Preparing to succeed: the impact of an Access module at the Open University

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Introduction

Context

This study explores the sustained impact of an Access module on mature students from disadvantaged backgrounds as they progress to undergraduate study.

Framed in the context of Office for Students (OfS) concerns about attrition, and Gorard et al’s (2006) conceptualisation of dispositional, situational and institutional barriers, student survey and tutor focus group data were collected in a case study at the Open University.

The Open University (OU) has, for over 50 years, sought to be ‘open to all’, by providing open access distance higher education at scale - undergraduate qualifications have no entry criteria (unless required by a professional body). However, with open access comes a responsibility to prepare students with the skills to succeed and offer support necessary to overcome barriers.
Introduction

Access modules

In 2012, the Open University developed a part-time 30-week distance learning preparatory Access programme (30 credits at Level 0), responding to concerns that tripled HE tuition fees in England would prevent students from the poorest backgrounds accessing HE.

Since the inaugural presentation in 2013, over 40 thousand learners have registered on an Access module, with the majority of those who pass progressing to undergraduate study and performing better than students from similar backgrounds entering undergraduate study directly.
Introduction

The People, work and society module (Y032)

7 Units

3 Blocks

• with low socio-economic status (Up to 86% on a presentation in receipt of a full fee waiver)
• with low prior entry qualifications (62%)
• with a disability (32%).
Related studies

A plethora of academic studies on widening participation have been published in the last 25 years, including research highlighting the need for adequate preparation for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, whether in relation to social class (Reay, 2013), ethnic background (McDuff et al, 2018), disability (Shaw, 2021) or poverty (Burke, 2012), as well as data insights into unequal access to HE (Chowdry et al, 2013).

Gorard et al (2006), who conceptualised three key barriers to widening participation:

- Dispositional barriers
- Situational barriers
- Institutional barriers
Related studies

Dispositional barriers

Life transition, recording academic culture shock – a loss of identity and belonging leading to reduced self-esteem. (Younger, 2019)

Anxiety around academic writing (specifically structuring essays in own words and referencing) which acted as a barrier to successful study. (Simons et al., 2018)

Feelings of dislocation, alienation and exclusion, especially for those returning to education at Level 0. (Hall and Winn, 2010)

Situational barriers

Time pressures mature students experience when having to ‘fit-in’ studying by juggling work (often involving a number of part-time jobs) alongside financial and caring commitments for both children and older relatives. Butcher (2015a, 2015b, 2020)


Mannay & Wilcock (2015) impact of class-bound inequalities including social housing was explored.

Institutional Barriers

Institutional need to support study skills and 1-1 contact alongside revisions to assessment loads for entry level distance learner (Simpson, 2013)

In a Scottish context collaborative teaching partnerships across FE and HE in the social sciences Cole (2018)

The need for institutions to offer greater flexibility is also identified by Benson et al (2012).
Key aims

The Access Effect

1. Impact on confidence, personal development and learning how to learn (dispositional barriers).

2. Impact on time management and opportunities to engage with digital learning (situational barriers).

3. Engagement with tutor support for progression (mitigating institutional barriers)
Methodology

Ethical consent and approvals were gained from the university’s Human Research Ethics Committee before the case study started, with registration on the university’s Information Asset Register complementing the Data Protection Impact Assessment.

The study was conducted in three iterative stages:

**Desk research**
- included members of the research team analysing internal ‘pre-data’ - longitudinal achievement, completion and progression scores of students on Y032 over the previous five years, alongside evaluative data produced for recent Access Programme institutional reviews.

**An online survey**
- administered to a sample of students who had begun their studies with the Y032 Access module and had since progressed to studying undergraduate modules in Education and Health. 15 questions, structured as an inclusive mixed survey of multiple choice and open text boxes, were developed by the research team.

**Focus group discussions**
- Six ALs- Staff Survey Project Panel application form had to be approved (SSPP-395) through the university’s Human Research Ethical Committee (HREC).
- A tutor who was a non-participant in the focus group transcribed 44-page discussion transcript.
Findings

Impact on dispositional barriers

The first impact identified a symbiotic relationship between enhanced learner confidence and the improvement of academic writing.

The multiple online activities helped me build my understanding of how to construct an essay.

‘After many years out of education, [People, work and society] helped me regain the skills I needed to start my degree course. I have achieved higher marks than I could ever have imagined, and I put this down to studying [the Access module].’

‘Writing reflectively (hard to look at yourself and your achievements)...starting to write and develop arguments’.
Findings

Impact on dispositional barriers

The second, related impact on dispositional barriers, was confirmation of the crucial importance for adult learners of a preparatory starting point to increase the likelihood of success:

‘Having never studied at HE level, [People, work and society] incredibly helpful before starting UG’.

‘[People, work and society] was an introduction back into education after about 25 years...gave me confidence to progress my studies’.

There’s a lot of things happening...not only are you learning about what really turns you on in the academic world, there’s also those little academic skills which are so precious if you are going to do a degree’.
Findings

Impact on situational barriers

The first related to improvements in time management, including finding the time to write more efficiently.

‘Managing time – first time being self-disciplined’.

‘I was able to study and work at the same time – writing and time management’.

‘Time management and writing...relearning art of essay writing and use of time’.
Findings

Impact on situational barriers

Second, and crucially for mature students new to the OU aspiring to progress to UG study, the support to become a competent online learner

‘Allowed me to gain understanding of how learning worked remotely with the computer and internet’.

‘Gave me skills to study online...helped me adjust to online learning’.

‘Helped to learn how online portal worked and use of Word for academic purposes’.
Findings

Impact on Institutional barriers

Institutional aspects of the Access learning experience which were within the team’s control, like the pace of the module, were highly praised.

‘Having a personal tutor and over the phone tutorials was very productive, I liked the 1-1 contact. Success in the course encouraged me to carry on with my studies’.

‘the phone call identifies any sort of anxieties, and barriers they face, because generally they are worried at that point about starting the module. If they mention something, I can go back to them and say ‘is it OK if I refer you and see what support the university can give you’.

‘The telephone tutorials are a kind of holistic conversation about how the module materials might actually link to their personal lives’.
Findings

Impact on Institutional barriers

‘...having a timetable, meeting deadlines, understanding the questions, really getting into studying and really understanding what the brief is. I think that’s very important for a lot of students’.

I had a student who had withdrawn a few times before, it’s assessments that really, really, worry her. She is doing extremely well, which she says places more pressure in her mind, to keep achieving very well. She takes it very personally, where she feels she hasn’t done as well as she should. The strategy I have developed is very frequent very short email conversations. It’s developing that personal relationship’.

‘...resilience that comes from being able to complete the course... tutors being flexible supports and encourages students just to keep going...’
Conclusions

The Access Effect

Framed around second chances to learn, an effective access offer should identify needs (which may be articulated or not), wants and interests, helping students understand both the benefits of learning and their own strengths.

Such ‘supported aspirations’ link to personal passions and may help address institutional barriers and acknowledge the sustained impact of such programmes.

The provision of flexible opportunities via well-paced and relevant preparatory curriculum, alongside pro-active empathetic 1-1 support, may offer some ideas to address sector concerns about attrition.
Impact

Fed into **new access modules** aligned to the four faculties- Two new modules – Y034 and Y035.

**Dissemination on different platforms**

- The European Conference on Education ECE–2024, London
  Accepted– July 2024
- Neon Conference – University of West London– June 2024
- Journal of Further and Higher Education.
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Thank you

Questions?

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