Access Courses as a Site of Engagement: A Research Project

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ACCESS RESEARCH PROJECT

Access Courses as Sites of Engagement

Introduction

This research project was funded by the Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance and Aimhigher Research Network North West. A database of Access students was held at the University of Salford that included students from 1998-2006. The names of the students were gathered by the Access Unit from their Enrichment Programme over the period. Ethical approval for the research was sought from the IRIS Director and advice on the Data Protection Act sought from the manager responsible within the university. The database contained information on name, age, address, telephone contact, gender, ethnicity, college and Access course attended. There were approximately 6000 entries on the database.

> "Access to higher education courses offer a route into higher education (HE) for those who do not have the educational qualifications which are usually required for entry. These courses provide the underpinning knowledge and skills needed for university-level study, and lead to the award of the Access to HE qualification, which is of an equivalent standard to Level 3 qualifications, such as A levels." UCAS website.

Individuals can study a range of courses in different subject areas such as health, science or humanities. Access courses can be studied over one year as a full time course or over two-three years as a part time course. The starting point for the study is the view that to enrol on an Access to HE course means that a major decision or turning point in an adult's life has taken place and that the individual wants to change direction. This change of direction is important and suggests that individuals may have missed an opportunity earlier in their lives or do not wish to continue in the same employment situation or in the case of many women who are carers their circumstances have changed. The engagement in learning is an agentic act on the part of the individual that may be prompted by others in the immediate family or friends. However, a necessary aspect of this engagement is the provision of Access courses as a means to enter higher education or change employment.

Research Methodology

The project methodology used a mail shot, telephone follow up and face to face interviews to contact people on the database. The mail shot contained a letter of explanation, a guarantee of anonymity based on BERA guidelines and an invitation to answer five questions relating to the Access course they had enrolled on and an invitation to become involved in the research project. Individuals who completed the survey and wished to be involved provided a contact e-mail or telephone number for interview. The telephone follow up interview was to remind individuals to complete their survey and return it in the stamp addressed envelope. In effect, these follow up interviews became telephone interviews particularly for individuals who had left the Access course without completing it. It became apparent that individuals who had been successful were returning their survey and asking for interviews but those who had left the course prior to completion were not contributing to the replies. For individuals returning the survey and indicating they wanted an interview these were arranged over a period of weeks from May to September 2008 and in January - February 2009. These semi-structured interviews were recorded and transcribed for data analysis.

Context of Access Courses

Nationally in 2006-07 a total of 37,840 learners were registered on Access to HE courses. In terms of gender 75% of these learners were women and 25% were men. In terms of ethnicity, 5% were Asian or Asian British, 17% were Black or Black British, 0.5% were Chinese, 6% were mixed race and 71% were White. In relation to attainment of Access courses QAA states that:

  'The success rate, calculated as the number of learners of awarded an Access to HE certificate (19,925) divided by the number of learner registrations that did not transfer out and were expected to complete in 2006-07 (32,265) was 62 per cent.' (QAA Key Statistics 2008 p.4).

The numbers registering on Access courses have remained stable while the number of students progressing to HE via A Level and vocational routes has increased over the past ten years. In the sub-region of Greater Manchester since 2001, the number of individuals enrolling on Access courses has remained around 2500 with a high of 2846 in 2000-2001 and a low of 2260 in 2002-03. There has, however, been a significant change in the completion rate of Access students from 30% in 2001-02 to 54% in 2005-06. This completion rate is based simply on completions and is not comparable to the QAA national statistic indicated above.

Table 1.   Sub Regional Profile of Access Students

  Registration and Progression to HE in Greater Manchester

	Registered	Complete	Progress to HE
2000-01	2846	848 (30%)	786 (27%)
2001-02	2590	928 (36%)	737 (29%)
2002-03	2260	1166 (52%)	929 (41%)
2003-04	2519	1346 (53%)	920 (37%)
2004-05	2563	1361 (53%)	961(38%)
2005-06	2416	1299 (54%)	1214 (50%)

Source: GMOCN 2006

Project Findings

The database of Access students held at the University of Salford for the years 2003-04 to 2005-06 represent approximately a quarter of each cohort. For example, there were 2519 learners registered on Access to HE courses in 2003-04 in Greater Manchester and there were 781 learners on the data base at Salford. This represented 31% of total registration for that academic year. So each cohort contacted was approximately 25 per cent of the total for the year. We were able to contact on average 39% of this sample by letter and or telephone. This equates to 10 per cent of the actual registrations for each year. In each year those contacted were learners who had progressed and learners who had withdrawn from Access to HE courses.

There were several issues related to mobility and telephone contact. The question of mobility began to figure in the project after the first mail shot as a significant minority of the individuals had moved house or flat in the one, two or three year period. The solution was to enter a return mailing address on the 2004 letters and four percent of the letters were returned no longer at this address to the university. A second issue that arose during the project was the number of individuals whose

phone number had changed or was discontinued and the reasons for this could be the number of individuals who have changed their mobile phone over the period of three years and because of change of address.

Salford Data Base Cohorts Contacted

Table 2.   2005-06

Number mailed	Contacted	Percentage
609	257	42%

Table 3. 2004-05

Number mailed	Contacted	Percentage
602	225	37%

Table 4. 2003-04

Number mailed	Contacted	Percentage
768	297	38%

The total number of learners from the three years 2003-04 to 2005-06 contacted was 779 from a dataset of 1979 learners. This number of contacts is 39 per cent of the dataset for the three years and 10 percent of the registrations for the three years 2003-06.

Analysis of Contacts for 2003 - 06

In total a mail shot of 1980 was distributed and approximately 780 returns from a variety of research gathering tools was recorded. These tools included a paper survey, telephone follow up, telephone interview and face to face interview. Table 5. is a breakdown of the results for the years 2003-06. The total of 780 also includes 72 returns that were registered as moved address.

Table 5. Contacts – Non Contacts 2003 - 06

Completed Access	430	22%
Current Student	120	6%
Withdrawn	133	7%
Moved Address	102	5%
Unknown	25*	2%
Not Contacted	1170	59%
Total	1980	100%

* A small number of surveys were returned without a name.

Site of Engagement

Telephone interviews and face to face interviews focused on six areas that were related to life course and experience of learning in formal education. The first interview question was aimed at getting the individual to talk about their experiences of education as a younger person and to try to make connections between the decision to register on an Access course and this experience. The second question focused specifically on the recall of this decision to register and the individual was asked to talk about influences such as family, employment, self improvement or financial reasons. Archer (2003) suggests that there are key moments in people's lives that are informed by a process of reflection and negotiation between the I and the me which she refers to the 'internal conversation' (Archer, 2003: 63-4) that provide insight into agency. In relation to engagement with education however, this decision to engage relies on knowledge of and the provision of routes to change an individual's life. There is evidence of such engagement via the Open University by adults who wish to engage with education and change certain aspects of their lives. Such reasons may be for reasons related to employment and professional development, related to a change of employment or to a desire to engage with education itself.

The concept of Site of Engagement, as used here relates to the development and provision of courses or processes that allow an individual who has not progressed into higher education by a traditional A Level or to a lesser degree by studying a vocational subject. There are, of course, other routes into higher education such as part-time study that cut across many traditional full-time routes such as routes provided by continuing education. The key aspect of Site of Engagement that distinguishes it from these part –time routes is that a Site of Engagement signifies a form of intervention at the national, regional or organisational level. Access to higher education courses reflect this form of intervention having commenced within universities and colleges in the 1970s prior to becoming an accepted third route into higher education. These courses are now an aspect of official policy and are validated by the Open College Network and subject to QAA. In terms of Access course development it has been the expansion of courses to fit a wider range of subject choices and career paths and the curriculum development aspects around alignment that have meant partnerships between Further Education Colleges and departments in universities that has been significant.

There two other key areas that can be regarded as Sites of Engagement that can provide evidence of agency in relation to pathways into higher education. The establishment and development of Foundation Degrees can be considered as a Site of Engagement that is reflected in national policy developments related to widening participation and employer engagement. At present there are approximately 72,000 students studying on Foundation Degrees (HEFCE 2008/16). This makes a total of 110,000 students on the two qualifications and represents 17% of the total number of UK first year undergraduates. The development and provision of Foundation Degrees is an important element in the Site of Engagement as it involves the commitment from within one or more education institution and entails the engagement with employers as a key aspect of the design of the course.

Storan (2000) argued that the spread of AP(E)L during the 1980s and 1990s was influenced by a number of factors including:

- The expansion of Higher Education student numbers.
- The Access movement
- Concern about the changing demographic conditions (i.e. an anticipated reduction in the number of 18 – year-olds expected to enter Higher Education).

- Financial support from various government agencies to fund AP(E)L projects.
- Impact of the NVQ model.
- The development of modular/credit based Higher Education. (Storan, 2000: 10-14)

Since these early initiatives however, AP(E)L has not increased significantly. Instead many universities developed such projects and many still have these but such accreditation models work against the formula for widening participation itself which has become increasingly based on post code and supplementary funding to support the student life cycle. Nevertheless, as a form of intervention AP(E)L can be counted as a Site of Engagement in that institutions developed plans for the purpose of increasing engagement. Research related to this Access project has taken the University of Salford as a case study in the use of AP(E)L and situated the findings in relation to the concept of Site of Engagement.

A Site of Engagement is constituted by:

Actions within national policy, regional initiatives or institutional agenda

As a result of the policy actions in relation to intervention and or curriculum design and development are put in place

Developmental research on programme or procedures is carried out

Individuals within the institution begin the process of validation individually or with partners Such as FECs

The intervention is marketed

The course/programme is reviewed and adapted after one year

There is continued alignment or review.

Learners

Individuals make decisions to alter or change the direction of their lives

Such decisions can be at first small but are related to Archer's (2003) Internal conversation

As a result an individual engages with learning in the form of an Access to HE course, AP(E)L a Foundation degree, an OU course or a college course

Individuals in engaging draw on support from a range of peers or family

In some cases individuals because of personal circumstances withdraw from the engagement

This withdrawal is contingent and the majority of people have been deeply affected by their experience

In other cases individuals persist in the engagement and alter their dispositions.

Sites of engagement and the internal conversation are critical ways of understanding change in identity through education. The next section deals with narratives of success. The voices of learners are used to evoke the changes signalled in the above.

The Internal Conversation and Narratives of Success

In this section the voices of learners who made the decision to register on an Access to higher education and their experiences in higher education are provided as examples that are evocative of success. Engagement commences with a decision to change something and this may be unemployment, a dead end job or it may be related to a perceived missed opportunity earlier in education. This process of revisiting the past in one's own mind can be added to by friends or family who have knowledge or experience of Access courses. It can also, however, be an individual act related to change in circumstances or in a relationship that encourages the individual to reflect on their past. The evidence from the interviews indicated a range of experiences that prompted this process of the internal conversation. At the heart of this is a form of imagining oneself as elsewhere and becoming involved in the Access course as an act of engagement by the learner. This is by no means a certain future but the process is stimulated by reflection and informed by the past in order to alter the future.

> **Joan** " I always wanted to be a ……….."

> **Sharon** " I wanted to make something of myself for my kids."

> **Alan** " I didn't think I could do this and now I'm a qualified nurse."

The initial impetus can stay with an individual as his or her circumstances change through the life course. In some cases the opportunity is not perceived and in others as the circumstances alter the opportunity becomes more realistic.

> **Karen**

> "Yeah, I've always wanted to be a nurse but the things.. the way they were whether I stayed on at school and did my nursing and not get the things I wanted then
> outweighed, you know, the prospects of leaving school with nothing and getting the things I wanted my outweighed my will to do a nursing course. So then when I got married and I had my son obviously I couldn't afford to do it then. I gradually increased my knowledge by my maths and English and Health and Social Care. Then I got a job working at an old people's home as a care assistant and things like that because that's the kind of thing I wanted to go into. So I was a care assistant and I'd done home help…oh by the way the course what I'm doing here is a degree in mental health nursing. Because I did those courses it gave me the incentive to want to learn more and more."

> **Maggie**

> "I left school and went to a college for about six months and left it and had loads of different jobs until 2004-05. In 2005 I had a little boy (single parent) and I wanted to do something to improve my life and make him proud of me. I went to college and had an interview and this lady advised me to do an Access to higher education course. I'd never heard of it."

Bernadette

"I completed my education with very few qualifications and went to work. Seven years ago I was made redundant and around about that time my mum became ill and I cared for her. While I was caring for my mum I did small courses at college just to improve my education. I did courses such as counselling before I registered on an Access to higher education course. I struggled at first because during the introduction they did physics and chemistry and I wasn't very good at that. But soon I really loved the work we were doing as the course was flexible and I could do it and still care for my mum. There was a lot of support on the college course."

John

"I went to a comprehensive school in Manchester. I didn't enjoy school at all. I think it was the second year. When I was in the second year my father died so I more or less pleased myself whether I went to school or not because my mum needed a breadwinner in the house so in the third year I'd go to school a bit but I had a paper round but I also had a job working for the ice cream man. That fetched a few quid in so I could pay my mum and in fourth year I never went to school and I left school with no qualifications. I wanted to go for big money but I did listen to my mother and she told me to get a trade which is something my dad always wished he had done.

So I got a trade as a bricklayer and went to college and enjoyed college but I failed it the first time round but in my last year I passed everything. I've been a bricklayer for years. I've worked abroad and earned a good butty at it. I came back to England and was doing well at it and then I damaged my back and I couldn't do any lifting at all. I was off work six months and it was about six months before I could start walking again and then did taxi driving because there was no lifting. I just sat down all day. I did that for a few years and got fed up with that. I went lorry driving for a couple of years, got fed up with that. I handed my notice in. I finished on a Friday and on the following Tuesday my mother took ill. So I said to my sister don't you come off work I've just finished work so I'll look after her and I was surprised I really enjoyed it and I'd never done anything like that before. My sister worked as an auxiliary nurse in W hospital and she encouraged me to go into nursing. I made some enquiries and I found out it would take about four years as I'd have to go to college to get my GCSEs and university I didn't really fancy it and as I'm a single parent I had most of the year off because I knew I didn't want to go driving again or do anything too heavy. I finally decided and went to college. The only thing I was good at was maths I was excellent at maths but my English lets me down a lot. I'd never been on a computer. When they started teaching me these things I really enjoyed it. I took to it and it was one of these things. It was like a drug to me I just wanted to learn and learn more."

Angela

"I wanted a course that would further my education, I had been unable, due to personal circumstances to stay on at school to gain A levels and had always wanted to go on to university. The Access course was part time, and so fitted in with family life (I have 3 children) I was also in a position where it was financially viable for me to continue with my studies and having just moved into a new area it was the ideal opportunity to start

something new. I had, had my family and wanted to concentrate on a career, but wasn't too sure which direction I wanted to go in."

Stella

" No I just went straight into a job and I was in a job then till I started having my children and in 1998 I went back into education. I went to X College in Manchester. I went to do English. Well it was a way to get myself back into work because I didn't really….I had a couple of O levels but nothing that would get me a good job you know..I needed something to get me back into work. because my children were still too young I was wanting to get my education so that when my children were old enough then I could go out and go to work because I 'm a single parent and obviously there are child care problems but also because I was brought up, because my mum worked, I was brought up as in a single parent home. My mum she was never around so we were latchkey kids as they used to call them and so I always said I would never have my kids as latchkey kids so I waited till they were like.. the youngest was fourteen before I would go out. I did part-time jobs you know school dinners a dinner lady and cleaning. I did all those but it was qualification wise that's why I came back.

What it was, I just went in and I said I want to be a nurse a mental health nurse because it always interested me anyway and my sister qualified about six years ago and after chatting with my sister I though I could do that you know the way I am. I just went in and said I want to go into nursing. They just said we've got an Access course in health and science which will get you into university. I didn't have any A Levels or anything so I wouldn't have got in otherwise."

Mary

" I chose to undertake an Access course to allow me to further my drive to alter my life following the death of my Dad; this was after I had enrolled on a counselling skills training course (Level 1). Following this, I enrolled on a Level 2 counselling skills course which I successfully completed. This lasted for 1 year and ran concurrently with the first of my two years studying the Access course. I found the Access course to be a very stimulating experience and this allowed me to gain academic skills. It was what I expected and more, allowing me to express thoughts and ideas that made the learning experience pleasurable. Working in this area is something that was shaped for me personally by life events and experience, so I couldn't say that I had always wanted to be a practitioner. Certainly for the last 15/20 years this has been the case but due to family commitments I have not previously had the opportunity."

These cases are evocative of the types of things that stimulate the internal conversation and this occurs in a form with people in employment and in professional employment as well as the individuals I have cited here. We all reflect on the opportunities for promotion, for change in our lives and we all imagine aspects of our lives being different and we all engage in different projects that we imagine will alter our lives. The internal conversations that we have attempted to capture are reliant on memory and the ways in which these individuals began to alter their lives and their dispositions to learning.

One of the key findings of the project is that there is an enormous reservoir of energy that contemplates change in individual circumstances but the acts of engagement are once removed from the ways in which institutions provide information and support.

The Internal Conversation and Narratives of Change

A key distinction that emerged in the research project was the ways in which engagement with learning altered during the Access to higher education course for some individuals. The initial internal conversation was a feature of all those who decided to enrol on the course but as circumstances changed at the proximate level so engagement became much more difficult to sustain. This does not mean that the experience of Access courses did not affect these individuals. On the contrary the majority of those interviewed who had withdrawn from the course indicated a strong desire to return to the Access course at some stage. However, caring for children or parents or financial considerations or other aspects of personal circumstances were the key stumbling blocks to engagement. The majority of the data gathered in this section came from telephone interviews. Individuals who had succeeded and progressed to university were much more likely to return the survey and were much more likely to opt for a face to face interview. Those who withdrew from the Access course were more difficult to contact but were willing to answer questions about the reasons for withdrawing from the course given their initial investment of time and commitment.

Paula

" About half way through my Access course I got pregnant with twins and just couldn't continue but when the twins are old enough I'd like to return to study."

June

" I didn't complete my Access course as I got pregnant and my little boy is at school so I'm going back to study."

Famidha

"I started the Access course but I've still ten credits to do..I've sort of withdrawn but I'd like to go to university after I've completed."

Reiza

"I completed the Access course and wanted to go to university but my son was studying for his GCSE examinations and I did not think I could take the time away from him at that stage. I will go on a university course in the next year."

Kay
" I started the Access course but I didn't complete it as there were a lot of things going on in my life. It was a bad time, personally."

Elizabeth

" I didn't complete the Access course. It was a combination of personal and course reasons and I just couldn't get it together. I'm hoping to do a course in midwifery in September."

Nicola

" I enrolled on the Access course but I was working in two jobs to make ends meet and had two kids to look after. So I just couldn't cope but I hope to return to study in the future."

Emma

"I'd love to come back to study but with three children I'll have to wait."

Conclusion

We interviewed over sixty individuals who had enrolled on Access courses and who had withdrawn form study. The vast majority indicated that they would return to study as the reasons for withdrawing were related to personal circumstances and for the majority of women related to their role as carers. This initial contact had affected them in a positive way and many wanted to return to study on Access courses when the circumstances changed. My own view is that GMSA in conjunction with colleges could target these individuals through the provision of Taster or Return to study courses.

Access courses provide evidence of powerful narratives of change from the learners involved. These narratives include changes in personal circumstances that affect engagement with formal learning. Learning through the life course (as becoming) can be ' non linear or uneven in pace' (Hodkinson, 2007). People act strategically in relation to their emerging identity.(nurse, social worker, midwife, engineer, environmental scientist, radiologist, construction site manager and in relation to other aspects of their identity single parent, mother, wife, carer, husband, unemployed).

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