

Understanding the  
impact of outreach  
on access to higher  
education for adult  
learners from  
disadvantaged  
backgrounds:  
**an institutional  
response**



## Foreword

In my role as Director of Fair Access to Higher Education, I have been fortunate enough to visit universities and colleges around the country, meeting with students from a range of backgrounds who are experiencing the life-changing potential of higher education. During these visits, meeting with adult learners is always inspiring. Having missed out on higher education at 18 for a variety of reasons, many are now juggling their studies with work or caring commitments. Not only do the skills and experience they bring to their studies help create a more diverse student body, but there is a clear societal and economic benefit to people succeeding in higher education – whatever stage of their life they come to it.

While we shouldn't be tempted to consider adult learners as one homogenous group, we do know that they are disproportionately more likely to be from disadvantaged backgrounds than those who enter higher education straight from school. We also know that adult learners are far more likely to study part-time. And with the dramatic decline in part-time numbers since 2010 showing no sign of levelling off, numbers of adult learners look set to continue dropping unless drastic action is taken.

There is a clear need for universities and colleges to reach out to prospective adult learners, and I am delighted to welcome the case studies in this

report which set out a range of innovative and exciting ways of doing so. Adult learners are a difficult group to reach. When I was a Vice-Chancellor, I could speak to hundreds of prospective students in a single day by visiting a sixth form. Clearly, this is not a viable approach with adult learners. So outreach activities for adult learners need to be creative, reaching out to communities to make direct contact with talented people who may never have thought that higher education was for someone like them. Key to this work is a focus on boosting confidence and improving 'soft skills' – while low confidence can be as much of a barrier as low prior attainment, improved confidence can also lead to improved attainment. Done well, this work can help unleash talent and transform lives.

Institutions must also ensure that the information, advice and guidance they provide to adult learners is tailored to their needs – taking into account the different factors in their decision making. And, when adult learners do enter higher education, there must be a recognition that there is a broad definition of success for these students. Universities don't solely exist to award degrees. For some adult learners, even a taste of higher education can make a huge difference, raising confidence and aspirations for individuals, families and even communities.



I am sure these case studies will help stimulate thinking, and encourage others to consider how best to reach out to adult learners. Age should never be a barrier to learning new skills or improving your career prospects, and I hope that all universities and colleges will think seriously about their role in ensuring that adult learners are empowered to enter and succeed in higher education.

# Introduction: the need for outreach aimed at disadvantaged adults

*In recent strategic guidance about developing Access Agreements, the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) (2017) has encouraged Institutions of Higher Education (HEIs) to target resources at widening the participation of adult learners<sup>1</sup>:*

*All institutions have a responsibility to consider how they might work to support part-time and mature learners... you should consider the different barriers mature learners may face in accessing, succeeding in, and progressing from higher education.*

This renewed focus is partly in response to government priorities around social mobility, and a recognition that adult learners, in particular those from disadvantaged backgrounds, represent a key, but all-too invisible example of an under-represented group in higher education (HE). Adult learners are disproportionately likely to be from disadvantaged or under-represented groups, including current target groups such as students from the white working class, from specific BME groups and students with disabilities. OFFA's attention to adult learners is particularly pressing given that most part-time learners are adults (Butcher, 2015), and the dramatic (61%) decline in the numbers of mature part-time and full-time learners in HE since 2010 (HESA) shows no sign of levelling off. OFFA regard the increasing decline in part-time students as "deeply worrying" and see this issue as hindering social mobility targets. Any sustained drop in adult learner numbers can only damage sector aspirations for a more diverse student body.

The potential disappearance of adult learners should also be an important issue for all HEIs, since England is entering a period when the 18 year old population is dropping, and will not recover until 2024 (ONS, 2017). However, adult learners are a heterogeneous group and reaching them is not easy, especially those potential students who may face multiple forms of disadvantage. Unlike young people, adults are not to be found 'captive' in compulsory education settings. Crucially, adults, the majority of whom are already working, have different motivations to engage with HE than an 18 year-old entrant, who policy-makers assume is focussed on a graduate job at 21. If adults are to be engaged in HE through employability arguments (and not all will be) outreach needs to recognise that mature students are often motivated by wanting to change to a better job (Butcher and Rose-Adams, 2015).

This research project is intended to stimulate an increase in sector outreach targeted at adults. It seeks to offer evidence of interventions which do attract adult learners into HE, and aims to provide universities with ideas with which to re-balance their current substantive efforts to widen participation solely through outreach with pupils in schools. In addition, the project has developed a three-step evaluation tool to support HEIs who may wish to understand how they can better support adult learners and who wish to evaluate the impact of that activity in their Access Agreements.

We argue that imaginative and flexible outreach work, aligned with inclusive approaches to admissions, flexible curriculum design and inclusive and embedded pastoral support, are needed to widen adult participation in HE study. Barriers preventing the success of part-time and mature students need to be addressed across the HE sector, and it appears creative interventions are urgently required for the sector to re-engage with adult learners.

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<sup>1</sup> Adult and mature learners are often used interchangeably in the literature. For the purposes of this report adult and mature learners are those learners of 25 years or older acknowledging that the needs of a 25 year old adult learner may be different from a 50 year learner.

# Defining outreach

This project originated in a shared desire between OFFA and the partner universities to pursue an evidence-led approach to outreach with adults, and to better understand the relationship of outreach activity to access, while acknowledging the complex issues around measuring the impact of any interventions. OFFA has been expecting HEIs to use evidence of impact to inform their practice, but this presents additional challenges in relation to adult learners, and in recent years, interest in using data to more effectively monitor and evaluate widening participation (WP) activity aimed at mature and part-time learners has become of greater interest (Holland et al, 2017). OFFA is keen to encourage greater attention to the widening of participation across HE through interventions aimed at adults. However, this is a complex area where policy, mission, strategy and practice overlap, and as a consequence we wrestled with a fundamental question throughout the project: where does outreach for disadvantaged adults begin and end?

This is an important question if the sector is serious about reaching out to adult learners. Most current WP outreach activity focuses on interventions in schools, partly because policy makers can appear infatuated with getting 18 year-olds from under-represented groups into selective universities. It could be argued this approach has been effective, since the number of 18 year olds from the most disadvantaged backgrounds (identified by POLAR 3 quintile 1<sup>2</sup>) entering HE has risen from 11% to 19% in the last decade, in spite of the fees rise in 2012. However, this singular approach to outreach takes a very narrow perspective, excluding adults with the potential to benefit from HE (and in turn benefitting the economy by upskilling). The kind of outreach involving direct engagement with school pupils to boost achievement is not a relevant or practicable approach when it comes to adults, who are more difficult to reach as they are likely to be in full or

part-time employment and fulfilling a range of domestic and caring responsibilities, or to be outside mainstream support mechanisms.

For adult learners, **outreach** can be defined as any targeted activity or intervention which provides information, advice and guidance (IAG), support, and inclusive teaching in a flexible manner, with the aim of building confidence, developing soft skills and raising attainment among this under-represented community. For the purpose of this report, the authors opted for a broad definition of what counted as outreach, starting from the OFFA perspective:

## Target activities at people from communities under-represented in HE.

To reach disadvantaged adults requires flexibility, so outreach was conceptualised on a continuum of the provision of:

- information, advice, guidance (IAG);
- support;
- learner-centred teaching;

This encompassed:

- informal and free learning;
- formal/fee-bearing learning;
- learning based in the community;
- learning based in the university;
- learning offering tentative tasters;
- learning offering credit-bearing progression.

<sup>2</sup> Postcode measure reflecting the likelihood of participating in HE (Participation of Local Areas). Quintile 1 least likely, Quintile 5 most likely.

Adults who, after a period away from education, decide, that accessing HE is right for them, need a range of supportive interventions to have the confidence to engage. This is not to argue from a deficit perspective, but to acknowledge the obstacles (often institutional and systemic) that adult learners have to overcome. The definition of 'disadvantage' in relation to adult learners is also complex, and is not the same as measures used with 18 year olds (for example, a metric around the proportion of pupils qualifying for free school meals is of little help in analysing adult disadvantage). While characteristics such as studying with a disability, coming from postcodes with low participation, or having certain BME backgrounds offer recognisable challenges to all

students, age-specific issues can add a further barrier, especially around prior educational qualifications, time out of education and increasingly the phenomenon of 'commuter students'.

For example, the importance of ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) courses was evident in two of the case studies. Those adults who do not speak English as their first language need to have access to these types of programmes to be able to engage with HE, and to successfully complete degree programmes. This links with a broader inclusivity argument for the right to HE for all (Burke, 2012; Holmwood and Bhambra, 2012).

## The case studies

Four universities collaborated on this project. Led by The Open University, in partnership with Birkbeck University of London, the University of Leeds and the University of Bristol, an integral aim was to learn from one another, and to share with the sector different approaches, set in very different contexts, to outreach aimed at adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds (ALDBs). Two of the universities are high tariff institutions with different missions and different traditions in relation to adult learners. Two of the institutions share missions around adult learning but differ significantly in their distance and face-to-face approaches. The institutions involved had all (separately) engaged with OFFA in pressing the need to take greater account of adult learners in Access Agreements

Five case studies were produced, each illuminating a different approach to adult outreach. Each institution designed its own study, drawing on literature appropriate to their contexts and making methodological choices relevant to their distinctive outreach offer. As a result insights were gained into different disciplinary approaches, different modes of study, different financial support packages and local/national settings.



## cs1

**'FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MY LIFE I WAS ACTUALLY STARTING TO ENJOY THE CHALLENGE OF MATHS': DOES A SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND MATHS ACCESS MODULE PREPARE STUDENTS TO SUCCEED IN UG SCIENCE?**

(The Open University)

In this case study The Open University explored with part-time adult distance learners and their tutors the extent to which a Science, maths and technology (STEM) Access module prepares students to succeed in undergraduate (UG) science. This study drew on analysis of existing evaluative module survey data and used a series of iterative telephone interviews with students at the end of their Access module, and half way through their first UG Science module, as well as interviews with tutors who taught on both. Findings indicate alignment with a number of more generic studentship findings around learner confidence and study management skills, but also uncovered STEM-specific findings around the fundamental importance of enhanced competence in number skills, as well as the positive impact of interdisciplinary learning in entry level STEM.

## cs2

**'GETTING OFF THE HILL AND REACHING COMMUNITIES': OUTREACH WITH ADULTS IN THE ARTS AND HUMANITIES**

(University of Bristol)

In this case study the University of Bristol explored community-based outreach with adults lacking conventional qualifications, to whom university (and/or a particular institution) might seem inaccessible or 'invisible'. This outreach included co-designed tasters with organisations working with: ex-offenders; individuals with a history of substance abuse; refugees and asylum seekers; single parent families and local ethnic minority communities. Adult learners progress to a full-time Foundation Year in Arts and Humanities with progression to undergraduate study. 11 interviews were conducted. Findings highlight the financial pressures faced by ALDBs moving from a lower (Foundation) fee to a full (undergraduate) fee. Other issues include: questions of 'belonging' at the institution and feelings of being an outsider/imposter; the importance of the content of the Foundation Year and its relationship to students' prior experiences; the geography of Bristol and ways in which the university itself interacts with class and race.

## CS3

## TRANSITIONING TO DEGREE STUDY: DO CERTIFICATES OF HIGHER EDUCATION MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

(Birkbeck University of London)

This case study from Birkbeck University of London focuses on the transition of students on a social sciences pathway on an access style programme in HE (Higher Education Introductory Studies, or HEIS) to the BSc in Social Sciences. Institutional data from 2008-9 to 2015-16 as well as interview data from nine HEIS students who had progressed to the BSc Social Sciences is drawn on in the analysis. Findings point to the success of HEIS as a point of access to HE for mature, disadvantaged students, and it appears the programme is reasonably successful in preparing students for their ongoing study on the degree programme. However, more disturbing is the significant drop in numbers enrolling on the programme and a potentially shifting student demographic in terms of income, since the introduction of increased fees by the government in 2012/13.

## CS4

## 'TOO OLD. NOT INTELLIGENT ENOUGH. CAN'T AFFORD IT.' THE CHALLENGES OF ADULT OUTREACH

(University of Leeds)

The University of Leeds' case study explores the experience of participants' involvement in the adult outreach activity offered by the University. The Lifelong Learning Centre provides bespoke adult and flexible programme delivery as well as supporting mature and part-time students. A key part of its WP remit is the work undertaken in low participation neighbourhoods (LPNs). Research included: analysing progression outcomes (past 3 years) from a bespoke outreach tracking database; and qualitative interviews with a participant sample, from a diverse range of backgrounds, residing in LPNs. Data is reported on participants who progressed to HE as well as those who followed a different trajectory. Themes emerging indicate:

- importance of Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) and the lack of such provision;
- randomness of opportunities available for adults from WP backgrounds to have progression opportunities;
- more participation in outreach activity = more likely progression;
- positive impact of pre-entry activity on preparedness for HE study,
- peer group support amongst adults from similar backgrounds,
- developing sense of belonging and identity.

cs5

## ADVISE ME: FREE ONLINE LEARNING AND RESOURCES TO ENGAGE ADULT LEARNERS FROM DISADVANTAGED BACKGROUNDS IN POST-COMPULSORY AND HIGHER EDUCATION

(The Open University)

This Open University case study reports a recent project funded by HEFCE's National Network for Collaborative Outreach (NNCO) scheme which developed a sustainable approach to adult outreach through the production of new free online resources dedicated to adult learners, on low or no income, looking to upskill or reskill to improve career and life prospects. The PEARL website (Part-time Education for Adults Returning to Learn) was designed as the 'go-to' place through the plethora of pathways available to adults, and fills a national gap in the IAG provided to adult learners. The sophisticated 'Advise me' tool, which is linked to a comprehensive data set matching the advice to the enquirer's aspirations and circumstances, is a key innovation. The project also produced six new free online courses for those seeking progression or a new career within specific areas of activity. Learners collect digital badges as they successfully complete each section, which can be shared with employers and displayed on social media.

## Findings summarised

Despite the different settings, the five case studies shared a number of findings: to be effective, outreach with adults needs to build confidence through supported small steps and tasters of HE. Outreach has to be delivered in a flexible way, at low cost to students, and with low-risk, and to be as personalised as possible. Outreach needs to bridge the informal-formal learning divide, and offer clear pathways. A prevailing theme, which could only have been elicited through qualitative research, was the need for outreach to counter the symbolism of adults feeling they 'did not belong', of feeling HE was 'out of reach'.

## Other examples of good practice

This report makes no claims to be representative of the diverse range of outreach work currently being undertaken across the HE sector with ALDBs. With a very limited timescale and budget, it was impossible to involve all the institutions who are already engaged in these sorts of strategic approaches to WP. We acknowledge the diversity in the sector in relation to adult learners, and argue strongly that the heterogeneity of adult learners needs to be recognised in outreach. While valuable insights were gained from colleagues working with post-92 universities and with HE in FE through the project steering group, we welcome further research analysing what works in specific local settings.

The five case studies are designed to highlight a small proportion of examples of successful, innovative and transferrable approaches to

outreach. This report was planned to support those doing this work in the sector, sometimes against the grain, and we hope it will stimulate further discussion, research and collaboration.

In a parallel project led by the University of Warwick (OFFA/Sutton Trust), the challenges of developing a one-size fits all evaluation tool for school-based outreach have been reported. In this project we have drawn on the five case studies and discussion between partners, and on feedback from sector colleagues at dissemination events, to fill the perceived gap in the sector for a simple and flexible evaluation tool which might help HEIs to develop an evidence base around institutional commitment to adult learners. We encourage sector engagement with our three-step evaluation tool and welcome feedback on how it might be enhanced.

## 'For the first time in my life I was actually starting to enjoy the challenge of maths': does a Science, technology and maths Access module prepare students to succeed in UG Science?

*Butcher, J., Clarke, A., McPherson, E., and Wood, C. (The Open University)*

The Open University (OU) Access module (Y033) is an additional starting point for an OU undergraduate (UG) qualification in Science, Technology, Engineering or Maths (STEM). Studied part-time through distance learning, Y033 lasts 30 weeks and is assessed at level 0 (30 credits). Interdisciplinary teaching material is organised into three blocks (two provided as books, one completely online) with tutoring through proactive one-to-one telephone contact – a crucial approach which builds trust with learners, many of whom are returning to education after a significant gap. With data from eight cohorts (around 4000 students), the demographic of the student body consistently aligns with the social mission of the university – attracting

a disproportionate number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds: 60% have low prior entry qualifications (1 A level or less); 60% + qualify for a full fee waiver due to low household income (the fee is subsidised by the university and is set at 50% of the standard OU fee to reduce the financial barrier faced by poorer students); over 25% students declare a disability (increasingly around mental health).

Almost all Y033 students are 'mature' (over 21) and often face personal challenges which act as significant practical obstacles to participating and succeeding in higher education (HE). Y033 learners are likely to have jobs (70% are working while studying, the majority employed full-time),

or be coping with their own health problems, or caring for family members: as a consequence, they juggle study alongside competing priorities. Y033 students also report feeling unconfident about their own studentship skills and often report a negative previous experience of education.

Successful Access students from Y033 can progress to S111, the first UG science module (60 credits at Level 4). Unlike on Access, students pay the full fee (£2750 for 60 credits), most using a student loan. With no entry qualifications (the OU sustains its original open access policy), any student *could* start directly with S111, so the UG module is designed to introduce all students to the study of Science at UG level to maximise success. However, demographic data suggests Y033 students who progress to S111 are more likely than direct entrants to be female, to be disabled, to have low occupational status and to be from a low socio-economic status (LSES) background – and are twice as likely to have low previous educational qualifications (LPEQs).

## Literature

We initially scoped the relevant academic literature to frame our study. The literature on outreach and access to UG study for disadvantaged adults in STEM is relatively under-theorised. It can be divided into attempts to better understand persistent gender imbalances in STEM participation, and attempts to address black and minority ethnic (BME) attrition and under-achievement in STEM. Three key themes can be discerned:

- The Science curriculum as a barrier to learning for a more diverse student body (Chang and Cheng, 2008; Duncan and Arthurs, 2012; Jordan, 2011; Kennedy and Odell, 2014).
- Personal attributes to overcome barriers to achieving as a STEM learner (Atherton, 2015; Moakler and Kim, 2014; Sheldrake, 2016; Waters and Gibson, 2001).
- Institutional support for STEM students with limited entry qualifications (Bentley and Allan, 2006; Coughlan and Swift, 2011; Knox, 2005; Rabitoy et al 2015).

## Methodology

In order to explore the extent to which a STEM Access module prepared ALDBs for an UG science qualification, we conducted a mixed methods study drawing on an iterative series of four data collection methods. Analysis of existing evaluative module survey data informed a series of 11 semi-structured telephone interviews, and email prompts which generated ten responses, all with students at the end of their Access module. These were followed up half way through the Access students' first UG Science module via seven phone interviews and two email responses. In addition, we conducted 14 telephone interviews with tutors who taught on S111, including some who also taught on Y033. Interviews were transcribed and content analysis was conducted by the research team.

## Findings

Findings indicate strong alignment between studying Y033 and enhanced confidence and competence in maths/number skills. Y033 also impacts positively on studentship skills and adult learner confidence. The critical importance of one-to-one tutoring and student support also emerge as a major contributor to the successful progression of ALDBs.



## Addressing adult learners' problem with maths through an integrated STEM curriculum

Tutors report that Y033 students often possess low maths skills initially, and can be very fearful of maths, although they rarely admit to worrying about studying science. However, after completing Y033, students perceive themselves as both having achieved enhanced competence and confidence in maths skills and even feel as though they are "enjoying the challenge of maths". So, whilst the content of the module may not be easy for them, they are able to embrace the process of learning.

Within the Access module a range of mathematical skills are both taught and developed, including: use of SI units (International System of base Units) and scientific notation, presenting scientific data on graphs, rearranging equations, use of fractions, and interpreting graphs and tables. Due to the wide ranging nature of the module, it is unlikely that students will have come across all these skills before. For example:

“The first block of Y033 was all science and there were parts I knew but a lot was really interesting and I found that I have really learnt a lot from such a brief course”  
**(Y033 student)**

When this Access module was written a decision was taken to set the maths skills within a relevant context, using an interdisciplinary approach to weave the maths skills through the materials in a 'little and often' manner. This approach was appreciated by students, who made comments such as:

“The teaching materials were structured in such a way that allowed me to slowly build up my confidence and capabilities. The optional mathematics activities are a case in point.”

Our research suggests embedding maths activities in an integrated approach to STEM learning, rather than teaching Maths in isolation, has helped remove major cognitive barriers.

During Y033, students are encouraged to become reflective learners and a wealth of reflective comments are received on module forums, as well as in the responses sought during this study. Many students commented upon the development of maths skills:

“...before Y033, my maths caused me great concern but by studying this module, my mathematical skills have vastly improved”  
**(Y033 student)**

“I have made a comment to my tutor that for the first time in my life I was actually starting to enjoy the challenge of maths. For someone who was always bottom of the class in maths, this is an achievement...”  
**(Y033 student)**

This improvement in maths skills was also noted by tutors on the follow-up UG module:

“Y033 students were less likely to make silly mistakes on computer marked assignments”  
**(S111 tutor)**

This improvement in maths is particularly important as Guo et al (2015) report the significance of success in maths as a predictor of achievement in STEM, and Kendricks and Arment (2011) noted barriers to success for students from a minority culture included low confidence as well as lack of academic preparation. Taken together these point to increasing confidence, and acquisition of maths skills, as important co-requisites for success in STEM for ALDBs.

In addition, several students commented positively about applying the maths skills they had developed to everyday life:

“

I... even feel confident in helping my son do his maths homework now. Before this course I would have struggled with this and would not have been confident in assisting him”

**(Y033 student)**

There were also several examples where students had realised that the development of their maths skills had currency within the job market and could lead to increased employability chances:

“

I managed to sit a maths test for a job interview and passed. This is something I would have struggled with before completing this course”

**(Y033 student)**

## Adult Learner confidence as a STEM student

Low confidence is an important issue for many adult learners, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Y033 students initially worried about returning to learning after previous failures, reporting a lack of generic studentship skills, and concerns about maths. Lacking resilience, they were easily ‘knocked back’ by poor grades. Waters and Gibson (2001) found that Access students’ self-identity could be threatened by fear of failure and that students lacking in confidence may not seek help. Crucially, the one-to-one tutoring model on Y033 requires tutors to proactively contact students rather than wait for them to seek help. This helped students find strategies to manage their time flexibly, and in doing so, learning to persist.

The tutor roles on the Access module and on UG science modules are very different, with Access tutors more pro-active in their one-to-one role than UG tutors, who work more with their students as a group. Y033 students find the one-to-one Access approach very supportive and report it assists with their confidence:

“

The telephone tuition has been great, my tutor has been very supportive and definitely boosted my confidence”

**(Y033 student)**

“

“My tutor was so lovely, and we seemed to have a really good bond right from the first telephone call, she just made me feel so relaxed and I didn’t feel intimidated or anything just relaxed and at ease”

**(Y033 student)**

On the basis of student and tutor comments, we believe that this Access tuition model instils a high level of trust and openness between tutors and learners so that learners in turn develop the confidence to be more proactive in their engagement with their tutors. Therefore, we subsequently investigated what behaviour students would demonstrate as they moved from the one-to-one model of student support on Access to more group-based UG tuition.



We conducted several interviews with tutors on the follow up UG module Questions in Science (S111). Some tutors could see a difference in students who had progressed from Y033:

“

...(there were) two main differences, firstly in soft study skills such as general IT use, orientation, finding [the] way to [the] website and induction type skills, [they] didn't ask half as many questions. In terms of harder study skills they were better, without a doubt, better at planning their studies.”

**(S111 tutor)**

“

I noticed at the day school when we were talking about what they'd done previously they were confident about putting ideas forward... more relaxed on the phone and not as many questions as a new student. They are confident enough to ask as well”

**(S111 tutor)**

Most tutors remarked that they could not discern any difference between those students who had progressed from Y033 and those who had entered directly at UG level. Yet rates of students without any A levels or equivalent are significantly higher on Y033 (over half) than on S111 (a third for the cohorts in this study). It seems students who had studied Access had received “added value” in terms of both knowledge and skills and also of confidence, and that the attainment gap and confidence gap that Access students have at the start of Y033 had been closed. Interviews with students and tutors indicate that most of our Access students start with little confidence but that their confidence and skills grow through the module and are maintained into S111, where these new skills help them to be proactive learners. Therefore, a positive feedback cycle is seen between increasing confidence and increasing achievement in these students. This reinforces the contention of Cotner et al (2011) that, in STEM, confidence is important to motivation.

Y033 students are also less likely to have unrealistic beliefs about study. Importantly, Y033 students were reported in their UG study as taking on realistic workloads, as they are aware of the time commitment of HE study, and are less likely to make inappropriate assumptions about study success:

“

I am quite glad I went with the Access course... I don't think it would have been wise to start straight in at level [4]... because of, I think, the amount of work that's involved... I think I underestimated how much time it would take... I expect that [S111] will be a lot pacier.”

**(Y033 student)**

In terms of outreach aimed at engaging students in STEM, it was significant that Y033 students reported feeling part of a learning community, particularly through support on online forums, where they could get informal peer support, and share study tips. This was particularly helpful for students with health issues. Similarly, when required to post in Open Design Studio (a virtual space in which students post photographs of activities and experiments), they reported enjoying commenting on one another's photographs and being supported to address the gaps in their study.

Y033 appears to give adults the opportunity to start again as learners, and develop a good study grounding before progressing onto degree level study in STEM.



## The importance of institutional support for disadvantaged adult students

Whilst tutors cannot fix many of the problems likely to challenge adult learners, the 1:1 tutoring model on Y033 helped students to find strategies to manage their time and to build in their own flexible scheduling to take advantage of periods of uninterrupted study and allow time for periods when study is more difficult. Students who have taken Access seem more likely to stay in contact with their tutor if they are struggling:

“Those who stay in touch tend to do better... it feels true... When there's a glitch, those students usually stay in touch  
(S111 tutor)

Access students are also more likely to ask for help, and generally learn resilience:

“I do know that there will be the support there, and all I have to do is ask, there will be the tutor support, there will be help forums, and on the website as well... I'm not going to know everything, that's an impossible thing to expect of myself.”  
(Y033 student)

As a result, they are less likely to be blown off course by future personal issues.

Adult WP students of course feel apprehensive, but Y033 helps to:

“...demystify the role of the tutor... you can't help people who don't tell you they need it.”  
(S111 tutor)

Students from Y033 then become more confident and more comfortable about approaching their UG tutor for support or answers.

The final section of Y033 is delivered entirely online, and whilst students might find it difficult to adapt initially, they are supported through this on Access; this is excellent grounding for their level 4 Science study, which is delivered entirely online. Students are better able to navigate the website and find the information they require, asking fewer questions at the start of the module and having less anxiety about the practicalities of finding the materials and submitting assignments:

“[The students] appear quite confident, particularly in getting to grips with the systems... they had a smoother start.”  
(S111 tutor)

Y033 thus operates as an effective induction into being a STEM distance learner, and provides stability in the difficult adult transition to UG learning. For those adult learners, who may not have enjoyed the benefit of strong IAG, discovering that HE can open the door to different career aspirations, or alter their plans altogether, is transformative. For example, one student indicated, in a piece of reflective writing, that they now would like to study Design, never having considered it before. An Access module like Y033 gives students the opportunity to try out their study before committing to a qualification choice, potentially opening the door for them to a different discipline qualification. In a few cases, Y033 students choose to progress to a different university, particularly if they have discovered they would rather study in a face-to-face environment. For others, there is a critical insight that they have insufficient time to commit to study at that particular time in their lives. Without the opportunity to gain such self-knowledge, they might commit to a level 4 module, have to withdraw but still incur significant student loan debt. It is important for adult learners that embedded reflective activities and cross-discipline study prompts informed changes to study intentions.

## Conclusion

Y033 provides an effective grounding for progression to UG study in science. A major impact on adult learner confidence is attributed by tutors to Y033 providing a 'smoother start', with students not 'blown-out' by challenging maths in a single block. The maths teaching is reported as 'digestible' and 'gradual', enabling tentative learners to feel less threatened. The wide range of maths skills required by scientists is threaded across the science materials 'little and often', including the integration of optional activities. Upon progression, S111 tutors felt Y033 gave students a head-start with the 'scarier' maths. Students from Y033 made fewer mistakes and engaged in 'good mathematical communication'.

In addition, Y033 helped adult students from disadvantaged backgrounds develop digital

literacy skills as part of their learning journey (Open Design Studio, forum posting, navigating the virtual learning environment which prepared them for studying S111 online. Y033 students also developed generic study skills through note-taking, formal writing and reflection activities all embedded in the STEM materials. This led to improved study confidence. Learners used tutor feedback to manage their study time and take on realistic UG workloads. Becoming part of a learning community was especially important for STEM students with health problems, who enjoyed informal peer support from online forums. Most importantly, studying Y033 resulted in adult learners being enthused about progressing to S111, when otherwise, as many admitted, they would have been nervous.

## “Getting off the hill and reaching communities”: Outreach with adults in the arts and humanities

*Fran Johnson (University of Bath) and Tom Sperlinger (University of Bristol)*

### Context

The Faculty of Arts at Bristol runs two programmes that are aimed at adult learners or younger students without conventional qualifications:

- Foundation Year in Arts and Humanities (FYAH, full-time)
- BA in English Literature and Community Engagement (ELCE, part-time)

Both programmes are supported through two 6-month introductory courses: Reading English Literature and Ways Into History. In addition, there are short taster courses run collaboratively with local community organisations including *Bristol Refugee Rights*, the *Single Parent Action Network (SPAN)* and *IDEAL Community Action*, which works with individuals affected by drug addiction, offending and long-term poverty.



## Key Statistics: FYAH

- 90% of students no A-Levels (or equivalent)
- 76% mature
- 49% local
- 37% from neighbourhoods with low participation in higher education
- 16% BME
- 74% incomes below £25k
- 37% with a disability
- 43% first in family to go to higher education
- Consistent near 50/50 split men and women
- 90% completion rate (of 84 students admitted between 2013-2015)
- 58 students have progressed to a degree

More widely, mature student recruitment at Bristol has remained steady since 2012, although the number of applications is falling (see figure 1). This is within a national context of declining mature numbers. The number of mature students in the Faculty of Arts is lower than the institutional average (figure 2), although this data is collected for entry via UCAS only and thus the students on the ELCE and FYAH programmes are not visible in these figures.

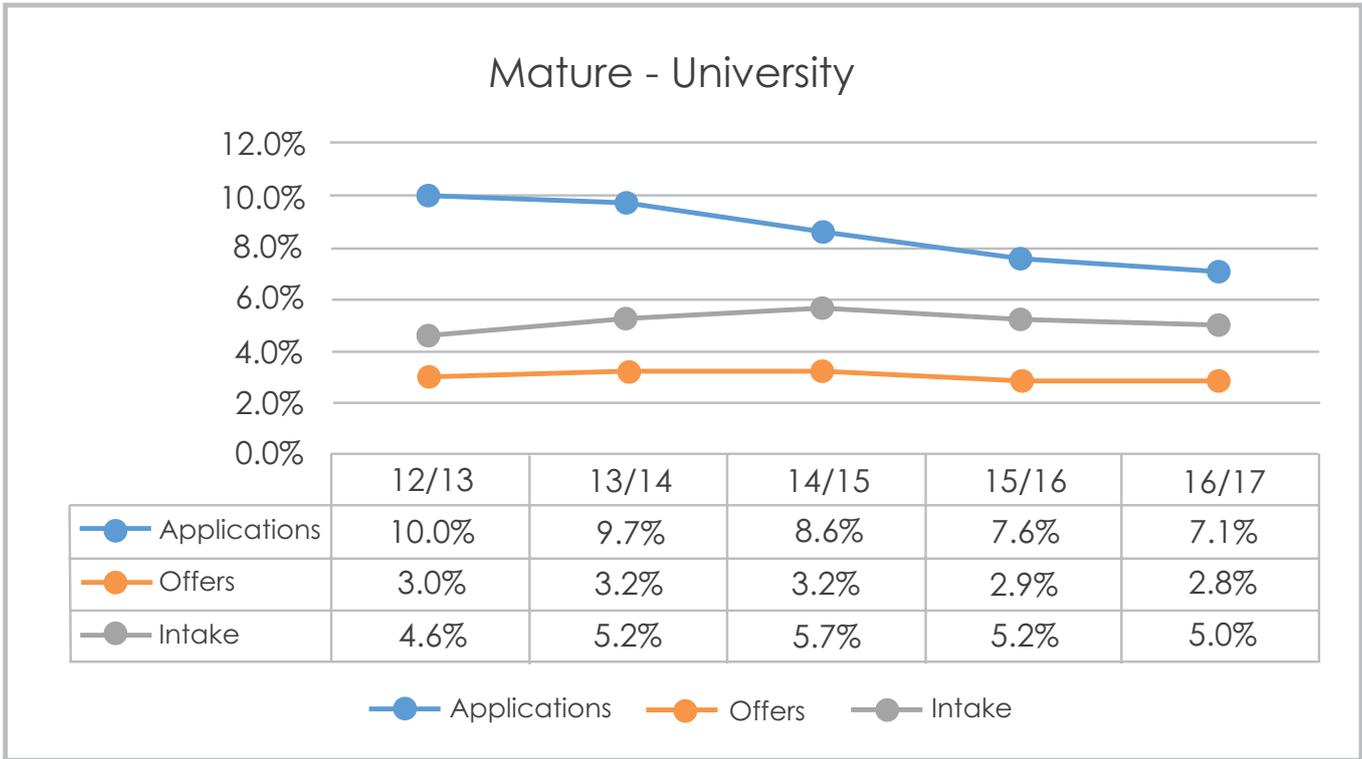


Figure 1

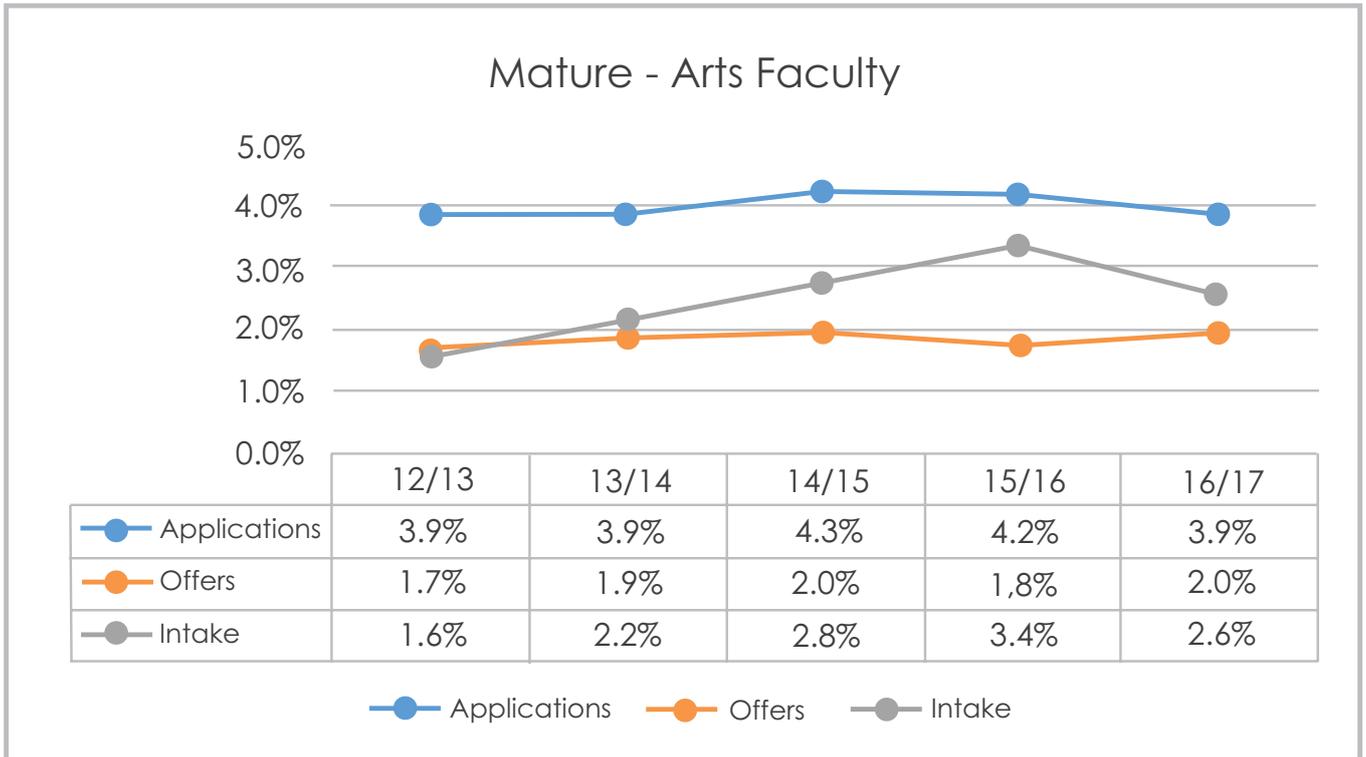


Figure 2

Bristol is exploring an expansion of outreach work with adult learners without conventional qualifications across the institution, building on the success of the outreach associated with the FYAH and ELCE programmes.

## Research methods

The first stage of the project involved collating existing data on recruitment, retention and progression for FYAH and contextualizing this in relation to work across the institution with mature students. One anomaly this revealed is that institutional-wide WP data excludes the ELCE and FYAH programmes as they are direct entry (although these programmes are reported on in other ways, for example via the Access Agreement). The results of a survey of former FYAH students on financial support were also analysed and integrated into the report.

The second stage of the project involved conducting interviews with a small sample of FYAH students. These were completed in accordance with the University's standard ethical procedures. 11 interviewees were selected: 5 men and 6 women; aged from mid-20s to mid-70s; 8 white and 3 from BME backgrounds.

Andrew	Current FYAH student
Alice	Completed FYAH, on supplementary year before degree
Isobel	Completed FYAH, on degree programme
Craig	
Claire	
Jamie	
Mary	
Kate	
John	Completed FYAH, discontinued degree
Julie	Not completed FYAH
Tim	Began ELCE degree but discontinued

Tim's community engagement project with IDEAL Community Action became a very successful form of outreach, including for students who subsequently studied on FYAH.

The interviews were conducted, and the initial analysis undertaken, by an independent researcher (Fran Johnson) who had no prior involvement with the FYAH programme. Student names have been changed to protect anonymity.

## Financial support

A survey of former FYAH students undertaking degrees at Bristol was undertaken in 2016/17, to which 20 students responded. This revealed a striking disparity in the amount of paid work these students are undertaking to support their studies compared to other undergraduates at Bristol. 58% of respondents had undertaken paid work during FYAH, while 74% had undertaken paid work during their degree. In 2015/16, a survey of first- and third-year undergraduates at Bristol was undertaken by the Personal Finance Research Centre in Geographical Sciences. It found that 25% of students overall were undertaking paid employment during term-time, compared to 47% of mature students and 49% of those not living in university halls. Additional findings included:

- 58% said that the fee for FYAH affected their decision to apply for the course (which was £3,500 in 2013/14 and has risen to £4,650).
- 84% said the availability of a bursary made them more likely to apply. In 2013/14 and 2014/15 a dedicated bursary of £3,750 was available for the programme; from 2015/16 the standard institutional bursary of £2,000 has been applied.
- 90% felt they had received sufficient advice on finances during FYAH.

## Brief Review of the Literature

McLellan *et al* (2016) argue that, rather than viewing WP as an 'intractable' problem to be alleviated through largely administrative initiatives, WP should in fact be viewed as an aspect of pedagogy itself. In particular, they emphasise the ways in which the experiences and, indeed 'outsider status' of the students on the Foundation Year can be harnessed as a positive attribute to bring to their studies and, more widely, to transform the institution of the university itself (McLellan *et al*, 2016). This echoes Thompson's 1968 lecture 'On Education and Experience', which argues that adult students bring unique experiences to education and that these experiences are transformative for the entirety of the educational process (Thompson, 1997).

Archer's paper draws on the New Labour Higher Education policy discourse around WP (Archer, 2007). It offers an interesting continuity in terms of the egalitarian and radical potential of WP policy and the tendency for its subversion when allied to a neoliberal agenda. Archer argues that there is a dominant culture within higher education that 'continues to privilege White, middle-class and male values and practices' and constructs the normative student as 'archetypal young, male, White, middle-class, independent learner' (Archer, 2007: 646). Unsurprisingly, those students who had been able to gain access to university but did not fit this normative construction continued to feel 'Othered'.

Finally, Warren's 2002 paper on curriculum design in a WP, higher education context draws on experiences from South Africa and similar experiences in Australia (Warren, 2002). Warren distinguishes between *separate*, *semi-integrated* and *integrated* approaches to curriculum design; separate approaches offer only limited impact and it is a mixture of semi-integrated and integrated models that provides optimum opportunities for a wide variety of students to succeed (Warren, 2002).

## Analysis of Interviews

### *Shifting Perceptions of Belonging*

The University's position at the top of the hill featured prominently in the data. This area was perceived as separate from the rest of the city. A reference to separate worlds was common and tied in frequently with a strong sense from participants of where they belonged. There was a strong sense of 'not belonging' at the university. Alice said: 'Well someone's going to come and put me out soon. They're going to realise, you know, it's not for me, I wasn't supposed to be here, you know, "Could you kindly leave?"'

All participants alluded in some form to a state of transition. Alice, for example, was apprehensive about applying for the FYAH: 'What's overwhelming about it is the personal letting go of one world to join another. There's no guidebook'. 'For some participants, their own story became a source of strength during their academic studies. For Tim: 'I'm getting angles that academics don't, couldn't possibly get, because they haven't got that life experience'. However, for Kate, this was valued more on the FYAH than when she transitioned to an undergraduate degree, where the larger cohort was less diverse: 'Then you feel you don't want to maybe give something of yourself, your life experience or whatever, because you don't know how it's going to be received; almost like you've given a part of yourself away really and it hasn't been reciprocated.'

### *Structural Barriers and Facilitators*

Most participants had taken out student loans to fund their studies and several participants were in receipt of bursaries as they were on low incomes. The integrated structure of the FYAH and undergraduate degree meant that the financial arrangements were already in place at the commencement of undergraduate study, which was beneficial for those participants who continued on this route. Alice reported that the short courses have been free and included a crèche, which worked well for her and provided a route into the FYAH.

However, those participants with caring responsibilities felt it would be impossible to balance study with part-time work. In addition, one participant, John, had previous debt from an earlier course for which he had received a student loan. This, coupled with ongoing health complications, meant that John was forced to discontinue his degree after one year. Whilst the University had, without precedent, secured him one year's tuition without fees, John was unable to pay the subsequent fees. Linked to this discussion regarding finance is the issue of housing and accommodation, particularly as Bristol is an increasingly expensive place to live. Julie, for instance, was living in social housing that was damp and unhealthy and as such, when her son got ill, she was forced to discontinue her studies.

The formal mechanisms of assessment posed problems for many of the participants. At the point of application to the FYAH, some participants were anxious about sending in some of their own writing and attending interview. For Kate, the interview process was daunting due to the types of questions asked of her: 'And the hardest question like "Tell me about yourself", urgh, that just made me go in a cold sweat'. Kate had spent some years struggling with addiction and 'cos I'd had such a huge gap of not doing anything. I found that very hard to disclose what I'd been doing'. For Andrew, it was reassuring that he could access the FYAH without GCSEs and A-Levels... He also liked not applying through UCAS but to the university directly: 'I suppose it's a bit more personal, that the university's more invested in you'.

Some participants raised the issue of exams, which were a feature of undergraduate study after the FYAH. This caused huge anxieties to the point, in some cases, of panic. The availability of skills training within the FYAH was helpful for the participants. This included essay writing, punctuation and ICT. Participants also responded positively about the access of the university in terms of public transport and also the timings of the FYAH classes (which are all taught Mondays and Tuesdays between 10am and 3pm) in terms of childcare and other responsibilities.

The supportive staff at the University of Bristol made a huge and positive difference to the participants' experiences. John felt 'they really did go the extra yard for me'. For Elise, the staff worked hard to welcome and integrate the participants: '[The course directors] really, really tried hard to instil it into us that we had every right to be there as much as anyone else'.

## Positives and challenges

Kate felt the FYAH would have been out of her reach as a first step, whilst Jamie found the FYAH itself enabled him to access the degree. Tim established a reading group at IDEAL Community Action as his community engagement project on the ELCE degree with people who were struggling, or had been struggling, with addiction and/or homelessness. He felt Bristol does community engagement well in 'getting off the hill and going down into... they're reaching communities'.

The course content of the FYAH was very positive for the participants. Isobel found it gave 'such a broad outlook' and John appreciated the variety in lecturers and topics covered. The seminars on the FYAH were particularly well-liked. Kate commented on the richness of the seminar discussions and attributed this to the diversity of students and their life experiences. Mary stated: 'My brain is just fizzing, and your brain just so alive with ideas and questions'.

The transition from the FYAH to undergraduate study was a recurring theme in the data. The continuity in terms of personal tutors was appreciated. Mary appreciated the friends she had made on the FYAH as it gave her a 'sense of belonging' once she began the degree. However, participants who transitioned from the FYAH to the degree commented on the shift in peer group composition. For the male mature undergraduates, the gender imbalance on arts and humanities degrees was particularly noticeable. In addition, the age of mature students was quite marked: 'Me and the woman who also did the FYAH, sat in the middle row in the middle of the lecture theatre and then everybody else came in and there was this gap left around us [laughing]. Like a sort of exclusion zone.' (Jamie).

Participants appreciated that the FYAH was timetabled well in terms of parental responsibilities such as the school run. This was not the case for some participants on the degree programme; Jamie had to work hard to have seminar classes that fitted in with his responsibilities as a father, for instance. Participants also talked about the increase in workload from the FYAH to degree-level study.

A number of students were assisted whilst studying at the university with a disability. The proactive approach of the university in this area and the supportiveness of staff made a big difference. This assistance was available free of cost, which was important.

## Key findings

The **success** of the FYAH in preparing disadvantaged adult, and younger, learners for undergraduate study at an 'elite' university suggests institutions can be much more ambitious about working with those without conventional qualifications. Key findings are:

1. A holistic approach is needed, which combines outreach, admissions, curriculum design, pedagogy, skills and financial and pastoral support.
2. To meet a wide range of government targets for participation, including for working-class inclusion, adult learning has a vital role to play. A key theme on FYAH appears to be social class, both from the qualitative data in the interviews and statistics on admission. 48% of the students admitted in 2016/17 are from low participation neighbourhoods.
3. Imaginative and flexible outreach work is vital, e.g. through taster courses of various kinds and student-led community engagement projects. These need to take place in a variety of locations and particularly in less affluent parts of the city.
4. Outreach can be transformative for individuals and for the institution, leading to collaborative partnerships with community organisations, including developing shared pedagogies.

5. An interdisciplinary programme or taster in the arts and humanities can be very effective in allowing students to explore new areas of interest and to bring their life experience to bear on their studies.
6. 'Success' for an adult learner is not always simply through the award of a degree: it is clear, for example, that Tim's engagement with the ELCE degree was profoundly successful, for him and many others at IDEAL, even though he had to discontinue his studies for health reasons.

Some key challenges also emerge from this case study. In particular, the transition from the FYAH to degree programmes can be challenging for students; financial support available is not currently adequate to judge by the exceptionally high number of students undertaking paid work.

At present, 'outreach' might be understood as *including* the FYAH and ELCE programmes (as well as the tasters) and in those spaces the students are often transforming the university as much as it is changing them, with Tim's work with IDEAL Community Action as the most conspicuous example. However, FYAH students are then being admitted *into* an existing set of programmes, in which they form a very small cohort. Key recommendations include:

1. There is also a challenge for institutions to do work of this kind on a larger or institutional scale. At Bristol, for example, there may be an opportunity to think through some of the lessons from the FYAH programme in the development of a new campus.
2. There is an urgent need to review the financial support available for adult learners, nationally and within institutions, to acknowledge their complex circumstances during the transition to university and once on a degree.

# Transitioning to degree study: do Certificates of Higher Education make a difference?

*Harman, K. (Birkbeck University of London)*

## Context

Birkbeck has been providing outreach and access to Higher Education (HE) for mature learners, including those without A level (or equivalent) qualifications, for a number of years and WP programmes include Careers and IAG advice, Application support and financial advice, Birkbeck's Big Ideas public lecture series and Bridges to Birkbeck. An important part of Birkbeck's Outreach work to potential students who might not traditionally access degree programmes has been the development of a range of access style Certificates in Higher Education whereby students 'transition' to degree level study.

This case study focuses on one of the access programmes at Birkbeck, Higher Education Introductory Studies (HEIS). The overarching question was 'has HEIS made a difference, and if so, how?'

## Research Methods

The first stage of the project involved collecting and analysing enrolment, retention and progression data for students on HEIS from 2008/9 to 2015/16 to examine: a) trends in the number and general characteristics of students enrolling on HEIS; retention on HEIS and transition to degree study and how this may have changed over time; and b) trends in the number of students progressing from HEIS to the BSc Social Science degree as well as retention and completion data for HEIS and non-HEIS students on the degree. It is important to note that the institutional data were incomplete in some areas. Furthermore, as some

students may have been enrolled on HEIS for two or more years, the completion and progression figures for a particular year may be slightly skewed.

The second stage of the project involved conducting interviews with a small sample of students progressing from HEIS onto the BSc Social Sciences. Nine students were interviewed to better understand what aspects of HEIS (if any) contribute to their successful transition to and progression on the degree and what changes might be needed to further develop HEIS. Students were selected for interview if they were in receipt of the student bursary at Birkbeck, which is an indicator of low family household income. However, in order to increase the size of the sample, HEIS students enrolling on the BSc Social Sciences degree in 2016/17 and not in receipt of the bursary were also invited to participate. 26 invitations were emailed to past and present BSc Social Science students (22 bursary and 4 non-bursary). The interviews, which were usually between 45 minutes to an hour in duration, were transcribed and then analysed for similarities and differences in experiences both on HEIS and on the degree programme.



## Key findings

The most significant trend in the data is the decline in enrolment on HEIS, with a peak of 401 students in 2009/10 to a low of 171 students in 2013/14. Since then enrolments have been erratic. In 2014/15 enrolments increased to 207, in 2015/16 they decreased to 176 and this year (2016/17) enrolments have increased again. They are still, however, less than 50% of the pre 2012/13 enrolment figures, reflecting the decline in enrolments of part-time students across the UK (Hillman, 2015; Universities UK, 2013). There has also been a significant change in the mode of study on HEIS. The programme is offered in fast-track mode, where students complete their programme in one academic year, or in modular mode, where students study over 2 years. Modular enrolments have drastically declined (only 14 modular students are enrolled in 2016/17 compared to the majority of students studying in modular mode in 2008/9). Most students are now studying on the fast-track programme.

## Who studies on HEIS?

Table 1 (below) provides a summary of key characteristics for students enrolled on HEIS during 2015/16 in comparison with students enrolled on FT undergraduate degrees at Birkbeck. Figures are available for HEIS students from 2008/9-2015/16 but there has been little change during the period, except for the number of low income students. The percentage of students on HEIS in receipt of the *Birkbeck bursary* in 2015/16 is surprisingly low and a potential cause for concern. Data on bursaries were not available between 2008/9 – 2011/12 but many of the students on HEIS were receiving PTG1 during that time, a government subsidy available to low income students for part-time study.

	Age	BME	Disability (declared)	Gender	Bursary*	Highest level of study
<b>HEIS (2015/16)</b>	60% > 25 85% > 21	60%	11%	69%	21%	+Most do not have A levels
<b>BBK FT UG degrees</b>	64%<25	56%	16%	++	41%	61% with A levels

Table 1

\* The bursary is an indicator of financial hardship for students at Birkbeck.

+ Data not available. Most starting the programme do not have A levels or equivalents. This is usually the reason for commencing study on HEIS. Most on HEIS have GCSEs or equivalent.

++data not available

## Does HEIS make a difference?

The Certificate in Higher Education award is a portable qualification that can be used to gain entry to degree programmes across the UK. Between 2011 and 2016, 582 students have

progressed from HEIS to degree study. We are not always made aware when students progress to degrees outside of Birkbeck so this figure could be higher.

	Enrolments	Withdrawal	Completion	Progression to degree study	Progression to BSc SS	Completion HEIS BSc SS	Enrolment non-HEIS BSc SS	Completion non-HEIS BSc SS
2008/09	394	121	14	Not available	2	1 (50%)	30	0
2009/10	401	87	29	Not available	9	7 (78%)	36	0 (0%)
2010/11	325	39	116	106	22	14 (64%)	68	36 (53%)
2011/12	313	32	122	104	21	13 (62%)	65	31 (48%)
2012/13	315	47	99	107	30	15 (50%)	44	9 (21%)
2013/14	171	20	57	119	33	13 (39%)	46	18 (39%)
2014/15	207	41	80	72	10	0 (0%)	31	3 (10%)
2015/16	176	86*	36	74	7	0 (0%)	20	0 (0%)

Table 2

\*The high number of withdrawals in 2015/16 is partly explained by 25 students that were only enrolled on 1 module on the Certificate rather than the entire programme. It is extremely difficult to remove these students from the data and this skews the retention figures, some years more than others.

## Analysis of interviews

The interviews have been analysed to examine the similarities and differences in students' experience on HEIS and factors that enabled and constrained their transition into degree study. The first noteworthy point is that many of the students interviewed had multiple WP characteristics, including mature age, low income, no A level qualifications, BME background and disabled (see Table 2). Another is that many of the interviewees had fled from conflict zones and as a result their study had been interrupted. Many had enjoyed

secondary study in their country of origin and had been quite successful academically, thus disrupting the view that WP students are necessarily academically 'weak'. All the interviewees highlighted the importance of the ability to return to study after a break from secondary school and the need for alternative pathways into degree study such as the Certificates. Many were hoping to go on and study at Master's level.

Participant	Age*	Disability declared	BBK bursary	Gender	Highest level of secondary education	Caring responsibilities (e.g. children, elderly parents)	Ethnicity
1	<25	No	Yes	M	Didn't complete GCSEs	Occasional	BME
2	26-30	No	Yes	F	No GCSEs	No	BME
3	Over 61	Yes	Yes	M	Equiv A levels	Unknown	BME
4	31-40	Yes	Yes	M	Equiv A levels	Occasional	BME
5	26-30	No	Yes	M	Didn't pass GCSEs	No	White
6	31-40	No	Yes	M	No GCSEs	No	BME
7	26-30	Yes	Yes	F	No GCSEs	Yes	BME
8	41-50	No	No	M	Equiv A levels	Yes	BME
9	21-25	Yes	Yes	F	GCSE	No	White

Table3

\*when commencing HEIS

Each interviewee had a unique and inspirational story about their return to study with each actively seeking a way into HE: one student returned to study late in life after a period of incarceration and torture in their country of origin; another was a white working class male who had not understood themselves as academic while at school but was now hoping to gain a first in their degree; another was an active trade unionist who found their study at university helped 'a lot' in their leadership role; one was the primary caregiver for a young child and managing this with part-time work and part-time study. Of the nine interviewed, seven were in (low) paid work and one in unpaid community work. Four of the interviewees were actively involved in community/voluntary work. All hoped to use their degree to find work in a social science related field.

All the interviewees were looking for a programme that would provide them with a route into degree level study and in this sense the outreach involved communicating that information:

“

I'd not finished [study] because of civil war in [country of origin] so I had to leave... And I remember when I was here in the UK I felt this kind of piece of me missing, the fact that I never had the chance to finish my studies. So, I was fantasising about going back to university until I did it, and to me it was a big achievement.”

**[P.1]**

Interviewees mentioned the importance of marketing that gets out to people e.g. the bus advertisements and many had attended the Birkbeck Open Evening, which provides the opportunity to discuss study plans with academic staff. Some had conducted online searches for courses and found the programme using the internet. Others were referred by English language Centres and Community Centres where they were already improving their skills e.g. Mary Ward and City Lit. What is consistent across all the interviews, however, is that *all* had decided they wanted to return to education:

“

I always used to say I'd love to go to university to my friends and they were like "Hold on, you aint even got GCSEs" and I was like "I know" and that's what kind of stunted my operation, like looking towards university... And one night... I got on a bus and I see it on a banner... "Night time university" I was shocked, I was thinking "What is this?" so I had to find out what it was and, you know, best thing I ever did. I swear.”

**[P.2]**

Many had reservations, fears and uncertainty associated with their ability to achieve in HE when they first started HEIS but their decision to start a course suggests a different cohort to those who think that 'university is not for the likes of us'.

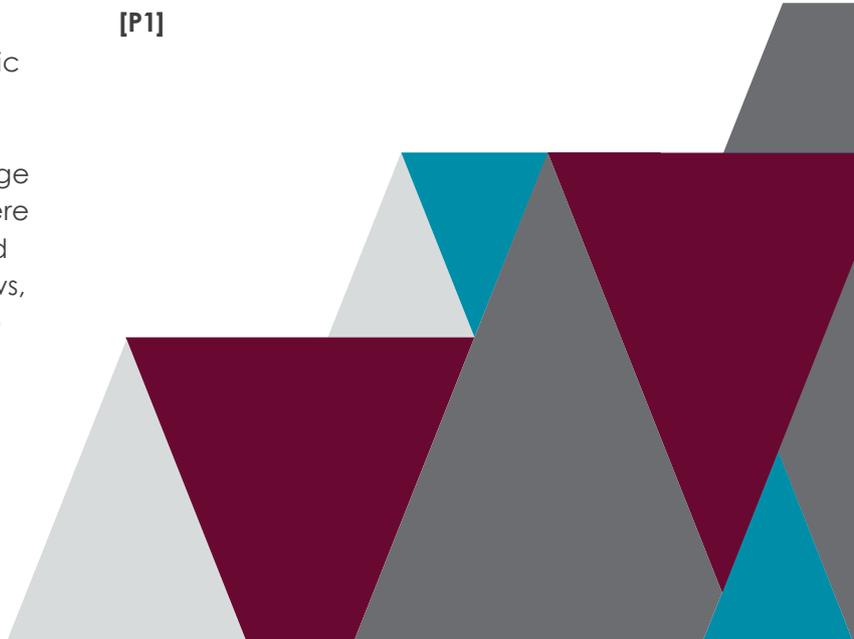
## What helps with transition to degree study?

Each of the interviewees was asked about their experience on HEIS and factors that helped with their transition to degree study. The responses in regard to experience were overwhelmingly positive. For example:

“

I kind of look at it [HEIS] as my first year of uni because it prepared me, you know. Like without that I would have never have been ready. I wouldn't have survived, like literally.”

**[P1]**



Specific areas contributing to successful transition to degree study included: the importance of English language support woven into the first module (for those who spoke English as their second, third, fourth or even fifth language); the opportunity to practise assessments they would encounter later in their degree programme, particularly essay writing; the usefulness of giving presentations and gaining confidence in speaking in front of a group; engaging course content; and the opportunity to try different subject areas:

“When I did higher education [HEIS], I forgot about the computing...then I go to sociology and psychology, that side... I'd never seen [these subjects] before and it was lovely and I wanted to do it again and again and more and more.”

**[P2]**

Many found the organisation of the programme, where they started with core study skills in 'Approaches to Study' and then developed these in ongoing subject-based modules, very useful, particularly in terms of building confidence. One student mentioned the Saturday workshops and how they helped consolidate what had been covered in the module. The most frequent response, though, was 'supportive tutors'. This in itself was not terribly revealing but on further questioning it included tutors who discussed ways they might improve their writing when providing feedback on assignments, tutors who answered their email questions and spent time in class discussing ways to approach assignments, and the choice of questions provided in assignments.

Another extremely important factor was the diversity in classes and the stimulating learning environment this created (Harman, 2017):

“the diversity [in the class] helped me to understand the world better in a way because if you come from a certain background or from a certain ethnic group or from certain religion ...you have a narrow vision of life because this is what you have been conditioned to. This is your experience. But when you meet other people and you start listening to them, I start telling myself “Ah maybe, you know, if I was them, if I were him or her, maybe I will see life differently...”

**[P4]**

Furthermore, the diversity in classes meant that students frequently inspired each other:

“it's motivational as well because when I see people sixty years old...I'm thinking like 'Wow, these people are doing this and I cannot fail, I cannot'. These people are here studying, they have children, they are mums and they are working as well...So it's that kind of motivation, to see, to be mixed with these people.”

**[P6]**

Other important factors were the part-time nature of the study, and the fact it was in the evening, which meant they could still earn income during the day. For one mother with childcare and daytime work responsibilities, evening study meant she could return to education. Another 'enabler' was the progression arrangement with students being able to progress after HEIS into year 2 of part-time study and for some, Year 2 fulltime. This meant students could finish their degree relatively quickly, which was extremely attractive as it meant a reduced loan:

“I'd only be in my second year of uni now, if I'd done [name of a course] and I'd be in nine thousand pounds more debt and a year behind what I am now. So, it was very lucky that I found it.”

**[P5]**

Some students mentioned the support they received from family members or friends and many spoke about the importance of the Birkbeck bursary:

“

...honestly, that laptop [purchased with bursary money] is the one that I'm using today so it [the bursary] does really make a difference. How can somebody say it doesn't make difference? ...Maybe they've never experienced being on a very low income and not having the money?"

[P7]

Many of the interviewees had commenced their study after the introduction of increased fees in 2012/13 and were philosophical about the debt:

“

I've put it to one side and not really let it affect [me]... cos there's nothing, there's no way of bypassing it..."

[P5]

Some were sceptical about the introduction of the maintenance loan for part-time study, with one asking:

“

Hold on, they want to give maintenance loans so you end up in more debt"?

[P7]

A key finding from the interviews is that each of these students understood themselves as 'successful' in their degree study. Success, however, was defined by each interviewee in quite different ways, thus opening up an important discussion around what constitutes 'success' in HE for mature, disadvantaged students:

“

... with my background, with my age, you know in my late sixties I attended university... but even now I hope I may do something in my field. So, yeah, when you compare it I can say success even though I came late and... in my area [country], is a military mentality. A young person they don't wish them to go to universities. A young person when they see he is physically good: "This can be soldier, this can be fight, this can run" And instead of saying "This can get a good mark... that's something which can serve humanity" No, "This can kill. This can go to war. This can run. This can take something on the shoulders [imitating throwing a gun over his shoulder]" So, I came from that area...at this age, from that background, I can say success."

[P3]



## Recommendations and areas for further exploration

So, does HEIS make a difference? The findings suggest it does, both in quantitative and qualitative terms and echo previous findings from research by Callender et al (2014). While Callender et al.'s findings focused on single parent, disadvantaged students on HEIS, and suggested tensions around transitioning to degree study for sole parents, the current study provides more positive outcomes in terms of progression. The fact that HEIS does make a difference is particularly pertinent at a time when the ongoing decline in part-time student numbers in HE has resulted in a significant decline in enrolments on Certificate programmes (not only at Birkbeck). If these programmes do make a difference, yet at the same time the external funding landscape is making it increasingly difficult for students on low incomes to access this type of programme, as suggested by the decline in enrolments alongside a decline in the percentage of students on HEIS in receipt of the Birkbeck bursary, are there other ways to fund this type of programme, other than from students' own pockets? For example, could these programmes become fees exempt for low income students, similar to the funding arrangement for 24+ (now 19+) loans where the first year of study is reimbursed on successful completion of the degree?

### Recommendation 1

Explore how the financial burden, which currently sits with WP students when they access supported entry into HE study, can be removed

The institutional data revealed progression patterns and provided a broad brush sketch of the type of student on HEIS. However the detailed texture of students' lives and factors contributing to success in ongoing study was only revealed in the interviews.

### Recommendation 2

The subjective experience of mature, disadvantaged students needs to be incorporated in institutional evaluations in order to better understand 'what' makes a difference to ongoing success in degree study and 'why', as well as 'what counts as success' for these students.

The resounding theme of 'diversity' that filled the interviews needs further exploration.

### Recommendation 3

Further research which explores the relationship between diversity and success in degree study. This should include analyses of diversity in curriculum, modes of assessment, spaces and times in HE that encourage the participation of diverse groups, and the diversity of academics working on these programmes.

### Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Claire Callender for extremely useful feedback as this case study was developed and to Robert Bell for providing institutional data which has been used in the analysis.



# 'Too old. Not intelligent enough. Can't afford it.'<sup>3</sup>: the challenges of adult outreach

Fraser, L. (University of Leeds)

## Context

The University of Leeds has a long standing commitment to supporting the recruitment of mature students from under-represented backgrounds. Challenging institutional targets have been established for the recruitment and retention of mature students from low participation neighbourhoods (LPNs) and no prior experience of higher education; 16% and 87.6% respectively.

Tasked with developing work in this area, the Lifelong Learning Centre (LLC) has a specific WP remit. Its provision includes full-time and part-time degree provision as well as six foundation level programmes with progression to all faculties at Leeds. The Centre also provides academic, pastoral and employability skills support to mature and part-time students throughout the University.

Local community adult engagement has been a key factor in the LLC maintaining its part-time recruitment numbers since changes in student fees in 2012, in contrast with part-time trends nationally. An adult outreach framework comprising three stages, entitled Transforming Horizons has been developed to articulate the work undertaken with adults from under-represented communities:

- Initial links with non-formal learning and community groups through to
- Work with adult GCSE groups (or equivalent), progressing to
- Preparing for progression to University foundation years and degree provision.

Volunteer mature student learning champions from diverse WP backgrounds (n=50) are integral to the delivery of Transforming Horizons.

The aim of the Leeds case study is to explore the impact of a range of adult outreach interventions in relation to higher education progression.

## Methodology

There are two aspects to the research:

- a. Quantitative analysis of tracking outreach participant activities in a bespoke database;
- b. Qualitative interviews with a participant sample.

The research participants were identified from the tracking database using a purposeful sampling criteria applied to select adults who had been engaged in various outreach interventions. This sample (n=14, six men, eight women) includes participants from a diverse range of backgrounds, age range between 25–55, level 2 qualifications or below, residing in LPNs. Selected participants included nine who have already progressed to higher education, another who is in the process of applying and four others who have not taken this trajectory.

The following topics were discussed in a semi-structured interview format:

- Educational and social background;
- Reasons for engaging in the outreach intervention;
- Any perceived correlation between consequent actions relating to educational/vocational/civic activity and outreach interventions;
- Participant feedback and reflections regarding intervention/s;
- Attitudes towards a university engaging in community-based outreach activity.

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<sup>3</sup> Research Participant

## Findings

### a. Quantitative Tracking<sup>4</sup>

This database was devised in 2013 to support the tracking of adult outreach participants. In total, 4,706 adults were documented as taking part in certain outreach activities during three academic years till July 2016. Linking this dataset with University student records indicated 486 (c.10%)

participants have subsequently progressed onto University of Leeds' provision.

The tracking database includes the following interventions:

Activity	Description
Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG)	Impartial Matrix accredited IAG which can include multiple sessions, support with applications, personal statements and student finance advice.
Study Days	On-campus, curriculum specific targeted at FE level 2 or equivalent learners
Jumpstart	Early evening non award bearing 6–10 week programme targeted at adults engaged in or considering FE level 2 qualifications. An informal course which aims to give an understanding of different curriculum areas whilst embedding skills e.g. critical thinking, academic writing, presentations.
Adult Learning Summer School	3/4 day summer school targeted at adults from LPNs with few qualifications. Exploring a range of curricula, academic skills and information sessions.
Community Visits	Awareness-raising activities with community groups from the Leeds City Region encouraging time spent on-campus

- Those who progressed were less likely to reside in the lowest participation neighbourhood quintile. There was no gender difference in the proportion of participants progressing, BME participation data is incomplete;
- IAG was the most common activity undertaken by people who subsequently progressed, followed by Study Days;
- IAG, itself a multiple intervention, was likely to be accessed in conjunction with other activities;
- Participants who progressed to the University were likely to have taken part in more activities than those who had not;
- Interventions containing a greater level of intensity had more impact on progression e.g. adult education provision rather than campus visits;
- A high proportion of students with FE level 2 qualifications or below proceeded to foundation years, foundation degrees and other part-time provision;
- Data indicates that an additional 220 outreach participants per annum are referred to other local higher education provision.

<sup>4</sup> Data analysis undertaken by Richard Francis, Lifelong Learning Centre, University of Leeds

This data analysis raised a number of methodological issues:

- Requirement for more granular data, in particular recording participants characteristics as well as number and length of interventions;
- Identifying ways of weighting very different outreach interventions in order to compare impact and enable greater analysis of causality;
- Lack of tracking data for those on a non-linear trajectory to HE study or following a different pathway.

## b. Qualitative Interviews

All participants had worked in unskilled/semi-skilled employment. For women this included: work in factories, cleaning, lunchtime supervisor roles in schools and office work. Men had worked in building sites, refuse, call centres, automotive trade and taxi driving. Only one person had progressed from the shop-floor to a managerial position. Work-related training was very specific to the role and in the main, negatively perceived. However health and safety training had been a catalyst for interest in further study for one participant.

People had come back into education in random ways. Personal interactions were key to participation including; family/friends, community-based workers, support workers or chance meetings:

“I got on the bus one day and I overheard a lady talking about a local centre that they had a crèche available and that finance was available for the crèche so people could do there GCSEs so I like, I interrupted her conversation and started asking her a whole bunch of questions.

The majority of participants had engaged with the University through staff visiting community education provision or partnership-working between the LLC and education/voluntary sector providers. One came due to his sister-in-law picking up a leaflet at a community centre and persuading him to make contact and others through the encouragement of supportive staff:

“I volunteered for a project in the Leeds City Centre, the lady there was amazing. She definitely believed in me and encouraged for me to pursue. But she definitely were like “Oh you could go to university” you know “I believe you could”. And I’d just laugh it off.

“And I worked with my support worker there and she kind of said “Have you never thought of going back into college or anything?” and I was like “No, cos my life’s ... I can’t, I wouldn’t be able to do it”.

Issues around identity were raised constantly. Age, background, ethnicity and disability were frequently expressed as barriers to higher education:

“I kind of felt like I shouldn’t go cos it wasn’t for me because I couldn’t do university. I’ve never been told that I could, do you know what I mean;

The mature student learning champions proved a crucial counter to these perceptions demonstrating the importance of being able to identify with others of similar backgrounds:

“They basically put into perspective that people like me that went through the situations that I’ve gone through; they were really specific with their life stories and you could just relate to them and they just made you feel comfortable.

“

Well they're just normal people like myself, like with children, and they're not, you know, I don't know who I think should go to university but they were just more like me.

Moreover for those who had progressed to undergraduate programmes, the peer support of 'people like me' is viewed as essential: 'We have our own Facebook group (former WEA students now studying at university) where we all talk and give each other help really like if we're stuck'.

None of the participants had any advice, guidance, careers information since leaving school. Those that commented on careers advice at school indicated that teacher prospects for them were low. In addition, families or carers had few expectations other than the importance of earning money and for some women, marriage:

“

University, my interpretation of university, was people that were born into money who had parent support that went and had additional tutor sessions, were absolutely brilliant and got the highest grades across the board, went to university, and if you weren't any of those you couldn't even think about going, sort of thing. It was too far out of reach.

Research participants had taken part in one or more outreach intervention. They talked about a 'drip, drip' effect, the need to take 'tiny steps' in raising confidence, self-esteem, self-belief that going to university is a possibility:

“

Yeah I think that contact is important because things can get in the way. Life gets in the way, you know, we have problems and stuff. But the fact that I was invited to this and then invited to that and then I'm going to progress to having a meeting, a one to one, it's given me like a pathway.

Moreover a key theme was the importance of obtaining as much information as possible in order to make informed decisions. 'I needed to confirm things again, again and again'. Finance, caring responsibilities and travel were crucial factors in decision-making. All commented on the value of the IAG service, the time spent focussing on their educational and vocational choices.

“

I remember talking to the chap about what I'd done beforehand and what I'd like to do in the future. The course I wanted to do, I don't know if it wasn't an option or if it would have ... I know I'd been given information about doing it elsewhere as well, it wasn't just to be done here...together we considered where I wanted to go and where I wanted to work...

In addition a number of participants remarked on interventions concentrating on their needs, rather than being a marketing tool:

“

The advice and guidance I had, it was like talking to a friend. ....they were talking to me like a person, but they were like "What do you like doing, what are your hobbies and do you actually want to go into higher education or do you want a job?"

“

We picked up loads of leaflets, there was like a table full from all different universities and colleges.



The outreach interventions incorporate curriculum provision giving participants an sense of university study whilst also being an educational activity in its own right. Research participants who have not progressed to HE, formulated a number of reflections about their learning, indicating continued interest in education and expressing a greater awareness of academic study:

“

We did about the Brexit (prior to referendum). We did ... and that was, it gave us an idea of how they taught and you learn and, yeah, how you argued things and not just believe everything you see in the papers like I actually did. Yeah, so it did give you an idea of how to be like an academic learner, just a small taster wasn't it?

For those interviewees who are now students, their responses allude to the positive impact of adult outreach interventions in perceiving HE study as a realistic option. Frequently referred to was the building of trusting relationships with staff, as well as spending time in a bespoke space (the LLC) for adults like themselves.

Community-based staff with an understanding of educational pathways were also extremely influential in raising aspirations:

“

I know that I would have never ever have come if it hadn't of been for the tutor in the WEA class. I think she was the one that like planted the seed that it could even be possible.

“

The teacher that actually taught us (community course) ...is the only person that ever suggested that any of us could even think about a university. And we didn't believe her for ages either, I don't think. I mean, she just mentioned it and then we went to the study day and it just made it seem possible cos it never had before.

However the need to work, in addition to travel time/costs and caring responsibilities were reasons for participants not progressing. For those on zero hours contracts, having the ability to plan for part-time/flexible study was highlighted as problematic.



## Conclusions

The findings of this research demonstrate synergies between outreach with adults and young people e.g. the importance of IAG, the benefits of a framework of outreach activities the effectiveness of WP students as role models, the benefits and limitations of quantitative tracking (Moore et al, 2013; Thomas, 2011).

However given that adults are harder to reach than young people located in schools, the research also demonstrates the randomness of adult learning opportunities. Massive reductions in adult learning budgets has led to a postcode lottery in terms of accessing provision. Structural pathways to HE for adults with few or no qualifications are deficient. People partake in university outreach activities through many different, often circuitous routes. Partnership working by the University has endeavoured to address this matter by working with community-based staff who are key influencers and the development of non -accredited programmes.

The outreach provision aims to take a long-term collectivist approach, engaging adults in critical thought, widening the horizons and perspectives for all participants - not just focussing on those with the intention to progress. Common to all research participants, negative perceptions of previous learning experiences and appreciation of an outreach adult education curriculum which endeavours to value their life experience and knowledge:

“

‘And I actually thought it would be similar to when we were at school, if you know what I mean, that similar learning. And I thought ‘I’ll never fit in. They’re all young’ ... But when I got here I was like ‘Oh they look about the same age as me’ and they were welcoming and it was that first point of meeting that first person and there were actually a big smile on their face and that helped. And understanding, not being judged.

## Key Recommendations for the sector

- Ensure the impartiality in IAG and outreach activity benefiting aspirations, decision-making, retention and success (see Field and Kurantowicz, 2014);
- Provide personalised financial advice for adults who have a range of complex needs and responsibilities;
- Increase likelihood of adult progression by delivery of intensive and sustained interventions, staff interactions, the incorporation of non-accredited course provision, bespoke mature student space and developing mechanisms for peer support;
- Alleviate issues concerning identity and ‘belonging’ by developing a diverse group of mature student learning champions acting as role models;
- Ascertain ways of connecting/collaborating with potential key influencers located in adult education settings, voluntary sector and in the workplace;
- Foster a capacity building collectivist approach in excluded communities which, over time, enhances engagement with higher education;
- Develop adult outreach as an integral component of the student experience, with tracking throughout the student cycle and with readily identifiable contacts.



# Advise me: Free online learning and resources to engage adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds in post-compulsory and higher education

*Butcher, J. (The Open University)*

This project, funded by HEFCE's National Network for Collaborative Outreach (NNCO) scheme, developed a sustainable approach to adult outreach through the production of six new (free) resources aimed at adult learners, on low or no income, looking to upskill or reskill to improve career and life prospects. This extended the work of the Social Partnerships Network (SPN), led by The Open University (OU), which consists of 11 national organisations operating at scale, each with a commitment to social justice and together forming a collective potential 'reach' to 7 million adults. Partners incorporated links to adult, community and FE Colleges, unions and employers, all with a particular focus on part-time and flexible study options that could lead to improved career/life prospects.

The partners have traditionally been committed to bridge the link between informal and formal learning pathways, recognising that adult learners may not yet be in a position (financially or in terms of motivation) to return to formally accredited education. Drawing on their professional insights, network partners understood that the development of skills and confidence had to be prioritised before adults could consider further learning. Given the national scale the OU operates at (in this instance, across the whole of England) local outreach events were neither feasible nor appropriate. Instead the focus was on developing and publicising nationally-available resources as part of a coordinated, coherent and sustained engagement. The social partner organisations have been able to signpost the outreach resources to their own members, and to other national and regional organisations with a vested interest in supporting adult education and career progression. This included a social media campaign and a range of marketing materials.

## Literature

Research into adult participation in learning through the life course (Tuckett and Field, 2016) establishes that adult participation in structured learning is sharply differentiated between those who *do* engage beyond initial education, and those who do not. The former tend to be disproportionately younger, more middle class, better qualified and in employment. Crucially, positive experiences of learning engender a desire for more learning, while negative experiences have the reverse effect. Coming from a 'learning-confident family' is an important factor in engagement. The literature attests motivation to take up learning as an adult is key: whether for work (younger adults) or personal development (older adults). There are thus dispositional barriers for disadvantaged adults around individual agency, self-efficacy, self-esteem and resilience. But there are also situational barriers, including time, cost, and institutional structures and processes which act as obstacles.

Peer groups are reported, in the same report, as a key element in supporting disadvantaged adults to engage in continuing and higher education. Of course, peers can be powerful inhibitors, with high levels of inequality in disadvantaged communities generating low levels of trust. But a positive example, the TUC's *Unionlearn* initiative, encourages workers (often in low paid, precarious employment) to take up learning through peer-driven advice and guidance – this is crucial to securing the confidence and trust necessary to participate in adult education. Interestingly, the authors argue that participation in adult education can be stimulated by supply, and that local outreach, supported by mass media campaigns, can be effective if the balance between universal and targeted provision is right.

Provision of free online learning offers a new hybrid in relation to informal and formal learning aimed at adults. The literature offers varied typologies. Werquin (2010) identifies: formal; non-formal; semi-formal and informal learning, whereas Illeris (2009) categorises everyday learning; school/institutional learning; workplace learning; learning for interest and online learning. However, there is a lack of clear differentiation, for example as to whether informal and formal learning are distinct categories (Cameron and Harrison, 2012; Golding et al, 2009), or whether 'formal' and 'informal' play out differently in specific learning situations – which influence the nature and effectiveness of learning (Colley et al, 2003). This project is situated at the informal end of the continuum, albeit promoted in the context of work settings.

The awarding of digital badges for small chunks of learning offers an important underpinning to this project. It is suggested recent developments in badging on open online courses motivates adult learners (Law and Law, 2014).

## The project

There were two substantive and distinct strands to the NNCO project, both launched formally in November 2016. First, the PEARL website (Part-time Education for Adults Returning to Learn) was designed as the 'go-to' place for adults (18 years and above), to help navigate through the plethora of academic and vocational pathways available to them. PEARL is intended to fill a national gap in the Information, Advice and Guidance provided to adult learners, guiding users through opportunities from short, free, online courses up to higher level learning. The website contains aspirational case studies around adults who engaged in FE, or WBL, or RPL that aim to inspire adults to return to learning.

The sophisticated 'Advise me' tool, which is linked to a comprehensive data set matching the advice to the enquirer's aspirations and circumstances, is a key innovation. This tool consists of a series of

questions relating to the preferences and circumstances of the learner (taking about 5 minutes to complete). Upon completion, a series of learning suggestions, advice and support, based on individuals' answers, are offered, together with guidance tips on what to consider when choosing between different options, where different types of courses may lead, and how to apply for further support if required.

As well as being designed to meet the needs of individuals, PEARL was consciously aimed at tutors, Union learning representatives and advisers who would be in a position to guide tentative learners on their first steps towards HE.

Second, the project also produced six new free online courses (15 hours each) for adults seeking progression or a new career within specific areas of activity. The format of each course is consistent, with an introductory podcast video followed by a mix of podcasts, interactive activities, quizzes, audio material and reflection activities. Learners collect digital badges as they successfully complete each section, which can be shared with employers and displayed on social media. Consultation with partners emphasised that learners were likely to want to study in smaller chunks of learning but still be able to receive some recognition of their achievement. Therefore each course is sub-divided into a series of sections, taking 2-3 hours of study, concluded with a 5-question quiz. Online badges are awarded to learners achieving at least 4/5 correct answers, and if learners complete all sections of the course and collect all the badges they receive a free 'statement of participation/completion' at end. Each course finishes with a significant 'next steps' section.

Each course consisted of a mix of new and existing content co-authored with SPN members, developed at introductory (Level 0) as small bitesize learning. Flexibility is key, allowing adult learners to dip in and out at will. Being freely accessible via *OpenLearn Create* increases visibility.

Courses are:

Course	Target Group
Supporting children's development	Teaching Assistants, other low paid unqualified staff in schools, parents
Caring for adults	Paid and unpaid carers, those working in social care, volunteering, family/community care settings and family carers
Introducing practical healthcare	Healthcare assistants, other low paid unqualified health sector workers, those with an interest in starting a career within the health sector
Taking part in the voluntary sector	Anyone interested in paid or unpaid voluntary sector work, those looking to enhance skills within the voluntary sector that will transfer easily into other sectors
Starting your small business	Anyone considering setting up a small/micro business, becoming self-employed, or who has recently set up their own business
Planning a better future	Generic course aimed at anyone looking to make changes to improve their life career prospects

Ongoing evaluation has been embedded from the start of the 18 month project, and includes both quantitative analytic data about engagement, and qualitative data relating to changed confidence levels and self-regulated learning. Anticipating that the time scale for measuring progression to HE for disadvantaged adults may be long, a number of key evaluative approaches have been built-in to the materials:

- End of course questionnaire, eliciting further study intentions
- Website survey, eliciting next step intentions
- Comparison of pre- and post- course self-directed learning scales
- Analytics data to track destinations post-PEARL or post-course

Four of the courses were made available pre-launch in a pilot presentation lasting three weeks. A pilot sample of 28 participants, recruited

through the SPN, completed all sections of their chosen course, including interaction with audio-visual material, all activities and quizzes, and downloading badges. Each participant completed a feedback questionnaire based upon their experience of the course. Nine participants evaluated 'Introducing practical healthcare', six evaluated 'Supporting children's development', seven evaluated 'Planning a better future' and six evaluated 'Caring for adults'. Key findings included greater clarity around motivations and expectations. For example, there were shared perceptions around: refreshing skills and knowledge about a subject they already knew; or deepening understanding and taking knowledge further on a particular subject; or, conversely, studying an introductory module in an unfamiliar subject. Additionally, participants in 'Planning a better future' expected information and guidance on careers.

The courses were considered 'easy' to navigate and the activities were highly rated in terms of helping understanding of the course. The quizzes were perceived to have aligned closely with course content, and downloading badges was rated as 'fairly easy'. The majority of participants felt they had met the learning outcomes after studying the course. It was noteworthy that some participants appreciated the flexibility of the course which allowed them to fit studying around their daily lives and work at their own pace. Overall, the courses were regarded as useful or very useful.

As a pilot, participants were asked to (optionally) provide personal information. Almost all did. Age and gender were similar across the four courses. 31% of the sample were aged 46-55, with 23% 36-45. 83% were female. Participants also completed a survey about likely further learning intentions. Most were keen to study more in the subject they had just completed, including investigating CPD opportunities. However, they were less likely to consider this course a stepping stone into HE, other than as an interest in more free OU materials. Some reported considering an Access to HE course or an FE course. Participants had very little experience of post-compulsory learning, and career-based learning was prioritised over university.

While the sample size was very small, there was a statistical indication from responses to a questionnaire activity near the start and end of the course that self-regulated learning and learning context increased over the course. This suggests studentship skills developed in the context of this approach to adult outreach, but this will need to be followed up through the ongoing evaluation of the live courses.

A dedicated evaluation officer was appointed from the start to compose an evaluation plan and to ensure robust mechanisms were built into assets. As a result, the data collected is fit for purpose and will continue to be evaluated for impact. Since launching, both the web site and the courses have been well-received by adult learners. Evaluation will continue longer term.

Analytics for the PEARL website demonstrate 5,214 browsers since launch, and the bounce rate (the proportion of visitors to the site who leave after viewing the first page) has dropped to 38%. The average number of pages viewed on each visit is around five. Crucially, 50% of visitors to the site are making use of the 'Advise me' tool.

Analytics data for the three months since launch for the individual courses include 2,473 browsers. However, key to evaluating the effectiveness of this approach to outreach will be the number of learners who have enrolled – the courses have been designed so that learners need to be enrolled to be awarded badges or a statement of participation having completed the section quizzes. This is a challenging metric as enrolling is optional, but since the resources were made available, 337 learners have enrolled. Already, 22 learners have received a statement of participation and 235 badges have been issued. The latter point is interesting in terms of understanding the learning behaviour of adults returning to study – the courses have been designed to engage new learners by awarding badges for small chunks of learning, and 27% of enrolled learners have collected at least one badge. This is a higher proportion than has been reported (Law and Law, 2014) in conventional free badged open courses (BOCs) available on the *OpenLearn* platform which award a badge on completion of the full course.

## Conclusion

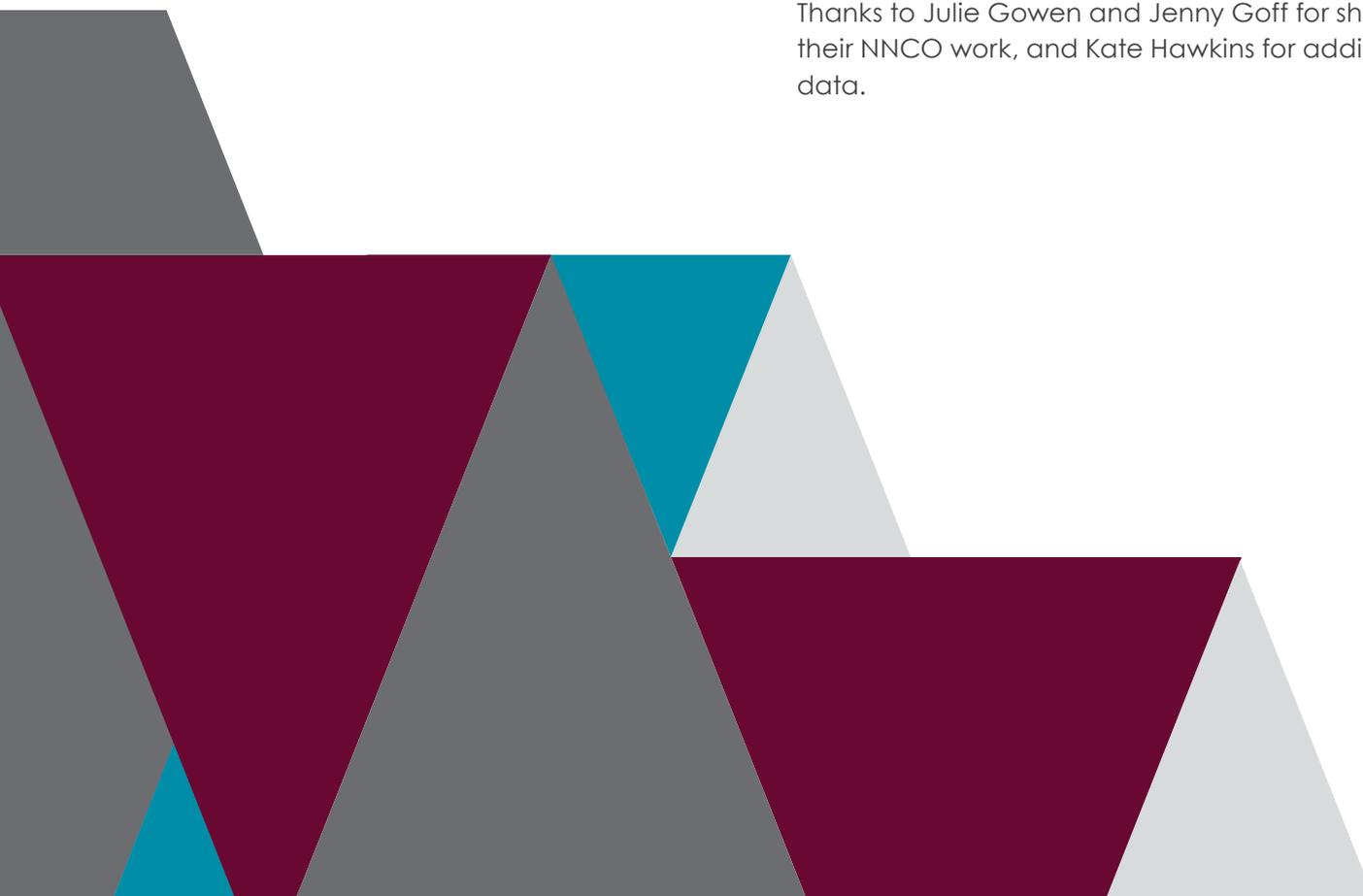
Although a work-in-progress, it would appear the PEARL website is an example of outreach positioned 'at a distance from' HE, but in a place where many ALDBs are, exactly the kind of WP students most universities find hardest to reach. By signposting pathways through a complex tangle of pre-HE learning opportunities, and connecting partners, PEARL offers a nation-scale model of how outreach might engage potential HE students in first steps on a much longer path.

There is also early evidence in support of the view that ALDBs can benefit from short chunks of flexible learning. The six badged courses were designed with adult learner behaviour in mind – they are not bounded by inflexible institutional structures and operate in the context of flexible pedagogies (Ryan and Tilbury, 2013). They appeal by being free, being short and flexible and by offering motivation via badges. Initially they appear to stimulate interest in further free learning and in work-related CPD, so this engagement must be evaluated rather than outreach leading directly to HE.

However, we were aware it would be extremely difficult to track part-time adult learner progression from informal to formal learning as a result of this outreach initiative. Adult learner trajectories are unique, and potentially involve long timescales and disjointed progression pathways. The kind of tracking based on personal identifiers, as in the school-based HEAT system for evaluating outreach with younger pupils, (Holland et al, 2017) is much harder in the informal learning sphere given that learners are not obliged to provide personal details, as well as the continuing absence of a unique learner number. Even if data on initial registration is tracked, alignment with formal learning registration systems remains highly problematic. In this setting, analytics is limited and feedback surveys may have low response rates. A key recommendation emerging from this case study is that, for the impact of adult outreach to be credibly measured, the sector desperately needs a data tracking system, with unique individual identifiers to monitor individual learners' progress from informal to formal learning. For adult learners, this can be a disjointed journey and take many years: do policy makers have the evaluative patience necessary for adult learner progression?

### Acknowledgements

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# Conclusion

*Adult learners enrich university communities but there are still far too few of them (Ebdon, L. 2016)*

The authors of this report are passionately committed to the view that, for HEIs to meet stretching government targets for participation, adult learning has a vital role to play.

We feel there are significant implications emerging from this report. We want it to have an impact beyond those already working hard in this area. The sector urgently needs to reframe adult learning, not as something 'additional' that needs to be put on an already crowded agenda, but as a vital and central part of meeting the government's stated objectives to widen participation in higher education. Support for adults should be targeted in HEIs' efforts to enhance key national participation targets, including: the recruitment and attainment of BME students; in broadening access for white working class groups; in improving outcomes for disabled students; and in ensuring learners from the lowest socio-economic groups have equitable access to HE.

Widening adult access to higher education could not be more important given the crisis of the current political moment. Post-Brexit, the divide that has emerged in the UK between those with and without a university education represents a crisis in democracy, for which universities are at least partly culpable. Yet each case study evidences, in a range of different ways, the power of HE to challenge the zeitgeist, to offer individuals hope and to reconsider the role of university/community engagement. Thus outreach with disadvantaged adults offers all HEIs a critical role to fill in times of austerity, when traditional 'outreach' spaces like libraries and adult education centres are under threat.

## Key project findings

The five case studies have highlighted a number of effective initiatives which could be scaled across the sector, as well raising a number of issues. However, one-size-does **not** fit all in relation to adult learners, so HEIs need to draw out the most context-relevant ideas and develop them to suit their own adult learners' needs.

### *The Need for Individualised Support*

An important finding is that outreach targeted at adult learners needs to be embedded in a student lifecycle approach if students from disadvantaged groups are to be successful, and not limited to the point of entry. We have identified (not for the first time!) that adults face random, ad hoc and unpredictable student journeys, and outreach needs to be flexible enough to recognise this arbitrariness. In addition, perceptions of elitism remain stubbornly resistant to challenge, with adult learners fearful that certain universities are 'not for the likes of me'. The level of individualised and peer support available in the preparatory outreach described in some of the case studies is not often available after transitioning to UG programmes. HEIs need to design-in 'bridges' for adult learners who do progress. These need to be highly contextualised – adult learners are not a homogeneous group, and not all are in need of 'academic support'. In addition, we recommend institutions develop metrics to capture 'success' for adult learners which are not reliant on the award of a degree, but recognise distance-travelled as a learner: this needs to acknowledge the journey from (low?) prior educational qualifications to Certificate and Diploma awards as well as evidence of personal transformation.

## *The Need for Effective Information, Advice and Guidance*

Information, advice and guidance is currently inadequate for adult learners. Not only are progression pathways complex, but the availability of personalised financial support is opaque for adults, especially in the transition from subsidised to full-fee study, and for the many adults who may not be in a position to study full-time. Across the sector, longer term strategies should be considered which ensure transparent pathways are available for adult returners to education. We recommend far greater alignment between nationally available resources and targeted local outreach activities.

## *The Need to Listen to the Voices of Adult Learners*

We acknowledge attempts to establish a causal link between WP activity and changes in student awareness, aspiration, access and achievement are not straightforward (Holland et al, 2017). While conducting this research, it became even more apparent that it is crucial the sector listens to adult learners' voices. In this project, each institution's quantitative data revealed progression patterns, and provided an overview of adult students. But the detailed texture of adults' lives as learners was only revealed in the interviews. The accounts provided by all the interviewees, of the difference that higher education study had made to their lives were extremely powerful: personal transformations that remain unrevealed if the sector measures only 'numbers'. We recommend all HEIs collect and analyse qualitative data to better understand the subjective experience of mature, disadvantaged students. Only then will evaluations of outreach be able to state confidently: 'what' makes a difference and 'why'?

## *The Need for Inter-disciplinary Flexibility*

Outreach which develops student confidence is crucial. Adults are likely to be time-poor, risk-averse when it comes to the cost of HE, and lacking the flexibility to study in traditional ways. Outreach needs to go to where adults are. Planned engagement with learning needs to be flexible, and the inter-disciplinary approaches taken in STEM, the Arts and the social sciences in our first three case studies offers the kind of student-centred flexibility that adult learners need. We recommend HEIs give more thought to the kind of curriculum they offer in outreach activities, and better align learning with adults' experiences.

## *The Need for a Sector-Wide Community of Practice*

This research project has generated a powerful collaborative momentum around the sharing of best practice in outreach aimed at ALDBs. To sustain and develop this further, resource will be needed to establish a community of practice network as a vehicle through which the project outputs can be taken forward. We are aware excellent outreach is undertaken in institutions it was not possible to include in this report – including HE delivered in FE or through alternative providers. We recommend the creation of a hub of activity in this area which brings in stakeholders across the sector, including key influencers in the wider community.

## Recommendations

1. HEIs should be more ambitious (and confident) in conducting outreach with ALDBs (ALDBs) – the case studies suggest supported pathways can be developed to enable adults without traditional entry qualifications to succeed. By widening participation to adults, HE learning environments are enhanced, while standards are not threatened. In order to facilitate this, access agreements should require HEIs to commit a specified and agreed proportion of their outreach spend on ALDBs. To identify a benchmark for resourcing:
2. HEIs should review their approaches to adult learners by using the 3-step evaluation tool (see link). They should start by evaluating the clarity and coherence of the whole HE offer in terms of 'fit' with the needs of adult learners.
3. HEIs should focus outreach with adults through engagement with key community influencers, including those in the workplace.
4. HEIs should explicitly involve adult learners as role models/mentors (and promote that as good practice).
5. HEIs should spend at least 10% of any outreach budget on evaluating its impact.
6. HEIs should press the sector to urgently develop a tracking system (using unique learner identifiers) to evaluate the impact of any outreach in terms of progression and subsequent success.



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# A three-step evaluation tool for outreach to adults from disadvantaged backgrounds<sup>1</sup>

Three underlying principles emerge from the case studies which have informed the development of an iterative three-step evaluation tool to stimulate and monitor the impact of university outreach activity with adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds (ALDBs). First is institutional culture, and a willingness to take the needs of adult learners seriously (institutional advocacy). Second is the institutional understanding of the diverse needs of (usually) local adult learners (institutional intelligence). Third is the practical commitment to analysing the impact of any interventions aimed at adult learners through the perceptions of the learners themselves (personalised understanding of impact). For institutions in the early stages of engaging with ALDBs as part of their efforts to widen participation, the three steps are best undertaken in order – the first is a critical underpinning for the second step, and the second is needed to inform the third. For institutions with a track record of engaging with ALDBs, the steps may be undertaken in parallel.

**Step 1** involves an institutional health check. The case studies revealed the fundamental starting point for meaningful and sustainable outreach with ALDBs to be the culture within the university. This can be represented in mission statements, in strategic plans, or in the energy and commitment of enthusiastic individuals. But for adult outreach to be meaningful, coherent, strategic and valued, there has to be a ‘climate’ of adult learner awareness in the institution. The more central this is to core activities, the greater the likelihood of resources to re-balance the culture to one in which adult learners have a greater priority.

The tool is designed to enable those colleagues charged with reporting WP progress through annual Access Agreements to rank their university ‘readiness’ for adult learners and to identify the appetite for doing more to widen participation by targeting accordingly. The 1-4 scale enables relative strengths and weaknesses to be noted and the total could be monitored on an annual basis, which could, as appropriate, inform OFFA of progress in this area.

**Step 2** involves reflection on the kind of activities that might be utilised with ALDBs. Drawing on the range of interventions described in the case studies, a set of factors ranging from adult-friendly IAG, learner support, marketing, flexible curricula and progression routes can be evaluated. Current adult learners and WP practitioners might be involved in scoring against the 1-4 scale in order to rate the suitability for ALDBs of current and planned outreach. The individual elements and the total could also be tracked over time, and could, as appropriate, be used to inform operational reporting to OFFA through Access Agreements.

**Step 3** focuses institutional evaluation on key elements that the case studies suggest remain significant barriers for ALDBs. These are distinctive to adults returning to study, and take the purpose of outreach back to where it belongs – to the transformative impact on the individual learner, rather than the all-too-common default of institutional recruitment data. Participants in outreach activities could complete a version of the simple matrix, to provide much-needed evidence for the sector of the extent to which confidence and self-belief have been enhanced, study skills and attainment improved and sector understanding enriched by engaging with the WP outreach provided. This personalised evaluation could also inform a more supportive bridge to undergraduate tutorial/study support for ALDBs.

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<sup>1</sup> Butcher and Fowle, 2017

## Instructions for completion

In consultation with the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) we have developed a 3-step evaluation matrix in order to help higher education (HE) institutions reflect upon their commitment to meeting the needs of ALDBs. This is intended to provide institutions with a rationale for decisions they might need to make about the reprioritising of resources to support ALDBs. Completion of the matrix could also provide evidence of impact to include in annual Access Agreements. We acknowledge that different institutions will be at different stages of engagement in outreach to ALDBs based on their differing missions and strategic priorities. However, in initial consultations around drafts, feedback has been received that the evaluation matrix offers a valuable stimulus to discussions around the extent to which institutions are:

1. Aware of the needs of adult learners

Which in turn informs

2. The tailoring of outreach activities to ALDBs

Which in turn needs to be evaluated in order to

3. Inform evidence-led practice of the impact of outreach activities which contributes to sustainable enhancement of outreach to ALDBs

We suggest that this three-step matrix is completed as part of a preparatory discussion around the content of the institution's Access Agreement, which includes a senior university manager, a widening participation (WP) practitioner and a current adult student (the latter may be particularly helpful for Step 3). This will ensure a range of different perspectives on the adult learner experience are recognised. In testing the first draft of this matrix it became apparent that some institutions have strong pockets of activity in this area but do not score well across the whole university. It may be that the tool is employed initially at a faculty level and results are then synthesised into a whole institution score. For those institutions at early stages of their engagement with adult learners a sequential stepped approach would enable relative strengths and weakness to be noted. Alternatively for institutions with a more developed approach the matrix steps could be completed in parallel rather than sequentially in order to signpost areas in which key decisions need to be made.

The primary value of the matrix lies in the prompting of discussion around institutional approaches to the needs of ALDBs. This could enable a rough measure of institutional commitment to ALDBs, as one element of widening participation, to be monitored internally year on year.

## Step 1: Is your institution ready for adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds?

	To a great extent (4)	Somewhat (3)	A little (2)	Not at all (1)
To what extent are adults a WP priority in your <b>Access Agreement</b> ?				
To what extent does your institution have <b>benchmarks</b> to measure recruitment, retention and achievement of ALDBs?				
Does your <b>Widening Participation/Access Strategy</b> make reference to adult learners				
To what extent is your focus on those adult learners studying:				
<b>full- time</b>				
<b>part-time</b>				
To what extent are institutional <b>resources</b> deployed with ALDBs in mind?				
To what extent does your institution provide <b>facilities</b> to support adult learners eg. Crèche, flexible library opening hours, accessible public transport?				
To what extent is the approach to ALDBs <b>centrally coordinated</b> ?				
To what extent is your <b>timetable</b> sufficiently flexible to meet adult learners' needs?				
To what extent is this <b>consistent</b> across the whole institution?				
To what extent are <b>academic staff</b> aware of the needs of adult learners and in a position to respond?				
To what extent are <b>student support staff</b> aware of the needs of adult learners and in a position to respond?				
To what extent are the needs of adult learners included in the <b>induction</b> of all student support staff?				
To what extent do you have a <b>financial support</b> package appropriate for ALDBs?				

How <b>visible</b> is any financial support package to prospective adult learners?				
To what extent does your <b>institutional culture</b> (try asking your students) create an environment to which adult learners feel they belong?				
To what extent does the Student Union take the needs of adult learners into account?				

## Step 2: How ‘fit-for-purpose’ are your planned outreach activities for adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds?

	To a great extent (4)	Somewhat (3)	A little (2)	Not at all (1)
To what extent does your institution <b>target outreach</b> specifically at ALDBs?				
To what extent do you engage with your <b>community</b> at a local level				
To what extent do you provide targeted <b>taster sessions</b> for adult learners				
To what extent does your <b>marketing</b> represent and appeal to adult learners eg. prospectus and bespoke leaflets, website case studies and/or images of adult learners and use of <b>appropriate</b> social media platforms				
To what extent does your institution support a mature learner <b>community</b> as part of a commitment to a student lifecycle approach				
To what extent does your institution provide <b>individual support</b> for adult learners eg. learning champions/mentors				
To what extent does your institution provide <b>specialist IAG</b> for adult learners				
To what extent does your institution offer clear advice around <b>progression pathways</b> (through the website or student advice channels) including the recognition of prior learning?				
To what extent does your institution offer a <b>preparatory curriculum</b> to support adults taking their first steps to HE?				
To what extent does your approach recognise and respond to the <b>unique and diverse</b> characteristics of adult learners?				
Adult learners begin their educational journeys from different starting points. To what extent is your approach to outreach sufficiently <b>flexible</b> ?				

<p>To what extent is your approach to outreach coherently <b>sustained</b> through</p> <p>a) Working in <b>partnership</b> with other organisations?</p> <p>b) <b>Planned</b> programme of activity?</p> <p>c) <b>Evaluation</b> of previous activity?</p>	<p><b>a)</b></p>			
	<p><b>b)</b></p>			
	<p><b>c)</b></p>			

### Step 3: What is the impact of your planned outreach activities on adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds?

	To a great extent (4)	Somewhat (3)	A little (2)	Not at all (1)
To what extent do you have robust <b>methodologies</b> to track the progression of adult learners?				
To what extent has the targeted activity contributed to the individual <b>learning gain</b> of adult learners:				
a) Increased <b>confidence</b> (can cope in HE)	a)			
b) Improved <b>study skills</b>	b)			
c) Higher <b>attainment</b>	c)			
d) Increased <b>self-belief</b> (can envisage success)	d)			
e) Increased <b>understanding</b> of the HE environment	e)			
f) <b>Active engagement</b> in learning	f)			
g) Shaping their personal <b>learning journey</b>	g)			
To what extent have your outreach activities increased the number/proportion of adult learners at your institution?				

## Next steps

Based on the discussion around the 3-step matrix and the scoring you agreed, we suggest the next step is to identify a series of actions which would widen participation to your institution by targeting ALDBs. For those institutions in the early stages of this work these actions may align with issues identified in Step 1. Other institutions might find their actions are more closely related to the outreach activities in Step 2 or will build upon recognition of the impact of those activities as identified in Step 3.

<b>Action</b>	<b>Timescale</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Resource implications</b>	<b>Measure(s) of success</b>