

Aspiring Towards Higher Education?

The Voice of the Year 11 Student

in 1 Volume

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

In 2001 the then UK Government set a national target to get 50 per cent of young people between the ages of 18 and 30 into higher education by the year 2010. To achieve this goal, higher education institutions were required to deliver Widening Participation initiatives that would target under-represented groups in a bid to raise aspirations and bring them into the sector. The study that underpins this thesis was an investigation into the issues surrounding widening participation from the perspective of students in their final year of compulsory schooling. It began as a year-long longitudinal study of the students' views as they moved towards a key transitional point in their lives. Nine students were identified from Year 11 in one school. Three were drawn from each of the following three categories or groups of students: (i) 'traditional students', these were students who were deemed as belonging to groups that were already well-represented in higher education; (ii) 'non-traditional' students, these were deemed 'non-traditional' in the sense that they were seen as belonging to groups that were under-represented in higher education; (iii) 'widening participation' students, these were recipients of a widening participation initiative delivered by their nearest university which, by implication, also deemed them as being 'non-traditional' in the sense that they were seen as belonging to groups that were under-represented in higher education. Each participant was interviewed in-depth three times whilst they were in Year 11; in December 2003, in March 2004, and again in June 2004. Whilst all interviews sought to elicit information about their lives at that point in time, the first interview was intended to gather relevant information about their past lives, the second a more in-depth look at their current lives, and the third focused on their future lives. Follow-up data were collected from some of the participants in 2009, 2010 and 2011. An in-depth interview also took place in June 2004 with the university's Widening Participation Officer and the school's Head of Year 11 and Widening Participation Co-ordinator. They are considered to be key informants to widening participation initiatives, more broadly in the case of the former, and specific to the school in the case of the latter.

The thesis reports on the process through which participants were selected (or not selected) for widening participation intervention, learning identities in school and out, imagined futures, choices, and ultimately what happened to those students who were tracked beyond Year 11. Flaws in the widening participation policy agenda at the time of the main data collection period were identified as: (i) the individualization of the

problem which drew attention away from the structural nature of the problem of under-representation and also from deep-rooted flaws within the education system; (ii) the lack of awareness of the longitudinal nature of the problem whereby entrance into higher education is dependent on prior learning and prior qualifications – this resulted in little or no account being taken in the selection process of widening participation-targeted individuals' previous patterns of achievements, such that they may not be on a trajectory that makes higher education a viable option, and (iii) the valuing of non-participation in higher education.

The thesis concluded by acknowledging that a new legislative framework about to be implemented in 2012 appears to be addressing some of these concerns. Issues that remain unaddressed include deep-rooted problems within the formal education system, the valuing of non-participation and of vocational training, and an appreciation that learning takes place on a trajectory.

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