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“I was going from one dead end job to another”: Developing the employability of
Access to Higher Education students. (0038)

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Paper Outline

Introduction and Context

Access to Higher Education (HE) is a nine-month diploma course aimed at mature students under-represented in HE who would like to study in it, 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. Access to HE has underpinned consecutive English governments’ aims to redress educational exclusion among non-traditional adult learners. In HE, such learners are seen as crucial in meeting widening participation targets and many HEIs recruit substantial numbers of Access students (Hinsliff-Smith, 2010). Yet, Access courses are constantly having to respond to external demands and the needs of HE. For example, QAA is conducting a review of the diploma specifications to ensure that the qualification continues to meet the needs both of adults following this route and the HEIs to which individuals progress (QAA 2013, online). Such demands create significant tensions around the ethos of Access to HE and the reality in which it operates. The shifting nature of Access also raises questions about the ways that learners on these courses are viewed in comparison to ‘traditional learners’, How accurate is it, for instance, to describe Access students as educationally disaffected? Access practitioners and academics have tended to identify Access students with the ‘educationally disaffected’, but this ignores how their experiences of the peripheral labour market influence their decisions to return to formal education via Access. Drawing on data from an ongoing project on Access students’ education to work transitions, this paper examines this issue and the extent to which an Access ‘qualification’ is perceived by the students as adding to the value of their labour power. The paper also argues for the dual value of Access not only in terms of offering individuals the opportunity to develop intellectually but to better equip them for work.

Theoretical approach

The paper will present the views of the Access students in this study, comparing them with the current literature on how access students are viewed and how they view themselves. Students involved in Access to HE courses have often known educational and social disadvantage but, regardless of previous experiences of schooling, they see higher education as a way to a 'better' life (Warmington, 2003). This links to particular conceptualisations of human capital theory (HCT) in which, according to HCT, individuals make logical and rational decisions around their education based on an understanding of the rewards it will generate (Tomlinson, 2013). Indeed it is this model which has been influential in shaping official policy framework on the role of education in the economy. Bourdieu's theorising is also influential in terms of how Access students' are positioned in the labour market and what they possess in terms of social, cognitive and cultural resources (Hodkinson et al 2008). Examining these approaches prompts the question, why do mature students take Access courses? Firstly, access courses have, since their inception, been targeted at specific disadvantaged groups of learners. Secondly, Access courses are endorsed by the QAA in a drive to widen participation. As such adult participation in this type of course has been portrayed as the way out of dependency and low expectation and a route to participation and active citizenship (Kennedy, 1997: 4). Educational and labour market aspirations have, therefore, become embedded in a discourse in which participation in higher education is 'constructed as offering the individual greater determination over the use of their labour power thus providing increased possibilities for self-realisation' (Avis, 1998: 5).

Methodology

The study draws on a current research examining Access students' learning transitions and uses a social interactionist framework that recognises people's learning and development being constructed through social interactions in particular milieu (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The study was based in seven urban and rural further education (FE) colleges in the East Midlands of England and focused on students who had enrolled for an Access Diploma in Social Science/Humanities. Across the colleges there were 60 participants who took part in a series of focus group interviews over an academic year (November, March and May). The interviews discussed issues relating to how the Access students saw themselves, their perceptions of learning, and their shifting identities. Out of the sample size, 12 participants were male and 48 were female. Their ages varied between 19 and 45 with the majority aged between 24-35. Participants came from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. Careers included homemaker, careworkers, hospitality and office work. Interview data was also collected from Access tutors. A questionnaire was also distributed to all the Access courses taught in the participating Colleges (n=365 participants) to provide background data about the Access students' education, qualifications and work experience.

Results and implications

For many of the Access students, joining Access to HE meant returning to a site formerly associated with marginalisation and truncated progress. The Access students' decisions to return to formal education, and enter HE, were informed by labour market narratives, since, for many of them, (low) paid work formed the immediate settings in which they took the decision to join Access. Further, work continued to provide most students' source of income while on Access. Interviews with the Access students suggested how their labour market experiences mediated the meanings that they had attached to education while at school, and made Access a preferred option. The analysis of interview data also pointed to the students socio-economic aspirations based on their dissatisfaction with their current labour market experiences. This raises questions about the extent to which the Access students are actually 'disaffected workers' as opposed to disaffected learners (Warmington, 2003). The interviews also demonstrated the significance and importance that Access students place on their courses as sites of transition between their current position (present identities), and their future position in the labour market.

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