Adult Education Research Conference

1998 Conference Proceedings (San Antonio, TX)

Finding a Route into Higher Education for Local Working Class Adults

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Recommended Citation

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Abstract. The accessibility to adults of six Scottish HEIs and the structural and ethical factors which operate to exclude or include them are examined.How higher education might create a true access culture is assessed through a case study of one institutional response to participation barriers for working class community activists.

Introduction

The reasons for certain groups' non-participation in education have been explored in some depth, and are generally explained in terms of 'barriers' to participation (Cross, 1986). These include institutional barriers, which arise from the negative cultural and structural characteristics of educational providers, as well as situational and dispositional barriers, which arise from conflict between potential learners and the educational and social systems with which they are interacting (McGivney, 1990). Such barriers prompted Halsey (1991) to argue that the outcome of expansion in higher education is the absolute but not relative gain of disadvantaged groups in relation to advantaged groups, because ascriptive forces continue to determine patterns of participation.

The suggestion has come from a number of quarters (Kasworm, 1993; Metcalfe, 1993; Peinovich, 1996) that institutions can do much to combat this continuing inequality through explicit access policy frameworks. One study (Smith et al, 1993), however, found that there was great disparity between institutions for which the cause of access was a central tenet in strategic planning; institutions where access was seen as a 'bolt-on' extra; and institutions where the culture of access was altogether absent from mission and planning statements. It appears that unless key individuals in academic departments who act as gate-keepers are committed to the justice of wider access, then institutions will be under little pressure to redress the other, more instrumental forces which work to preserve the status quo.

Research Design

In order to examine the culture and policy of differing higher education institutions, semi-structured interviews were held with key staff from the six higher education institutions in one Scottish city. A maximum of six individuals in each institution were interviewed about their

views of access procedures in their institution; the ways in which on-going and exit support services operated; and their personal views of adult students. Respondents were drawn from four categories: senior policy makers with an institutional responsibility for access (a Vice-Principal or Dean of Studies); staff from student support services; individuals with an overview of access procedures (such as registrars or deans of faculty); and admissions tutors or heads of departments with both relatively high and low numbers of adult students. The data gathered enabled the assessment of how far these differing perspectives contributed to a culture that prioritised or marginalised access for adult students.

The research into a special project (LAST), based in one of these institutions, involved both documentary analysis and interviews. Documentation on the planning of the project and recruitment and selection procedures was gathered and analysed and supplemented with informal interviews with community education workers, the project planning team, LAST staff, Trust members, and applicants. Participants were interviewed four times: at the start of their course, after three months, after 18 months and again after 24 months. Participants were asked about what had led them onto the course and the factors which helped to sustain their participation. The interviews were transcribed and analysed and this information was used to identify common themes, which included motivation; academic and financial support; school experience; learning experiences which had resulted in change; and attitudes to higher education.

Providers' Views

During the course of the research into the culture and policy of the different HEIs it was found that, although all respondents believed that widening access to adults was desirable in terms of principle and equity, a number of factors militated against it. Each of the respondents identified structural and ethical pressures which served to check their inclusion. These factors also operated at a functional rather than theoretical level where, for example, an admissions tutor might welcome an increased number of adults with non-standard entry qualifications in their department for reasons of social justice, yet feel unable to increase an allocation for such students because numbers are capped centrally. There appear to be three levels of challenge, national, institutional, departmental, and individual, to a more inclusive culture in higher education that operate as institutional barriers - both structural and cultural - for adult returners.

At the national level, although most respondents were ethically committed to the principle of widened access, they felt there were a variety of central, structural barriers militating against it. Chief among these were financial and political pressures from outwith their institutions such as the need to meet target student numbers. A few respondents, however, believed the moral imperative to widen access was such that institutions needed to work actively to challenge these external barriers. Thus, the very function of higher education was considered and questioned by respondents who felt that institutional or individual will could be stifled from the outside. For example, adults were increasingly taking on financial debt to fund their courses, which threatened participation at all stages. Respondents argued that with the best will in the world, there was little they could do to help support adult undergraduates in such a political climate.

At the institutional level, in many institutions and departments, support for widening access was seen to be diminishing in real terms with many departments, viewing widened access as a reactive, rather than proactive, process. Most admissions tutors spoke of selecting students from a large pool of applicants. Where courses were popular, applicants were chosen on the strength of their [generally traditional] qualifications and likeliness of success on course. There seemed little need in such circumstances to take what were perceived as the 'risks' of non-traditional candidates or seek to increase the number of applicants.Whatever the reasons for the constituency of applicants, it is clear that departments followed the path of least resistance in choosing students. Only in departments with already high numbers of adult students were systems in place for assessing applicants in terms of the value added by the institution. Finally, at the individual level, institutions' access culture could be tempered by personal belief that only young school leavers were the appropriate constituency of the University as the following quote, from a Registrar, illustrates: 'There are some people who feel that to exercise any form of positive discrimination that would deprive a very talented 17-year-old of an opportunity to matriculate is criminal'.

If key individuals in academic departments who act as gate-keepers are not committed to the justice of wider access, then institutions will be under little pressure to redress the other, more instrumental forces which work to preserve the status quo. Indeed, adult students themselves stress the importance of sympathetic individuals for course success: as will be seen in the following account of the LAST project, a collective response can do much to overcome institutional barriers to participation.

The LAST Project

This project is designed to enable previously excluded people from the working class, disabled, and minority ethnic communities to overcome the barriers that prevent their participation in higher education. All the eighteen participants in the programme are working class, three are disabled, three are black and none have the standard entry qualifications for the degree in Community Education that they are taking. The project 'seeks to achieve equality of outcomes for people whose circumstances, geographic, physical or cultural, would not permit them to consider becoming professionally qualified' (LAST, 1994: 2). It aims to enable these groups to enter the community education profession whilst working in their own communities and studying part-time. Apart from the barriers that HEIs themselves present to access, non-traditional participants experience situational and dispositional barriers that prevent them from seeing higher education as a possibility for them. In this section of the paper I will discuss how this project has attempted to overcome some of these barriers.

Overcoming Institutional Barriers

The institution has become accessible to this group in a variety of ways: through the culture of the department and the attitudes of the lecturing staff; the subject matter of the course; the

admissions arrangements; the assessment methods used; and the availability of resources. These are each discussed more fully, below. Becher (1989: 20) has suggested that academic cultures are related to the nature of knowledge; that 'the attitudes, activities and cognitive styles of groups of academics are bound up with the characteristics and structures of knowledge domains with which groups are professionally concerned'. Staff on this course had close links with the economically disadvantaged communities from which the students came. In addition, the course had a strong subject focus on issues of inequality in society that made staff particularly aware of the barriers to participation from excluded groups.

The admissions arrangements encouraged applications from community activists in two main ways. Firstly, community work staff generated 'demand' from local activists through early guidance about the value of their informal experience and provided community-based opportunities for them to develop study skills. Secondly, only those whose personal circumstances and lack of educational qualifications would not enable them to gain entry to the degree in the normal way were able to apply for a place through this project. Thus the normal entry requirements were reversed, making possession of the standard entry qualifications a disadvantage.

A further factor was that the methods of assessment, usually a combination of written assignments and oral, group presentations, with no exams, were particularly appropriate for this group. Indeed for any failure in connection with a particular assignment, there were a further two opportunities to overtake the failure with detailed feedback and advice from the staff members concerned. This form and level of support was on top of the role of the two LAST tutors in providing responsive and extensive personal support. More broadly, the privileging of experience from practice, the general approach that being working-class was a positive asset, and the ethos of the course with a particular emphasis on learning from experience, were all factors that contributed to a culture that valued the participation of this group in the course.

The high level of resources available for the project in terms of academic and financial support has been of considerable value. This includes extra tutorial support through the two LAST tutors and finance for travel, books, dependents' care and disability support costs.

Each student has extensive individual tutorial support with a student/tutor ratio of 9:1; there are six lap-top computers available which students can take home as well as computers in the institution; and there is a fund for travel and dependency-care costs. The two LAST tutors have mediated not just between the course and the students but also between them and the whole institution. Examples of this mediation include the prioritising of the issue of access to the institution for disabled people and the successful negotiation of longer submission times for the students' assignments.

Overcoming Situational and Dispositional Barriers

One of the barriers to individuals participating in higher education identified in the literature is negative school experience (McGivney, 1990). Whilst all of the participants were negative about

their own school experiences, they were able to give positive examples of learning which had taken place at a later point in their lives. These experiences were often associated with their involvement in community action: 'What I've learnt since school has been through being involved in campaigns . The important thing I learned was that you do not have to put up with things because if what you want is right then you can change things. That's something they never teach you at school'.'

Because this informal learning provided the entry requirements for the course it means that early negative experiences of school and an understanding that higher education is for 'folk who aren't like us', can be overtaken by removing some of the attitudinal barriers to participation and by being part of a cohesive group. By privileging experience of community activism over academic qualifications at entry the students were helped to value their own strengths. The interviews also highlighted the importance of sympathetic, supportive and approachable tutors, good relationships and patterns of communication between this cohort and fellow students and the suitability of course content. The students provided informal support to each other both through study groupings in their own geographical area and through the tutorial groups. One student suggested that 'being part of the group [is] an inspiration in itself, either socialising or supporting each other with assignments'. Personal factors such as levels of motivation, support from family and friends, and the quality and availability of study facilities and guidance were identified as important. Another student said, 'I think you have to know your limitations and ask for help when you need it and have that recognised'.

Thus, by adopting a strategic, pro-active approach towards breaking down the barriers facing working class adult returners, one department in one institution has been able to create a true access culture.

Conclusion

It appears that where strong personal aspirations are allied to a well-focused project rooted in the community and set within a relatively well-resourced and culturally compatible higher education course environment, the negative channelling experienced by so many working class people can be successfully challenged and overcome. The way this has been achieved in the LAST programme is summarised below.

Institutional barriers: admissions procedures favour young, traditionally qualified candidates; inflexible course arrangements disadvantage adults with varying domestic responsibilities; student loans and other central sources of finance discriminate against older learners; individual members of staff may have little sympathy towards the particular needs of adult students; assessment procedures favour students who have experienced previous academic success; HEIs' ethos tends to reflect social inequalities.

LAST response: pro-active recruitment procedures encourage applications from members of traditionally under-represented groups in higher educaation; the programme includes part-time provision which is not tied to conventional term times; students are able to combine their studies

with part-time work in their communities; finance is made available through the Urban Aid Programme for travel, dependents' care, and disability support; course policy and content heightens staff awareness of the needs of excluded groups; emphasis is placed on individual tuition and guidance; assessment procedures are group-based and flexible; the 'community' of students provides support and reinforces the positive aspects of a diverse student body.

<u>Dispositional barriers</u>: adults with negative school experiences are less likely to return to higher education; continuing education - particularly higher education - is undervalued in many communities, where the culturally-derived attitude that 'education is for other people' can prevail (see McGivney, 1990).

<u>LAST response</u>: students are encouraged to identify past, positive learning experiences of all kinds; these experiences are all valued explicitly by course tutors; the privileging of experience over qualifications enables students to recognize their own strengths; contextualizing the course in participants' communities reduces the 'otherness' of higher education.

Thus, the idea that becoming a professional and gaining a degree is an opportunity open to all - even 'folk like me' - can gain ground not by emulating the well trodden, individualistic middle class passage to higher education, but through a collective process. HEIs following this path will not have reflected and reproduced the inequalities in society, but 'prioritised provision for those whose earlier educational disadvantage would give them a first claim on a genuine lifelong learning system'.(Woodrow, 1996: 57).

Challenging the idea that education is for other people requires not only a change in attitudes by participants but also requires institutions to change their approaches. Only if there is a clear commitment to previously excluded groups will the way be paved to a truly accessible higher education for all adults.

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