

Adults' Reflections on Gaining Entry to Higher Education

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Background

Adults returning to Higher Education (HE) remain a non-normative and non-traditional category of entrants to (HE). Whilst some recent evidence from market research conducted by a university in south London suggests that this is changing (Pollard, 2009), the reality is not reflected in terms of the promotion of HE courses, or the focus of support that these students may require in order to engage, and succeed, in HE. Working class students are those who have traditionally experienced transition difficulties through seeking to move into the middle class arena of higher education (Jackson and Marsden, 1962). However, in many major urban areas working class entrants may have become supplanted by other entrants, particularly with overseas origins. A widening participation agenda has sought to address the needs of working class learners. However, migrant students are similarly socially and/or educationally disadvantaged by a higher education system that may not be sufficiently well attuned to their needs. The importance this has in a European context is that urban conurbations in Europe, as with the UK, are experiencing an increasing migratory population (EC, 2009), many of whom will seek to improve their social opportunities and integration through accessing higher education. Jean-Michel Baer states that social inequalities can only be addressed where barriers to social inclusion are removed. However, this requires a holistic approach to social and educational policy development (Baer, 2009). Thus, identifying the constraints experienced by potential HE students through their reflections on their own experiences may enhance entry into, and success in HE. A greater understanding of these issues should provide opportunities to improve social inclusion of these adults through enabling them to secure their career goals in the future. Furthermore, these messages of success are transferred to their children who in turn will be less likely to experience social exclusion.

Research Questions

There are approximately 35,000 adults studying on Access to Higher Education courses throughout the UK (QAA, 2009), in preparation for entry to HE. Although the majority of these adults are white British, this is not the case in London where the majority are from other ethnic groups, many of whom have migrated to the UK. There is a similar migratory impact being experienced in other European cities (EC, 2009). The aim of this study was to establish and clarify the factors that facilitated and/or constrained adults' social inclusion through the choices and decision-making that they were able to make in seeking to re-engage with education and to progress to HE. Drawing on the work of researchers who have focused on choice and decision making in a social context (Giddens, 1991; Burke, 2007), this is an exploratory study of a cohort of adults seeking to enter HE in the UK, following a preliminary course of study (n=85).

Methods

Located within an action research methodology (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992), and the multi-disciplinary contributions this can offer both education and social research, this study sought to systematically collect data (Stringer et al., 2007). A detailed questionnaire was mailed to a cohort of adults who had recently completed a pre-university level course in 2009. This research instrument was designed to explore the social histories, and educational journeys of this cohort through a mixed methods approach of closed and open questions.

Frame

The quantitative data were analysed to provide comparative data with those at a national level. The qualitative data were transcribed verbatim and have been subjected to a thematic analysis. The qualitative data provide an additional richness to the quantitative data and identify those factors that participants identified acted as constraints, or facilitated the choices that they made and the meanings that these choices had for them. Additionally, participants were asked for their suggestions on what they considered providers should do in order to improve the learning experience.

Research findings

Initial findings indicate that as with national data, 74% were female, and 46% were parents. Only 23% were white British, whilst this compares closely to the urban demographics, it is at odds with the national situation of 74% white British on these types of courses. Only 41% of this cohort had been born in the UK. There were 29 birth countries identified and 37 different countries where compulsory education took place; one-quarter were educated in more than one country before the age of 16. 31% had previously attempted to study and had dropped out of their courses. Whilst 7% had no educational qualifications at all, a further 68% had only achieved Level 2. more than half were working part time and three-quarters had incomes of less than £10,000. These initial findings indicate that migration and the associated social issues that arise from this are potential constraining factors on adults accessing a traditionally focused higher education provision. The findings of this study, suggest that there is much targeted and focused support that can be provided to a migrating population such that social inclusion may be enhanced and the goals and aspirations that these adults have, can be achieved.

Drawing on the theoretical understanding located within action research it is anticipated that the findings may lead to social and/or educational change, at a local, national, and/or international level. It is the intention of the author to encourage strategic developments at a local level, in the first instance, based on the findings, and for the implementation of these to be subsequently evaluated.

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