Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications
and other research outputs

'Taking me back to my school days...'The experiences of adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds in a distance learning HE environment

Book Section

For guidance on citations see FAQs.

oro.open.ac.uk

'Taking me back to my school days…' The experiences of adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds in a distance learning HE environment

Fowle, W. and Butcher, J., The Open University

Wendy.fowle@open.ac.uk

01908 654126

Abstract

This paper presents emerging findings from data collected for a professional doctorate that sought to explore the experiences of adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds who had undertaken a distance learning Access module, prior to undergraduate study. Based on a series of vignettes (devised to address ethical challenges around labelling widening participation learners), semi-structured 1-1 telephone interviews were used to explore the impact of participants' past experiences of education, and how this affected their current HE studies. The findings suggest that a poor experience of compulsory education created an initial detachment from post-compulsory education, with participants reporting aimlessly drifting into work. All participants described one or two influential individuals who guided and supported them back towards education to the point where the thought of gaining a degree was feasible. We concluded continuing support throughout undergraduate study is vital to avoid participants reverting to their disengaged school experience. A key recommendation is that rather than identify adult learners as one homogenous group who merely need to develop confidence and study skills, HE providers should draw on the unique life experiences of adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, in order to gain a better understanding of potential vulnerabilities that may impact upon successful HE engagement.

Keywords

adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds; Access; widening participation; higher education; success

Background

The Office for Students (OFS), the new higher education (HE) regulatory body for England, which combined the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), was launched in 2018. Under the OFS and contained within the new Access and Participation Plans (replacing Access Agreements), HE providers in England are required to be more transparent in terms of their widening participation spend, using evidence-informed decisions based on analysis of institutional data. The recent OFS consultation on the future of Access and Participation Plans indicated a tighter focus on outcomes rather than expenditure and put forward a proposal for sector-wide key performance indicators. Such indicators do little for HE providers, like the Open University (OU), whose student cohort consists of predominantly adult learners (25+).

OFS explicitly identifies adult learners as one of the five priority widening participation groups that require a particular focus of attention in terms of access and success. In the words of Chris Millward, Director of Fair Access and Participation at the OFS, speaking at an OU Widening Participation Conference:

We crucially need to make progress with mature students where we have experienced significant decline

(Chris Millward, OFS, 2018)

This is an echo of Professor Les Ebdon's statement in 2016

Adult learners enrich university communities but there are still far too few of them

(Les Ebdon, OFFA, 2016)

Recent figures relating to the participation of adult or mature learners in HE, who generally study part-time, suggest that there has been a dramatic decline (HESA, 2018). For the OU (see Appendix 1), the UK's largest provider of HE, primarily through part-time, distance learning, the impact has been serious. Callender (2018) reports that the OU (England) has suffered a 65% drop in new part-time student registrations from 2010/11 to 2015/16, compared to 45% in the sector more generally. This decline is even more worrying in terms of social justice and social mobility, as Butcher's (2015) research suggests, many adult learners (who mainly study part-time) present characteristics disproportionately associated with widening participation:

- With caring responsibilities
- Disabled

- Women
- First in family
- Low disposable income

Traditional approaches to outreach to encourage students from disadvantaged backgrounds into HE, typically focus on raising aspirations (Doyle and Griffin, 2012; Dominiczak, 2013; Loveday, 2015; Higher Education Academy, 2016) and more recently attainment (Office for Students, 2018), primarily for school-aged children.   Initiatives such as the OU's Access Programme aim to support adult learners returning to learning after a long period out of education, through offering a supportive learning environment from which students can develop confidence in their academic ability and study skills. Other initiatives such as the Foundation in Arts and Humanities programme at the University of Bristol, community-based outreach from the Lifelong Learning Centre in Leeds University and the Higher Education Introductory Studies (HEIS) programme at Birkbeck, University of London (see Office for Fair Access, 2017) also provide supportive environments where developing a sense of 'HE is for me' is central, fostering a sense of belonging within an HE environment. These approaches are crucial to counteract the feeling of being an 'imposter' (Chapman, 2017) or a 'fish out of water' (Reay et al, 2009; Reay, 2010) that many students from non-traditional backgrounds experience.

The case studies presented in the OFFA report (2017) clearly demonstrate such programmes have a positive impact on the students who participate and, from an OU perspective, students from a disadvantaged background who study an Access module do better than students who enter directly onto the OU's Level 4[1] modules. It is worth noting that the OU retains its unique open entry policy, so Level 4 modules are designed to be introductory, providing students with a supportive learning environment that develops their confidence and academic skills embedded within the curriculum at undergraduate level. Access modules are 30 credits at Level 0[2]. Level 0 and are designed specifically to provide a taster of HE prior to registration on an undergraduate qualification. They aim to develop confidence, academic competence and study skills specifically for students who have been out of education for some time and who have low previous educational qualifications. Access modules have a unique tutoring model whereby students receive regular one to one telephone tutorials in order to build trust. This differs from curriculum at Level 4 and above where tutorials are held online or face to face. The approach assumes that once confidence and study skills have been

---

[1] Level 4 modules are equivalent to Certificates in HE or Higher National Certificates
[2] Level 0 modules are Entry level qualifications which sit below Level 1 qualifications (GCSE/NVQ Level 1) (Gov.UK, 2019)

developed, students will no longer need the additional support that has been provided, other than what is embedded within curriculum design, accessible and available to all students.

In England, the OFS are keen to encourage more student involvement in the development and monitoring of institutional Access and Participation Plans, particularly positioning students as co-creators rather than the subject of interventions. If this approach comes to fruition and the voices of all students, across all demographics, can be heard, there is potential for a more inclusive learning environment to be available for all. This article contributes to this endeavour through research which, through narrative, elicits the voice of adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds studying at the OU.

Literature

There is a significant lack of student voice in the literature around adult learners in HE. What research there is focuses upon class distinctions and issues of identity and belonging (Michie et al (2001; Mallman & Lee, 2016; Waller, 2006). This builds upon existing literature that focuses upon young (18 – 21 year old) working class students within traditional, full-time, face to face environments (Reay, 2001; Archer et al, 2005; Loveday, 2015). Michie et al (2001) report that adult learners returning after a lengthy time out of education and possibly having had poor experiences in the past, do so with anxieties around confidence in their own academic abilities and study skills in contrast to other students. For students studying with the OU, which requires no entry qualifications, these anxieties may be amplified. Studies of young working class students in face to face universities (Michie et al, ibid) reveal similar anxieties, not necessarily in terms of academic ability but certainly in terms of comparison with their peers, which affects their identity and sense of belonging.

Whilst Michie et al (2001) and Waller (2006) clearly differentiate their studies based on age, they attempt to move away from labelling students, either as mature, adult, young or non-traditional, reflecting instead the diverse nature of students. Waller (ibid) supports this view, referring to approaches to supporting adult learners in HE as an 'over-simplification'. The desire to move away from labels is welcome but somewhat limited as alternatives are not forthcoming. The concept of adult, mature and non-traditional students is contested and unexplained assumptions are inevitably embedded within the loaded terms. The OECD (2018) defines adult learners as those who lack basic literacy skills, the unemployed and those learning for vocational and non-vocational purposes. It specifically makes reference to low skilled adults and adults from disadvantaged backgrounds (Miyamoto & OECD, 2005). Whilst they do not define what is meant by non-vocational purposes it suggests that this encompasses the leisure learner rather than the development of higher level skills

to be applied within the workplace. These combined elements present a particular type of adult learner, a paradigm which is not necessarily conducive to the learning offered within an HE environment. This may provide a partial explanation as to why adult learners have traditionally been over-looked in widening participation discourse.

Hillage's (2000) review confirms the confusion regarding the definition of an adult learner ranging from over 19, over 21 or over 25. The distinction is important in any research into adult learners as the needs and experiences of younger adults are likely to differ quite significantly from older adults (Michie, et al, 2001; Office for Fair Access (OFFA), 2017). The literature goes some way to acknowledge the heterogeneity of adult learners (Waller, 2006; Busher, 2015) but is limited in identifying approaches that respond specifically to their individual circumstances.

The importance of acknowledging distinctions within the adult learner literature is equally relevant when distinguishing between adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds and adult learners generally. We acknowledge that by creating sub-groups within the concept of the adult learner there is a drift towards homogeneity. In order to explore issues and experiences of students, some form of categorisation is required even though the outcomes and recommendations should be applied to all students. Focussing upon adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds is one of many lenses that can be applied, that builds on the existing knowledge base around widening participation and adult learners.

Michie et al's paper (2001) focuses upon adult learners and present issues regarding their poor past educational experience. Whilst it doesn't claim to, it does not reflect the issues that adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds might experience over and above issues of identity and belonging. This suggests that the experience of all adult learners is the same despite acknowledging the diversity of the cohort.

To add further confusion to the debate, the term mature learner is also used interchangeably with adult learners both within the literature and in policy discussions. Whilst it may offer alternative terminology to demarcate a younger adult from an older adult, failure to clearly define the exact meaning of the term subsequently affects the usefulness of the content. For the purposes of this we have taken the decision that adult learners refers to students who are aged over 25 on the grounds that this demarcates those learners in their early twenties who may have resat A levels, or taken a gap year or two.

Methodological challenges

The research adopted a case study approach (Stake, 1995) which was reviewed and revised in light of findings from the initial study and continuous reviewing of the literature. The bounded case was the OU, the largest provider of HE in the UK, primarily through part-time, distance learning.

A pilot study was undertaken to verify the methodological approach, which required approval from the institutional research projects and ethics committees. This process revealed ethical challenges and sensitivities in relation to the research questions being asked, which continued to be played out as the interviews were undertaken. The issue related to whether explicit reference to participants as 'widening participation' or disadvantaged students should be made, given that this could imply certain assumptions about the student which could negatively impact upon their engagement with current and future studies. Opposing views within the institutional approvals process suggest that this is a contentious area of debate, but one that receives little attention in the literature. A consensus of opinion was not reached but the decision was made to 'soften the language' used in the email invitation and interview questions. The challenges of referring to students as 'widening participation' or 'disadvantaged' students' became more problematic as the interviews progressed and alternative approaches that could be used in the main study, were explored. These approaches included using texts extracted from institutional strategy documents and re-ordering of the interview schedule to encourage a more natural conversation. Neither of these alternative approaches addressed the challenges and more radical approaches were explored, specifically the use of vignettes which Neff (1979 in SAGE, 2017) suggests are 'are a valuable non-threatening way to introduce discussion with respondents on sensitive topics'. Vignettes also address some of the challenges identified by Ashworth and Lucas (2000) in relation to researcher bias and help to detach the research from the professional position of the researcher. The vignettes developed for use in the main study were piloted prior to their use.

In relation to the cohort of students invited to participate in the pilot study, the findings did not reveal anything other than what is already known from existing literature in terms of the impact of Access-type programmes on developing confidence in academic ability and study skills. This suggested the need to focus more explicitly on students with particular characteristics that the literature suggests contributes to the experiences of non-traditional students in HE, namely those from low socio-economic backgrounds and on low incomes. The main study therefore invited participants with these characteristics.

Main study

The characteristics of participants to invite into the main study were primarily used as a proxy to represent disadvantage:

- Were aged between 25 and 59

- Had studied an Access module prior to the first year of their degree

- Lived in POLAR3[3] Quintiles 1 and 2 (Adults in HE measure)

- Had low previous educational qualifications (less than 2 A levels)

- Received a full fee waiver

From a potential sample of 134 students, 15 agreed to be interviewed. Following an initial email invitation to participant, positive responses were collated into an Excel spreadsheet and direct contact was made with the participants. Participants were invited to provide details of their availability and the interview were arranged accordingly. The timing of the interview was therefore at the request of the participant and agreed with the researcher. Following this confirmation, a subsequent email was sent containing a consent form and three vignettes (Appendix 2). Participants were asked to return the signed consent form prior to the interview. They were asked to consider the three vignettes prior to the arranged interview and asked if there were aspects of any of them with which they could identify. They were able to select relevant sections or phrases from multiple scenarios and encouraged to form their own, verbally, during the interview.

The vignettes were an aid to the discussion. Identification with one specific vignette was less important than the conversation they facilitated. 12 interviews out of the 15 that originally agreed were actually conducted. One participant did not respond to the email to arrange a date and one participant did not answer the telephone at the time arranged. For the final participant, despite several short conversations on the telephone, we were unable to find a convenient time to talk. An ethical decision was taken to stop contacting them after three attempts.

For the students who were interviewed, each interview lasted between 25 minutes and one hour. Typically the participants were contacted in their homes, with the researcher telephoning either from their office or home. The interviews were recorded and 225 pages of transcript were

---

[3] POLAR3 Participation of Local Areas – Adults in HE (AHE) – POLAR3 is a measure (in quintiles) of disadvantage used by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) within the HE sector in England. It relates to the number of adults with HE qualifications within a particular postcode area. POLAR3 Quintile 1 refers to the lowest participation of adults in HE and Quintile 5 refers to the highest participation of adults in HE.

produced. The transcript data was analysed in NVivo using Braun & Clarke's (2006) stages of thematic analysis.

Table 1. Demographics of participants

Education	POLAR3	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Disability Declared
Less than A Levels	1. Most disadvanted	30	Male	White	Disability Declared
Less than A Levels	2	39	Male	White	No disability declared
Less than A Levels	2	29	Female	White	No disability declared
Less than A Levels	2	43	Female	White	No disability declared
Less than A Levels	2	38	Male	White	Disability Declared
Less than A Levels	2	42	Male	White	No disability declared
Less than A Levels	1. Most disadvanted	27	Female	Mixed	No disability declared
Less than A Levels	2	49	Male	White	No disability declared
Less than A Levels	1. Most disadvanted	29	Female	White	No disability declared
Less than A Levels	2	38	Female	White	No disability declared
Less than A Levels	2	49	Female	White	Disability Declared
Less than A Levels	1. Most disadvanted	47	Female	White	No disability declared

Findings

The three vignettes worked well in engaging students in the conversation early and went some way to avoid the researcher applying labels to students. Instead students were enabled to identify themselves within a particular vignette or certain aspects within each of them. Several themes emerged from the analysis of the transcripts. (Pseudoyms are used to protect anonymity).

Disengagement: an adult learner from disadvantaged background's starting point may be a major psychological barrier

Analysis of the interview data has reinforced the position that adult learners and in particular adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, are not a homogenous group (Michie et al, 2001) and that each has their own individual and unique story to tell. There are however some common elements to their stories that are useful in responding to the research questions, with a specific focus on adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. In contrast to the findings that emerged from the pilot study, many of the stories told by participants in the main study were dominated primarily by poor experiences of compulsory education, which contributed to a disengagement at an early age. Comments from the pilot study suggest the reasons for not engaging with HE relate to the cost of HE; the need to earn and contribute to household bills; lack of expectation to progress from parents and teachers and a disability or personal circumstances:

There was no expectation in the late 70s that I would go to university - certainly

that was never discussed

I had no way of going into HE, I was from a very large family and my wage packet

was needed and I really wanted to study but there was no opportunity

These reasons are typical of the data reported in adult education literature. However, refocussing the sample to attract students from disadvantaged backgrounds in terms of income and areas of deprivation produced findings that the general adult education literature does not reveal and that approaches that aim to develop confidence in academic ability and study skills fail to address. These findings relate to the psychological impact of past experiences which are deeply rooted within an individual and more than just a conscious or unconscious decision to go to university having fulfilled the requirements of compulsory education. Overcoming these psychological barriers are the first hurdle faced by adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds and require small steps, generally taken over a long period of time before any form of education may be considered.

Relationships: the adult learner from a disadvantaged background can be particularly vulnerable

For the majority of participants in the main study, the challenges they faced related to the relationships they had with their peers, their teachers, their families and professional services. In terms of relationships with their peers, issues of being bullied were common and contributed to participants not attending school at all, or only attending sporadically. Mel's experience of bullying had quite a significant impact on her as she moved beyond compulsory education, primarily as a result of the bullying at school that came from within her own circle of friends. She recalls how she found it difficult to form friendships in other educational settings (i.e. college) and in the world of work, a perception that made it difficult for her to let anyone close. The implications of this for studying with the OU are significant in relation to her engagement with other students in tutorials as she explained her preference for the online environment as it creates distance between her and the other students.

For other participants it was the feeling of being different that they recalled as being a contributory factor to their negative experience at school, although much of this was recalled upon reflection rather than how they understood the situation at the time. Some of this indifference related to academic ability which was perceived to be reinforced by the actions of the class teacher and also the processes for supporting pupils who were seen as needing additional help. Lee recalled how he struggled with reading and writing and was aware of how other children perceived him, describing how they would call him thick, particularly when asked to read out loud in group reading. The relationship with teachers was also an issue and relates to the expectations of him as a pupil and a disbelief in him when he had submitted a good piece of work, which, as he believed suggested that he had copied from someone else because "he couldn't possibly have created a piece of work that

good". Similarly, the process to support pupils who were seen as behind with reading and writing, further differentiated the pupils from their peers as they were removed from the classroom to 'work on their handwriting' or practice their reading. Many years on, this experience has remained a powerful influence and a situation likely to be experienced by many adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds returning to learn. The impact of this on Lee's experience of studying with the OU is evident as he reflects on how he engages with the online forums.

> *I'm so conscious about my writing. I never write on Facebook, very rarely, because*
> *I worry that I'm going to write something on there that I'm going to put the*
> *wrong thing or it's going to be spelt wrong and it'd take me back to them days of*
> *when I was a kid*

His anxieties in relation to assessment are also evident and the feelings that ensue on receipt of a low mark and feedback that he perceived as 'quite harsh'. He explicitly relates to the feeling of being back at school, where his confidence was knocked and he was made to feel stupid. This differs to Mel's experience described above and reflects the flexibility to not have to expose themselves in the online forum which provided a counter to the vulnerability they felt. In a sense the option to not engage with the online forums could help students who have experienced similar situations, but literature suggests that students who are more engaged are more likely to succeed than those who are not (Balfanz, et al, 2007; Collie et al, 2017). The option to attend face to face tutorials, whilst challenging for some students in terms of location of tutorials, is a possible response to students who find working in the online environment challenging. However, for some of the participants, this environment reinforced their own unique experiences of being in a traditional classroom environment. One participant recalls how difficult she found face to face tutorials as the dominant students prevented her from having her voice heard. In another situation the research participant recalls her dread of reading out loud in a group or class setting, which created fear and anxiety. These actions served to reinforce their perceptions of themselves in comparison to their peers and a gradual eroding of confidence and feeling of indifference and isolation that impacts upon how they approach their current studies. This is a significant barrier which is carried forward in relation to engagement with HE and has implications for tutor support.

A greater role for the tutor may be required that ensures all students have equal opportunity to contribute, whether in an online or face to face tutorial, but something that is seen as a more equitable experience in an online environment. For others however, the ability to speak as opposed to write is a welcome approach. This suggests a need for a deeper and more personal understanding of a students' background which is embedded within module delivery and should be encouraged

within tutor development programmes, recognising the obstacles that adult students have faced to even start an Access programme.

There is clearly evidence to suggest development of trusted relationships with peers and professionals, as the students progressed from compulsory education had a major impact on student experiences. This is significant for these students in helping them to overcome their previous poor relationships with other pupils, teachers and professional services.

Transition to OU study: the non-linear educational journey of adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds

The journeys that participants have taken resulting in them studying with the OU take many different forms, from one participant attempting college before working in a supermarket, to another who lived in a barn for six months prior to joining the army and managing a nightclub. Despite their unique and individual stories, and differences in terms of the stage at which they returned to education, there are common elements to their journeys. These primarily relate to the influences that have impacted upon their decision to study following their negative experiences of school. In most cases there is clearly an influence of other people in the participants' decision to enquire about HE study. In many cases this decision was not immediate and developed over time. For Lee the start of his journey to HE began with a colleague suggesting he took a maths course which he did, along with his friend 'to get them off work for a few hours'. He recalls the enjoyment he got from the course and a realisation that he could achieve in maths. This progressed to a literacy course where his formal dyslexia diagnosis was made which, for him, was a life-changing experience.

Gary's story is a demonstration of resilience that literature on adults learners suggest is a defining factor of success (Hoult, 2011; Duckworth, 2017). He recalls his army experience and the psychological impact this had on him to the point where he made the decision to leave. He drifted between jobs and admitted struggling with alcoholism and violence. With the support of professionals and his partner however, he was able to address some of his issues which subsequently led to his desire to do something more with his life. His partner suggested the OU but he found identifying the most appropriate course quite challenging. He persevered and after several phone calls and some independent research around what courses were available, he found the OU's Access module.

These stories are powerful as they provide examples of the lived experiences of some current OU students who had very negative experiences at school. The influence and support of family, colleagues, friends and professional services and their own desire to study has enabled them to take

their first tentative steps into HE. Having a support network has been vital to these students who felt that support during their school days was lacking, primarily from their peers, teachers, the school and educational authorities. This is relevant for their engagement with the OU particularly given the transition from the unique learning environment of the Access programme to a level 4 module. Despite the participants in this research having completed an Access module, a certain level of susceptibility was evident in the responses they gave in relation to assessment feedback. Lee received over 80% in his first assignment he then received just over 40% for his second assignment. His anxiety was obvious as he awaited a response to his request for feedback. This was clearly impacting upon his confidence and the insecurities that he described from his previous educational experience, were starting to resurface.

Discussion

The research has highlighted that the concept of the adult learner, referred to in academic literature and by policy-makers does not truly reflect the diversity of the student cohort and approaches that aim to develop confidence only partially meet the needs of adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds.   Exploring the experiences of individuals based on specific criteria inevitably creates a category within which research participants are placed which is counter-intuitive to the argument being presented in this chapter. The inherent challenge is embedding any recommendations into institutional practices that are inclusive in nature.   The research detailed in this chapter, supports the idea that one-size does not fit all and that widening participation initiatives which aim to develop confidence and study skills, form only one part of a much wider network of support initiatives that should be embedded within curriculum design. This approach avoids deficit models where individuals are 'selected' for interventions based on specific characteristics, but draws upon the evidence provided by an exploration of the unique experiences of students from a wide range of backgrounds. Research into widening participation to HE has produced a significant literature that provides evidence of the many initiatives that HE providers undertake to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds into HE and through HE. These individual projects must not be seen in isolation but as a contribution to the knowledge that HE providers and policy-makers should use to create inclusive learning environments that ensure all individual needs and experiences are reflected in the study experience.

Tutor and peer support: the importance of learning relationships

The research suggests that these trusted relationships develop over time and are a result of a gradual process from which the participants begin to develop confidence in themselves and in their ability to seek support from others. This is particularly relevant for adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds as issues relating to trust played a big part in their previous educational

experience. As a consequence initiatives to support students through their HE journey must be embedded within the institution whilst recognising that the experiences of adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds may present barriers for these students to develop trusting relationships. Opportunities for these relationships to grow must be offered through a variety of mechanisms i.e. tutors, student mentors, buddies, learning advisers or informal social media forums, enabling students to find the most appropriate source of support relevant to their needs. Time should be allocated across all of these platforms to enable the emergence of trusted relationships, where it is anticipated that eventually students can feel comfortable in speaking about, and asking for support, to overcome particular challenges and anxieties.

Institutions should not make assumptions about the needs of their students based on particular characteristics but more informal and open discussions will help inform tutors of some background information and provide a sense of understanding of the historic challenges that the student has encountered. This will enable a more personalised approach to learning whereby the tutor can pre-empt and empathise with the student, allowing the tutor to offer more personalised support which will also serve to develop and embed the trust within the student-tutor relationship.

Personalised learning: the importance of flexibility

Responding to individual experiences, students' preference for online or face to face learning should also be taken into account at the very early stages of module design. The point should be made that this is not just about personal learning styles and preferences, but is influenced by past educational experiences, which this research suggests, has particular consequences for adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, and which can have a significant impact on the level of engagement and subsequent success. A blended approach to learning will enable choice for students to support them to learn for success. Similarly learning for success needs to be consistently supported through each stage of the learning journey, both within modules and transitions between. The research identified inconsistencies particularly from transition from Level 0 to the first year of a degree programme, following the highly structured supportive environment of the Access programme. There was also a divergence in support reported by participants within the first year of the degree module, despite these modules being designed as introductory. Levelling out these discrepancies is essential to ensure that students who to ensure all students receive equality of opportunity to succeed that are commensurate to others.

Tutor development: the importance of empathy

In order for the above to be achieved tutors should be provided with appropriate training and development not only in relation to supporting students with subject content and study skills, but in

developing softer skills that are conducive to understanding the previous experiences of students and how these may impact upon their current and future studies. It is likely that these skills will need to develop over time and there is a rationale for new tutor recruitment processes to request evidence of the application of softer skills. Complementary to this, 'getting to know your student/tutor' time could be allotted prior to the formal start of the module which will act as a foundation from which positive, trusting relationships can develop. It should be recognised that the tutor may not be the sole source of support for some students and therefore mechanisms to enable self-directed support relationships, either with other students or other professionals within the institution should be encouraged and supported.

Inspiration: the importance of raising supporting self-belief

It should be noted that many historic widening participation initiatives have focused upon raising aspirations, for instance the AimHigher programme (Higher Education Academy, 2016), particularly amongst school pupils. The research reported in this chapter suggests that adult learners in general do not lack aspiration, so aspiration-raising initiatives are inappropriate. What the research reveals is the need for inspiration, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, from peers, role models and mentors to give them the confidence and belief that they can do it, given their previous negative experiences of education.   This increased confidence however can easily be knocked by the perceived negative comments and low scores received in assessments or in engagement in tutorials, either face to face or online, and social media platforms. These experiences can reinforce some of the self-doubt and negativity experienced when the participants were younger. Whilst the research reported here does not present issues regarding the impact of feedback, there is a suggestion that this is something that could be improved in order to provide more consistent support. There is an opportunity for further research to explore this in more detail particularly around assessment feedback and how it is received and acted upon by adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Conclusion

This research has revealed some significant findings for the OU to consider and which, more importantly, are of relevance beyond the OU. Of upmost importance is the need to rethink the discourse around adult learners and the assumptions embedded within the very concept. These assumptions suggest adult learners are a homogenous group and that in order to be successful in HE they simply need to develop confidence in their academic ability and study skills through Access–type programmes. The research reported in this paper supports the literature that suggests adult learners are not a homogenous group but in contrast, offers some practical solutions to address some of the issues that these assumptions create, particularly through the lens of disadvantage. Whilst conducting the research has inevitably meant categorising students based on particular

demographics, it has revealed the divergent and unique experiences of adult learners from which HE providers can learn, to embed support that recognises the particular vulnerabilities that may result in disengagement with education, reminiscent of past educational experiences. In acknowledging the heterogeneity of the adult learner cohort, it is essential that any initiatives adopt an inclusive model of teaching and learning which supports all students, without labelling some in deficit terms. Further research could focus upon a different demographic which would contribute to the existing literature around the diverse needs of adult learners but its practical application must be inclusively embedded.

Past experiences of compulsory education which were mostly perceived as negative by participants, clearly have impacted upon their subsequent engagement with education prior to and during OU study. Developing good and trusting relationship is paramount to ensuring students receive personalised and appropriate support, to enable them to continue their studies and achieve equitable outcomes. Support needs to be consistently provided beyond Access but it is imperative that a deficit model is not adopted, given the diversity of the student cohort that suggests one size does not fit all. The support required must recognise the non-linearity of the adult learner HE journey, particularly those who have faced and overcome the most difficult and challenging circumstances, which have not only impacted upon their engagement with education but on them as individuals. Messages that communicate softer benefits of HE are required that inevitably will have an impact upon students as individuals and their wider family and friends' networks.

References

Archer, L., Hutchings, M. and Ross, A. (2005) *Higher education and social class: Issues of exclusion and inclusion*. Routledge. Available at: https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=g2iBAgAAQBAJ&pgis=1 (Accessed: 4 July 2016).

Ashworth, P. and Lucas, U. (2000) 'Achieving empathy and engagement: a practical approach to the design, condu...: EBSCOhost', *Studies in Higher Education*, 25(3), pp. 295 – 308. Available at: http://web.a.ebscohost.com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=5&sid=2a807ba 2-836c-480a-8696-20f3acaf3936%40sessionmgr4006 (Accessed: 15 September 2018).

Balfanz, R., Herzog, L. and Mac Iver, D. J. (2007) 'Preventing student disengagement and keeping students on the graduation path in urban middle-grades schools: Early identification and effective interventions', *Educational Psychologist*. Taylor & Francis Group, 42(4), pp. 223–235. doi: 10.1080/00461520701621079.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), pp. 77–101. doi: 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.

Busher, H., James, N. and Piela, A. (2015) '"I always wanted to do second chance learning": identities and experiences of tutors on Access to Higher Education courses', *Research in Post-Compulsory*

Education. Routledge, 20(2), pp. 127–139. doi: 10.1080/13596748.2015.1030235.

Butcher, J. (2015) *'Shoe-horned and side-lined'?: Challenges for part-time learners in the new HE landscape | Higher Education Academy*. Available at: https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resource/shoe-horned-and-side-lined-challenges-part-time-learners-new-he-landscape (Accessed: 14 June 2016).

Callender, C. (2018) *Stop the decline in part-time undergraduate study | Wonkhe | Comment*. Available at: https://wonkhe.com/blogs/stop-the-decline-in-part-time-undergraduate-study/ (Accessed: 3 November 2018).

Chapman, A. (2017) 'Using the assessment process to overcome imposter syndrome in mature students', *Journal of Further and Higher Education*. Routledge, 41(2), pp. 112–119. doi: 10.1080/0309877X.2015.1062851.

Collie, R. J., Holliman, A. J. and Martin, A. J. (2017) 'Adaptability, engagement and academic achievement at university', *Educational Psychology*, 37(5), pp. 632–647. doi: 10.1080/01443410.2016.1231296.

Dominiczak, P. (2013) 'Young poor have low aspirations, says David Cameron', *The Telegraph2*, 13 November. Available at: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/david-cameron/10448134/Young-poor-have-low-aspirations-says-David-Cameron.html.

Doyle, M. and Griffin, M. (2012) 'Raised aspirations and attainment? A review of the impact of Aimhigher (2004–2011) on widening participation in higher education in England', *London Review of Education*, 10(1), pp. 75–88. doi: 10.1080/14748460.2012.659060.

Duckworth, A. (2017) *Grit : the power of passion and perseverance*. New York: Scribner.

Gov.UK (2019) *What qualification levels mean: England, Wales and Northern Ireland - GOV.UK*. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/what-different-qualification-levels-mean/list-of-qualification-levels (Accessed: 12 February 2019).

HESA (2018) *Free statistics online - HESA - Higher Education Statistics Agency*. Available at: https://www.hesa.ac.uk/free-statistics (Accessed: 13 June 2016).

Higher Education Academy (2016) *Aim Higher Scheme*. Available at: https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/enhancement/themes/retention-and-success/widening-access-programmes-archive/aimhigher-associates (Accessed: 29 September 2016).

Hillage, J. *et al.* (2000) *Adult learning in England: A review*. Brighton. Available at: http://www.employment-studies.co.uk/system/files/resources/files/369.pdf (Accessed: 20 January 2018).

Hoult, E. (2011) *Adult learning and la recherche féminine : reading resilience and Hélène Cixous*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Loveday, V. (2015) 'Working-class participation, middle-class aspiration? Value, upward mobility and symbolic indebtedness in higher education', *The Sociological Review*, 63(3), pp. 570–588. doi: 10.1111/1467-954X.12167.

Michie, F., Glachan, M. and Bray, D. (2001) 'An Evaluation of Factors Influencing the academic self-

concept, self-esteem and academic stress for direct and re-entry students in higher education', *Educational Psychology*. Taylor & Francis Group, 21(4), pp. 455–472. doi: 10.1080/01443410120090830.

Miyamoto, K. and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2005) *Promoting adult learning*. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Available at: http://www.oecd.org/edu/innovation-education/promotingadultlearning.htm#ExecSumm (Accessed: 20 January 2018).

Neff, J. A. (1979) 'Interaction versus hypothetical others: the use of vignettes in attitude research. Sociology and Social Research', *Sociology and Social Research*, 64, pp. 105–125.

OECD (2018) *Thematic review on adult learning - Background - OECD*. Available at: http://www.oecd.org/edu/skills-beyond-school/thematicreviewonadultlearning-background.htm (Accessed: 20 January 2018).

Office for Fair Access (2017) *OFFA Topic briefing: White British students from low socio-economic status groups - OFFA*. Available at: https://www.offa.org.uk/topic-briefing-white-british-students/#individuals (Accessed: 18 April 2017).

Office for Fair Access (OFFA) (2017) *Understanding the impact of outreach on access to HE for disadvantaged adult learners*. Bristol. Available at: https://www.offa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Final-Report-Understanding-the-impact-of-outreach-on-access-to-higher-education-for-disadvantaged-adult-learners-docx.pdf.

Office for Students (2018) *Regulatory Notice 1: Guidance on access and participation plans 2019-20*. Available at: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-notice-1-guidance-on-access-and-participation-plans-for-2019-20/.

Reay, D. (2001) 'Finding or losing yourself?: working-class relationships to education', *Journal of Education Policy*. Taylor & Francis Group, 16(4), pp. 333–346. doi: 10.1080/02680930110054335.

Reay, D., Crozier, G. and Clayton, J. (2009) '"Strangers in paradise"?: Working-class students in elite universities', *Sociology*, 43(6), pp. 1103–1121. doi: 10.1177/0038038509345700.

Reay, D., Crozier, G. and Clayton, J. (2010) '"Fitting in" or "standing out": working-class students in UK higher education', *British Educational Research Journal*. Routledge, 36(1), pp. 107–124. doi: 10.1080/01411920902878925.

Stake, R. (1995) *The art of case study research*. California: Sage. Available at: https://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=ApGdBx76b9kC&oi=fnd&pg=PR11&dq=the+art+of+case+study+resesarch&ots=KuNNl1Jqet&sig=ey0JvdV10SHfshMPBwLnbxsyDkA#v=onepage&q=the art of case study resesarch&f=false.

Waller, R. (2006) '"I don"t feel like " *a student* ", I feel like " *me* "!': the over-simplification of mature learners' experience(s)', *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*. Routledge , 11(1), pp. 115–130. doi: 10.1080/13596740500508019.

Appendix 1 The Open University

The OU is unique in that it has no entry requirements for any of its programmes of study. Students studying with the OU are predominantly older than students studying at a traditional face to face university. While the OU's demographic has been getting younger for at least a decade, the average age of an OU student is still relatively high at 28, and OU students typically combine their studies with full or part-time employment.

The OU offers undergraduate modules at Levels 4, 5 and 6, and also a Level 0, 30 credit Access programme. The latter is designed specifically to support students who have been out of education for some time, back into the learning environment. A choice of three interdisciplinary modules, at half the standard OU module fee, offer support in study skills and the unique one to one telephone tutoring model provides support to develop academic confidence and familiarisation with distance learning. A full fee waiver is also available for eligible students (in England, in households with annual incomes below £25, 000). Progression from print-based to online learning is embedded within the curriculum design and prepares students for a blended approach to learning as they progress through their OU studies.

Appendix 2 Vignettes

Student A

Student A is 28 and works full-time as a checkout assistant in the local supermarket. They were not interested in school when they were younger and felt that the teachers were never really bothered about teaching them. As a result they left school at 16 with 1 GCSE in drama.   Their situation wasn't unique, not many people stayed on at their school to do A levels and go onto university, it just wasn't what was expected of them. Living in an fairly deprived area, the job market was quite limited to low skilled/low paid work and this student just fell into this line of work too, just like their parents. As the years went by they realised that they didn't want to be stuck doing the same job for the rest of their life but felt trapped into a lifestyle with no one help offer advice as to what a potential future might hold for them. They wanted more out of life, to enable them to support their children through education and to show their children that there were other options open to them than just following the same path that they had done. The main concern for the student was the cost of education. Being a checkout assistant, they didn't earn a great deal and they weren't even sure what type of course would be the best for them. The thought of getting into debt over it was not something that they could even consider, they weren't sure if there was any financial help available and were embarrassed to ask for it. They explored options and saw courses that were available that could help them to upskill and reskill and also ones to help develop basic skills in numeracy and literacy. There were still costs attached to these and the student wasn't really quite sure what it was they wanted to do. The student came across the Open University's Access modules and although at this point didn't even think that a degree was on their radar thought that the Access module might help to develop some of their skills and maybe help to decide their future direction. Access modules are designed to address issues of lack of confidence in academic and study skills and act as a taster for what higher education might be like. As a non-traditional student coming into education from a low socio-economic background, the student was told that they might be eligible for some financial support, which allayed some their concerns about paying for an extra year's course on top of a full degree. Whilst the student was still not convinced this was the right route for them, they enrolled on an Access module to see what it was like.

Student B

Student B is 39 and desperately wanted to go to university when they were 18. Unfortunately circumstances at the time meant that this wasn't possible so they set about a career in marketing and have done quite well for themselves. However there has always been the feeling that they were not taken quite as seriously as their colleagues who had higher education (HE) qualifications in

marketing and felt inferior to them particularly when senior colleagues went to others for advice rather than the student. This also happened in meetings when their opinion was disregarded or not taken seriously over others. Student B decided that if they were to develop their career further and be taken seriously they must seek to gain a qualification in marketing before it was too late but they were worried that they had been out of education for so long, they might not be able to do it. Due to the negative experience in their workplace, they were lacking in confidence in their professional capacity as well as their academic ability. They were worried they would not be able to fit in study around all the other pressures they faced and whether they had the time management skills to deliver what was required. They were also not sure what options were available to them and whether it was even possible as, due to personal circumstances such as children at school and partner working locally, they wouldn't be able to attend a university that was too far away. They started to research adult education programmes but found most of them related to developing basic skills in numeracy, literacy or digital skills which were skills that student already had. They became frustrated in the lack of information around courses for people who needed more that basic skills. A search for free courses revealed the Access programme at the Open University and further exploration of the website influenced the student's decision to contact the OU advisory service. Here the various options were explained to the student, particularly around what it means to study part-time at the OU and what level of commitment was required. The student was still not convinced that this is the route they wanted to take and was worried that they wouldn't be able to fit it all in. The advisor suggested an Access module might be a first step and act as a taster before taking the plunge into a full degree programme. The student was concerned that it would put an extra year onto their degree if they decided to continue but with the support of the advisor decided that this was probably the best option before committing fully. Luckily, they were also eligible for the full fee waiver as their household income was less that £25,000 as they were currently working part-time to care for their children.

Student C

Student C is 59. They did quite well at school and achieved several O levels however their parents were not very supportive of education. Although they wouldn't describe themselves as on low income or from a low socio-economic background, they were not financially in a position to support them into university. University wasn't for people like them, they weren't traditional university people and they should stick to the type of work that most of their family and friends did. Although they didn't consider themselves as coming from a disadvantaged background, the parents felt that it was better to start a career and to put the money they were earning back into the family. Student C did do some further education in a vocational course. After leaving college they continued to work

within that industry but deep down they knew that they wanted to get a degree. This desire was renewed when their children went to university but it was pushed to the back of their mind as they questioned whether they would fit in with the younger students and whether they were capable, both academically and mentally to do a degree. They wondered whether they would be able to relate to the other students and whether they would fit in with traditional university life. What would they have in common with the other students? Whilst their children were supportive of them doing a degree their friends were less encouraging which reinforced their doubts. An advert on the television showing mature learners, studying at distance, instigated a phone call to the Open University and the adviser there talked them through the options available. The student talked about whether they could do it and that they had low confidence in their ability to study for a degree and whether they had what it took. They also talked about not feeling they would fit in. The suggested an Access module might be the place to start to get them back into the swing of education and make sure it was the right thing for them. This gave them to boost they needed and they enrolled on the Access programme.