

University is Not Just for Young People

Emma Pollard

Senior Research Fellow
Institute for Employment Studies (IES)
Mantell Building
University of Sussex Campus
Brighton BN1 9RF
UK

Abstract

What do adults think of HE? Is it relevant to them and their careers? Do they aspire to HE? Are they aware of HE and the options available? And could, and indeed should, they be encouraged to consider HE?

To answer these questions, DIUS commissioned IES to undertake an exploratory piece of research to help them to a) better understand adults' perceptions of and orientations to HE, and b) help them find ways to engage and motivate learning essentially to encourage greater participation in HE. This paper outlines the research approach, the inherent challenges, and the research findings.

This paper was prepared for the Participation Research Group, University of Southampton.

August 2008
ISBN: 9 781 85184 400 5
IES Working Paper: WP16

ies

Introduction

There is a dual government agenda to a) improve the UK's global competitiveness and meet the economy's projected skills needs, and b) improve social inclusion and deliver social justice. This agenda is driving the government's stated desire for greater and wider participation in HE.

Britain's higher education is a major contributor to the economic success and social well being of the country. Higher education is a national asset, whose excellence in teaching and research is world recognised. Better educated and more highly skilled people are more likely to be in work, earn more and contribute more productively to our economy and society. Knowledge and skills provide people with their surest way into work and prosperity, helping eradicate the causes of poverty and division.

DIUS website, June 2008, www.dius.gov.uk/policy/highereducation.html

Increasing and broadening participation lies at the heart of the government policy papers 'The Future of Higher Education' and 'Widening Participation in Higher Education' published in 2003, and has been encapsulated more recently in the government's response to the Leitch Review of Skills 'World Class Skills: Implementing the Leitch Review of Skills in England' (2007), and in the latest strategic consultation launched in April this year by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS).

High level skills – the skills associated with higher education – are good for the individuals who acquire them and good for the economy. They help individuals unlock their talent and aspire to change their life for the better. They help businesses and public services innovate and prosper. They help towns and cities thrive by creating jobs, helping businesses become more competitive and driving economic regeneration. High level skills add value for all of us.

Foreword to Higher Education at Work – High Skills: High Value, DIUS, 2008

The government has a target 'to increase participation in higher education *towards*' 50 per cent of 18 to 30 year olds by 2010, and this has been in place for some time. Participation amongst young people has been rising and moving towards government targets. It was at its highest in 2005/06 at 42 per cent, prior to the introduction of variable tuition fees, and currently stands at 40 per cent. However, this target focuses on young people, and tends to prioritise first degrees and traditional undergraduate study.

Through the work of the Skills Review¹ there is now an acknowledgement that relying on the flow of young people through the education system is not sufficient for the

¹ HM Treasury (2006), *Prosperity for All in the Global Economy – World Class Skills*; and HM Treasury (2005), *Skills in the UK – The Long Term Challenge*

country to meet its ambition to become a world leader in skills by 2020, as 70 per cent of the 2020 workforce is already beyond the age of compulsory education and there is a declining 18 to 20 year old population. HE needs to be widened to encompass the whole working age population. To this end, the government has set a new target to exceed 40 per cent of the working age population (not just the workforce) that are qualified to level 4, that is to HE level, by 2020; with an interim target of 34 per cent by 2011. In addition, to stimulate demand within the workforce, a key policy for government is employer engagement in HE. The ethos behind this is that by incentivising and funding HE provision that is partly or wholly designed, funded or provided by employers, employers and employees will collaborate to raise their skills for the future.

Recent decades have seen a steady rise in numbers of mature students, and in 2006/07 over half (55 per cent²) of new entrants to HE were over 21 years old – although mature students still tend to be concentrated in full-time other undergraduate level study (such as HNC, HND and more recently Foundation Degree study) and in part-time study. The most recent figures show that while 21 per cent of new entrants to full-time first degrees were aged over 21 years, 55.4 per cent of entrants to full-time other undergraduate degrees and 92.5 per cent of entrants to part-time first degrees were over 21 (including 59 per cent who were at least 30 years old). Yet only 31 per cent of adults currently have a qualification of level 4 or above. So, despite these encouraging figures, continued and faster growth is required to meet the government's targets.

Also, to cope with the anticipated growth in volume it is recognised that the HE sector needs to rebalance its priorities to offer new types of provision that will meet the needs of learners and their employers. University should not just be for young people, and the Skills Review recommends a new offer for adults to encourage them to learn. This involves raising aspirations and awareness, enabling people to make informed choices from a wider set of options, and providing targeted financial support.

BUT what do adults think of HE? Is it relevant to them and their careers? Do they aspire to HE? Are they aware of HE and the options available? And could, and indeed should, they be encouraged to consider HE?

To answer these questions, DIUS commissioned IES to undertake an exploratory piece of research to help them to better understand adults' perceptions of and orientations to HE, and to help them find ways to engage and motivate learning essentially to encourage greater participation in HE. This paper outlines the research approach, the inherent challenges, and the research findings.

² Higher Education Statistics Agency (2007), *Students in Higher Education Institutions 2006/07*

Methodology

The research involved a 20 minute computer assisted telephone interview (CATI) that was undertaken by BMRB on behalf of IES between May and July 2007 to a sample of 1,401 adults.

The research was targeted towards those adults who were active in the labour market, that is working adults both employed and self-employed and also those unemployed but actively seeking work. Those further from the labour market, for example women looking after children, are an interesting group of potential HE entrants as education can be used as a way back to the labour market, but they fall beyond the scope of this research. The survey was also confined to England, as the study was funded by DIUS, and 'adult' was defined as an individual between the ages of 22 and 55 (inclusive). A series of non interlocking quotas were set using the Labour Force Survey covering age, gender, ethnic origin and region to ensure that the responding sample would broadly represent the adult working population, and that the survey results would provide a good indicative base for perceptions about HE for all working adults.

The aim of the study was to capture the views and plans of potential higher education entrants; 'potential' was somewhat challenging to define given the variety of levels of study on offer and access routes to higher education (including Accreditation of Prior and Experiential Learning). In discussion with the Department it was decided to extend eligibility to include those with any level qualification up to level 4 or indeed no formal qualifications – so potential was defined very broadly. However, it was decided to exclude those already formally qualified to level 4 given the government focus on 'firstness' embodied in the ELQ (equivalent or lower qualification) policy, and so the research excluded adults potentially returning to HE to complete a second undergraduate or a post-graduate qualification. Overall, this makes the research somewhat unique. The research focuses on those who could go to university but are not already there, whereas most research on adults either focuses more widely on learning, paying little attention to HE, or focuses on HE but takes as its subjects individuals applying to or studying at university (ie those already there). This focus, however, also creates challenges in identifying and reaching the target group of adults as they form part of the wider workforce, and as such are not a known and easily contactable group.

A 'directory plus n' method of generating telephone numbers was therefore used to develop the sample. It represented the most cost effective method to reach the wider workforce and to introduce a degree of randomness. This method takes known numbers from directories and changes the last one or two digits to random other digits. This creates new numbers which have a high probability of being 'live' numbers although it can under-represent ex-directory numbers and does not satisfy true random probability sampling (as not all households have a known and non-zero chance of selection). Eligibility screening questions were then used to ensure only the

target group was surveyed and to fill the quotas outlined above, and data were also collected to take account of the probability of selection within households.

With the support of a steering group and a panel of experts (researchers and practitioners), the survey was designed to ensure the questions would be of relevance to all respondents, not just those who might consider HE. Careful thought was given to the introduction and the flow of questions so as to maintain interest and not alienate respondents, which could affect their willingness to take part and affect their answers. The survey started with background (and eligibility) questions, moved through questions about learning experiences, current labour market status, work experience and further plans, and then led on to questions focused on HE, and finished with questions designed to collect personal details to allow for sub-groups of respondents of particular interest to the Department to be identified in the analysis (eg older adults and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds). Questions captured data on the factors identified in research literature to be associated with participation/non-participation: socio-economic background, prior learning experiences and attainment – contributing to a ‘learner identity’ (Gorard, 2006; Smith, 2005; Bowl, 2003; McGivney, 1996); the make-up of social and cultural networks (Fuller et al., 2006/08); caring and family responsibilities (McGivney, 1996; Carroll and Jones, 2007); aspects relating to actual and anticipated work and life transitions such as career change or redundancy (Smith, 2005; Fuller, 2006); perceptions around the need for skills and qualifications (Davies et al., 2001); and perceived financial well-being and attitudes to debt (Gorard, 2006).

The responding sample

Some quota cells proved hard to fill, and the responding sample had fewer males, younger respondents, individuals from black backgrounds, and those from the South East. This was corrected for with weighting prior to the analysis. After weighting the sample broadly reflected the working adult population (as defined by the eligibility criteria): just under half were women (45 per cent), nine per cent were from a black and minority ethnic background, and just under half were mid-career (aged between 31 to 44, 45 per cent). In addition, almost three-quarters (70 per cent) were married or living with a partner, just over half (54 per cent) had financially dependent children living with them, and the vast majority were home owners (73 per cent). Using occupation as a proxy for socio-economic background, 43 per cent were from lower socio-economic backgrounds (lower technical, semi-routine, routine and manual occupations).

Table 1: Personal background of the responding sample

	Frequency	%
<i>Sex</i>		
Male	771	55.5
Female	630	45.0
<i>Age Group</i>		
22-30	322	23.0
31-44	630	45.0
45-55	448	32.0
<i>Ethnicity</i>		
White	1,262	91.0
Black	70	5.1
Asian	42	3.0
Other	13	0.9
<i>Disability</i>		
	59	4.2
<i>Family make-up</i>		
Married/living with partner (no children)	357	25.6
Married/living with partner (with children)	619	44.4
Single/divorced (no children)	288	20.7
Single parent	129	9.3
<i>Housing tenure</i>		
Own home outright	195	14.2
Own home mortgage	803	58.5
Rent/part rent (private landlord)	186	13.5
Rent/part rent (social housing)	188	13.7

Base: All

Source: PHEES Strand 2 survey, IES/BMRB, 2007

Most respondents (93 per cent) were employed at the time of the survey, commonly in full-time employment, but seven per cent were unemployed and looking for work. The employment activity and sector profile of respondents corresponded closely with figures from the LFS, although there was a slight over representation of public sector workers. They appeared to value their work experience in the labour market over their qualifications, as respondents tended to feel it was their work experience and their skills and competencies that were important in securing their jobs rather than their qualifications. Respondents tended to be satisfied with their jobs, particularly with the work itself, followed by opportunities for training and development, and then pay. They were least satisfied with opportunities for advancement and promotion. Despite high levels of satisfaction, most individuals (with the exception of the self employed) anticipated and were confident of making some change over the following five years, most commonly anticipating doing a higher level job. Only one-third (34 per cent) of employees expected to be in same job with same employer.

Table 2: Employment characteristics of the responding sample

	Frequency	%
<i>Employment status</i>		
Full-time employee	881	62.9
Part-time employee	283	20.2
Self employed	134	9.6
Unemployed and available for work	97	6.9
Other (but currently in paid work)	5	0.3
<i>Socio-economic background</i>		
Higher managerial/large employers	99	7.1
Higher professional	49	3.5
Lower managerial and professional/higher technical and supervisory	260	18.9
Intermediate	263	19.0
Small employers	111	8.1
Lower technical and supervisory	93	6.7
Semi-routine	338	24.4
Routine	150	10.8
Never worked/LT unemployed	18	1.3

Base: All

Source: PHEES Strand 2 survey, IES/BMRB, 2007

The majority of respondents had left school before the age of 19 (87 per cent) and this was reflected in their attainment levels. Over half (55 per cent) left with a qualification below level 2, 27 per cent left with a level 2 qualification, and 19 per cent had a level 3 qualification – the level traditionally associated with HE entry. Although just over one-third (37 per cent) had positive feelings about school, respondents tended to have mixed feelings about their time in compulsory education and feel their performance was average (45 per cent and 57 per cent respectively), and these subjective ratings of compulsory schooling were linked to attainment levels.

Despite cool attitudes towards school, most respondents (80 per cent) had engaged in some form of organised training or learning since leaving school and were positive about this experience, particularly in terms of the benefits related to their current work. The additional learning undertaken appeared to have translated into improved qualification levels (although it should be noted that measuring qualification levels through survey data is notoriously difficult). At the time of the survey 30 per cent had achieved a level 3 qualification, up by 11 percentage points, however 11 per cent still had no formal qualifications. In general, respondents had positive attitudes towards learning which reflects their engagement with further learning: 92 per cent agreed that ‘learning about new things is enjoyable’ and 75 per cent agreed with the statement ‘I see paying for your own learning as an investment’. Slightly fewer (65 per cent) however agreed that ‘you need qualifications to get anywhere these days’ and 27 per cent disagreed with this statement.

Key findings

Positive attitudes to HE

Attitudes to HE were measured using eight statements (both positively and negatively worded) and a five point Likert scale. Respondents were asked to say whether they agreed, strongly agreed, disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statements, they could also give a neutral response but few did so – generally respondents had an opinion.

Attitudes to HE were positive, which was greater than expected and perhaps represents a change in recent decades, and attitudes were generally positive across all groups of respondents. University was seen as being open to all: 83 per cent agreed it is not just for young people, 72 per cent agreed people like me do go to university, and 55 per cent agreed going to university is something that everyone should consider. However, there was lower agreement with these statements amongst male respondents and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds – groups of particular concern to the HE sector. University was also seen as relevant and accessible: 71 per cent agreed university is not irrelevant once you have got a job, and 48 per cent agreed that getting into university is not difficult. However, there were some concerns about getting in, 36 per cent perceived it difficult to get in, again particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and also those with limited experience of HE and with lower level qualifications.

Table 3: Attitudes towards HE

	Strongly agree %	Agree %	Neither %	Disagree %	Strongly disagree %	Total N
University is not just for young people*	53.0	29.7	5.6	8.1	3.5	1,399
Best jobs go to people who have been to university	15.8	19.2	8.8	29.8	26.3	1,387
People who go to university do not end up with heavy debts*	5.5	12.8	10.1	29.5	42.1	1,340
Getting into university is not difficult*	17.7	30.2	16.3	22.2	13.6	1,238
Going to university is worth the cost*	31.7	36.2	12.0	12.5	7.6	1,330
Going to university is something everyone should consider doing	29.1	25.6	11.1	20.3	13.9	1,381
People like me do go to university*	44.7	26.9	8.9	9.9	9.5	1,363
Going to university does not become irrelevant once you have got a job*	28.8	41.7	8.4	14.1	7.0	1,366

Base: All (excludes 'Don't know')

Note: * these statements have been reversed, so that all agreements are associated with positive attitudes to HE, and disagreements are associated with negative attitudes to HE

Source: PHEES Strand 2 survey, IES/BMRB, 2007

Going to university was not really seen as a passport to the best jobs: 56 per cent felt the best jobs don't go to those who have been to university and this fits with the general perception that work experience, skills and competencies are more valued than qualifications in the labour market. University was also linked with debt, but considered to be worth the costs: 72 per cent felt that people who go to university end up with heavy debts, and 68 per cent felt going to university is worth the cost. This attitude is perhaps a reflection of respondents' generally positive attitudes to debt, tending to consider borrowing money as a normal part of today's lifestyle and, as outlined earlier, their positive attitudes to investing in learning. There were greater concerns about the costs and value aspects of HE amongst women, those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds and those from the mid socio-economic group.

These results suggest that working adults are positively disposed towards HE, but those from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely than others to think HE is not for the likes of them and that it is difficult to access. However, multi-variate analysis using ordinal logistic regression indicates that the strongest influence on attitudes is family and peer group experience of HE.

Potential limited awareness

Respondents were asked to report how well informed they felt they were about aspects of HE, and generally respondents felt they had some knowledge about the opportunities available in HE, that is the types of qualification, subjects, places and ways you can study (58 per cent of all respondents, and 60 per cent of those considering going to HE felt informed). They were slightly less confident about their knowledge around accessing HE, with 47 per cent of all respondents and 50 per cent of those considering going to HE reporting they felt informed about the entry qualifications required. However, perceived awareness of costs and of the financial support available in HE was low: 44 per cent of those considering going to HE felt they were aware of the costs and 28 per cent felt they were aware of the financial support available. Lower perceived awareness or knowledge about costs and financial support was linked to greater concerns about the financial issues of HE participation.

Although respondents generally felt they knew about HE in terms of what it has to offer, 65 per cent said they had not actually looked for information about HE, either for themselves or for someone else in their family. This perhaps raises the question as to whether respondents were really aware of all the options. The perception they have may be based on outdated information as HE has changed considerably over the past decade and continues to change. Where respondents had looked for information, key sources were the internet and educational establishments, particularly universities, colleges and schools. These were also cited by those who hadn't actively sought information as key potential sources of information and advice about HE, so would appear to be key conduits for messages about HE. Few used or said they would use a careers adviser or a telephone helpline such as learndirect, and similarly employers were not really regarded as a source of information or advice about HE.

Table 4: Summary of ordinal logistic regression models of perceptions of HE

Perception	Only for the young	Best jobs go to grads	End up in heavy debt	Difficult to get in	Not worth the cost	All should consider it	Likes of me don't go	Not relevn't if you've a job
Independent variable								
Age								
Age squared								
Sex (Male=1)	-ve	-ve	+ve				-ve	
Ethnicity: black								
Ethnicity: Asian						-ve		-ve
Ethnicity: other						-ve		
Disability (yes=1)								
Dependent children					+ve			+ve
Living with parents				-ve		-ve		+ve
Living with partner								
FT employee								
PT employee			-ve		-ve			
Self-employed								
Tenure: outright	-ve							
Tenure: mortgage	-ve						+ve	
Tenure: priv't rental								
Highest qual: Level 3				+ve			+ve	
Highest qual: Level 2								
Highest qual: Level 1								
Friends in HE: few	+ve			+ve			+ve	
Frnds in HE: several	+ve			+ve			+ve	+ve
Frnds in HE: most	+ve	-ve		+ve	+ve		+ve	+ve
Parents in HE							+ve	
Sibling / university (yes=1)		-ve				-ve	+ve	+ve
Experience of school: positive					+ve		+ve	+ve
Experience of school: negative							-ve	
Region: Midlands and East of England								
Region: North of England								
Occupational group: manager and prof				+ve			+ve	
Occupational group: intermediate				+ve	-ve			

In the models here, one category of each of the independent variables is chosen as the reference category (for example, in the case of sex, the reference category is female, in the case of qualifications, the reference category is having no qualifications *etc.*). A positive sign indicates that the variable in question increases the propensity for an individual to disagree with the statement compared with the reference category; a negative sign indicates that the variable increases the propensity for an individual to agree with the statement compared with the reference category.

Notes: Reference categories are: sex (female); ethnicity (white); disability (non-disabled); dependent children (none); cohabiting (single); employment status (unemployed); tenure (social rental); highest qualifications (none); Friends in HE (none); parents in HE (no); sibling / university (no); experience of school (mixed/ neutral); region (south of England) and occupational group (routine)

Source: PHEES Strand 2 survey, IES/BMRB, 2007

Table 5: How well respondents felt informed about aspects of HE

Informed about	Very well %	Fairly well %	Not very %	Not at all %	Total (N)
Opportunities available	14.8	42.8	29.3	13.1	1,365
Entry qualifications required	10.1	37.4	35.5	17.0	1,334
Those considering HE only					
Opportunities available	17.3	42.9	28.8	11.0	412
Entry qualifications required	12.9	36.6	35.5	14.7	411
Costs of HE	11.7	31.7	36.5	20.2	411
Financial support available to adults	5.8	22.3	40.5	31.4	408

Source: PHEES Strand 2 Survey, IES/BMRB, 2007

University seen as something they could or would consider

Although the respondents had not been to university (by nature of their eligibility for the survey), some had seriously thought about applying to university in the past: 18 per cent had considered it at the time of leaving their continuous full-time education, a key decision making point, and 24 per cent had considered applying at some point in their career/lives since then. When asked about their thoughts on going to university in the future, 30 per cent said they would consider it, of which 6 per cent were already considering it, 5 per cent would definitely consider it, and a further 19 per cent would probably consider it. Going to university is seen as something the respondents would or could consider for the future.

Bi-variate analysis techniques such as cross tabulations and chi-squared tests, and multivariate analysis techniques such as logistic regression modelling were used to explore which groups would be most likely to consider HE in the future. Taking into account a range of attitudes, education, employment and personal background characteristics, propensity to consider HE in the future was found to be associated with:

- attitudes or perceptions of HE – those who agreed with the following statements were more likely to consider HE in the future: university is not only for young people, people like me do go to university, going to university is something everyone should consider doing, going to university is not irrelevant once you have got a job, and the best jobs go to people who have been to university
- experience of HE – those who said most of their friends had been to university were more likely to consider HE in the future, as were those with a parent who had experience of HE
- subject assessment of schooling – those who had a negative experience of school and those who felt they had done poorly at school were more likely to consider HE in the future than those who were neutral about the experience or felt they were an average performer
- background – those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds were more likely to consider HE in the future, as were disabled individuals

- living circumstances – those living with their parents were more likely to consider HE in the future than those living alone, and those who did not own their own houses were also more likely to consider HE in the future.

In addition, the bi-variate analysis indicated that those who had previously considered HE, who were experiencing financial difficulties or were unemployed were also more likely to consider HE for the future, however these were not tested in the regression model.

Table 6: Logistic regression model of the propensity of respondents to consider entering HE in the future (model excluding HE perception indicators)

HEint	Odds Ratio	Std. Err	. z	P> z	[95% Con	f. Interval]
Age	0.964	0.073	-0.490	0.627	0.831	1.118
Age squared	1.000	0.001	-0.150	0.884	0.998	1.002
Sex (Male=1)	0.847	0.141	-1.000	0.318	0.610	1.174
Ethnicity: Black	6.395	2.898	4.090	0.000	2.631	15.543
Ethnicity: Asian	5.668	2.440	4.030	0.000	2.438	13.176
Ethnicity: Other	3.530	1.298	3.430	0.001	1.718	7.256
Disability (yes=1)	2.011	0.626	2.250	0.025	1.093	3.701
dependent children (yes=1)	1.183	0.207	0.960	0.337	0.839	1.668
Cohabiting: living with parents	2.112	0.773	2.040	0.041	1.031	4.326
Cohabiting: living with partner	0.903	0.162	-0.570	0.570	0.636	1.283
Employment status: FT employee	0.937	0.256	-0.240	0.811	0.548	1.602
Employment status: PT employee	0.688	0.217	-1.180	0.236	0.370	1.277
Employment status: self-employed	0.552	0.207	-1.590	0.113	0.265	1.150
Tenure: outright	0.277	0.088	-4.040	0.000	0.149	0.517
Tenure: mortgage	0.545	0.122	-2.720	0.007	0.352	0.844
Tenure: private rental	1.060	0.294	0.210	0.834	0.615	1.826
Tenure: don't know	0.505	0.265	-1.300	0.194	0.180	1.415
Highest qualification: Level 3	1.590	0.470	1.570	0.116	0.891	2.837
Highest qualification: Level 2	1.292	0.379	0.870	0.383	0.727	2.297
Highest qualification: Level 1	1.271	0.364	0.840	0.402	0.726	2.227
Friends / university: few	1.349	0.261	1.550	0.122	0.923	1.971
Friends / university: several	1.331	0.307	1.240	0.215	0.847	2.091
Friends / university: most	1.900	0.468	2.610	0.009	1.172	3.079
Parents / university (yes=1)	2.513	0.761	3.040	0.002	1.388	4.550
Sibling / university (yes=1)	1.091	0.184	0.520	0.606	0.784	1.518
Experience of school: positive	0.818	0.149	-1.100	0.270	0.573	1.168
Experience of school: negative	1.505	0.298	2.070	0.039	1.022	2.218
Region: Midlands and East of Eng	0.758	0.135	-1.560	0.119	0.535	1.074
Region: North of England	0.785	0.149	-1.270	0.203	0.540	1.140
Social class: manager and prof	0.997	0.186	-0.020	0.988	0.692	1.437
Social class: intermediate	0.961	0.186	-0.210	0.837	0.658	1.403
Performance at school = good	1.490	0.263	2.260	0.024	1.054	2.107
Performance at school = poor	1.347	0.295	1.360	0.174	0.877	2.069

Notes: Reference categories are: sex (female); ethnicity (white); disability (non-disabled); dependent children (none); cohabiting (single); employment status (unemployed); tenure (social rental); highest qualifications (none); friends in HE (none); parents in HE (no); sibling / university (no); experience of school (mixed/ neutral); region (south of England), occupational group (routine), assessment of school performance (average)

Source: PHEES Strand 2 survey, IES/BMRB, 2007

Table 7: Logistic regression model of the propensity of respondents to consider entering HE in the future (model including HE perception indicators)

HEint	Odds Ratio	Std. Err	. z	P> z	[95% Con	f. Interval]
Age	0.956	0.075	-0.570	0.567	0.820	1.115
Age squared	1.000	0.001	-0.170	0.868	0.998	1.002
Sex (Male=1)	0.869	0.151	-0.810	0.421	0.618	1.223
Ethnicity: Black	6.745	2.877	4.480	0.000	2.924	15.562
Ethnicity: Asian	8.234	3.916	4.430	0.000	3.241	20.915
Ethnicity: Other	3.492	1.298	3.360	0.001	1.685	7.235
Disability (yes=1)	2.757	0.900	3.110	0.002	1.454	5.227
dependent children (yes=1)	1.080	0.201	0.410	0.680	0.749	1.556
Cohabiting: living with parents	1.688	0.648	1.360	0.173	0.795	3.582
Cohabiting: living with partner	0.902	0.168	-0.550	0.579	0.625	1.300
Employment status: FT employee	0.897	0.261	-0.370	0.709	0.508	1.586
Employment status: PT employee	0.731	0.240	-0.960	0.339	0.384	1.391
Employment status: self-employed	0.585	0.225	-1.400	0.163	0.275	1.243
Tenure: outright	0.279	0.093	-3.820	0.000	0.145	0.537
Tenure: mortgage	0.553	0.131	-2.490	0.013	0.347	0.881
Tenure: private rental	0.977	0.278	-0.080	0.935	0.559	1.707
Tenure: don't know	0.544	0.287	-1.160	0.248	0.194	1.527
Highest qualification: Level 3	1.408	0.435	1.110	0.269	0.768	2.580
Highest qualification: Level 2	1.153	0.357	0.460	0.646	0.628	2.116
Highest qualification: Level 1	1.199	0.359	0.600	0.545	0.666	2.157
Friends / university: few	1.188	0.238	0.860	0.388	0.803	1.758
Friends / university: several	1.002	0.246	0.010	0.993	0.620	1.622
Friends / university: most	1.254	0.326	0.870	0.384	0.753	2.089
Parents / university (yes=1)	2.091	0.676	2.280	0.022	1.110	3.940
Sibling / university (yes=1)	0.946	0.166	-0.320	0.753	0.670	1.335
Experience of school: positive	0.708	0.135	-1.820	0.069	0.488	1.027
Experience of school: negative	1.575	0.331	2.160	0.031	1.044	2.378
Region: Midlands and East of Eng	0.750	0.136	-1.580	0.113	0.525	1.071
Region: North of England	0.767	0.150	-1.360	0.174	0.522	1.125
Social class: manager and prof	1.066	0.208	0.330	0.741	0.728	1.563
Social class: intermediate	0.981	0.192	-0.100	0.920	0.668	1.440
q5he_1	1.251	0.110	2.560	0.011	1.054	1.486
q5he_2	0.870	0.048	-2.500	0.012	0.780	0.970
q5he_3	1.064	0.066	1.000	0.315	0.943	1.201
q5he_4	0.989	0.068	-0.160	0.873	0.864	1.132
q5he_5	1.000	0.072	0.010	0.995	0.870	1.151
q5he_6	0.868	0.051	-2.400	0.017	0.773	0.975
q5he_7	1.258	0.091	3.170	0.002	1.091	1.450
q5he_8	1.361	0.109	3.850	0.000	1.163	1.592
Performance at school = good	1.381	0.252	1.760	0.078	0.965	1.976
Performance at school = poor	1.377	0.320	1.380	0.168	0.874	2.172

Notes: Reference categories are: sex (female); ethnicity (white); disability (non-disabled); dependent children (none); cohabiting (single); employment status (unemployed); tenure (social rental); highest qualifications (none); friends in HE (none); parents in HE (no); sibling / university (no); experience of school (mixed/ neutral); region (south of England), occupational group (routine), assessment of school performance (average)

Source: PHEES Strand 2 survey, IES/BMRB, 2007

Interestingly, factors that did not appear to be associated with propensity to consider HE in the future were gender, age and qualification level. Age and qualification level were found to be linked with propensity when using bi-variate analysis, but the regression model indicated this relationship was likely to be explained by other factors. Socio-economic background also did not appear to be associated with future consideration of HE, but it was found to have had an influence on past consideration. Finally, attitudes relating to costs and access to HE – perceptions that people who go to university end up with heavy debts, that getting into university is difficult, and that going to university is not worth the cost – had no association with propensity to consider HE in the future.

Perceived benefits of HE

For those considering going to university at some point in the future, a key driver or motivator centred around enhanced employability and careers, such as enabling them to develop their career, change the type of work they do, earn more money, or get a new job. Almost half (48 per cent) cited these reasons and they appeared to be particularly important drivers for younger respondents and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Personal development was another key driver, in terms of self confidence and intellectual challenge, and this was cited by one-third (34 per cent). This group of motivators was relatively more important to those from higher socio-economic backgrounds and older respondents. A further driver related to helping individuals in their current job. This was cited by just under a quarter (22 per cent) and included aspects such as getting new skills for their job, improving work satisfaction, and to some extent providing access to better pay and promotional opportunities. It is interesting to note that job motivators feature less frequently than career motivators in the consideration of HE. The reverse is true in the consideration of wider learning and training where the perceived benefits were likely to be centred around jobs rather than general careers.

The pattern of motivators to HE was largely mirrored when exploring the potential benefits of HE amongst those respondents who were not considering HE. Although this group of adults perhaps considered HE less relevant or accessible to them, when asked 88 per cent felt that going HE had benefits for adults. Improving prospects was the most frequently cited advantage for adults in going to university (52 per cent), followed by personal development (26 per cent), and improving current employment circumstances (26 per cent).

Table 8: Benefits of HE (motivators for considering HE or potential benefits for adults)

	Considering HE (motivators)		Not considering HE (potential benefits)	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
General employability/career reasons	198	47.5	505	51.9
- get a new job	97	6.9 (50.0*)	na	na
- change type of work	116	8.2 (59.3*)	na	na
- set up own business/go self employed	68	4.8 (34.7*)	na	na
- develop career	118	8.4 (60.4*)	na	na
- earn more money	114	8.2 (58.7*)	na	na
Personal development	140	33.5	255	26.2
Reasons related to current job	91	21.9	248	25.5
- gain new skills for the job	59	14.4 (66.3**)	na	na
- get a pay rise	45	10.8 (50.7**)	na	na
- get a promotion	44	10.6 (49.9**)	na	na
- get more satisfaction from work	55	13.1 (61.5**)	na	na
General interest/fill spare time/carry on learning	36	8.6	64	6.6
Life change/life event reasons (eg children leaving home/divorce)	26	6.3	31	3.2
Get a recognised qualification/improve qualification	23	5.5	-	-
<i>Base</i>	<i>416</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>972</i>	<i>100.0</i>

Note: multiple response question, therefore sum % greater than 100%

* employability reasons explored further for those considering HE, number in brackets shows proportion of those citing general employability reasons that cited that specific reason

** job related reasons explored further for those considering HE, number in brackets shows proportion of those citing job related reasons that cited that specific reason

Source: PHEES Strand 2 survey, IES/BMRB, 2007

Encouraging factors

As noted earlier, 30 per cent of respondents would consider going to university in the future which leaves 70 per cent who said they would not consider applying, of which 38 per cent who felt they would be unlikely to consider it, and 32 per cent who were just not interested at all. This group of respondents were asked if any factors, from a given list, could encourage them to consider applying. The majority (79 per cent) said that at least one of the given factors could encourage them. Respondents who were most likely to be encouraged were: younger, those with higher level qualifications, non-home owners, those with peer group experience of HE, those with family commitments, and those reporting financial difficulties.

It appeared that if HE was made more convenient respondents could be encouraged to consider applying. If adults could study from home or work, 62 per cent said they could be encouraged; if there was a suitable course at a university close to their home, 56 per cent could be encouraged; or if they could study in the evenings or weekends, 51 per cent would consider applying to HE. A change in their circumstances such as

being made redundant could also encourage them to consider HE (59 per cent), as would the provision of financial support (52 per cent). Encouragement from others also had an influence on consideration of HE, particularly encouragement from an employer (59 per cent) as well as friends and family (50 per cent).

Table 9: Factors that might encourage you to consider HE in the future

	Frequency	%
Being able to study/learn from home or at your work	606	62.3
A change in your personal circumstances (eg being made redundant)	574	59.1
Encouragement from your employer	548	56.4
A suitable course at a university close to your home	544	55.9
Availability of funding to support you while studying	506	52.0
Being able to study in the evenings or at weekends	500	51.4
Encouragement from your family/friends	488	50.2
Information and advice about the options available	443	45.5
Availability of childcare	292	30.0
No answer	208	21.4
All those not considering HE	972	100.0

Base: Those not considering HE

Note: multiple response question, therefore sum % greater than 100%

Source: PHEES Strand 2 survey, IES/BMRB, 2007

The potential influence of employers was explored further by asking a direct question (to employees only) ‘would you consider going to university if your employer were to support you by offering you paid time off to study (eg day release)?’ and 69 per cent said they would definitely/probably consider going. Those most open to the influence of employer support were men, younger adults, those with higher level qualifications, those working full-time, or those in financial difficulty.

Only 21 per cent said nothing could encourage them to consider HE and these tended to be older individuals, those married or living with a partner but with no children living with them, and those who considered themselves to be comfortably well off. Taking together those who would consider HE and those who could be encouraged to do so, this leaves 15 per cent of all respondents who do not see HE as an option for them as they are not in the least interested and cannot be encouraged.

What kind of HE do adults want

Those considering applying to university (30 per cent of all respondents) were asked to think about the kind of HE they would prefer – in terms of subject of study, location of study and type of study.

Respondents tended to be decided about the kind of subject they would like to study at HE. They gave a wide range of subject preferences, but vocational subjects such as

business, computing and nursing were most commonly cited – particularly amongst those who were motivated to consider HE out of career reasons.

Respondents had a preference for face to face provision and part-time study, particularly part-time study delivered in the evenings and at weekends rather than in the day. This was especially important to those working full-time and those worried about finances. Few would prefer to study full-time and few would want to study at a distance or in the workplace (13 per cent and 3 per cent respectively). Respondents also wanted to study close to home (62 per cent) or within commuting distance (21 per cent), and local study was relatively more important to those with family commitments who perhaps cannot travel very far, and those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds or lower socio-economic backgrounds who perhaps want to stay within their local communities. No-one really wanted to move away to study.

Table 10: Preferences for higher education study

	Frequency	%
Close to home	252	61.5
Within commuting distance	86	20.9
Require me to move/spend time away from home	4	0.9
Open University	7	1.7
No preference/don't mind	59	14.3
Other answers	3	0.6

Base: Those who would consider HE in future

Source: PHEES Strand 2 survey, IES/BMRB, 2007

Table 11: Preferences for study pattern

	Frequency	%
Full-time	49	11.9
Part-time (day)	74	18.0
Part-time (eves/weekends)	131	31.8
Summer/summer school	4	1.1
Distance learning/online	53	13.0
In the workplace	11	2.7
No preference/don't mind	85	20.6
Other	4	0.9

Base: Those who would consider HE in future

Source: PHEES Strand 2 survey, IES/BMRB, 2007

These preferences perhaps indicate that respondents held a traditional view of HE, that of classroom or lecture hall based provision; and had a requirement to be able to fit HE around work and family commitments.

Challenges to overcome

Those who reported that they would not consider applying to HE at some point in the future (70 per cent of all respondents) were asked to give their main reasons for not wanting to go to university. These reasons fall into two groups: not wanting to study, representing motivational or attitudinal barriers; and not being able to study, essentially structural obstacles. The most commonly cited reasons were that they didn't see HE as useful to them, in that they didn't need it to get work or a career, or that it was easier to get a job (24 per cent); or that they were not interested in HE, didn't see the point and had had enough of studying (23 per cent). However, as noted earlier, career and employability reasons were found to be key drivers for adult engagement in HE, so some individuals clearly do see the value in HE. Lifestyle barriers were also frequently cited. These barriers include lack of time due to work or family commitments (20 per cent), concerns with the cost of study and/or debt issues (15 per cent) and age (19 per cent). Age appears to be a barrier to future participation for older adults, despite the general perception that HE is not just for young people (a view that was found to be held across all ages of respondents). Future non-participation was not about concerns over fitting in, lacking necessary qualifications, worries about coping with study, or lacking of information about university.

Table 12: Main reasons for not wanting to go to HE in the future (compared to reasons for non-participation at time of leaving school and during career/life since leaving school)

	<i>Future</i>		<i>Since leaving school</i>	<i>Upon leaving school</i>
	Frequency	%	%	%
Didn't need it to get work/career/easier to get a job	228	23.5	23.9	28.4
Not interested/don't see the point/had enough studying	219	22.6	19.3	24.8
Lack of time due to work or family reasons	191	19.7	19.2	4.9
Age (eg too old/too young)	183	18.8	-	-
Concerns with the costs of study/debt issues	144	14.8	19.9	14.5
Happy with present situation	37	3.8	-	-
Worried about the difficulty of study	19	2.0	2.0	-
Difficulties with travel/childcare	19	2.0	2.6	-
General financial reasons	17	1.7	2.1	2.7
Lack the necessary qualifications	15	1.5	6.5	12.0
Personal reasons	15	1.5	-	-
All those not considering HE	972	100.0	1,401	1,401

Base: Those not considering HE

Note: multiple response question, therefore sum % greater than 100%

Source: PHEES Strand 2 survey, IES/BMRB, 2007

These barriers to future participation correspond closely with the reasons given for past non-participation. Again, key reasons were perceived lack of value/need (24 per cent) and a lack of interest (19 per cent), followed by concerns over the costs of study (20 per cent), a lack of time due to other commitments (19 per cent), and perceived lack of the necessary qualifications for entry (7 per cent). Structural obstacles were more likely to have deterred those who had seriously considered applying to HE in the past. These individuals were interested and saw a value in HE, but were put off by the costs or worries about being able to balance study with their other commitments.

Of those considering going to university in the future (30 per cent of all respondents) almost all had some concerns about the HE experience – these are aspects that could deter entry. Those with most concerns were from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, from lower socio-economic backgrounds, with limited HE experience, and those mid-career; suggesting that these groups may need greater support to maintain their enthusiasm for HE.

The most commonly cited concern was the availability of financial support (80 per cent), followed by ability to balance study with work (75 per cent). The concerns reflect key reasons for past non-participation and indicate that finances and balancing commitments continue to trouble respondents. Other concerns included running up debts (69 per cent), being able to cope with the workload (59 per cent) and worries about getting back into study and the availability of learning support (51 per cent). There was little concern expressed about fitting in, which reflects the general perception that the university experience is open to all, or concerns with the travel arrangements which is unsurprising as generally adults want to stay local to study. Similarly, there was less concern about the potential pay back (ie that going to university might not improve their job prospects).

Table 13: Potential concerns amongst those considering HE in the future: ‘If you were going to university would you be concerned about any of the following?’

	Frequency	%
Availability of financial support	331	79.5
Availability of childcare facilities	131	31.6
Running up debts	287	68.8
Being able to keep up with workload	244	58.6
Fitting in/making friends	82	19.7
Travel/transport arrangements	106	25.5
Getting back into study and availability of learning support	212	51.0
Balancing study with work commitments	313	75.2
It may not improve my job prospects	118	28.4
None of these	18	4.2
<i>All those considering HE</i>	<i>416</i>	<i>100.0</i>

Base: Those who would consider HE

Note: multiple response question, therefore sum % greater than 100%

Source: PHEES Strand 2 survey, IES/BMRB, 2007

Conclusions and implications

In conclusion, despite having decided not to go to university in the past, attitudes to HE were remarkably positive amongst the working adults surveyed, and this represents a change over the past decade or so. The university experience was universally regarded as something that is open to everyone regardless of age, background and circumstances, although understanding of entry routes was perhaps limited. The university experience was also seen as having some value to adults, even to those already in work, although it was not perceived as automatically providing access to the best jobs. Work experience and the portfolio of skills acquired were felt by respondents to have greater currency than qualifications in the labour market, at least in terms of achieving their current labour market position. Yet HE was viewed positively as a way to improve longer-term prospects, with career development and employability factors given as key reasons for considering HE and key advantages more generally for adults to engage in HE.

There is an interest in HE amongst working adults, and 30 per cent of respondents would consider applying to HE in the future, particularly to study vocational subjects in local universities part-time in the evenings and at weekends. Although generally attitudes to HE were positive, some adults do not see HE as relevant to their working lives, and to engage these individuals there is a need firstly to overcome a lack of interest and a perceived lack of value or usefulness – attitudinal barriers that can be particularly difficult to challenge. These could be addressed with greater encouragement from friends, family and particularly employers, and with information and advice about the range of options available and evidence of the rewards or benefits to HE. Once interest has been ignited, structural obstacles to participation need to be removed to enable adults to access HE. It is important to provide convenient courses and employer support that will enable adults to combine study with work and family commitments in subjects of interest to older individuals that have clear career paths or an employability focus. It is also important to provide information about the real costs involved, likely debt levels (where understanding is limited and linked to greater concerns), and more targeted financial support. These measures could encourage more working adults to consider HE as an option for them, ready for when their lives create a window of opportunity, and convert thoughts of applying into concrete action.

However, the study indicates that adults' orientations to HE are not homogeneous, and there are perhaps three key groups with different intentions towards and concerns about HE. Each group may require different strategies to attract them to HE and any actions taken will have different levels of success in securing their engagement. These groups are worthy of further exploration in any subsequent research.

Firstly, there are those who have very similar characteristics to more traditional HE entrants, in that they tend to be younger, in social networks where HE is the norm, with higher level qualifications, and from black and minority ethnic backgrounds.

These individuals appear to have just missed out on HE participation in their earlier careers – in that they are likely to have considered HE in the past and consequently are more likely to consider it as an option for the future. This group tend to feel well informed but are particularly worried about the financial aspects of HE participation.

Secondly, there are those with some aspect of disadvantage such as experience of unemployment, living in social housing, having a disability or health problem, having had a negative experience of school, or experiencing financial difficulties. These individuals may not have considered HE in the past, but are more likely to consider HE for the future. For this group participation in HE can be seen as a way out of disadvantage. This group have relatively greater concerns about the availability of financial support and about coping with the demands of study.

Finally there are the waverers, those with a lower tendency to consider HE for the future but could be encouraged. This group has a number of sub-sets including adults from lower socio-economic backgrounds who may need convincing that HE is for the likes of them, and encouragement to overcome lack of interest and concerns about being too old. This group has relatively greater concerns about being able to cope with the workload and getting back into study. The group of waverers also includes those 'mid-career' who tend to feel less well informed about HE, have the greatest family commitments and therefore greater concerns about balancing work and study. This sub-set also have a tendency to expect employer support for their HE participation. Other sub-sets of waverers are those from higher socio-economic backgrounds and older adults who tend to consider themselves to be happy in their careers and financially comfortable (and therefore not deterred by the financial aspects of HE), yet could be motivated to consider HE for personal development reasons.

The research also indicates several interesting tensions or challenges to encouraging adult participation in HE.

Adults considered themselves to be aware of the opportunities available in HE and, to some extent, aware of the requirements for entry but few had actually sought information or advice and some of the findings indicated that their knowledge may be limited. HE has changed in recent years and there are pressures for it to change further still, and adults may have an outdated vision of HE provision based on the experiences of friends and family. Being able to combine study with work is a key concern of adults when considering HE, and being able to study from home or work was an important aspect in encouraging participation. However, only a handful stated a preference for learning in the workplace (which government aim to be a major development in HE) and a relatively small group preferred to study via distance or online learning, instead the vast majority would prefer face-to-face provision at a local university or college. This may reflect an informed preference but could indicate limited awareness of the range of ways individuals can engage with HE. This represents a challenge, to inform individuals who may think they already have all the information they need, and to present an appropriately targeted message. Currently

information about HE tends to be targeted towards younger people, while sources for adult learners tend not to focus on HE.

Adult preferences for HE were remarkably consistent, given the heterogeneity of adults in the working population (reflected in the backgrounds and ambitions of those surveyed), with a clear preference for vocational courses delivered through part-time teaching at local institutions. This presents a challenge for HEIs – can they deliver this kind of experience, when and where adults want it? Developing courses and providing teaching during the evenings and at weekends involves considerable resources at a time when institutions' are under funding pressures due to the effects of the policy to fund individual study towards qualifications that are neither equivalent or lower in level than an existing qualification. A related issue here is the individual financial support available for this type of HE study. Adults generally felt ill-informed about this aspect of HE but had a general expectation that they could access a government grant or university bursary to help fund their studies. Although the support package has changed and improved for part-time students in recent years, it still lags behind that available for full-time study and is virtually non-existent for part-time study of a very part-time nature. Adults need better information about the reality of the support arrangements, and provision of financial support needs to be tailored to the learning patterns and preferences of working adults in order for it be effective in overcoming barriers and to work to encourage adults to apply to HE.

Employers were seen as funders and supporters of adult HE, but they were not regarded as a place for HE delivery (learning host), as a source of information or advice about HE, nor a place to apply learning. Whilst wider learning and training was considered to bring job-related benefits, participation in HE was considered to bring longer-term career and employability benefits – perhaps enabling individuals to move on from their current employment situation and employer. This presents a challenge for employers. The government policy focus on employer engagement looks to employers to co-fund HE study for their employees and indeed adults have an expectation that employers will contribute towards their study costs, and providing paid time off to study has a positive impact on encouraging employees to consider HE. However, will employers want to support their employees if they are likely to use the skills and knowledge acquired to move to another employer?

Finally, although attitudes towards HE were positive, and a large group of adults were considering going to HE in the future or indicated they could be encouraged to do so, for some adults HE was just not relevant at all. This presents a challenge to the accepted notion that underpins much of higher education policy, the notion that higher education is the right thing to do. For some individuals, non-participation in HE is the right thing to do.

References

- Bowl M (2003), *Frustrated Participants: Adult Learners and Higher Education Aspiration*, University of Birmingham
- Carroll S, Jones R (2007), *Researching Ourselves: A Participatory Exploration of the Impact of a Learning Intervention for Women Returners*, Paper presented at the 37th SCUTREA Conference, Queen's University, Belfast
- Davies M, et al. (2001), *For Me or Not For Me? That is the Question: A Report on Mature Student Participation in Higher Education*, DfES
- Fuller A, et al. (2006-2008), *Non-Participation in Higher Education: Decision-Making as an Embedded Social Practice working papers*, part of the Teaching and Learning Research Programme funded by ESRC; including Fuller A (2006) 'Mid-Life Transitions to Higher Education: Developing a multi-level explanation of increasing participation', University of Southampton (to be published in *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 39 (2): 217-235)
- Gorard S, et al. (2006), *Review of the Widening Participation Research: Addressing the Barriers to Participation in Higher Education*, a report to HEFCE by the University of York, Higher Education Academy and Institute for Access Studies
- McGivney V (1996), *Adult Participation in Learning: Can we change the pattern?* Paper presented at EU Conference at Newcastle University: 'Research on Lifelong Learning: Implications for Policy and Practice'
- Smith MK (2005), *Participation in Learning Projects and Programmes*, Infed