

**Equipped for learning? A follow-up of the effectiveness of an Access to HE delivery model for skills for participatory learning at University**

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This study investigated the value of an Access to HE teaching and learning model developed in a further education college within the higher education environment through the exploration of the learning experiences of former Access to HE students during their first year of study at university. While previous research in this field has highlighted that retention at university may be related to factors such as socioeconomic characteristics of mature students, student contact with academic staff and institutional culture gap between further and higher education, the present project adopted students' use of study skills workshops, in particular preparedness for module/unit assessments as a key indicator in assessing the value of the Access model.

The project deployed the case study approach and data were collected through semi-structured interviews with former Access to HE students. Initial findings indicate that students do access study skills workshops offered by their universities. While some felt that the access courses prepared them well for study at university in terms of the study skills needed to tackle assessments, they also felt overwhelmed with the workload at university and the formalities of deadlines. In addition, it was pointed out that a significant factor in their confidence in achieving at university was the strong pastoral and learning support offered by their Access tutors, which they did not receive at university.

**Keywords:** Access to Higher Education; First year experience at higher education; Learning support; Widening participation; Assessment;

## **Introduction**

This paper aims to explore the learning experiences of former Access to HE students during their first year of study at university. The study focuses on factors relating to how seven students' previously experienced learning and teaching model on an Access to HE course at an inner London FE college prepared them for HE study. This study builds on a paper by Nieto et al (2008) that sought to identify the learning and teaching model used by Access to HE practitioners in an inner London College. The study investigates how the students perceive the demands of HE study after completing an Access course, how they use central learning support services and what learning strategies, if any, they construct.

## **Setting the context**

Access to HE programmes developed in the late 1970s as an alternative route to University level study for mature (+21) students. They were developed by partnerships between Universities or Polytechnics and neighbouring Further Education Colleges, sometimes with Local Education Authority involvement, offering clear progression routes to named awards at the receiving Higher Education Institute (HEI). From their inception they were predicated on the assumption that the traditional qualification route into University level education – A levels – used teaching and learning practices and models, which were perhaps inappropriate for mature learners (Parry 1986).

Researchers in the 1980s (Woodrow 1988, Parry 1986) argued that Access courses are characterised by their student orientation and focus on the process of learning and skills development rather than being subject or institution based. 'Unlike the banking of knowledge under an A level regime the Access intention is to develop content both as a vehicle for improving study and communication skills and as a necessary foundation for further study' (Parry 1986:46).

In their general introduction about Access courses Open College Network – London Region (2008) [OCNLR] describes study on an Access programme on its website as being, 'Learning to develop ideas, write essays and make notes are all important parts of Access programmes. In addition, you are introduced to subjects that will be covered more fully in the degree and diploma programmes'.

However, Nieto et al (2008) identified a hybrid learning and teaching Access to HE model that although focussed on skills development, the teachers also built in elements of flexibility and individualism into the course – flexible assessment deadlines, extra tutorials, multiple tutor assessed formative draft assessments, emphasis on sharing tutor feedback with the whole group – that would be very rare in an HEI environment. Indeed, this very supportive learning,

teaching and tutoring model is at odds with the generally accepted HE teaching and learning model that prioritise skills for independent learning (SIL), critical thinking and developing the capacity for autonomous learning (HEFCE 2003, QAA 2008).

In part, to address these differences UK universities increasingly offer additional learning support through study skills courses, often using widening participation monies, aimed at supporting learners in their development or enhancement of SIL and thus, improve retention rates (Wingate 2006) following Government recommendations of providing teaching and support services that take into account the learners' cultural, social and economic backgrounds (House of Commons 2008). However, previous research examining the experiences of the first year at HE could not establish a relationship between student services, including learning support, and retention rates (Thomas et al 2002); rather it has been indicated that continuation of study at HE may be related to the institutional culture gap between further and higher education (Hayes et al 1997, Archer 2001); socio-economic characteristics of mature adult students (such as gender, marital status, social class and ethnicity) (Reay et al 2002, Connelly and Chakrabarti 1999) and student contact with academic staff (Yorke and Londgen 2008). However, there have been relatively few studies exploring what impact experiencing a different learning and teaching model at a lower level has on the learner and learning in an HE context (Gorard and Smith 2006).

Several studies have focussed on how previous learning experiences influence study at HE. A course enquiry questionnaire (CEQ) approach indicates that students who seek a more personal approach to understanding their studies tend to be deep learners, whilst those more focussed on memorising and meeting assessment criteria learn more superficially (Karagiannopoulou and Christolides 2005; Trigwell and Ashwin 2006). A learner's previous social, cultural and learning experiences can influence a learner's approach to learning; for Bamber and Tett (2000) the mature 'non-traditional' learner has to negotiate a series of stages or transformations before they become 'successful' HE learners. Donaldson and Graham (1999) identify the importance of previous life experiences and schooling as key in influencing how mature learners cope with HE study.

In terms of assessment, mature students perceive assessment performance as essential to their confidence and in their abilities as students (James 1997). However, Pitts (2005) found that feedback comments were open to a range of, sometimes contradictory, interpretations, and that students had difficulty in articulating what they wanted from the process. What is more, in the Access to HE courses learners are prepared for HE study through a developmental assessment model which has as an inherent part of learning the incorporation of feedback. Consequently, the experience of this assessment model may pose challenges in former Access to HE students' transition to HE study. Therefore, the present study, although small-scale, intends to explore what Access students may perceive as the challenges of study at the higher level considering their previous learning and teaching experiences, how they use

and experience learning support services and how they construct their learning within this unique set of previous and first year experiences.

### **Aim and research questions**

The main aim of the present study was to investigate the value of an Access to HE teaching and learning model developed in a further education college within the higher education environment through the exploration of the learning experiences of former Access to HE students. For the purposes of this project, value is defined as the quality of learning at FE level and its usefulness and further applicability manifested in skills at HE level.

The research questions the study aimed to address are:

1. How do former Access to HE students perceive the demands of their higher education course compared with the demands of the access programme?
2. Do former Access to HE students, use study skills services offered by their universities and why?
3. What learning strategies, if any, do former Access to HE students employ to meet the demands of their higher education course?

### **Research Design**

The proposed research is a follow-up study of a previous case study investigating the development of skills for independent learning in an Access to HE programme (Nieto et al 2008). As such, the present study deployed the case study approach, focusing on the learning experiences of former Access to HE students in their first year of study at university. Data were collected through one-to-one semi structured interviews with former Access to HE students and analysis was carried out through a thematic approach using the qualitative data analysis software package Atlas.ti 5.

Former Access to HE students who participated in this study were in their mid 20s to mid 30s and all completed the Social Science/Humanities Access to HE option. Six were male and one female; two progressed to traditional universities and five to post 1992 universities, studying Business Studies, Social Policy, Politics, Law and Primary Education. Although five were born outside the UK, only three felt that English was their second language.

Confidentiality of participants has been respected at all stages and informed consent was sought.

## **Findings**

Generally the findings suggest that former Access to HE students participating in this study perceived their HE course to be different, if not more demanding than their Access to HE course and that an essential aspect of their success was time management. In addition, although most welcomed the additional learning support available to them, 4 participants pointed out that the presence of similar, subject-specific support structures would significantly improve the chance of higher achievement. While many perceived achievement as obtaining high grades, little consideration was evident about the relationship between the learning journey and achievement. The sub-sections below explore participants' views on the demands of assessment, their need for learning support and learning strategies deployed to cope during their first year at university.

### *Coping with the demands of assessment*

While all participants thought that their assignments at university were indeed a true reflection of their lectures and of the requirements for the first year of study, they also felt that the process of assessment of coursework was more demanding than that experienced as Access to HE learners. Specifically, the emphasis on the Access to HE course is on a developmental process of learning whereby learners are given the opportunity to discuss in tutorials all stages of coursework, including the structure and draft of an assignment and incorporating tutor feedback before the final grade is being set to the assignment. At university however, the completion of an assignment is an individual process that requires learners to work autonomously and where the grade set is final.

You could ask your teachers specific questions, you could discuss what you do in the assignment and they will tell you if you are on the right path, but they don't read drafts because they don't have the time. If you want to check your grammar and construction of sentences you can go to the English support office, if you want to check the content of your assignment you best ask one of your friends. The people who check your English they are English teachers, they will not know about the sociology of Marx for example, so the best is to ask one of your friends. [Student F]

Furthermore, one of the major characteristics of Access to HE courses is the synthesis of study skills and subject delivery, which in turn allows learners without any formal school leaving qualifications to prepare for study at HE. On the contrary, although many universities

nowadays have learning support services available to students, these services tend to be centralised and distinct from the academic departments. Thus, those learners who feel the need of additional learning support can receive it in the form of study skills, but not overtly within academic subjects. As student A. who has English as a second language explained, this form of assessment may place some students at disadvantage, as he expected a similar delivery structure to the Access course at university.

The tutor, you can ask maybe during the lecture but you can't book an appointment to discuss about your essay. At the beginning it was a problem for me but you don't have any other choices. If you don't understand the essay question you can ask the lecturer. (...) Sometimes, I feel disadvantaged, definitely, by the type of assignment. At the beginning they give you the essay questions without even talking with you about it, the talking takes place later. In that case I felt disadvantaged. In the access course it was okay, everything went smoothly, we expected the same at university, but it is different at university. [Student A]

Although historically Access to HE courses were targeting mature, 'second chance' students, in London they attract a high number of students with ESOL needs as often it is the only progression route into university (QAA 2009). Thus, even though only one student studied on the specialist Access course for students with ESOL needs, all students whose English was not their first language found academic writing an additional problem, particularly the perceived need to spend no more time for the production of assignments. Thus, a further issue highlighted by another student who has English as a second language is that although the time allocated for assignments is generally sufficient, she felt disadvantaged in her ability to produce an academic text.

I think that the problem is, eh, English is my second language, I think for me, it would be good if they could give me more time, but as I said, they have to give all of us the same time. But, definitely, I need more time. In one task for example they asked for academic writing. But academic writing is quite difficult because we speak English as a second language, so I need more time, eh, to search, to have the right words at the right place. What I used to do [in Access] is just copy, most of the time copy and paste to be honest. My access tutor warned me about this, in the first assignment she said that you cut and paste. [Student B]

A further issue many participants identified as different from the Access to HE course is the set deadlines for submission of coursework. While the flexibility regarding deadlines in the Access course enabled many to combine their study needs with their personal needs, at university many were surprised by the strict deadlines related to submission of coursework. As Student E explained:

On the access course I had enough time, too much time, and actually the time given at uni is similar, the only difference is that I can talk to you about my assignment before I finish it, while there at uni I can't. I think that in access the first term should be tighter, you learn fast at the beginning. I was at uni 45 minutes late with submitting my assignment and they didn't take it, they send me to apply for extenuating circumstances. [Student E]

## FACE

In comparison with the Access to HE course then, a key aspect to achievement in coursework at university for former Access to HE students is organisation of their time, an aspect which for some mature students, even though highly motivated, is difficult because of their prior responsibilities.

The thing is the decision that you want to do something. For example I am a single mum, I have a three year old daughter, so I have to organise my time because I want to do something. It is not easy, I try to manage my time, to submit my assignments on time. [Student B]

Consequently, many participants perceived the time management demands to be greater at university, partly because of their personal responsibilities and partly because these demands were different from their learning experience in Access to HE courses.

Time management pressures are greater at the university course, because they don't have that kind of organisation, for example the access course tutor talks to other tutors, but there they don't know what is going on with other modules. So you can have 2 assignments with the same deadline. [Student A]

Furthermore, participants felt that their Access to HE course equipped them with the skills needed for assessment but not yet viewing academic work as a journey of personal understanding. Rather, it is still seen as being a technical process, instrumental and assessment-led, as the extracts below demonstrate.

The access course prepared me for the assignments; it's very much what we had to do in the access course. Most of my fellow students are from Access courses, many are mature students and they find it more difficult because they have not been studying for a long time. The A-level students find it easier because this is what they were doing for their A-Levels (comparing theories). [Student F]

I think that the access programme is preparing us for efficiency. [Student C]

Thus, Student F and Student C regarded themselves as different from their more traditional background colleagues and also, while they believed that as former Access to HE students they had the advantage of having the skills to approach assessment, in comparison with A-Level students, they felt that the interruption in their learning experiences could pose some difficulty for study at university. For example Student C. commented that open book exams would be more appropriate for mature students because of the interruption in their learning experiences.

### *Accepting feedback and seeking learning support as part of the learning experience*

As outlined in the previous section, Access to HE programmes enable learners to incorporate tutor feedback in their assignments and thus improve their work by knowing the assessment criteria in advance and working towards them; at university all participants found to their

surprise that the process of assignment writing is only part of their assessment. Specifically most participants felt that feedback received from their lecturers at university was not always detailed and carefully constructed, but rather blunt. Most importantly, they not always regarded the feedback received as helpful.

The criticism is not helpful but fairly blunt. Sometimes, at the beginning it really put me off but later I felt I really needed to do more. It's not disappointment, but I felt that my work was better than it is. If you criticise someone, you have to give details, but we don't get details. [Student A]

In addition, many participants initially thought that they would be assessed on the content rather than the style of their written work and early on the course, failed to realise that academic writing skills are a major part of assessment by coursework, for example essay structure and correct referencing, and would at first dismiss the significance of this to their final grade only to be disappointed when they received feedback.

They give you some notes, how you should do it, how you can improve it. To be honest I was really upset in my first assignment with my lecturer but I realised it was a good thing, for example I didn't reference properly, and I did one mistake, for example I have to put s in endings, and also, I didn't know how to quote properly. I was criticised for the way I wrote the essay, not what I wrote. I was upset because I thought I would get a better grade. Now I have learned to learn from feedback. [Student B]

It becomes evident from the above extract that at many instances former Access to HE students may initially not perceive constructive feedback on their assessment as a part of the learning journey. This may in part be an outcome of the more benevolent assessment and feedback regime they experience on the Access to HE course. In the case of Student B. there was also not any direction from the university about how to use feedback for improvement. In addition, a further emerging issue is the fact that at university although assessment on coursework incorporates academic writing, constructive feedback itself targets the content of the assignment only. With regard to academic writing style, most participants reported to be advised to access learning support services, where they can receive additional help with English for academic purposes.

You can approach the tutors and tell them which difficulty you're having and they will direct you to the right person. Then at my university we have a place (...), they provide support with writing, English and grammar. They won't actually tell you what you have to write, they will tell you if the content and the grammar are correct. They will actually analyse your essay for structure. [Student F]

Five out of seven participants sought additional help through learning support services available at their university, either on their own initiative or advised by their lecturers. In all cases they did so because they wanted to improve their performance on written assignments. Interestingly, those who had English as a second language perceived learning support as a

service offering help with grammar and writing and consequently, were surprised to find out that the services were equally sought after by native English speakers.

Yes, I am aware of learning support provision and they do help us, from time to time, if you feel you need support in academic writing you can go to tutorials once a week for 2 hours. I went to one and I was really surprised to see that all of the students were like, native speakers, and some of them are even in their third year of study and they still need these courses. If you ask to know how to break the question, they will show you on a different question. It's self-referral, just go there, sign for it, if you fail to turn up you will also be penalised. I am not embarrassed of needing learning support (...) I don't think this is embarrassment, obviously you need to learn and they can help you. [Student A]

With regard to learning support then, it depends to a large extent on the willingness of the learner firstly, to accept that the learning journey at university does not only require knowledge related to the academic subject of interest, but also the necessary academic skills and techniques. Secondly, the learner moves through the realisation that the learning journey at university is to a large extent a guided, but nevertheless individual process which requires a large degree of autonomy. More so, those who did not seek help from the learning support services at their university have identified other ways of supporting their learning, such as through the use of virtual learning environments.

I don't receive learning support, but I am comfortable with receiving learning support though. What was provided, you've got a reading list and also additional reading lists and resources, so there is support like that. We've got a e-learning system where some lecturers have their legacy and teaching materials online. It is a good thing because it ensures that students have access to the lectures. [Student C]

Consequently it could be argued that the learning experience at university for former Access to HE students participating in this study is different in the fact that it requires a larger degree of learner autonomy in their ability of identifying various knowledge sources, for example through readings, lectures, seminars, learning support regarding study skills and additional materials on virtual knowledge depositories, such as Blackboard or Moodle, and in demonstrating as learning the engagement with these sources in their coursework. As highlighted by Student G. below, if this is achieved, the learner feels empowered by his achievement; if the outcome is not as expected, then the learner is disappointed.

I think that first, when you do write your assignment you do get to read some last year's work, so you can basically see a difference in writing and how that writing compares to how you write, especially with A-level students, but if you do make sure that you write to best of your ability and make sure you finish it on time, and ask some mates of yours to read it, then take it to the learning support so they can check the grammar and spelling. If you don't understand the question you can always go back to your tutors and ask. (...) When they do assess your essays and you have a good grade, you feel good, empowered. When you have a bad grade, you feel bad. If you do have support and stay the same you feel

disappointed, if you do better with support you continue going there because you feel good that you have improved. [Student G]

Finally, with regard to the use of learning support services, it seems that it has not only a central role in the achievement of those participants who have used the service, but also contributes to the motivation and empowerment of students.

### *Becoming autonomous learners*

Although during their Access to HE course participants were enrolled in specific subject programmes (e.g. Access to Law, Access to Humanities/Social Sciences, Access to Education Studies), they were required to choose specific subject oriented modules in addition to their skills modules. This enabled them to meet students and lecturers from other Access to HE subject programmes. In addition, in the Access to HE course there was a strong emphasis on the development of study peer groups as part of the learning experience, where sometimes group work was assessed as well as individual work. At university, participants' life is to a certain extent characterised by anonymity, partly because of the larger number of students and partly because of the absence of any directed attempts for the development of peer groups or mentoring system as part of the learning experience. Thus, participants have to rely on their own input and learning support available to them for their achievement.

In the Access course we came from different backgrounds and it was for one year. At the beginning, we felt that our tutor didn't help us enough and we feel like weak, we had barriers. At uni it's another world. Sometimes the lecturer doesn't know who you are. In the access course what we have done helps me now, and gave me motivation, determination and confidence that I could do it. A mentoring system would be good, in one way it would be good, but in another way it could mean that you rely on another person to pass the year. So, I prefer to go to learning support because I can just ask there, can you please help me with it? [Student B]

As Student B's account above demonstrates, the existence of learning support services enables the preservation of learner autonomy, while the presence of peer groups might jeopardise the independence she felt as a learner. In addition, the Access to HE learning experience had elements of pastoral support in its structure which is not present at the university. Student C's account below demonstrates, that the Access to HE programme indeed prepared him for learning autonomy.

The key thing is that you are autonomous, I do think that access prepares you for that because we were given assignments. (...) I think the thing with the access programme was it a melting pot, there were a lot of mature students, diverse, but I guess that for those who bang on it you do learn independent learning from there, especially from the research. [Student C]

Although Student C. recognised that the diversity that characterised his peers in the Access to HE course made it necessary for the need of flexibility to be built in the programme which would be absent at university, the programme did indeed prepare him for learner autonomy, identified in the skills and techniques that allow one to devise strategies to meet the demands for the first year of study at university. In addition, as is highlighted in Student A's account, if Access to HE students allow this flexibility to be the major determinant of their learning experience, they will encounter problems with their learning performance and achievement at university.

Just to kind of advise on how hard it is at university, and be strict with deadlines, because here [in Access] you can go on with your course but not there [in university]. Also, more skills, more advice, how to cope with life at university. Access course students need to read more books, because when you get there you need to be ready. And time management, you have to teach people how to manage their time, because time is so crucial at university and the problem is that at universities there is not much help available, never. [Student A]

As the quote above indicates, Access to HE students participating in this study experience significant learning issues when they arrive at university. Although they all felt prepared in some sense for HE study, key themes emerge from their comments. These themes will be discussed below.

## **Discussion**

Overall, a key theme that emerges from the study is that although former Access to HE students feel that they may have the technical skills to complete assessments and their course of study and have some conception and route map towards becoming some form of autonomous learner they still experience problems and issues related to skills in their first year in HE. These issues include lack of time management skills, probably related to the benevolent deadline regime experienced during their access course, and their still emerging academic writing skills which some compare unfavourably with traditional students.

Apart from skills though, which may be expected considering their relatively short pre-university course in comparison to the traditional route of A levels, more fundamental issues emerge: firstly, most participants referred to their different previous learning experiences, specifically how long they had been away from formal education and the demands of juggling their home circumstances with HE study; secondly, that even those who perceived themselves to have good English and also where English was their second language, they still struggled with writing enough/quality to meet the assessment deadlines imposed in HE. More fundamentally though, they still had a very technical and instrumental approach to their learning – 'preparing us for efficiency', 'now I have learned to learn from feedback' – and not developed the more personalised approach associated with deep learning (Karagiannopoulou

and Christolides 2005; Trigwell and Ashwin 2006). They have not yet in the first year moved through the transformational stages identified by Bamber and Tett (2000) or experienced the 'eureka' moment explored in Meyer and Land's (2003) work on threshold concepts. Consequently, with regard to the demands of HE study, it could be argued that former Access to HE students may perceive HE study more demanding than study on Access to HE because of the emphasis on learner autonomy, which requires them to demonstrate knowledge gained through readings and lectures by making use of the technical skills related to academic writing.

Further, former Access to HE students miss at HE study the shared learning and assessment journey they experienced with the tutors on their previous course. They are particularly concerned that whereas on access the tutors spent time explaining what was needed to meet assessment criteria and had some knowledge of their progress on other modules, this type of learner/teacher dialogue was absent in HE. Some find as substitute the learning support services at their university, but are disappointed to find out that again, they have to call upon their autonomy as learners in order to incorporate the technical advice received from learning support into their assignments in order to demonstrate their learning. Thus, learning support becomes for former Access to HE students a service from which they seek reassurance about their knowledge as presented in coursework.

Finally, former Access to HE students during their first year at university come to the realisation that they need to adopt a deeper approach of learning, specifically in their reading, in order to cope with the demands of their HE course. Initially, they may be disappointed to find out that HE study requires them to reflect upon and learn from their mistakes and that the skills acquired from their previous course are only part of the assessment. Slowly, they understand that as beginning students at university, they have just started a learning journey in which they are called to use their autonomy as learners to develop and present their knowledge under the traditions of higher education and in which their prior experiences, although informative and valuable, can be used as knowledge only if these are reflected upon theoretical knowledge. Thus, for former Access to HE students the transition to HE study may show signs of irregularity with regard to learner autonomy, in that it requires them to devise individual learning strategies, but also signs of preparedness for the learning process at university.

## **Conclusion**

This paper explored the learning experiences of former Access to HE students during their first year of study at university by focusing on factors relating to how previously experienced learning and teaching model on an Access to HE course at an inner London FE college prepared them for HE study. While major characteristics of their previous Access course were

flexibility and criteria-led assessment based on developmental learning, during their first year of study at HE students initially experienced problems related to individual study, time management and recognising feedback on assessment as part of the learning journey. Thus, study at HE was perceived as more demanding than study at Access to HE because it requires a higher degree of learner autonomy. Learning support services were widely used but their role was distinct from skills provision in Access to HE, where it is inherent in the programme structure. Finally, students realise that in order to be successful learners at university they have to adopt a deeper approach to learning and become autonomous learners. This may be more difficult for former Access to HE learners owing to their interrupted learning and personal and work demands outside study. While these findings are only applicable to the specific case study, they nevertheless provide a snapshot in the experiences of former Access to HE students' first year at university.

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