

## **Widening participation and access: room for vocational decision-making**

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### **1. Introduction**

For many years, the term *widening-participation* has particularly belonged to the sector of continuing education concerned with the entry to continuing education of adults (largely), who have not traditionally participated in post-statutory education. Invariably, *non-traditional* groups have been defined in terms of characteristics of age, gender, class and race. At the heart of the sector have been two practices, access and guidance, which have had as their established mission the enablement of these groups to participate in continuing education. The acknowledgement of the importance of Access courses to the drive for widening participation can be found in the 1987 White Paper's reference to Access courses as 'the third recognised route' into higher education (DES 1987).

In the recent period, however, new Government policies and initiatives and the funding that this has brought in their wake, has promoted widening participation to a larger educational community, and given it a new focus and depth through its link with a wider policy of combating social exclusion, for example Education Action Zones. Whereas, previously, aficionados of widening participation had to be content with an annual discussion (usually at the time that A level results are published), now we have clearly established aims and targets such that, for example, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)

expects all the institutions it funds to engage in the widening participation campaign, and expects to make the submission of widening participation strategies a condition of grant for higher education institutions (Partnerships for Progression par.14)

Ironically, these policy developments are being operationalised at a time when Access courses, the traditional route of non-traditional entry into full-time higher education, seem to be declining nationally.

This Paper, drawing on some work in progress, considers the implications for Access courses and their students as these developments impact on higher education and, through reflection on the decision-making process of a group of Access students on the programme at the University of Derby, asks how well the constituency of non-traditional students will be served by these new arrangements.

### **2. The Widening Participation Scene**

David Blunkett's letter to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in December 1998, announcing the funding arrangements for the following two financial years was historic, in so far as it clearly announced that widening access

was a measure by which the achievement of universities would in future be assessed. In a subsequent press release, David Blunkett was quoted as saying,

...we expect resolute action from them (*the universities*) to broaden access to under-represented social groups. Everyone with the capability for higher education should have the opportunity to benefit from it (DfES Press Release 570/98).

If not for the first time, here was at least formal acknowledgement that non-traditional applicants to HE were equally deserving of their place in the sun.

Since then, however, as the Government has attempted to come to grips with the seemingly intractable problem of getting working-class students into university (and added to its own burden through the self-imposed target of 50% of 18 – 30 year olds experiencing higher education by 2010), the discourse of widening participation seems to have become particularly focused.

In their new policy and initiatives towards widening participation, outlined in the Future of Higher Education White Paper (DfES 2003) and Partnerships for Progression (HEFCE 2002) the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and HEFCE and the national Learning and Skills Council (LSC) respectively have confirmed a distinction that has recently emerged between the approach to be taken towards young students and that toward mature students.

The new HEFCE/LSC programme to encourage widening participation, Partnerships for Progression (now absorbed within the Aim Higher brand), is clearly largely aimed at young people. The targets to which each Partnership is committing itself are expressed in terms of 18-19 year old entrants to HE (Partnerships for Progression p18), and the activities scheduled are designed in effect both to mitigate the drop-out of young people from the education system prior to progression to HE and to encourage the application to HE of those who are qualified to do so, but choose not.

It is not a matter for criticism that there should be a different approach to young people than that taken towards adults, only that there is little encouragement in Aim Higher/P4P to focus on older adults not participating in education. The balance has clearly shifted. Whilst acknowledging that the partnerships themselves are best placed to determine with whom it is effective to work, HEFCE issues the caveat, that they

...will maintain the focus in this initiative on the participation of the under 30s, since P4P has been funded to address the HE target. (Partnerships for Progression p6)

The HEFCE rationale is persuasive. Of those who graduated in 2001, approximately 75% had begun their degree when they were 18 or 19. If the proportion starting HE is to be increased so startlingly within the decade, it can only make sense to concentrate on that age group which forms the bulk of the student population.

Adults are not excluded from widening participation plans, but in this differentiated approach, the manner in which they are to be included is largely determined by the

mode of study through which any increased participation is to be engineered. In the main, it seems that the new Foundation degree and/or work-based and distance learning (incorporating accreditation of prior learning practices) will be the vehicles for increased adult participation in HE.

The bulk of the expansion will come through new types of qualification, tailored to meet the needs of students and of the economy. Our emphasis will be on the expansion of two-year work-focused foundation degrees, as they become the primary work-focused higher education qualification. (The Future of Higher Education White Paper 2003)

The implication is that this mode of learning will provide for the incremental development of the learner, predicated on their existing vocational and professional skills. An underlying rationale may be that in a period of full employment adults do not need or will not want to study HE fulltime (Foundation Degree, Student Guide).

The merits or otherwise of these policy initiatives is not the subject of this Paper. What is of concern is the effect of their conjunction on Access courses, which have been a substantial vehicle for adult progression to HE in the past. In the same White Paper, the DfES comments in relation to Access courses that ‘numbers have not increased significantly over the past few years’ (UCAS statistics show both an absolute and proportionate decline in the numbers of Access students accepting places on full-time university degree courses between 1997 and 2001) and goes on to state that,

We will ask the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education to come forward with proposals to modernise the criteria for Access courses so that they are sufficiently flexible and attractive to meet the needs of today’s adult learners. (The Future of Higher Education White Paper 2003)

So, here we have a widening participation programme which in the context of progression to HE is reinforcing an emphasis on young people or, where it addresses the needs of adults, does so with modes of learning intended to develop and enhance the existing skills and work practices of adults.

What do Access courses have to offer in this scheme of things? In this second part of the paper, we turn our attention to the decision-making process which we suggest is manifest in the Access programme and go on to argue that Access serves the particular and distinctive needs of a specific group of adult learners, which are not met elsewhere.

### **3. Decision-making on the Access Programme**

#### **The Programme**

The University of Derby’s Modular Access Foundation Programme is unusual, in so far as it is both a non-advanced and a Year Zero programme delivered within a HE institution, and in that its numbers has increased in a period which has seen the decline in the number of mature students with Access qualifications progressing to full-time HE nationally (UCAS, 2003).

Given the subtly changing widening participation context discussed earlier, we sought to reflect on the continued relevance of Access, by focussing on how our existing students formulated and made decisions about careers and education, and the educational and guidance needs which were thereby given expression. In particular, in work in progress, we are seeking to examine

- the relationship between current occupation and expressed vocational aims
- the extent to which students entered the course with fixed goals.
- The impact of their learning experience on these goals
- The agencies which influenced this decision-making

### **The Questionnaire**

As part of this work, a questionnaire was devised and issued to students through their Study Skills tutors. 51 were returned in March 2003, which represented a sample of about 20% of the institution's Access student population who are due to complete their study in June 2003. By March, the majority of students who had applied to universities will have received the results of their application.

As part of the information that they provided about themselves, respondents gave their most recent occupation. No-one gave an occupation which could be classified as *professional* and only 12% could be categorised as *technical or managerial*. The majority of students therefore derived from those social categories that are disproportionately under-represented in HE.

In the questionnaire, students were invited to consider a number of items and asked (*Question 1*) to choose that which best described their motivation for joining the Access Programme.

- **80% declared a specific vocational aim**
- **14% stated a general vocational aim for example to get a better job**
- **6% identified an interest in a subject being taught**

Of the 47 respondents who endorsed a vocational motivation, when asked (*Question 4*) what had happened to this original aim

- **34% replied that it had changed during the course**

What was the means by which students approached this change? When asked (*Question 3*) what steps they'd taken to review their original motivation

- *27% said none*
- *26% discussed plans with a School Guidance worker or visited the University's Career Development Centre*
- *47% discussed plans with their Study Skills Tutor (Personal Tutor)*
- *2% sought guidance from an external institution*

There is no previous statistical work upon which to draw, but anecdotal evidence seems to suggest that Access courses have performed an increasingly overt vocational purpose for their participants in recent years. Whilst not 'work-focused' (using the term the DfES apply to Foundation courses), Access courses are clearly fulfilling a vocational purpose for the very large majority of these students.

Almost three quarters of respondents confirmed an engagement with a member of staff acting in an educational/careers advisory role. What appears from this response is that not only is the Access Programme fulfilling a specifically vocational need, but it is also providing the opportunity, overwhelmingly through the support structure of the institution, to review this vocational-decision making.

What we have emerging is a model of Access provision which can be described as vocational but, perhaps more interestingly, seems to continue to provide a platform through which vocational decisions are either confirmed or new and different vocational decisions are taken. (reference to endorsing earlier work).

Phil Hodgkinson (1998), as others before him, has echoed the work of Pierre Bourdieu and chosen to root his over-view of young people's career decision-making in the specific historicity and place which they inhabit. Hodgkinson argues that what makes young people's decision-making process and the outcomes of it understandable, is that it takes places in their particular, and to some extent unique, social and cultural context.

Gibson and Waters in an earlier research paper (2000), deploy a similar approach when they consider motivation and Access students, in so far as they draw heavily on the work of Linden West (West 1996) and Bourdieu's concept of *habitas* to suggest that an Access course creates a space in which students can reconceptualise their identities. In their survey of Access students in the East Midlands, Gibson and Waters 'found evidence of students who had been in a state of liminality'. Whilst Gibson and Waters choose to pejoratively characterise this *liminality* in terms of 'student loss of self-identity, feeling threatened, anxious and consumed with panic', liminality can also be a very creative place in between the past and the future. It this very liminality which enable many students (as in the survey) to conceptualise new possibilities for themselves. If a new place is offered with new experiences within which to conceptualise future plans, it is not unlikely that a range of new possibilities will be identified, which would not have been perceived as realistic before that new learning experience. A guidance intervention to enable learners to make sense of these experiences and to reconceptualise becomes paramount. In this model of a widening participation programme it is not solely the award or the specific and generic

competences that are acquired through it which are of value to the learner, it is the opportunity it provides for reassessment, re-evaluation and re-orientation, which is unique to it.

In a similar way, but more pragmatically, the authors of the Guidance Council's study (2000) of adults' expectations and requirements of guidance note that,

While it (guidance as a one-off activity) may be sufficient for some people, it was clear that for others this would just be a small part of what might be a much longer, more complex process (Guidance Council 2000)

What we have emerging, therefore, is a vocationally-focussed programme, predicated on change, but which facilitates through its own student support systems the making of decisions based on an understanding of self, newly crystallised through the multiple interaction with the course.

The practical reality of this experience is described in the following case study, one of several drawn from the current survey.

Sarah's original plan was to undertake a food technology degree with a view to a future teaching career. Although she held down a good job as a chef in a large public sector organisation, there were no courses flexible enough to allow her to continue her work and undertake such advanced study. When she explored the plan in more detail, it became clear that the appropriate course was not available locally. Sarah had become sufficiently motivated, however, to want to continue with her change in direction, so signed up to an Access course with the specific aim of entering the BEd programme for primary teaching.

Although these aims had been quite well thought through, the personal development which took place on the course – under the impact of the teaching and learning, the exposure to new ideas and the contact with peers – radically exploded Sarah's perceptions of what was possible and suggested opportunities not thought of before.

Rather than enter the specifically vocationally focused BEd degree, Sarah has opted for the BSc Biology degree, a subject which she particularly enjoys, and one which will afford the opportunity for further reflection on future career options.

#### **4. The Place of the Access Course**

There are, therefore, key distinctive characteristics of the Access course that distinguish it from the main programmes currently intended to widen adult participation to HE.

They are:

- The provision of a learning programme within a support structure that encourages review and reflection
- A multi-subject programme which encourages educational progression and vocational commitment but which does not unnecessarily diminish vocational choice at the outset
- The availability of multiple exit points to degree and vocational diploma courses.

It may be, therefore, that whilst the criteria for Access courses do need to be modernised so that they arrest their current decline, this should not be at the expense of losing these distinguishing characteristics. The room for vocational decision-making that Access courses provide, gives them a uniqueness within the widening participation prospectus should not be underestimated nor undervalued.

Paraphrasing an old cliché that if Access courses weren't around, you would have to invent them seems peculiarly apposite at this point in time.

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