'The access course could change your life': Capturing mature students' understandings and expectations of Access to Higher Education

Context of the study

Access to Higher Education (HE) is a contested notion that is linked to social justice, equality of opportunity, and economic prosperity both individually and nationally (Burke, 2007). Most recently it has been defined as 'fair access' to HE through the development of particular admissions practices by HE institutions. Recent consecutive governments have tried to address educational and social inequalities by encouraging entry to HE in part through the development of Access to HE courses. Access to HE courses are aimed at social groups who have been historically underrepresented in HE and at individuals who would like to study in HE, but have few or no relevant formal qualifications and who are 'excluded, delayed or otherwise deterred by a need to qualify for (university) entry in more conventional ways' (Parry, 1996, 11). They are intended to provide learners with the subject knowledge and generic skills required for progression to and effective study in HE and the self-confidence to contend with its challenges (Woodrow, 1988).

However, attempts to address social inequalities for individuals of all ages is now under threat In a report, 'Investing in Skills for Sustainable Growth' (DBIS, 2010) the government outlined a new further education funding system including full funding for young adults aged 19-24 years undertaking their first full level 2 or level 3 qualification for the academic year 2012/13, and government backed loans from 2013/14 for learners aged 24 or over undertaking level 3 or higher qualifications to replace grant funding (BIS, 2010; 7). Consequently, students over the age of 24 years will either have to pay for Access course in full up front or take out loans to cover their costs. Yet it is these Access students who are often on low wages or only have part-time jobs because of their social circumstances. It is against this policy backdrop that the paper examines the perceptions of a group of mature students who have completed an access to HE course in social sciences and humanities at three Further Education (FE) colleges in the East Midlands, and their understandings of the importance of access courses in reshaping their future lives by allowing them to escape their current precarious social and economic circumstances.

Theoretical approach

The paper will present the views of the mature students in this study, comparing them with the current literature on how access students are viewed and how they view themselves in terms of their sense of identity. In particular it will consider whether Access students are perceived by themselves and others as being 'legitimate students' (Burke, 2004, Waller, 2006, Woodin and Burke, 2008). Through returning to education, Access students are involved in changing their learner identity through a process of (re)construction, although returning to

education is not the start of a person's development of their learning identity (Brine and Waller, 2004). Further, educational or learner identity is not separate from the students' past or present lives that has been closeted away since secondary school and is now dusted off and readjusted for post compulsory level education (Warmington, 2002). An important aspect of (re)constructing learner identity and identities, however, is gaining confidence (Brine and Waller, 2004) through engaging in supportive relationships and struggling in adverse circumstances to hone their vision of themselves and their preferred lives.

Methodology
This qualitative study worked with mature students and tutors on Access courses at three urban Further Education (FE) colleges in the East Midlands of England to investigate their perspectives on why these students, who generally had few formal qualifications, wished to gain entry to HE, how they perceived themselves as learners and their expectations of Access courses. Participants gave voluntary informed consent to participate and were aware they could leave the project at any time, which some chose to do. The trustworthiness of the study was addressed by triangulating data collection from the students using focus group interviews and individual audio diaries and from Access tutors using semi-structured interviews. The qualitative data was analysed thematically. The outcomes from this multi-site case study cannot be generalised to a wider population than its participants, but the themes that emerge raise questions that need to be consider in other similar institutions and courses nationally.

Results and implications
The paper will demonstrate the significance and importance that mature Access students place on their courses as sites of transition between their current position (present identities), and their future position (identity trajectories) (O'Donnell and Tobbell, 2007), as well as potentially strengthening their position in the labour market. The participants attributed much of the success of the Access courses to the hard work, dedication and commitment of the Access tutors. This leads to questions over the efficacy and appropriateness of current policy trajectories, despite their rhetoric, which appear to work against the tenets of adult education that have traditionally prioritised widening participation through responsiveness to students' needs (Reay et al, 2002). In order to avoid reproducing past educational inequalities, central government discourses on widening participation in HE need to be enacted in ways that address the real social and economic needs of putative students. The students' narratives reinforce how widening participation policies must move beyond discourses of self regulation, in which individuals are positioned as solely responsible for the production of the self with the skills and qualities needed to succeed in the new economy (Burke,2007), to provide the support people need to maximise their constructive roles in society.

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