

Теория и методика профессионального образования

THE ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION PROGRAMME IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

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This article provides an introduction to the Access to Higher Education programme in the United Kingdom, and selectively reviews the research literature about its effectiveness. The programme gives mainly mature students from non-traditional backgrounds the opportunity to enter higher education. The review first describes the origins and nature of the programme, then examines the raw data of the official statistics, before going on to consider both quantitative and qualitative research studies in turn. The more quantitative studies into the programme's effectiveness paint an inconclusive picture, with mixed evidence about achievement which is often not generalizable. The more qualitative studies which focus on learners' experiences generate useful insights but are not designed to judge the programme's overall effectiveness. The review concludes that while the programme has indeed benefited large numbers of students, further research is needed to assess whether any limitations in student achievement are attributable to the design of the programme itself or due to external factors. In a rapidly changing higher education landscape, the future of the programme is unclear.

Keywords: access to higher education, mature student, literature review, learner experience, student achievement.

Introduction: the context, origins and nature of the programme

The aim of this article is to provide an introduction to the Access to Higher Education programme in the United Kingdom and to selectively review current research into its effectiveness. The Access to Higher Education (Access to HE) Diploma is a qualification which allows 'non-traditional' students, mostly over 21, to enter higher education (HE). It is a 'third route' to higher education courses, alongside 'A' levels and vocational qualifications. Access programmes run in all four countries of the United Kingdom, and there are many similarities between them. However, the main focus of this article is on the Access to HE Diploma which runs in England and Wales and is regulated by the Quality Assurance Authority. Research from other parts of the UK is drawn on where considered relevant.

The terminology with which the English education system is usually described reflects a three-stage model: compulsory primary education from the age of 5, then compulsory secondary education from 11 to 18, and finally optional tertiary education after the age of 18.

Tertiary education may be either higher education or further education (FE). Higher educa-

tion institutions (HEIs) are typically universities, and offer first degree level qualifications and above, or their equivalent. Further education providers are usually Further Education Colleges (FECs) and offer a more vocational range of qualifications. It is FECs which are the main provider of Access to HE Diplomas. In practice the HE/FE divide is blurred; some HEIs run 'access' courses, while some FECs either deliver HE on behalf of an HEI or offer 'foundation' degrees (considered equivalent to the first two years of a three-year undergraduate degree) in partnership with an HEI. The phenomenon of 'HE in FE' is likely to grow as a result of the Coalition government's willingness to allow FECs to acquire independent degree-awarding powers. Within the HE sector itself there is a hidden divide, between the pre-1992 universities, which generally have more academic prestige and are more selective, and the post-1992 universities which are former polytechnics, are less selective and are less advantageous to graduates entering the labour market.

These different stages are associated with progressively higher levels of qualification, as classified by the Qualifications and Credit Framework, which applies in England, Northern

Ireland and Wales. Thus at 16 students commonly take GCSEs, which at higher grades count as a level 2 qualification. At 18 students typically take A levels, which are a level 3 qualification. Level 3 qualifications are the normal prerequisite for study at HE level, though exceptions are sometimes made and the Open University has an open enrolment policy. The Access to HE Diploma is a level 3 qualification. University qualifications range from levels 4 to 8, with a foundation degree classed as level 4 and a bachelor's degree (the 'standard' undergraduate degree) classed as level 5.

The Access to HE Diploma is designed to allow 'adults' (i.e. anyone who has left school) to enter HE, even if they did not manage to achieve the necessary qualifications in the past. In 2012–2013 13 % of Access to HE students were aged 19 or under [1], but most students are 'mature'. The term 'mature student' has changed in meaning over the years, but it is now common to classify students of 21 or older as 'mature' [2]. Access to HE is also seen as a qualification aimed at 'non-traditional' students. This term is sometimes used to refer to students who are the first in their family to go to university, and sometimes to refer to students from social groups which are, or are perceived to be, disadvantaged, such as the disabled and ethnic minorities.

The adult education movement dates back to the nineteenth century and has been championed by the left as part of the project of emancipating the working class. In parallel, and sometimes in tandem, adult education has been promoted by middle-class reformers as a means of incorporating potentially unruly and turning them into responsible citizens. These two strands, the emancipatory and the reformist, are still present in debates about adult education today. The origins of the Access to HE Diploma lie in a letter of invitation sent by the Department for Education and Science to FECs in 1978 [3]. The Labour government wanted to encourage the training of teachers from ethnic minority backgrounds by promoting the development of access courses to allow mature students to enter teacher training. However, the Labour Party itself noted that access to higher education for students of low socio-economic status actually declined in the late 70s [4]. It was under the Conservative governments of Mrs. Thatcher and John Major that Access to HE really took off. In 1987 a government white paper *Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge* identified the need to extend univer-

sity participation to mature students. This initiative reflected both economic circumstances and demographic pressures. In the eighties Britain deindustrialised and experienced high unemployment. By 1987 it was becoming widely accepted that Britain had to develop new industries and services requiring a well-educated workforce, and that adults would have to be prepared to retrain during the course of their working lives. The participation rate of young people in higher education was noted to be much lower in Britain than in other competing countries – some 15 % compared to 20 % in West Germany, 30 % in the USA and 37 % in Japan [4]. Moreover, the numbers of young people likely to go to university was set to fall now the post-war 'baby boomers' had all passed through the educational system. Universities were now more receptive to the possibility of recruiting adult students than they had been in the past [3]. The Conservative Education Secretary, Kenneth Baker, wanted to aim for a 30 % participation rate, but this posed problems for a government committed to containing government spending. His solution was to change the funding model, so that in future students, who benefited from higher earnings as graduates, would pay a substantial part of the cost of their education through a system of student loans [4].

Since 1990 enormous changes have taken place in the funding of higher education. In 1990 student loans were brought in to replace maintenance grants. The Labour government of 1997–2010 adopted and extended the funding model introduced by the Conservatives as a bipartisan consensus emerged around the idea of education as an investment in 'human capital'. In 1998 tuition fees were brought in, also to be covered by loans. In 2004 and again in 2012 the maximum level of tuition fees was raised, reaching its current limit of £9,000 per annum. These changes attracted vocal opposition, some from within Labour ranks, as it was feared that poorer students would be deterred from going to university by the prospect of a heavy burden of debt. The Labour government was keen to emphasise its belief in equality of opportunity. By this it meant an equalisation of the life chances of the children of different socioeconomic groups, so that, for example, the child of a poor family would at birth be statistically as likely as the child of a wealthy family to go to an elite university. By the mid-noughties there was concern within the Labour Party that the government's initial efforts to widen participation in higher education to include previously

underrepresented groups had failed. When tuition fees were first raised, following the 2003 white paper and 2004 Higher Education Act, the government demanded that in return universities should intensify their efforts to recruit from underrepresented social groups. An independent regulator was introduced to have oversight of the fairness of university admissions, and universities had to sign Access Agreements spelling out their plans to widen participation as a condition of being allowed to charge higher fees. Even more conditions, affecting how the extra money may be spent, have been placed on universities in return for allowing them to charge higher fees since 2012. The 2012 tuition fee increase has been associated with a drop in the numbers of mature and part-time university enrolments [2].

From 1989 Access to HE Diploma courses run by FECs were brought under the regulatory umbrella of the Council for National Academic Awards; this regulation is now carried about by the Quality Assurance Agency. The significance of this step is that access courses are no longer ad hoc, local developments. They now provide a portable, standardised qualification which, in theory at least, is recognised by all universities, allowing students greater choice when making their applications. The grading system for Access to HEs standardised to allow three passing grades for each unit (pass, merit and distinction) and the content specification was revised in 2013, with two important results. Under the new specification a student must take units worth 60 credits, but only 45, which must relate to 'academic' content, will be graded; the other 15, usually involving study skills, will now be ungraded. In addition, since 2013 any level 2 (GCSE equivalent) element will no longer be approved by the QAA, forcing students with weak Mathematics or English to take a GCSE exam rather than gain equivalent credit on the Access to HE course. Both these changes reflect reluctance on the part of universities and employers to accept Access to HE qualifications at their face value [5–7]. Study skills will still be necessary to do well in the 'academic' units [8], but it will be interesting to see whether the downgrading of study skills has any negative effects, such as demotivating students. In the past the development of study skills has been seen as an important aspect of preparing FE students for university [9]. Although this change was initiated by university stakeholders in Access to HE, ironically enough support for study skills at university has been

found to be beneficial to mature students, who are sometimes unaware such support is available [10]. The removal of the recruitment cap on students achieving grades of ABB or better at A level has also raised the question of the exact value of the Access to HE Diploma to universities. The guidance given by the Higher Education Funding Council for England suggests that the equivalent grades for Access are 30 credits at distinction and 15 at merit. The logic of this unclear (Access students have to achieve two-thirds of their qualification at the highest attainable grade, unlike A level students) and Access students are further disadvantaged by the fact that A level students can take more than three A levels, whereas Access students are limited to a maximum of 45 graded credits. This issue will soon no longer matter when the student cap is lifted completely, irrespective of grade.

A further area in which Access students may be disadvantaged in comparison with A level students is the University and College Admission Service (UCAS) application process. The UCAS application is completed in the autumn of the second year for A level students, but during the first term of study for students on the one-year Access course. This means that tutors wait to observe student performance before completing references, and this delay may cause stress to students [11]. Access students have had little time to develop self-confidence as a learner or to evidence achievement at the time that they complete the form. Furthermore, Access students are on average of lower socioeconomic status than younger applicants, and Steven Jones has argued persuasively that better off, especially privately educated students, are better able to impress admissions officers through the statement, calling into question the fairness of the way it is administered and used at present [12]. These are matters of some concern given the substantial difference between the acceptance rates for younger applicants and mature applicants. Between 2005 and 2010 the acceptance rate for younger UCAS applicants varied between 75 % and 82 %, whereas for mature applicants the rate varied between 58 % and 68 %; the gap between them ranged from 13 to 17 percentage points [10]. However, only a minority (roughly a quarter) of mature entrants to full-time first degrees apply with an Access to HE Diploma. To judge the effectiveness of the programme, the point of departure must be the raw data collected by the agencies concerned.

**The effectiveness of Access to HE:
what the raw data shows**

Statistical information about the Access to HE Diploma and its effectiveness in the UK is fragmented. First of all the historic differences between England and Scotland, and the impact of devolution, mean that some datasets cover all four countries of the United Kingdom, some England and Wales together, and others England, Wales, Northern Ireland or Scotland individually. Secondly the hollowing out of the British state and the transfer of the work of government to non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs), mean that the Diploma exists within a complex ecosystem of funding bodies, regulatory agencies and institutional providers with differing needs and sectoral outlooks. Thirdly individual bodies have changed their data collection methods over time. The result is that the various datasets are not always compatible, and some of the time series need to be viewed with caution. Nevertheless, it is possible to paint a broad-brush picture of the Access to HE programme.

The first key feature to note is the growth of the programme since the 1980s. In 1989 there were some 6,000 Access students [13]. By 1999–2000, there were more than 37,700 Access students registered in England and Wales on QAA-approved courses [14]. By 2004–2005 this figure had risen to a peak of 41,600 [15]. Numbers fell to 35,675 in 2007–2008, before rebounding to a peak of 46,095 in 2009–2010 [16, 17]. The figure for 2012–2013 is 43,155 registered students [18]. More than a third of a million students had passed the Access to HE Diploma by the time it reached its 20th anniversary as a national qualification in 2009 [19]. Although the programme has reached a large number of students, its growth appears to have reached a plateau.

Another key feature of the programme which the demographic statistics reveal is the heavy preponderance of women, which was already in evidence by 1998–1999 when the Access student population was 70 % female [20]. The tendency has remained broadly stable, and in 2012–2013 the proportion of females was 73 % [18]. The Access programme has developed during a period in which women have transformed their position in higher education, from one of numeric minority to one of numeric dominance [21]. Since women were historically a disadvantaged group in higher education, the Access programme has contributed to a success story, though only as a small part of a much broader social trend. Conversely the

imbalance might prompt the question of why comparatively fewer men choose to join Access courses. The conventional explanation is that the most popular Access courses provide an introduction to ‘caring’ careers which have traditionally been dominated by women, such as nursing, midwifery and social work. However, this explanation risks essentialising men and women, and overlooks the possibility that the course mix is demand-led, and is the result, not the cause, of the gender imbalance. The apparent reluctance of men to enrol on Access courses is explored further in the section on learning experiences below.

Only 13 % of Access to HE students studied part-time in 2012–2013. This figure does not reflect the true number of students who combine their studies with paid work. In order to complete the course within one year, students have to register to study ‘full-time’, even though they may not be required to attend college every day. A high proportion of Access to HE students (36 % in 2012–2013) come from deprived areas, and minority ethnic groups are well-represented (32 % in 2012–2013). Both these features have remained broadly stable since regular collection of statistics began in the late 90s. Although Access to HE is thought of as a qualification for ‘mature’ students, not all of its students are technically mature (21+) with 13 % aged 19 or less in 2012–2013. A further 38 % were aged 20–24, so that more than half were under 25. This reflects a trend for the average age of Access to HE students to fall [1, 18]. Nevertheless, Access to HE students in higher education applying through the UCAS admissions system are indeed older on average than their student colleagues [22]. In 2012–2013, 12 % of learners had a disability (5 %), learning difficulty (5 %) or both (2 %). The percentage of learners with a disability has increased since 1998–1999 when it was 2.2 % but it is not clear why. In 1998–1999 the percentage with learning difficulties was not reported [20]. Of successful UCAS applicants in 2012–2013, Access to HE applicants were more likely to have a disability or learning difficulty (15 %) than other applicants (9 %).

Of registered learners, 69 % completed the course within a year, and a further 7 % expected to continue. Of those completing, 92 % were awarded a diploma [1]. Access to HE applicants to universities through UCAS had a 68 % success rate, as opposed to a 78 % success rate for other applicants. However, black candidates were more

likely to succeed via the Access route than by another route [22]. The profile of accepted applicants from Access to HE differs sharply from that of other successful applicants to higher education institutions (HEIs) in that they are much more likely to come from areas of previous low participation in HE, as defined by an analysis known as POLAR. Prior to the introduction of POLAR it was difficult to test whether successful Access to HE applicants were more likely to come from working-class families than other successful applicants, because so many did not provide the relevant information. Although POLAR provides only a proxy test, it does provide some evidence of the social inclusivity of Access to HE [18, 20].

It is now commonplace to talk about considering students from a 'life cycle' perspective – what has been dubbed 'getting in, getting through, and getting on' [23]. It is of great interest to know how Access to HE students fare if and when they get into higher education. Access to HE students were on average less likely to get a first class or upper- second class degree than other students in 2012–2013, and this has been a consistent pattern since 2000–2001 when such figures were first collated [22]. Mature Access to HE students showed a lower non-continuation rate than those with other qualifications, with 9.9 % not continuing into their second year in 2011–2012. However, for young Access to HE students (less than 9 % of the Access to HE students) the non-continuation rate was substantially worse than for most other qualifications [22]. The six-month employment rate (whether working or studying after six months) of mature full-time first degree leavers with Access to HE varied between 84.9 % and 91.0 % over a seven-year period from 2005–2006 to 2011–2012. It was always slightly lower than the employment rate for those with A levels, Baccalaureate or Highers, but the figure is hard to interpret as it does not take into account the degree class awarded. [22] It should also be noted that Access to HE students are concentrated in the post-92 universities, and these attract a lower graduate earnings premium in the labour market [24–26].

When UCAS published Access to HE statistics in 2001 it proclaimed that 'The initial aim of the Access movement – to make higher education accessible to those who, through traditional means, were not gaining entry, has succeeded.' The report cited the success of Access to HE in getting mature students and women, including black women, into higher education [27]. There

is something to be said for this common-sense view. However, there are no clear goals for what Access to HE should achieve. It did contribute towards Labour's effort to achieve 50 % participation in HE by the 21–30 age group by 2010, but there are no specific targets and it is not obvious what the reference group should be [28]. Equally, while the statistics on student achievement and progression go some way to alleviating the worst fears of critics of widening participation, there appears to be scope for improvement. Lastly, the value of the Access programme as an educational intervention needs to be assessed methodically against alternative courses of action [29].

The effectiveness of Access to HE: what the research evidence shows

The question of the effectiveness of Access to HE courses cannot be decided from the raw data alone. For example, the lower achievement of Access students in terms of final degree class may reflect a range of factors such as prior attainment or pressure of work. Moreover, this achievement may overall be creditable in terms of educational 'value added' for each student. More rigorous methods are required to resolve these questions. The studies in this section have mostly attempted to be systematic and quantitative, though they have limitations.

One early study by Wray compared direct entry mature students with Access students. Wray was a direct entry student himself and questioned the need to do an Access course at all. He found that Access students did gain an initial advantage compared with direct entry students, but that it disappeared by the time of graduation. His results were not generalizable [30].

Day and Highton carried out a detailed micro-level study of the quality of feedback given on a course. Their work suggested practical ideas but was not generalizable [31].

A study by Palfreyman-Kay of the needs of disabled Access students argued for greater disability awareness, including awareness of learning difficulties such as dyslexia. He called for disabled ex-students to be involved in marketing [32].

Marr studied the 'Openings' modules of the Open University which enable non-traditional students to acquire study skills. She noted the limitations of treating study skills as part of a 'deficit' model, and urged the need to integrate them with subject teaching [33]. By contrast, Burke sounded a radical note in questioning the whole idea of the study skills approach. She argued that academic

writing is an exclusionary practice and a regulatory discourse. Individuals are excluded from it by a lack of cultural capital and encouraged to conform to its rules. The rules of academic writing embody judgements which may be questioned, such as whether it is permissible to write in a personal voice or not [34].

Dimitriadou carried out a study of 1st year ex-Access to HE students to find out whether their course had benefited them in HE. In Access to HE the emphasis is placed on the learning process and on skills. Universities also provided study skills support but it did not appear to be crucial to retention – instead dropping out related to cultural issues, level of contact with tutors and socioeconomic status. Time management problems and a lack of dialogue with tutors led students to seek support. Access students believed that the course did make them more autonomous [35]. Field et al also found that supportive tutors make a key difference, this time in a study of a university-run access programme in Scotland [36]. Jephcote and Salisbury found that FE tutors were committed to their students and went beyond the programme specification. Tutors saw FE as an important ‘second chance’, and therefore were committed to supportive relationships with students. There was constant pressure to implement change, from above and externally, but they worked around this pressure [37].

Richardson carried out a study of learning approaches and academic performance, by administering a questionnaire and then subjecting the results to factor analysis to look for underlying patterns. He found evidence of a deep learning style in mature students. There was no clear connection between learning style and achievement. Mature students perform at least as well at graduation and in persistence as younger students [38].

Richardson, based on a review of other studies, advanced the tentative hypothesis that mature students are more likely than other students to take a ‘deep’ approach to learning – an engaged approach concerned with the meaning of what they learn, rather than merely being content to reproduce it. He also noted the role of life experience as a resource and as a motivating factor in study. He notes the possibility of sampling bias in the studies examined [39].

Hayes, King and Richardson carried out a study of student learning approaches using a questionnaire. They then carried out factor analysis. They identified ‘deep’, ‘surface’ and

‘mature’ learning approaches among Access students, but found that this pattern was different from that of other undergraduates. They speculated that this mismatch might prove a source of difficulty to Access students. However, the study is not representative and is not generalizable [40]. Moreover Haggis has criticised this type of approach as inadequate and mechanical [41].

Smith in a 2008 literature review noted that a 2006 HEFCE study found that 39 % of Access to HE students went on to undergraduate study. Two-thirds graduated within five years. 78 % found graduate jobs within six months. One in four first time mature students beginning a full-time course had the Access to HE qualification [42]. Callender and Jackson found that Access to HE students are highly likely to apply to HE [43].

A study by Hinsliff-Smith et al was inspired by concern about the attrition rate of nursing students. The study showed that Access to HE students had developed coping strategies relating to childcare and to balancing commitments while on the Access course. Information advice and guidance (IAG) and university to college links also helped. The representativeness of study is questionable [44].

Hartley and Norton reviewed early research on mature students, including some Access to HE performance. They observed that generally mature students performed at least as well as younger students. Mature students also tended to be better at ‘deep’ learning and time management. However, overall mature students had a higher drop-out rate [45].

A review by Gorard et al noted that Access students are at an advantage compared to other mature students who have difficulties, as they have been already been introduced to ‘the rules of the game’ i.e. how to be an independent learner. The lack of supervision and guidance at university are a shock to some non-traditional students. Evidence from Scotland suggested that Access failed to reach as many BME students as intended. Poor progression and achievement were found in one study, though students were happy. A study at Liverpool Hope showed similar success rates across all categories of student, suggesting Access to HE students perform at least as well as others [28].

Osborne compared the performance of Access to HE students to that of other students at Stirling University. Access to HE students did slightly worse at obtaining passing grades in units (90 % v 94.3 %) but the picture was com-

plicated by the different origins of Access to HE. UK (not Scottish) and Stirling University-controlled Access to HE students did better than average. Access to HE students did worse than average in science and maths subjects, confirming an earlier report. This study did not control for confounding factors and cannot be generalised [46].

Osborne more recently considered that the 'articulation' from FE to HE by the vocational route has been disappointing. There has not been an expansion of Access to HE numbers so they are a less important as proportion of the expanded sector in Scotland. Little progress has been made in creating a flexible HE sector [47].

In general, both Gorard et al and Smith have noted that there is a lack of scientifically rigorous testing of the effectiveness of interventions such as Access to HE for mature students [28, 42]. Such evidence as has been generated appears to be sufficient to dispel fears that Access students cannot succeed in HE, but achievement and access to elite universities are both areas where more progress could be made.

The learning experience of Access to HE students

While much of the research into the effectiveness of the Access to HE programme has been substantially quantitative, another broad swathe of research has adopted a largely qualitative approach. The theoretical bases of these studies are diverse, but almost all of them focus on the learner and their learning experience as they make the considerable transition from being someone outside the formal education system to being a new university entrant.

One influential example of this approach was a study by O'Donnell and Tobbell which took Wenger's idea of 'communities of practice' as its point of departure [48]. 'Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.' Such communities have a shared domain of interest, its members discuss and share information, and they are practitioners [49, 50]. The concept has been applied in the field of education and here it is used by the authors to explore how far mature students are able to become members of a student 'community'. They interviewed mature students on a university-run access course (not an Access to HE Diploma course). They identified a 'trajectory' in which the learner's sense of identity shifted from being an outsider to being a member

of the community. However, they noted obstacles to this transition in institutional physical and administrative practices, such as running access classes away from the main campus [48].

Reay focuses on the sociological and psychological aspects of the transition to HE. Working-class mature students have to make a double transition – from one stage of education to another, and from one class to another. This is qualitatively different from the experience of their younger middle-class counterparts in HE. Following Beck, she argues that there are risks in changing identity. Changes in the labour market mean that there is a race for educational credentials. However, 'Shame and the fear of shame haunts working-class relationships to education'. This influences the choice of which university to apply to, and persuades some that 'elite' universities are not for them. There is a tension between the feeling of being 'not right' for an older university and the feeling of not being proud of going to a newer one. Middle-class students are more focused on issues of prestige in selecting a university. Reay notes that at one time 'access' was a movement for challenging the system from below, but now while class inequalities remain, there is a conflict for working-class students between the demands of 'authenticity' (being true to their roots) and equal access to elite universities [51]. Some working-class students have to choose between poverty and failure (work vs. study time). Psychological barriers to choosing some universities exist, connected to ideas of 'fitting in', connected to conceptions of class and race [21]. Reay notes the widespread belief that educational credentials are essential to get on in life, or 'mass credentialism'. She notes that 'authenticity' is a classed concept – being true to your roots for the working class, self-realisation for the middle class [13, 52]. Reay has also adapted Bourdieu's idea of the 'habitus', a disposition towards certain values and behaviours, to talk about an institutional 'habitus'. She uses this to argue that some Access students depend on their FEC for advice regarding university admissions, and the standard advice of the FEC is to go to a post-92 university, because of prior success in gaining admissions. Thus the 'habitus' of the FEC channels Access students in a certain direction and dissuades them from applying to elite universities [53]. By contrast Reay et al note the critical role of one tutor who persuaded an Access student to try successfully for a university she would not otherwise have considered [54].

James found that students were actively both changing their identities and strengthening their position in the labour market. Good relationships with Access tutors were crucial in helping them through this transition [55]. James and Busher et al found that learners did change their identities and become more confident and independent. However, some had negative experiences in applying to university concerning the way in which the Access to HE Diploma, and their life experiences were regarded by admissions staff [56]. (This undervaluing of working-class life experience reinforces the possibility that the personal statement may be an obstacle to equality of opportunity.) They used a 'communities of practice' approach to examine learners' shifting identities. They noted informal 'emergent communities' of students, as well as tutor-led groups. Tutors had power over the students, but were seen to be supportive. Financial problems were a common obstacle to successfully making the transition [57]. James, Busher et al also examined the 'discourses' that students used about themselves and their education. Discursive approaches examine how our understanding of social reality is constructed through language [58]. A 'discourse' is a particular way of talking about the world or some aspect of the world, and can be located in a variety of texts from everyday speech to high art [59, 60]. Mature students' discourses about themselves as learners and their trajectories showed them to join AHE as 'disaffected learners' as a result of exam-focused curricula and a lack of respect from teachers. Some also joined as 'disaffected workers' unhappy working in jobs without prospects or satisfaction. The authors also relate Bourdieu's notion of social capital to the students' testimony that supportive teachers and feeling part of a group helped them [61, 62]. James, Busher and Suttill found that the popularity of Access to HE reflected growing economic uncertainty. Many AHE students made a transition from a negative to positive learner identity. The role of tutors was crucial, both in being supportive and in relating learning to the life course of the students [63]. They also found that students progressed from lacking self-confidence as a result of poor prior achievement to having confidence as independent learners having experienced learning success [64].

Brine and Waller note the role of Access to HE in widening participation to lower socio-economic status groups. They question whether a change in learner identity on Access to HE also

involves a change in class identity and note the complex relationship between gender and class. Access to HE was not the first adult learning experience for some of the subjects of the study. Like Beck, they talk about risk as a key concept. There are four main types of risk: of academic failure, of economic hardship, of strained personal relationships and of conflict surrounding class identity. Women have bought into the government's discourse of aspiration but this discourse presents a positive outcome as if it were certain. None of the women could enter an old university. They experienced risk to personal relationships, sometimes linked to class identity [65, 70]. Waller also examined two accounts by Access to HE students, one by a woman who was the first female in her family to go to university. Waller notes that processes of individualisation (as described by Beck) mean that life changes such as bereavement can be experienced as personal failures rather than as societal problems [66].

Focusing on the experience of black students in Access to HE, Richards found that some students experienced discrimination in that during enrolment they were required to do tests that other new students did not have to do. She highlights the importance of mentoring students [67].

Warming ton found that students develop an idea of personal development as a kind of mental insurance against the potential failure of the course to deliver employment. Students wanted to get away from the peripheral labour market and welfare dependency, and qualifications a way out, but they needed to insure their identities against the risk of failure. Their experiences of the labour market transformed their previous disaffection with education, and led to a desire for a career rather than a job. This should be understood as a form of agency not conformism to the system. Students developed a sense of self-worth as insurance against the possibility that educational success might not deliver the job they hoped for: the idea that "They can't take that away from me." Students cultivated the illusion of being able to survive the vagaries of the job market [68].

Webb found that gender and social class were important influences upon risk taking. For example, the experience of divorce could transform the outlook of a working-class woman. Webb also noted the importance of social capital in providing support to students [20].

Burke argues that identity is constructed from already available discourses. She notes that Access to HE is female-dominated and in her research found that some working-class men see a 'student' learner identity as incompatible with the values of working-class manhood which involve earning money and spending it. Notions of masculinity and family influences affected their decisions. However, she argues that working-class men do not have a 'deficit' which needs to be corrected [69]. Burke has noted themes of respectability, bullying and laziness in men's accounts of themselves, and a complex relationship between their ideas of masculinity and their desire to change [70]. She has examined how men with negative prior experiences of learning relate this to their masculinity and reinvent themselves as students, for example by talking about dealing with their self-confessed 'laziness' [71]. With Woodin, Burke found that the possibility of failure in education was a threat to the sense of self for working-class men. Their awareness that Access to HE was seen as not seen as the 'gold standard' like A levels, reinforced feeling of being outsiders. Race, class, money, and family all influenced the choices they made [72]. With migrant students she also took a discursive approach and looked at how they resist the dominant discourse of them as problem students and assert a positive identity [73]. In her research with working-class women, Burke found that women's participation in HE goes much deeper than mere instrumentality. Education is not just a means to an end such as a better job: it is a search for space for the self. Burke argues that a deficit model of working-class culture pathologises the working class. She also argues that the neoliberal model of free individual choice ignores the actual tensions which arise from women's participation in the labour market [74]. Burke has also used discourse analysis on interviews with practitioners in FECs who are responsible for widening participation. She noted the role of social class on individual outlooks, which did not necessarily reflect the government's neoliberal rhetoric [71].

Jones' research on Access to HE social workers portrays the Access programme as a success story. She noted changes in learners' self-perception and also their resilience. She noted that a difficult balancing act with family and friends was required. She highlighted the importance of group solidarity [75].

In contrast to some of the approaches discussed above, Field and Morgan-Klein have tried

to restore the importance of class as a category of analysis, in contrast to the tendency to talk in terms of subjective identities. They acknowledge that gender and 'race' are also relevant. They highlight the connections between class and subjective identity. For example, low income may mean a decision to live at home and study locally, but this means less participation in student life, less socialising and greater marginality [76].

Chapman has found that some mature students suffered from 'imposter' syndrome. In other words, they felt they did not belong at university. Chapman uses a 'communities of practice' approach and argues that mature students came to see themselves as 'novice academics' rather than as students, because they engaged with the learning side of university more than the social side [77].

The mainly qualitative research described above is not designed to prove the effectiveness of any particular intervention. Rather it is designed to sensitise practitioners in FE and HE, to get them to ask themselves the right questions and design interventions accordingly. A good example of this approach is the University of Surrey study by Newson et al, which combines a review of research findings with practical recommendations for improving the way the university deals with mature students [78].

Concluding remarks

There is a wealth of evidence that the Access to HE programme has been a life-transforming experience for many of its students, and a substantial number of people have benefited from it. Most of the evidence suggests that tutors are committed to their students, Access students do develop as independent learners, and if they get to university, the overwhelming majority do obtain degrees. However, there are areas of concern. Taking the figures for 2012–2013, if 24 % of Access students do not complete, and if 68 % of applicants through UCAS are successful, then only just over half of Access students will become undergraduates, without allowing for completions not awarded a diploma, and those who choose not to apply. Arguably the lower level of degree classification of Access students is a concern, and certainly the concentration of Access students in post-92 universities could be seen as a form of what Forsyth and Furlong have dubbed 'hidden disadvantage' – wider participation, but still not on equal terms [79]. Then again, only further research can uncover to what extent

these results are attributable to any failings on the part of the Access programme (such as inadequate preparation for HE), or stem from other causes such as the practices of HEIs themselves. Certainly McGivney's research into student 'persistence' suggests that many of the reasons why students fail to complete degrees are outside the scope of the Access programme [80, 81], and a similar mixture of family, work, and financial pressures is found in the research of McVitty and Morris [10].

Probably the greatest threat to the programme is the constantly shifting nature of the British HE/FE landscape. The result of the governmental pressure on universities to 'widen participation' in return for being allowed to charge higher tuition fees, is that universities are increasingly devising their own programmes of outreach and

access. This may mean that universities give preference to their own bespoke access programmes in admissions. This would be a step backwards from the vision of Access to HE as a nationally portable qualification of standardised quality, and might actually restrict student choice. A second trend is the development of 'HE in FE', in which FECs offer undergraduate qualifications, usually at level 4, and usually in partnership with at least one HEI. Government policy is to encourage FECs to become new entrants in the HE field, and some FECs may see their Access students as a pool of recruits who can progress internally to degree level [82]. Once again this will give rise to the danger of 'hidden disadvantage'; but for some students, wider participation in HE on unequal terms will still be preferable to not participating at all.

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ББК Ч 426-24**ПРОГРАММА ПОДГОТОВКИ К ПОСТУПЛЕНИЮ В УНИВЕРСИТЕТ
ВЕЛИКОБРИТАНИИ ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION****Т. Брайан***Южно-Уральский государственный университет, Челябинск*

Представлено описание программы подготовки к поступлению в университет Access to Higher Education. Программа рассчитана в основном на студентов зрелого возраста из неблагополучных семей. Описаны характер программы, ее истоки, статистические данные, количественные и качественные научные исследования, посвященные изучению ее эффективности. Большое число количественных исследований констатируют ее невысокую эффективность. Исследования, посвященные изучению качества результатов программы, не дают представления об общей эффективности программы. К основному выводу можно отнести тот факт, что программа является востребованной большим количеством студентов, но необходимы дальнейшие исследования, чтобы выявить факторы, влияющие на успеваемость обучающихся. Эти факторы могут быть как внутренними, связанными с реализацией программы и ее структурой, так и внешними. В условиях быстро меняющегося высшего образования, будущее программы неопределенно.

Ключевые слова: доступ к высшему образованию, зрелый студент, обзор литературы, опыт учащегося, достижения студента.

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