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Challenging the boundaries: transitions to further learning (0027)

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Research Domain: Higher Education Policy

This paper reports on research conducted into widening participation and transitions to further learning which was supported by three funding streams, HEFCE, Aim Higher Sussex and a local Strategic Learning Partnership, the Ore Valley Forum.

The research examined the transitions to learning from the perspective of young people who were in school moving into post-compulsory education and training. We worked with young people not engaged in education and training, the NEET group. Our third project examined what affect the local Aim Higher programme had had on those who had successfully entered higher education and were now in their second year of study.

The research identified pivotal moments in an individual's learning trajectory and demonstrated the power of working with local community representatives from diverse organisations who have engaged pragmatically and intellectually in the education regeneration of the area.

Research Domain: Higher Education Policy

Challenging the boundaries: transitions to further learning

HEFCE provided funding aimed towards a better understanding of the social, economic and cultural factors that might lie behind the low participation rates in a local community in order to establish what might be done to improve them. The University of Brighton was one of four HEIs which examined this issue.

The local strategic learning partnership in Hastings approached the University's Community Engagement Programme, CUPP, to seek support to research the extremely low achievement rates of young people in the local schools and to begin to understand what contributed to this and therefore what could be done to improve the achievement of young people and help them move from school to further learning and training with a better learning and qualification platform.

A third source of funding enabled the research team to examine how people targeted through the Aim Higher initiative were experiencing their degree programmes and how well prepared they felt they had been for higher education study.

We were provided, then, with an opportunity to examine, through three different projects, the transitions to learning from the perspective of young people. The three stages comprised those in

Years 10 and 11 of schools (aged 14 – 16), the latter group about to move into post-compulsory education and training, those young people not engaged in education and training, the NEET group which accounts for approximately 10% of young people in England and young people who had successfully entered higher education and were now in their second year of study.

With each of these projects, we undertook a literature review to identify the existing research and current understanding of a complex and in policy terms, fast changing phenomena. The responsibility for learning in the post-compulsory sector at national government level has been a source of concern as departments have been created and then disbanded or merged. The funding for learning of young people and adults is about to transfer from one main agency, the Learning and Skills Agency, (LSC) to two, the Young People's Learning Agency (YPLA) and the Skills Funding Agency (SFA). Higher education continues to be funded by HEFCE but colleges of further education are increasingly working to at least two paymasters, two quality assurance regimes and a myriad of other demands from awarding bodies and professional bodies. This frenetic activity at national level provides the backdrop to provision at local level.

Research aimed at understanding why people do not do well or do not progress to further formal learning and training includes the recent 14 – 19 Review (HEFCE, 2006, Nuffield, 2009, TLRP, Parry, 2008), and studies examining young people's attitudes to debt incurred through study (Watson & Church 2003, Watson and Church 2009,) and young people not in education or training (DCSF 2007)

We are developing a concept of transition which can not be accounted for by structural barriers or indices of deprivation alone. We wished to follow cohorts of young people as they progress (or not) from school to the world of learning and work. We were also keen to build our relationship with our local community and importantly, ensure that we could, together identify ways in which we as researchers and our institution more generally, could participate in economic regeneration. We were, therefore, in for the 'long haul'.

Our Aim higher project involved the three HEIs in Sussex. We asked all second year full time students who were first in family to study in higher education to tell us about any activities which helped them know about and decide to enter HE including visits to the local university, talks at school, specific Aim higher activities. We then interviewed a group of students at each HEI. Initial findings indicate that not all young people who could have benefitted from Aim Higher have done so and conversely, some who participated in the programme were not strictly speaking part of the target group. However, activities which promote the idea of studying at university can contribute to decision making but these are part of a 'drip feed' approach and the influence of peers, family and teachers at school continue to be important factor in raising awareness and aspirations.

In our HEFCE funded project, we distributed a survey for all year 11 pupils who were about to take their GCSEs, asking them how many they hoped to achieve, their career aspirations, if anyone in their

family had experienced HE, how likely they were to go to HE and for their opinion on what it meant to study at HE (for example, if they thought that getting into debt was a 'bad thing'). We conducted a focus group with parents in one participating school and following the GCSE results and the ongoing research will follow members of the cohort into their new programmes at the local colleges.

Our final project involved analysing the local indices of deprivation for the area against pupil achievement and working with a group of Year 10 pupils. This project has developed a number of offshoots including an analysis of the housing conditions and ability of pupils to undertake homework, and liaison with a project which had been set up to enable parents to become researchers within their local community (Turning Point). We are seeking funding to examine the apprenticeship opportunities in the area and work with families to provide intergenerational data and understanding of aspirations in the community.

The emerging picture shows that transition to higher education is prepared by pivotal moments in individuals learning trajectories. Decisions occur in constrained contexts and build upon the consequences of earlier choices and transitions. Our research has demonstrated the power of working with a local community where representatives from diverse organisations have engaged pragmatically and intellectually in the education regeneration of the area.