

The experience of young people in higher education: factors influencing withdrawal

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Summary

A key element of English government policy regarding Higher Education (HE) is its focus on widening participation and the closely related issue of retention. This is an important issue for the individual student, for whom withdrawal from a chosen course of action may have profound social and psychological implications. Measures from Health Psychology (HP) as well as a range of demographic variables and individual narratives are used to develop a formal approach to understanding the process of integration into HE, with a view to developing informed participant-led strategies for assisting culturally diverse young people through university. Initial results indicate significant differences between students who successfully complete their university education and those who withdraw. The quantitative findings are explored further in relation to student narratives and discussed with particular reference to retention and outcomes.

Keywords

Transitions

Widening Participation

Social Psychology

Narrative

Coping

Self-esteem

Degree Outcomes

Social justice

Key issue

A key question in understanding the first year experience in Higher Education (HE) concerns its relationship to widening participation – do we expand entry at the expense of increasing withdrawal, and how does the HE experience impact on the individual? Government policy has established a framework to achieve the aim of 50% entry into HE by 2010. However, widening participation at a structural level is not the same as enabling successful participation by real individuals. The benefit of a social psychological perspective is that it examines psychosocial factors that influence the personal outcomes of transition, and the individual experiences that mediate that transition.

This longitudinal study explores the student experience using a range of measures from Health Psychology (HP) including Self-Esteem, Self-Efficacy, Coping, Perceived Social Support and Subjective Well-Being. These findings are explored in relation to individual narratives and a range of demographic variables, including parental experience of HE, pre-entry qualifications and non-direct entry. In this paper, we present some initial findings that reflect factors that influence student withdrawal, student experience, and student attainment through the HE experience.

Widening participation

The Government's proposals for widening participation targets 'bright young students from poorer backgrounds' (DfEE, 2001:1). Students come to University with a diverse range of individual histories, experiences, expectations and aspirations. In order to examine degree outcomes it is important to have some understanding of these issues. Traditionally Edge Hill has attracted students from lower socio-economic groups and those who live locally. It is well placed therefore both to understand and to explore the

experience of those students that are currently the focus of Government design.

Simply encouraging more students to the HE experience does not necessarily predict positive outcomes, either at the individual or societal level. According to Tinto (2006) low-income students are disproportionately academically under-prepared. The Seventh Principle of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education developed by the American Association of Higher Education (Chickering and Gamson, 1987) states that good practice in undergraduate education respects diverse talents and ways of learning. Staff may need help in accommodating a range of learning styles and need incentives to change. Lorion (1991) states that diversity necessitates examination of one's own, often unspoken, assumptions about good and bad, about who people are and how they live, and about differences and similarities among people from different backgrounds and world views. It is predicted that research that informs our understanding of the impact of diversity on institutions and the impact of institutions on a diverse student body will enable the necessary change to ensure positive outcomes.

The contribution of psychology

According to the DfEE (2001) as we expand access, and participation in HE becomes the norm the HE system will increasingly underpin social justice. However, the researchers question whether this is automatically the case. The simple expedient of expanding access raises the crucial psychological issue of how participation can be made a successful experience for the individual and thereby contribute to a more just society. Without considering the experience of participation, the impetus behind this government-initiated action may not be in the best interests of the psychological well-being of those with unrealised potential, the supposed target groups. This is particularly important in an era of mounting student debt and increasing competition for graduate style employment opportunities. According to Parkes (1996) one of

the greatest challenges to educators is to meet the educational and personal needs of students entering higher education.

While widening participation is generally explored from a sociological perspective, examining phenomena such as age, gender and socio-economic status, the experience of life, of which HE is simply another facet, is essentially a psychological one. Such experience comprises influencing and being influenced by one's individual characteristics, such as the ability to cope, the sense of self-efficacy, self esteem and attitudes to significant others. A particular strength of psychology is in investigating how behaviours actually work in terms of how individuals evaluate situations and respond to them. For example, how the impact of events is mediated by the individual's level of anxiety, coping, social support, or self-esteem. Not only does psychology reveal particular mediators of the student experience, it also gives a broader view of the experience of transition.

To improve the lives and opportunities of young people living in the UK we need to understand their experiences from their perspective. It is important to gather their views on their environments, their relationships and on the services that they receive. Using a narrative approach in addition to the questionnaire survey and psychological measures attaches importance to the perspectives of those being researched. Where the general concerns of psychology have in recent years focused on developing general explanations of human behaviour, the use of narrative celebrates the individual. The subjective experiences of individuals can inform a socio-structural approach, recognizing the contribution of individual life stories or narratives to the overall picture of life as an HE student today.

Method

Student experience was investigated at induction and after graduation. Data from 216 Psychological and Social Sciences students who graduated in 2004 and 2005 are reported. These students are predominantly first generation

entrants and not all enter by traditional routes: 68% have no parental experience of Higher Education and 29% have no 'A' levels.

The COPE scale (Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub, 1989) assessed individuals' preferred coping responses in the face of stress. These may be adaptive and positive (such as active coping, planning, and seeking instrumental support) or maladaptive (e.g., denial, disengagement from the problem, or focusing on venting emotion). The Generalized Self-Efficacy scale (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1993) measured individuals' beliefs in their ability to control demands and respond to challenges. While self-efficacy measured individuals' sense of can-do, perceived self-worth was recorded using Rosenberg's (1965) Self-Esteem scale. The Significant Others Scale (Power et al., 1988) assessed the social, emotional and practical support provided by each individual's social network, including any perceived discrepancy between the actual and ideal amounts of support available. Subjective Well-being (e.g., current levels of anxiety and depression) was measured using Warr's (1983) questionnaire. Individual narratives (McAdams, 1996) invited participants to write freely and anonymously about their own lives and experiences of coming into Higher Education.

Results and analysis

Preliminary examination of the 2004 graduates revealed a tendency for a significantly more positive appraisal of stress to be made by the small group of 12 withdrawers in comparison to those who completed their degrees. (T-tests revealed that the responses of Active coping, Planning, Positive growth and Reinterpretation, and Acceptance of stress were all significantly higher in this group at $p < .01$). This suggested that withdrawals are often positive life decisions made by individuals. Once the samples were combined (2004 and 2005 graduates) there was no longer evidence for any significantly consistent difference between withdrawers and continuers in personal coping style.

However, educational background did yield significant differences in coping styles. Non-A-level entrants consistently employed more positive coping than entrants with A-levels. (T-tests revealed significantly higher Active coping responses, Planning, Positive growth, and Acceptance of stress, all at $p < .05$.) This may reflect a relatively passive continuation onto the HE pathway by former A-levellers, in comparison to those who enter HE through rather different decisions and routes. As a result, the question becomes one about those who stay as well as those who leave, with an accompanying need to unpick non-completion of degrees and degree achievement. This is addressed here using discriminant function analysis (DFA).

Discriminant Function Analyses

Following screening of the data, an analysis was run to reveal the factors that contributed to degree completion and non-completion. In the full sample, 28 students did not complete their degree and 188 did complete. Discriminant analysis revealed a significant overall association between completion/non-completion and a single function (Wilks' $\Lambda = .91$, $\chi^2_{(11)} = 20.71$, $p < .05$). Table 1 gives overall correlations between the discriminant function and the variables in the analysis. These correlations aid simple interpretation of the nature of the function. Further analysis confirmed that possession of A-levels and direct entry into HE were significant factors that defined the function. Residence in university accommodation made a small but significant contribution. Notably, parental experience of HE did not discriminate between completers and non-completers: it is being an A-level or direct entrant rather than being a first-generation entrant that counts.

See Appendix 1

Having A-levels, direct entry, parents with HE experience, and university accommodation each scored 1, as did completion of the degree, while a lack of these attributes scored zero. The correlations presented in Table 1 show that those who do complete their degree studies tend, in order of importance,

to have A-levels, to be direct entrants into HE, and to not be resident in student halls. Conversely, those who do not complete tend not to have A-levels, to be non-direct entrants, and to be resident in student halls.

A second DFA assessed degree attainment. In the sample, a group of 48 were awarded Firsts and 2:i degrees, and 107 were awarded 2:ii or below. The DFA revealed an overall significant association between group membership and a single discriminant function (Wilks' $\Lambda = .90$, $\chi^2_{(11)} = 15.30$, $p < .001$). Stepwise analysis revealed that only Direct entry to HE and Self-esteem contributed to the function, while the other variables were redundant. 73% of all outcomes were successfully predicted by the model.

See Appendix 2

With higher awards scored as 1 and lower awards as 2, the correlations in Table 2 show that those who achieve a higher degree classification (1st or 2:i) tend not to be direct entrants into HE and to have higher self-esteem. Conversely, those who are awarded a lower classification tend to be direct entrants into HE and to have lower self-esteem. It should be noted that in the DFA direct entry is not confounded with age. Although older students did tend to get better degrees, age did not emerge as a factor that significantly contributed to achievement. The emergence of self-esteem as a factor underlines the importance of individual psychology to degree success.

Notably, neither A-level experience nor Parental HE made any contribution to achievement of a higher degree classification. Instead, non-direct entry into HE is crucial in degree achievement. The positive contributions of non-direct entry and self-confidence to achievement in HE may reflect psychological maturity and aspiration.

Summary of quantitative analysis

The most striking findings concern A-levels and direct entry into HE. A-levels are important in predicting degree completion, but have no impact on degree

score. Direct entry into HE increases the likelihood of degree completion, but seems to militate against higher achievement. Those who do achieve tend to be non-direct entrants with a higher self-concept. The fact that self-concept plays a part in achievement confirms the importance of individual experience. This takes effect in terms of self-worth and a sense of can-do rather than coping style, and therefore will be unique to individuals and their life experiences. Coping style does not measurably differentiate between overall outcomes such as completion and non-completion and degree results, although adaptive coping may be associated with positive decisions to withdraw. Figure 1 summarizes the pattern of the results.

See Appendix 3

Narratives

Narratives generated themes and factors similar to those distinguished within the scales. As well as the fact of transition, which is a significant life change, educational background brings challenges to coping such as perceived disadvantage:

‘One of the biggest worries of mine was the fact that most people on the same course as me had already studied A-level psychology and seemed to know a great deal more than I did therefore I felt at a disadvantage’

‘I do feel that everything can be overwhelming at first. You have to go and find everything out for yourself. It is slightly reminiscent of being thrown in at the deep end.’

Given the challenge, social support and significant others were an important resource:

‘I was nervous, as any student would be, as I was living on campus, living with strangers and living away from home for the first time in my life... My mum was very supportive of me and she knew I had been through a hard time, my brother was

supportive and excited as he had been to University and loved it and my sister was supportive and proud as she never went to university.'

'If they [the other students] had not been there the course would have been much more difficult, maybe even impossible.'

The anxiety that comes with transition can summon coping through positive reappraisal of the situation, and a sense of self-worth or self-esteem:

'I did have doubts about being a mature student and wondered whether I would fit in. When I started the course I found I was one of only a few, which came as a bit of a surprise, however, I focused on the positive aspects of my position like the fact I had life experiences to contribute and apply to my work.'

While there was relatively minor quantitative evidence for the influence of positive coping on a group-wide basis, adaptive coping strategies such as positive reappraisal are likely to be important on an individual basis, and these emerged in the narratives. Other strategies included active coping:

'The best way to tackle the first few days at university is just to start talking to people you don't knowyou feel more relaxed because you know some people and you are not on your own'

However, employing positive strategies such as planning was in itself a demand for some:

'I am not an organised person at all, so I don't actually know how to cope with being at Edge Hill'

The narratives show that coping is not just a characteristic set of responses that are employed by an individual. Instead, awareness of needs and relevant strategies may exist but the response remain latent:

'I do not seem to have the motivation to strive to achieve what I know I can. I am someone that needs support... I haven't really sought after this in the college itself'

Positive reinterpretation of challenges enables personal growth, and personal growth itself was an important theme:

'When I arrived at Edge Hill. I was filled with excitement and anticipation, as to what I would learn and the people I would meet, I was disappointed, as many of the students are more concerned with the student bar. As a mature student, I expected to find this distasteful, however it has given me a new lease of life and I have embraced it... I feel very happy and satisfied with my life.'

'Doing a degree is the best thing I ever did, it has made me grow up so much and has taught me so much about life.'

Finally, the importance of personal growth ties in with the results from the discriminate factor analysis that indicated that high self-concept and non-direct entry were important determinants of degree success. This could be loosely interpreted as psychological maturity, noting that chronological age was not a key factor. In the narratives, a similar theme emerged in the form of aspirations and seeking opportunities for growth:

'I have been a mother for 14 years, bringing up three children, ten of those years on my own. I have been in and out of education since my eldest was born, gaining the qualifications I did not and should have gained in senior school... I have also found that being a mature student learning seems to be easier, as I seem to understand a lot more at my age than when I was younger, and I knew then and now that I am capable. I think this has a lot to do with growing up. I find myself knowing more and more what I want out of life and where I want to go.'

Aspiration was also discussed by the younger entrants:

'The most important thing to me is that I'm happy and not stuck in a dead end job, I don't want to dread going to work each day as many people do. I would love to become a famous criminal psychologist or profiler but setting my sights slightly, my dream is to get into clinical psychology. To talk to people, listen to their problems and hopefully be able to help or offer some form of advice.'

Conclusions / points of departure

The results show that the psychological approach is beneficial, in this case revealing the importance of self-concept and individual profiles that increase the scope of the more frequently considered demographics. Government policy misses the individual by focusing on inclusion in a purely structural way. Individual factors influence outcomes for students (e.g. coping with stress, health and well being). Widening participation may in reality open the door to increases in psychological disadvantage, for example, through financial burdens, delaying life transitions, and the entrapment of completion or quick repayment upon drop-out. Divisive policies which demonstrate little awareness and understanding of the psychosocial fabric of people's lives do not enable young people to feel 'included' whilst undertaking HE. Such initiatives are not exemplary of social justice. Recognition of individuality and individual educational needs promotes social justice.

Traditional research by social scientists, other than psychologists, tend to locate causes in social systems. In contrast, the psychological focus on the individual implies relatively more immediate causes of behaviour. With the emphasis on diversity there is an increasing need for formal psychological investigation in order to understand youth experiences, attitudes, and well-being.

Statements made by individuals living within the relevant social group provide an important opportunity for constructing a picture of a social phenomenon from the perspective of those who, unlike government ministers, are living that phenomenon today, and who are rarely heard. For the student unused to the HE experience there may be a lack of understanding of levels of qualification, what these qualifications mean in real life, and of the HE culture and all that it entails. By the time students realise, it is too late to influence outcomes. In their turn, staff may hold many pre-conceptions about students' prior learning,

their attitudes, what they should know how to do. Being informed about individual experience has practical significance. The mismatch between staff expectations and student performance may too easily lead to students being labelled as mediocre which becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The reality may be they do not know how, information given does not translate easily into information understood, especially for students from different worlds. In using the narratives of participants the research focuses on the person, telling the story of their individual life and reflecting on their own existence. The approach demonstrates a commitment to ensuring that the young people central to the research are involved in and empowered by the process. In examining students' stories in relation to measures of psychological health and well-being we present a picture of experience that may contribute to informed policy that is translatable into a practice that contributes to a just system.

Biographies

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Appendix 1 **Table 1. Structure of the discriminant function for degree completion/non-completion.**

A-levels	.77
Direct entry	.43
In accommodation	-.25
Positive adaptation	.18
Parental HE	.18
Depression	.15
Self-esteem	-.15
Maladaptive coping	.13
Sibling HE	.11
Anxiety	.04
Self-efficacy	.02

Appendix 2 **Table 2. Structure of the discriminant function for degree classification.**

Direct entry	.75
Self-esteem	-.64
Age	-.46
Self-efficacy	-.32
Social support disparity	.29
A-Levels	.26
Gender	-.20
In accommodation	.18
Parental HE	.07

Appendix 3. Summary of overall influences on the sampled degree outcomes (n=216).

