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The Open
University

Real lives, imagined futures:
Stories of participation and progression through the
Open University professional qualification in Youth Work

Roger Harrison, Stephen Harrison
and Tyrrell Golding, FHEA

Widening participation

Changing perceptions, raising aspirations



BA (Hons) Youth Work



Designed to provide flexible routes to youth work qualifications

Students can achieve 'step-off' qualifications at CertHE and FdA

Professionally validated in England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland with students located across 5 nations

Students able to combine work and study with the rest of their lives

Work-based learning central to the programme – pedagogy draws on context of workplace as a resource for learning

47% of students begin study without 'A' levels

Students are working in a wide range of contexts and many have extensive experience of practice

Confronting Change



A Changing Field:

‘We’re kind of like old Connexions advisers but working with a much more targeted group of sixteen to nineteen year olds each... And the team that I’m in is made up of people like myself. So youth workers, participation workers, and people that were careers advisers before. So it’s a real mish-mash of skills and abilities in the team.’

Our Research



Funded by OU Centre for Inclusion and Curriculum

Keen to elicit students' experiences and to better understand the factors that support their retention and completion of qualifications, as well as barriers that they may have encountered

Broadly biographical approach – exploring the connections between the personal, occupational and social factors which shape the hopes, fears and performance of our students

Examined students' accounts of their developing identity as youth workers, and the discourses that they draw on to make sense of their professional role and their practice at a time of change

Methodology



Small scale qualitative investigation with focus on students from low socio-economic backgrounds

Semi-structured interviews with 15 students – mostly face to face but some via telephone interviews – exploring their past experiences; current and recent experiences of study and work; future aspirations

Small team of 6 researchers who are all involved in the writing and teaching of the course

Provided rich set of data from which key themes have emerged

Samantha's Story: History of participation in education



Samantha left school at sixteen having achieved D grades in her GCSE's:

'I didn't really try at school. It was just school, it wasn't interesting to me, I didn't really have any idea what I wanted to do'.

'I was pregnant when I left school as well. [...] it was just 'Well I'll just be a mum' you know. No thought about, [...] 'Well how am I going to support this child?' or anything. It was 'No, I'm just going to be a mum' [laughing] You don't really at sixteen, generally you don't really think past that'.

Samantha's Story: Learning trajectories and vocational identity



Samantha's decision to return to education and re-sit her GCSE's and pursue other qualifications were tied up with an array of critical incidents in her life:

'Well I always wanted to work with children and I'd been to the college before. I started doing an NVQ, did an NVQ2 in childcare. An then I did a level two counselling course as well [...] and then I started working in a nursery'.

'I had my daughter and actually realised that I don't actually like other people's small children [laughing] [...]I just didn't have the patience that I had with my own daughter.

Samantha's Story: Resilience and reflexivity



Reflecting back on her journey Samantha illustrates how her personal philosophy has supported her in her decision making regarding the development of her career and participation in education:

‘I’ve always thought I can do anything and that’s what I tell everybody I meet, that they can do anything they want, you know. So it wasn’t really a conscious decision. ‘Oh I could do that, I could go to university’, it was just, ‘actually that’s the course that I need to do, to be what I want to be’ And it happened to be university rather than college so that’s just what it was. And I had to do the Access course to get in’.

Samantha’s story is far from unique in terms of those who participated in our research.

Respondents' Past Educational Experiences – voices from students



‘Yeah the school kind of tailed off. I’d left with some qualifications **but I never ever collected the certificates to prove anything.**’ (Lee)

‘At the time of going through GCSEs **I was actually evicted from home** so that made it really difficult. I didn’t leave school with great grades as they were because of the lifestyle I was going through at the time and I wouldn’t exactly call it a trauma but some people might see it as being a trauma in my life.’ (Holly)

‘I think that was probably the whole ethos in the family that, you know, perhaps it was derived from **working class people don’t do degrees.** Bearing in mind I’m forty seven.’ (Beth)

‘Well to be quite honest when I was young, you know, they used to call you thick and things like that, you know. And it sort of used to knock you for six and then you wouldn’t open your mouth. [...] I mean when we left school, that’s it, you had to get a job. Well **boys from my background it was either factory or the forces**’. (Bob)

Motivations for study – voices of students

‘So **my passion** had already been around community work and empowerment and participation but I kind of slipped into being a youth participation officer and I knew I needed to get qualified.’ (Jolene)

‘I started volunteering and no aspirations to study, no anything, and that came afterwards. I didn’t intend to get into this because I wanted a qualification [...] just like **it rolled kind of naturally I suppose**. Before I knew it I was going for a job one night a week, it got put to two nights and then it just sort of naturally clicked. And I think having people around you as well that said “Well you should do this, you know, you can do this, you really enjoy it so why not?” ‘ (Sharon)

‘I do have to go away once a month for a tutorial but apart from that I can do everything at home so I’ve got my family life, my student life as well as bettering myself and in the long run my son. So I can obviously – I’m on benefits at the moment – **I can get off benefits and, you know, have a stable job and a stable life for both me and my son.**’ (Amy)

The challenges – voices of students

‘My lifestyle is work, home, church work, home, church ... but actually I don’t study at home because of my kids ... The at nights when I’m supposed to study I’m tired. I study more in school. So it makes me come to school early, so **from 7.00am to 8.00am I face my studies.**’ (Joe)

‘To begin with I found it really, really difficult, the academic side, like the assignments ... **very anxious, very daunting.** Plus I found it difficult to make time to go to all the tutorials and I suppose it didn’t really help that at that particular time my husband was away so that made it difficult ‘cos I have two children. (Holly)

‘I’ve got a full time job now and I’ve got three other part time jobs. And then **my studying on top.** So it’s ‘Well I’ve got to pay for this’ like, you know. So it’s juggling things about.’ (Bob)

Factors that support and help them 'get through' – voices of students



'My partners' just, you know, **a silent rock** really you know, in the sense of me unsung hero.' (Simon)

'Oh well **my mum's really proud of me** and I'm the only one in my family who's been to university.' (Samantha)

'**I'm really loving doing this course.** And the Open University has just given me, you know, another opportunity in my life that I can, you know, better myself and actually do something with my life.' (Amy)

'Every time anything goes right with working with young people and I feel like I've achieved something then that's always a high point and I think '**Yes I can use this for my study**' and that's great and it means that I'm developing and doing what I should be doing.' (Holly)

'**Bloody minded determination possibly.** I want to do it. I've started it now, I want to do it. ... So I'm doing it now more because I want to do it rather than I feel I should or I need to.' (Mary)

Imagining the future ...

‘Well, I mean the reason I’m studying is to get a professional qualification in youth work or be at a professional level. Obviously to get more money but, you know, as **it’s a career I want**, you know, I made the decision way back, you know, when I was volunteering that this was a career I wanted.’ (Darren)

‘I think this degree will be important to me **to prove that I can do it** I think first thing. And then to be regarded as a professional youth worker and not just a good youth worker that’s an NVQ level three.’ (Beth)

‘**I want to find a full time permanent position.** Cos there’s a lot of fixed contract jobs out there as well and I think “Well that doesn’t give me security”’ (Samantha)

Conclusions, next steps, further questions



We have identified a number of key conclusions, next steps and further research from our analysis of the research:

- We need to understand the complexity of students' lives, learning pathways and motivations if we are to support their success in HE
- Students have multiple identities and may have fragile identities as learners
- Students' career pathways don't develop in a linear way, nor do their study pathways
- It is important for module teams, particularly of WBL qualifications, to regularly research the motivations, aspirations and experiences of their students to keep in touch with their students