



‘Walking tall’: A critical assessment of new ways of involving student mothers in higher education

Summary of key findings¹

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December 2014

Introduction

This study evaluated part-time undergraduate courses targeted at low-income student parents delivered in Sure Start Children’s Centres located in areas of multiple deprivation, and run by Birkbeck, University of London and the Open University (OU). It assessed the setting up of these courses and their organisation, and explored perceptions of the courses’ impact on the lives of the mothers, their families, and their children’s educational trajectories from the perspective of: the course participants; staff responsible for managing and teaching the courses; and the Children’s Centre staff.

The study, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, was conducted by researchers at Birkbeck and the Institute of Education. It consisted of a literature review; 17 interviews with staff at the Children’s Centres, Birkbeck and the OU; an analysis of Birkbeck’s and the OU’s student records; a survey of 115 course participants and 30 follow-up in-depth interviews; and a roundtable with stakeholders. Most of the fieldwork was conducted between April 2012 and September 2012.

Policy Context

This research relates to courses run between 2007/8 and 2011/12, a period of changing policy landscapes affecting both higher education and Children’s Centres. At the start of this period, widening participation policies and rhetoric concerning ‘raising aspirations’ and ‘lifting barriers’ were at their peak, and were the impetus behind the development of the Birkbeck and the OU courses. These ideas have subsequently waned and refocused on social mobility and meritocratic ideas underpinning fair access – ensuring that more ‘disadvantaged’ students access the ‘best’ universities. In line with this changing ideology, the increasing marketization of higher education, and desire for a more diverse and competitive sector, were the 2012/13 reforms of higher education. These reforms withdrew most of the funds universities received from government for teaching undergraduate courses, regulated and raised tuition fees for part-time undergraduate courses to up to £6,750 a year, and introduced loans for part-time students to meet these higher fees. These reforms have contributed to the dramatic decline of the part-time higher education sector nationally, and the demise of part-time

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courses, including those under investigation. Part-time UK and EU undergraduate entrant numbers in 2013/14 were almost half what they were in 2010/11 (Oxford Economics, 2014).

These funding reforms did not impact on the students in this study who were still eligible for two government-funded means-tested grants targeted at low-income students: a grant for tuition fees of between £820 and £1,230 (in 2011/12) a year with the amount varying depending on a student's intensity of study³; and an annual course grant to meet the costs of books, travel and other course expenditure of up to £265 (in 2011/12). Some institutional discretionary funds were also available and tuition fees still were comparatively low – around £350 per 30 credit module. These grants were vital to the mothers in this study, as the vast majority paid no tuition fees.

The Sure Start Children's Centres were similarly undergoing changes. The Sure Start programme was part of a large and ambitious strategy to prevent present and future social exclusion and contribute to the New Labour government's commitment to reduce child poverty. Its initial objective in 1999 was: 'To work with parents and children to promote the physical, intellectual and social development of pre-schoolchildren particularly those who are 'disadvantaged' to ensure they are ready to thrive when they get to school' (Eisenstadt, 2012 p 32). Its core services were designed to improve parenting skills and mothers' self-esteem. Following the 2003 Green Paper *Every Child Matters* and the 2006 Children's Act, the programme expanded, Sure Start were folded into Sure Start Children's Centres and came under local authorities' control, and there was a greater emphasis on the employability agenda - helping mothers back to work. By 2006, there were 2,500 Sure Start Children's Centres offering a wide range of services and covering the 30 per cent most deprived communities and including 70 per cent of children in poverty. The Children's Centres in this study opened when the Sure Start programme was expanding rapidly. They all had a remit to provide integrated early years and childcare services, which this study shows is so important to support mothers wanting to acquire qualifications prior to returning to work as well as making a direct contribution to the wellbeing of their children.

Since 2010, the core purpose of Sure Start Children's Centres has changed, emphasising *targeted* interventions to improve outcomes for young children and their families and reduce inequalities, particularly for those families in greatest need of support' (DfE, 2013, p. 6) by improving child development and readiness for school, supported by raising parents' aspirations, self-esteem and parenting skills as well as improving both child and family health and life chances. This core purpose has been criticised recently by the House of Common Education Select Committee as 'too vague and broadly worded and should be reviewed to focus on achievable outcomes for children and families and to recognise the difference between centres. This should include reaching clarity on who centres are for—children or parents—and what their priority should be.' (House of Commons, 2013, p 3). In addition, in the last few years the Centres' budgets and services have been cut, and they are no longer required to provide integrated early years and childcare services or other services onsite but instead have to facilitate access to these services. Some are charging for services previously provided free, and several hundred have closed down.

Widening participation: Setting up the courses

Vital to the courses' success were their design. They were based on mutually beneficial community-based collaborative partnerships between the universities and the Children's Centres. The courses aimed to widen higher education participation by overcoming some of the initial impediments to access faced by low-income and 'disadvantaged' mothers. The vast majority of mothers received government-funded tuition fee grants and paid no tuition fees. Free on-site childcare was available. The courses took place locally in the Children's Centres - a convenient, familiar, supportive, and non-

³ In 2011/12 students studying 50% to 59% of a full-time course could get a maximum of £820, those studying between 60% and 74% could get up to £985, and those studying 75% or more can get up to £1,230.

threatening environment, and were run during school hours so that students could fit them around their other commitments.

For many mothers their initial decision to join the course was an opportunistic one – the offer was there. They would not necessarily have sought it out themselves, hence the importance of the outreach work. Their motivations for studying were primarily instrumental: to improve their life opportunities; to gain a higher education qualification/credits; and to get a job or better job not necessarily immediately but at some point in the future.

Analysis of Birkbeck and OU student records revealed that the majority of all course participants between 2007/8 and 2011/12 were women (93%), aged 25 and over (84%), non-White (58%) and with low entry qualifications of Level 2 or below (65%). All the participants surveyed were women and most were lone parents (55%), were not employed before starting their course (73%), had household incomes of under £15,000 (65%), left school under the age of 18 (58%), and did not have another family member who had studied for a higher education qualification (53%) - all socio-economic characteristics typically associated with ‘widening participation’ and ‘non-traditional’ students.

Widening participation: Learning and Teaching

Birkbeck students were taught face to face, with one three-hour session per week over the academic year. They were aiming for a 120 credit point Certificate of Higher Education (Cert. HE), usually consisting of four modules, two of which they could take at the Children’s Centre, and the remainder at Birkbeck’s Bloomsbury or Stratford campus. In contrast, Open University students’ 15 credit Openings course was ‘distance’ learning, all materials were provided to the student in advance and they could study at their own pace. Students were given telephone support from a module tutor and offered five study skills sessions and weekly peer and tutor support sessions at the Children’s Centre.

The inclusive pedagogic approaches to learning and teaching adopted by both universities, sought to: enable learners to reflect on and move forward from what often had been less-than-positive earlier educational experiences; help them re-engage with the learning process; and encourage and enable them to use their personal experience and those of others in theoretical and analytical ways. The approaches were characterised as critically reflective and inquiry-led active learning, and recognised that learning is an emotional as well as an intellectual activity, all of which were considered essential for widening participation and for creating inclusive learning opportunities.

The vast majority of course participants surveyed reported that they had had extremely positive teaching and learning experiences (93%), particularly in terms of the quality of their course (90%) and the learning support (88%) and feedback (87%) they received from staff. The biggest challenges they faced, especially lone parents, was juggling their studies with the rest of their life (87%) because they were busy at home (75%) and had inadequate support at home (50%). Participants interviewed in-depth, also talked about the challenges of learning how to study and learning about what was expected of them.

Widening Participation: The Outcomes and Impact of the Courses - key findings

Impact of the course on the participants

The pedagogical approaches adopted by the courses were effective in meeting the planned learning outcomes. The majority of course participants surveyed thought that their skills had developed ‘a lot’, especially, their ability to think about their own learning (83%); their knowledge about a particular subject (80%); analysing and respecting people’s different views and perspectives (76%); and improved writing skills (75%). And 79 per cent claimed that they had been able to use what they had learnt on their course in their daily life.

Eighty-seven per cent of the Birkbeck course participants surveyed completed the modules they started at the Children's Centre, compared with 56 per cent of OU students - a finding broadly in line with other OU studies. The different completion rates may relate to diverse recruitment practices. OU courses were open access, any student could enrol. In contrast, Birkbeck courses were more selective although still admitted students who might struggle to complete the course successfully but who had the potential to gain much from it. The main reasons students did not complete their course were associated with personal and domestic problems, especially their ill health or health problems with a family member, particularly for those with a disabled child and who were lone parents.

As significant for course participants were the wider benefits of learning which were a testament to these courses' success. Eighty-eight per cent of the course participants surveyed believed that as a result of the course, they realised they could get a higher education qualification, while 87 per cent said they enjoyed learning more. The courses had increased the women's confidence in their capability of gaining a degree, which was the main aim of both the Birkbeck and OU programmes.

In addition, the vast majority of respondents thought that as a direct result of their course they were more self-confident (83%); felt more positive about their future (76%); were more interested in the world around them (70%); and had better life opportunities (60%). So the course had helped to raise their aspirations. When these outcomes are compared with the women's motivations for studying, we see that the courses largely fulfilled the participants' key reasons for taking them.

The in-depth interviews with the course participants (and the programme directors, lecturers and Children's Centre staff) reiterated these impacts and suggested how the courses had led to a strong sense of achievement and opened up new opportunities while raising the women's personal ambitions. The women felt more self-confident, had developed a stronger sense of themselves, had improved their parenting skills, and they had gained new friendships and support networks furthering social cohesion and their social capital.

A key perceived benefit of this programme was the way the women felt they were encouraged to develop critical thinking, drawing on and extending their own experiences, and challenging different perspectives about the world around them in a range of contexts. The women's study experiences were transformative - their studies had changed the way they understood their world in a way that could not be reversed or forgotten. They were more critical about the world around them, more tolerant and respectful of diverse opinions, and had developed ways of debating them. Some engaged in new activities, they had started reading broadsheet newspapers and books, going to the theatre, going to the opera, watching foreign language films, and one got rid of their television.

The courses had whetted the participants' appetite for further study too. Two out of five survey participants engaged in further study after they had finished studying at the Children's Centre. Over three-quarters said they intended to take another course within the next three years, especially those from poor households, suggesting that for this group of students the decision to progress may need to be part of longer term planning.

The courses did not have an immediate reported impact on the labour market activities of the course participants surveyed but many (41%) had children aged five or under when they started their course and a number of women were intending to have other children in the foreseeable future. However, 72 per cent of course participants surveyed planned to get a job or another job in the next three years, especially those studying at Birkbeck.

Impact of the course on participants' children and family

The women had surmounted significant obstacles to participate and succeed on these courses. They had overcome: a lack of time, space, and 'permission' to study; little support at home; and very demanding caring responsibilities, which sometimes included looking after elderly relatives as well as

young children. These domestic constraints and other pressures highlight how there were wider issues for these women about accessing higher education and escaping poverty which were not simply dealt with by providing free courses in low-income communities.

The mothers drew attention to how their attitudes to and behaviour with their children, including their approach to parenting, and their aspirations for their children had changed because of the courses. Significantly, 84 per cent of the course participants surveyed believed that as a result of their course they had higher educational aspirations for their children, a half reported that their children were more interested in learning, and a similar proportion thought that their relationship with their children had improved.

In the interviews with course participants, the women talked about how they felt about themselves had changed as a result of the course, which they believed also benefited their children - they were calmer, more patient, and more knowledgeable, while their understanding of their children increased. So the courses had increased the mothers' ability to manage their children's behaviour, communicate with them and support their learning at home more effectively. Many participants helped their children with their school work with far greater confidence, and the visible effort that parents put into studying made them a role model for studying for their school age children. In other words, their parenting skills had improved.

The impact of the course on the women's relationship with their partners was less positive, with the women surveyed most often reporting that their relationship had deteriorated in some way – a finding evidenced in other studies.

Implications for widening participation policies: two for the price of one

There was very clear evidence of the benefits of these courses for the mothers and their families,⁴ echoing the findings from other larger studies on the wider benefits of both adult learning (Dolan et al, 2012) and family learning programmes (Cara and Brooks, 2012). According to the course participants and the staff interviewed, these courses were really valuable to the women in their own right. As a direct result of the course the mothers also had reaped some of the wider benefits of adult learning which also impacted on their children's approaches to learning. For most women, their experiences and taste of higher education were transformational. The courses had enhanced the mothers' wellbeing and their human, cultural and social capital, contributing to societal, individual, and education gains.

This study highlights some of the limitations of dominant discourses and theoretical understandings of widening participation and social mobility, including seeing widening participation as just about raising aspirations and overcoming barriers. The issues many of the women in this study faced reflected more deep seated social, economic, and political forces and factors underpinning educational inequalities and 'disadvantage'. The study also illustrates some of the shortcomings of widening participation policies informed by the ideas of raising aspirations and lifting barriers. Such policies focus on outreach, information, advice and guidance, flexible provision, and enhanced student support as mechanisms for encouraging 'under-represented groups' to enter higher education, as encapsulated in the Office for Fair Access and the Higher Education Funding Council for England's recent *National strategy for access and student success in higher education* (BIS, 2014). These policies often assume that if barriers are lifted and aspirations raised, then participation can be widened. And they frequently adopt an individualised deficit model – blaming the victim for not participating or not completing their course. Some policies recognise the need to start early and to engage young people at different stages of their educational careers. Indeed, of late there have been initiatives aimed at primary school children, as well as work with young people in colleges and secondary schools. Reaching mature aged potential students through outreach activities is much more problematic and

⁴ Like most evaluations of this kind, in our study there was no control or comparator group which challenges the extent to which causality can be attributed.

cross-sector and inter-sector partnerships are seen as a way of overcoming these issues. Flexible and part-time provision is similarly seen as a mechanism for widening participation, especially for those with family and/or work commitments. In many ways this type of thinking underpinned elements of both Birkbeck and the OU's courses run at Children's Centres while recognising the limitations informing these dominant strategies for widening access to higher education.

Other research on higher education participation and social mobility stresses that the main determinant of participation is educational attainment, and that social class differences in attainment are formed early in children's lives, leading commentators to suggest greater investment in early years education, and by implication a more constrained role for higher education in directly influencing widening participation (Vignoles, 2013). It is well established that children growing up in poorer families leave school with substantially lower levels of educational attainment and are less likely than their more privileged peers to participate in post-compulsory education. Such 'achievement gaps' are a major contributing factor to patterns of social mobility, poverty and inequality. These educational deficits emerge early in children's lives, even before they start school, and widen throughout childhood.

Research suggests that the aspirations, attitudes, and behaviour of parents and children potentially play an important part in explaining why poor children typically do worse at school (Goodman and Gregg, 2010). Other research suggests that it is not possible to establish a clear causal relationship between aspirations, attitudes and behaviour and educational outcomes in part because of the poor evidence base (Gorard, *et al*, 2012). However, interventions focused on parental involvement in children's education, especially their early education, have demonstrated evidence of impact on raising attainment (Cater-Wall and Whitfield, 2012). The two major areas of policy and practice identified as potentially making a contribution to reducing educational inequalities are firstly, parents and the family home - improving the home learning environment and helping parents from poorer families to believe that their own actions and efforts can lead to improved outcomes, and secondly, children's attitudes and behaviours - raising families' aspirations, reducing children's behavioural problems and engagement in risky behaviours, and helping poorer children believe that their own actions and efforts can lead to improved outcomes (Goodman and Gregg, 2010). In particular, interventions related to the following are likely to influence children's school readiness and subsequent attainment: improving at home parenting; involving parents in school; engaging parents in their children's learning and in their own learning; and aligning school-home expectations (Cater-Wall and Whitfield, 2012). These findings are largely confirmed by yet further research. For instance, Waldfogel and Washbrook (2010) confirm that parenting and home environment are important contributors to income-related gaps in the cognitive development of 5 year olds, and that parenting consistently emerges as the single most important factor in gaps in school readiness. They illustrate the effectiveness of parenting programmes in improving parenting and school readiness, and discuss the positive role of early childhood education programmes too, particularly for 'disadvantaged' children. However, poverty matters too. Underpinning the achievement gaps at school entry is both parenting and poverty.

Other research focuses on the intergenerational transmission of skills. It discusses the widespread evidence of a strong correlation between a variety of parent and child outcomes in the UK, including income, education, social class, cognitive ability and basic skills. In so far as there is a causal relationship between these outcomes, interventions that improve parents' skills are likely to have a positive impact on the outcomes of their children (Crawford, *et al* 2011). Other studies (Harkness, *et al* 2012) highlight how the level of education of the mother has significant effects on child outcomes and attainment. This type of research, and evidence from earlier programmes like Head Start and the Perry Pre-School Programme in the United States, informed the development of the Sure Start programme and Children's Centres and their efforts to tackle child poverty and inequality.

In practice, the policy discourse and critiques regarding widening participation and social mobility, with a few exceptions, have been divorced from the policy discourse around early years' education, Sure Start and Children's Centres, and reducing child poverty and inequality. Responsibility for these

two policy arenas lie in different government departments, reflecting the silo nature and mentality of the Welfare State. This study and the courses Birkbeck and the OU provided in the Children's Centres, help bring together these discourses and the thinking underpinning them. In a sense, both Birkbeck and the Open University acted as a bridge between these two interconnected, but often separate, policy domains.

The findings from this study suggest that the women believe that their participation in these courses had had a significant impact on their feelings about the higher education environment and whether they considered it was a context suited to, and open to, them and their children. The findings indicate that the courses contributed to making higher education seem to be a place where those from less privileged backgrounds could participate, contribute to and enjoy learning, and engage in the different perspectives and criticality that it introduced. Yet widening participation strategies and policies, such as those outlined in the *National strategy for access and student success in higher education* (BIS, 2014), largely ignore such dynamics.

Moreover, the findings from this study suggest that the provision of adult learning opportunities tailored to meet the needs of those traditionally excluded from higher education opportunities are a valuable widening participation strategy. They are of equal potential value for future generations of children from low-income families, if not more so, than projects aimed at raising the aspirations of high-achieving primary and secondary school children.

Through the courses' carefully crafted curricula, pedagogic approaches and their location in community settings working alongside dynamic partners and other community groups, higher education, and the Birkbeck and the Open University courses in particular, were showing their readiness to be inclusive in their practices – to meet and work with the needs and interests of those from 'disadvantaged' backgrounds rather than simply aiming to raise aspirations to join an unchanging institution and higher education environment.

This shift in the mothers' thinking about higher education that they previously had thought of as 'not for the likes of them and their children' contributed to raising their personal aspirations and those of their children. Responsibility for a lack of aspiration lay not with women themselves, but with higher education institutions and the constraints within which they are presently working in the current policy context.

Our study also suggests the mothers' attitudes to parenting, as discussed in the literature above, did improve as a result of their involvement in the Birkbeck and OU courses, and many 'parenting skills' also were encapsulated in the course curriculum, and the more general demands of the course. The mother's involvement in the courses reportedly contributed to an improved home learning environment and more activities in the home conducive to learning, all of which benefited their children. Many mothers also acted as educational role models for their children.

The research showed significant changes in mothers' thinking about their own potential and their own identities in relation to university study and the potential of their children as a result of their taking part in these very particular kinds of courses. Both the mothers and their children benefitted – the policy benefits were 'two for the price of one'.

Since this study was undertaken, Birkbeck failed to recruit any students in 2013/14, while the OU has closed down their courses. These courses are casualties of the 2012/13 reforms of higher education and subsequent policy changes. In Birkbeck's case, its failure to recruit is primarily linked to higher tuition fees, the move from tuition fee grants for part-time students to student loans, and the ending of National Scholarship Programme⁵ for undergraduates. Tuition fees for these courses have trebled since 2012/13. Before 2012/13, a low-income student would have got a grant to cover all their tuition

⁵ The programme provides additional financial support to help individual students from low-income backgrounds as they enter higher education

fees, now they have to take out a student loan instead which are unattractive to many potential students (Callender, 2013). Yet, Birkbeck remains committed to these courses.

The closure of the OU's courses is associated with the shifts in institutional priorities and organisational cultures, and with them different understandings of success, arising from the 2012/13 higher education reforms. Cuts in the Student opportunity allocation⁶ and the need to demonstrate its impact, as well as issues related to student funding, all contributed to the demise of the OU courses at Children's Centres

The wider social contexts of low-income women's lives still frequently make it difficult for them to participate fully in higher education. That said, the decline of this kind of community-based higher education collaboration is enormously regrettable if what is meant by widening participation or widening access is the creation of a more inclusive higher education environment and participation in subsequent opportunities that can arise as a result of a transformational higher education experience.

About the Nuffield Foundation

The Nuffield Foundation is an endowed charitable trust that aims to improve social well-being in the widest sense. It funds research and innovation in education and social policy and also works to build capacity in education, science and social science research. The Nuffield Foundation has funded this project, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation. More information is available at www.nuffieldfoundation.org



⁶ These funds, provided by HEFCE, recognise the additional costs of recruiting and supporting students in three main areas: students from 'disadvantaged' backgrounds; students with disabilities; and work to retain students who may be less likely to continue their studies.

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