

Rewriting the Future Phase 4 Executive Summary

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During 2022 research was carried out on behalf of Future U to investigate the barriers and enablers for adult students returning to education and progressing into Higher Education.

The aims were:

- to explore the educational trajectories and aspirations of adult learners in Lancashire;
- to develop an understanding of perceived barriers, and challenges encountered;
- to consider how students access advice and support for re-engaging with education and progressing to HE.

Methods

1. In-depth interviews were carried out with four 'successful' adult students who had entered HE. The researchers used the interview data to create extended I-poems which told stories of adult learner engagement.
2. Five dialogue groups were conducted with ~30 adult students in colleges. The extended I-poems were shared with the students to provoke recognition and discussion around salient issues for the participants. The researchers worked with participants to create visual storylines representing the challenges and successes of their journeys through education.
3. An online pilot survey informed by the themes arising from the previous steps was created to test how to involve greater numbers of adult students. This was distributed to five colleges for completion. A total of 11 responses were collected and analysed.
4. The datasets were analysed with reference to the previous three phases of the project and relevant literature around marginalisation, labelling theory, and educational policy.

Findings

The following elements were identified as particularly relevant to adult learners who were re-entering education through FE college courses.

- Perceptions of self, e.g. as capable, worthwhile, or clever (or the opposite)
- Perceptions of self by others, e.g. as above
- Relationships with others, including their own children and families, employers, past and present
- Influential sources of information, beliefs or attitudes
- Structural and contextual influences on progression
- Knowledge and understanding about education
- Employment and experience
- Impact of change, e.g. on family, finances, relationships, dependency, health.

The report gives examples of each as illustrations from the students who participated in the study. While each of these elements was significant in having both negative and positive effects on entering HE, the findings showed that they were often interconnected in complex ways that defied making generalisations or assumptions about adults in education. However, there are certain conclusions and recommendations to be made.

Adult learners can be considered a marginalised group. However, they are not a homogenous group and individuals are also marginalised through different circumstances. Harrison and Atherton's (2021) four dimensions of marginalisation are useful in understanding the ways in which adult learners can be marginalised through: society, systems, time/space, and relevance.

Education is about change. Adult learners in the research suggested that information and support with Employment and Experience, Knowledge and Understanding, Influential Sources and Impact of Change enables them to progress in education, whereas lack of information and support creates barriers and challenges. Whether students have access to this support and how they then perceive their selves, how others perceive them, and the relationships involved, are mediated by contexts and structures. These include societal and system influences at the heart of marginalisation, which can make the difference between whether students are encouraged or discouraged from engaging and progressing toward HE.

Figure 1. Interconnecting Dimensions



Greater awareness of these complex influences by students and by those involved in education at every level is needed for better understanding and support for students to successfully embrace change.

Recommendations

- Further develop the pilot survey as part of a suite of evaluative tools to ensure that the broader elements involved in students' engagement and progression are more widely monitored.
- Colleges and universities should make access routes into higher education more explicit with information, support and guidance for potential students more widely accessible. Suitable outlets for information to reach adults not currently in education should be explored.
- All interventions should acknowledge the multitude of barriers that may prevent students from re-engaging and progressing in education.
- Practitioners and educators must be more aware of the complexity of marginalisation involved in contexts and structures and how these mediate relationships and perceptions of learners.
- Interventions and further research and evaluation should focus on the whole picture of the student rather than merely one aspect.
- The benefits of employment and work experience (beyond finance) for all students is often underestimated and requires further research.
- Adult learners benefit from opportunities to build trusting relationships with their fellow students and regard each other as a source of social and academic support, shaping knowledge and understanding. This should be encouraged.
- Employers and family members are viewed as influential sources and further exploration of how this resource can be developed in and out of educational institutions should be explored.
- Impact of change on the lives of adult learners must be considered more appropriately, for example through the finance available, the ways that colleges and HEI's can support parents and families and managing work-life-education balance.