

FACE blog

Prof. John Butcher, The Open University

What is the impact of an Access Programme?

I began my career in 1985 teaching English to mature learners on an Access course in a FE College. Such programmes have been offered since the late 1970s, prefiguring policy makers' interest in Widening Participation (WP) by 20 years. Access programmes have enhanced subsequent achievement, attainment, retention and continuation, correlating with greater student satisfaction (Busher & James, 2018).

In 2018, the Post-18 Review (Augar Report) proposed bridging courses to prevent unnecessary attrition from Level 4 undergraduate study (UG), suggesting the sector still lacks clear policy in this space, despite the existence of at least three substantial pathways:

- 40K students per year take an Access to HE Diploma across 1200 FE courses and many progress to UG study, usually at a (local) partner university.
- 4.5K students per year take an Open University (OU) Access module, with many progressing to OU UG study (and some to conventional universities).
- 700 Foundation Year courses are offered annually through UCAS, aimed at preparing students not meeting entry requirements to progress to associated UG degrees: these can be considered as a proxy for Access, especially for students aged 18-21.

My research suggests age further compounds the kind of intersectional disadvantage highlighted by the Office for Students as barriers to participation, and that a key challenge for mature students is a lack of preparedness rather than any lack of aspiration (on which, historically, so much WP resource has been targeted at pupils in schools). So, I wonder if the key impact of an Access programme can be aligned with mitigating the critical barriers to successful engagement in HE identified by Gorard et al (2006):

Dispositional – mature learners lack confidence and are at greater risk of life disruptions

Situational – mature learners need to juggle multiple priorities so lack time for study is compounded by money worries.

Institutional – HE is insufficiently flexible to address those dispositional and situational barriers affecting mature learners.

I lead the OU's Access Programme, and we have conducted extensive scholarship to better understand the transformative impact on a much more diverse student body entering HE later in their lives. Students and tutors identify dispositional barriers such as fragile self-esteem, a lack of resilience, anxiety about being assessed by an 'alien' essay, a first generation feeling of 'imposter syndrome' and fear carried from school (especially of maths, but also disciplines such as poetry). Situational barriers are also noted, particularly the impact of a lack of time and money contributing to a heightened risk of withdrawal ('not feeling good enough'). The Access team also acknowledge the extent to which even the OU can be insufficiently flexible as an institution to meet all learners' non-linear learning journeys.

At the OU we have sought to address situational barriers, utilising a full institutional fee waiver for Access students on low personal incomes, designing a pedagogic structure which supports students transition from print to online learning (including alternative provision) – and embedding an accessible authorial voice. Students tell us they regret not returning to education earlier – relishing

their sense of achievement, for example on our STEM Access module, 'enjoying for the first time the challenge of maths, helping their son with maths homework, or passing a maths test at job interview'. A key impact was reported as learning how to learn and learning how to manage their time for effective study. Crucial to that positive impact was an inspirational tutor who supported and encouraged Access students to achieve their potential. Interestingly, students appreciated the value in being made aware of the transferability of their existing life skills.

While Access programmes manifestly enable more diverse students to access HE, institutional and sector metrics suggest subsequent retention, achievement and progression can be problematic. I am sure my institution is not unique in analysing completion rates on our Access Programme and consequently demanding explanations of, and interventions to improve, our attrition rates. This decontextualised scrutiny has, over the years, concerned me. However, in preparing for a conference presentation recently, I was reading some of the academic literature associated with enabling programmes in Australia (broadly, what in the UK, we would call Access programmes). I was very struck by something published over a decade ago (Bennett et al, 2012) in which the authors argued that the 'intensification of focus...from government policy of widening access...and institutions which focus on enabling as a source of student capital...although different...tend to consider the student as a form of investment...a potential source of revenue'. The authors pursue the implications of this, noting 'enabling educators struggle to fit with dominant discourses that often reduce success to a comparatively narrow definition concerned with completion rates.'

I now reflect institutions utilising conventional quantitative models of attrition associated with standard UG study (the proportion of registered Access students who complete and pass the module and progress to subsequent UG study) are measuring the wrong impact with the wrong lens. There is an urgent need to take account of the complex nature of attrition within Access Programmes, recognising significant areas of difference from undergraduate programmes and the wider higher education model of attrition. The personally transformative impact of an Access programme on a mature learner returning to education should be judged by qualitative measures. Only they can take account of the more complex contextualised circumstances in which some adults may be forced to withdraw – aspects often beyond the control of an Access programme.

Reference

Bennett, A., Hodges, B., Kavanagh, K., Fagan, S., Hartley, J. & Schofield, N. (2012) 'Hard' and 'soft' aspects of learning as investment: Opening-up the neo-liberal view of a programme with 'high' levels of attrition', *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*: 14, (3), 141-156 ISSN: 1466-6529

Gorard, S., Smith, E., May, H., Thomas, L., Adnett, K. & Slack, K. (2006) *Review of widening participation research: addressing the barriers to participation in higher education*: HEFCE

900 words