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

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

Sheila Curran and Tyrrell Golding

Widening participation

Changing perceptions, raising aspirations



Our Context



- The Open University is the UK's only university dedicated to distance education
- Open access policy - for most courses no previous educational qualifications are required
- Teaching model – supported open learning, e-learning central to course delivery
- Nearly all OU students study part time and 70% are in full time employment
- Widening participation and access to HE is central to the OU's mission and purpose (Butcher et al, 2012)

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 – 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

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

Respondents' Past Experiences



- Students' past experiences, including previous educational history, were varied
- Some students have studied at HE level before – many left school with few formal qualifications and spoke about fragile identities as learners
- A number spoke about growing up in families where HE wasn't for 'people like them'
- Students described their experience of involvement in youth work – including their 'accidental' journeys into the field
- Complexity of students' lives - experiences described included early parenthood; family bereavement; the birth of a child with disabilities; relationship breakdown; and redundancy

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

- Responding to changing professional requirements – and encouragement from others
- Wanting to develop as a youth work practitioner
- Wanting to ‘make something’ of themselves’ and provide opportunities for their children
- Personal challenge – proving that they were capable of HE study
- A number described their ‘accidental’ journeys into youth work and HE level study – serendipitous work histories and study pathways
- Motivations and study intentions were not fixed and had changed

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)

Their current experience - challenges they are dealing with...



- ‘Life getting in the way’ – students are combining paid work, voluntary work, study and the rest of their lives
- Financial pressures and constraints
- Fear of failure - not being ‘academic’
- Current uncertainties in a turbulent professional field

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)

Working and studying at a time of change ...



Understandings of workplace learning emphasise the importance of the sector, organisational context, work practice, and social relationships on opportunities to learn and change in work (Felstead et al, 2009; Rainbaird et al, 2004; Eraut, 1998)

Students are studying and working at a time of turbulence in the public sector and the youth work professional field

The fragile and fragmented nature of youth work as a profession leaves it particularly vulnerable at times of social and political change. It is a profession with an *'ambiguous set of practices, pushed in different times by different interests'* (Bradford, 2005)

Students accounts of becoming a professional reflect current turbulence and still unfolding changes in the sector, as well as continuities

Working and studying at a time of change – voices of students



‘When I came to Rivertown I was recruited to come in as their youth participation officer and I had to give three month’s notice from my last job. So in the space of me resigning from my last job and coming to Rivertown, Rivertown Youth Service then decided to commission out their participation work. So when I came it was a bit like “Ooh, we recruited you with your skills for this but unfortunately that work’s gone now but this is what we’re going to ask you to co-ordinate.’ (Jolene)

‘For a period of eight years I had regular sessions with young people. 2010 government, new government came in and pulled a lot of the funding and told a lot of the local authorities they needed to cut funding. And the first thing that the area I lived in did, they cut the grant support to the organisation that I was working for part-time.’ (Beth)

‘It’s all changed recently, I should say that. We’ve been restructured, so the management structure has flattened and our posts have changed ... It’s quite strange. We’re not settled yet, we don’t know what we’re doing’ (Mary)

Factors that support and help them 'get through'



Family and friends (Feinstein et al, 2007)

Self-motivation and determination

Goal of achieving a recognised professional qualification

'Passion' for youth work and confidence in their skills as practitioners

Realising that they were capable and could study and succeed at HE level

OU staff and tutors

Support from colleagues and employers

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 ...

Students have their own agendas and aspirations for their future lives and careers - Imagined futures that have not been mapped out by policy makers and HE lecturers

Some students look forward to careers in youth work –for others the future appears less certain



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)

Imagining the future ...



‘I just want to work with young people and I know it sounds really stupid. I do and that’s what I want to do. [...] I don’t have any aspirations to be a manager because I’ve done that and I ran three national projects... I want to go back to the voluntary (sector).’ (Jolene)

‘I enjoy the job that I’m doing right now. I enjoy working with the young people. I suppose in a few years time when I’m a bit older then maybe then I would want to go into managing and doing a different aspect towards the role towards, you now, changing policies and things like that to help further and enable young people to go on and develop their skills.’ (Holly)

‘So in terms of work, I don’t know, will there be a youth service to work in? Who knows? The next reorganisation is probably about three months off and they might ... Locally a number of the boroughs locally they don’t have a youth service any more. They’ve just decided that’s it, end of. Despite any number of politicians saying that it’s valuable and we should be supporting this and all the rest of it. Obviously the will in the big society is that the voluntary sector will take over so maybe I need to be looking in that direction. So perhaps the qualification will be useful. I don’t know.’ (Mary)

Imagining the future ...

Students' intentions were not necessarily what we were expecting:

'I would like to get the qualification, even if I leave the school environment, and being from Nigeria my aim is to have a school in Nigeria ... so if I have this knowledge I can now apply it to Africa.'
(Joe)

Julie – wants to effect change for young people in the church in which she is involved as a volunteer as a result of her studies '...just getting people to think a bit differently. Cos the mind, it's about changing people's mindset. So that's, I mean obviously I want the degree but it's about the long term effects of the young people for me within our church.' (Julie)

Conclusions, next steps, further questions



- Importance of understanding the complexity of students' lives, learning pathways and motivations if we are support their success in HE
- Students have multiple identities – and may have fragile identities as learners
- Findings will be disseminated internally and inform Widening Participation Strategy and Action Plan
- Looking forward, how will changes in HE funding in England impact on the choices of adult learners and part-time students– and students on courses leading to professional youth work qualification?

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