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Title	Attainment and transition experiences of students progressing from an evening access programme to undergraduate study
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Attainment and transition experiences of students progressing from an evening access programme to undergraduate study

The under-representation of particular sections of society in Higher Education (HE) has driven the widening participation agenda. The Scottish Government has an ambition that 'by 2030 students from the 20 per cent most deprived backgrounds should represent 20 per cent of entrants to higher education' (COWA, 2016). Socio-economic disadvantage remains the primary barrier for entry into higher education but access may also be affected by other markers of disadvantage such as care experienced individuals, people with physical or sensory disabilities, those with poor physical or mental health and those from different ethnic groups (BIS 2014, Scottish Government 2015). These barriers are often reinforced by the complex processes of social reproduction (Bourdieu 2010; Leese 2010) that ensure that many feel that higher education is "not for the likes of us".

Abertay University defines its purpose as:-

- To offer transformational opportunities to everyone who has the ability to benefit from Abertay's approach to university education;
- To inspire and enable our students, staff and graduates to achieve their full potential.

The Access to Higher Education Abertay Dundee (AHEAD) programme aims to develop study skills and increase levels of confidence prior to university entry. AHEAD is delivered two evenings a week guaranteeing entry to an Abertay degree course upon successful completion. The course was significantly restructured in 2012, and with transition an emerging HE theme, a successful bid was made to the Abertay Teaching Learning Enhancement Fund to support the costs of employing research assistants to undertake the qualitative aspects of the study.

The study's aims were to:-

- Investigate student attainment and experiences on transitioning from the AHEAD programme to undergraduate study
- Use the findings to enhance the student experience.

Method

Grade point average (GPA) was calculated for the AHEAD cohorts at each stage of study and compared with the GPA for their year group. Three student researchers were recruited and following ethics approval former AHEAD undergraduates were e-mailed and invited to participate in the study. Two focus groups involving 16 former AHEAD students were conducted and there were face to face semi-structured interviews with a further 9 students.

Results

More than two-thirds of AHEAD students were drawn from the local community, over 60% of the cohort were female, more than a quarter came from the most deprived quintile of the Scottish population and 10% identified as BME. (BME population for Dundee City is 6% and much lower in the neighbouring local authorities (DCC, 2015)). Of the 144 students who enrolled between 2012 and 2016, half registered for Abertay degree programmes (range 41-63%). A small level of attrition was observed with each ensuing stage of study (Figure 1). However, it should be noted that many still exited with a recognisable university qualification.

Figure 1. Patterns of progression from the AHEAD programme by year of enrolment

A comparison of attainment (Figure 2) reveals that former AHEAD students did significantly better in stages 2 and 3 of their university degree ($t_9 = 2.25$ and $t_6 = 7.74$, $p<0.05$) but achieved a significantly lower GPA at stage 1 ($t_{16} = -19.5$, $p<0.05$) (though still attaining a 2:2 grade point average).

Figure 2. AHEAD Student Attainment using GPA as the Comparator

Interview & Focus Group Findings

Students spoke of AHEAD being a positive transformative experience:-

"I think when you've been at home with kids for a while you start to doubt your ability, ..., and even a lot of my friends they'll look at me and go 'I couldn't do that', but you could, ... it gives you that confidence in yourself that you've got the ability to do things like that like, like chemistry and maths, things that are maybe out your comfort zone" . (Student K)

"Absolutely, unbelievable, I thought I'm not going to be able to do this, ...I thought that this was for people that are naturally clever, I didn't realise that I actually had it in me to produce what was asked of me ... but I never actually thought I had potential to do something ... especially studying... it's a whole new world of opportunity and having to use your brain, I honestly think my brain has doubled in size in the last two years, it's crazy... "(Student D)

The positive themes associated with AHEAD were:

- Developing key study skills
- Building confidence/self-esteem
- Learning the university systems: 'getting a head start'
- Evening study
- Free 'no risk' return to education
- Supported degree choice
- Building social relationships
- Supportive staff

The features that emerged from the focus groups/interviews where the students recounted a less positive experience related to:

- Poor understanding/knowledge of AHEAD amongst some staff members
- Not feeling fully part of the University
- A sense of abandonment at the end of the course
- Some module specific delivery and content issues eg. pertaining to pace and level.

Discussion

The role of higher education in enabling transformational learning and access to alternate opportunities is well documented (Kasworm & Bowles, 2012) and can also be experienced by those on pre-entry routes as voiced by the AHEAD students. Furlong and Cartmel (2009) acknowledge that a diverse student body means that there can be wide and varied perceptions of the higher education experience. However, educators need to be careful of using the language of deficit when referring to widening access participants (Morley and Lugg, 2009) and is something that Abertay colleagues will be cognisant of going forward. Sensitisation to higher education can be more challenging for those who are first generation students (Ulriksen, Madsen, Holmegaard, 2017) and for commuter students (Pike & Kuh, 2005). The

qualitative commentary reflect the feelings and perceptions of integration, participation and belonging voiced by many students transitioning into university (O'Donnell and Tobbell, 2007) – it is important that the AHEAD students are aware that they are not alone in experiencing these identity 'crises' (Crossan, Field, Gallagher and Merrill,2003). The quantitative data evidences attainment which legitimises these students' enrolment. Peer mentoring can support transition (Langer, 2010) and the programme team will look to facilitate these student partnerships in induction week, as well as ensuring that the students have access to a named tutor for support in their first year of study.

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