

Beyond GCSE?

Pathways into Higher Education for mature students studying in community education

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Overview of the project

The West Yorkshire Widening Participation Project was a partnership between the 5 Higher Education Institutions in West Yorkshire. The partners were the University of Bradford, University of Huddersfield, University of Leeds, Leeds Metropolitan University and the Open University. The Northern School of Contemporary Dance and Trinity and All Saints College were also partners. The aim was to widen participation in Higher Education through working with colleges and schools with low progression to HE, disadvantaged communities and ethnic minority groups. The partnership chose to undertake five major strands of activity with an identified Higher Education Institution leading on each strand. The School of Continuing Education, University of Leeds led work on developing flexible pathways into Higher Education. The aim was to create collaborative pathways, through the use of existing models of good practice from individual HEIs, which were more responsive to the requirements of underrepresented groups than traditional curricula. This has resulted in two major strands of work: 'Higher Education Community Learning Pathways' and the 'Beyond GCSE?' programme. This paper will focus on the work undertaken on the 'Beyond GCSE?' programme'. The work has been funded through HEFCE special initiative funding available from 1999 to 2002 and will be developed further through the 'Partnerships for Progression' initiative funded jointly by HEFCE and the Learning and Skills Council.

The School of Continuing Education, University of Leeds has been delivering community-based courses for over 20 years. Our aim is to promote the ethos of lifelong learning and participation in Higher Education for people previously excluded from formal education. As well as widening participation, we try to ensure that our work incorporates a broader social purpose, hence all our programmes are negotiated and undertaken in collaboration with groups who are part of geographical, social, cultural or other communities.

The project worked with two Further Education partners; Park Lane College and Thomas Danby College, the two largest Further Education Colleges in Leeds. There are seven other FE Colleges in Leeds. Park Lane College is the largest FE College with over 35,000 adults and young people enrolled on its courses, 90% of its students are part-time. It operates on four main sites and in more than 40 local centres across the city where the College's Adult and Community Education programmes are run. The project work built on partnerships between the School of Continuing Education and the FE Colleges, which had been developed and

consolidated over a number of years, in particular, partnerships with the colleges' Adult and Community Education departments.

Context and general issues

The relatively large proportion of students who fail to progress from level 2 to level 3 qualifications is of national concern. A National Audit Office report (2002) stated that people from poorer social classes and disabled people continue to be under-represented in Higher Education. On a regional level, adult education enrolments for Yorkshire and Humberside (1.7%) were below the national average (2.7%) in 2000¹. At 67%, the local level within the Leeds district of participation in continuing education is well below the national average of 78%².

The lack of coherent educational progression routes for learners, which not only raise the aspirations of under-represented groups, but also ensure that applications to Higher Education are successful, has been identified nationally as a barrier to progression to level 4. This particularly applies to those sections of the community, which experience multiple social disadvantage, such as minority ethnic groups, carers, lone parents, older people and disabled people³. The report also states that these groups of people are likely to disengage with education after level 2.

LSC statistics for West Yorkshire identify 19 to 24 year olds as the group who are the highest economically inactive. The disappearance from education and training of 19 to 24 year olds has become of national concern. This is reflected in the lower numbers from this age group applying to Higher Education in comparison to numbers of school-age applicants⁴. The national picture of adult learners shows a steady rate of engagement in learning up the age of 50⁵. However, how does this profile fit with the government's target of 50% of 18 to 30 year olds gaining an experience of HE by 2010? The current LSC focus on post 16 learning is concentrated towards the attainment of Basic Skills and level 1 qualifications. There does not appear to be a great deal of resources and importance placed on the attainment of HE by those who are aged over 19 and in particular those who are aged 30 and over. The age profiles of the students who took part in the project reflect this national picture, the majority are aged between 25 and 40. As one student put it, 'it's not fair, we need grants'.

The programme

It would appear, therefore, that in order to increase numbers from disadvantaged backgrounds participating in Higher Education; Higher Education needs to engage with these potential students while they are studying at level 2. The 'Beyond GCSE?' programme aimed to address this issue directly. The programme supported learners from socially excluded areas, who are studying in community settings at GCSE level, in order to encourage them to go onto Higher Education. It was devised in partnership with staff from Park Lane College, Thomas Danby College and the

¹ 'Report on Level 3 / 4 Provision for Adults in the Wakefield District' (draft) (2002), page 2

² Ofsted Inspection Report, Park Lane College (2002) www.ofsted.gov.uk/reports

³ 'Report on Level 3 / 4 Provision for Adults in the Wakefield District' (draft) (2002), page.5

⁴ www.ucas.ac.uk/figures

⁵ National Adult Learning Survey 2002

groups of learners themselves. The range of activities on offer included day schools at the School of Continuing Education, visits to other relevant departments and first year undergraduate lectures, as well as tours of the campus. In addition, sessions aimed at raising learners' attainment as well as aspirations were held at the college community venues and taught by FE and HE staff. Free childcare and transport were offered to support all these activities. The programme also had a residential element and groups of learners spent weekends at the Northern College in Barnsley in order to give them the chance to really focus on their studies as well as reflect on their personal aims and aspirations.

A key issue identified in the report on Level 3 / 4 Provision in Wakefield was the importance of ongoing educational advice and guidance at level 2 to encourage people to think about 'what next'; this could help learners to progress to level 3. An essential thread running throughout the 'Beyond GCSE?' programme was ongoing group and individual advice and guidance sessions from the university's pre-entry advice and guidance specialist and also involved the advice and guidance strand of the West Yorkshire Partnership 'Into Universities'. This was seen as very important and an aspiration raising activity in its own right by the students. This was complementary to the adult guidance provision available at all levels within Further and Adult Education.

Other issues around progression to level 3 highlighted by the draft report⁶ include a lack of interaction between staff delivering at level 2 / 3 and those working on Higher Education programmes. The project involved staff in Further and Higher Education, including those in Further Education involved in the delivery of level 2 and 3 provision. These staff has been involved with the delivery and evaluation of the programme activities.

Impact, outcomes and achievements of the project

Five communities in Leeds were targeted through partnership with Park Lane and Thomas Danby Colleges: the inner-city areas of Chapeltown and Beeston, the outlying estates of Stanks and Middleton and the former mining community of Kippax. The lack of progression into Higher Education within these areas is illustrated by government statistics: in 1997 in the electoral ward of Middleton, just 15 people, of all ages, went onto study at HE, in 1998 this had increased to 25. The ward of Beeston is similar, with 35 people going onto HE in 1997 and 45 in 1998⁷. Over 60 learners on FE community based courses were involved with project activities aiming to progress people into HE. The learners themselves reported an increased awareness and knowledge of routes into HE and the majority now see themselves as possible candidates when they hadn't considered it before. Students also reported that the extra study skills and subject sessions had had a positive effect on their studies, and, as a result of these sessions, materials which support learners in developing higher level study skills to enhance their attainment at GCSE level have

⁶ 'Report on Level 3 / 4 Provision for Adults in the Wakefield District' (draft) (2002), page.7

⁷ 'University Admissions by Place of Residence' <http://tables.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk>. (These statistics have been collected from UCAS and show only full-time students.)

been devised. In addition, students have described the impact of their raised aspirations and awareness on their families. Many of them not only are aiming towards HE themselves, but also view it as a realistic and desirable goal for their children.

The work of FE staff has been crucial to the success of the project. The HE project worker visited all the GCSE groups during their class time at least once and has maintained contact with those students who have taken up the activities on offer. However, this contact on its own is certainly not enough to have a great deal of effect and it is no coincidence that the centres in which the tutors and co-ordinators were most proactive also had the most students taking part in the programme. The college staff and particularly the GCSE tutors were instrumental in promoting the activities and encouraging their students on a regular basis. The ethos of support and encouragement of learners, which is evident throughout adult and community provision, is the necessary context to any successful work in encouraging students to progress further. The importance of entry level courses in providing a positive and successful experience of learning, as well as a solid foundation, for learners to then aspire to and progress onto GCSE level provision, is essential and must not be overlooked.

FE staff noticed that students' perceptions of Higher Education changed very gradually over the year and that by the end of their course they were more comfortable with activities such as visits to the university. However, it must always be borne in mind that the impact which education has on adults' everyday life can be over estimated and that perceptions amongst learners of HE as 'not for us' changes very slowly. Similarly, the idea that adult students progress in a linear fashion through the education system is misleading. It is unrealistic to expect people to automatically move on from GCSE to level 3 and then HE from one year to the next. It has not been possible to track all the students who took part in the programme, however, learner destinations have included further study at level 2 (mostly other GCSEs), a few people have gone to level 3 provision, other people have found full-time work or changed their jobs and some students are now at home as full-time child carers. The programme's aim in encouraging students to go onto Higher Education can be seen as a long-term strategy, rather than as direct recruitment into HE.

The project work has shown that guidance is one factor which can bring about changes in direction and subject choice in a proactive manner, this again illustrates the point that learner progression is not always continuous. Many of the students involved with the project have changed their aims and the focus of their studies as they have progressed. Guidance needs to be ongoing as students considering HE are often going through a process of redefining their personal aims and objectives as well as gaining more knowledge of their options within HE. The addition of guidance can make a difference to students' decisions on going on to level three study rather than opting for the safer choice of attending level two courses accessed within their own community.

Throughout the programme, advice and guidance was available to all participants. A large percentage took this up, of which the great majority intended to progress to level 3 study and aim towards HE. Significantly, the learners reported that they were more likely to access HE advice and guidance provision themselves as a result of the project. The availability of accessible pre-HE guidance, which was viewed as

impartial by the learners, was an essential element of the programme. Materials developed by the guidance strand of the West Yorkshire Project: 'Into Universities' were extremely useful to the project and provided clear accessible information on local HE advice and guidance provision, routes into HE and part-time HE study⁸.

FE staff have reported a raised awareness of the possibilities within HE for their GCSE students. Some staff now have more knowledge on the options open to adults within HE and the entry requirements needed for mature students to gain a place. Further sessions on the potential options for GCSE and level two students are planned and will be open to all FE staff. The project has also had an ongoing impact on the HE staff involved, with a greater understanding of the needs of mature students from socially deprived backgrounds and awareness of the potential they have to succeed at HE level. The impact the project work has had on HE staff is illustrated by work which has been developed with the University's School of English. This has included a talk by the admissions tutor to a group of GCSE students, visits to first year undergraduate English lectures, tutorials run by English postgraduate students and a forthcoming conference with FE Access staff.

A video "Real Value" has been produced by the University of Leeds' Media Services with the School of Continuing Education. This features the learners talking about their experiences of education and the impact the project has had on their lives and their plans for the future. The following is an extract from the video in which Deborah, one of the students involved in the project, describes her experiences and aspirations. She is a lone parent and mother of four. She is aged 28 and lives in South Leeds on an outlying estate. She left school before the sixth form and returned to community-based Further Education in 2001 to do GCSEs with Park Lane College. In 2002 Deborah took GCSEs in Psychology and Sociology, she got an A* for her Psychology exam and won an award from Park Lane College for the highest achievement in a GCSE across the college. She has recently had her fourth child.

'I didn't come from a family that you'd go to University and at that time I don't believe that anyone left with the aim of going to uni, because we were just going to get jobs. A lot of people went to Sight and Sound colleges or did a course at college to get receptionist skills but that was it.

I always loved school, I did like English and thought I'd do very well, in reality my exams weren't as good, I got lower grades at school than I should have done. I really wanted to be an English teacher. I'd had that dream ever since I was like four or five and I used to write fairy stories and I'd get stars for them. I was told I was really good at writing. When I expressed my wishes to my form tutor, he said, "How many girls do you think have exactly that same dream as you've got right now and how many girls do you think actually achieve their dreams?"

⁸ These are: a leaflet containing contact details for all pre-entry guidance services within local HE providers, as well as Learn Direct; a booklet: 'Routes into HE' for mature students, which describes different entry routes available and outlines their potential 'pros and cons', and a booklet on part-time HE study. For more information contact Rebecca Moore, Open University, Leeds.

When I was at school I always felt really positive and really strong and believed that I would do anything that I wanted to do. In reality, when I left school and I'd had my safety net taken away from me I had no confidence whatsoever. So it was extremely hard to stand out and say "I am different to everyone else", because I wasn't, I was brought up like everyone else. I was no different and every time it came to doing what I wanted to do, I believed I'd be laughed at and people would say, "Well no, you can't do that because you're not clever enough."

My dad believed it was a women's job to stay at home and look after her family. He always believed that it was more important for my brothers to get a trade and get a decent job and as long as I could cook and clean and iron then it was OK. Even though I was happy to be a mother and I was reasonably happy with my life, I was never really happy with myself. I always felt I could do more than sit around talking about baby clothes and baby shops, that's what life had become, but inside me I always had an urge to talk to other people that weren't just mothers. I lost my confidence when I had my children and I started GCSEs because I wanted to know I could do it, and I wanted my kids to be proud of me. Suddenly I did feel free and that I wanted to see and speak to other people and find my own feet and see what I could do again because I never lost the desire to be educated and to get the education that I thought I deserved.

I think you give yourself the confidence, you take the first step, walk through the door and meet other people like yourself and you realise you are not the only person that is like this and thinks these things. I always felt like I struggled while I was taking the course. I never believed even after taking the exam I would have passed. I didn't believe it and the kids didn't believe it. When I got my results the children thought I'd won something. They kept saying, "Mum's won an A star", or "Mummy's an A star".

When we visited the university, for the first time in an awful lot of years I had the chance to spend quite a long time with different people and talk to different people all in one day. I always felt that they (University students) class themselves as real students and we're not the real students and that made me feel a bit uncomfortable. I thought university was just for rich people the project took me out of own reality, made me believe I can do more. I felt for the first time that I might actually be able to go to university. It didn't seem so out of reach. (I now know about) the various ways of getting into university. I know now that anyone can come to Uni.

The first thing that made me want to achieve something was my children because I was looking after three children on my own and the reality was that for the rest of their lives I'm solely responsible for everything that happens to them. I believe that your children live by the examples you set and I didn't want to never do nothing and give my children nothing to make them proud of. I'm doing Maths and Law GCSEs this year. I do have the intention of going to uni, even though I'm not sure of where I want to be yet.

My Mam married my Dad, had the children, stayed at home, cooked and cleaned and that's all she ever did. My Dad believed his daughters would do the same. When I passed the exam he was absolutely over the moon. He was so proud he wanted to

show everybody, he had three (news)papers and even now he hasn't stopped talking to me about it. He has said to me, "You've got to stop having children because you've kept having all these kids," and that is really the best thing I could have hoped for.'

Conclusions

In order to enable learners from socially excluded backgrounds to progress to Higher Education, level 3 provision needs to be accessible. However, this provision tends to only be available at main FE or HE sites and not all learners can attend these courses. This may be due to any number of barriers including cost, lack of transport, time, or childcare and the perception of the learning site as only for young people. Therefore, level 3 provision (as well as HE provision) needs to be available in learners' own communities. The costs associated with this, such as childcare, study support and room hire, means that this is usually considered unviable. Ideally, project funding would be available which would support the relatively low numbers of learners wishing to continue to level 3 study in their local area, alternatively, the development of different progression routes through other forms of delivery such as ICT, e-learning, multilevel provision, intensive short course and residential could be explored. However, this also calls for a great deal of careful partnership work with the various FE providers within Leeds, who all offer their own level 3 and often HE provision.

The project can be seen as increasing the level of co-operation between sectors through raised staff awareness and knowledge of the differences in cultures and ethos of different providers. However, embedding project work within an institution does not automatically happen without additional funding and senior management support, even if dissemination has been widespread and successful. Usually, project staff and FE tutors are employed through temporary, part-time contracts, often working at the margins of an institution. If a long term, sustainable approach to encouraging adults from socially deprived areas to access HE is to be taken, institutions need to show commitment through due recognition of the work done and employing more members of staff on a permanent basis.

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