

Are mature students at Sheffield Hallam University widening participation students?

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Introduction

The opening up of educational opportunity and the provision of a high quality student experience are key elements of Sheffield Hallam University's mission. SHU has been very successful in its efforts to widen participation and support students. When considering under-represented groups it achieves higher than benchmark figures for all undergraduate students. This is complemented by a strong track record in supporting students through their studies.

Mature students constitute an important group of under-represented students in Higher Education, but far from being a homogenous group, they are a group of individuals who present complex socio-economic and personal circumstances. The main aim of the study was to reveal more about the socio-economic, motivational and educational characteristics of SHU's mature students. Sheffield Hallam's mature students are predominantly local and come from the surrounding sub-region of South Yorkshire. Taken as a whole, South Yorkshire exhibits participation rates in Higher Education (HE) well below the national average. It is designated a European Union Objective One Area, reflecting relatively high levels of social and economic disadvantage.

This paper presents the findings of a mature student survey, undertaken in May 2002. Almost, twelve hundred students were sent questionnaires and two hundred and ninety one, almost 25%, were returned. The research has involved the analysis of these responses and data from Sheffield Hallam's student information system.

The main areas considered in this paper are:

- previous education
- under-representation in higher education
- reason/motivation for study

The Student Cohort

The students originally considered were all new mature students over the age of 23, commencing their programmes of study in academic year 2001/2. However this was narrowed to the following specific groups:

- new full time or sandwich students on HE level awards starting at level 4, e.g. BA (Hons), BSc (Hons), BEng (Hons) or HND courses, and Top-up Degree programmes commencing at level 6
- new part time students on HE level awards starting at level 4, e.g. BA (Hons), BSc (Hons), BEng (Hons) HND or HNC courses, and Top-up Degree programmes commencing at level 6

Enrolment data indicate that more than half of the cohort studied in two of the University's ten schools; these are the School of Health & Social Care and the School of Social Science & Law. Forty percent were evenly distributed across the Schools of Business and Finance, Education, Environment & Development and Cultural Studies.

It should be noted that the study did not include students on:

- non award bearing programmes
- franchised HE programmes at Partner Colleges and
- programmes where the students had not started at the beginning of the programme, for example those with advanced standing (direct entrants) - who incorporate into their new

programmes HE credit already achieved on another course (APCL – Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning) or who have been awarded credit for their prior experiential learning (APEL)

Entry Qualifications

Student Information Data

Sheffield Hallam's student information data revealed that full-time or sandwich students, aged 23 or over on entry, had the following entry qualifications:

- Postgraduate Award/First Degree/Other Graduate and Equivalent - 24%
- Sub-degree HE Qualifications/Credit - 22%
- Professional Qualifications - 2%
- Level 3ⁱ - 21% (A levels only - 16%)
- Access to HE Certificate/Credit - 21%
- Foundation Awards - 3%

These data indicate that a high proportion of these mature students already have experience of higher education (46%). This is considerably more than the national figure of 18% reported (Ross A, 2002) for the 21-30 age group. A significant number (24%) have already gained first or higher degrees. This indicates that many of SHU's full-time mature students are not starting but returning to HE study. However, there is evidence that these returning students are attracted to only a small range of specialist vocational courses, e.g. Community Justice, Community Specialist Practice, Nursing, Physiotherapy and Occupational Therapy.

Sheffield Hallam, like many post 92 universities, has a strong tradition of providing a range of full-time Higher National Diploma (HND) programmes in vocational subject areas. HNDs are self-contained HE qualifications in their own right, but on completion of an HND the student may apply to transfer onto a degree course. Under some circumstances, a student with an HND will enter the final year of a degree or its equivalent (this is Level 6 in the English credit framework). Transfer, on successful completion, to Level 6 top-up degree courses may account for the high proportion of students found in our cohort with sub-degree qualifications or credit. However, it is unlikely that they account for the whole group, suggesting that students with sub-degree awards and credit are entering programmes at Level 4 (the first year equivalent in the English credit framework). This implies that the credit they have accumulated is not being transferred into their new award. It may be that the credit achieved is not specific to the new programme of study, especially if the student has changed disciplines.

Access Programmes appear to be the leading route used to develop the skills and underpinning knowledge needed to study a full-time HE programme. They equal other Level 3 qualifications, including A levels, as methods used to gain entry to SHUs full time HE provision. Whilst current guidelines mean that there is reasonable surety that students with Access qualifications took them as mature students, it is not possible to say the same for students with other Level 3 qualifications who may have taken them either as mature students or when they were eighteen. Compared with Access qualifications, Foundation Awards represent only a small proportion of the entry qualifications. This is probably due to the well established and extensive Access provision offered by local colleges compared with Foundation Courses.

When the above data is compared with that for the new part-time students, there are some similarities but some obvious differences, as indicated below:

- Postgraduate award/degree/degree equivalent - 27%
- Sub-degree HE qualifications/credit - 22%
- Professional Qualifications - 26%
- Level 3 Qualifications - 13% (A levels only 5%)
- Access to HE Certificate/credit - 2%
- Foundation Awards - >1%

Again, students with postgraduate or degree qualifications form a large part of the cohort, as do students with sub-degree HE qualification/credit (49% in total). Some of the students with these sub-degree qualifications will reflect students moving through specific part-time HNC to HND and HND to top-up degree provision, for example Business Studies. However, this cannot account for all those with HE qualifications and credit. This suggests that, as with the full-time and sandwich mature students, the University's part-time provision is being used as a means of returning to HE study.

A significant number of part-time students (26%) cited professional qualifications as their entry qualification; this number undoubtedly reflects the nature of many of the part-time programmes available, for example Business Studies, Health Care Practice and Housing Studies. This is considerably higher than for full-time programmes (2%).

Students with only Level 3 entry qualifications are a considerably smaller group overall (16%) when compared with full-time and sandwich students (45%). Most notable are the differences between those with A levels as their highest qualification on entry (5% compared with 16%) and those with Access awards/credit (2% compared with 21%). The Access finds are consistent with national figures (Access to HE, 2002) which show ten times more former Access students studying full-time HE courses when compared with part-time.

Questionnaire Data

The analysis of the responses to the survey has concentrated on three types of entry qualification – Access, A levels and HE awards/credit. The additional information gained from the questionnaires has enabled the evaluation of the age at which the entry qualifications were gained to be compared with the age at which the HE study commenced. It also provides data on the subject areas studied by students with the above entry qualifications.

When data from respondents who had undertaken an Access course was analysed, it was found that all the students had entered degree programmes and the vast majority's (97%) mode of study was full-time. This supports the University's Student Information data, which indicates that most former Access students study full-time. Students with Access as their highest entry qualification constituted 21% of those responding to the survey.

The average age of the students when they commenced their Access course was 34 years old, the youngest was twenty-one and the oldest fifty one. Ninety percent of the students started their University programme within two years of completing the Access course. The average starting age of the degree programmes was thirty-six. The main subject areas studied were as follows:

- Teaching related courses – 30%
- Nursing/Health related provision – 16%
- Social Work Studies – 13%
- Sociology/Psychology – 10%
- Humanities – 10%.

Given (Bromley R, 2002) the recent swings towards vocational Access provision in Health Studies and Nursing, more students progressing to Nursing/Health might have been expected. However, Sheffield Hallam University only offers a degree programme in nursing, whilst the University of Sheffield offers a diploma, which is known to be attractive to many local mature Access students.

The questionnaire also provided information on the students' home postcodes, which confirmed that the vast majority of these students are from Sheffield Hallam's travel to study area.

Students with 'A' levels as their highest qualification on entry represented 14% of respondents. All the students were enrolled on degree programmes, but unlike the Access group, twenty percent studied part-time.

The average University starting age was slightly lower than the corresponding Access Course students, at thirty-five years old, although the age range (24 - 74) was considerably wider. Interestingly, 53% of this group had achieved A level qualifications at 18/19. Of these, the average age when commencing the HE programme was 29 years old, indicating a significant gap between being 'able' to study HE and actually taking up a place. The two oldest students had returned to college, at 71 and 58 respectively, to undertake A level subjects before going on to study History as part-time degree students.

The main subject areas studied were as follows:

- Humanities - 21%
- Science/Engineering/Computing - 21%
- Business related - 15%
- Social Sciences - 14%
- Healthcare related courses – 10%
- Teaching related programmes - 10%
- Law - 8%

Compared with the Access groups, the A level group showed a marked tendency towards 'traditional' 'academic' programmes.

Thirty-three percent of the survey respondents had previous experience of Higher Education including first or higher degree qualifications. Of these sixty percent studied on full-time programmes. Closer examination of the qualifications on entry indicated that 46% already had first degrees. Forty percent of these were studying on a single programme - Community Justice.

The average age of the students in their first year of study was thirty-five, very similar to those with Access and A level qualifications.

The main subject areas studied were as follows:

- Community Justice - 23%
- Healthcare related courses – 30%
- Engineering related - 10%
- Teaching related programmes - 7%
- Humanities - 7%
- Business related - 7%

Under-represented groups in Higher Education

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) uses postcode conversion procedures, social class data and the former school or college to determine if a young undergraduate student is from an under-represented group. Data available (HEFCE, 2002) indicates that 94% of Sheffield Hallam's young full-time undergraduates studied in state schools or colleges, 31% were from social classes I, II, III, IV & V and 15% were from low participation neighbourhoods. Mature students (those over 21) are categorised as being from under-represented groups if they have no previous experience of higher education and come from low participation neighbourhoods. Mature students represent 25% of the full-time undergraduate population at SHU. Sixteen percent of the mature undergraduates have no previous experience of HE and come from low participation neighbourhoods.

The analysis of social class data requires the translation of occupations into a series of socio-economic categories. The University's student information data is collected from the student's UCAS applications or the SHU enrolment forms, the latter rely on the individual to determine their own social class. In the case of students under 21 this relates to the parent's occupation, mature students social class is based on their own previous profession.

Data has been collected for approximately 40% of the full-time and sandwich mature students over twenty-three and data indicates that 35.3% are from social classes IIM (Skilled Manual), IV (Partly Skilled) & V (Unskilled). This corresponds well to the questionnaire data on social class which indicated that 34.2% of the respondents were from social classes IIM (Skilled Manual), IV (Partly Skilled) & V (Unskilled).

When students with no previous higher education are considered the percentage increases to 37.4%, whilst 40.9% of those with Access as their highest qualification fall within these social classes. If this data is compared with that for young full-time undergraduates (31%), proportionally more mature students are from these lower social groups. So, it can be broadly concluded that mature students are more likely to come from the lower social class backgrounds and this likelihood increases if they have no experience of HE and especially if their entry qualification is Access.

A simple comparison between the HEFCE data for young full-time students from low participation neighbourhoods (15%) and mature students with no experience of higher education and from low participation neighbourhoods (16%) would suggest that they are roughly similar. However, it is acknowledged that the data sets are not exactly the same. Because the analysis of this group of mature students indicates that 46% already have experience of higher education, the 'under-represented' students must come from just over half the sample. Therefore, mature students with no experience of higher education are almost twice as likely to come from low participation neighbourhoods compared with young students.

Motivations for study

When respondents were asked why they had chosen to study at university the majority indicated that they wished to improve their career prospects, develop professionally or wanted to change careers.

Students returning to study via the Access route were predominantly doing so to change their careers (60%), 15% cited improving their career prospects and 15% were studying for personal reason / personal development. A similar trend was seen in those with A levels, although more were concerned with improving their career prospects (23%) than changing their careers (42%).

Full-time students with previous experience of higher education were motivated by improving their career prospects/development (18%), changing their career (35%) and as a requirement of their employment (31%). However, the training requirement was related mainly to those on one specific course - Community Justice. When part-time students with previous experience of higher education were considered 45% were concerned with career development, 10% with career change and 23% with 'getting a degree'. The notion of getting a degree was very much linked with improved career prospects, especially amongst those in healthcare related professions.

Consequently, most mature students have either a specific career in mind or are studying as part of their career development. The idea of going to university to 'broaden ones horizons' is far less applicable to this group of students.

Conclusion

The study has revealed that a significant number of mature students cannot be considered as 'widening participation' students under the current HEFCE definitions, as they have previous experience of higher education. However, if the mature students with no previous experience of higher education are considered, twice as many will come from low participation backgrounds compared with young undergraduate students. Furthermore, social class data indicates that these mature students are more likely to be in social classes IIM (Skilled Manual), IV (Partly Skilled) & V (Unskilled). This propensity increases if the student has studied an Access course. So, whilst the study indicates that mature students at Sheffield Hallam as a group cannot be defined as 'widening participation' students, it has identified that certain sub-groups are more likely to contain 'widening participation' students.

The results also indicate that the majority of mature students, irrespective of mode of study or previous experience of higher education are predominantly motivated to study by the desire to either improve their job prospects or change their careers paths entirely. This is amply reflected in the vocational nature of the majority of programmes being studied by these students.

References

Access to Higher Education, *Key Statistics*, 2002

Bromley R (2002), *Access Provision in Further Education colleges*, RPM 452, LSDA, London

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ⁱ In the English credit framework, Level 3 qualifications cover GCE Advanced Levels, Scottish Certificate of Education Highers, General National Vocational Qualifications/GSVQ or National Vocational Qualifications/S, Ordinary National Certificate or Ordinary National Diploma (including a number of other equivalents)