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PERSPECTIVES ON ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

Practice and Research

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Rosemarie Davies has worked in Further Education (FE) for over 30 years and has 20 years' experience of teaching and managing provision on a range of higher education (HE) courses, both in further education colleges and with a Manchester-based training provider. Since 1993, she has worked extensively with a variety of universities at the

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Anthony Hudson is a Research Manager at Continuum, the Centre for Widening Participation Policy Studies at the University of East London (UEL) and is currently undertaking doctoral research on the identity of Access to HE tutors. He is a Social Scientist by training, a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and an experienced manager, teacher and researcher. Before returning to higher education, he worked in the not-for-profit sector where he was General Secretary of a learned and professional society. He has taught on a range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes specialising in research methods at a number of post-1992 institutions. Hudson developed and taught on New Beginnings (UEL's fast track HE access programme). Since joining Continuum, the Centre for Widening Participation Policy Studies at UEL, he has managed a diverse portfolio and undertaken a wide range of consultancy, research and evaluation projects at local, national and international levels.

PREFACE

In June 2017, a group of researchers and practitioners interested in Access to HE came together in order to facilitate a special Access seminar at the 24th Forum FACE Annual Conference, hosted in partnership by the Glasgow School of Art and the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. There was a shared belief that Access to HE was still an important aspect of widening participation and more research was needed in this area. Later, in September 2017 their collaboration continued when they presented *Alive and Kicking: Perspectives on Access Education* at British Education Research Association (BERA) held at the University of Sussex, Brighton.

The work explored in the afore-mentioned seminars was then developed to become the basis of this book. The writers (working in further and higher education) offer an account of Access education from various points of view and represent the diversity that exists in Access provision. For example, the Access to HE Diploma (AHED) is currently monitored by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and is usually taught at level three in colleges. However, some universities deliver in-house bespoke Access courses that range in duration from one semester to a full academic year, covering a range of skills and subjects, but with a focus on internal progression. The

researchers represented in this book value 'close to practice research' and utilise a range of approaches.

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INTRODUCTION

Samantha Broadhead

This book considers the courses that were designed for those students who do not have the typical qualifications to enter higher education. Compulsory schooling, for many social, cultural and practical reasons, does not facilitate academic success for a number of people. Thus, another means of learning is needed to provide such people with an opportunity to achieve their personal, educational goals. Originally, the aims of Access courses were to develop students both academically and to some extent emotionally so they could confidently follow their aspirations to undertake either higher study or a professional career. Sometimes this kind of study simply fostered a love of learning in a person as part of them living a fulfilled life.

These courses may be generically called 'Access courses'; however, the naming of such provision has been associated with shifts in how Access courses are perceived and valued by educational practitioners, institutions, policy makers and the students themselves. Kearney and Diamond (1990) have argued that those who provide and develop Access courses have wider educational, curricula, social and political goals that are misunderstood by other agencies. Access courses that aim to facilitate higher education participation are given a capital 'A' in the literature and those with wider, social justice

concerns are given a small case 'a' (Connelly, 1991; Kearney & Diamond, 1990). This convention is followed within this book.

In the early 2000s, those Access courses delivered in further education (FE) were referred to as Access to HE (AHE). As a level-three credit-based qualification for students wishing to go to university, the AHE made the intended aim of Access education more explicit in its title. These were courses about getting students into higher education rather than employment or further training. The personal development aspects of the AHE qualification were also downplayed in its name.

Further developments occurred in the late 2000s when the qualification was renamed the Access to HE Diploma (AHED). Currently, the AHED is validated by Access Validating Agencies (AVAs), which are in turn accountable to the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). AHED is mostly delivered in the FE sector. However, private training providers do offer AHED courses, and some universities also deliver similar programmes.

The people who study on AHED or on Access courses in general are sometimes described as 'second-chance' students, implying that they have already been given a chance to succeed but for some reason have failed (Parry, 1996). When a person does something wrong, commits a crime or acts dishonourably they are given a second chance to do better. Therefore, there is an unfortunate, moral aspect to the term 'second-chance student' as it implies that they have done something wrong in their compulsory education that needs to be put right. This notion can be contested; social, cultural, economic, demographic, political, and/or health factors mean that some students do not get a fair opportunity to achieve when at school age. For example, they may be looked-after children; they may have to care for ailing parents; they may

have suffered a long-term childhood illness or they may have parents who are incarcerated, all of which could disrupt a child's education. There is also the possibility that the quality of school education a child receives is not very good. In addition, there may be instances where students have suffered bullying at school for not fitting in. Duckworth (2014) has written about the forms of symbolic violence students can be subject to from institutions, staff and other students. In other words, there are many, many reasons why people do not gain the formal qualifications at school that are not about individual aptitude or personal disposition towards learning. Some people really have not had a first chance to succeed educationally, so it seems misleading to refer to Access students as 'second-chance students'.

Access students are often described as 'non-standard', 'non-traditional' or 'unconventional' (Broadhead & Gregson, 2018; Osborne, Leopold, & Ferrie, 1997; Parry, 1996; Wakeford, 1993). It appears as if this diverse group of people are defined by how different they are to those 18- to 19-year-old students who enter higher education with 'A' levels after school. When Access students are described as 'untraditional' or 'unconventional', there is the assumption that people learn in standardised or traditional patterns where educational achievement is linked to a person's biological age or life stage. There is a danger that these terms associated with Access students are used in a pejorative way where 'different' is equated to being 'sub-standard' (Broadhead & Gregson, 2018). Parry (1996) wrote about 'discourses of derision' where commentators in the early 1990s talked about Access students as if they would inevitably lower academic standards if they were allowed to enter universities in high numbers. It was assumed that the inclusion of a more diverse set of people would be problematic and cause a decline in quality, although there was little evidence this would be the case

(Parry, 1996). It could be argued that coming to education later in life can bring benefits to the individual and the institutions in which they study. For example, students have usually gained a lot of life experience that will mean they may be better equipped to deal with any difficulties or challenges they may face in their education (Broadhead & Gregson, 2018). They also can be highly motivated to achieve for themselves and their families (Broadhead & Garland, 2012: O'Shea, 2014).

Researchers such as Busher, James, and Piela (2015) claim that although there have been a growing number of studies about mature students in further and higher education, there have been few that have focused on Access to Higher Education (AHE) courses. However, there have been notable studies on Access education; for example, Burke (2002) has written about the student experience on Access courses in the late 1990s. Burke (2002) contextualised Access education within a growing neoliberalism where policies highlighted the economic benefits of Access education to the nation rather than the social justice principles that had previously driven its development. More contemporary texts by Busher and James (2018) and Billingham (2018) have continued to situate AHE in its broadest sense within neoliberalism. This book considers Access, AHE and AHED courses in particular, from various perspectives, in order to show how the neoliberal context of educational policy has often been in tension with the values and aims of Access practitioners.

A thorough discussion of Access education is timely and significant. The newly formed Office for Students (OfS) has identified mature students as a group with declining participation within higher education (OfS, 2018). Access programmes in all iterations are an important means of enabling people to improve their life chances by enabling participation in higher education. In light of recent findings by the Social

Mobility Commission reported by Allen and Tyler (2017) there has been a fall in part-time student numbers over five years by 56%, suggesting that adult students are struggling to study, care for dependents and work concurrently. The Social Mobility Commission (2016) also found that, over the last five years, 1.2 million students from low-income homes have left school without five good GCSEs. As more careers require higher education qualifications, people who have not achieved level-three accreditation (conventionally 'A' levels in the United Kingdom) will need to find alternative ways of entering higher education. AHE courses are still needed in today's Britain as are other enabling courses in other parts of the globe.

What is the state of Access education in the twenty-first century? This question needs to be addressed as adult learners seek to gain AHE in order to increase their life chances and social mobility for themselves and their families. This book evaluates some of the recent changes and argues that Access education is alive and kicking because of its diversity, serving different people in different ways. As much of the research in this book is carried out by practitioners and researchers who have worked in access education, their unique and valuable analysis is grounded in authentic experience.

Chapter 1, 'Access to HE: from Margin to the Mainstream', describes the historical context of Access education, focusing on England. The aim of this chapter is to establish the debates around Access education that were rooted in the 1960s and 1970s. A move from an elitist to a mass higher education system in the United Kingdom was one reason why Access education became politically significant.

During the 1980s, there was an expansion of 'non-conventional students' into higher education which coincided with an increase in Access courses (Osborne et al., 1997; Wakeford, 1993). The Access route was seen as the 'third'

way for students to enter university (DES, 1987). It gave students a broad introduction to the skills and knowledge required for entry to higher education and enabled them to apply to the courses of their choice through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS). This account of the development of Access courses is an important narrative because it captures the values, philosophy and pedagogical approaches practiced by tutors that made Access education distinctive. It also argues that Access students were not always welcomed into higher education. Access education was met with scepticism by those responsible for maintaining standards in higher education. A growing interest in Access education by the UK central government led to a growing divide between those who believed Access was inevitably about getting more people into higher education and those who believed Access had a more radical project, which was about changing higher education itself.

Chapter 2, 'Access to HE: Monitoring and Standardisation', continues the argument begun in Chapter 1 by referring to both current policy and the experiences of Access practitioners. The expansion of Access provision was accompanied by increased monitoring and standardisation of the curriculum. In the early 2000s, AHE courses were monitored by AVAs such as the Open College Network (OCN) and recently Certa and Ascentis. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) licences the AVAs to ensure they are fit for purpose.

Before 2008 AHE certificates were flexible and ungraded. Access tutors were able to have some control over the structure of their curricula in order to be responsive to their particular students and local context. AHE certificates were not fully understood by some HE institutions, partly due to them being so different in size and structure. However, since 2008, the AHE units of learning became graded and then the unit

sizes (one credit representing 10 notional hours of learning) became standardised. The AHE qualification was then renamed the 'Access to HE Diploma'. These recent changes meant that in 2017 the AHED could be aligned to UCAS tariff points. Standardisation made the AHED more visible and understandable to higher education admissions staff. Grading made it easier for institutions to select AHED students on to competitive degree courses. However, some practitioners have felt the AHED has become more like 'A' levels where students are under pressure to gain high grades and the personal developmental role of Access education has been undermined.

The development of the AHED has taken place alongside other changes that have had an impact on AHED students, for example, funding. Students in the post-compulsory sectors have become more personally responsible for funding their own education. The introduction of the 24plus loan in 2013 created some uncertainty for some students where the thought of accruing debt was an additional barrier to returning to education. Currently, AHED students, who are older than 19, pay for their education with an Advanced Learner Loan. The loan is written off if the AHED student completes an undergraduate degree and is an additional motivation to progress to higher education. However, it is also an additional pressure because if the student does not achieve the grades needed to progress they will be financially disadvantaged.

After a decade of grading the AHED, the QAA is reviewing the qualification and aims to consult with Access experts in order to improve it in line with the changing needs of students.

Chapter 3, 'Learning on a Bespoke Access Programme', focuses on an Access course, which is developed and delivered in higher education. The first part provides an account

of how higher education institutions in England are developing their own, non-QAA approved, access provision. It highlights the range and scope of such courses, the type of institutions offering them and the learners they serve.

The subsequent sections of the chapter draw on the experience of developing, delivering and undertaking research on a bespoke access programme at a post-1992 institution. The original Access programme was developed as an externally funded project in 2000/1 and subsequently became embedded as a short course. Over the years, the programme has been subject to a number of changes in terms of duration, delivery and content. Describing the development of the programme offers the opportunity to consider the internal and external drivers for such change. The current provision serves to highlight the tension between institution drivers and learner needs.

The remaining sections draw on institutional data and data from interviews with students and staff to provide a more detailed insight into the programme. Institutional data reveal the contribution that the programme has made to widening participation and the progression and attainment of students.

Chapter 4, 'The Trust between Access to HE Students and Their Tutors: A Practitioner Research Project', provides an account derived from Access practitioners who have used a practice-based Research Development Fellowship managed by Sunderland University Centre of Excellence in Teacher Training (SUNCETT) and funded by the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) in order to investigate issues around 'trust' and Access education. As this is a chapter written by a practitioner it offers a different voice, one that is sometimes absent from academic debates. For example, the writer chooses to write in the first person so that the reader is included in their internal thoughts and decision-making processes about their practice.