WP by contextualising some of the ways in which WP students’ choices of HE institution and programme are influenced and framed by wider considerations and discourses. Specifically, this paper offers a discussion of how locality influences the transition experiences of many WP students transitioning to HE from FE.

Our research suggests that ‘staying local’ is often rooted in individuals’ emotional attachments to locally based networks of family and friends which helped to support established (and successful) patterns of family responsibilities, working and studying. As Jones (2010) writes

The notion of these networks may be applied to further research on understanding experiences of learners within higher education – not in either ‘fitting in’ or ‘standing out’ – but as to how they may negotiate a ‘network of intimacy’ and the (changing) form they may take (p. 26).

For this reason we argue that WP students may choose local universities on the basis of feeling that feel they maintain an existing, geographically-based, sense of what Goodenow (1993) has termed ‘belongingness’; a key factor in educational achievement.

Another key finding was the hopeful resilience of the respondents, which was often facilitated by staying local. When asked to rate their confidence levels about moving from further to higher education the majority who were in FE suggested they felt at least ‘quite confident’ or ‘very confident about moving to HE. Similarly, most of the respondents already in HE recalled feeling that they felt ‘quite confident’ or ‘very confident’ about moving to higher education. This is not to diminish the concerns of the significant minority of respondents, (15% in both FE

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and HE), who reported feeling ‘not at all confident’ about the transition experience. This resilience reinforced our opposition to the ‘deficit discourses’ which often characterise WP students as ‘needy’, ‘less confident’ or more likely to ‘fail.’ In their place we were able to draw on our evidence base to celebrate the positive identity work undertaken by students transitioning locally in our region.

The respondents were clearly juggling multiple roles (as parent, carer, worker) whilst the same time grappling with the structural relations and social and cultural complexity of ‘becoming a student in HE.’ This ‘third shift’, beyond personal responsibilities and study, represents an additional burden of social and psychological endeavour that ‘middle class’ students, whose siblings and parents have degrees (Bradley, Kirby & Madriaga, 2015) and who are following what Bradley et al (2015) call the ‘taken for granted pathway’ in to higher education, are largely spared. It was clear therefore, that for many respondents ‘being a student’ was just one aspect of complex personal responsibilities and priorities that made up their identity whilst at university.

To conclude our understanding of the significance of ‘staying local’ has implications for curriculum design; pedagogies; teacher development; and the way FE and HE conceptualise the idea of ‘the transitioning student’. For curriculum design it requires ‘mainstreaming’ discussions around the significance of transitioning into induction activities and personal development sessions throughout the first year to ensure that all students’ experiences of transitioning are acknowledged and valued.

In pedagogic terms it means paying self-conscious and collaborative attention to an exploration of the differences and similarities between ideas and concepts about practical expressions of teaching and learning and being a teacher or a learner in different institutional contexts. Attention should also be paid to the ways in which FE and HE programmes may be differently structured, patterned and assessed and how students are explicitly enabled or taught to make the transition from one institution to another. In particular, differing perceptions and expectations around ‘independent learning’ between FE and HE should be explored and debated in order encourage and support students.

For teacher development good transitions depend on encouraging and enabling teachers to become ‘researchers’ of the transition experiences of their students to build local, professional knowledge about what makes transition successful in their context. In particular, teachers should be explicitly aware of the ‘third shift’ work that many WP learners undertake and the concomitant life-world complexity that they manage. They also need to be sensitive to the fact that many WP do not generally experience university in same way as students who have moved away to study and who do not have such additional responsibilities to juggle. Educators in FE and HE need to be thoughtful and reflective about how they conceptualise and
project meanings about each other’s sector, including the kinds of definitions that they work with (consciously or unconsciously) with their students to ensure that they open up new spaces and places for WP students to re-shape, re-make and take ownership of what it (could or should) means to be a student in higher education as they transition. For example, a meta-awareness of the ‘becoming’ nature of HE for ‘the student’ could involve lecturers acknowledging that transition from FE to HE will initiate changing conceptions of individuals’ identities as learners and students alongside other identities that make up their habitus. Moreover, these changing conceptions may involve uncertainty and adaptation as students ‘live out’ their transition from FE and HE, not only in terms of how they see themselves, but how others, such as family and friends may see them.

Finally, for everyone in the FE/HE community good transitions entail a linguistic shift, moving from nouns to verbs which means accepting that there is no such thing as ‘the student’ only ways of experiencing life in HE as a student that are deeply social, cultural, material and fluid. Moving beyond ‘the student’ enables a move beyond the old and unhelpful binaries of ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional’ students towards more nuanced, sophisticated models that embrace, celebrate and respond more effectively to the ever-divergent needs of a diverse student body. With regard to institutional planning and strategy this more nuanced and complex concept of what a student is or needs will necessitate universities and colleges taking careful account of the ‘third shift’ work that many WP students undertake when transitioning. Such an adjustment requires changes in the nomenclature and shape of student support structures, processes and services to ensure that they that scaffold and enable all kinds of students to manage their transition from FE to HE successfully.

References


The higher education field academy: the impact of a skills-focused approach to widening participation in higher education

PROFESSOR CARENZA LEWIS

The Higher Education Field Academy (HEFA) is a WP programme devised by Carenza Lewis in 2005 which aims not only to raise interest in HE study but also to instil a range of transferrable skills to help disadvantaged 13-15-year-olds fulfil their enhanced aspirations. HEFA learners work in small, mixed-school teams to complete a short project which contributes to academic research as part of a challenging outdoor, cross-curricular scheme. A framework devised in collaboration with education assessment professionals gives learners a valid measure of the skills they have developed and an understanding of how these will help them study and secure university places and jobs in the future. This paper reviews HEFA’s methodology, assessment framework and its impact on participants using quantitative and qualitative data from more than 5,000 learners, and considers the implications this programme, focussed on developing higher learning skills at an early age, has for supporting learning for life.

The Higher Education Field Academy (HEFA) is an unusual WP programme devised by Carenza Lewis with funding from Aimhigher (Lewis 2014b) which is now delivered by the Universities of Cambridge and Lincoln as part of access agreements with OFFA. HEFA aims to raise HE progression rates amongst under-represented sectors, targeting state-educated UK students in school years 9-10 & 12. This reflects the continuing need for universities to improve access to HE as, despite considerable progress in recent decades in reducing social differentials in UK HE progression rates (Milburn 2012), the percentage of state-educated young people who progress to HE (48%) is still smaller than for those who are privately educated (60%) (DOE 2014, 11), while large pockets of very low rates of progression to HE remain in many rural and formerly industrial areas (HEFCE 2013, 27-30; HEFCE 2016). Most recently, the need to focus on supporting student learning beyond the life-cycle of the university course has been highlighted (OFFA 2015, 2-3), as has concern that an evolving ‘hourglass society’ may in the future reduce the options for people from poorer backgrounds to progress to university (Stuart 2012, 133-151).

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4 (http://www.access.arch.cam.ac.uk/schools/hefa)
From 2005-11 HEFA formed part of Aimhigher’s programme of generic summer schools, which were required to run over two or more residential or non-residential days and enable learners to experience university life and learning (HEFCE 2005; Hatt et al. 2007; HEFCE, 2007; HEFCE 2012). From its inception in 2005, HEFA was intended to develop skills for life and learning which could boost educational achievement (Lewis 2007, 136-7) as well as fulfil the more conventional WP aims of inspiring and informing (HEFCE 2007; Passey and Morris 2010). On HEFA, learners work in small mixed-school groups to carry out a two-day archaeological excavation in an historic settlement, making new discoveries which contribute to university research (Lewis 2014a). After an initial briefing on excavation aims, methods and protocols, learning mostly adopts a more constructivist approach as participants move beyond this ‘zone of proximal development’ to actively participate in the acquisition of new knowledge, skills and understanding (Hein 1998; Piaget 1963). Throughout, skills-development is supported using digital presentations, written guides, hands-on demonstrations and discussion with experts, recognising that different learners prefer different learning methods (visual, auditory, kinesthetic) (Gardner 1983). After completing their excavation, learners spend a third day indoors at an HEI finding out how their discoveries contribute to research, touring and dining in student halls and participating in a workshop about university. Afterwards, learners prepare a written report on their excavation using the records they themselves have kept. The aim is that learners will be able to develop a wide range of cognitive, communication and writing skills necessary for success in education in a way which boosts their educational self-confidence and success more effectively than taking part in passive observation or replicative activities.

The impact of HEFA was closely monitored from the outset (Catling 2010; Lewis 2011), but in 2009 a programme of applied research into HEFA revised the framework for assessing and reporting on the transferrable skills learners develop and deploy during fieldwork (Johnson & Lewis 2013). This now uses a more explicitly articulated framework of validly elicited behaviours and range descriptors applied to skills divided into three broad categories: practical, ‘soft’ and writing. Practical skills include data collection/ processing/ analysing, measuring and recording, working to set standards and health and safety requirements; ‘soft’ (personal, learning and thinking) skills (National Curriculum n.d.) include verbal communication, structured working, creative thinking, reflective learning, working with persistence and team working; and writing skills including report-structuring, research, referencing, technical writing, and IT. Team supervisors use the range descriptors to assess performance (in order to ensure consistency across different assessors), as do learners who self-assess in order to increase their awareness of and engagement with the skills development process. Assessment is carried out formatively as well as summatively to enable learners to achieve progression. Learners’ written reports are assessed by a small number of trained university
HEFA has strong positive impact on learner aspirations and attitudes to learning as it inspires and upskills. This is evident from assessment data, formal endorsement by the OCR exam board and successful submission as a University of Cambridge Impact Case Study for the 2014 REF. HEFA’s capacity to develop transferrable skills for life and learning has been central to its success in enhancing educational aspirations in thousands of learners, and responds to currently recognised needs to extend learning support beyond the HE lifecycle.

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Learner Transitions – Exploring the learning careers of access students

ANTHONY HUDSON

There is a well-documented literature on the “access movement” and the Access to Higher Education Diploma which has contributed to widening participation by providing an alternative route into Higher Education for *soi disissant* “second chance” learners. Whilst the majority of access courses are Quality Assurance Agency recognised and delivered in Further Education Colleges, a small number of universities deliver their own access courses.

Adopting a social constructivist approach this paper explores the learning careers of a small group of students on an access course delivered in a post ’92 university. Data was gathered using a combination of life-grids and semi-structured interviews with students; and semi-structured interviews with both academic and support staff.

Students faced numerous challenges, cultural, social and academic in their learning careers. For many, transition and effective learning was only possible when they felt supported by academic and professional staff.

Background and Context

There is a well-documented literature on the “access movement” and the Access to Higher Education (AHE) Diploma which has contributed to widening participation by providing an alternative route into Higher Education for *soi disissant* “second chance” learners. (Bushier et al, 2015; Diamond, 1999; Hayes et al 1997; and Preece et al, 1998).

In 1978, at the invitation of the Department of Education and Science, seven local education authorities piloted preparatory courses for access to higher education. As Diamond (1999) notes:

>This provision could be designed to meet local needs...In particular, it specifically rejected the conventional A level approach to teaching and learning. In those early days, part of the dialogue between Access practitioners focused on the extent to which Access was a means to effect change within HE itself. (Diamond, 1999:186)

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Under the 1988 Education Reform Act access courses were recognised as a third route into higher education alongside academic qualifications and vocational qualifications. The subsequent introduction of a national framework and “kitemark” in 1989 further legitimised and led to “a mass explosion of Access courses” (Diamond, 1999:186).

Since it was established in 1997 the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) has been responsible for regulation and licencing of Access Validating Agencies who validate and award access qualifications. Access courses have undergone dramatic changes through a process of standardisation and centralisation. With this shift in responsibility the influence and agency of access practitioners has diminished and the qualification is increasingly “A” levelised.

In 2013/14 some 44,685 learners enrolled on the AHE Diploma and 23,085 learners with an AHE Diploma entered higher education in England and Wales. (QAA, 2015). Whilst the majority of access courses are QAA recognised and delivered in Further Education Colleges, a small number of universities deliver their own access courses. The research aimed to explore the learning careers of learners on one of these courses; how their dispositions to learning have changed over time; and the role of staff in supporting effective learning and transition.

Methodological Approach

The research adopted a social constructivist perspective (Lave & Wenger, 1991) to explore the learning careers (Bloomer & Hodgkinson, 2000) of students who had current or recent experience of the access course. In addition to students, we were also interested in exploring the experience of academic staff with current or recent experience of delivering the course and staff providing pre-entry information, advice and guidance and study skills support.

We drew on the institution’s management information system to provide data on learner demography, achievement and progression. Primary data was gathered using a combination of life-grids and semi-structured interviews with students and semi-structured interviews with both academic and support staff. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Although the sample was relatively small, NVivo was used to code and analyse data.

Initially used to aid recall of work histories for the Social Change and Economic Life Initiative (Dex, 1991); the life-grid was subsequently developed and assessed for reliability of recall in epidemiology and health research (Blane, 1996 and Berney & Blane, 1997). Life-grids have increasingly been used in social and educational research (Abbas et al, 2013; Webster et al 2004 and Wilson et al, 2007). As a visual tool they enable respondent and researcher to map life events along a timeline. The decision to use the life-grid was taken for a number of reasons:
Firstly, to engage the learner in the process of constructing and reflecting on their learning career. Secondly, we wanted this to be a shared endeavour and the life-grid has “the potential to alter traditional interview dynamics” (Parry et al, 1999: 4.7), allowing respondents to have greater control of the process. Thirdly, using the life-grid has the potential to facilitate a more relaxed research encounter and the discussion of sensitive issues (Wilson, 2007), although we recognised in some instances that the life-grid may initially be intimidating and alarming to some respondents and therefore reduce any potential for “an immediate improvement in rapport” (Bell, 2005:63).

Findings

In terms of outcomes, students who successfully complete the access course and progress to undergraduate study at the university are more likely to achieve a first or upper second class degree than their peers and less likely to achieve a third class degree.

However, the focus of the study was the student’s learning career and how their disposition to learning changed over time. Students faced numerous challenges, cultural, economic, social and academic on their journey. Having had negative experiences at school, for many, successfully completing the access course; transition to HE and effective learning was only possible when they felt supported by academic and support staff.

Academic and support staff not only met the academic, social and sometimes emotional needs of the learners, but operate in an institutional context where the value of such courses is challenged.

In terms of our methodological approach, we have found like others (Abbas et al, 2013) that by undertaking semi-structured interviews in combination with a life-grid that learners were able to relate their experience, in this case their learning career, to other aspects of their lives.

Implication for policy and practice: opportunities for further research

Access courses designed and delivered in higher education institutions, as opposed to the AHE Diploma regulated by the QAA and delivered in Further Education Colleges (FECs), may more easily be designed to meet the needs of the local community and at the same time articulate with, or ease progression to undergraduate programmes within the institution.

For learners, whilst the transition from “access student” to “undergraduate student” may not be seamless and without challenges it is certainly made easier if
they are familiar with the routines and rhythms of HE in general and the facilities and services of a particular institution.

For tutors and support staff one of the challenges was institutional ambivalence towards the course and concerns that some colleagues expressed about learners entering higher education via an alternative route into. Far from being “at risk” such learners enrich the student body and constitute an important source of applicants for the institution.

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Adding value to access to HE: The challenges and triumphs of building in professional accreditation

JULIE FARMER⁶, JEAN SCRASE AND EMILY ROSS

The Gatsby/RSC perspective

The Access to HE Diploma Science scheme with registration was developed to meet the Gatsby Charitable Foundation’s aim to support the development of intermediate level STEM skills and technician registration. Gatsby provided resources and funding to incorporate an employer-led project into relevant Access to HE Diplomas. This together with the knowledge and skills developed through the rest of the Access to HE course were recognised by the Royal Society of Chemistry (RSC) as providing students with the opportunity to meet the requirements of professional registration, namely Registered Science Technician status (RSciTech).

The scheme has been operating since September 2013 when it was piloted with one Access Validating Agency (AVA) and 5 further education colleges. Between 2014 and 2016, the scheme grew to involve 18 colleges and six AVAs. This year the Royal Society of Biology (RSB) has joined the programme and in addition to the students, college lecturers and technicians have the opportunity to become professionally registered.

RSB and RSC are licensed by The Science Council to grant the awards Registered Science Technician (RSciTech) and Registered Scientist (RSci). Together with chartered status, the awards form a framework of professional recognition for every stage of a career in the sciences. The professional bodies assess the Access to HE students for evidence of the key competencies required to achieve the RSciTech award. The professional bodies provide regional education coordinators to explain and organise membership, to advise upon the scheme, to provide some existing employer links to colleges, and assess evidence of the competencies.

The QAA perspective

QAA was approached early in the development process, which coincided with the implementation of the 2013 Specification for the Diploma⁷. This specification

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⁶ Quality Assurance Agency: Email j.farmer@qaa.ac.uk
⁷ https://www.accesohe.ac.uk/AboutUs/Publications/Pages/diploma-specification-2013.aspx
had included the opportunity for Diplomas to include units requiring students to undertake large scale projects. This made it possible for the AVAs involved to capture the requirements of an employer led project within the project unit that would then be a common unit in all the differently constituted Diplomas in Science offered by the different providers involved. QAA also clarified its requirements that any assessment carried out by the Royal Societies must not conflict with its own assessment regulations for the Diploma, and that students were given clear information about which aspects of the assessment were required for their Diploma and which was needed by the Royal Societies. QAA was positive about the concept, appreciating that it was potentially an effective way of adding value to the Access to HE Diploma for students, improving their eventual employability and possibly enhancing the strength of their applications to higher education.

The AVA perspective

CAVA’s mission is to facilitate fair access and aid social mobility by validating relevant and high quality Access to HE provision that increases the opportunities for non-traditional learners to study at university. The Access to HE Diploma (Science) RSciTech scheme fits well with the AVA’s enhancement activity to benefit CAVA’s members and students.

Recognising these benefits CAVA set strategic objectives to work with Gatsby, the professional bodies and colleges. CAVA selected providers to take part and supported them to modify courses to incorporate the RSC approved research project unit. CAVA ran development events to enable colleges taking part to share good practice and resolve any issues and provided colleges with operational support to run the scheme, such as help with employer liaison and assistance with professional body visits and activity.

Particular challenges included the identification of a sufficient number of employer-led projects for all students and delayed membership of the RSC, preventing students gaining the benefits of membership early on in the course.

The benefits to students

All students had the opportunity to become members of either the RSC or RSB for two years, paid for by their college. Those students that completed an employer-led project also had the opportunity to be assessed by the professional bodies against the requirements for professional registration.

The top twenty five students each year were invited to attend an awards ceremony at Burlington House – the RSC headquarters in Piccadilly.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>RSC members</th>
<th>RSB members</th>
<th>No. students</th>
<th>No. students</th>
<th>No. Lecturers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

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widening-participation@open.ac.uk
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
<th>Number of Employers Engaged</th>
<th>Number of Students Achieving RSciTech</th>
<th>Number of Students Achieving Registration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2013–14</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014–15</td>
<td>433 (728 inc 2013)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015–16</td>
<td>142 (575 inc 2014)</td>
<td>350 (92 not Access students)</td>
<td>TBC</td>
<td>TBC Est. Approx 100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*This number is likely to be higher if students have retained their membership.

Gaining RSciTech or RSci status proves that the student, lecturer, technician has:

- demonstrated professionalism to employers and colleagues
- transferable skills that allows work across different science sectors
- built on academic achievements and developed professional skills in a work environment
- gained knowledge and awareness of the chosen area of science
- developed strong scientific skills and demonstrated a commitment to improving them
- shown personal and professional integrity
- committed to career development and advancing excellence in the sciences.

Prospects for the future

During the last three years, the number of professional bodies licensed by the Science Council to award professional registration has increased. This expansion, together with the development of the governance and regulatory authorities for the standards, has resulted in a review of the requirements for professional registration. In 2016 the regulatory authority recommended that to meet the professional registration standards, applicants are likely to need to evidence at least twelve months’ experience of practice in a full time, structured work environment, supported by an employer to ensure exposure to all competencies. As it is unlikely that significant numbers of Access students would meet the new requirements, the Access to HE Diploma (Science) RSciTech scheme is not continuing after 2015-16.

In terms of legacy, all the participating colleges will continue to run the scheme incorporating the 6 credit independent project unit. This has been well received by HE and often stated as the most valuable part of the course in student evaluations.
Those colleges that have established employer links will continue to encourage their students to carry out an employer-led project.

The Access to HE Diploma with specially designed project unit will continue to provide students with the opportunity to meet the knowledge (and some skills) components of the RSciTech register. An applicant to the register would be able to draw on their Access to HE Diploma to evidence knowledge competencies, completing their application following work experience to demonstrate how their knowledge and skills acquired through the qualification were applied in the workplace.

Key stakeholders are considering the basis on which the scheme could continue. By building on the relationships made between colleges, professional bodies and employers, stakeholders are now exploring registration in FE across all science qualifications.
A Welsh perspective: Widening access for adults through community outreach, open educational resources and distance learning

INNOVATIVE PRACTICE

GAYLE HUDSON, HANNAH PUDNER AND ELERI CHILCOTT

This session will focus on widening access work undertaken in the Higher Education context of Wales. This work is underpinned by the Welsh Government’s commitment to social justice and partnerships, as opposed to the marketisation system in England.

In the context of: regional widening access partnership structures (Reaching Wider), an increased emphasis on universities working with local schools, large cuts in adult community learning, and part time access provision; where are the pathways to HE for adult learners?

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HE: Transforming lives through life-wide-learning? April 27th-28th 2016, Milton Keynes, UK
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INNOVATIVE PRACTICE

DR MADELINE FISHER

Employer-Engagement partnerships with Higher Education Institutions have potential to upskill employees and widen access to Higher Education. Initiating requirements for bespoke courses can be a lengthy process fraught with difficulties due to time-diemands on executives, confusing terminology, and lengthy negotiation processes.

This paper provides a framework for setting up bespoke Work Based Learning, as a starting point for discussions. It highlights where executives need to be involved and where there is scope for delegation, pending subsequent executive decisions. Examples of questions requiring early answers are included, so that if the partnership is not likely to progress, it can be curtailed or adapted quickly, with considerable savings.

The paper is based on PhD research into the impact of such courses on three large organisations (public, private and the HEI) using a modified grounded theory approach (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) and fractal concept analysis (Wasserman, Clair and Wilson, 2009) of semi-structured interviews (Wengraf, 2001) of perspectives of executives, negotiators and all involved in the learning process. There were positive impacts for all organisations. Recommendations for the HEI included this framework to facilitate prompt bespoke HE provision when starting new employer engagement negotiations.

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Alternative routes into HE:
Preparing adults for HE success:
The pre-entry jumpstart course

INNOVATIVE PRACTICE

FIONA CHAPEL

The Jumpstart programme raises adult learners’ academic skills and aspirations to HE and offers them the chance to develop an HE identity. Jumpstart is a free 10 week part-time course held at the University of Leeds which aims to enable adults to develop their critical thinking skills and begin to consider higher education. It was developed through collaborative work between the University’s Lifelong Learning Centre, community organizations and Further Education providers throughout West Yorkshire. The course is specifically targeted at adults who have had few educational opportunities and would not normally consider HE as a realistic option.

Jumpstart was designed to address gaps in provision in adult education for those who are studying at GCSE level. The course focuses on critical thinking and academic writing skills, HE subject tasters and developing an HE identity. Impartial advice and guidance is embedded throughout and participants have frequent opportunities to meet undergraduate mature students from similar areas of low HE participation.

This ensures that learners leave knowing their possible pathways into HE and if they progress, it enhances their sense of belonging when studying at university.

Jumpstart is innovative for a Russell group university in its sustained engagement with pre-access adult learners from widening participation cohorts. The course draws on the tradition of student-centred adult education with learners exploring ideas and theories around education with an emphasis on transformation.

Course evaluations have shown that participants experience a shift in their perception of themselves as HE learners. A high proportion of learners indicate at the beginning of the course that they are interested in HE but do not have the confidence and skills, whilst on completion, stating that they can now make informed decisions about further study. Crucially, they report a substantial increase in their confidence levels, enabling them to apply and progress to HE.

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We have found that previous participants are recommending the course to their family and friends and that community and FE tutors are increasingly referring adults to it.
Young applicants in school scheme (YASS) – taking the Open University into the classroom and the challenges of reaching students from WA backgrounds

INNOVATIVE PRACTICE

KITTY CHILCOTT

The Young Applicants in Schools Scheme (YASS) offers final year students in Scottish secondary schools the opportunity of studying with The Open University. Over 4,000 students from 60% of Scottish secondary schools have taken part in the scheme since it was launched in Scotland in 2007. This academic year 1,075 students registered for an OU module through YASS and 31 of the 32 Scottish education authorities have schools participating in the scheme.

While YASS has grown in both geographical reach and student numbers, including students from WA backgrounds, there is need to ensure that it continues to respond to the widespread concern around fairer access to HE. In particular the concerns outlined in the Scottish Government’s report by the Commission on Widening Access.

In this presentation I will offer an overview of the challenges of delivering a national programme that aligns to the strategic priorities of the Scottish Government whilst at the same time directly addresses some of the real challenges that many schools face in providing senior phase curriculum for their students. I will alight on key issues around defining WA students within a Scottish context and increasing their numbers; OU curriculum provision and; the recognition of YASS attainment within the HE sector.

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12 This figure does not include independent schools
Recognition of prior learning (RPL) as an alternative route into higher education

INNOVATIVE PRACTICE

LAURA GOWER

Newcastle College is a dual sector institution offering a wide range of both Further and Higher Education programmes. We pride ourselves on widening access to Higher Education in the North East and with just under 3000 HE students we are one of the largest providers of HE in FE. We have a substantial mature student population with 57% aged 21+. Our programmes have a strong vocational focus and students often bring with them a wealth of extremely valuable prior experience.

Since 2008 students at Newcastle College have been able to gain credit for prior learning through our Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) process. In 2012 an online submission system ‘Recognise Me’ was developed to further encourage RPL applications. Following a year of piloting and a further year of full operation of the service and in response to high levels of support required for claimants, the College has gone on to develop an online RPL module (launched in Sept 2015) to further support learners to make claims.

The College has seen a steady increase in successful applications approved with 1.3% of students gaining credit via RPL in 2012-13, followed by 2.6% in 2013-14 and 5.3% in 2014-15. Despite this increase there are still a number of barriers around RPL. This presentation will take a look at our work so far and the challenges we and the wider HE sector face in regarding RPL as an alternative route into HE.

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Using a series of studies over a period of ten years, we have collected quantitative and qualitative data on students who have Higher National (HN) qualifications through study at college and subsequently progressed to degree study. This paper recognises the important role colleges in Scotland have in improving participation and access to higher education (HE) but argues for the need to better understand the ways in which students navigate their transition into and through HE study. The data identifies complex and interrupted learning journeys that are typical of the part-time student but often at odds with the wider Scottish policy context of effective and efficient learner journeys. Work and employment is central to these individual learners and using examples from the study we draw on some of these learner journeys, the characteristics of how work and study intertwine, and the impact on individuals. Setting this within literature on transitions has allowed us to explain the multiple transitions experienced by the part-time student and value the diversity of the student body as a whole.

Over a decade, the university has been collecting quantitative and qualitative data on students who have Higher National (HN) qualifications. Using a mixed method longitudinal study we have sought to explore the transition experience of this group of students and investigate the motivations for both HN and degree study and what is valued about each. The paper recognises the important role of colleges in improving participation and access to higher education (HE). The data identifies complex and interrupted learning journeys that are typical of the part-time student but often at odds with the wider Scottish policy context of effective and efficient learner journeys (Scottish Government, 2011).

As part of the QAA Scotland enhancement activity the university is seeking to, enhance understanding of key transition points in the learner journey and the support students require to navigate these junctures. The latest study has sought to build on our knowledge of the transition experience of students who have previously studied in the college sector in Scotland. This work highlights the complexities for such students making the transition into University level study. Students are moving between organisations (from college to university) and changing level of study (from HN to degree study). A change in level however,
does not necessarily mean a vertical transition e.g. from HNC, the equivalent of undergraduate year 1 to undergraduate year 2. Often students will transition into degree study at the same level or lower e.g. from HND to undergraduate year 1 in a new and unrelated area of study. Students have also described their experiences of transition from the perspective of their learning, highlighting the perceived differences in HN and degree study. In particular such descriptions focused on the different academic skills required and the differences in rigour related to degree study. Although 56% of students studying at college did so on a part-time basis, there is recognition that studying at a part-time, distance learning institution represents another transition in learning that they need to negotiate.

Whether or not students use credit transfer and the gap in study between college and commencing study at the university has been a feature of previous studies and is repeated again. There are indications that students are more aware that they can transfer credit and there has been a slight increase in the percentage claiming for previous study. However, there continues to be a majority who do not claim. There is evidence that this affects the transition: for some it is a motivating factor, but for others it is perceived as not relevant or there are institutional barriers (that are accepted) to do with time away from study and insufficient direct subject content. While the latest study shows a slight reduction in the average study gap for this group of students to eight years, there are common factors expressed that have prevented students making the transition sooner e.g. work or lack of employer support, personal life and finance.

Students highlight the challenges they have experienced in their transition to degree study. The majority are working, therefore, the biggest challenge is fitting study with busy work and family lives (Butcher, 2015). This also illustrates the many ‘micro’ or daily transitions that they are making from student life to work, family or community life (Ashford et al., 2000). In terms of their transition in learning they have expressed challenges related to academic study skills, time management, the different teaching methods experienced and different expectations from a range of tutors.

Students have identified a range of institutional support they feel would help to negotiate the transition into degree study. They have highlighted good information to do with course selection and course content, good preparation in terms of what is expected of them by way of time and commitment, academic study skills, the use of technology and more information about future careers. Formal institutional support from tutors, as well as on-line support through their course website and on-line forums all featured highly. However, informal support from family, work colleagues and friends was also present for many of the students. Improvements and suggestions for additional support during study highlighted further opportunities to engage with other students. A strengthening of employer links was also highlighted and this may be through careers guidance, course content, work
experience or work-related projects and credit for work-based projects (Beach, 2003).

Reflecting on their transitions in learning, students reported development across a range of skills including communication, organisational and problem solving skills. This resulted in skill enhancement on a personal and professional level. For some this had impacted on their career allowing them to progress or move to new employment. For others, they recognised beneficial impact between study and work and improved working practice. Overwhelmingly, students were positive about how their study had improved their confidence resulting in a sense of personal achievement and a greater self-awareness.

References


Aspiring D/deaf actors – Passion, possibilities and pathways

INNOVATIVE PRACTICE

EONA CRAIG

The presentation will share progress and learning within a partnership between Solar Bear, a specialist Scottish theatre company for D/deaf performers, and the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. For the last three years the organisations have been working in collaboration to explore pathways into the profession for aspiring D/deaf actors.

The bridging between a highly specialist theatre company and the national conservatoire resulted in the launch of the new BA Performance in British Sign Language and English in September 2015.

The partners are confident that the joint training programmes now established at pre-HE and HE levels will result in ground-breaking opportunities for a generation of D/deaf actors as well as contribute to a culture shift in theatre in Scotland.

Within a portfolio of pre-HE pathway projects, we established an apprenticeship programme that offered pre-HE learners from a D/deaf Theatre Skills pilot, a 16-month apprenticeship in the world of Scottish theatre.

The apprentices worked with the partners to assist in the research of a potential degree for D/deaf actors, advise upon and promote issues of accessibility within the Royal Conservatoire and in the wider arts community, and acted as ambassadors, agents of change and trail-blazers for aspiring D/deaf actors previously excluded from Higher Education and a potential career in the arts.

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17 https://www.rcs.ac.uk/courses/BA-performance
A leaner journey approach to facilitating access and positive transactions

INNOVATIVE PRACTICE

RHONA MCCOMISKIE

This paper presents an innovative project developed to support the transition into higher education for young people from under-represented groups. Taking a learner pathway approach, the initiative is part of an extended continuum of support which engages our most challenged students as they navigate the journey from broad general education into their senior phase of the Curriculum for Excellence and beyond. Through a programme of subject and self-development engagement activities, the project aims to raise participants’ aspiration for entry to higher education and ease their integration into the university environment both academically and socially.

The paper provides a case study of the project’s success factors in achieving an effective model of engagement which prioritises the needs of individual learners and is founded on a longitudinal view of transition support. The paper further highlights the integrated framework and continuum of support participants receive and the alignment of the project with pre-entry and induction activity. Impact around the increasing proportion of senior phase pupils participating in the project and the subsequent increase in applications and enrolments are presented alongside qualitative evidence to demonstrate impact for the learner.

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Using journalism to inspire year 3 pupils in areas of deprivation

INNOVATIVE PRACTICE

JOANNA MACDONNELL

This paper will present a project undertaken with Year 3 pupils from two schools which are situated in one of the most deprived areas in the country (indices of multiple deprivation, 2015) and where 27.7% of children live in poverty (Health Profile, 2015). A project was set up to introduce the children to Higher Education through an interactive media trip. A preparation session took place in school with an academic from the Broadcast Media department followed by a half day trip for each class to a local Windmill. The children worked with student ambassadors, facilitated by an academic, from the University to use the cameras and make a film of their trip as ‘journalists’ by doing pieces to camera and interviewing one another. They also took still photos which were accompanied by blogs the children wrote about their experiences and factual information they had learnt. This project enabled early engagement with HE and the opportunity to work with student ambassadors from the local area who themselves were WP students. It also provided the chance to discuss careers in media, the purposes of working hard in school and the opportunity to develop media literacy.

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The theme of access to success focusses on transitions into HE, particularly from Access courses, and the experience of these students within a University setting. Access can of course be more broadly interpreted to include any students who come into HE study with low entry qualifications or who face other issues which may affect their progress. Policy has shifted in recent years from a focus on widening participation to a student lifecycle approach, in which retention and achievement are considered just as important.

We look forward to exploring the impact of such ideas in a series of papers on day 2 at the conference:

Edward Bickle and Elizabeth Gauntlett report on the student lifecycle of Widening Participation students to explore notions of aspiration and academic resilience.

Jennifer Randall and Sian Jones outline a project challenging deficit definitions of Widening Participation students in which academic skills were developed in the context of transformative pedagogies drawing out diverse personal experiences.
Being and becoming a university student first generation students in higher education: A model of transition

DR JULIA HOPE

This inquiry draws on data collected through a grounded theory approach and at one UK higher education institution (The Centre) between October 2011 and January 2012. The single case study, captures the experiences of a single group of 50 first generation students through the e of semi structured interviews.

All undergraduates first generation are expected to take part in university daily life and routines. Social integration and the relationships with lecturers and fellow students over the first few months were key the students completing their first semester, first year and subsequently their degree programme. 38 of the students engaged with The Centre during the first semester 34 of completed their studies. Three of this cohort progressed to postgraduate study.

For some being absent was a phenomenon which occurred in the first few weeks and continued throughout the first semester. Being absent resulted in negative feelings such as being lost or underachieving. Many felt that they had missed opportunities to receive essential information, to aid them in becoming/being more involved with The Centre. This variation of involvement was becoming/being engaged in university life as a whole. This meant that they interacted with their external environment with interest and a positive attitude, which aided their sense of achievement and improved their academic productivity. When engaged in HE activities, not only were they physically present, their interest in the activity meant that they took part and were involved.

A student’s sense of achievement was affected by how involved they were in university life and their developing sense of being an undergraduate. Students seek to define new learning (and new methods of learning) by measuring them against prior learning experiences. Previous ways of working and of understanding were an inevitable point of reference. In the collective account, academic teaching was seen as a critical element, as it influenced the student’s transition and involvement in HE. This was presented from two perspectives, the impact of effective teaching and the impact of ineffective teaching.

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Through being engaged, the students assimilated new knowledge, communicated with staff, made friends and started to ‘become a university student’. However, being engaged did not automatically take place subsequent to attending, it occurred only when they began to engage with The Centre. Those students who were disengaged found it hard to concentrate and learn or felt attending lectures, seminars, etc. was pointless. To make a successful transition and become, be and achieve as an HE student, they also needed to deal with any self-identified difficulties. The ability to respond to and overcome self-identified difficulties was an important and integrated part of the involvement and ultimately the transition process.

Given the similarity of institutional experience of the students in this study, it is both their personal aims and their level of involvement, which explain the variations in their transition experiences. Undergraduate experience policy, design and practice needs to prioritise students’ success and satisfaction to aid successful transition. This raises the question of what success and achievement mean. For the students in this study the meaning of achievement did not necessarily equate to completion or high academic grades. A more general sense of achievement could be used as a valuable reference point for undergraduate experience policy, design and practice based on students’ experiences.

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A collage of transitions: Uncovering personal histories and portraying transitions into university of non-traditional learners

STEPHANE FARENGA

This paper is based on research conducted as part of a doctorate and explores the transitional period into higher education (HE) of first year undergraduate students at the University of Hertfordshire (UH), who come from widening participation (WP) backgrounds. The literature on WP students’ experiences suggests they encounter potential difficulties during their transition into HE. This paper seeks to better understand the identities of WP students and how these factor into successful experiences of university, in order to provide new knowledge on their transitions into HE. The deployment of habitus and particularly ‘personal history’ helps to unpack how identity might be formed and impact students’ transitional experience. The use of collage methodology has led to insightful conceptions of WP students’ identities. It has also demonstrated their acute understanding of their HE environment, which suggests a rejection of the hypothetical notion that these students should experience HE as ‘fish out of water’.

This research focuses on students’ first year in higher education (HE), which is regarded as a crucial time to students’ persistence (Krause, 2005 and Andrew et al., 2008). There is also a particular concern for the transition of students from widening participation (WP) backgrounds into HE (Gale and Parker, 2014) and their continuation beyond their first year (Kift and Nelson, 2005 and Kift, 2009). The research aims to give a voice to those students transitioning into the University of Hertfordshire (UH) in order to explore and map their experiences, whether they deem these to be successful or otherwise.

It is set against the backdrop of a neoliberal WP agenda that has resulted in HE participation increases across the last 15 years for the most disadvantaged socio-economic groups (Higher Education Funding Council, 2013). However, critics have railed against the perverse nature of WP policy that assumes students from WP backgrounds must “remake” their identities in order to conform to more traditional profiles to access and be successful in HE (Burke, 2007, p.417).

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Conceptual Framework

Theoretically, Bourdieu’s concept of habitus is adept at shaping how we understand what identity is (1984, 1990 and 1993; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). Reay et al. (2009) utilise habitus to great effect in their research on how students feel they fit in at their university and whether their brought identities persist or change. Reay (2004) previously established that “individual histories […] are vital to understanding the concept of habitus” (434), a notion that Reay et al. (2009) reiterate. They understand ‘personal history’ as a key component to defining student habitus as it makes up the sum of an individual’s past experiences. The authors determine personal histories are important in understanding students’ transition into university, suggesting a varying degree of student experiences in HE. With this in mind, the research questions of this paper are:

1. To what extent do personal histories of WP students shape student identities?

2. How do these identities impact WP students’ transition into UH?

Tied into these questions is a hypothesis that WP students can experience discomfort during their transition due to the potential mismatch between their brought identity and those of more traditional students that the institution may better support (Archer et al., 2003 and Reay et al., 2009).

A mixed methodological approach

Eisner suggests that an arts-based approach is a particularly useful methodology if research aims to expose feelings, emotions or responses to a specific phenomenon: “the life of feeling is best revealed through those forms of feeling we call the arts” (2008: p.7). If we agree that transitioning into university might provoke a varying range of emotions and different experiences from students, then Eisner argues such an approach will provide dividends.

In terms of methods, collage—meaning the cutting and pasting of different materials—stands out as an effective way to engage participants and allow them (and researchers) to make “new connections” concerning phenomena surrounding student experiences (Butler-Kisber, 2010: 104). Having established that transitioning into HE can elicit different responses, collage allows each participant to explore this phenomenon on their own terms and with their own voice.

In practical terms, collages were bookended by group discussions designed to provide context to the collage and to allow participants to engage with their work and that of their peers. These were recorded and along with the collages form the research’s data.
Early findings

The data collected so far as part of this doctorate is very encouraging and calls into question the validity of the hypothesis expressed earlier in this paper. At this point, findings are grouped along two themes: the primacy of resiliency in students’ personal histories and a distinct hyper-awareness of their environment.

Resiliency is mainly represented in financial terms and in the form of schooling experiences. The participants have challenging, layered financial backgrounds and express how these shape the way they understand themselves and how these continue to permeate their identities as HE students (see Collage 1 in the Appendix).

What came as more of a surprise is the extreme awareness participants demonstrate of their HE environment. Their understanding of society as a neoliberal landscape in which they have a significant economic part to play is intriguing (see Collage 2 in the Appendix). This view is soaked with Bourdiesian language that displays a real “feel for the game” (Bourdieu, 1993: 5), which leads to a sense that these students are very much “fish in water” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 127), as opposed to ‘out’. That kind of awareness is well captured in this quote, which was part of a discussion following a collage-making session:

“I see it [university] like, in a race, everyone starts off at the same point, but there are certain people who might be starting a few metres back and might have to run a longer race to get to the same place as someone else, and that’s why I need to go out there and find opportunities, make opportunities, and go and grab them, not just wait for something to come to me because that will be very unlikely. – KA on her environment and opportunities

These findings are promising and will be expanded on as the research progresses. Additionally, there are more data collection sessions planned that will feed into this paper and explore the students’ transition more deeply while making richer connections with their personal histories.

Conclusion

This research complements the critique of neo-liberal discourse surrounding access to HE and seeks to recalibrate the relationship between student and institution to one that validates the identities, experiences and success of students from WP backgrounds. Bourdieu’s concepts expose such inequalities between students and institution as it emerges that those with a “feel for the game” (Bourdieu, 1993: 5) are better equipped to navigate educational institutions, which are often predisposed to favour individuals with certain habitus. However, the use of collage has resulted in fresh perspectives on what personal histories are formed of and has called into question some of the traditional thinking on how WP students
experience university. It is hoped that this doctoral research will continue to shed new light on the intersections of identity and transition within the HE environment.

References


Appendix

Collage 1 – resiliency in identity

“I’ve got my own back, don’t really need anyone else to have my back – I’ve got me and I’m doing fine.” – KA on resiliency
Collage 2 – ‘fish in water’

As expressed by SW in his discussion on university:

1. “Are you *too* nice?”: Self-awareness about how to behave with others
2. “Tightrope walker”: The difficulty of the HE journey he’s on (incl. his course and route to HE)
3. “Go the extra mile”: Doing what you can to differentiate yourself from others
4. “Race/running”: The competitive nature of the HE environment and graduate labour market
(Re)conceptualising ‘Disadvantage’ in UK widening participation policy: Possibilities for transformation?

DR COLIN MCCAIG23 AND PROFESSOR JACQUELINE STEVENSON

In this presentation we draw on our own research for the Higher Education Academy, OFFA and HEFCE to outline how successive governments have, variously, turned their policy gazes on different groups of students described (but ill-defined, and inadequately measured) as ‘disadvantaged’ and locate these developments within context of an increasingly stratified and differentiated higher education sector. We evidence how such policy imperatives have been designed to variously (but also inconsistently and problematically), ‘widen participation’, facilitate ‘fairer access’ and enable greater ‘social mobility’ and discuss the significant implications for the equality of access, retention and success of different groups of ‘disadvantaged’ students. We end our presentation by reflecting on the current target of doubling the proportion of ‘disadvantaged’ students in UK HE by 2020 as well as the possible implications for the sector of the 2015 Higher Education Green Paper’s overt focus on social mobility.

The 2015 UK Green Paper ‘Higher education: teaching excellence, social mobility and student choice’ reiterates the David Cameron’s previously announced social mobility target of doubling the number of “socially disadvantaged” students entering higher education between 2009 and 2020. This requires an increase from 13.6% to 27.2%: (the figure was 18.2% in 2014) though patterns of participation are highly varied (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2105). The use of the term ‘disadvantaged’ signals a shift in the way in which under-represented students have, historically, been defined. For example ‘poor’ students have been referred to, variously, as working-class, from low social-class groups, from low-participation neighbourhoods, former recipients of free school meals, or first-generation (more recently ‘first in family’) students.

These definitions – often used variously or interchangeable – are all problematic: the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification used as part of the UK HE Performance Indicators data collated by the Higher Education Statistics Agency, for example, assigns NS-SEC 8 to all students with disabilities, full-time parents or carers, those on means-tested benefits, and those who are retired as well as those who are unemployed - ‘long-term’ or otherwise (Stevenson et al 2014). This

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homogenises students according to both their social classification and/or their economic position. Moreover the focus on the access to higher education of students from ‘low participation neighbourhoods’ (used for much recent WP policy) is equally controversial: although LPNs are areas that have been defined as having a lower-than-average propensity to send young people to university, our research (Harrison and McCaig 2014) evidences that more disadvantaged families live outside them than within them, while they contain a higher-than-expected proportion of relatively advantaged families.

The term ‘disadvantaged’ used in the new Green Paper is just as problematic: disadvantage it is rarely defined; thus disadvantaged students are subjectively classified as such without clarification about what advantage might look like. This can leave the framing of dis/advantage up to individual institutions to the extent that particular groups of students can be seen as disadvantaged in one institution (for social, economic, psychological or resource reasons) but yet as advantaged, or at least as not-disadvantaged in another (Stevenson et al 2014) compounding the potential for inequality across the higher education sector.

Dis/advantage as a framing device thus serves and reinforces the marketisation of the English sector, dependent as it is on visible differentiation between institutions. An aspect of this has been the general policy shift from widening participation (designed to increase the number of ‘disadvantaged’ students accessing higher education), to 'fair access' (the absence of overt discrimination against particular underrepresented groups except on the basis of qualifying grades) thus enabling social mobility (fair access of the best qualified ‘disadvantaged’ students to the most elite institutions and into the 'higher professions') (Stevenson et al, 2014; McCaig 2015, McCaig and Taylor 2015, Bekhradnia, 2003)). In this conceptualisation of the policy shift, the emphasis has moved from concern about the background of the individual entrant to higher education (access) to ensuring the 'brightest' achieve in the 'best' institutions and thus have more chance of 'success' that can be described as helping social mobility, i.e. success that is achieved in a Russell group university and which leads to the 'higher' professions. The disparities in access outcomes between these approaches have been widely noted in our own research (Stevenson et al 2014, McCaig and Taylor 2015, Harrison and McCaig 2014) as well as by researchers such as Vicki Bolliver whose focus on inequitable access of BME students to Russell Group Universities has illuminated the inherent inadequacy of fair access and social mobility when it comes to actual social inequalities of access. (e.g. Bolliver, 2015).

While the expansion of higher education may lead to increased opportunities for access to higher education for previously under-represented groups, a hierarchical arrangement of higher education institutions within the system often means that only particular kinds of HEIs provide opportunities for particular social groups (Stevenson et al 2014, McCaig 2015). WP policies are recognised as having failed
to create equity of opportunity for students across the system since, as our research evidences (McCaig 2015) the older more traditional ‘higher-status’ universities are far more likely to attract and retain students from higher-income and other traditionally privileged social groups.

In this presentation we draw on two research projects undertaken for the Higher Education Academy to illuminate how such discontinuities, ambiguities and contractions play out in practice. McCaig and Taylor draw on data (survey and interview) from across 33 HEIs to evidence the implications for the sector – in terms of widening participation, fair access and social mobility - of changes to student number controls. Stevenson et al then draw on qualitative survey responses from 350 front line teaching staff as well as interviews with 33 senior academics to evidence how staff conceptualisations and considerations of both widening participation and social mobility are shaping pedagogic practices with significant implications for the HE sector. We conclude our paper by identifying how the dual focus on both access and social mobility outlined in the Green Paper is, therefore, emblematic of further inconsistencies and contradictions since access is likely to occur at the lower-status universities whilst social mobility is recognised (including by the current Government) as being attainable primarily through access to the most elite institutions. We will end our presentation by inviting participants to reflect on how these contradictions might continue to reframe UK higher education as well as the implications for the continued transformation of the HE and, in particular for student access and student success.

References


HE: Transforming lives through life-wide-learning? April 27th-28th 2016, Milton Keynes, UK widening-participation@open.ac.uk

Peer assisted learning: What counts as research in WP?

CATHY MALONE

What counts in BME research?

Presented here is a case study of a practical intervention designed to improve course cohesion and student engagement. The scheme appeared to have real impact in terms of supporting development of diverse range of individuals including those from target Widening Participation groups (BME & POLAR1), although these students were not the explicit focus of the intervention. In evaluating the scheme, a rich account of the course was considered interesting but peripheral, what was really required for evidence of impact was some form of quantitative evaluation. This seems to bear out Howe's suggestion (2004) of a hierarchy of research that values quantitative research over qualitative. This paper presents samples of each form of data for reflection; including notes of participant observation and data from longitudinal analysis of NSS statistics.

Peer Assisted Learning Intervention

PALS is a peer assisted learning scheme that recruits and trains senior students to design and deliver subject-specific study sessions for first year students. It is based on the idea that students learn best, with and from each other (Vygotsky 1978). The benefits of peer led learning have been thoroughly explored; (Martin & Arendale 1993, Falchikov 2001, Fox & Stephenson 2006, Longfellow et al 2008, Fleming 2009) and there has been a recently renewed interest in how peer learning schemes can address the challenges of massification of Higher Education (Hilsdon 2014, Keenan 2014). Such schemes appear to offer multiple employability benefits to the mentors and support in a practical way the development of "communities of practice" (Lave & Wenger 1991), thereby, fostering a sense of belonging that has been linked with first year success (Tinto 97, Pascarella and Terenzini 1991).

Development of Peer Assisted Learning Scheme in Professional Health Course

In the initial pilot after two days of training the second year students, PALS leaders, worked in pairs to run a series of six weekly sessions with groups of 12-15 first year students. They also attended debriefs after each hour long study session. This follows a template popularised by Manchester National PASS/ SI Centre,

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which promotes a form of peer assisted learning that is “student led, subject specific and centrally supported” (Ody & Carey 2009).

Evaluation

We evaluated the scheme through interviews and questionnaires addressed to all the stakeholders; first years following the scheme, second year leaders and staff. As the PALS lead trainer I recruited, trained and observed the second year students and took detailed notes throughout. We also drew on institutional data that was collected routinely to examine the impact of the scheme.

Student and staff observations combined with responses to staff and student questionnaires formed the basis annual report to the subject group. While the questionnaire and self-report comments were enormously positive, what I found compelling were the detailed narratives of the student journey that emerged from my observations of the PALS leaders. These narratives provided a more detailed, personal and richer demonstration of what for some was transformational growth. For leaders these schemes offer a leadership opportunity in a low stakes, unassessed setting. This experience appeared to have a significant impact on students, in particular on those who arrived at university with little personal experience of leadership.

There was also a longitudinal shift in the ethos of the course. This was most evident in the tenor of the relationships among the student group. By creating a role for students in supporting novice learners there appeared to be a shift towards a much more collaborative approach to learning. The creation of role of student leaders seemed to alters the locus of control and invite students to join a community of learners. The results that emerged confirmed the findings of external research (Keenan 2014) that highlighted the wide ranging benefits such schemes can offer that are of particular relevance to institutions interested in creating a more inclusive learning environment. However, these accounts which rely on participant observation appeared to have little internal validity. While they proved influential and powerful with other staff, at a strategic or faculty level such accounts were clearly inadequate in terms of demonstrating impact.

Quantitative Evaluation

There are proportionally few students on this course who from widening participation target groups. With an annual cohort of 50 and fewer than five in each target group, it is almost impossible to demonstrate statistically significant impact. Additionally as attendance was extremely high at the sessions (90%-95%) there was no possibility of comparing students who attended against those who didn't. We did however conduct a longitudinal analysis of NSS scores for the course in question. This revealed:
• From 2013 and 2014, there were significant gains in Overall Satisfaction (75% to 89%), Academic Support (70 to 88%), Assessment and Feedback (63% and 78%) and Organisation and Management (40% and 59%) between 2013 and 2014.

• There was a drop between 2014 and 2015 across some of the section areas, however, the Overall Satisfaction figures remained the same (89%).

• In 2012 and 2013, the Overall Satisfaction scores in BSc Midwifery were substantially lower than the Nursing subject group in SHU and the sector. However, in 2015 the scores were higher than the Nursing subject group at both SHU and the sector.

The PALS scheme is one small element in a rich and challenging course, and given the rich nature of individual progress these results suggest the PALS scheme may have contributed to this small overall improvement in student satisfaction. However this data, slight though it is, has in practice been far more influential than all the qualitative data collected.

Conclusion

Clearly different research methods tell different stories. The emphasis on impact and rigour of research, as if these are neutral terms, appears to bias and privilege one form of research over another. While issues such as 'belonging' emerge from research as key indicators of successful induction, and there is talk of partnership in learning premised on a notion of education that is social constructivist, these broad concepts are distorted by the tallies we keep of them. As a practitioner new to the field it seems that research that matters, is almost exclusively quantitative and underpinned by a rather crude experimentalism. Interventions that support educational inclusivity surely require an acknowledgement of a richer research stream that puts at its centre the voices of the students we are attempting to support. This response to this case study raises questions for the wider community about how we evaluate practical interventions and how we evidence impact.

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How universities in England engage with research to support BME student experiences in their access agreements: Getting out of the gap

ALEX WARDROP

This paper explores how universities in England engage with research addressing the experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students in their access agreements.

From a lexical analysis of access agreements we found an increase in institutional research activity relating to differential attainment rates between students from some BME backgrounds and their White counterparts. However, this focus on gaps in attainment is rarely accompanied by any outline of changes in institutional practice designed to improve student experiences.

Drawing on critical race theory and ideas of ‘non-performativity’, we argue that the way research is being engaged with in access agreements risks perpetuating a “racialised gap in belonging” rather than supporting BME students to thrive (Coleman, 2015). By concentrating research on attainment gaps, access agreements are not mobilising resources to critical reflect on, and support transformations within, institutions and the structure of HE more broadly.

Background

The use of access agreements as a regulatory vehicle for higher education (HE) in England has supported the widening of participation (OFFA, 2014; UCAS, 2014). However, increased equity in access has not been met with increased equity in success.

Recent analysis (HEFCE, 2015: 20) found that the “proportion of White graduates who achieved a first or upper second class degree in 2013-14 was 76 per cent, compared with 60 per cent” for BME graduates. These differences are not just due to entry tariffs as differences in degree outcome exists between White and BME graduates with four A grades at A-level (HEFCE, 2015: 20-21).

Research showing differences in attainment and outcomes along racialised lines is not new. There are a number of significant studies which confirm a highly

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racialised gap in attainment exists in our universities (Connor et al., 1996; 2003; 2004; Broecke and Nicholls 2007; Fielding et al. 2008; Richardson 2008a; 2008b; 2015; Cotton et al., 2010; 2015; Singh, 2011; Stevenson, 2012). In the case of BME students it seems that opportunities for access have not been met with opportunities for wider support of student experience (Leathwood et al., 2009; NUS, 2011).

Evidence from The National BME Education Strategy Group (2006) highlighted how social and economic segregation has contributed to institutional cultures whereby Black students can’t build supportive and nurturing relations with their peers and teachers. Connor et al., (2004) linked feelings of isolation to a lack of institutional diversity and BME staff role models (see Bhopal, 2014; 2015; ECU, 2104).

Although there has been significant effort to tackle institutionalised racism, the issue of differential attainment is often reduced to “student deficit models where in effect their perceived lack of ability is seen as the primary cause for their relative lower attainment” (Singh, 2011: 7-8). These assumptions serve to increase marginalisation. In the words of Coleman (2015), the whole curriculum of the university (from what and who is taught, who teaches, and how they teach) has established not “a racialised gap in attainment, but rather a racialised gap in belonging” (see Stevenson, 2012).

Methodology

Critical race theory (CRT) begins with the premise that the social order is structured along oppressive, racialised, lines (Ladson-Billings, 1998; McCoy et al., 2015). Understanding racism as systematic and institutional means understanding how HEIs as institutions can reinforce racism even in documents intended to reduce inequalities (Iverson, 2007; Hiraldo 2015; Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995; McCoy et al., 2015).

Our findings are drawn from a lexical analysis of access agreements covering academic years 2014/15 – 2016/17. The search was conducted using the qualitative data software package, MaxQDA. We analysed this data thematically to understand how institutions engage with research activity relating to BME student experiences.

Access agreements state what institutions intend to do with their higher fee income to support widening participation (WP). They perform, in a highly structured and public way, an image of universities as accessible (Bowl and Hughes, 2013; 2016; McCaig, 2015).

Speech act theory and ideas of performativity can help unpick this rhetoric. For Austin (1975), a performative speech act brings about what it says. Butler developed this by highlighting how performativity is a “reiterative and citational practice … [which] produces the effects that it names” (1993: 2). Ahmed (2005) re-
oriented this with the concept of ‘non-performative’ speech acts. These “work by not bringing about the effects that they name” (Ahmed, 2005; 2012). Ahmed saw institutional strategies as locales for non-performativity. Conceiving of access agreements as non-performative texts asks the reader to consider what has not been brought about by their words.

Following this, we suggest that by reiterating a racialised attainment gap, research in access agreements may not be reducing that inequality but, instead, producing the effect of a racialised difference in student experiences of belonging.

Our conceptual argument is that in reiterating a BME attainment gap, without outlining an infrastructure for support, institutions are enabling that gap to continue. That is, in the very research intended to address the issue, institutions risk perpetuating a culture that marginalises BME students’ experiences.

Findings

The findings form part of a larger analysis (Wardrop et al., forthcoming). We found that although there has been an overall increase in research activity since 2014-15, research remains a troubling aspect of access agreement discourse.

Initial findings suggest that there has been an increase in institutions engaging with research relating to BME student experiences:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic year</th>
<th>2014-15</th>
<th>2015-16</th>
<th>2016-17</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institutions with access agreements</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutions engaging in research to support BME student experiences</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data shows research being used to identify racialised attainment gaps at individual universities. It is not clear in all cases what interventions or strategies are being developed to support or enhance BME students’ attainment and experience.

We argue that by not engaging with existing research, institutions are diverting resource away from developing more reflexive, anti-racist, interventions. This risks perpetuating the “racialised gap in belonging” by aligning BME students with a deficit rather than “unmasking and exposing racism” within HE structures (Coleman, 2015. Ladson-Billings, 1998: 11).
Implications

Examining how access agreements frame their research relating to BME student experiences can expose inequalities and enable institutional policy to be improved to better support students to succeed.

The theory of non-performativity offers an approach to counter the gulf between rhetoric, policy, and practice. This could enable more effective interventions to challenge and change deeply rooted structures of inequality.

Highlighting CRT as a profoundly enabling strategy to expose and challenge structures of oppression could re-shape how WP research, practice, and policy is undertaken and understood. For example, the use of storytelling to share lived experiences and counter racist hegemony could establish ways to tell WP stories differently. Taking seriously how structures of highly racialised oppression have shaped HE is to take seriously the need for collective, bold, efforts to change them (Ladson-Billings, 1998: 28).

Rather than reiterate existing research, we suggest that when it comes to the experiences of BME students, examining attainment gaps is part of the problem. It is time to stop minding the gap and get out of it.

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Exploring how to use student-student mentoring to increase student success amongst widening participation students in a distance learning context

DR TROY COOPER, TINA FORBES AND JOANNA ROBSON

Context student ‘belonging’ and student success

The HEA sponsored ‘What Works? Student Retention and Success Programme’ summary report identified ‘the human side of higher education … finding friends, feeling confident, and above all feeling part of your course of study and the institution’ (Broadfoot in Thomas, (2012b, p.1)) as the most significant factor in student success. Another conclusion was that ‘in particular analysis of effective approaches to increasing retention’, developing student ‘belonging’ was key and involved ‘supportive peer relations, meaningful interaction between staff and students, the development of knowledge, (and) confidence and identity as successful HE learners…’ (Thomas, 2012b, pp. 14-15). The full report of the programme (Thomas, 2012a) explored in more detail how this related to the building of resilience necessary for students to continue in a course of study when put under pressure and challenge in other areas of their lives.

The last 10 years have seen changes in the external environment in relation to the funding of universities and of student participation in HE study which have eroded many previous distinctions between full and part time students. Many, and possibly the majority, of full time students now undertake significant amounts of part-time paid work during their studies, and significant minority live at home, so the boundaries between full and part time students are blurring in terms of experience.

However, part-time students may face particular challenges which relate to higher levels of isolation, needing to become familiar with new social environments and learning technologies, learning to manage increased expectations of them as students and time management and balancing study with other life commitments (Williams and Kane, 2010). For students who study with the Open University distance study deepens these issues, because they are not only part-time but have only very periodic and often electronically mediated contact with peers, staff and other units of the University. Students from particular educational backgrounds of

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low prior involvement and achievement in education will struggle even more to surmount these additional barriers to development of the belonging and integration into the structures and processes of HE study which Thomas identifies as necessary to high levels of resilience.

A student mentoring pilot for part time students studying at a distance

The Open University has long been aware that whilst an open entry policy allows access of particular low participation groups to HE this does not necessarily translate into equivalent levels of success for these groups compared to others (Simpson, 2013). In particular students with levels of prior educational qualification (PEQ) below A-level currently have significantly lower rates of retention and achievement on modules than those with higher levels of prior study, and are significantly less likely to complete their course of study.

A team in the faculty of social sciences designed a vertical student-student peer mentoring system to pilot with a group of new students registering on to their first social sciences level 1 (HEQF level 4) module of study in October 2015. It offered experienced social sciences student mentors who were studying at OU level 2 (HEQF level 5) or 3 (HEQF level 6) in social sciences to any student living in East Anglia or London with PEQ lower than A-level.

The student mentors were trained on the purpose and aims of mentoring, type of relationship involved, and in terms of boundaries, communication etiquette, support and how to problem solve. Mentees were provided with briefing on appropriate forms of contact, and the supports, resources and safeguards available in advance of their first actual contact with their mentor. The mentee-mentor relationship was generally conducted in an individual online forums dedicated to the mentor and their mentee, allowing individual and private communication, with occasional Skype or Skype-like contact if desired by both parties.

Protocols were in place to match for gender, age band and ethnicity in assigning mentors to mentees. The mentoring briefings and information about the pilot were placed on a website for participants to consult, and all were aware of two mentoring project support managers who provided information, support and training on these pages but were also consistently available should there be more urgent or complex issues to address. The pilot project lasted 5 months and concluded in at the beginning of February 2016.

Evaluations and conclusions

Of 380 students offered mentoring, 47(12.4%) expressed an interest to be mentored. Eight of these students, however, never fully joined the scheme, leaving
an initial total of 39. Two students then quickly withdrew from the module leaving 37 (9.7%) as the final participating number of mentee students. Compared to invited but non-participant students in the pilot (281), the mentee group were the same age on average than non-mentees (36.7 yrs v 35.1 yrs) and there were the same proportion of ethnic minority students (10.25% v 9%), but were more likely to be male (24% v 21%) and to have a disability (35.5% v 20%).

Some numeric comparisons have been performed for completion and retention between 3 groups: 1) the low PEQ group of students who were offered but did not take up mentoring – Low PEQ non-mentee 2) the low PEQ group who were offered and did take up mentoring – Low PEQ mentee and 3) a group of low PEQ social sciences new students not in the pilot project who were not offered mentoring.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Submission rate Tutor Marked Assessment 03 of the 05 on the module mid-January 2016</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Low PEQ non-mentees n=287</td>
<td>160 students submitted: 57% of original starting group and <strong>79.2% of those registered at this point</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Low PEQ group mentees n=37</td>
<td>26 students submitted: 70.3% of original starting group and <strong>87% of those still registered at this point</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Low PEQ group not in pilot n=413</td>
<td>246 students submitted: 59.9% of original starting group and <strong>74% of those still registered at this point</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Submission rate Tutor Marked Assessment 04 out of 05 on module end February 2016</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Low PEQ non-mentees n=287</td>
<td>124 students submitted: 43% of original group and <strong>62% of those registered at this point</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Low PEQ mentees n=37</td>
<td>25 students submitted: 68% of original group and <strong>83% of those still registered.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Low PEQ group not in pilot n=413</td>
<td>204 students submitted: 49% of original group and <strong>61% of those still registered.</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the 10\(^{th}\) March (just over half way through the module) students still registered to study were:
Whilst the impact of mentoring in producing higher rates of assessment submission and, to some extent, retention for the mentee group compared to others is undoubtedly a complex one, these figures are highly suggestive of a beneficial impact, and wholly congruent with findings in the rest of the HE sector on the benefits of student peer mentoring (Sanders and Higham 2012; Andrews and Clark 2011; Harding and Thompson 2011; Boyle, Kwon, Ross and Simpson 2010; Black and Mackenzie 2008; Rogers and Tremblay 2003). In considering the relatively low take-up of mentoring by students offered it, it is worth considering Thomas’s (2012a) conclusion that students in most need of support often do not actively seek it, and that to be effective interventions and approaches to increase student engagement and belonging must therefore be mainstream ‘opt out’ not ‘opt in’, and proactive (p20 ibid).

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A novel approach to researching the student experience across the higher education lifecycle: Using interpretative phenomenological analysis to explore ‘widening participation’ students’ aspiration and academic resilience

EDWARD BICKLE AND ELIZEBETH GAUNTLETT

In moving from widened access to success, this paper is concerned with both the aspirations of young people from widening participation backgrounds and their existing or developing resilience as HE students. In-depth exploration of the cognitions and emotions of these young people, through listening to the stories of their experiences, provides rich data that may enhance support in future. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is one credible, insightful research approach which may enable educators, researchers and policy-makers to see the nature and significance of students’ experiences in a previously unseen way. This paper offers the joint perspective of two PhD researchers exploring the phenomena of aspiration and resilience in students from low participation neighbourhoods and low-income backgrounds. We will debate the important methodological challenges and implications of applying IPA to these projects, including use of language to convey meaning, the role of researcher reflexivity and the difficulties in achieving a truly interpretative account of the phenomenon.

Context

This paper considers the advantages and challenges of using a novel methodology within two PhD projects. The first study examines the notion of raising the aspirations of young people from under-represented and disadvantaged areas to aspire to Higher Education (HE). Although aspiration raising is a key concept within widening participation (WP) policy and practice, Brown (2011) suggests that the ways in which young people’s aspirations are represented in policy has exaggerated ‘the distance between the lived experience of young people and the futures they are encouraged to anticipate for themselves’ (p. 20). This may be down to the creation of doxic aspiration, where those with the most powerful capital create a norm wherein HE is a desirable future. By not subscribing to this future, young people are often portrayed to be in ‘deficit’. This research aims to gain a deeper

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contextual understanding of the aspirations of a group of young WP students and how these aspirations are shaped through everyday experiences.

The second piece of research considers resilience as a psychosocial concept; referring to the ability of a person to achieve good outcomes despite experience of adversity (Rutter 2012). It is about how we ‘adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten stability, viability or development’ (Masten 2014). HE students that meet criteria for WP initiatives such as low-income or working-class status are considered to have experience of adversity and a successful developmental outcome (i.e. enrolment at university). This research aims to enrich our knowledge of the role of resilience in the prediction and facilitation of academic success (Ungar 2003), whilst avoiding the arbitrariness associated with the selection of resilience outcomes, risk factors and protective factors that quantitative analysis can entail.

Predominantly used in health research, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) offers a way to make sense of the meaning of individual experience, in the context of personal and social worlds (Smith and Osbourn 2007). Whilst phenomenological studies within educational research are not uncommon, the approach remains under-utilised in WP research. In one example, Allan and Clarke (2007) adopted a phenomenographic perspective to identify variation in the experience of first year undergraduates when engaging with study skills, which offered direct implications for the professional practice of undergraduate tutors. A limited body of literature specifically using IPA in educational research is available, and much has a considerable focus on student health issues and experiences of disability (see Denovan and Macaskill 2013; Conroy and De Visser 2015). Thus, IPA as a methodology is a novel approach to exploring the lived experience of students from WP backgrounds adopted by both the projects outlined above.

Applying IPA to WP research

Within each study, the need to draw on populations with similar demographics (low participation neighbourhoods and low income) means that we seek to understand the distinct experience of the individual and the social, historical and cultural contexts in which those experiences occur are of the upmost significance to the inquiry (Eatough and Smith 2008). This idiographic approach sees participants as representing a perspective rather than a population (Smith et al. 2009) and allows individualised perspectives on aspiration to emerge. This is opposed to more generalised, nomothetic claims of young people’s aspirations prevalent in WP policy.

One of the key methodological challenges is capturing the essence of a person’s experience conveyed in their own voice. Given the need for the researcher to enter the lifeworld of the participants, interview questions have been designed to be open-ended and non-directive, so participants may share their personal experiences of the
phenomena of aspiration and academic resilience in their own words (Willig 2013). As suggested by Smith et al. (2009) semi-structured interviews will begin with primarily descriptive accounts before more analytic accounts are sought. Thus the outcomes of both projects are interpretative accounts, which refrain from attempts to draw direct causal connections (Willig 2013). In exploring academic resilience, this means attempting to resist looking for determining factors which underlie experience, and access more meaningful accounts drawn from the students’ own stories of challenge and success.

The role of the researcher in IPA is not only to interpret the experiences of the participants in a manner that remains faithful, but to step back from these experiences and to ask questions, such as ‘what assumptions underpin this account?’ (Braun and Clarke 2013). By examining how a phenomenon first appears, the researcher is engaged with making sense of the project and thus their own perspective and knowledge facilitates the analytical process; a hermeneutic endeavour particularly relevant for WP research. For example, academic resilience as a phenomenon occurs in the space between a person, their environment and outcome, and so making sense of students’ descriptive accounts necessitates an interpretative analysis.

Reflexivity is embedded in IPA. Researchers must consider how their own prior experience and preconceptions about the research influence their perspectives. Unlike other forms of qualitative inquiry, IPA explicitly recognises data analysis as subjective and makes this transparent to the reader, avoiding attempts to ‘bracket’ or exclude this element. In the aspiration study, the researchers’ interpretative framework has been influenced, for example, by experience in researching university outreach programmes over a number of years as well as their own experience in transition to HE. Such experience facilitates rapport-building and developing interview schedules that are clear to participants. To ensure interpretation remains faithful to the participants’ accounts, a number of strategies are available to the researcher: reflexive journals; field notes; and supervisory discussion which establish a coherent decision trail.

**Conclusion**

Within a complex and evolving HE landscape there is a greater need for evidence-based practice in relation to WP and fair access and the lived experiences of WP students across the student lifecycle.

Applying IPA to WP research is a novel approach to examining students’ experience, which allows exploration of the thoughts and beliefs which link individual’s descriptions of experience and meaning. Despite challenges, IPA can help researchers gain a deeper understanding of the lived experience of aspiration.
and resilience in WP students that may facilitate assimilation to and success within HE

References


New students, new support:
Moving from access to success

MICHELLE FLEMMING

Various factors, both ethical and pragmatic, have led to an increase in the number of students from traditionally under-represented groups attending university. Much of the focus over recent years, particularly in the UK, Australia and the US, has been to ensure access to higher education by these under-represented groups. However, although access rates have risen, further work needs to be done to ensure the retention and success rates of these students. This paper presents details of some pilot work being undertaken at one university to determine the needs of commencing students and to provide tailored support for these students. A Student Readiness Survey (SRS) was developed in order to determine what supports commencing students need. Partly as a result, a range of new ‘just-in-time’ support for students was developed and implemented. A total of 803 students (25% of the commencing student population in semester 1 2015) completed the survey. Of these, 34% identified as first-in-family and 84% identified as needing at least one type of support. Students from widening participation backgrounds (64%) made greater use of the academic support programmes than did other students. Students will be tracked over time to determine their retention and success rates.

Introduction

Universities face pressure to increase the access and participation of students from traditionally under-represented groups. Some of this pressure comes from genuine attempts by governments to provide more equitable access to higher education and other pressures come from the need to increase the skilled labour force. Getting a student into a university is now recognised as only the first part of the equation. The cost of attrition is high for students and universities alike. Many students from under-represented backgrounds such as those who are first-in-family to attend university, students from low socio-economic status backgrounds, students with disability, mature age students, students from rural backgrounds, those from non-English speaking backgrounds and refugees, often do not have an understanding of how university ‘works’. As one student stated in a study undertaken by Long, Ferrier and Heagney (2006, p. 109) when describing why she dropped out:

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Lack of support from teachers etc., lack of ‘how uni works’ knowledge i.e. essay writing, WebCT, not knowing what course best suits me as I couldn’t find the right person to talk to about it.

The above quotation encapsulates many of the known factors about why students drop out of university. Research undertaken in the U.K (e.g. National Audit Office, 2007; Quinn, et al., 2005; Yorke & Longden, 2008), the US (e.g. Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004; Tinto, 1993) and Australia (e.g. Long, et al., 2006; McInnis & James, 2004) indicates a number of commonalities across institutions and indeed countries when it comes to reasons for withdrawal. These can be summarized as lack of preparation for higher education; dissatisfaction with course/poor course choice; poor academic experience; problems with social integration; financial difficulties; and personal circumstances.

Early engagement, particularly in terms of good, structured orientation and transition programmes, has been found to be valuable in terms of assisting students stay and succeed (e.g. Keenan, 2008; Quinn, et al., 2005; Yorke & Longden, 2007). The attitudes of Australian first year university students has been tracked every five years since 1994. Results of the most recent survey indicate that the Australian student body is increasingly diverse and that providing at risk students with early support improves retention (Baik, Naylor & Arkoudis, 2015).

In order to try to address these feelings of lack of belonging and lack of how university works, and to provide a range of tailored support for students a Student Readiness Survey (SRS) was developed and implemented at an Australian university in 2014. The main purpose of the SRS is to determine the types of support that commencing students identify as needing. The responses to the survey allow the provision of tailored information regarding the available support that best meets each student’s needs. Additionally, the survey responses allow for the university to tailor support services to better meet the needs of commencing students. At the same time the survey was introduced, a new suite of ‘just-in-time’ support services, both online and face-to-face, were developed to better meet the needs of a growing and changing student population. The current paper details the findings from the semester 1 2015 SRS.

Method

An email invitation to complete the SRS was sent to 3202 commencing students in semester 1 2015. The email contained an explanation of the survey’s purpose, a description of the randomly-drawn prizes for survey completion and a URL link to the survey.

The survey consisted of 23 items. The student identification numbers of the respondents were available through the survey mechanism; hence, demographic
information was available directly from the university’s data warehouse. The major sections of the survey were designed to analyse the respondents’ preparedness for study and to invite students to self-identify their support needs, prompted by a checklist of 11 support areas, plus an open-ended ‘other’ category, as shown below:

- Essay/Assignment writing
- English reading and writing skills
- English speaking skills
- Referencing for assignments
- Mathematics and Statistics skills
- Exam anxiety
- Time management and self-directed learning skills
- Group work skills
- Oral presentation skills
- Information search skills
- Digital literacy skills
- Discipline-specific support or other support needs

All survey respondents who identified as needing a listed support were sent an email that outlined the available supports for their specific needs. They were also invited to join a social support programme. Analysis of SRS respondent engagement in five of the support programmes was undertaken.

Results

Of the cohort who received the email invitations to complete the SRS (N=3202), a total of 803 students responded (25%). Demographic information about the participants is shown below in Table 1.

Table 1: Participants’ Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>515</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>288</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic/International</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic</td>
<td>713</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate/postgraduate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>675</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widening participation categories</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-in-family</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mature age (over 25)</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial disadvantage</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outer regional or rural</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As can be seen above, a large number of students who completed the survey were students from widening participation backgrounds. In total, 514 (64%) of the students identified as coming from one or more widening participation categories. Moreover, 159 students (20%) identified as not having studied (at school, university or another tertiary institution) for four years or more, with 62 (8%) not having undertaken formal study for more than 10 years.

Support needs

Students were asked ‘With reference to your intended study, do you feel that you require support in any of the following areas (tick all applicable boxes)’. A total of 673 students chose at least one support need. The total responses in each category are provided in Table 2.

Table 2: Total self-identified support needs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-identified support needed</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Referencing</td>
<td>415</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essay/assignment writing</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time management</td>
<td>303</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral presentations</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information searching</td>
<td>265</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exam anxiety</td>
<td>257</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maths &amp; stats</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital literacy</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group work</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English reading and writing skills</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline specific/other support</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English speaking skills</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the students from widening participation groups, 86% (n = 441) identified as needing at least one academic support, as compared with 80% (n = 232) of the students who did not identify as coming from a widening participation group.

Supports provided

As a result of the 2014 SRS, a number of new support services were introduced and existing ones revamped. The key support services provided to address the needs identified by the commencing cohort included the supports detailed below.

- Study Skills drop-in study help sessions: these sessions include help with understanding assessment tasks, essay and assignment writing, referencing, finding information, time management and study planning, exam preparation, and using online programmes.
- Rovers: current students, trained to help other students with understanding assessment tasks, structuring assignments, referencing, using online resources and using printers.
- Peer-Assisted Learning Sessions (PALS): weekly group study sessions for specific first-year units run by peer leaders.
- Study Help site: the site contains numerous interactive learning resources and downloadable resources on a number of topics.
- Online tutoring: a 24/7 on-demand online tutoring service.
- English skills: a free intensive English course.
- Mathematics and statistics help: a centre to provide mathematics, statistics and information technology help.

Students’ identified support needs were grouped into categories and an email template was created for each category. A total of 673 emails were sent out, utilising approximately 20 different email templates depending on the combination of supports identified. The emails provided details of the supports available specific to the students’” needs and invited students to utilise the services.

**Analysis of the use of support services by SRS respondents**

Analysis of usage by the SRS respondents was possible for five of the major support programmes: the Study Skills drop-in study help sessions; the Rovers; the PALS; the Study Help site; and the online tutoring. The engagement of the 673 SRS respondents with these five programmes in their first semester is summarised in Table 3. Table 4 shows the breakdown of academic support services used by students from widening participation backgrounds and non-widening participation backgrounds who identified as needing at least one support (\(n = 673\)).

Table 3: SRS respondent engagement with the academic support programmes/services

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study help drop in sessions</th>
<th>Rovers</th>
<th>PALS</th>
<th>Study Help site</th>
<th>Online tutoring</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No of respondents who engaged with the support</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>361</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total attendances/usage instances</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>471</td>
<td>4234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of respondents who identified support needs and engaged with the support</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
<td>16.6%</td>
<td>53.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4: SRS respondent engagement with the support programmes/services according to background

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Programme/service utilised</th>
<th>Widening participation group ((n = 441))</th>
<th>Non-widening participation group ((n = 232))</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Any support programme</td>
<td>277 (63%)</td>
<td>138 (59%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Help Moodle site</td>
<td>245 (56%)</td>
<td>116 (50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PALS</td>
<td>69 (16%)</td>
<td>43 (19%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rovers</td>
<td>39 (9%)</td>
<td>14 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Skills drop-ins</td>
<td>31 (7%)</td>
<td>6 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smarthinking</td>
<td>20 (5%)</td>
<td>4 (2%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

The vast majority (84%) of SRS respondents self-identified as needing support in at least one area. The most frequent areas of support selected were referencing \((n = 415)\) and essay/assignment writing \((n = 401)\). Time management was the third-greatest support need identified \((n = 303)\).

The support program with the greatest degree of SRS respondent engagement was the Study Help site, with 54% of the 673 respondents having some recorded activity on the site, and a total of 4234 activities recorded for the respondent group. The peer-assisted learning sessions (PALS) program had the second-highest level of SRS respondent engagement, with 17% of the 673 respondents having a recorded attendance in PALS and a total of 471 attendances recorded for the respondent group.

A disproportionately large number of commencing students from widening participation backgrounds engaged with the university by completing the survey. Moreover, these students made use of the academic support services and programmes on offer. It is encouraging to see that reaching out to these students proactively assists with their engagement.

Universities need to continue to engage with students to ensure their retention and success. As universities increase the participation of students from groups that have not traditionally participated in higher education, it is imperative that we continue to provide wrap around support to ensure that students stay and succeed. The retention and success of the students engaged in the programmes described above will be tracked to determine the success of the initiative.
References


Longitudinal approach to summer schools: An ongoing case study of good practice

INNOVATIVE PRACTICE

DR PATRICIA HARRIS

We developed a nursing-specific, transition summer school with follow up support to address the potential for students from WP groups to be less informed about HE and therefore less prepared for their journey to and through HE\(^1\). Building on studies which found that well informed applicants have higher acceptance rates\(^2\); the summer school aimed to increase WP applicant’s knowledge of the available nursing programmes and improve applicant’s confidence in their ability to succeed. Additionally, the summer school aimed to provide a realistic experience of HE which is hoped to support the construction of realistic expectations which will ultimately aid in retention of students\(^3\).

The overall aim could be viewed as a scheme to improve

i. Successful conversion of potential WP applicants to confirmed WP applicants due to feeling informed about their choice and confident in their ability to cope,

ii. conversion of WP applicants to WP offer holders due to having increased motivation and through stronger applications,

iii. Transition of firm offers to enrolled students who are more likely to stay and succeed on the programme due to informed choice and because reality of HE meets their expectations\(^4\).

Proposed changes to funding has brought WP provision for health professional courses to the fore and this presentation will discuss the good practice of the summer school and post-summer school support.


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Examining the role of academics in supporting widening participation

INNOVATIVE PRACTICE

KIM RIDEALGH

This paper will examine the role academic colleagues can play in the Widening Participation process, ensuring that Widening Participation support is considered in all aspects of institutional strategy, by providing examples of innovative initiatives from the University of East Anglia. At the University of East Anglia a unique academic post is held in each Faculty to ensure that Widening Participation students are supported throughout their time at university and that subject-specific Outreach sessions can utilise world-leading research to raise aspirations. This paper will highlight examples, primarily from Modern Foreign Languages, to demonstrate how world-leading research can help raise aspirations and support long-term intervention projects, and how Widening Participation research can form REF-able impact cases and support academic promotion. Norfolk is both a rural and coastal county and faces difficult challenges in raising aspirations as some areas of the county have a progression rate to HE as low as 8%. Thus, by creating a dynamic range of activities in collaboration with academic colleagues, a wide range of targeted activities can be delivered, activities that also benefit current UG students, academics, and support the reputation of the university itself.

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First generation scholars scheme

INNOVATIVE PRACTICE

GINO GRAZIANO

The University of Sussex’s innovative First-Generation Scholars’ Scheme (FGSS) is a progressive, linear programme which supports young people from underrepresented groups, from primary school through to graduation. Founded in 2012, after the cessation of the national Aimhigher programme, and the introduction of £9,000 fees, FGSS began as a set of support measures aimed at different entry points of the student lifecycle – outreach, success and progression. As the programme has matured, these strands have intertwined, and an overarching framework of support has emerged. Under the banner of FGSS, students engage with a learner progression framework prior to entry, are financially and pastorally supported post-entry, develop their employability through an ambassador programme and graduate internships, and receive continuing support from our Careers team post-graduation. As FGSS enters its fourth year, this workshop will look at the intersections of each of these strands, and look forward to the full realisation of the FGSS plan as each cohort of students matures. This workshop will ask to what extent universities should implement strategies to provide additional undergraduate support for students from underrepresented groups through to post graduate study or employment. This workshop will aim to discuss the concept of a student lifecycle in a national context, gather a range of diverse perspectives and seek to identify who has a part to play in supporting students across their learning journey.

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Improving success and retention for widening participation students in an experienced based programme

INNOVATIVE PRACTICE

STEPHANE FARENGA

This paper is a continuation of Farenga’s (2015) research on the National Scholarship Programme (NSP) provision at the University of Hertfordshire (UH). That research corroborates the shift in national student funding reform policy away from access tools and towards measures that impact student success and retention (Bowes et al., 2014).

This paper focuses on the development of a holistic, experienced-based programme within UH’s 2014/15 NSP delivery and charts its impact on success and retention within a new cohort of students. The findings here support Farenga’s previous research that further, varied support is both valued by students and results in demonstrable outcomes, most notably a 42% decrease in the withdrawal rate between the 2013/14 and 2014/15 NSP cohorts at UH. The impact such provision has on the transition of students into UH is reviewed in light of Gale and Parker’s (2014) conceptualisation of transition.

With its dual focus on how shifts in national policy affect institutional provision and the case study analysis of UH’s impact on students, this paper should be of use both to national and institutional policymakers, as well as practitioners and researchers within the converging fields of widening participation and student experience.

References


DOI:10.1080/03075079.2012.721351.

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Reflections for change:
Transformative education and skill development in a widening participation university

INNOVATIVE PRACTICE

JENNIFER RANDALL and SIAN JONES

This paper outlines an academic skills module delivered within a Health Studies Programme at a WP university. A critical memoir, academic readings, and a photovoice research project served as vehicles for engaging in reflections about the students’ positions in the world and the broader socio-political structures within which they live and work. Supporting WP students to develop the academic skills required of university success is essential if we wish to fully realise the aims of a WP agenda. This project moves away from a deficits focused model of teacher/student engagement to one that acknowledges and applauds diverse learners—who are rich in embodied knowledge about the inequalities discussed in the content of their coursework and who exhibit the potential for real transformation and learning gain. Not only did the module’s innovative pedagogy enable students to improve reading and critical thinking skills, but it also helped students to engage with other support services, to grow in confidence, and to foster a real connection to each other and the institution. All of which are fundamental to academic success; meaning that this project has had a significant impact on progression, retention and achievement and therefore realises the aims of the infra-campus campaign: Belong, believe and achieve. Activities included a student led photovoice exhibition that allowed the students a platform to tell and celebrate their own stories. The module facilitated a conversation allowing students to link their personal experiences of privilege and disadvantage to larger sociopolitical stories. The legacy of this module lives on through the repeat of the module with an integrated teaching assistant programme involving past students and is further developed through a student developed international exchange programme where students will emulate the process of reflection and reformulation with others.

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The Working with Young People Student Ambassador Project is a pilot for module-based peer to peer support. This informal, non-academic, student-to-student support, aims to offer invaluable insights into distance-learning and how OU study works, to assist newer students at the start of their studies.

Our WwYP Student Ambassadors are experienced current level 2 and 3 students or graduate volunteers from the OU Working with Young People programme, who have been recruited and trained to offer support to all students studying ‘E108 Working with Young People in Practice: An Introduction’, in 2015/16. Our WwYP SAs can:

- share relevant insights into studying with the OU
- signpost newer students to the range of help available at the OU

To help newer students with:

- negotiating a new learning terrain
- forming effective relationships
- participating in a range of new activities
- becoming effective users of a range of tools for learning

Peer to peer support is very popular across the HE sector and this could be a valuable, additional support mechanism available to students to access if they feel they need it.

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FLEXIBILITY AND TECHNOLOGY

THEME LEAD: RONALD MACINTYRE

Lots of interesting and important work has been done around barriers to entering and remaining in education, research which moves the discourse beyond the availability of places. The papers in this theme drawn directly on those narratives, this might seem a rather banal point. However digital discourses on exclusion have tended to focus on the useful and necessary push to get everyone connected, access inequities, and less on participation. As more people are connected it is becoming clear who is connected, how they connect and what they do once they are connected varies socially, economically and educationally (Schradie 2013).

These questions overlap in online education, most of my own experience has been at the Open University UK (OU), here the question was often how much online in our supported open distance model, as we were concerned about excluding those without access to the relevant technology. However, while access is not pervasive it is widespread. Access questions have not gone away, but participation questions have become acute. One can design learning journeys that make use of the potential of digital technology, but might end up excluding those without the relevant literacies, at the same time if we do not create learning journeys that encourage and challenge people allowing them to develop digital literacies we may be failing in our educational duty. Papers in this theme tease out these aspects attempting to address those dilemmas.

At the start I said digital technologies offered opportunities and challenges. In many ways the digital participation narratives can learn a great deal from the widening participation community, to look beyond access, or the description of underlying structural inequalities, and start exploring the subtle and complex and overlapping ways in which people can become excluded. However, the widening participation community perhaps also ought to listen. Switching from addressing the fears around exclusion as a challenge around inclusion. For some time people in the widening participation community have noted the way we often look to reshape learners in the image of the academy (Bathmaker et.al 2013), rather reshaping the academy. Digital communications - and by this I mean online as more than broadcasting - have the potential to change the relationship between teacher and learner. Reconfiguring who where and how knowledge is produced and consumed. John Casey at Glasgow City College, Trevor Collins at the OU and Will Gregory from Reachwill Ltd. explore the use of video within education. In

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particular, the annotated video tool they have developed and its use as a teaching and assessment tool. Here we seem to be seeing the possibilities for technology to destabilise the privileging of text as a teaching and assessment tool, and starts us thinking about embodied knowledge and how one communicates and demonstrates competence.

Work on socio-material and technical relationships and how we learn through for and by doing has been influential in educational theory (Fenwick et al. 2012), but it has yet to touch pedagogic practice. When bodies and technology have been brought into pedagogic discourses they tend towards techno-topia with distinctive echoes of Schumpeterian “Creative Destruction” associated with neoliberal models of socio-technical relations (Macintyre 2015b), ignoring questions of social justice and hidden assumptions which might exclude certain groups (Macintyre 2016). More participatory ideas around the role of technology as a site of co-creation are needed. However, we need to take a critical perspective, recognising technology is neither neutral, nor deterministic (Kitchin and Dodge 2011), but shaped by human values, values that need to be uncovered, examined, and even reformed (Feenberg 2002). It is my sense that as digital participation and widening participation meet and discuss in spaces like this conference we can start to look at how we might reconfigure those relations.

Many of the papers in this theme innovative practices papers, and those not able to attend will only see the abstract. However, if you like what you have read or seen I would encourage you to search out the authors and programmes to learn more, I am sure they would be glad to hear from you.

References


Revisiting barriers to participation

PETE CANNELL

This paper explores whether, in the light of ubiquitous digital technology and the availability of free online courses, it is helpful to revisit well-established understandings of the barriers facing non-traditional students. We begin with brief reviews of the literature on barriers to widening participation to higher education and the largely distinct literature relating to digital inclusion. We then report on action research undertaken with a group of union learning representatives (ULRs) that illuminates some of the complexities of thinking about barriers in the context of a digital world. Through the findings of this research we reflect on the opportunities and challenges involved in using open educational resources (OER) in workplace settings, whether it is necessary to reconsider the way in which barriers to participation are conceptualised and suggest some areas for further research.

Overview

There is an extensive literature that seeks to understand the persistent inequalities in access to post compulsory education and the reasons for underrepresentation of particular groups; see for example Gorard (2006). Barriers to participation can be summarised as situational, institutional and dispositional (Fuller and Paton, 2008: 2). This threefold categorisation has been further examined to understand how particular barriers impact in specific and nuanced ways on particular disadvantaged groups (Stone and O’Shea, 2013).

Access to and success in higher education has always required the development of a range of literacy skills and Thomas (2014: 817) notes that the lack of such skills and the lack of recognition of skills that mature learners bring with them to their studies forms a powerful disincentive to engagement with education. The rapid growth of the use of digital technologies has added a new dimension. To some extent the challenges of digital engagement can be understood through the traditional categorisation of barriers to participation. So for example, a recent Office of National Statistics report (ONS, 2014: 14) shows that, while Internet access has increased, there is still a significant minority who face situational barriers associated with income. This point is emphasised in the Scottish context in the ‘Digital Scotland’ report (2010: 31), which notes that ‘Those already most disadvantaged are least likely to be connected.’ ‘Across the Divide’, which examines digital exclusion in Glasgow, one of the areas of the UK with the lowest

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levels of Internet Access, also stresses the impact of poverty and notes that even if access to technology is enabled dispositional factors remain important:

‘A successful approach to tackling digital exclusion must recognise the different attitudes which citizens have towards the internet and take the needs and motivations of each individual as the starting point for providing help and support’. (White, 2013: 29)

Research on digital engagement has shifted from a focus on access to technology to consider pedagogical challenges when opportunities for learning are mediated by technology. Connectivity, content and access to appropriate digital devices is necessary but not sufficient (Armenta et al, 2012: 346). Helsper and Eyan (2013) consider how linking digital literacy and digital exclusion frameworks can allow for a more nuanced understanding of digital engagement. The JISC report on Learning Literacies in a Digital Age (Beetham et al, 2010) noted that learners in general are ‘poor at deploying their digital skills in support of learning’; this suggests that these issues are particularly important in a widening participation context.

Free, openly licensed learning materials, known as Open Educational Resources (OER), form an increasingly important part of the educational landscape. A number of authors have flagged the potential of OER to contribute to widening participation (see for example D’Antoni, 2009). In a widening participation context the fact that OER are free to use is clearly important. In addition, however, the flexibility and freedoms that open licenses afford, in particular the ability to remix, reversion and contextualise offer the possibility of reaching non-traditional learners in new and carefully targeted ways. Despite this, Butcher (2011: 168) notes that:

‘... there is little evidence of educational transformation resulting from OER practices: [..]. The lack of sufficient evidence hinders understanding of the role of OER in widening access to education, social inclusion, and long-term sustainability.’

These conclusions are confirmed by a recent OECD report (Falconer et al, 2014).

The OERHE report (Lane and Van Doorp, 2011) provides a valuable account of the issues involved in using OER in widening participation settings. Many of the ideas outlined in the report are being elaborated and piloted by the OEPS project in Scotland (Cannell, 2015). One strand of this work has in a partnership with

37 https://oepscotland.org/about/definitions/
38 www.oepscotland.org
Scottish Union Learning has provided very helpful insights into the way in which barriers to participation are articulated in the use of OER.

During the summer of 2015 the OEPS project held a series of workshop events with a total of 90 Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) from more than 15 trade unions and a wide range of private and public sector workplaces (Macintyre, 2015). The aim of these workshops was to equip ULRs with the skills and confidence to support their colleagues in finding and using OER. To do this the workshop agenda allowed space for ULRs to consider the challenges of using OER in a workplace setting. Typically ULRs support non-traditional learners. In the course of discussion they articulated the situational and dispositional barriers that they confront. They reflected on how some aspects of the online environment interact with and reinforce barriers for novice learners. An unfamiliar environment that ‘looks like a university’; the sheer quantity of material available as OER, the difficulty of making choices and uncertainty about the value of existing skills and whether new skills are needed. The idea that online means individualised learning is also a powerful disincentive. In the course of discussion we started to reconceptualise barriers to participation in non-formal OER environments. ULRs and other trusted intermediaries in social settings are not teachers, but they are key facilitators of social support. Their experience of the value of this support in breaking down barriers echoes findings from research (Rebollo, 2014: 179; Lane and Van Doorp, 2011). Learning design, pedagogy and frameworks for student support are key to overcoming barriers. Using OER, however, shifts the boundaries between the institution and the learners. It also requires new skills, for example, the careful curation of material. The outcomes of the workshop series have formed the basis for a set of practice-based interventions to support URLs. The findings from the workshops suggest that there is also a need for more research into the ways in which students learn in collective settings using OER.

References


Open educational resources and widening participation: is there a new pathway to HE?

LAURA HILLS, HANNAH GORE AND JONATHAN HUGHES

Open Educational Resources (OERs) have been hailed as means to widen participation into Higher Education to people who are geographically, socially and economically disadvantaged worldwide. In reality, many of those who have taken advantage of the opportunities offered by OERs are already well educated. This paper investigates how a particular approach to OERs, Badged Open Courses (BOCs), may be widening participation to Higher Education to learners in a way that other OERs do not. It examines the design and assessment of BOCs and compares the profile of BOC learners to other OER learners and to students at Open University, an institution which operates open entry into Higher Education. The findings suggest that BOC learners have a similar profile to other Open University learners, are less likely to have a Degree than other OER learners and are also more likely to ‘click through’ to formal University courses.

Introduction

Open educational resources (OERs) are teaching and learning materials that are freely available to everyone to use, whether you are an instructor, student or self-learner (Jisc, 2010). Although OERs can be written for any particular group of learners and for any purpose, one espoused benefit of OERs, and particularly MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), is to widening participation in Higher Education.

Despite the huge numbers of OERs which have been developed worldwide, there is concern that the focus on widening participation has been somewhat diluted. The reality is that most OER and particularly MOOC learners are already highly educated and so although participation in HE may have been widened geographically and technologically, it has not necessarily been widened academically or socially.

This paper seeks to examine the notion of widening participation through the lens of a suite of OERs, Badged Open Courses, which have been developed by Open University specifically to support the transition into Higher Education and to

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address the issue of whether they do, indeed, offer new ways for people to engage in HE.

**OERS and widening participation**

The notion of OERs as being freely available has given rise to much debate around if, and how, they might widening participation to higher education. These debates have particular characteristics depending on where they take place.

On a global scale, the impetus for OERs has come from a recognition of the social and economic benefit of high levels of participation and attainment in education (Lane, 2012). However, access to higher education can be restricted by the physical availability of Higher Education Institutions, and the costs involved. Therefore, a guiding principle of OERs is that they can “offer new ways for more people to engage with, or participate in, HE study, whether or not they are registered as a student at an HEI” (Lane, 2012, p. 137). A key development in recent years has been the rise of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), developed by Universities and drawing on their established curriculum but designed to be studied independently by learners. The millions of learners who have signed up for has certainly supported the notion that access to Higher Education worldwide has, indeed, been widened. Research into the nature of such learners has revealed, however, that as many as half of all MOOC and OER learners are already educated to degree level (Farrow et al, 2005).

Within the United Kingdom, where there has been a similar upsurge in the development of OERs, a second debate has emerged around the role of OERs in widening access into Higher Education. In recognition of the technological and social barriers which may impede learner engagement with online learning, there has been a movement towards developing partnerships with groups of learners (Cannell, 20515; Hudson et al, 2013) so that their use of existing OERs can be better supported and contextualised. Such approaches specifically target widening participation groups and so, unlike most OERs, so, indeed succeed in widening participation into HE, although at a very small scale.

The debate around the role of OERs in widening participation to HE has tended, therefore, to focus on either the large-scale approaches of MOOCs or small-scale and localized initiatives. This paper will now examine how an OER, which uses a targeted curriculum and incentives to completion, through badging, might be better placed to support widening participation at scale.
Badged Open Courses: A new route to widening participation?

In many respects, Badged Open Courses (BOCs) resemble other OERS developed by Universities worldwide and have a set of core features:

- 8 Weeks in length
- 3 hours a week
- 24 hours of learning
- Test quizzes Weeks 1-3 and 5-7
- Badged quizzes weeks 4 and 8
- No forum or contact with a tutor

However, Badged Open Courses (BOCs) are produced by Open University, and have been specifically developed to support the transition into Higher Education. They are focussed on Access and pre-University learners and are designed as an introduction to the concepts and ideas associated with key subject areas, such as Mathematics, English, and success in learning and in the workplace. A particular feature of BOCs has been the method of assessment. The use of weekly formative quizzes and two summative quizzes mirrors assessment practice within online and distance learning, (Jordan, 2014) and is designed to support learning through feedback. The use of badging has also been recognised as a means of encouraging retention and employability (Farrow et al, 2015). A final difference to many University- designed OERs is that BOCs are permanently available to learners, so that learners do not need to wait until a course start date to register.

The design and structure of the BOCs are, therefore, intended to provide a more accessible and structured learning experience, but at a large scale.

Methods

The purpose of this research was to find out about the profile of BOC learners, how they compare to other OERS, and whether we can claim that they do, in fact, widen participation in Higher Education.

Quantitative data were collected and compared between learner profiles on the BOCs, Open Learn and FutureLearn, operated by X University, and students formally registered on Open University courses. Completion, attainment and ‘click through’ rates to formal HE study were also examined. Qualitative data, in the form of learner feedback, were also analysed where this existed.
Findings

**BOC users**
So far, over 140,000 visits to the BOCs to date resulting in 20,000 enrolments. 1600 learners have requested a brochure and a high proportion of learners (~28%) click-through to make an enquiry to X University. The average completion rate is 9% and over 1500 free OU badges have been awarded. Over 200 formal module registrations have been made (mostly at entry level).

**Comparison to other OER learners**
A comparison of learner profiles on the BOCs, OpenLearn and FutureLearn indicates that BOC learners are more likely to be based in the UK than other Open University OER learners and generally have lower educational levels.

Comparison to formal registered students at Open University

A comparison has also been made with the profile of registered students at X University, both on undergraduate courses and pre-University Access courses. The data indicate that BOC learners are similar to Open University undergraduate students in relation to age (Under 25), employment status and prior qualifications and are also similar to Access students in relation age (Under 25) and disability.
Implications

The profile of BOC learners indicates that they do conform to the notion of OER learners as already highly education and, in fact, are similar on profile to students registered in formal education at Open University. Although Open University operates an open entry policy, it cannot be claimed that this similarity in profile suggests that students are from particularly disadvantaged backgrounds. However, the fact that such learners do not already possess higher education qualifications and are more likely to ‘click through’ to formal HE study than other OER learners, indicates that they do see HE as a new option for them. As a result, BOCs can be said to widen participation to HE.

A further implication of this study is that the role of OERs in widening participation in HE may be seen in different ways. Although the supported approach suggested by Cannell (2015) and Hudson et al (2013) does succeed in widening participation in HE to previously underrepresented groups, it so in a highly individualised way, which may be inappropriate to the large-scale nature of many OERs. The success of the BOCs in engaging learners who are not currently involved in Higher Education suggests that they may also contribute to widening participation in a way which is both cost-effective and appropriate at scale.

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INNOVATIVE PRACTICE

DR CATHY STONE

Online learning has a critical place in widening access and participation and facilitating success in higher education for a diverse range of students, many of whom are from backgrounds which have been historically underrepresented at university. Increasing numbers are taking up the opportunity to study online, particularly through open-entry pathways. However, within the open-entry and online space in Australia, attrition rates are very high. Under the 2016 Equity Fellows program, the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) in Australia is funding a national project to investigate the range of practices, supports and retention strategies currently being used within online learning both in Australian Universities and at the Open University, UK. The aim is to determine the effectiveness of such strategies in meeting the different and complex needs of this diverse range of students and hence ultimately improving their participation and academic success. Looking also at current international literature, this project aims to deliver a set of national guidelines for Australian institutions, informed by research evidence, for improving the access, academic success and retention of students in online education. This presentation will discuss the background to this project, the Australian online learning context and the findings from a recent Australian study into the experiences of first-in-family students who are studying online as open-entry students.

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Rethinking student engagement for part-time and distance learners: Using technology to create community

INNOVATIVE PRACTICE

KAREN FOLEY AND LIZ MARR

Engaging students in a learning community is clearly recognised as problematic for those studying part time and/or at a distance. Indeed, there are specific challenges for those who have no choice but to adopt such study options – because of caring responsibilities, geographical location or disability, for example. Many institutions are now offering flexible opportunities through online study which can widen access to HE study. Tools such as on line forums, webinars and other forms of electronic communication offer opportunities for synchronous and asynchronous interaction with both fellow students and academics but are limited in the extent to which they can develop ‘community’.

Student Hub Live is a livestreamed web cast induction event run by the Open University, primarily for new students but which allows students to ‘chat’, submit questions and participate in discussions with staff and fellow students. In this session we will describe how the event has been developed, including the challenges faced in relation to accessibility and share some video footage which shows sample content. We will also explain how the concept might be used in other settings where face to face interaction is limited or not possible, for example when working with students on split site campuses, at partner institutions, or conducting outreach in remote communities.

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The Big Red Button: A video toolkit for open education

INNOVATIVE PRACTICE

JOHN CASEY42 AND WILL GREGORY

Digital video is now a ubiquitous part of our daily lives yet it remains underused in education – especially for assessment purposes. The nature of the media itself presents problems - large files that are difficult to navigate, reference and share. The Big Red Button is an open source toolkit that aims to overcome these obstacles by providing a toolkit that uses a simple but powerful concept. It enables users to identify and share extracts from video resources in the form of ‘virtual clips’. No video file is altered or copied in the process. Once a clip has been specified users can then add textual annotations that are ‘pinned’ along the timeline of the virtual clip.

The Big Red Button will work on smart phones and be particularly useful for assessing learners who need to capture and share authentic evidence of their knowledge and skills in workplace and community settings and receive feedback from their learning and training providers in the same setting. The session will include a demonstration and report on user trials with a diverse set of learners including stonemasons, care workers and hairdressers. There will be an opportunity for participants to try out the toolkit themselves and provide feedback.

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PART-TIME AND MATURE LEARNERS

THEME LEAD: JOHN BUTCHER

The dramatic decline in the numbers of HE learners studying part-time in the UK has been well-documented. The crisis is one directly impacting on the opportunities mature/adult students might seize: a 40% drop in part-time undergraduates in England over the last five years, with a 55% drop in sub-degree level study (diplomas, certificates and for institutional credit) presents a particular risk for institutions committed to widening access and enabling social mobility. The loss of part-time students disproportionately affects those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds – adults for whom part-time HE represents a second chance, a possibility of upskilling for employment and a chance to transform personal and family lives.

We look forward to exploring the impact of such challenges in a series of papers on day 1 at the conference:

Natalia James and Vanessa Beck report on the perils of disregarding older learners in HE, using student voice data to highlight the inflexibilities in University policies, and the dangers inherent in not recognizing the diversity found in older students.

Samantha Broadhead reports on parity issues between part-time and full-time learners through narratives of mature art and design students.

Sarah O’Shea, from an Australian perspective, challenges deficit definitions of those older learners who were first in their families to engage with University, exploring the ‘cultural wealths’ such students bring with them.

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The perils of disregarding older learners in higher education

DR NATALIA JAMES AND DR VANESSA BECK

Despite changes in demographics and in policy rhetoric older learners still remain largely absent from debates about higher education. The small number of HE students in their 40s, 50s and older are often alienated by the competitive, credentialism-driven and formal nature of education (Findsen, 2012), resulting in fragile student identities. This paper explores the existing chasm between mature students (21+) and ‘older’ learners, a label that is often rejected due to its potentially ageist undertones. It is argued that without a terminology to identify or capture this group of ‘older’, usually part-time and often distance learning students, it will be impossible for Universities to provide them with support appropriate to their increasing numbers in society. The paper is based on a small-scale, qualitative research project with older learners exploring their motivations for and barriers to studying as well as their learning and support preferences.

Context of the study

Demographic change in our society highlights the importance of including older learners in lifelong learning. This applies not only in terms of leisure-based learning but also in the provision of work-based learning for older people. The pressure to work for longer makes an increase in demand for learning and development at later stages of the life course likely and adds to the potential benefits of learning in terms of health and dependency in older age (Istance 2015). However, consideration of all older adults is largely absent from policy debates about higher education (HE) despite the rapid decrease of their participation in HE (HEFCE 2015). The small number of HE students in their 40s, 50s and older are often alienated by the competitive, credentialism-driven and formal nature of education (Findsen, 2012), resulting in fragile student identities. This paper explores the existing chasm between mature students (21+) and ‘older’ learners, a label that is often rejected due to its potentially ageist undertones. The paper, which draws on data from a small-scale qualitative research project, asks these learners about their motivations for and barriers to studying as well as their experiences of learning and support.

Theoretical approach

Who qualifies to be labelled as an ‘older learner’ will vary but in terms of current educational policy, ‘mature students’ are defined as those aged 21+ years (HEFCE

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The UUK (2012) place their focus on older learners who are aged 50 and over. Mature students on UG/PG, PT and DL courses tend to be students in their 30s (~50%) and 40s (~33%), with 50+ (~12%) as a point at which educational activity goes into sharp decline (Phillipson and Ogg 2010, Withnail 2010, Istance 2015). Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) assign older adults by using chronological age rather than referring to different life stages, such as changing career, made redundant, volunteering and/or retired. They tend to be portrayed as a homogeneous group, in which age or age-related data is not presented or where the discussion is about the entire group of mature and/or part-time students (Frith and Wilson 2014); older adults (Findsen 2012); older learners (Withnail 2010) or some combination of these used interchangeably.

The importance of the proposed project derives from the significant decline in older learners, which constitutes a key challenge for the sector (HEFCE 2015). Older learners can contribute positively to the economy and their involvement in learning ensures widening participation and may result in social mobility. The subject matter is also a pressing topic for research because HE policy discourse continues to be dominated by assertions about the importance of full-time opportunities for 18 year olds. This approach ignores the diminished age diversity in HE (Schuller and Watson 2015) and the inequality of access to HE given the increased age diversity in the population. HEIs thus give little consideration to understanding why older learners choose to study during or post-work, as well as the ways in which they learn and how they are supported (Withnail 2010). For older students at HEIs, little is known about meeting the needs of older adult students, particularly in terms of supporting retention, attainment and progression (Istance 2015).

Methodology

The paper draws on a small-scale exploratory study that elicited the authentic voice of older learners to better understand and re-prioritise the needs of an invisible, difficult to reach but still significant cohort of learners. It addressed three areas:

1) Why do older learners enter HE?
2) What are the barriers to older learners entering HE, how are they experienced by the learners themselves and what can HEIs do to reduce or eliminate the barriers?
3) Is there a relationship between older learners’ learning preferences and life and work-based experiences?

The sample included individuals with different reasons to enter HE as well as from the range of older age categories. Eight older learners participated in in-depth one-to-one interviews either face-to-face, by telephone or Skype depending on their
preference and availability, e.g. due to family or work commitments. Conversations covered background, prior learning experiences, motivations, access to and participation in HE, support, study preferences and learning styles, and individual understandings of being an older learner. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis. Findings allowed an in-depth analysis of the dialectics of agency and structure to provide a deeper understanding of what it means to be an older learner.

Initial findings

Respondents were asked about their own definition of what an older learner is. The question elicited a number of very different responses about the use of definitions such as “non-traditional” or “mature” which were seen as “perhaps less initially offensive than older”. However, the distinction between a ‘mature’ student and an ‘older student was often confused with statements that “an older learner is going to be anyone that does not go directly into college after high school”. One individual refused to take part in the interview and expressed anger at the use of the term ‘older’ writing: “I do want to say that I am offended by being called an ‘older’ learner/student”. The relativity of perceptions about a specific age or the term ‘older’ were highlighted by our oldest respondent who at age 70 hadn’t thought about herself as an older learner because “as we go through life we are learning all the time, aren’t we?”

Clearer distinctions between ‘mature’ and ‘older learners’ were made by respondents who highlighted that and older learners is “a mature student with life skills”. In particular, having an open mind to learning and the importance of knowledge were mentioned. Another respondent stated “I’d say probably more experienced, maybe have a little more patience and stay more focussed.” The issue of choice was also emphasised. “It’s not like I’ve got to establish a career, I’ve established one, I’m just choosing to do something different.” They saw the “intrinsic value in education” Employability was also a motivating factor both in terms of aspirations for a new or change of job. Some found the link between study and work important in terms of developing skills and confidence to get a job: “I'm just grateful to have the chance now to be able to do this...I get up and study from half five to half six each morning before I go to work and at night times.”

Barriers to study included the financial cost of courses, a challenge that necessitated individuals’ family support: “My partner was very encouraging and said it was okay to spend the money, because it’s quite expensive, so we had to have a bit of a family discussion about that and I had a discussion with the boys about them doing more of their own stuff.” A major benefit of studying as a part-time ‘adult’ was that the positive outcomes were often greater than those gained from studying at an earlier stage in the life course.
Lack of flexibility and support for older learners was also a problematic concept, with some respondents reporting on having to balance the time for study with competing work or family demands: “No, no help from the university at all. They’re pretty inflexible with any deadlines and that kind of thing.”

Implications for study

An initial analysis of the data reiterates the challenges that HEIs face in understanding and providing support appropriate to their older learners’ needs, and - despite policy discourses advocating (and indeed claiming) flexibility in higher education - the older learners’ experienced inflexibility. What emerged from the data was the large degree of diversity and complexity for older learners on a range of dimensions, including age, employment situation, family situation and social background. In line with a life course approach (Hofmeister, 2015) we therefore argue that chronological age is less helpful in describing an older adult engaged in learning. Age categories (e.g. 30+, 40+ and 50+) can indicate contextual information about students and prompt assumptions about reasons to study. Universities need to pay more attention to the diversity found in the older adult population, including the variables of race and ethnicity, education, income, and physical and cognitive impediments.

References


Mature students in art and design higher education: How can we ensure parity of the student experience for part-time with that of full-time?

SAMANTHA BROADHEAD

The national policies, operating within the United Kingdom, of widening participation for students exists within a competitive and uncertain higher education culture. The impact of this on those students described as ‘second chance’ or ‘untraditional,’ who at the same time want to become artists or designers, needs to be examined in order to ensure parity of part-time and full-time student experience.

The paper draws upon the narratives of part-time and full-time post-Access to HE art and design students. They were people who had gained places on creative degrees with an Access to HE diploma, rather than the more conventional A levels; they tended to be mature students with diverse social backgrounds (Hudson, 2009:25; Penketh and Goddard, 2008:316; Burke, 2002:81). These narratives were selected from a qualitative, longitudinal study (2011-14) that sought to investigate the experiences of post-Access to HE students in art and design higher education.

The participants were studying on a range of creative degree programmes in various institutional contexts. Narrative inquiry was used to show the ways in which students reflected on and took stock of their learning careers, (Clandinin and Connelly, 2004; Butler-Kisber, 2010).

The theories of Basil Bernstein were used to analyse the narratives of these students because his work on pedagogic devices exposed how the mechanisms used for distributing knowledge could advantage one social group rather than another, (McLean et al. 2013: 269-274). References were made to two papers of particular significance, firstly, Class and Pedagogy: Visible and Invisible (1975) which described the class bias in the progressive education movement in Britain during the 60s and 70s. Bernstein described two extreme models of pedagogic practice as being either explicit or implicit, however he made the point that these two forms were hardly ever seen in a pure state. These practices were also used in current art and design higher education (Broadhead, 2015). Secondly, Vertical and horizontal discourse; an essay in 1999, provided a means of looking, firstly at the context-bound, segmented, informal language of horizontal discourse in comparison to the hierarchically organised, re-contextualising and abstract language of vertical discourse (Bernstein 1999, pp.158-159). The structuring of social relationships, it

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was argued, generated the forms of discourse but the discourse in turn structured a form of consciousness and motivated modes of social solidarity, (Bernstein 1999, p.160). This theoretical approach was pertinent to art and design higher education, and in particular studio practice, because the nuances of what the students needed to produce to be creative and to gain good marks could be gained by the day-to-day discussions that naturally occurred within the space as well as the more formal dialogues that happened with students and tutors during critiques of work. Similar observations have been made by (Edstrom, 2008, p.31) where she argued that MFA Visual Arts students in Sweden strategically talked with their supervisors to gain alternative opinions about their work, however this focused largely on student/teacher conversations rather than peer/peer.

The main findings of the study were that horizontal discourse between students and staff in the studio either included or excluded the part-time and full-time participants. It was suggested that part-time art and design students could be disadvantaged by the pedagogic devices used by educators in art and design education, (Broadhead, 2015). This was because of three main reasons: 1) students were not able to use the resources and space of the studio; 2) they were less likely to understand the strategies for success in art and design due to fewer opportunities to take part in horizontal discourse with peers and 3) part-time students were in danger of being mis-read as not being serious about their creative practice. This could lead students to feel frustrated, confused and unconfident in their studies.

The Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) offered the possibility to compensate the part-time students for their decreased access to knowledge through horizontal discourse within the physical learning spaces of the studio. However, even though part-time students engaged with the VLE it did not always give them accurate and appropriate information nor was it able to effectively communicate the more tacit and nuanced knowledge ascribed to art and design education.

The implications of the study for those who teach part-time art and design students are that their particular needs should be considered when planning curricula and assessment. Educators should endeavour to provide, timely, accurate and clear information on VLEs whilst avoiding last minute changes to the dates and times of trips, tasks and deadlines to assignments. This is because of the impact such changes could have on the experiences of part-time or non-traditional students who need to carefully plan their education with other commitments. For example, those students who work need to arrange time off in advance with their employers to accommodate educational trips can be frustrated if the dates change at the last minute as renegotiating different leave times can be difficult. Those students who have care responsibilities in addition to their educational commitments also need reliable dates and times with which to plan their time.
By listening to students who are under-represented on the course, it may be possible to glean a valuable perspective that has not been considered before. This perspective may introduce innovation and change into the art and design programme. Where possible, educators should promote open and critical discourse between different generations of students in the studio. Often mature students have different cultural points of reference from younger ones; by sharing this knowledge with each other students can gain a richer and broader understanding of their creative contexts. They also can share the ‘rules of the game’ or strategies for success within an art and design context.

Institutions should support staff in practicing different forms of pedagogy for different student needs. Just as a focus on lecturing can be ineffective in delivering a creative curriculum; a focus on studio practice can be an ineffective means of teaching particular skills. It can also be difficult for part-time students to learn through studio practice alone due to not having the time and space to do so.

Although it seems that standardisation is a means of ensuring all students get appropriate information about the ways they will be taught and assessed the findings of this study suggest institutions should avoid a ‘one size fits all’ approach to quality control and modes of communication.

References


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*HE: Transforming lives through life-wide-learning? April 27th-28th 2016, Milton Keynes, UK*

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Navigating the knowledge sets of older learners: Exploring the concept of experiential capital amongst first-in-family mature age students

PROFESSOR SARAH O’SHEA

This paper is based upon research with university students who were first in their family to come to university. The studies sought to explore how attending university impacted upon both the learners and their families, particularly the intergenerational implications of this attendance. Drawing on in-depth interviews conducted with older university students, this paper will focus on how this mature cohort articulated the ways in which they drew upon life and work experiences in their transition to university. The research indicates that these learners had access to additional capitals in the higher education environment including what has been termed as ‘experiential capital’. In exploring the characteristics and sources of this experiential capital, the paper will include suggestions about how higher education institutions might seek to both recognise and nurture this resource within the university environment.

Background

Globally, university enrollments continue to increase with a substantial number of commencing students who are older and returning to education after a significant gap in learning (OECD, 2013). This attendance pattern is particularly noted in Australia, evidenced by both the reduction in student enrollments directly from school (Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005) and also the significant percentage of enrolled undergraduate students who are aged 25 or above (40%) (ABS, 2012).

As well as mature aged students, another significant cohort within the Australian higher education environment are those students who are first in their family to attend university, which is reported as being 51% of the total university population (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). These authors argue that the high number of first-in-family students in Australia is not surprising given that the higher education sector is in a ‘phase of educational expansion’ (p.321). However, this first-generation or first-in-family group is recognised as being at greater risk of attrition and also, regarded as typically encountering additional barriers and complexities in their higher education journey. For example, Thomas and Quinn (2007) report how first-

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in-family status may reduce individuals’ perceptions of their sense of fit or ‘acceptance’ within the institution, resulting in perceptions of ‘lack of entitlement to be there’ with an accompanying ‘negative impact on self-confidence’ (p77). Similarly, Bryan and Simmons (2009) in their study of Appalachian first-in-family students identify how this cohort reflected on various obstacles encountered during their transition into this environment, including difficulties managing the relational, financial and identity facets of their lives.

The particular issues and obstacles encountered by older students, particularly those with child dependents, are also documented in the literature (Gouthro, 2006; Hinton-Smith, 2009, Reay, 2003) so this paper will explore how one cohort of older first-in-family students enacted success within this higher education environment. First-in-family status was defined as having no one in the immediate family including partners, parents, siblings and children who had previously attended university. Included in this participant group are parenting and carer students as well as those experiencing financial or social stratification. This diverse life experience adds greater depth to the findings, recognising that individuals can never be defined in discrete terms and are instead intersected by multiple biographical and social considerations.

Theoretical approach

The research outlined in this paper is underpinned by recognition that discussions of university participation and engagement need to shift beyond deficit discourses or equity constructs and instead explore this field by drawing on multiple ‘faces, voices and experiences’ (Solarzano & Yosso, 2002, p24). This process was assisted by reference to the Community Cultural Wealth framework developed by Yosso (2005), which recognises the cultural strengths of diverse student groups. The Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) Framework has been largely theorised in relation to Hispanic students and students of colour within the United States, but arguably has broader considered application to other non-dominant and under-represented groups throughout society.

In developing CCW, Yosso (2005) built upon Bourdieu’s perspectives on cultural capital. Yosso (2005) argues that Bourdieuan concepts of cultural capital assume that white middle class culture is the ‘standard’, which can result in other types of culture being ‘judged in comparison to this norm’ (p.76). Yosso instead proposes that there are alternate forms of cultural practices and wisdom that are equally valued by more marginalized and less powerful groups. Yosso proposes six forms of capital including ‘aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial and resistant.’ How these various cultural capitals resonate with first-in-family students has been explored in previous publications (O’Shea, 2015, 2014) so this paper seeks to interrogate the possible silences in Yosso’s work, specifically as these relate to
Methodology

This paper presents research conducted with first-in-family students at an Australian university between 2013-2015. An initial study was conducted in 2013 and students were recruited via an email sent out to a random selection of first year commencing students who indicated on their enrollment forms that neither parent had attended university. A total of 25 students were interviewed but only the narratives of the older students (those over 21 years) who had no other family members involved in university have been drawn upon in this analysis (n = 15). Whilst the study was small-scale, the use of open-ended narrative biographical interviews generated rich data. Students were encouraged to reflect deeply on their motivations for attending university and the ways in which they enacted success within this environment. Drawing on analysis from this initial study, the second study sought to elaborate on themes related to the cultural wealth of older participants, with specific reference to Yosso’s framework. This latter study was conducted between 2014-2015 and a total of eighteen older students, with ages ranging from 25 – 62 years, agreed to participate in in-depth interviews. Table (1) provides an overview of all the participants (all of whom are referred to by pseudonyms) and indicates the diversity of this group in terms of age, background and also, discipline focus.

Both studies adopted a recursive approach to data analysis, which required a continual dipping into the data, reflection and then interrogation. This process was assisted through line-by-line analysis within NVivo (10); the emerging thematic categories (or nodes) were then explored and questioned. Themes then emerged inductively from the interview narratives and were further refined through a process of reflection and memo writing. This act of writing enabled deeper engagement with the data, particularly as a means to check implicit assumptions and assumed understandings.

Results and implications

The deeply personal accounts provided by participants indicate how this movement into university is an embodied one. These older students reflected upon motivations that were both emotional and also, altruistic in nature. The focus of this paper is on the ways in which these older students enacted success within this tertiary environment and the ways in which they drew upon prior knowledges and skills in this enactment. Repeatedly, participants described how their ‘experiential capital’ provided a rich but largely unacknowledged resource in their higher education journey. One example is Sam, a 44 year old mother of two, who described herself as advantaged due to her ‘…knowledge of the world and how things work
and when the lecturer talks about walking down Oxford Street in London, I can picture it because I’ve done it whereas they [younger students] just don’t have this idea.’ The full paper will draw upon student narratives to unpack the nature of this experiential capital and how this impacts on university transition and engagement for this cohort.

There remains a tendency to define older students in terms of deficit or lack, which can mean that their life knowledges remain largely underutilized and unrecognised within the university landscape. In these interviews, the participants reflected upon a range of abilities that included resilience; motivation and tenacity, often derived from their apriori life experiences, which assisted them to succeed and persist in this environment. Using rich qualitative data, this paper will deeply explore the nature of such ‘experiential capital’ and consider ways that universities might build upon the particular cultural wealths of this older cohort in the enactment of lifelong learning.

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EMPLOYABILITY

THEME LEAD: RONALD MCINTYRE

In this section, Roberts considers how to ensure equitable access to very employment focused programmes through targeting at entry and throughout. While it is right that we focus on equity at the point of entering education and during it, when considering employability one is considering the notion of equity and fairness post education. Rattenbury, Holmes, McEwen and Rennison look highlight these inequities in their study of education to work transitions, noting even with specific employability programmes they tend to be used by those that need them least and many of the social factors we recognize in WP (family background) often play a significant role. They explore how making this visible informs institutional policy and practice.

On the surface the themes addressed at this conference seem disparate, however the question of transitions underpins all our work in WP, indeed sometimes I think WP can be defined as an attempt to work around what it not happening, it’s about the absence of smooth transitions, structural problems and underlying social inequities that alter people’s life chances. In the end, what is it for, education is of course an end in itself and lifelong learning, but is also about accessing to “a living”. Questions of equity of access to those employment opportunities are important ones the WP community needs to consider. Flexibility is clearly tied into ideas of lifelong learning, but so is technology, while the technologies themselves are tools they are becoming increasingly every day, and just as we might press on numeracy and literacy, so questions around digital participation are challenges that need to be met head on. If we do not provide routes in for those distanced from the digital world we will be failing in our duty as educators.
QMUL Careers And Enterprise Programmes

INNOVATIVE PRACTICE

RACHEL SARA ROBERTS AND J.P. MORGAN

Context

41% of Queen Mary University of London (QMUL) undergraduates come from low income backgrounds, receiving a bursary from the university. QMUL’s five year analysis indicates that, six months after graduation, these students are up to 14% more likely to be unemployed, and 30% more likely to be in non-graduate jobs, than their non-bursary peers.

Innovation and implementation

QMUL Careers & Enterprise closes this gap through targeted programmes.

QMentoring matches bursary holders with professional mentors in relevant sectors.

QConsult supported by J.P. Morgan, launched April 2015, places teams of high-calibre students from low-income families into east London growth sector businesses to conduct mini consultancy projects; providing challenging team- and client-focused work experience; enhancing networks; transforming confidence through intensive, on-demand wrap-around support.

Impact

In nine months, 79 students have been placed with 16 businesses – on target for 120 students and 25 businesses by June 2016.

9% of QMUL’s bursary students will benefit this year.

- Three months later, 100% state this has had a lasting impact. 89% are in next step employment (two at J.P. Morgan and Deloitte).
- 67% of business hosts would now consider recruiting from QMUL, with 89% keen to support other QMUL careers initiatives.

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Understanding university employability initiatives using figured world theory. Findings from a post-92 university

INNOVATIVE PRACTICE

JAMES RATTENBURY, HANNAH HOLMES, FIONA MCEWEN, YVONNE RENNISON

This paper discusses an employability initiative at a Post 92 UK university, aimed at final year accounting and economics degree students. This was undertaken in the context of the department’s Destination of Leavers of Higher Education (DLHE) employability data. After the completion of two short, voluntary and unassessed ‘employability bootcamp’ courses, in Autumn 2014 and Spring 2016, interviews were conducted with participants. The purpose of these was to better understand participant's motivations and how they engaged in wider employability discourses. The researchers applied sociocultural theory, specifically figured worlds (Holland et al 1998) as a theoretical lens. This theory draws upon themes of heteroglossia (multi-voicedness) and self-authoring from Bakhtin (1981). Findings suggested that students who engaged with employability initiatives were typically those already most prepared for the graduate job market. It emerged that family, peer, school and cultural Influences may play a greater influence in student engagement than employability initiatives driven by university policy. These findings improve understanding of both the impact on students of employability initiatives and the role of university employability metrics in informing policy.

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