

# Women, Access and Progression: an examination of women's reasons for not continuing in higher education following the completion of the Certificate in Women's Studies

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**ABSTRACT** *This study is an exploration of the reasons why women who had successfully completed an access course did not progress on to higher education. Following a review of the relevant literature on women as returners to education a number of main themes are identified and discussed. The study is based on in-depth interviews with women who did not continue on to higher education following the successful completion of the Certificate in Women's Studies at the University of Ulster. This research highlights the difficulties faced by women who want to continue with their studies. From the interviews three main obstacles to progressing further with higher education emerged; caring responsibilities, financial constraints and lack of career advice. It is argued that women as mature students face particular difficulties due to their role and position in society. Also the women themselves have been conditioned into putting their own needs after the needs of their families, and their personal development is often not afforded a high priority. Finally it is suggested that government's commitment to widening access to higher education is simply rhetoric if it does not take account of the broader inequalities faced by women. Policies to improve access appear to be somewhat at odds with the removal of the financial support necessary for study at higher education.*

## Introduction

Since the early 1990s widening participation in higher education has been a persistent theme in British government policies. Official government reports such as Dearing (1997), Kennedy (1997) and Fryer (1997) have supported the view that broadening access should be a key government priority. The Labour government elected in 1997 has continued with its Conservative predecessor's policy of providing and promoting alternative routes of entry to higher education. Their document, "The Learning Age" (1998), contained an explicit commitment to continuing Dearing's widening participation agenda. The majority of these policies have been

couched in terms of social justice and tackling social exclusion, with the broad aim of tackling the inequalities associated with access to higher education. Within the past 20 years there has been a marked increase in the number of courses which provide alternative modes of entry to higher education for the non-traditional student. Generally, the non-traditional student is defined as mature and does not have the standard qualifications usually required for entry into higher education. In the United Kingdom the student profile has changed radically, due largely to increases in access courses, foundation courses and part-time degrees. A key feature of the system is an ageing student population. The Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA) figures show that in 1994–1995 over 40% of the student population was over the age of 25 and 25% was aged between 21 and 24 (THES, 1996). Access courses have provided the main route of entry for large numbers of mature students. In 1995 there were over 1,200 recognised access courses accounting for over 30,000 students in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, with separate arrangements existing for Scotland (Wilson & Hill, 1997). Access courses are seen as central to broadening participation, as they provide opportunities for those groups traditionally under-represented in higher education. Yet, as this paper discusses, for many, the successful completion of an access course does not necessarily mean progression on to higher education.

This paper is based on a small-scale study which aimed to examine the reasons why women who had completed a part-time access course chose not to continue on to higher education. The research is based on in-depth interviews with 10 women who had completed the Certificate in Women's Studies at the University of Ulster. The University of Ulster is one of two universities in Northern Ireland and is based on four campuses across the Province (Magee College, Derry, Coleraine, Belfast, Jordanstown). Access courses began in Northern Ireland in 1973 with the introduction of a Certificate in Foundation Studies for mature studies in Magee College. The other university, Queen's University of Belfast, first validated access courses in 1989. The women in this study were former students of the University of Ulster at Magee College in Derry. The research recognises the value of the views and perceptions of these women and suggests that in order to fully understand the difficulties faced by mature women students it is important to take account of their experiences. Their accounts of the difficulties faced by women returners to education tell us much about the choices and opportunities available to many women. They also shed some light on the importance of cultural expectations and norms within society. All of these women enjoyed their return to education and were highly motivated and keen to continue with their studies. However, it was seen as imperative that they did not challenge the cultural values and expectations of their society. They were conditioned into putting their own needs after those of other family members. They viewed their own ambitions as selfish and difficult to justify. As Whaley (2000) noted, women are constrained by both internal and external barriers. Internal barriers are typically limited aspirations and expectations, whilst external barriers are financial and structural.

The three key reasons for non-progression into higher education identified by these women were caring responsibilities, financial constraints and lack of

career advice. Overall, caring responsibilities were the most important constraint to further study and the one which most of the interview period was spent discussing. Whilst the fact that women are constrained by caring responsibilities is hardly new or surprising, what is interesting is that just one of these women was actually looking after her own children. The lack of decent affordable childcare has been consistently highlighted as a major barrier to women's access to higher education, but what this paper draws attention to is that women's caring responsibilities are not simply confined to looking after their own children. The fact that they bear the major responsibility for care of the elderly and other dependent relatives must be acknowledged and recognised by any policy which aims to increase their participation in higher education. The financial difficulties faced by these women suggest that the British government's rhetoric about widening participation is somewhat at odds with the dismantling of the financial support necessary for study coupled with the introduction of course fees. Finally, it is noted that information is crucial to widening participation. Women must be given clear accessible information in order to make informed choices.

## **Rationale**

Following completion of an access course it is expected that a significant number of students will proceed to higher education. Indeed, in many ways, this is seen as the primary objective of these courses. The Certificate in Women's Studies at the University of Ulster was no exception and claimed that it was designed to provide an opportunity for adult women students to "advance themselves academically/professionally" (University of Ulster, 1993, p. 4). Examples of former students who had undertaken degree courses were used to promote the course and illustrate its success. Other possible reasons for a return to study, such as self-fulfilment and confidence building, were clearly considered to be of secondary importance. It was suggested by Cappizi (1996, p. 43) that:

It is reasonable to argue that nationally over 60% of students enrolling on an access programme achieve the access certificate but that a much higher percentage (over 80%) proceed directly to higher education.

In a report by the Higher Educational Funding Council (1996, p. 12) it was stated that the completion rate of access students was around 70%, with about 52% proceeding directly into higher education. They did, however, call for some research in this area as they noted that:

In spite of the large numbers of access courses and students registered on them, a significant number of these students do not appear to progress to higher education.

It is this issue of progression or, indeed, more precisely, non-progression, to higher education that is addressed by this research. Whilst teaching on the Certificate in Women's Studies, I was struck by the number of women who successfully completed the course but did not continue on to higher education. Indeed, of the last

intake of students for this access course, just 4 of the 21 women who had originally enrolled had proceeded on to higher education. The reasons for this relatively low level of progression are unclear, as the university had kept a limited amount of information on those students who had continued on to degree courses, whilst nothing was known about those who chose to leave after completion. Also, the information on those who had continued their education was quantitative, dealing solely with numbers and percentages. There was an absence of qualitative information focusing on the views, attitudes and perceptions of the women who completed the course.

## **Literature Review**

The educational experience of mature students has become a major focus for research since the early 1980s; initially, the emphasis of the vast majority of these studies was on large-scale quantitative research (Britton & Baxter, 1999). Typically, they detailed the participation rates, background and achievements of mature students (Smithers & Griffen, 1986; Woodley, 1987). Whilst these studies were extremely important in that they provided details on the specific characteristics of mature students, they were limited to facts and figures. Studies that gave these students a voice, allowing them to talk about their experiences and attitudes, were less common. Smith (1993) has suggested that as a result of this focus on quantitative techniques women's experiences have been marginalised and their voices have been silenced.

Edwards (1993) went a step further and suggested that the system and structure of higher education was inherently biased. She pointed out that the implicit learner model that informs the majority of research on mature students could be described as a male model. The experience of the male student is taken as the norm and women are expected to conform to this. Women students are entering an arena of male-defined structures, values and knowledge. Therefore, within higher education, women are viewed as problematic because of their particular needs in relation to childcare and family commitments. The assimilation of women's experiences into a male model ignores and denies the specificity of women's experience and the ways in which gender impinges on the student experience. Robinson (1980, p. 4) has stated that "the norms of our higher education policies and higher education systems are the norms of the bachelor boy student".

Whilst one must acknowledge the difficulties that exist for women entering higher education, it is important to remember that not all universities have followed the same policies and agendas. Therefore, whilst some have actively resisted access courses, seeing them as inferior, others have embraced the opportunity to widen access. It is important that research on experiences in higher education acknowledges that students are not a homogeneous group, but rather that their experiences of student life are predicated by factors such as gender, class and race.

As Parry (1995) has noted, despite the increased interest in mature students, there is still a dearth of data on access courses and their students. He suggested that little was known about students who entered higher education through access courses.

Many universities simply referred to these students as non-standard entrants. He went on to note that even less was known about the processes and procedures through which these students were admitted. Whilst access courses are an important means of enabling women to enter institutions that were previously out of their reach, Ryle and Stuart (1994) reiterate that there is still an absence of detailed information about these students. Although gender and education in schools has been the subject of extensive research, gender and inequality in higher education is still a relatively under-researched area. To some extent this lack of qualitative in-depth research is beginning to be addressed by studies such as Parr (2000) and Hutchings and Archer (2001). Britton and Baxter (1999) note that despite the invisibility of women in many areas of educational research, this is not the case in the literature on mature students. Indeed, a good case could now be made for the lack of knowledge about the mature male student. However, few of the existing studies on the mature female student actually examine reasons for non-progression or withdrawal after the completion of an access course. The educational literature on female mature students is dominated by a number of main themes, such as reasons for returning to education (Leonard, 1994; McLaren, 1986; Pascall & Cox, 1993), barriers to returning to education (McGivney, 1993), initial educational experiences (Edwards, 1993) and the differences between men and women's educational experiences (Maynard & Pearsall, 1994; Webb *et al.*, 1994). Obviously, some of the issues raised in these studies are equally relevant to women who have successfully completed a number of years of study. A key factor remains the sexual division of labour in the private sphere. Women are the primary carers for young children and older people. They are responsible for the majority of domestic work such as cooking and cleaning. Usually, if a women returns to education then it is up to her to negotiate the competing demands of family responsibilities and education. A key problem is the lack of access to adequate affordable childcare facilities. Women are expected to organise and manage suitable childcare arrangements. University crèches are expensive and sessions have to be booked for the whole term (Jackson, 1998); also, childminders often expect to be paid over holiday periods. Securing childcare, which is financially viable and compatible with study arrangements, can be problematic. Women are also expected to be flexible enough to take over when care arrangements breakdown. Edwards (1993) noted that all of the women in her study considered themselves to be responsible for the well-being of their family, especially their partners and children. Women had little choice in the selection of educational establishments as they had to choose one that would be best suited to their family commitments.

Financial dependency is a significant factor underlying many of the problems encountered by women attempting to return to study and remains a significant factor when deciding whether or not to continue with studies. Leonard (1994) suggested that the level of financial support was dependent on the financial circumstances of the household, in particular whether or not the husband was employed. If the husband was unemployed, or in a low-paid job, financing educational necessities such as books could be difficult. For many married women financing their education was difficult. Many women returners are unemployed

and financially dependent on their husbands. Those who are in paid employment are often in low-paid jobs and suffering from economic hardship. Part-time work is largely a female phenomenon, and is associated with inferior pay and poor employment conditions, which leads to labour market marginalisation. This marginalisation is aggravated by the lack of training and promotion opportunities. Part-time work rarely provides women with sufficient resources to gain genuine independence (Lister, 1996). The financial demands associated with a return to study may mean that it is not a realistic option. Many students face economic hardships in attending university, but this is particularly pertinent for lone parents and women dependent on a male partner for support.

### **Leaving Higher Education**

In her survey of mature students in higher education, McGivney (1996) reported that gender was a significant variable when assessing reasons for withdrawing from courses. Unsurprisingly, family commitments were cited by considerably more women than men. Men were more likely to leave their courses due to stress and employment issues whilst women reported difficulties combining domestic responsibilities with study. The difficulties of studying and integrating domestic responsibilities have been highlighted in a number of studies on withdrawal from university courses. Hibbett (1986) found that 53% of students who had left award-bearing courses at a college or higher education institution were married women. Metcalf (1997) noted that mature women at a university in Wales had twice as many concerns as men. Support from other family members when studying has also been identified as a key factor determining whether or not a mature student completes his or her course. Munn *et al.* (1992) claimed that mature women students organised their courses so that their families' needs could be met, although the success of this strategy depended on having a supportive partner. However, Maynard and Pearsall (1994) reported that married men received much more support and encouragement from their partners than married female students. McGivney (1996) also highlighted the differences between mature and younger students as important when considering reasons for withdrawal from courses. She suggests that mature students are more likely to suffer from a sense of inadequacy about their perceived lack of academic skills. Older students find it difficult to be confident and are more inclined to suffer from self-doubt. The fact that women are more likely to suffer from self-doubt and tend to be self-effacing is already well established in the educational literature. Many mature women who had been labelled a failure at school find the prospect of returning daunting. Often they have had negative experiences at school. These women see education as something for other "smarter" women.

### **Structural Constraints**

Structural constraints include: lack of jobs, lack of training schemes, lack of information and a lack of guidance. A lack of suitable employment and the high level of qualifications needed to secure any jobs have pushed women towards returning

to education. Access courses through self-development, encouragement and counselling can direct students to a suitable career. However, as Wilson and Hill (1997) noted, the successful completion of an access course does not guarantee a place in higher education, nor does it lead to a better place in the labour market, especially as such courses seem to have little recognition outside academia. What is needed is a coherent policy at government level that addresses the lack of recognition of women's role in society. Access courses are important but they are not enough to change the inequalities in the higher education system. Women returners to education encounter a range of difficulties which men do not experience. Also, as McGivney (1996) noted, universities must accommodate and acknowledge the needs of a diverse range of students. Although many universities have encouraged adult learners, and, indeed, see them as essential to maintain student numbers, few have actually adjusted their procedures, course provision, teaching practices and support services to be suitable for an adult learner. She describes the lack of support for part-time students as "disturbing". Adult students are not considered a priority, especially if they are part-time students.

## **The Study**

Increasingly in recent years access courses have been moved out of universities into higher education institutes. The Certificate in Women's Studies was franchised out by the University of Ulster in 1999 to a local college of further and higher education. In the final year of the course at Magee College 21 students enrolled, nine withdrew at different points throughout the 2 year period, with 12 women completing the course. Of these 12 women, 11 achieved the grade of over 60% which was necessary for progression on to degree level, but just four women proceeded on to degree courses. This study is based on interviews with 10 former students who had achieved the necessary grades to continue on to higher education but chose not to. The women selected were typical of the students who had completed the course in terms of age and socio-economic status. The existing data available on the students revealed that there were no obvious differences between those who did and those who did not continue with their education.

As the aim of the research was to let the women tell their stories, I adopted an ethnographical research approach. This qualitative approach was deemed to be particularly suitable as it enabled the researcher to gain an insight and an understanding of the women's views and perspectives (Neuman, 1997). I had already established a relationship with the women as a lecturer in Women's Studies and as an advisor of studies. I felt that this method would enable me to further develop my rapport with these women. The interviews were loosely structured around their educational experiences and perceptions, reasons for non-progression and hopes for the future. The interviews took place in the university and in a local coffee bar. The loosely framed interview schedule allowed me to direct the discussions without rigidly controlling them. As Reinharz (1992) has noted, interviews allow an exploration of the meanings and interpretations of the participants and, if done well, allow the participants' voices to be heard. The women were willing and enthusiastic

participants and a number of them expressed surprise that they could have something valuable to say. The interviews took place from January to April 2000; each interview lasted approximately 1 hour. Detailed notes were taken during the interviews and these were written up immediately after they had concluded. The interviews were analysed using content analysis.

## **Results**

Ten women who successfully completed the Certificate in Women's Studies and achieved the necessary grades to continue in higher education, but chose not to, were interviewed for this study. All of the respondents were between 28 and 60 years of age. Five of the women were between 40 and 50 years of age. Six of the women were married and one was separated. All of the women had children, and family size ranged from one to five children. The children were usually in their late teens or older, although one woman had a daughter aged 6. Five of the women were grandmothers. Just one of the women was in paid employment whilst studying; she was a part-time youth worker. Three of the women had been in full-time paid employment and had retired shortly before they commenced their studies. Two women had been employed as telephonists and one woman had been a nursing auxiliary. One woman had been self-employed buying and selling fashion goods. Two women had not been in paid employment since getting married, whilst three of the women had never been in paid employment. Seven of the women described themselves as working class whilst the remaining three women described themselves as middle class. Four of the women owned their own homes whilst the others lived in social rented housing. All of the women were white and were born in Ireland.

## **Caring Responsibilities**

Whilst a number of main reasons for the women's non-progression with their studies emerged, the most significant factor was caring responsibilities. Six of the ten women reported that they now had caring responsibilities, which were the key factors in preventing them from pursuing further study. Interestingly, just one of the women was actually looking after her own children. Five of the women were looking after their grandchildren. Two women were the primary carers for dependent adults, one woman was looking after her father-in-law and the other was caring for her mother. The women who were caring for their grandchildren explained that they felt a moral obligation to help their children, even if this was detrimental to their personal development. One woman explained that when she was asked to help she felt that she had no real choice:

My daughter and her husband asked me to look after the two wee ones so that she could go back to work. They couldn't afford to pay somebody, So what else could I do? I wouldn't have had the heart to study knowing that they needed me.



Another woman explained that whilst she had been told by her friends to put her needs before those of her daughter, she felt that this was not really an option:

They are always saying to me you have to let go, let her paddle her own canoe, but I just can't. I suppose I feel that it's my duty to do everything I possibly can and I enjoy the children.

One of the women who was looking after her daughter's two children on a regular basis suggested that caring was part and parcel of being a woman, and for her it had been the main feature of her life. This was not something that she was bitter about but accepted it as part of life:

I started caring when I was eight; I looked after my younger sister. Then I got married had a family of my own and looked after them. Then my daughter and children and I'm now looking after them. I think its just part of a woman's lot, mind you some women get away easier than others.

The woman who was looking after her father-in-law explained that he had been taken ill suddenly and she was the only one available to look after him:

I was all set to go back and do a degree in fact I had even enrolled on a course but my husband's father took ill and I had to look after him. Things just didn't work out as planned, mind you they rarely do.

These findings must be set in the context of childcare in Northern Ireland. Whilst the United Kingdom has the worst record for childcare provision in the European Union, Northern Ireland has by far the worst level of provision in the United Kingdom (Hinds, 1991). Historically, levels of low provision mean that under-5s in Northern Ireland are less likely to access nursery education than their counterparts in Great Britain. Full day care for children is almost entirely non-existent and for many women a paid childminder is the only other option. As women tend to be concentrated in low-paid employment, for them paid childcare means that there is little financial incentive to undertake paid employment. It is those women who are fortunate enough to have relatives to assist with childcare who can afford to go to work. Linda Edgerton (1986, p. 61) commented on the conservative ideologies that exist in Northern Ireland. She suggests that much of women's oppression lies in the family structures and ideologies that exist in the Province:

In many working-class communities the extended family network has not only remained but has been reinforced by the "troubles" [providing] a further barrier to the development of female independence.

Evason (1998) has argued, however, that larger families and stronger family ties in Northern Ireland do not result in a larger pool of people available for informal care. Significantly, her study on informal care contains no specific references to the role that grandparents play in rearing children. The women interviewed in this study were expected to play an active role in rearing their grandchildren. This may also be related to the fact that the birth rate is particularly high in the north-west of Ireland, especially amongst teenagers. Since World War II, fertility rates in Belfast have

decreased whilst in Derry they have increased. It has been suggested that one of the most fundamental features of Derry society in the 1960s was high fertility and birth rates. In a study of demographics, Robinson (1967, p. 176) suggested that the population was:

Similar to those of tropical under-developed countries rather than those of temperate West European countries. In Britain a similar age structure to that in Derry was last known in 1881.

One of the women interviewed explained that her daughter had become pregnant at 15 and therefore she felt compelled to help her:

She just couldn't cope; I nearly went mad. Then when I calmed down I had to help her whatever way I could. I thought my days of child rearing were over but that's life. You never know what's around the corner.

Another woman who was looking after her grandchildren stated that she had agreed to do it for a year to help out, but she was doubtful about ever getting the opportunity to return to study:

I said I would give them a hand out for a year and by then they would have sorted something out. But sure you know how it is by then they might have another child and it would be more or less impossible to leave.

Another woman stated that she would definitely like to return to education but family life meant that making definite plans was futile:

When they are a bit older I would like to go back and maybe do a degree in social work or something like that. I haven't really thought about it that much to tell you the truth, as it's difficult to know what will be going on then.

The existing studies on women and access to education have highlighted the importance of decent affordable childcare. They have described a lack of childcare as a significant barrier to women's access to higher education, but this has been in the context of the students' own children. This study demonstrates the need for childcare at a wider societal level as women are often expected to look after children within the extended family setting. These women were willing to give up or postpone their own education opportunities in order to help their families. The women displayed characteristics that have been described as indicative of feminine duty, they always put themselves last, and they were available when needed, never selfish and always willing to help. These findings support Skeggs's (1997) assertion that there are class differences associated with caring. Working-class women are more likely to describe themselves as naturally disposed to care, as this way they can gain for themselves some status and moral authority. Ironically, it is this close association with the caring role which has meant their colluding in the continuation of social and sexual divisions in which they are ultimately subordinate. None of the women challenged the expectation that they would care for others; in some respects this was surprising as they had just completed a course in Women's Studies. This

course was overtly political and encouraged women to challenge the culture and society in Northern Ireland, which constructed them as subordinate. This apparent contradiction in theory and practice was commented on by one of the women:

I really enjoyed the course and it made me see things in a new light. I thought though some of it was a bit much. I particularly didn't like the feminist criticisms of the family. I could see what they were saying about men having all the power but I wouldn't really agree. I am a woman and I can't help caring about my family, you can't fight nature.

Significantly, all of the women noted that they would have liked to continue with their studies. None of these women had stopped because they were disappointed by their experiences or felt that they were not capable of further study. They claimed that circumstances had dictated that they could not continue. Yet in a number of cases the women had actually offered to care for other family members. It seemed that some women were content to defer their progress on to degree level, as the thought of taking the step into a degree programme remained intimidating.

## **Finance**

All of the women interviewed mentioned that the cost of continuing with their education was also problematic. The Certificate in Women's Studies had been subsidised and those who were in receipt of benefit paid the nominal amount of £11 per module. This subsidy was not available for further studies and meant that continuing with their education necessitated a significant financial commitment. For two of the women the absence of grants and introduction of fees meant that continuing with their education was not an option. One woman explained that she felt that she needed to secure paid employment and could not really afford to take more time out to study:

For me taking on the commitment of a further three years of study was not a realistic option. Whilst the access course was subsidised it still cost money for books, travelling and just money for things like coffee and meals. I just couldn't justify going on, especially if fees were involved. My idea was to get a job, save some money and then maybe come back at a later date.

Another women stated that her husband had been made redundant and this had ensured that she was not in a position to undertake the necessary financial commitment:

We have children and bills to pay so it was not realistic for me to take on something which would cost so much.

One woman explained that whilst her motivation for undertaking the access course was simply to prove something to herself, she felt that she simply could not afford to pay fees, and as a result further study was not a realistic option:

I couldn't commit myself and my family to such a big financial undertaking. It wouldn't be fair.

Other women explained that they did not think spending large amounts of money on themselves represented good value for money. A main reason for this was their age; these women claimed that even if they did get a degree, they were too old to pursue a new career:

If you didn't have to pay I probably would have gone back and done something. But it was sort of made clear to us at the end of the Certificate that there were no further options for us. We were more or less told that there was no hope for us at University. We were too old and couldn't afford it.

I wouldn't have the money to do a degree. Anyway at my age it would be pretty pointless, even if I did get the qualifications I'd never get a job at the end of it. If it's a choice between me nearly fifty and a twenty-year-old, who do you think would get the job?

Six of the seven women explained that they had no independent finances to pay for their education and any financial commitment would have to be negotiated within their families. It was generally felt that a 3 or 4 year degree was too much of a financial commitment. These findings appear to confirm Britton and Baxter's (1999) assertion that women are very reluctant to prioritise their own needs. The financial commitment was spoken of in terms of what other members of the family needed:

If I had the money myself well then that would be a different story but I can't expect them to go without so that I could do the course that I wanted to do.

It just wouldn't make sense for me to pay at this stage, you may say I missed the boat. My daughter is doing her A levels this year and she got nine GCSEs. She said she was leaving school and I said no way. Hopefully she will go to University and we will pay for that.

Whilst many women are keen to return to education and have been encouraged by the focus on widening access, the reality is that fees and the lack of maintenance grants makes entering university much less likely. Steele (1999) noted that the University Admissions Council (UCAS) applications from adults were down by 12% and suggested that this is in large part due to the financial difficulties faced by mature students. Unlike traditional school-leaver entrants from middle-class families they rarely have parents willing and able to pay the bills.

### **Lack of Career Advice**

A number of the women also commented on the lack of clear career advice that they were given by the university at the end of their access course. Many were unsure of the courses that were available to them and the ways in which credit points and the module accreditation system could work for them. The general feeling amongst

these women was that they had been left “high and dry” after their access course and they had no real grasp of the available options. There was a general misconception that all students were subject to a flat-rate payment of £1,000 fees per year regardless of their individual circumstances. This is similar to the findings of Merrill’s (1999, p. 58) study in which she noted that “those who did seek guidance from the careers office found it a negative and unhelpful experience”.

One woman explained that she had decided to undertake a part-time course in addiction studies, as she understood that this would be subject to a minimal fee. However, when she went to enrol for the course she was advised that she was expected to pay £800. This was something that she was unaware of, and subsequently it was financially impossible for her to study as she had originally intended. The women felt that the lack of clear accessible advice had tainted their overall positive experience of education. As this woman explained:

It was as if they wanted nothing more to do with us. We had finished our course and we could do whatever we liked after that. There was no encouragement to continue and the advice given was contradictory.

At the end of their access course the women were spoken to by one of the faculty administrative assistants, who explained some of the options available. A former student of the course also came to talk about her experiences. Whilst these women were trying to be helpful, the absence of any input from the university careers service was mentioned by a number of the women:

I was just confused. I didn’t know what I could do and what I couldn’t do. At least if you had the information you could have made the choice. I did make an appointment to go to see a careers advisor but to be honest I was as wise going into that talk as I was coming out. I asked her about fees and she said I’d need to talk to somebody else, as she didn’t deal with that. It was like banging your head against a brick wall. In the end I just gave up.

Another student had a similar experience when trying to obtain information about the choices available to her:

I went to one place and they said oh no you need to talk to somebody else about that. I went to them and they said well it depends on a whole range of things, I just couldn’t get a straight answer. In the end I just felt stupid and was afraid to ask any more.

A number of the women felt particularly aggrieved about how they were treated at the end of their access course. The lack of information about their future options was both annoying and frustrating. For some of the women it was as if they were seen in some way as inferior to other students:

At the end it was like they just wanted to wash their hands of us. It was a bit like we have let you see how it is for students but now you can go away.

I was really mad at the end. When you asked about what courses you could do we were just patronised. It was as if we had just done a Mickey Mouse course and were getting ideas above our station.

Also important here was the fact that all of the women interviewed claimed that family commitments meant that they could not travel to other campuses. The women were therefore restricted to the courses offered by Magee and even then were unsure which courses they were eligible to apply for. It would appear that poor advice on careers and opportunities is a feature of women's lives. A 1999 report by the Equal Opportunities Commission claims that the gender divide in subject choice was often a direct result of poor advice to 16–18 year olds (THES, April 9, 1999). A number of the women mentioned that they felt that part-time students received very little support within the university. They were not seen as “real” students and felt that they were treated as second-class students; they felt disconnected from much of university life:

You would see the students talking about their nights out or their clubs and societies, we just weren't part of that. After two years I still didn't know how to join a club or who to ask about it.

Another woman suggested that they should have been advised about the difficulties of undertaking part-time study and the limited opportunities to interact with other students:

I always felt that we were isolated, we never met anybody, we just talked to ourselves.

Another woman, however, felt that the perceived isolation was self-inflicted and many of the women made no effort to interact with other students:

They are always moaning about this and that. I never felt that we were isolated. We were given a fantastic opportunity to see University life and meet new people. You don't need somebody to tell you how to meet people.

In their study of women's experiences of higher education, Isaac *et al.* (1995) noted that female students are more likely than male students to feel alienated within university life. This study would suggest that whilst a number of women felt alienated from the rest of the university, during their two years of study they had made no effort to mix with other students. The access students were given a high level of support from their tutors and in some cases relied on them to ensure their well-being rather than using their own initiative.

## **Conclusions**

For all of the women interviewed for this study, participation in the access course was an enjoyable experience, developing the women's confidence and self-esteem. They felt that it had improved their lives in a number of ways and encouraged them

to be more positive about themselves. Lack of motivation was not a factor for these women, as all were keen to continue with their studies. Whilst partners were not hostile to their study, there was no renegotiation of roles to allow for the women's additional workloads. Study was supported as long as it fitted into the existing routine in the household. For most of the women, the access course was seen as an opportunity to fulfil their educational potential rather than a means of career development.

The majority of these women did not continue with their studies because of caring responsibilities within the family. They felt a moral obligation to assist the members of their family where possible. Within the working-class society, kin relations are still extremely strong and women are still regarded as the main carers within families. The women's caring role did not cease when their children became independent but rather continued throughout their lives. Whilst the participants in this study did not feel resentful about missing their opportunity to continue with their study, those who had taken on caring responsibilities felt, realistically, that it was unlikely that they would return to study in the near future. It was noted in the *Observer* newspaper on May 14, 2000 (p. 20) that one of the fondest hopes of the then Home Secretary Jack Straw and his Ministerial Group on the family was that grandparents could be encouraged to play a larger role in rearing their grandchildren. It must be recognised that this continuation of the caring role may cost less financially for the mothers involved, but can have a high cost in terms of the carer's personal development. For the government this cheap childcare means that mothers can be pushed back to work and their minimal provision of childcare can be legitimised.

Not surprisingly, finance was also a main issue for these women. Whilst government moves to encourage universities to widen access by promoting access courses for those unable to enter education through the traditional means are to be welcomed, these policies appear to be somewhat at odds with their overall educational policies. Access students are now forced to pay fees and are no longer able to obtain maintenance grants. Tighter benefit regulations introduced as part of the Job Seekers Allowance (1996) mean that the numbers of hours a student can study have been reduced from 21 to 16. Also, stricter rules regarding the search for work ensures that one must set aside more time to prove that one has been actively seeking work. Therefore undertaking an access course may not be a viable option.

Also important is the fact that many of these women lacked the knowledge to make informed choices about their futures. They were unsure about which courses were open to them and the different patterns of study available. They were also confused and ill informed about the financial regulations now associated with full and part-time study. Contact with the career's office was described as a very negative experience, and this is something which the university must address. As these women are constrained financially and geographically, it is vital that they have a clear picture of what is available and what it is going to cost them. Informed choices are impossible without clear accessible information. What this study highlights is that if the British government is serious about promoting social inclusion through education then it is important that it actually speaks to students, finding out what

their particular needs are rather than simply assuming that they are being catered for. Also, education policies must take account of the fundamental structures within society that restrict the choices available to women. Educational policies that stress inclusion and social justice with equal opportunities for all simply ignore the broader social structures that define and restrict women's choices. Universities have a responsibility to undertake research into the reasons for withdrawal from education, and simply to state that the reasons depend on individual circumstances is not acceptable. It is not simply a question of putting bottoms on seats but setting in place structures which can enable all citizens to exercise their social, economic and political rights. Listening to the voices of those who have been part of the system but were unable to continue is essential if change is to become a reality.

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