# ESCalate Student 2010 Grant Project Final Report

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Date submitted</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Project Title</strong></td>
<td>Access student perceptions of factors that impact upon their learning journey</td>
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<td><strong>Project Start date</strong></td>
<td>5 July 2010</td>
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<td><strong>Project End date</strong></td>
<td>5 July 2011</td>
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Access student perceptions of factors that impact upon their learning journey

Laura Mears

5th July 2011
Summary
This research was chosen for its significance to current debate and personal interest. The motivations and barriers of adults returning to education is a large debate in the current economic climate, it is widely accepted that there are no longer jobs for life. Therefore the need to gain educational qualifications is rising in order for individuals to compete within the labour market. Lifelong learning is an important initiative as part of the European Union’s Lifelong Learning Programme which aims to enable students to learn for life (Watson and Taylor, 1998). Parallel to this is the UK Government’s Widening Participation. According to Scales (2008) widening participation aims to avoid social exclusion.

Lifelong learning can be seen as not just academic but also personal and life skills, which are learnt throughout a person’s life (Rogers, 2002). However, for the purpose of this research the aim was to find out what motivates adults to return to education and what barriers they may face. This research could have potentially looked into a range of settings and courses, including colleges, universities or community centres; however this research investigated the perceptions and experiences of students on access courses, specifically women. This was due to the research being small scale and narrowing the sample.

Aim and objectives
The overall aim of this research was to discover the motivations and barriers experienced by adult learners returning to education. In order to gather this information it was important to choose a specific course to collect relevant data. Access courses are popular with adult returnees due to the need of producing
evidence regarding qualifications. Access courses give those adults who do not have the relevant qualifications an alternative one. There are many different Access courses which are available to adult returnees; however it was not necessary to choose a specific one for this research.

This research was carried out using students studying on an access course in a college or university setting. Specifically the objectives of the study were to:

1. Identify the motivations and barriers which adults faced when returning to education.
2. Evaluate the motivations and barriers which were supported from literature.
3. Analyse findings to report back to colleagues.

Objective one focused on information regarding motivations and barriers collected from primary research via interviews and questionnaires. Objective 2 evaluated the primary data and compared it to the secondary data collected from books, journals and websites. Objective 3 finally analysed the data to summarise findings and make recommendations to report to colleagues.

**Methods**

Primary data was collected in order to find out what the motivations and barriers were that adults faced in south Wales. This data was analysed against the secondary data collected.

This research was based around the form of a case study, it was the study of individuals in a college in south Wales where they were interviewed and asked to fill
in questionnaires. The use of a case study was chosen in order to gather information whilst students were in their own environment. Denscombe (2007) explains that a case study focuses on an instance on a particular phenomenon which will provide in-depth information from a group of people who have experienced it. This concurs with the research that was conducted; a sample of women studying an access course and data was gathered from these participants. Case studies are often related to qualitative data collection, however as Bryman (2001) states they are becoming more related to both qualitative and quantitative research.

The research sample used was purposive, Cohen, Mannion and Morrison (2008) explain that this type of sample was chosen as the research was looking at a specific purpose. To be able to gather relevant and purposeful data it was necessary choose a sample of students who were going to produce the necessary information. Cohen, Mannion and Morrison (2008) explain that purposive sampling enables the researcher to gain knowledgeable people who will give an insight to the most reliable information.

Interpretive theorists such as Max Weber believe that to understand a person’s standpoint they must understand the reasons why they have chosen to do it (Haralambos and Holborn, 2000). This relates to the research as it aimed to find out the reasons why individuals returned to education not just the statistics of numbers of returning adults to education.

Before the qualitative research took place, questionnaires were be piloted. They were piloted to a small sample of women on a course within the researchers own
institutions. It was important to pilot the questionnaires to ensure that no mistakes were made on the day which would have delayed participants and the researcher’s time. The principle reason was to increase the reliability, validity and practicability of the questionnaire (Cohen, Mannion and Morrison, 2008).

Both qualitative and quantitative data collection was necessary in order to gain in-depth information. Questionnaires were distributed at the college on arrival before semi-structured interviews took place. Questionnaires were an easy way to gather basic information.

Semi-structured interviews took place and were recorded via a voice recorder. Interviews were a useful method so that the questions on the questionnaires expanded upon. It enabled the researcher to fully understand the motivations and barriers to adult learning.

**Results**

Adult education is not a new phenomenon; it has however changed over the last 100 years. In 1903, the Workers’ Education Association (WEA) was created to help the working class population gain a higher education at University; previous to this Act it was very difficult for working class people to gain a place at University as there were very restricted routes which existed at the beginning of the 20th Century (Fieldhouse, 1998).

The Central Committee on Women’s Training and Employment undertook the role of training women for industrial and domestic work, emphasising on equipping women for their perceived natural work which was either in the home as a wife or as a
domestic servant (Fieldhouse, 1998). In the 1970s it was very noticeable that society was becoming increasingly divided by social, gender and racial inequalities, with a range of social problems, which ranged from structural unemployment, homelessness and racial discrimination (Fieldhouse, 1998).

From reading literature on this subject before gathering the primary data for this research project it was quite clear the kind of motivations and barriers that would be discussed and mentioned. This section will discuss and evaluate the findings from interviews and questionnaires which were found.

Tutor interview
A semi structured interview took place with two tutors at the college; course leader for Humanities and course leader for Nursing Access courses. It was explained that the courses were very similar apart from the main bulk of the course subject, both courses had mandatory core subjects including English, Communications and Maths. Both courses could be taken either part time or full time, however funding is affected which one was studied, the full time course was funded by the Welsh Assembly Government.

Fieldhouse explains that “Access to Higher Education Scheme was initiated by the Labour Government in 1978 and enthusiastically continued throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s by successive Conservative Governments, it was intended to be a very specifically targeted affair” (1998, pg73). The Access scheme began in 1978 when seven local authorities established a pilot Access programme, with a view to increase the numbers of ethnic minorities entering education (Fieldhouse, 1998).
Women started to show a continuous rise in aspirations and Access courses gave them the opportunity to gain a qualification (Field, Gallacher and Ingram, 2009).

Tutors explained that Access courses in their original context were set out to only enrol over 25 year olds, this was then reduced to 21 year olds and now since the Age Legislation it is 16 years old. However, in this college it is their policy to only interview those students who have had ‘substantial life skills’ that will be accepted. A standard letter is sent to those students who are only a couple of years out of compulsory education to advise them on gaining work experience in their chosen field or applying for A-levels before applying for the access course. This can be seen as encouraging the idea of Lifelong Learning.

Lifelong learning is a concept which hopes to enable people to learn for life (Wilson, 1999). Hargreaves (2007, pg1) agrees with this explanation confirming that “learning lasts for life”. Therefore learning and education should not end at 16 years old when compulsory education ends but should continue to help with careers and personal aspirations (Hargreaves, 2007). Scales (2008) is of the same opinion as Hargreaves’ theory, there is no longer a job for life and therefore training and re-training is needed to gain a secure place in the labour market. Ball (1989, pg7) conveys that “we must create a learning society in which lifelong learning is the norm, not the exception”. However, it is important for all parts of society to be included in Lifelong Learning.
Jones (1990) confirms that the implementation of alternative routes into higher education has been progressing for a number of years and is closely related to the idea of widening participation.

There has been a substantial amount of research into widening participation over the last few years; however one very influential person is Helena Kennedy who has researched into Lifelong Learning and Widening Participation. Helena Kennedy’s influential report called Learning Works: Widening Participation in Further Education which is known as the Kennedy Report, argued the “importance of learning and skills for an economic success” (Scales, 2008, pg276). Field (2005) agrees that regardless of age or other factors opportunities should be available for all.

Course tutors clarified the requirements for students to enrol on access courses, these included a written test and computer based tests on application. It is only after the test has been successfully completed that applicants will be asked to attend an informal interview with course tutors.

It was made clear that at the informal interview applicants are asked what their long term goal is. Motivations are often discussed and some of the most popular are being made redundant and own children have grown up so doing something for themselves. However, it is not a major discussion when at interview. Barriers can also be very personal and built around confidence as to whether or not the student is capable of doing the course or completing it (Thomas, 2001).
Merriam *et al* (2007) lists many different factors which influence individual decisions to further education and training, these include; lack of time; too busy; family responsibilities and too old to learn. Worries and concerns are often brought to the attention of tutors when students start the course and are always surprised with the amount of anxiety and fear of failure that mature students, particularly, carry. Other worries are the quality of the work they will produce or wanting to drop out due to not doing very well on the course. Bad experiences in previous education are also common anxieties, worrying that college will be a similar experience as school.

Mature students are often the ones which have the most anxieties about college and the most ‘needy’. Tutors believed this to be true due to the fact that they are eager to succeed and are very focused. Tutors clarified that when discussing this at a recent conference with other access course tutors this was also evident at other colleges.

Every year there are withdrawals from the two Access courses, however it is usually the younger students who drop out. This could be related to less responsibility and being interested in alternative things at a young age, hence the reason they are often rejected onto these courses. Mature students do often withdraw also, they are more serious reasons though, such as husbands being made redundant so students need to go back into paid work to support the family or health issues.

It was evident that these courses are a fantastic way to prepare students for university. They teach students how to write academically, reference and carry out primary research. Tutors explained it would be very interesting to see how students
at university found their first year when coming from an access course and those straight from A-level.

Finally discussed was the need for government to pay more attention to adult education. 14-19 education is very focused at the moment however, adult education is not funded as much as it should be, the need for extra courses or short courses are restricted due to this aspect. Adults need to retrain for a mixture of reasons but are restricted due to the government not putting enough funding into adult education. Adults used to enjoy coming to classes for the social aspect however it is now an area of education which is full of qualifications which has taken away the enjoyment in adult education.

Student interviews and feedback

Interviews took place with five full time students on the Humanities Access course and 4 part time students on the Nursing Access course. Questions were asked generally not specifically about the course they were studying. The questions were based on the questionnaires which each participant filled in, so they were able to expand on their answers.

Half of the students who were interviewed lived in Barry, with the other half lived in different areas of Cardiff, this shows that the college takes on board Widening Participation. Uden (1996, pg224) explains that “widening participation: the idea that more and different people should be learning”. HEFCW (http://www.hefcw.ac.uk/policy_areas/widening_access/widening_access.aspx, no date) confirm this idea and use the term that “widening access is about increasing
opportunities for people from a diverse range of backgrounds to benefit from higher education (HE)”. HEFCW have also conducted their own research and have implemented their own policies which have enabled Welsh communities to be included in adult learning and education. HEFCW agrees with Kennedy’s ideas of the need to eliminate social exclusion. One of their papers includes ‘Reaching the Wider Initiative’ which “aims to increase higher education participation from groups and communities in Wales by raising aspirations, and creating new study opportunities and learning pathways to higher education” (HEFCW http://www.hefcw.ac.uk/policy_areas/widening_access/reaching_wider_initiative.aspx).

Motivations
According to Scales (2008) motivation is something which compels us to do something; the point is where this motivation comes from. Women returning to work can sometimes be motivated after a divorce and to show that they are capable of more than being a housewife. There are circumstances where adults feel like children with regards to how they are treated in the classroom (Scales, 1998). Therefore some adults return to education tentatively due to lack of confidence and previous negative experiences in learning (Scales, 1998).

Uden (1996) challenges Scales’ ideas of motivators and argues that there are three main motives for returning to education these include vocational, academic and personal interest and development. According to Uden (1996) more adults are returning to education to secure employment as there is no longer a job for life.
Scales (2008) believes that everyone is motivated to learn and that it is part of our human nature, humans have always learnt and if they didn’t then the human race would not survive. This is not necessarily linked to education, humans learn in society generally not just in an educational setting. Therefore the key word when discussing this is that learning is natural but education is not (Scales, 2008). Scales challenges the idea that “Everyone wants to learn; unfortunately they might not want to learn or in the ways that you want them to do it” (2008, pg227). Most adults return to education with a variety of motivations and will have a real interest in the subject they have chosen to study (Scales, 2008).

Participants discussed the reasons for their attendance on the Access course, a reason which regularly came up was the need for qualification in order to develop a career. Those students who are enrolled on the Access to Nursing course already work in a setting related to health, however due to the fact they are not qualified they do not gain the benefits of a salary. Interviewee one explained that she did everything a qualified nurse did just didn’t have the benefits. Rogers (2007) confirms that many adult returnees are motivated by the need for a qualification in order to gain more money. Scales (1998) confirms some students return to education to develop a new skill or improve on what they already know. Interviewee two explained similar reasons for enrolling on Access to Nursing. She was working as a care worker but not able to move up any grades so doing this course enabled her to go onto university to qualify as a nurse. Being made redundant and having the opportunity to do what they wanted to do when children had grown up was another motivation.
During one interview the student explained that she wanted to return to education to gain a better education and lifestyle for her family. She explained that she was brought up in a deprived area, never understanding what education was for, and therefore she wanted to teach her children differently. Egan (2010) explains that many children from deprived areas do not have the influence from parents when in school, parents do not value education.

**Barriers**

According to Thomas (2001, pg65) “The term ‘barrier’ is used to refer to factors that discourage or prevent participation in post-compulsory education”. Thomas (2001) states that barriers vary between individuals, these barriers can range from distance required to travel to entry requirements.

Thomas (2001) identifies four different types of barriers to learning; these are demonstrated in the diagram below.

*Education Sectors*
Labour Market

Figure 1

Thomas (2001, pg76) argues that further and higher education should not rely solely on qualifications when deciding on admission, as these are “indicators of past performance only, not of potential capacity”.

Thomas (2001) considers the idea that social and cultural factors come from the construction of personalised social groups. Giddens (2001) clarifies that these groups consist of how individuals dress, language barriers and their general lifestyle choices. Harablambos and Holborn (2000) confirm that individuals are able to create their own identities and to change them as necessary.

Barriers were the main issues which were discussed when interviewing the students. Many students stated the same barriers and worries when applying for the access course. These included childcare and balancing it with college work. McGivney (1991) clarifies that women, more than men, are more likely to use family problems as an issue for not participating in education. Merriam et al (2007, pg67) further explains that individuals are “deterred from participating by personal problems, lack of confidence, educational costs, lack of interest in organised education generally, or lack of interest in available courses”. McGivney (1994) agrees with these factors and builds on the barriers from her research. McGivney (1994) declares that personal barriers are a major issue but are commonly more noticeable amongst women and those with previous negative educational backgrounds.
Students stated that they have to be organised and not leave college work until the last minute. Worries regarding keeping up with the work and meeting grades was a concern, but they are much more confident now that they are at the end of their first year or finishing the course if full time. Thomas (2001) has developed the idea that low aspirations and motivation are the two issues which individuals face the most when returning to education. McGivney (1990) agrees that attitudes and expectations are the most popular individual factors. McGivney (1990) declares that the only way to overcome these individual barriers is to make education an environment which is a service for the community and not just specifically aimed at those who are more intellectual.

Confidence was a major concern for some students, especially meeting new people and fitting in due to being older. It was evident that some students did not have good experiences in school and were worried that college was going to be similar environment. The amount of adults returning to education is dependent on their experience within school. Thomas (2001) believes that the experiences we gain in school give us a perception of further learning. As discussed with course tutors access students were very determined to succeed and that is one worry which was raised when interviewing the students; some were worried of failure. Adult returnees to education have responsibilities so do not want to fail and see the course as a waste of time.

A final barrier which was discussed was not being able to fund the course financially. According to Maxted (1999) one of the most frequently asked questions when applying for further and higher education was the cost of the course. Thomas (2001)
states that cost was a definite barrier which has a huge impact on the attendance to further and higher education. Gorard et al (2007) agrees with Thomas (2001) and emphasises that the barrier for cost of education may not necessarily be the fees but also include an indirect cost such as transport and childcare. Maxted (1999) supports Gorard’s idea of indirect costs; Maxted (1999) states that some adult learners will need to sacrifice an income to undertake courses. However, these barriers are overcome with many students explaining they have support from family and friends. Field (2005) explains that this is seen as social capital, related to relationships such as friends and family. Fields (2005, pg5) states that these relationships can be seen as “a resource, which people can then draw on to achieve their goals”. Some students are entitled to benefits to help with child care or if in full time education the course is funded by the government.

Whilst talking to students on the access courses the majority of the students expressed their thoughts on the course. Students were grateful that they had taken this route, due to the need of gaining qualifications. However, they explained that the access course had prepared them well for university, regarding referencing, writing academically and meeting strict deadlines. One student explained that her friend recommended the course due to that reason.

Questionnaires and student feedback

Students from both courses filled in a questionnaires, 24 from the Humanities Access course and 12 from the Nursing Access course, answers were then expanded on during their interviews as previously discussed. Questionnaires captured quantitative data. As previously discussed half of students were from the Barry area
and the other half from Cardiff. Motivations and barriers were discussed, motivations are shown below in a graph. The graph simply displays the motivations which participants ticked on the questionnaire, these included a fresh start and re-training.

The main barrier which students chose on the questionnaires was confidence, many students worried about meeting new people and being able to complete the course. Finance was another barrier which was found to be important to students however, as discussed previously this was overcome by family and friends helping financially. Again barriers from the questionnaires are displayed below in the graph. The graph shows clearly, that confidence was the main issue which students faced when making their decision on returning to education.

**Project Impact**

This project aimed to understand the motivations and barriers that adults faced when returning to education. The project set out to look at literature which evidenced different motivations and barriers. Primary research was then conducted to see if those motivations and barriers were still evident or if different ones had arisen.

From conducting this research it was clear that certain barriers and motivations were highlighted. The main motivation which was mentioned by most participants was the need to qualify in order to gain more precedence in a current job. Students working as health care professionals do not gaining the rewards, such as pay. Access
courses are therefore an excellent way to help those adults who have been in jobs for a number of years to progress and develop. It was also made clear that Access courses helped students to prepare for university, this was a very interesting point which was discussed during tutor and student interviews. Harvard referencing, essay writing and primary research prepared students for university life. Students found this to be very helpful and did not feel so anxious about going to university because of the training they had received on the course. Course tutors explained that it would be very interesting to see how students in university who entered straight from A-level reacted differently to those who entered from Access courses, perhaps the next step of this research.

Barriers were seen to be a major part in the students’ decisions to return to education. One of the main barriers and worries was confidence, students worried they would not be able to cope with the work load or gain the grades needed to enter University. As discussed earlier their fear of failure was very great and students did not want to let anyone down. Finance was another barrier which worried students however, funding and help from family and friends supported the students.

The research was very informative and interesting, meeting very influential people while carrying out primary research. Students were determined to succeed and improve their lives, they were grateful for the opportunity and determined not to fail.

References


