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**Chapter:** Part-time mature students and (the unexpected benefits of) access to the arts

**Authors:** Butcher, J. & Clarke, A.

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## **Introduction**

In the UK, the last twenty years has witnessed a plethora of research outputs, as well as millions spent, on generic approaches to widening participation to higher education. However, since the demise of the National Arts Learning Network in 2009 (a nationwide collaboration between specialist arts institutions across England, funded by HEFCE, to widen participation into the arts), access to the arts has remained relatively under-explored. Notable exceptions include analysis of inequitable admissions practices in art and design (Burke & McManus, 2011) and descriptions of the use of arts activities in school-based aspiration-raising outreach (Felton et al, 2015). However, as a sector, we have significantly less developed understanding of the impact of preparatory programmes aimed at supporting progression into undergraduate study in the arts.

This 'absence' of the arts from national and sector discourse on Widening Participation (WP) is tellingly revealed in A level results data (Hazel, 2018) and recent UCAS application data (FE News, 2021), suggesting that potential students are increasingly seeking undergraduate degrees in STEM (Science, technology, engineering and maths) rather than the arts and humanities. In addition, systemic obstacles to accessing the arts in higher education can be demonstrated through the decline of arts provision outside of private schools (Brown, 2019), and the kind of financial barriers facing Arts graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds as represented by the additional hurdle of unpaid internships (Cuyler and Hodges, 2016).

Such challenges are compounded in relation to adult learners, especially from those groups requiring flexible routes into higher education. Adults (defined by HESA as aged over 21), often have limited time and sparse financial resources to engage with higher education. Adults need to balance the wearing of numerous 'hats' before considering taking on a student identity, including the necessity for many to juggle both work and caring commitments. For lots of adults, a personal investment in arts education may appear a quixotic self-indulgence. Generally, those mature students who do enter the system find it is not designed with their needs in mind: as a result (Hubble & Bolton, 2021) they are more likely to drop out than younger student (15% v 8%) and less likely to gain a 'good' degree (67% v 79%). Challenges facing mature students have been amplified since the introduction of high tuition fees in England in 2012 (Callender & Thompson, 2018).

While the inflexibilities of conventional campus universities have served some adult learners poorly, the COVID crisis of 2020-21 has disrupted traditional HE teaching approaches, and the sector has seen a significant transition to more, more flexible, and more creative online teaching as a response to lockdown restrictions. The COVID crisis has also seen many adults facing the threat of redundancy or the precarious imposition of furloughing on established jobs. As a result, there is increasing evidence that adults are re-evaluating their lives and careers (Ducharme, 2020) and exploring learning opportunities (Olson, 2020) more than previously. We wonder if, in promoting generic efforts to widen participation amongst school-age pupils, and in government infatuation for careers in STEM, the sector has yet to learn from the COVID disruption. Insufficient account has been taken

of two critical gaps in widening participation: first, the needs of adults who may only be in a position to study in a flexible or part-time mode; second, the pedagogic transition required to prepare adult learners for successful study in the arts.

This chapter explores the challenges faced by a group of part-time mature students, learners whose voices are rarely heard in research around the arts. Numerous reports (see Butcher, 2020) have lamented the dramatic drop (61%) in the number of adults engaging with HE over the last decade (OfS, 2019). However, the consequent near-disappearance of part-time mature learners from conventional university study, is rarely mentioned in institutional Access and Participation Plans (OfS, 2019), and the impact of this narrowing of participation has still not been sufficiently addressed. Despite regular calls by the regulator in England that HEIs should acknowledge this, part-time adults remain virtually invisible in widening participation policy at a national level (OfS, 2020).

We are therefore pleased to report a case study which goes some way to plugging that gap, presenting findings from an investigation into the impact of an arts and languages Access module on adult learners at the UK Open University (OU). The University has retained an open access registration process, and a preparatory module is offered to those students with low prior entry qualifications, as well as to those adults lacking confidence returning to education after many years. This 30-credit module is assessed at Level 0 (pre-HE but embedded as a voluntary starting point in a BA Hons qualification). 6K+ part-time distance learners have registered on the module since 2013, and they are offered a preparatory cross-disciplinary course introducing three substantive disciplines (art history, literature and history). Most students who pass the module progress to undergraduate studies at the OU, especially the BA Humanities, and, as they progress, tend to out-perform similar students who enter directly.

To provide some institutional context, the OU has half a century of experience in delivering tuition through distance learning. Students are allocated to a specific tutor group - that tutor is responsible for marking assessments (TMAs) and providing extensive feedback to enable learner progression. Access students, who may be particularly anxious and lacking in confidence due to their prior educational experiences, are supported via regular pro-actively arranged telephone calls. This model of tuition support builds trust in students and prepares them for more independent learning at Level 4 (first year of an undergraduate degree).

Since the OU introduced Access modules in 2013, institutional statistics have persistently indicated that students with low previous educational qualifications who are new to the university, and who study an Access module before progressing onto their degree-level study, perform to a standard 10+% higher than their contemporaries from similar backgrounds who enter the university directly into level 4. Whilst we know that this happens across all three Access modules (for example, for STEM, see Butcher 2017, Butcher et al 2020), this scholarship sought to explore if there were Arts-specific ways in which tutors and students could measure a greater degree of confidence and/or competency.

Possible Insertion of Figure 1 Module structure

### **The 'Access' issue**

Drawing on two decades of generic WP literature, we identified a number of key themes to contextualise our study of adults accessing the arts. We began with Gorard et al (2006), who identified an important three-part framework (situational, institutional, dispositional) to conceptualise the barriers associated with efforts to widen participation. This framework has

particular resonance with the kind of obstacles faced by economically disadvantaged adult learners, who, as Gorard et al noted, were not all automatically motivated to engage in learning:

- situational barriers equate to the practical challenges facing mature learners. For example, these may be associated with the cost of study, the time commitment required for both full-time and part-time study, and the distance to travel to attend classes in non-residential universities.
- institutional barriers reflect the inflexibilities inherent in systems which remain largely premised on young students attending university full-time. For example, these disincentives may be around timetabling strictures, uncompromising assessment deadlines, lack of creche facilities, closure of library and/or restaurant facilities in the evenings, inadequate personal tutoring/student support facilities aimed at adult learners, or well-meaning but poorly targeted exhortations focussed on sexual health and 'Wednesday afternoon' sports societies/clubs.
- dispositional barriers expose the long-term effect of what might have been poor prior educational experiences. For example, the extent to which adults who missed out on going to university at 18 carry with them a feeling of 'imposter syndrome'. Many may constantly expect to be 'found-out', a 'fish out of water' who shouldn't be there.

Gorard et al (2006) acknowledged the place of alternative entry routes for mature learners, identifying Access courses and Level 0 provision as supportive transitional programmes which can lead to positive achievement. Access courses in the UK have a long history, offering, since the 1980s, an alternative to the traditional A level entry route to university. They have prepared students with low prior qualifications, or those who have been out of education for years, to progress to undergraduate study.

The specific challenges faced by mature learners on Access courses were explored by Reay et al (2002) who identified transition difficulties as complex and problematic when ethnicity, gender and marital status intersect with the consequences of class. The greatest obstacles in their study were faced by time-poor lone mothers from working-class backgrounds, for whom time to study was time away from caring for others and thus non-negotiable. These adult students existed in especially challenging financial circumstances. Their 'choice' to participate in HE was described as identifying what cannot be had and exploring the paucity of remaining options – like the predicament described in Butcher and Rose-Adams (2015) as a Hobson's choice.

Most adults are only able to contemplate studying part-time, and although the OU (and some other universities) have proud histories of teaching part-time, the recent experience of adults returning to part-time learning is under-researched. Hunt and Loxley (2020) identify an instrumental Irish policy drive in which a focus on employability and re-skilling masks the heterogeneity of part-time student perspectives. They note a clash with students' sense of belonging in their institution, as well as the obstacles to persistence adult learners are inevitably forced to overcome. This tension is also cited by the mature part-time learner voices quoted in Butcher (2020), who highlighted life disruptions and money worries (situational barriers) and university inflexibility (institutional barriers) as impacting on their studies.

It appears that despite two decades of institutional effort and policy exhortations instigated by the Dearing Review (NCIHE, 1997) to widen participation across the UK, there remains a considerable inequity in access to and success in HE, both for working class students (Reay, 2018) and black and ethnic minority students (UUK/NUS, 2019). Students from both groups are spread very differentially around institutions and national data (OfS, nd) demonstrates they achieve and progress poorly, relative to students from more advantaged backgrounds. This suggests, as Burke (2012) argued, that Widening Participation is a contested terrain, balancing a tension between transformative

approaches to social justice, and a more utilitarian compensatory approach which can conceal historical inequalities and intersections of disadvantage. She notes the need to take account of different routes, and different modes of study, in any analysis of WP. While much attention has rightly been given recently by OfS to characteristics associated with persistent participation and awarding gaps, including ethnicity, disability and proxies associated with low economic status, the position of part-time adult learners remains under-addressed. Age appears to intersect with, but also compound, existing disadvantages.

### **The participation problem: adults, interdisciplinary arts and employability**

There is a danger that, with negative media coverage from politicians (Garner, 2014; Donelan, 2020) adding to the perception by adults that investment in (high) tuition fee costs is disproportionate to employability outcomes in the arts, mature learners from disadvantaged backgrounds will perceive the arts and humanities as risky and unattractive. The consequence for Arts higher education is likely to be that participation will become less diverse. We have therefore taken an adult learner lens to Gorard et al's (2006) framework (noting their worries about poor rates of progression on Access courses which were due to other barriers to participation) in order to identify a clearer understanding of discipline-specific challenges and solutions to widening participation in the arts.

The majority of OU learners study at part-time intensity, and most have chosen, since the 1990s, to graduate with a named single subject undergraduate qualification. However, the preparatory Access module and the 60-credit introductory Level 4 module in the arts and humanities have been deliberately designed to be interdisciplinary (Butcher & Clarke, 2021). The potential benefits of adopting an interdisciplinary approach in the arts to widen participation is asserted in Sperlinger et al (2018) who provide strong emancipatory and participatory arguments around transforming and engaging mature students from disadvantaged backgrounds in a community-based Foundation Year with progression to a selective university. Conversely there is also evidence that interdisciplinary approaches in Art and Design education can present challenges to mature students (Broadhead, 2017), with a recommendation that invisible pedagogies need to be made explicit and acknowledge an adult's previous education.

We argue there is something distinctive about the experiences and perceptions of adults who wish to engage with the arts but, because of the disadvantages they face, can only study part-time. In a UK-wide report on part-time learners in HE, Butcher (2015) noted differences between the disciplines. His interviews with adult learners across the sciences, social sciences and arts, revealed that, unlike gendered and employability-related drivers for studying STEM and Education/health subjects, adults opting for arts subjects were less driven by the need or desire to gain qualifications. Rather the key driver was a distinctive personal engagement around love of subject. Part-time learners in the arts appreciated access to expertise and embraced a conception of personal transformation, despite having previously been discouraged by parents from studying subjects in which they were perceived as unlikely to make a living. Studying the arts was an immersive experience related to personal identity, not 'juggling' studies, as those studying for employability had, and insistent they were not 'leisure learners'. Although they had no time to study full-time, their commitment to the arts was significant.

Davies & Elias (2003) note that, for adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds returning to education, wrong subject choice is a critical factor in premature withdrawal. At an individual learner level withdrawal can be extremely damaging, not only in relation to the identity and self-perception of already tentative adult learners (dispositional barriers), but also given the amount of tuition fee debt incurred for no beneficial outcome (situational barriers). It is unfortunate that, as Sperlinger et al (2018) avow in an intriguing thought experiment, the current HE system seems designed from the

premise that all students will have been the kind of 13 year olds who knew what they wanted to do with their lives, and enjoyed good health when sitting their examinations in the 'right' subjects. In contrast, adult learners are a heterogeneous (Butcher, 2017) bunch and often carry negative learning experiences with them for many years (Fowle, 2018) Their sketchy knowledge of disciplines may be based on out-of-date experiences of school subjects and, if combined with a lack of understanding of the complexity of HE qualification pathways, may result in poor choice of degree qualification. By enabling new learners to delay having to choose a single subject on entering HE, the OU, as an avowedly open access institution, has sought to mitigate attrition. By introducing interdisciplinary arts, students report enjoying the opportunity to engage with subjects they had not considered, or in some cases, not even heard of. The positive impact of an interdisciplinary approach can be demonstrated in persistent data that around 25% of Access students change their intended degree route as a direct result of studying on the preparatory module.

Adult students in previous studies of an interdisciplinary Arts Access module (Clifton, 2012) have enjoyed the opportunity to think and discuss critically, a point amplified by Condee (2016), who argues persuasively for critical thinking in teaching and learning in the humanities, with interdisciplinarity providing an opportunity for a C21st recalibration of connecting together. So, opportunities to explore different subjects, and the connections between them as manifest in interdisciplinary study, seem to be an important and under-researched aspect of effective approaches to curriculum design for widening participation in the arts.

### **Supporting skills development and teaching the 'rules of the game' in a preparatory arts curriculum**

In the Arts, Warren (2002) identified three models of academic support: separate, semi-integrated and integrated in supporting learning. However, Boughey (2002) noted the tension between arts institutions offering study skills to students from under-represented backgrounds (essentially, a deficit model 'blaming' the student for their learning shortcomings, and sending them 'off' for additional academic development) and the urgent need for institutions to adjust their own pedagogic practices to be more inclusive and more student-centred. Zemits & Hodson (2016) additionally lament university attempts to 'bend' students to fit inflexible university teaching systems. The dilemma of the extent to which support should be separate or integrated can be magnified in a distance teaching university like the OU, which is committed to its mission to be open access (there are no selection criteria for undergraduate qualifications to sift potential learners) and which has embedded systems to support entrants with low prior entry qualifications.

The opportunities afforded by technology-enhanced learning to widen participation were explored in Jones and Lau (2010). They noted advantages in accessibility but challenges for some learners. Crucially, they advocated for the positive impact of a comprehensive induction, pro-active targeted support as well as the removal of financial barriers. It is worth noting the OU is not an online university, rather it offers students supported open learning, a blend of content delivered through print and media-rich virtual learning environments, supported by pro-active tutors. We were keen to explore how adult learners, commencing study in the arts, might best be supported in this highly specific context.

Identifying the most effective pedagogic choices can be crucial in meeting the needs of adult learners in the arts. For example, Miall (1989) argued for a more student-centred approach in the teaching of English Literature, describing as highly motivational the deliberate systematic experience of a range of methods and instruction in interpretation, with texts chosen for their ability to speak to a student's own experience. Smith and Hopkins (2005) emphasised the need for a more informed transition given the mismatch between student expectations of English literature and the realities of

university study in the discipline. Green (2006) queried whether the transition of learners into undergraduate study in English Literature could be improved by the interrogation of pedagogic assumptions, given his research revealed critical skills like 'reading' were understood so differently by new students and their lecturers. He advocated for a three-part model of HE teaching, in which content knowledge was balanced by knowledge of students' previous (school) learning and the impact of pedagogic delivery. The importance of starting where the students are is, we believe, even more important for adult learners

Zemits and Hodson (2016) concluded that any discussion of widening participation in the humanities which used a lens of cultural capital drawn from the work of Bourdieu needed to include the fostering of awareness of personal perspectives on historical and contemporary events, alongside an awareness of the contested nature of meaning. This resonated with our experience of working with adult learners. We deliberately designed our study to elicit the impact of personal transformation on the identities of mature students who thirstily engaged with the arts.

We also drew on previous scholarship in which 'assumed' knowledge and competence was rendered visible to students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and tacit 'rules of the game' were made explicit in relation to academic success in the arts. A critical engagement with the literature on inclusive assessment (Butcher et al, 2017; Wilson et al, 2016) enabled us to explore the alignment between inherent intentions in our pedagogic design and student perceptions. Consequently, we sought to better understand the extent to which, what might be termed an access pedagogy, was effective in inculcating the 'rules of the game'.

## **Methodology**

We were keen to investigate the extent to which, and in what ways, the OU Arts and languages Access module prepared adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds to progress to undergraduate study in the arts. The open access context of the study was very relevant (Yin, 2004), so we made a methodological choice to conduct what Stake (1995) identified as an institutional case study, in an interpretive paradigm, using qualitative methods. The case we studied was bounded by the Access module under examination. Based on themes emerging in the WP literature, and researcher professional knowledge gained from eight years' experience working on the production and presentation of the module, we questioned how an arts Access module prepared part-time mature learners for their first 60 credit undergraduate arts module.

The case and research question were explored through a lens informed by learner demographics - mostly adult learners, from disadvantaged backgrounds, with low prior entry qualifications. We elicited students' qualitative perceptions of the impact of the Arts and languages module to identify common and unique features of the preparatory learning experience and better understand the power of the learning experience.

Data was elicited in three stages. First, student participants volunteered in response to an invitation via email in the module forum. Findings from 37 semi-structured telephone interviews with a convenience sample of Arts and languages Access students completing their module were analysed. On average, each interview lasted about 25 minutes and was digitally recorded. The questions asked to students were developed and refined by the researchers, and after reliability-testing on a colleague, were structured to cover:

- the extent to which tuition by 'phone had met their needs as a student new to university study in the arts.

- the extent to which adults felt isolated by studying the arts alone, or if they felt part of the broader OU community (utilising student forums, for example).
- the extent to which student confidence had been enhanced by studying the Arts and languages Access module.
- the identification of arts-specific study skills impacted by their studying the Access module.
- the extent to which knowledge of arts subjects was enhanced by studying the module.
- the extent to which students felt prepared to progress onto an undergraduate qualification in arts and humanities.
- if students had at any point encountered obstacles that could lead to their withdrawal, and if so, what had motivated them to continue.

Second, tutor perceptions on the impact of the Arts and languages Access module were gathered by informal conversations in staff development sessions. Third, specific student opinions were sought via forum prompts.

We used an analytic lens drawing on theories associated with widening participation, especially Bourdieu and cultural capital. Interviews were transcribed by one of the researchers, and the raw data was initially analysed separately by each researcher through a process of continual comparison drawing on Corbin and Strauss' (2008) concept-driven theoretical sampling. This allowed emergent partial conceptual frameworks to be developed, which were then discussed to establish a consensus on the reliability of emerging themes. Concepts were then linked together to identify three main findings. While we cannot claim generalisability of the findings beyond the uncertainty of 'fuzzy generalisations' (Bassegy, 1995) in which intelligent interpretations of other similar cases, in other contexts, can be made, we do suggest the importance of an 'Access effect'.

In addition to the need for Access preparation to overcome learning barriers in the arts, two themes emerge: the intrinsic benefit of interdisciplinary arts study for adult learners (v extrinsic employability outcomes, and the impact of an 'Access pedagogy' on the inculcation of arts-specific skills and generic studentship skills. In our findings below, we report on student feedback – students have been anonymised, using numbers for one channel of communication (threads on forums about careers) and letters for another (student interviews from an Employability scholarship project); the 'careers threads' are also numbered, 1 referring to the October forum and 2 to the February.

## **Findings**

### **The participation problem: adults, interdisciplinary arts and employability**

As previously asserted, greater focus is given both socially and through funding on qualifications that have a more direct vocational correlation, and linking arts subjects to employability – particularly specific job roles or vocational areas – can be challenging, due to the wide ranging and transferable nature of the skills gained by studying arts and humanities subjects. Students returning to education to study on the arts Access module have frequently reported that they are doing so because they have always wanted to study in that subject area – sometimes after being pressured by family to study a more vocational subject when younger, or were simply not given any opportunity to study further (student 3, careers thread 1) – and are clear that they are fulfilling a promise to themselves in doing so. Often, this does not relate to any specific future career plans, although some students remain open to this. In some cases, students have reached a point at which they recognise that their current career has a limited span for them, physically or motivationally. They are therefore hoping for a new career arising from their study, although perhaps not feeling as time-pressured to get onto the career ladder as younger students might feel. These older students recognise that they are unlikely to be able to study at full-time intensity, and therefore the completion of a degree will take



a further six years after they complete Access. However, for one male student in his early 40s, working in a manual job, he was aware that he needed to study consistently in order to progress and make changes before his job became potentially damaging or excessively tiring (Student A from employability project).

When examining posts on a careers thread on the forum to welcome students to the first interdisciplinary arts module of their degree – the follow-on module to the Arts and languages Access module – there are two distinct groups of students posting. One group represents the perspective of Student A above; they have recent or ongoing professional experience in a particular field, such as the prison service, policing, or yoga teaching, but recognise that there are limitations within that field which will hinder their progression. For one student, the fact that there were no further progression opportunities within the prison service was, for her, a primary driver for reconsidering her options, and beginning to study with a view to the possible changes she might be able to make to her working life in the future, although she expressed no clear aim on this (student 4, careers thread 1). For other students – a yoga teacher, and a journalist – the pandemic has adversely affected their work, and their future prospects of working in that field, and has necessitated a return to study perhaps more quickly than they might otherwise have undertaken. For many older students, however, there is also a concern that career conversion might not be possible, and that time pressure operates in a different way – one student expressed that he felt that ‘at 49 sometimes I get the feeling I am in the last chance saloon’ (Student 1, careers thread 1).

Older students might not have such clearly defined career aims but perhaps know that they want to study something that they enjoy, that they will value, and which they will want to give precious time to once they have completed their work and caring commitments (Student B, employability project). Other students express quite clear aims, such as to ‘get into proof reading and copy editing’ (Student 2, careers thread 1). Teaching is a popular choice with return-to-learners, and two students in their 30s expressed a desire in completing their degree and a teaching qualification (students 5 and 6, careers thread 1). However, many older learners are not entirely sure what options might be available to them – they are concerned about having had a variety of jobs, which has put them off addressing constructing a CV (student 1, careers thread 2) or simply do not know what options there are (student 2, careers thread 2). It is clear that for older learners, whilst they might have aims to change career, or even quite clearly defined goals, they are aware that there are other barriers which might inhibit them achieving the change they desire.

There was also a distinct change in the requests to the careers adviser on the two welcome forums that were examined. The first forum supported the start of the October 2020 module, and the second the start of the February 2021. In careers thread 1, there were mostly slightly older students posting their aims and engaging with conversation via the forum; in careers thread 2, on the February forum, there were many more students requesting a personal consultation in which they could discuss their career aims, and there was a mixture between students expressing that they had a clear goal (although not articulated in their post) and those who wanted to discuss options. The students on the second forum represented a greater percentage of those who wanted change but were not sure what – and discussions on other threads recognised the effects of the pandemic on working opportunities, with many students who had either been made redundant or who realised that their job might not be as secure as once believed. This lack of certainty around what might be available to them with an arts and humanities degree, named or otherwise, might relate to comments made by older Access students in an employability project. When asked about career goals, even when a goal was articulated, students expressed the belief that it was not widely known exactly what areas of work an arts degree could lead to. All four students interviewed expressed the belief that the general public were unaware of what careers would be open to arts graduates, and that parents of younger students would prefer to direct their studies to qualifications with a more

clearly articulated career goal, such as law, business, or STEM subjects. One student expressed that she had not considered studying arts when she was younger because she believed the only thing that she would be able to do with such a degree would be to teach, and that she thought this belief persisted amongst people of her age group, who are now parents of younger university students. The potential opportunities were welcomed, and all four participants felt that greater knowledge of the range of careers open to arts graduates would lead to it being an accepted pathway particularly for students characterised by QP 'flags' like low socio-economic status or from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds.

### **Supporting skills development and teaching the 'rules of the game' in a preparatory arts curriculum**

The part-time learners we interviewed were adamant about the crucial impact of being supported in their Arts and languages Access module to acquire specific skills/competences. These were identified as both generic studentship skills (like time management) to overcome the situational barriers they encountered, and dispositional enhancements associated with boosting the confidence of a tentative returning learner. It was apparent from a consensus in the comments that, due to the time away from education, or indeed the negative experience of prior education they carried with them, Access students had very little sense of their own academic potential. They regularly used phrases like 'terribly unsure' or 'not having the courage' in relation to their perceived capability to undertake undergraduate study in the arts – but that this lack of confidence was mitigated by the positive experience of taking an Access module (we of course acknowledge we were speaking with students who volunteered to share their experiences and may have been predisposed to be affirmative).

It is known (Donovan & Erskine-Shaw, 2020) that an academic canon associated with the arts and humanities can present barriers to students from under-represented backgrounds, not least in those disciplines privileging essay based assessment relying on clear structure, confident assertions and a more elaborate vocabulary, or in disciplines operating with implicit 'rules of the game' involving tacit competencies like criticality or objectivity.

A crucial impact on students of taking an Access module in the arts and humanities seems to come from engaging in a relatively low risk academic programme which endorses that an adult has the skills to be a legitimate member of a university. This may be especially true in the arts and humanities in which access to the academic canon can, too often, be assumed. The module provided, for one student, an opportunity for them to learn in the same way that they would when they progressed, but without the immediate pressure (Interview 16).

This suggests an important point about what might be termed an Access pedagogy – that teaching approaches need to prepare adult learners for what they will experience on an undergraduate module. This Arts module offered a realistic and authentic version of learning in HE, but a bridging one, tempered by an acknowledgement of the students' starting point. Students on an Access module are not going to be a homogeneous group, and as such may include vulnerable and tentative learners. An Access curriculum which takes students on a gentle trajectory, with opportunities for flexibility in relation to the pressure of formal deadlines, needs to offer a taste of HE in which undergraduate pressures are mitigated – preferably by a pro-active, empathetic and supportive tutoring model, which helps to build learner confidence to progress to their degree (Interview 28).

This is a powerful confirmation of the impact of preparatory study. Not only is the issue of confidence addressed, represented as a personal barrier around agency and self-perception of students feeling as though they have the power to be effective learners which emerges strongly in the literature (for example, Johnson, 2018), but the significance of adult students feeling brave enough to commit to HE study despite all the competing demands on their time and negative

experiences from previous education is exposed. This invisible obstacle, the courage to engage with HE, is rarely reported in the pedagogic literature.

Even if students have studied previously in a different discipline, or a long time ago, they indicated that there were still issues about fitting study in around work or family commitments. This did not just relate to having the time to read module materials, or even to writing essays, but seemed a more general concern. For these distance learners, it was about learning how to get into the rhythm of study, and how to make effective use of the limited time they had available. This was an aspect of preparation that needed addressing before they committed to degree level study and longer, more intensive modules.

Specific study skills were reported as being improved by participating in the Access module. Time management was cited by over a quarter of respondents as a skill that had grown for them during their study. For example, getting into 'the routine of studying' was cited by one student as an important part of their preparation to study further, and crucial to making the decision to continue studying; this student was acutely aware of their own failings in terms of planning, and actively wanted to improve their approach to study (Interview 14).

Learning to set themselves a routine of study seems an important outcome of Access study. One student indicated that they had made the decision to postpone further study for a year, as two of her children were taking A-levels and preparing to go off to university in the next 12 months, so her time would be squeezed (interview 30). Her comment, however, was that without having undertaken the Access module, she would not have realised that it would be so difficult to fit in to her family commitments and would probably have ended up withdrawing from study. This aligns with the kind of obstacles identified by Reay et al (2002) that learners need to overcome to find the time within their competing commitments.

Another student reported learning to be organised to maximise the limited time to study available to them, as they were working at two different jobs; they developed the skills to utilise even small slivers of time to further their study (Interview 35). This is a reminder that the experience of HE is very different if a student must work – and in this instance the time pressure of multiple jobs echoes points made about juggling work and study in Butcher (2015).

## **Conclusion**

What has been clear to us over the past eight years is the powerful effect of our pedagogical model. In supplying students with a tutor and an expectation that tuition is delivered on a 1:1 basis, students are permitted to save face in terms of not needing to disclose what they perceive as their ignorance to a group of peers, and to gain support and guidance on the very specific aspects of studying that are important to their progress. The effect of this model is so powerful that level 4 modules in both Arts and Science curricula have incorporated 1:1 tutor-student contact at crucial touchpoints in their introductory modules, recognising the transformative effect of that personal relationship and individualised approach. These modules have also partially taken on board the approach of blending study skills and module content, although the skills development activities still sit somewhat separately to the curriculum and can be skipped by time-poor students. Undoubtedly, however, it is the effect of being able to give students a less pressured, more tailored and more blended approach to study that is particularly transformative.

Despite the doom-mongers, students are still electing to study the arts, and are doing so across all age groups. We conclude embedding generic skills helps to enhance learner confidence and time management. Academic literacy skills relevant to the arts and humanities enhance cultural capital

and enable disadvantaged learners to access challenging disciplines. The impact of a preparatory arts and humanities module extends into the lives of individual students, suggesting a counter-narrative to the prevailing, 'economic value' paradigms of higher education policymakers.

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