COURSE STRUCTURE ON ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION DIPLOMA PROGRAMME: IMPLICATIONS ON MENTAL HEALTH AND DECISIONS OF MATURE STUDENTS

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Abstract

This paper investigates the impact of the course structure and the various decision made by colleges in running Access to higher education diploma programme on the mental health and decisions of the mature students on this programme. It reports part of the findings from the research carried out to investigate the courses of 'drop out' and the practices that can promote successful completion on the Access to HE Diploma programme. The research, which took a qualitative approach was carried out within six further education colleges in the East of England, with thematic analysis used in analysing the data. It emerged the structure and delivery of the programme do not only impact on the mature students' decisions, but also on their mental health, which as well, have a great effect on their decisions.

Key words

Access, Mental Health, Higher Education, Dropout, Further Education, Widening Participation.

INTRODUCTION

Having the opportunity to participate in higher education (HE) is linked with poverty prevention and lifelong wellbeing (McNamara et al., 2019). It can transform not only the individuals, but also the local and wider society (Vignoles and Murray, 2016). HE might not be the most superior form of learning (Burke, 2012), which this paper is not intending to portray HE as, but its importance is considerable. It can lead to diverse direct and indirect benefits for individuals and the society (Baum et al., 2010). Education does not only qualify learners for certain roles; it socialises them to participate in community, family, and social contexts and, at the same time, equips them to develop their sense of selves, identity and agency (Facer and Sandford, 2010). This paper focuses on the importance of HE, some of the barriers preventing some mature students from completing Access to HE Diploma programme and some of the practices that can help overcome such barriers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

People without traditional qualifications are prepared for university study through Access to HE diploma qualifications (QAA, 2020). With no upper age limit for Access to HE courses and many not formally having any entry requirements, most of the courses are completed within a year, though there is the opportunity for part-time studies within two or more years, while some could be through evening sessions or distance learning (QAA, 2017). Access to HE diplomas are full level 3 qualifications like A-levels (CAVA, 2017) and are widely recognised by UK universities (QAA, 2017). Access to HE students differ from the traditional A level students, though they all study at Level 3 (Burke, 2002). Access to HE Diploma programme is designed for mature students who sometimes come into education with different issues to deal with (UCAS, 2016). They are most likely having to manage employment with childcare and spouses and at the same time, having to cope with the process of returning to

learning formally in institutional settings (Busher and James, 2020). A good number of the Access to HE students are women (QAA, 2020; Busher and James, 2019) who have to face competing demands for time and energy (Busher and James, 2020). Out of the over 37,000 students who registered for Access to HE in 2017-18, 73% were women (QAA, 2020). Access to HE diploma programme aims at providing opportunity to study at HE level for those earlier excluded, especially women and those from ethnic minorities (Bowl, 2014). It is related to equality of opportunity, social justice, and economic prosperity not only at the individual level, but also nationally (Burke, 2007). The Access to HE courses which are mainly taught in colleges (Busher et al., 2015), are regulated by the Quality Assurance Agency for HE (QAA), who licences the Access Validating Agencies (AVAs) to act as awarding bodies and get Access to HE Diplomas awarded to successful students (QAA, 2020).

The Access to HE diploma, which is one of the qualifications directed at giving mature learners a second chance of study at HE level (OFS, 2019), has about 22% dropout rate (QAA, 2016). Despite the improved proportion of those from deprived backgrounds going to university and college over the last decade, there remains significant access gaps between the proportions of students from poorer and wealthier backgrounds (OFS, 2019). Widening access has been a main HE policy agenda in the UK in recent decades (Evans et al, 2019) and the government continues to debate on how to reduce the participation gap (OFS, 2019). Widening participation into HE is a means of promoting social mobility and equality, with the aim of increasing the number of individuals attending HE from underrepresented groups (Heaslip et al, 2017). However, it opens new battlegrounds in the same space where it should function in promoting social justice (Bunn et al, 2020). Those with relative economic, cultural, and social advantages benefit the most from its policies (Burke, 2012). The problem of widening participation should not only be about identifying talented individuals with potential and capacity but also consider the part social privilege plays in recognising this capability (Burke, 2020). It has moved from being widened to the bright student from a poor background to better access for women and more recently, does not only mean access for the qualified from a poor background, but also anyone who could benefit from it irrespective of their underachievement in school due to their disadvantaged backgrounds (Vignoles and Murray, 2016). Mature students are more than traditional age students, likely to be from lower socio-economic backgrounds and might be anxious about returning to formal education as a result of their previous experiences (Busher and James, 2020). Some of these returning adults might as well need some support on how to study (Huddleston and Unwin, 2013).

The FE sector shoulders the responsibility of providing vocational education and training, education for people with learning difficulties, basic skills and Access to HE programmes (Bowl, 2014). Their qualifications also include A level and BTEC (Kogan, 2018) and the sector encompasses adult and community learning, private sector training, work-based learning and some HE provision (Dennis et al, 2020). There are different pressures experienced in this sector, posing a range of challenges to their leadership (Hill et al, 2016). Government investment in adult education is generally low compared to school-based education (Bowl, 2017), while the removal of government subsidies on some of the adult education courses has resulted in their discontinuation (Bowl, 2014). To be able to cut costs and maximise funding, FE colleges have had to reorganise themselves, streamline curriculum areas and reduce their staffing levels, which has placed additional workload on the remaining staff members (Dennis et al, 2020), posing additional strain on their time (Huddleston and Unwin, 2013). The colleges also face declining learning resources, while having to deal with increased competition for learners (Hill et al, 2016). The college leaders' choices are very crucial to meeting demands and stabilising their organisations (Dennis et al, 2020). For this research, Giddens theory of structuration was used in understanding the interdependent relationships between social structures and human actors which is required in exploring social practice (Burridge et al, 2010). Structuration is a way of understanding the connection between the social interactions in education settings and the way by which the major structural principles which describes the society is reproduced (Shilling, 1992). Structure consists of rules and resources which do not only constrain agency, but also enable it (Giddens, 1984). Into the constitution of the agents and the practices produced by the agents enters the structure, which is both the medium and outcome of agent practices (Powell, 2019).

Many FE colleges experience significant increased mental health difficulties in recent years, placing additional challenges of supporting students with this issue on their staff members (Maudslay, 2018). Mental illness affects a growing proportion of students, with fivefold increase in the proportion of affected students over the past 10 years (Thorley, 2017). There exists a link between disadvantage and mental ill health (Maudslay, 2018) with students' academic performance and their desire to remain in education being affected by poor mental health and wellbeing (Thorley, 2017). Having dropout as a student's outcome does not only have negative implications, but also has unpleasant consequences on the affected students, creating hindrances to their personal development (Alvarado, 2019). Unmet expectations can pose a risk of depression or other mental health problems among such candidates (Reynolds and Baird, 2010) and having a sense of academic under achievement puts the formation of their self-esteem at stake (Hoeschler and Backes-Gellner, 2019). Earlier research by Hoeschler and Backes-Gellner (2019) suggests those who drop out of college permanently display lower self-esteem when compared to graduates, even if they eventually achieved a lower qualification, making their ability to complete the highest form of qualification they aspired to achieve critical to their self-esteem. Dropping out of college can also have some repercussions within the community, such as reduced family involvement with the community, higher risk of unemployment, stigma among community members and criticism or gossiping (Alvarado, 2019). For those from low-income backgrounds, dropping out of education continues to hinder their upward economic mobility (Kearney and Levine, 2016).

METHODOLOGY

The research took a qualitative approach and was based on Social Constructivism worldview. Subjective meanings are created by interacting with others (Creswell, 2014) as in the case of this research. The interaction of the participants in a social situation helps understand the situation (Busher and James, 2019). As there were discussions with people to construct knowledge in this research, their culture and activities within the community helped in constructing reality. Purposive sampling, which allows cases to be chosen based on some processes or features of interest being illustrated (Silverman, 2010) was used in the study. Six colleges were used as sample out of a population of about eleven colleges offering Access to HE courses in the three counties used in the East of England. The six colleges were chosen based on their geographical locations and awarding bodies. Some are based in cities and some in more remote areas. Case study, which is a situation that explores one or more individuals, processes, activities, events, or programs thoroughly (Creswell, 2014) was the strategy adopted in this research which studied a particular context. It focused on how the causes of dropout among access to HE students and the practices that can encourage successful completion of these courses could be understood. Interview which is an interaction between two or more people having a particular purpose in mind (Kumar, 2005) was used as the main method of data collection. The participants were Access to HE programme coordinators, tutors and students on both Science (Sc) and Non-Science (NSc) Access to HE courses. The student group included those who were on their Access to HE courses as focus groups (FG) and those who had dropped from the programme (DO). Face-to-face interviews were used to solicit information from the tutors and coordinators (T/C), which allowed their feelings and expressions to be read. Telephone interviews were conducted with the DOs, as they were no longer at the colleges by the time the interviews were conducted and the FGs were interviewed within the colleges. Semi structured open ended interview questions were used to get the participants opinions. This gave them opportunities to express their views during the interviews. Thematic analysis was used in analysing the data, with NVivo used in coding.

FINDINGS

Course structure impacting health issues

The way the courses are handled in the colleges, their structure and delivery are prevalent issues on the programme. Access to HE being a Level 3 programme like A 'levels (CAVA, 2017), but being run full time within a year (QAA, 2017), while A 'levels are run full time within two years makes the structure and delivery very fast paced and intense. The Access to HE students are expected to do so much within a short period of time, which some of them find difficult to cope with. The traditional A Level students are usually younger, not having such responsibilities a mature student would usually face. However, the Access to HE students being mature, have different responsibilities competing with their time. Some have childcare responsibilities, other family commitments, mortgage or rent and other bills to attend to, while many of these mature adult students have been out of education for a long time. Having to complete this intense course within a year makes them find the workload overwhelming. Some of them eventually make their decisions to leave the programme. This was expressed by many of the respondents, including the T/C and students, though the theme was more popular among the students, with almost all the DOs and all FGs referring to this. Examples of such comments are given below:

> The way it was delivered and stuff like that....eh, it's pretty fast paced because I've been to the university before, ... this is really fast paced in terms of I mean,... maybe, it's a lot of pressure than going to university. (DO 7)

> Um, I think the biggest challenges that,.. because you're pretty much trying to do a two-year work course in one year…the workload was quite a lot. Uh, and of course, you're doing…double the work that you would usually be doing. So, that was just the big…biggest challenge. (DO 11)

> Maybe the workload in general. It could be overwhelming. You've been out of education for a long time and you come back and you get so much work load. Some people find it so overwhelming and so don't feel they can do it. (NSc FG 1, College D)

> We try to do two years' work in one and particularly with my guys, a lot of them have got families to deal with… you know, they're adults now, they've got problems that might be more complex perhaps than 16-year-olds. (NSc Tutor 3)

Health-related issues, which ranged from mental health issues, physical health issues, illnesses and stress, were a common theme among all the different categories of people interviewed. Mental health issue was very prominent and came from many of the interviews conducted. All the coordinators, almost all the tutors and some students discussed this, although it was most frequent among the T/C group. It was described as the main cause of dropout from Access to HE. For the students with some underlying health issues, coming on this kind of challenging, stressful, and time-consuming programme aggravates their conditions, even if it had earlier been under control. Some of them are unable to cope with the extra pressure and decide to drop out of the programme. Below are some examples of their comments to illustrate this:

I suffer with quite bad a–…anxiety. So, I get worked up quite easily with the amount of work. (DO 11)

… I don't think it's realistic for people to take on something as challenging and as pressured as Access……you know, if they have any sort of anxiety issues. (Sc Tutor 1)

Underlying physical or mental health issues that perhaps were under control but when they come on a course that is quite challenging and stressful, time consuming, financially, umm, constraining, … I think they just... umm, they find that those illnesses then come back to the fore, whereas they might have been under control. … And I think they might go back to the doctor and get medication but often they just think, "Oh it's just too much and I'm not gonna do it, I'm gonna drop out. (Coordinator, College B)

Although some colleges have already put some practices in place to support the students with health-related issues, these supports are usually not enough to deal with the pressing demands. Examples of such comments, which only came from the T/C group are given below:

With those who are suffering from some sort of mental illness, um, we try to support them as much as we can. Uh, but for some of them, it's just too much. (Coordinator, College E)

And the mental health support, I think in (the) college ... you know, we are really, really struggling. I think we've got one or two counsellors who are both part-time. I mean, it's just ... there's not enough in the way of support for, you know, the mental health needs of students. (NSc Tutor 2)

Some suggested practices for Access to HE programme

The way assignments were organised within the programme was seen as a pressing issue, needing attention on the programme. This was more suggested by the student groups, who raised different suggestions about how the assignments could be coordinated. Some of the suggestions included giving clear assignment deadlines, doing assignments within the college, having flexible timings to hand in assignments, having free time for assignments and not having all deadlines together. This was suggested by more DOs, a few FGs and one tutor. Below are some of the comments:

I would suggest, um, having a more flexible, um, assignment ... I mean, having flexible timings of when you can hand in the assignment. (DO 4)

I think they could stagger the units between the subjects. Instead of having deadlines for all three subjects all at the same time, you could be rolling through one unit with one subject and another unit, so they could be staggered. You have deadlines more often and not all at once. (Sc FG2, College B)

Class arrangement was also seen as an issue on the programme. This was more suggested by the FGs, with no DO referring to it. Some tutors also raised their opinions regarding this. Suggestions raised on this included but were not limited to having drop-in-sessions, catch up sessions, smaller classes, study groups before exams, revision class outside the college, issues relating to timetable such as early timetable to help with plan, putting courses that would later be beneficial in the first semester. Examples of such comments are as follows:

Probably just offer study groups. Maybe, because … we do a lot of revision in class, before exams or whatever, but for some people, they're still stuck, so maybe a study group just before the exam. (Sc FG1, College A)

Smaller classes and more teachers. I personally think there should be a teacher and a TA around the room, helping people that aren't sure. (NSc FG1 College B)

I think the, uh, maths for scientist in semester one as well because they need to know maths, so I think it's a good thing. (Sc Tutor 5)

Some of the respondents expressed their views on the time spent on the course. The theme came from both the T/C and students. Half of the Coordinators, some Tutors, some FGs and one DO discussed about it and the students' views were similar to those of the T/C. They believed more time could be built into the course to encourage successful completion. The students believed

that there should be more time within the programme devoted to study skills, presentations, essay writing, course work, and help with assignments. Some even suggested the course could be made longer, but not all agreed to this. The T/C would want more timetable hours for the course or more paid hours to support the students or even coordinate the course properly. However, as the Access course has not come with guided learning hours, a coordinator expressed how this has put them at a disadvantage in arguing for extra time in the timetable for the course. Examples of such comments are given below:

> I would have preferred it if I had time built into the college day to actually do the work that they set, I could have done it then but when it became more and more work that you had to do in your own time, home time, I was unable to do all …. maybe an Access course could go over 2 years and not into 1 year. (DO 13)

> I think it would help, I know it makes it difficult for people who can't commit their time, if it was five days a week, I think that will almost be better because you've got more classroom learning time. (NSc FG 1, College D)

> Probably if I had more time to do tutorials with the students, one to one, because I only get paid for a sort of one-hour slot a week, and often, I do it at other times that I probably don't get paid for. But really, I think I should have more paid time for tutorials so that I could then see like four students a week for tutorials, not two. (NSc Tutor 1)

> I think the other thing is the time … Access doesn't come with guided learning hours, so we don't have something they can point to and say, that's how many hours we need. And that puts us at a bit of a disadvantage when we're arguing for extra time in timetables. So I think that's probably the main thing. (Coordinator, College E)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The rules and resources available on the Access to HE programme greatly impact the outcome of the programme. They recursively affect the agents, who were the Access to HE coordinators, tutors and students in this research, influencing the decisions made, with the actions of these agents also influencing the rules and resources made available on the course. The findings of this research revealed the structure and delivery of this Access to HE programme pose a challenge, which might influence the decisions of some of the students to drop from the programme. The college leaders' decisions are of considerable importance in stabilising the organisations (Dennis et al, 2020). Running a level 3 course like A level within a year (full time), while full time A level takes two years, makes the course too rigorous for many of the mature students, which some find unable to cope with. Most of these students are mature learners, with other responsibilities. Some have even been out of education for over 20 years. This makes it extremely fast paced and completely overwhelming for some of them, making them unable to cope with the demands of the course. The research by Busher and James (2020) suggests the prior experiences of Access to HE students might make some of them anxious about returning to formal education. Some might also need extra support on how to go about their study (Huddleston and Unwin, 2013), not making the structure of the Access programme helpful to this group of students. The norms on the Access to HE programme and the way it is being run impacts on some of the students' health. It could aggravate some of their existing issues or cause some, while there might not be enough resources to support such students. Access to HE learners are more likely to be from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Busher and James, 2020) and the Access to HE programme which gives second chance to mature learners to study at HE level (OFS, 2019) is related to equality of opportunity (Burke, 2007). However, a lot still needs to be done in supporting this group of students. This research revealed there are some resources already put in place by some of the colleges to support those affected by this issue, but they are usually not enough to deal with the pressing demands. This impacts on their decisions to either drop from or continue with the Access to HE programme. The research revealed mental health issues to be a major cause of dropout from the Access to HE programme. Previous research suggested that the mental benefit of adult education has been identified for adult learners (Waller, 2018), but this was not evident in this research. The result did not show that a fast-paced course like Access to HE helped to minimise the effect of mental health issues but could rather contribute to it. Various existing literature, however, reported on mental health issues, which the findings of this research correlate with. More students are being affected by mental health issues (Thorley, 2017), with a good number of these cases being experienced in FE colleges, posing additional challenges on the staff members (Maudslay, 2018), which this research also revealed. Rethinking the time spent on this fast-paced programme is of utmost importance. As some would prefer the period of time spent on the programme lengthened, some would rather prefer it completed within a year, however, increasing the hours spent on the programme could be very helpful. If Access to HE leaners are at the college for more hours, receiving extra support, especially with their assignments and the Access to HE tutors given more paid hours to provide more support to the students, it might ease the pressure on the programme. The Access to HE course coordinators being given more time to properly coordinate would also be useful in getting their ideas on running the programme implemented. This extra support could be useful to some Access to HE students and on the long run, contribute towards their upward economic mobility.

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