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Preparing to succeed: the impact of an access module

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ABSTRACT
This article explores the sustained impact of an Access module on mature students from disadvantaged backgrounds as they progress to undergraduate study. Framed in the context of OfS concerns about attrition and conceptualisation of dispositional, situational and institutional barriers, student survey and tutor focus group data were collected in a case study at the UK’s largest distance learning university. Findings suggested an Access module impacted by aligning learner confidence with improved academic writing, provided a crucial preparatory starting point, and led to enhancements in student time management and competence in learning online. Institutional barriers were mitigated through a 1–1 proactive tutoring model. Recommendations about the implications for improving support for Year 1 students are made.

The Office for Students (Office for Students 2022) highlighted a critical level of attrition affecting the continuation and progression of higher education students in England, particularly impacting learners from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. This threatens sector efforts to widen Higher Education (HE) participation to a more diverse, under-represented population. The UK Open University (OU) has, for over half a century, sought to be ‘open to all’, by providing open access distance higher education at scale – undergraduate qualifications have no entry criteria (unless required by a professional body). However, with open access comes a responsibility to prepare students with the skills to succeed and offer support necessary to overcome barriers.

In 2012, the university developed a part-time 30-week distance learning preparatory Access programme (30 credits at Level 0), responding to concerns that tripled HE tuition fees in England would prevent students from the poorest backgrounds accessing HE. As part of this commitment, tuition fees on an Access module were subsidised at 50% of a standard 30 credit module and at present, students with a household income below £25,000 are offered a full fee waiver. Eighty per cent+ of students registering for an Access module now study for free, thus mitigating the cost barrier for many disadvantaged learners.

Since the inaugural presentation in 2013, over 40 thousand learners have registered on an Access module, with the majority of those who pass progressing to undergraduate study and performing better than students from similar backgrounds entering undergraduate study directly. Until 2023, three interdisciplinary Access modules have been presented every October, February and May:

- Arts and languages
- People, work and society
- Science, technology and maths

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A strong pedagogic framework has been developed for these modules (based on the importance of transitioning (Harwood et al. 2016; Kift 2009), including a common structure of three blocks, the first print-based and the second two digital. The approach also embeds a series of 1:1 conversations between individual students and a dedicated tutor.

The people, work and society module

The *People, work and society* module introduces students to a wide range of disciplines, including social sciences, psychology, health and social care, education, business and law. Students study three blocks, the first presented in a book, the second and third online. Each comprises seven units of study as shown below:

The module has consistently proven popular, attracting at least 55% of the university’s Access students in any one presentation, representing over two thousand new learners per year. It has attracted students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, with internal data identifying a higher proportion of students:

- with low socio-economic status (Up to 86% on any presentation in receipt of a full fee waiver)
- with low prior entry qualifications (62%)
- with a disability (32%).
Many students have told their tutors (and parallel qualitative comments emerge in reflective assessment tasks) that they are first-generation learners and from low participation neighbourhoods. However, the People, work and society cohorts have the lowest retention and progression rates of the three modules. Passive withdrawal can be correlated with the higher proportion of students receiving fee waivers, some of whom report experiencing digital poverty (Butcher and Curry 2022). There also appear to be links to the proportion of students (20%) reporting mental health challenges, higher than university norms. Many Access tutors also report trying to support learners experiencing chaotic lives who are ill-prepared for HE study.

The Access team has previously undertaken research on module impact which has identified a sustained ‘Access effect’ for students completing and progressing into undergraduate study. Scholarship carried out with students and tutors on the STEM Access module (Butcher et al. 2018, 2020) and on the Arts Access module (Butcher and Clarke 2021) conceptualised this Access effect as evidenced by:

- enhanced confidence
- improved studentship skills
- increasingly strategic approaches to assessment (becoming ‘assessment-literate’)
- willingness to pro-actively engage with a tutor

All of which persisted into undergraduate study and positively affected subsequent achievement, leading to improved retention and greater success for students progressing from Access (compared to similar students who registered directly for first-year undergraduate study).

This article does not report a module evaluation. Rather, it explores the extent to which any similar impact can be identified for students progressing from the People, work and society Access module into undergraduate study in education and health and other cognate disciplines, utilising data from a student survey and tutors’ focus group.

**Literature: introduction**

A plethora of academic studies on widening participation have been published in the last 25 years, including research highlighting the need for adequate preparation for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, whether in relation to social class (Reay 2013), ethnic background (McDuff et al. 2018), disability (Shaw 2021) or poverty (Burke 2012), as well as data insights into unequal access to HE (Chowdry et al. 2013). Although the experience of mature learners is relatively under-researched, especially in relation to progression from a distance learning Access course, it is reported that preparatory challenges for mature learners may be compounded by specific obstacles associated with age, including juggling responsibilities and identities (James and Busher 2018). Critically for this research, it is also reported that there can be a prevalence of early attrition in distance learning (Simpson 2013).

To focus down a relevant set of research studies to inform this exploration of the impact of an Access module, we adapted a framework drawn from Gorard et al. (2006), who conceptualised three key barriers to widening participation:

- Dispositional
- Situational
- Institutional

We have used these key descriptors as themes to structure the literature review and inform our research questions. Findings from the first two themes informed a better understanding of the personal challenges Access students face (and which a preparatory module might seek to address). The third theme was adapted to identify potential mitigations, exploring what institutions can do to offer flexible, timely, student-centred support to Access learners.
Dispositional barriers

Adult students returning to education often admit to a lack of confidence (a critical dispositional barrier). Younger et al. (2019) analysed the ‘returning to education later in life’ transition, recording academic culture shock – a loss of identity and belonging leading to reduced self-esteem. While such a transition needs to be navigated by all students leaving formal education, for those mature learners taking a Foundation/preparatory programme, there appears to be a danger of insufficient cultural capital to navigate undergraduate study without demotivation. J. Simons, Beaumont, and Holland (2018) note predictable challenges for mature students joining a Level 4 distance learning module. These included anxiety around academic writing (specifically structuring essays in their own words and referencing), which acted as a barrier to successful study.

This aligns with those dispositional aspects Hall and Winn (2010) report as emotions inherent in new university study, such as feelings of dislocation, alienation and exclusion, especially for those returning to education at Level 0 - the kind of student identity issues described in Jury et al. (2015) as imposter syndrome. Waters and Gibson (2001) focused on psycho-social reasons for withdrawal from an Access Programme, describing them as threats to adult learners’ concept of self. These included feelings of fear, guilt, a sense of alienation, pressure from family and friends and ageism. J. Simons, Beaumont, and Holland (2018) also identified extrinsic motivation in this case, resulting from employers paying for the course (the learner not wishing to let them down), or a student not wanting to waste their own money if self-financed.

Understanding how an Access module can actively mitigate dispositional barriers by transforming adult confidence and learning skills became a key research question in this study.

Situational barriers

Butcher’s research with part-time adult learners (Butcher 2015a, 2015b, 2020) reported on the time pressures mature students experience when having to ‘fit-in’ studying by juggling work (often involving a number of part-time jobs) alongside financial and caring commitments for both children and older relatives. This matches findings from J. Simons, Beaumont, and Holland (2018) who noted obstacles around time management (balancing study alongside normal life activities such as working and/or caring) which were reported as amplifying feelings of isolation. Such situational barriers can be further compounded if students have a disability, are first in the family to engage with HE, or are living in areas of low participation. All these factors limit the availability of peer support and further separate the student.

In a study of non-traditional students in Wales engaging with undergraduate study in the social sciences (Mannay and Wilcock 2015), explored the impact of class-bound inequalities, including social housing. While the Welsh government had committed to regeneration policies, the mature working-class students attracted back into education were reported as having to fit in with middle-class assumptions. The researchers found that students’ pedagogic identities were psychologically split, resulting in feeling a ‘fish out of water’ (Mannay and Wilcock 2015). This led the authors to question whether universities caused or challenged inequalities. Despite attempts at situational flexibility, the digital divide (as represented by unequal access to broadband and hardware) led some students to struggle with online forums, their challenges compounded by inaccessible and overly technical IT support. However, mitigations were usually student-initiated, with buddying up and Facebook groups providing informal support. Indeed, J. Simons, Beaumont, and Holland (2018) noted mature students had to use pragmatic strategies to manage their time efficiently, such as studying at weekends and ‘chunking’ in advance questions to raise with their tutor.

Reporting similar findings, Benson et al. (2012) study of an Australian Social Work programme, explored the implications for supporting a more diverse group of students in HE, particularly those from low socio-economic backgrounds alongside complex life circumstances. The authors suggest
disadvantage is cumulative, with being an older, first-in-family, rural student particularly challenging. The emotional and material impact of studying necessitated a profound re-balancing of commitments (whether competing with children for use of the family laptop, or major adjustments to family finances). Critically, few students in this study sought support from their university, lowering their own expectations about grades and relying instead on mature resilience and determination to scrape through.

Understanding the importance of developing students’ time management and learning skills to mitigate situational pressures on accessing HE thus became a second research question.

Addressing institutional barriers

Simpson (2013) noted the institutional need to support study skills and 1–1 contact alongside revisions to assessment loads for entry-level distance learners. This is echoed in J. Simons, Beaumont, and Holland (2018) identification of the importance of high-quality tutor feedback in tandem with support from institutional systems. Their study also reported the importance of a symbiotic relationship between a tutor’s faith in a student’s abilities and a developing confidence and self-belief (learner autonomy) arising from ‘study-buddies’ and family encouragement. Hart (2012) also identified institutional support but focused on the quality of feedback and interaction, recommending universities consider how they interact with individual learners in the process of developing new student identities. Transition trauma is lessened if the infrastructural links (for example, good working relationships to build belonging or the teacher appearing ‘there for you’) are embedded in the university experience. Research in Australia (Seary et al. 2023) has identified the importance ‘mattering’ as part of the development of a foundational student identity, distinct from student belonging in any transition to university study.

In their exploration of the impact of revisions aimed at reducing attrition to a distance learning Level 4 Healthcare module, J. Simons, Beaumont, and Holland (2018) reported enhancements including Day School provision, 1–1 teaching and asynchronous online forums. These resulted in an improvement to a 63% pass rate, which the authors framed around resilience as a positive construct of ‘adaptive resourcefulness’.

Knox (2003) conceptualised the key to preparatory provision in a Scottish context as ‘HE for real’, allowing students to overcome concerns and adjust to HE in a supportive way, enhancing confidence and equipping students from disadvantaged backgrounds for success. In a later study (Knox 2005), she explored the movement of students between the Further and Higher Education sectors, arguing FE attracts different students and that successful progression cannot be taken for granted in a complex qualification framework.

Also in Scotland, Cole (2018) explored collaborative teaching partnerships across FE and HE in the social sciences. Crucially, disadvantaged learners vulnerable to social exclusion based on intersections of age, class, income and ethnicity, were reported as needing to study nearer to home given family commitments and poor transport. Hence, they were more likely to commence their studies in FE, rather than elite universities, enjoying a more inclusive, supportive environment with reduced financial risk and a curriculum designed to align with students’ everyday lives and to be transferable to the workplace. Students pursued a secure learning pathway into undergraduate study via articulation hubs based on HNC/HND courses in the social sciences. While numbers were relatively low, the impact of developing academic skills and time management in a student-centred environment resulted in high completion and pass rates, reflecting what Leech, Marshall, and Wren (2016) report as students treating FE and HE as two separate fields.

The need for institutions to offer greater flexibility is also identified by Benson et al. (2012) to smooth any switch between part-time and full-time study. They argue professional development in social inclusion is required, encouraging tutors to be more pro-active in pointing students to sources of Information, Advice and Guidance and facilitating support groups.
Australian policymakers’ narrow conceptualisations of success in enabling programmes (broadly equivalent to UK Access programmes) were considered via similarities in outcomes in the 48 nationwide programmes (Syme, Davis, and Cook 2021). However, despite commonalities in learning outcomes, progression in other terms has been challenged; Bennett et al. (2012) argued that they failed to improve participation on the grounds that not all learners entering such programmes are committed to a goal of completion. They argued that students enter for multiple reasons and institutions should expect a diversity of outcomes. The authors propose that dropping out should not be characterised as a waste of time – rather it is about an opportunity to test the water, with enabling programmes representing a different micro-economy of completion and attrition compared to UG study. They went on to question how the impact of ‘soft’ successes, such as individual enrichment or positive shifts in aspiration, should be evaluated.

In a similar way to the cohort in question in this paper, the Australian students on the one-year enabling programme did succeed, but only 50% completed, citing time commitments, family responsibilities and choosing the wrong course as reasons for non-completion – although the authors noted some of those return to further study (Bennett et al. 2012). Perhaps metrics based purely on student progression into graduate employment (associated with younger students’ instrumental goals) misrepresent many mature students’ aspiration for a degree, which can be prompted by a love of learning, rather than future employment (Reay, Ball, and David 2002).

Identifying institutional barriers and what worked in addressing them became a third research question. To better understand any sustained ‘Access effect’ from the People, work and society module, the research focused on:

1. Impact on confidence, personal development and learning how to learn (dispositional barriers).
2. Impact on time management and opportunities to engage with digital learning (situational barriers).
3. Engagement with tutor support for progression (mitigating institutional barriers)

A fourth ‘sub-question’, exploring the extent to which the motivation of ‘career readiness’ was a relevant impact, emerged, in response to the tension between the intense UK policy focus on employability and the contrasting claims in the literature. For example, Sava (2012) highlights adults voluntarily engaging in education – whether by the intrinsic motivation (a dispositional factor) of personal advancement or extrinsic objectives around skills and professional development. She argues both can lead to transformative dispositional change.

Methodology

Our research sought to identify the common and unique features influencing learning on the People, work and society Access module and to explore the extent to which the impact of studying the module was sustained (an ‘Access effect’) into successful undergraduate study. A case study is described by H. Simons (2009) and Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier (2013) as involving the in-depth exploration of diverse perspectives in a real-life context, using a variety of data collection tools to identify both complexity and uniqueness. For this reason, we decided it was the most suitable approach for our research, fitting with the limited timescale in which to collect data (the module was being presented for the final time in 2023 and institutional funding to support the scholarship was available only for one year) as well as the need to systematically collect and triangulate evidence from multiple sources as factors interacted. The research questions coalesced around the aspiration to identify factors impacting successful student learning which might be sustained beyond the immediate module studied – especially important as we were seeking to amplify the voices of mature learners, too rarely heard in HE research.
Ethical consent and approvals were gained from the university’s Human Research Ethics Committee before the case study started, with registration on the university’s Information Asset Register complementing the Data Protection Impact Assessment. All university ethical procedures were followed to ensure integrity in relation to the recruitment and collection of data from tutors and students. The latter required approval from the Student Research Project Panel, the former via an application to the Staff Survey project panel.

The study was conducted in three iterative stages:

1) Desk research included members of the research team analysing internal ‘pre-data’. This included longitudinal achievement, completion and progression scores of students starting their studies with the People, work and society Access module over the previous five years, alongside evaluative data produced for recent Access Programme institutional reviews. This resulted in a temporary set of potential research questions which were reformulated during a series of research meetings.

2) An online survey was administered to a sample of students who had begun their studies with the People, work and society Access module and had since progressed to studying undergraduate modules in Education and Health. Fifteen questions, structured as an inclusive mixed survey of multiple choice and open text boxes, were developed by the research team. Ethical approval was initially agreed for a two-step approach – a sample of students were asked to agree to take part before receiving an online survey. However, this resulted in very limited take-up, so the team re-sought ethical approval for an embedded ‘agreement to take-part’ which included the survey with the consent request. This was more successful, with 19 surveys returned from 378 potential participants. A small team of tutors were recruited to bring ‘lived’ professional insights and experience of their other students to the analysis of the data and to comment further in the focus group. To draw out themes proportionate to the sample size, an initial 16 pages of systematic thematic analysis (Fugard and Potts 2013) was further developed by the research team via a series of meetings to funnel data down into key findings.

The authors are very aware of the relatively small number of responses from what was a self-selected sample of successful Access learners and treat responses as only softly indicative in terms of conclusions to be drawn. As such, quotations from students in the following findings section are representative of key themes rather than individually attributable.

3) Prior to the focus group discussions, appropriate permissions and consents were gained for the involvement of the Access tutors. To enable participation of Access tutors in the focus group discussions, a Staff Survey Project Panel application form had to be approved (SSPP-395) through the university’s Human Research Ethical Committee (HREC). Individual consents were obtained from the six tutors with permission for the evaluation of their transcripts maintaining their confidentiality as participants. Following this institutional approval, an online focus group was conducted and recorded via MS Teams with a voluntary sample of six Access tutors who taught on both the People, work and society Access module and one or more undergraduate modules in Education and Health. Prompt questions were developed by the research team based on themes from the survey responses, and these prompts were shared with participants in advance to stimulate deeper discussion. Tutors were asked to share perceptions and experiences of past People, work and society students in relation to the impact of their Access module on their subsequent journey through UG study. The 44-page transcript was initially analysed by an experienced university tutor (not a participant in the focus group, to reduce bias), before the research team separately developed a coding system and came together to analyse the responses and structure relevant themes. In the following findings section, contributions from tutors are attributed to any quotations selected by a numbering system 1–6 to preserve anonymity. Each of the three iterative stages contributed to explorations of an ‘Access effect’.
Findings

The majority of student respondents to the survey answered that their principal motivation to study People, work and society had been to explore the extent to which studying at HE level was for them – a key dispositional barrier. The module was perceived as a starting point/springboard, aligned with an interest in pursuing relevant disciplines, some of which had been identified as employment opportunities. Tutors identified how the subject matter of the module (exploring topics like people, mental health, psychology) inevitably attracted students who may have experienced long-term health support themselves, but that the interdisciplinary nature of the module helped many students understand what they didn’t want to study (for example, shifting away from original, very defined assumptions that a degree like Psychology was their aspiration). Tutors also noted that students could ‘see themselves’ in the module and that helped when tutors drew out relevance in the module materials.

Impact on dispositional barriers

Two specific impacts addressing dispositional barriers were identified from analysis of the student survey and confirmed in the tutor focus group. The first impact identified a symbiotic relationship between enhanced learner confidence and the improvement of academic writing. This is a crucial impact for older students from disadvantaged backgrounds, who are understandably nervous about engaging with HE for the first time. All students reflected that the Access module offered a highly effective but low risk starting point, crucial in providing a space in which individual learners could test out if they could cope academically. Confidence in succeeding in HE grew as a result. In concrete terms, the sustained impact on essay writing skills was perceived as vital for adults returning to education and was especially significant for subsequent successful UG study. Students, most of whom had not studied for years, stated:

The multiple online activities helped me build my understanding of how to construct an essay . . . and gave me the skills to improve my written communication.

Crucially, the module enabled students to overcome their fear of academic writing. By acknowledging the importance of preparatory academic skills, students came to understand the requirements for success at undergraduate study. For example:

I have achieved higher marks than I could ever have imagined and I put this down to studying [the Access module].

The impact on subsequent successful studies was not limited to confidence in the mechanics of constructing an essay. Students perceived a positive impact from the opportunity to write reflectively (and receiving tutor feedback on that reflective writing). This seems especially important for older learners to help them realise they have pre-existing skills which can be adapted and enhanced for HE:

[1] Had never written academically or referenced or reflected. These skills came as a result of the module . . . Without these, I wouldn’t be able to do as well in my current studies.

Skills development to support both specific essay writing skills and the attentiveness required of reading ‘academically’ was reported as being embedded effectively in the structure and pace of the Access materials:

Reading academic work (rather than my usual) needed a more attentive reading approach. Essay-building tools served me well for Year 1 and beyond.

Dispositional barriers can be particularly challenging and self-limiting for adults from disadvantaged backgrounds seeking to take the first steps into HE. The People, work and society Access module
appears to have a positive impact, iteratively developing confidence and supporting the academic writing skills necessary for sustained undergraduate success.

The second, related impact on dispositional barriers, was confirmation of the crucial importance for adult learners of a preparatory starting point to increase the likelihood of success, building self-esteem via engagement with the module:

[People, work and society] was an introduction back into education after about 25 years . . . gave me confidence to progress my studies.

Tutors reported consistently hearing students describe long-term barriers. For example, a student commenting they:

. . . did have aspirations to do this or that, but it wasn't a door that was ever open to me . . . no one ever spoke to me at school about this. (Tutor 4)

Preparedness can also be revisited in an Access module for those students lacking confidence despite previous achievement. One tutor noted a student who already had a first degree but:

. . . felt she hadn't realised her full potential . . . she never felt she was really good enough, and had never planned an essay . . . we worked in partnership, the self-belief at the end of the module, it was lovely to see an opposite end of the spectrum. (Tutor 1)

The university's Access team are aware the confidence of People, work and society students can be fragile, particularly amplified when confronting anxiety-inducing assessment tasks. Supporting proper preparation for assessment tasks was critical, and one student commented on the module:

Got me back into studying . . . prepared me for [university] assignments.

Tutors commented positively that assessment was introduced early in the module, with 'gentle' weightings and feedback which addressed anxiety. Another tutor developed this impact, describing a student developing self-belief:

Access is often the first thing they have achieved, and it's a university . . . and it can do tremendous things to them. (Tutor 5)

It was also noteworthy that more than one student reported that the experience of studying the People, work and society module had motivated an older (adult) child to take the module, suggesting a profound impact within a family's perceptions of the extent to which HE was accessible to them. A tutor extended this point:

Students may be single parents or from a difficult family background . . . over the module, they grow in confidence with their own parenting skills . . . how they support their children academically with an awareness of learning strategies, showing their children there is value and worth in education. (Tutor 3)

This feels an important and insufficiently researched benefit of an access course and the impact it has not only on the student but their immediate network.

**Impact on situational barriers**

Students and tutors cited two identifiable impacts on the situational barriers faced. The first related to improvements in time management, including finding the time to write more efficiently, with survey responses indicating a significant impact on time management. Students saw benefits in:

Managing time – first time being self-disciplined . . . relearning art of essay writing and use of time.

This impacted the dilemma of squeezing in academic work when short of time:

I was able to study and work at the same time.

Tutors commented:
One student was working 47 hours a week in Lidl and she had a small baby, and during the module she was pregnant again, but managed to complete to a high standard … I had another male student who was working 50+ hours, living in a high-rise flat with restricted internet access, with his sister who just had a new baby … he managed to submit and do well despite doing most of his studying on his phone. (Tutor 1)

This suggests it can be possible for situational barriers around time pressures to be overcome with sufficient institutional flexibility (see below).

Second, and crucially for mature students aspiring to progress to undergraduate study, the support to become a competent online learner was crucial, given distance learning at the university is increasingly delivered through online learning. Students were generally very positive about the balance of print and online learning, reporting specific skills had been improved during the Access module:

Allowed me to gain understanding of how learning worked remotely with the computer and internet, helped me adjust to online learning’. Helped to learn how online portal worked and use of Word for academic purposes.

Tutors reflected on supporting a trajectory to digital literacy and confidence embedded in the module:

I think some students are reluctant about the online learning, especially if they’ve not got those developed computer skills, but sometimes they relish the challenge of successfully navigating studying online … it’s a revelation to them. (Tutor 4)

The role of the Access module in inducting new students into the ‘mysteries’ of distance education at the university was also highlighted. This was important as students’ prior education was conventionally classroom-based:

Helped understand how [the university] works and studying at a distance …

All tutors were convinced of the powerful impact on subsequent study of knowing how distance learning works, including the electronic assessment submission system and web-based support, information and guidance.

This impact was important for the retention of tentative and vulnerable learners for whom distance learning can be daunting enough without two-thirds of the module delivery and almost all assessments conducted online. In addition, subsequent undergraduate success depends increasingly on digital confidence.

Impact addressing institutional barriers

Institutional aspects of the Access learning experience which were within the team’s control, like the pace of the module, were highly praised. As one tutor commented:

One of the good things … is the first assignment is really early in the course and its very informal … it gives them the confidence they can do it. (Tutor 6)

The pedagogic design of the module framework appeared to offer new students a ‘perfect start’ and to be fit for purpose.

The key impact on institutional barriers was acknowledged by students as tutor support. The positive impact of the one-to-one relationship with the tutor was described as being based on proactive phone contact (although tutors emphasised customising support for those who were not confident speaking on the phone by utilising email), supportive feedback, and being responsive and approachable (‘being there’). Such tutoring assisted students in understanding how distance education works:

Having a personal tutor and over the phone tutorials was very productive, I liked the 1–1 contact.

Tutors reported deliberately mediating the module material, drawing out relevance:
The telephone tutorials are a kind of holistic conversation about how the module materials might actually link to their personal lives. (Tutor 2)

In the focus group discussions, tutors recognised being valued for their empathy rather than ‘subject nous’. They also identified the need for proactive engagement to mitigate obstacles faced by many students. For example, flexibly initiating reasonable adjustments and supporting extensions to enable all learners to study equitably and reach the end of the module, an impact which set the student up to succeed in subsequent study. One tutor described a couple of students with illnesses:

the way round that was to ring them strategically at a time when their illness was more manageable, for example after 2pm, and to be understanding about giving extensions. (Tutor 1)

Students commented on the encouraging quality of regular phone calls and email contact in encouraging persistence and the link to pro-active support provided by the university. One tutor commented:

I have had quite a lot of students with physical and mental health disabilities, but the support the university has put in place on starting the module has given them the confidence to carry on … if they had started at Level 4 they probably wouldn’t have been able to cope with the workload. (Tutor 3)

Tutors gave examples of using their own experience as students to create parity and empathy, with students responding positively to a shared experience around learning obstacles. Others were unsurprised at student concerns about attempting their first assessment:

… they had a pretty questionable earlier education experience, often 30 or 40 years ago, I try and emphasise to students the Access modules are really low risk at the start, trying to downplay the barriers without dismissing their personal circumstances. (Tutor 4)

Participants in the focus group also recognised what might be considered ‘neediness’ in some Access learners:

I had a student who had withdrawn a few times before, it’s assessments that really, really, worry her. She is doing extremely well, which she says places more pressure in her mind, to keep achieving very well. She takes it very personally … . It’s developing that personal relationship. (Tutor 3)

Tutors also identified the:

… resilience that comes from being able to complete the course … tutors being flexible supports and encourages students just to keep going … (Tutor 2)

Examples of the ‘flexible supports’ tutors encouraged included:

It’s about saying to students, look you have this weekly planner, but sometimes you just have to be pragmatic. Forget those two weeks and jump ahead to the key weeks, you can always go back. (Tutor 1)

Tutors commented on the importance of building trust with their students, as they effectively are viewed by students as the face of the university. One tutor noted:

I think sometimes, at the beginning of a module, you don’t have that trust, but it’s the telephone tutorials, they are non-invasive and non-threatening … students are more likely to disclose things, giving you a better idea of the challenges they face. (Tutor 2)

Another reiterated how, as long as a student is comfortable with the conversation:

the phone call identifies any sort of anxieties, and barriers they face, because generally they are worried at that point about starting the module. If they mention something, I can go back to them and say ‘is it OK if I refer you and see what support the university can give you. (Tutor 3)

The impact of having a designated tutor, pro-actively supporting students on a 1–1 basis, cannot be underestimated. Institutionally, the university took the decision to invest resources in front loading
support for mature students with low prior entry qualifications. This critical and enabling 1:1 relationship ensures the development of a trusting tutor relationship and conversations that support and validate the students’ previous experiences (work, personal and academic) – bringing the outside in (Jackson 2011) and seeing strength and value in past experiences to current study. The importance of prioritising such support offers some mitigation to the institutional inflexibilities and situational and dispositional barriers faced by students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Importantly, two negative findings emerged from the survey, echoed in tutor discussions – first, students perceived no immediate impact in relation to employability, although tutors gave examples of students contacting them some years after their Access module, updating their career advancement. This suggests the impact on employability may be more of a slow burn, as mature students were taking an Access module for the ‘pure’ intrinsic HE experience, attracted by the course content or (as one tutor reported) wanting to do something else after being in the same job for thirty years.

Second, in terms of broader disciplinary skills, students perceived little or no impact on their numeracy skills. This prompted revisions to the replacement module to ensure students aspiring to UG study in, for example, psychology had more of a grounding, and developed confidence in some specific and relevant numeracy skills.

Conclusion

A crucial impact recognised by former Access students and their tutors was a clear sense of preparedness for progressing to UG study, a sense in which they felt culturally ‘ready’ for the challenges of HE. As one tutor asserted:

…having atimetable, meeting deadlines, understanding the questions, really getting into studying and really understanding what the brief is. I think that’s very important for a lot of students.

An access module appears vitally important for the success of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly those older students returning to education after a length of time. Former People, work and society students have fed back that, even after success on Access, there can be a need to adjust to more limited, reactive support at undergraduate level:

[People, work and society] definitely gave me an edge when I started my degree. I could tell in the group forums which other students had studied an access course.

This is not about the institution, but rather the growth of any student to overcome dispositional barriers around confidence as a learner and a new understanding of learning how to learn, extending to performance and achievement:

Without [People, work and society] I don’t think I would be achieving the marks I have on my first and current UG modules.

However, tutors were keen to shift the impact from a narrow definition of successful progression to UG study:

Passing the module is a great achievement in itself when you consider where the vast majority of students were when they started the module … that inhibiting barrier that “I cannot study” is broken down.

Sava (2012) reminds us institutions need to be better at offering equality of opportunity in accessing education for a more diverse audience. Framed around second chances to learn, an effective access offer should identify needs (which may be articulated or not), wants and interests, helping students understand both the benefits of learning and their own strengths. Such ‘supported aspirations’ link to personal passions and may help address institutional barriers and acknowledge the sustained impact of such programmes. The provision of flexible opportunities via well-paced and relevant preparatory curriculum, alongside pro-active empathetic 1–1 support, may offer some ideas to address sector concerns about attrition from Level
1 study, which remains problematic across the UK, affecting individual students and institutional performance metrics.

Some of the positive impacts on institutional barriers identified in this study include timely and quality feedback, flexible learning modes and training tutors to be confident in inclusive learning and teaching approaches, all of which would be beneficial for student retention beyond entry/preparatory programmes.

If the sector is serious about addressing Year 1 attrition, we recommend institutions learn from the positive impact of inclusive teaching and proactive support on this Access module. Refocussing resources and making them more accessible to all will help more students succeed. Adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds do not stop being disadvantaged simply by completing an Access module like People, work and society. They gain confidence, an important factor in continuing their studies. However, barriers arising from financial constraints and time pressures, as well as the need for robust digital access, are likely to persist into undergraduate study. Further sector research is needed on the continuing institutional support needs of students progressing from preparatory programmes like Access so that success can be sustained.

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