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**Accessing and Making the Transition from Further
Education to Higher Education: important socio-economic
and life course considerations**

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Executive Summary

The study upon which this paper is based aimed to explore the experiences of students enrolled on 'Access to Social Work' courses striving to navigate their way from further education (FE) to higher education (HE) social work programmes. The study was set within the context of widening participation policy and more stringent Department of Health (DH) entry requirements for social work education introduced in 2003. These requirements stipulate that all applicants to social work education must demonstrate key skills in literacy and numeracy equivalent to grade C GCSE, and personal suitability for social work (DH, 2002).

Whilst undertaking the role of Social Work Admissions Tutor at Middlesex University from 2001-2005, both pre and post the introduction of the DH entry requirements, I became aware through my widening participation work with local FE colleges that some students from less privileged social backgrounds were experiencing increasing difficulty in accessing the BA Social Work at Middlesex University (Dillon, 2007a; Dillon, 2007c). This may have been due, in part, to the increased volume of social work applications now apparent within social work education (GSCC, 2008 and 2009). The continual increase in applications may be as a result of widening participation policy, a key governmental policy objective to broaden access to HE to students from under-represented groups. Other initiatives such as various DH recruitment drives to increase the social work workforce, and the introduction of a non-income assessed bursary with the BA Social Work in 2003 may also have made social work a more popular career choice and resulted in a broader spectrum of students training to be social workers in terms of age, income, experience and diversity" (Hafford-Letchfield, 2007: 171; see also, GSCC, 2009). Whilst the increased interest in social work as a career is generally to be welcomed, my professional concern is that the increased competition for social work places and more stringent entry requirements for social work education may have created additional access barriers and new educational inequalities among some students from less privileged social backgrounds.

The study undertaken explored some of these professional tensions and concerns, and formed the basis of a thesis completed for the award of Doctor of Education at the Institute of Education, University of London. This is a professional doctorate. Hence, the study focussed on a key aspect of my professional practice, namely, widening participation and social work admissions policy and practice. Particular focus was given to the experiences of BME students as more than 50% of Middlesex University's student population is from a minority ethnic social background, including around 600 overseas students (Middlesex University Equality and Diversity Strategy, 2008). In addition, both the literature, and the General Social Care Council (GSCC), the regulatory body for social work education, have revealed differential outcomes in access, progression and achievement for these particular students (see inter, alia, Connor et al, 2004; HEFCE, 2006; Tolley and Rundel, 2006; Archer and Francis, 2007; HEA, 2008; GSCC, 2008; GSCC, 2009). Issues of intersectionality in terms of ethnicity, gender and class were also of central consideration when investigating access students at three FE colleges in terms of their educational and career decision-making, social background factors, and key influential 'turning points' (i.e. life events/experiences) influencing these processes. The perspectives of three course tutors were also investigated.

Findings

- Students' education and career decision-making are generally inextricably linked.
- Students' education and career decision-making are influenced by key 'turning points' characterised by significant life events.
- Key 'turning points' influencing education and career decision-making can be 'structural', 'forced' or self-initiated'.

- Key turning points can be classified as 'primary' and 'secondary'.
- 'Secondary turning points', relating to key events occurring at later points in the life cycle, had the most significant impact on education and career decision-making.
- Family influence was perhaps an unconscious influence on career choices, demonstrated by the majority of participants following similar career trajectories to at least one of their parents.
- The generally higher status career options chosen by students compared to one or both of their parents suggests some increase in social mobility over generations of families.
- Access students' education and career trajectories are generally complex, frequently non-linear and influenced by a number of different factors, including socio-economic circumstances.
- The pursuit of particular educational objectives was seen as an important means of advancing students' life chances and also those of their families.
- BME students' education and career decision-making was strongly motivated by a drive to overcome sometimes severe socio-economic disadvantages
- BME students were also motivated by wanting the opportunity to give something back in the future to people from similar ethnic communities in comparable socio-economic situations.
- Adverse socio-economic circumstances presented potential obstacles to students realising their education and career ambitions.
- Adverse socio-economic circumstances experienced by students were compounded by a lack of economic, social and cultural capital evident among the students.
- Issues of poverty experienced by some of the students were exacerbated by the lack of governmental financial support for vocational education choices such as access courses.
- Very few students applied to pre-1992 universities and only one student secured a place at this type of institution.
- Students were far more likely to apply to post-1992 universities, but a minority were unsuccessful in securing social work places, or a HE place per se.
- BME students disproportionately experienced more challenges to fulfilling their education and career desires at both situational and structural levels.
- BME students generally had less economic, social and cultural capital than their white counterparts, compounded by social inequalities apparent across generations of families.
- BME students disproportionately experienced more barriers when attempting to gain entry to both pre-1992 and post-1992 HEIs.
- Barriers to HE entry for BME students included problems with basic skills development; stereotyping, and ethnocentricity and eurocentricity when undergoing HE social work selection procedures.

- Barriers to students achieving particular education and career aspirations were compounded by the interplay of gender, ethnicity and class.
- Course tutors played a key role in 'fine-tuning' and confirming students' career decision-making.
- The academic and pastoral care provided by course tutors was fundamental in preparing students for HE and in building up their confidence levels.
- Course tutors were instrumental in addressing social inequalities through their aspiration raising work; for example, encouraging students to pursue higher status careers in social work rather than in social care.
- The course tutors' own social backgrounds were an influential factor in generating the supportive learning cultures apparent among the three access courses.
- The findings confirm my professional concerns that some students from less privileged social backgrounds are experiencing increasing challenges accessing social work education, and this is disproportionately the case for BME students.
- Despite barriers experienced, the exercise of agency was strong among the students, characterised by a strong motivational drive and determination to overcome existing situational and institutional barriers to HE progression.
- The students were passionate about wanting to make a difference to people and to society through the pursuit of their education and career aspirations.

Key messages for social work education, HE per se and widening participation policy

- Access students' education and career trajectories are complex and non-linear.
- Admissions procedures need to be holistic and balanced, taking into account social background factors denoting suitability for social work.
- Students potential to succeed must be considered not just at the point of entry, but over the duration of the three year BA Social Work.
- Students' unique life course experiences need to be seen as an asset to HE and to the social work profession.
- More needs to be done to support access students' entry and transition to social work education.

Accessing and Making the Transition from Further Education to Higher Education: important socio-economic and life course considerations

Introduction

The study undertaken aimed to explore relevant social background factors and key 'turning points' influencing the education and career choices open to students from 'non-traditional', or less privileged social backgrounds enrolled on FE access courses. It was set within the context of widening participation and the introduction of more stringent entry requirements for social work education in 2003.

Background

Widening participation, also sometimes referred to as 'widening educational participation', is a key policy objective of the current Government. It arises out of historical concerns about the persistent under-representation of students in HE from less privileged social backgrounds, notably, students from low income families, particular minority ethnic groups, those with disabilities, and also women in general (see Robbins, 1963; Dearing, 1997; Kennedy, 1997). In essence, widening participation policy aims to encourage HE entry from students under-represented within British universities (QAA, 2008b). Whilst widening participation initiatives such as access courses have had a modicum of success (i.e. participation rates among previously under-represented social groups have improved), such students are mainly to be found clustered within post-1992 universities, while the more privileged students are still dominant within the old, elite universities (Archer et al, 2003; Guardian, 2009). Moreover, in general, students following the 'traditional' 'A' level route are far more likely than 'non-traditional' students pursuing vocational routes to HE, such as access courses, to be offered university places (Wolf, 2002; Connor et al, 2004; HEFCE, 2006 and 2009). Whilst the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE, 2006) notes the progress that universities have made in embedding widening participation as a core part of their mission, both HEFCE and a recent report from the Cabinet Office (2009), suggest much more still needs to be done to encourage access to HE for vocational learners and for those wishing to enter different professions.

Rationale

In the context of social work education, widening participation policies appear to have increased the demand for social work places and led to increased competition for places (GSCC, 2008 and 2009). This increase in social work applications was confirmed within my own department by quantitative admissions data that I collected over a four year period. There was a sharp year-on-year increase in the number of BA Social Work applications. Indeed, applications more than trebled between the academic years 2001-2005 (Dillon, 2002, 2003, 2004a, 2004b; 2005). To provide an illustrative example from one particular year, between January 2004 and January 2005, 752 applicants applied for eighteen places, a percentage increase of 42 per cent; the ratio of applications to entrants was 1:44 for this particular academic year (Dillon, 2004b).

In addition to increased competition creating potential barriers to social work education, the situation has arguably been exacerbated by more stringent Department of Health (DH) entry requirements introduced with the BA Social Work in 2003. The DH outlined four key entry requirements for the BA Social Work: Key skills in English and mathematics equivalent to GCSE grade C; the ability to communicate clearly and accurately in spoken and written English; a Criminal Records Bureau check (CRB); and demonstration of 'appropriate personal and intellectual qualities to be social workers' (DH, 2002: 2). These entry requirements were introduced following the recommendations of the Laming Report (Laming, 2003) which was an independent inquiry into the high profile child abuse case of Victoria Climbié (ibid). In particular, the report highlighted concerns that social workers did not always have the apposite literacy skills to fulfill essential social work roles (Laming, 2003;

Rai, 2004); for example, ability to write the court reports which can determine whether a child is removed from their family.

Consequently, the DH professional and academic entry requirements have placed an increased onus on social work educators to admit students with appropriate academic skills with the potential to become competent, accountable social workers who will uphold professional standards (Dillon, 2007b). However, a key professional concern is that these entry requirements have led to an over-emphasis on academic skills, with other equally important aspects of suitability for social work (e.g. relevant social background factors and experiences, and the importance of 'softer skills' such as 'warmth', empathy and sensitivity), being seen as secondary and, therefore, given less consideration during HE social work selection processes. Together the increased competition for places and more stringent entry requirements may have created additional barriers and prohibited some students from less privileged backgrounds entry to social work education.

Literature Review

The enduring problem of unequal HE participation was highlighted in the 2003 HE White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education* (DES, 2003). Here, a particular concern was the persistent under-representation of white working class men in HE, and the over-representation of students from BME backgrounds within post-1992 universities. The White Paper acknowledged that whilst there had been improvements since the Robbins and Dearing reports, which also illustrated issues of under-representation among particular social groups, the social class gap was still "unacceptably high" (DES, 2003: 17).

A review of widening participation research commissioned by HEFCE (Gorard et al, 2006), summarised the varied barriers to HE faced by potential and actual students. This review identified three types of barriers to HE participation: situational barriers (e.g. individual circumstances), institutional barriers (e.g. admissions procedures), and dispositional barriers (e.g. an individual's motivation and attitudes to learning) (Gorard et al, 2006: 5). Gorard et al. (2006: 30) also point out that, "surprisingly few studies [...] have attempted to draw a link between social background characteristics and aspirations to participate in post-compulsory education". It also commented on the need for more research following students up at different stages of the life cycle.

In the context of social work education, very few UK studies have explored 'Access to Social Work' students' experiences at the point when they are striving to progress to HE social work programmes, especially the experiences of black minority ethnic (BME) students. Whilst Jones' (2006) study did explore these particular students' experiences, her investigation only focused on one course and did not examine access barriers to HE. Other studies (see Aymer and Bryan, 1996; Moriarty, 2004; Hussein, et. al, 2007; Moriarty and Murray, 2007; Hafford-Letchfield, 2007; Holmstrom and Taylor, 2008; GSCC, 2008; GSCC, 2009) have explored issues for students from different socio-economic and less privileged backgrounds, but this was in the case of students already enrolled on HE social work programmes. Another study, Cropper (2000), focused specifically on the experiences of BME students enrolled on an 'Access to Social Work' course within an HEI setting. This study primarily investigated a mentoring scheme for students. It did make, however, some insightful observations in relation to colour-blind and ethnocentric learning and teaching strategies sometimes apparent within higher education institutions (HEIs). It also suggested useful strategies for supporting BME students specifically within the context of social work education.

Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework that underpinned the study was interdisciplinary in nature and built upon knowledge from sociology, critical social theory and life course development. Theoretical ideas developed by Bourdieu (1998); Hodgkinson et al (1996), and ideas from critical race theory were particularly pertinent to the study. Bourdieu's critical analysis of class relations,

and his social reproduction thesis, provides one possible explanation for why unequal educational opportunities prevail among different social groups. Bourdieu saw the education system as a hidden structure manipulated by the powerful to reproduce the overall society and described the social processes by which minority elites shape society and perpetuate their interests, thus being advantaged in the process (ibid). Bourdieu did, however, recognise that individuals can also shape their own life chance; hence, recognising dynamics of structure and agency at play.

In contrast, Hodkinson et al (1996) explored issues of social class and the interplay between structure and agency and life course factors, with a specific focus on vocational education and training. They suggest individual social action can be shaped by three types of 'turning points' or key life events, classified according to their causes, *structural*, *self-initiated* or *forced* (Hodkinson et al, 1996: 142-143). 'Structural turning points' include non-participation in education because of socio-economic disadvantage, for example. 'Self-initiated turning points' refer to when an individual is self-determining in transforming their lives through accessing HE education, for example. 'Forced turning points' are the result of external events; for example, an accident or bereavement, which might prevent a student from entering, or completing an education course. Finally ideas from critical race theory, which offers "a legal theory of race and racism designed to uncover how race and racism operate in the law and in society" (Parker and Lynn, 2009: 148), was used as a lens through which to expose educational problems among BME students who participated in the study. Critical race theory also legitimises and gives voice to the educational experiences of BME students so that they can be heard; in doing so it embraces notions of agency and transformation (Fernandez, 2002).

Methodology

Research design

The investigation undertaken employed a mixed method approach using both quantitative and qualitative methods involving questionnaires, focus groups and individual interviews. This kind of design facilitates triangulation of the findings and promotes research rigour in relation to validity and reliability (Robson, 2002).

Methodological orientation

The methodological orientation of the study was informed by two traditions of inquiry. Firstly, an iterative (hermeneutics) approach underpinned by phenomenology, which is concerned with studying, understanding and interpreting phenomenon; for example, particular human behaviour, structures of society and how people function within these frequently deep structures (Robson, 2002). Second, an investigative (semiotic) approach, influenced by critical realism, which embraces phenomenology, but also recognises the contribution of symbolic interactionism (Webb and Webb, 2006). Critical realism recognises that the "real world is not only very complex but stratified into different layers, and that social reality incorporates individuals, groups and institutional and societal levels" (Robson, 2002: 32). It also conceives of knowledge as the result of the impact that political and social forces have on institutions and individuals.

In contrast, a methodological orientation embracing both phenomenology and symbolic interactionism, "attempts to understand the [deep] hidden meanings of phenomena and the essences of an experience together with how participants make sense of these", in terms of meaningful statements and other symbolic forms of expression (Grbich, 2007: 84). Symbolic interactionism in particular recognises that people can be self-determining and embraces ideas relating to serendipity, unforeseen consequences of actions and the possibilities of transformation (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000; Webb and Webb, 2006).

Research aims

The key aims of the study were to:

- To explore the social background of cohorts of students enrolled on 'Access to Social Work' FE courses.
- To explore the education and career decision-making and choices open to students per se, and with particular reference to BME students' experiences.
- To investigate whether students' education and career aspirations were influenced by key 'turning points' in their lives.
- To identify the outcome of students' HE applications.
- To elicit course tutors perspectives on students' education and career decision-making and any related obstacles that they considered they experienced.
- To consider the implications of the findings for 'Access to Social Work' students, my department, Middlesex University, and widening participation policy.

Research questions

The study focused on the following five research questions:

1. What motivations and key 'turning points' influence 'non-traditional' students' educational and career decision-making?
2. Do 'non-traditional' students in general and BME students in particular experience any obstacles or barriers when pursuing their post-compulsory education and career aspirations?
3. Do course tutors play a role in 'non-traditional' students' educational and career decision-making?
4. Do course tutors consider that 'Access to Social Work' students in general and BME students in particular experience any obstacles and barriers when pursuing their education and career choices?
5. What are the implications of the findings for a) 'non-traditional' students b) my own professional practice and c) widening participation policy and practice?

Research ethics

Ethical approval and consent was granted from the participating FE colleges and individual tutors and students. Confidentiality was adhered to and entailed not identifying the participating colleges, students and tutors. Pseudonyms were used for the colleges and research participants, and all research documents, tapes, transcripts and other research-related material were securely stored and then destroyed at the end of the research process.

A key ethical concern that I grappled with throughout the research process related to concerns about potentially further problematising groups of students already considered to be problematic in the literature, that is, 'non-traditional' students, and specifically BME students.

Whilst a positive aspect of my investigation included highlighting, for example, the key strengths and efforts of the students to overcome social disadvantages, I also identified particular difficulties experienced, for example, problems with basic skills development. In exposing these issues, I am, therefore, aware that I run the risk of negative interpretation of my findings; for example, such issues being seen as individual deficits or problems located within particular social groups, rather than perhaps linked to broader, structural disadvantages. However, it is my hope that this study primarily illustrates the resilience of the students in striving to overcome socio-economic disadvantages, and the contribution that their experiences can make to social work education, and the social work profession.

Data collection

The research tools used for the study included social background and HE choice/outcome questionnaires, initial and follow-up focus group with students, and individual interviews with students and course tutors. Fifty-five students (the entire cohort of students at the 3 colleges) completed social background questionnaires. Twenty one students participated in initial focus groups. Thirteen students participated in follow-up focus groups at the end of their course, and individual interviews were conducted with four students and three course tutors. Finally, 12 students completed HE choice/outcome questionnaires at the end of their studies.

The social background questionnaires enabled the collection of contextual information including: students' ages, ethnicity, social class, family commitments, their educational background, and that of their parents and, where known, the outcome of HE applications. These were subsequently used as a sampling tool for the focus groups and individual interviews. The initial and follow-up focus groups provided the opportunity to elicit data from a larger number of students than would have been possible with individual interviews. This research strategy also enabled an assessment of any changes in students' education and career decision-making over time, and is recognised as a particularly useful method for exploring motivations and perceptions (Scottish Executive, 2005). The individual interviews with students and course tutors permitted a more in-depth exploration of students' lives and educational experiences, their career and educational aspirations, and related decision-making processes, and tutors' perspectives on these areas. The completion of HE choice/outcome questionnaire enabled an assessment of the number and type of universities that students had applied to, and the outcome of these applications.

The context

The fieldwork for the study took place between June 2008 and June 2009 and was carried out within three different FE college sites in the South East of England. Two colleges were located within one city centre, and the other within an outer city borough. The colleges shared similar characteristics in that they all catered for students from a variety of socio-economic and minority ethnic backgrounds and all had well established access courses with partnership links with Middlesex University and other HEIs.

Sampling

The colleges were selected on pragmatic grounds using a convenience sampling strategy. This involves choosing the nearest and most convenient locations and persons to act as respondents (Robson, 2002: 265). The students who participated in the focus groups were selected using an opportunistic sampling strategy. Opportunity sampling derives from psychology and entails using people from the target population available at the time and willing to take part (Robson, 2002). The decision to use this sampling strategy was based on problems experienced during the pilot phase, when a randomised stratified sampling was to be employed. Due to the busy schedules of the students and course tutors the planned sampling strategy was not possible; hence, the use of opportunistic sampling. Students were

selected for individual interviews using a purposive sampling strategy, that is, students from BME backgrounds who had barriers to overcome due to their personal and socio-economic circumstances were specifically chosen.

The samples

Of the fifty-five students who completed social background questionnaires, 78% of the sample were women; 78% were from BME groups; 74% self-defined themselves as 'working class', and the students ranged in age from 18-48, with 32 being the average age. Of the twenty one students who participated in the initial focus groups, 17 were female and four male; 16 were from BME groups and five were white. Of the thirteen students who participated in two follow-up focus groups, 10 were female and three male; 10 were from BME groups and three were white. Finally, of the twelve students who completed higher education/choice questionnaires at the end of their studies, 9 were female and 3 male, and 9 were from BME groups and 3 were white.

Data analysis

Quantitative data analysis methods were used to analyse information supplied on the social background questionnaires and HE choice/outcome questionnaires, including the number of participants from 'middle class' and 'working class' backgrounds and their average age. This data was used to contextualise and to inform and support the findings from the focus groups and semi-structured interviews; it also aided the interpretation and triangulation of the findings.

Qualitative data analysis methods were used to analyse the information gathered from the focus groups and individual interviews. One main approach, 'thematic analysis', influenced by Miles and Huberman (1994), was used. These authors view analysis as consisting of a concurrent flow of activity involving data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing and verification. This includes producing summaries and abstracts, developing initial codes and categories and memo writing. In terms of data display, this entails representing the data in a rigorous and systematic way by, for example, using matrices, charts or tables. Finally, verification entails drawing conclusions about what the data say and what it means in terms of what themes are emerging from the data and any patterns, regularities and irregularities, for example (Miles and Huberman, 1994). These processes are not necessarily linear; instead, they are part of "a continuous iterative process" (Robson, 2002: 476).

Strengths of the study

A key strength of the study relates to triangulation. The latter "involves the use of multiple sources to enhance the rigour of research" (Robson, 2002: 174). Denzin (1988) distinguishes between four types of triangulation: 1) the use of more than one method of data collection; 2) observer triangulation; 3) methodological triangulation, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches and 4) theory triangulation using multiple theories or perspectives. Three different types of triangulation were employed for my study. Firstly, three main methods were used to collect data, including focus groups both at the beginning and at the end of participants' studies. The interviews with course tutors also provided an additional perspective and further aided triangulation. Secondly, a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods was used to analyse the latter. Thirdly, four main theoretical bodies of knowledge deriving from sociology, critical social theory, feminism and life course development were drawn upon and, finally, issues of intersectionality *vis-à-vis* class, ethnicity and gender were explored in relation to research participants' education and career decision-making.

Limitations of the study

A limitation of the study was not having sufficient time to be able to verify the interpretations of the findings with all of the research participants. However, some verification was possible during the semi-structured interviews with students and during the follow-up focus groups

conducted at the end of the students' studies. Another limitation was also the small sample sizes for the individual interviews. However, time did not permit a more in-depth investigation of additional students' experience.

Findings

Key findings from the study are presented and discussed under three main themes that emerged from analysis of the data: *Social Background Factors and Prevailing and New Social Inequalities; Influences on Students' Education and Career Trajectories over the Life Course, and Supportive Learning Cultures as a Counterbalance to Social Inequalities.*

Social background factors and prevailing and new social inequalities

Most of the students (74%) were from 'working class' or less privileged social backgrounds and nearly all were combining study with low paid/status work within social care to 'make ends meet', and to help them overcome adverse socio-economic circumstances in the longer-term. They were mainly mature students - their average age was 32 - were predominately women (78%), and from black minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds (78%). The historical over-representation of women pursuing careers in social work has been well documented (see inter, alia, Perry and Cree, 2003, GSCC, 2008 and 2009). The predominance of BME students on the three access courses is mirrored by the growing numbers of such students now entering social work education (GSCC, 2008 and 2009). The over-representation of students from working class and generally less privileged social backgrounds is a reflection of the widening participation role of access courses (Jones, 2006). However, historically there has been an over-representation of women and BME students progressing to higher education through vocational routes such as access courses (see Dearing, 1997).

Social disadvantages such as poverty, time pressures, and initial low confidence in academic ability presented additional challenges for some of the students when striving to progress to BA Social Work programmes. Perhaps partially as a result of these social disadvantages, the students were less likely to apply or to be offered places at pre-1992 universities; indeed, less than half (30%) of the fifty three students who supplied information applied to pre-1992 universities, and only one student managed to secure a social work place at this type of institution. Some students also experienced difficulties in gaining entry to post-1992 universities. It is, however, recognised that these findings may partially be a reflection of the number of particular types of universities within the geographical areas where the students lived. Students' education decision-making may have also been made on rational choice or pragmatic grounds; for example, family commitments and the commutable distance of particular universities, or where students considered they would best 'fit in'. A sense of 'belonging' is also an important consideration when choosing a university, as was illustrated by a recent study of social work students (Moriarty et al, 2009), and confirmed by some of the students in this study. Conversely, the university choices of students may provide further indication of the historical under-representation of students from less privileged backgrounds in pre-1992 universities and their over-representation in post-1992 universities (see inter, alia, Robbins Report, 1963; the Dearing Report, 1997, DES, 2003, Archer et al, 2003).

Manifestly, barriers to entry to social work education were disproportionately evident among BME students. They were less likely than their white/other counterparts to be short-listed, or to secure a place after undergoing selection procedures. Moreover, a minority of these students were unsuccessful in securing places on any vocational or non-vocational degree programmes. Two explanations provided by the access course tutors for these disparities related to cultural misunderstandings and racial bias during social work education admission processes. One tutor considered, for example, that the animated communication sometimes apparent among BME students was on occasion misconstrued as aggression. There was also a perception, also shared by a minority of BME students in the study, that more was expected of them during admissions procedures. Stereotyping *vis-à-vis* career choices deemed appropriate for particular students was also considered to be an issue, with assumptions being made that BME students

had the 'correct' caring disposition for social work and particular nursing roles. Perhaps as a result of these assumptions, social work was generally considered by two course tutors, and some of the students, to be a more diverse profession that was more open to BME students and those from a range of other different ethnic backgrounds, as the following observations illustrate:

I mean, I think eh from the point of view of social workers, I know because I take a lot of calls from social workers because I work within the health team, and, um, it seems to me like United Nations well, first of all, there seems to be so many different people that work in one office nobody seems to stay long enough to get to know anyone, but every time you ring up there seems to be, you know, different; there's Carlos and then there's different sounding names and, so I've always seen social work as quite open and hopefully it should be very diverse (Amelia – White British female student).

I think it could well be that em that it's seen as a destination that they are welcomed, so they don't have to open new doors and go through any glass ceilings or any, you know, foundational work. It's already done. It could be that (Course Tutor – Black British female).

Conversely, career choices such as medicine, law and specialist areas of nursing such as midwifery, which were viewed as more 'middle class' professions, were considered less open to BME students because of a lack of precedent of people from these backgrounds entering these professions. BME students being deemed more appropriate for social work does not, however, explain why some of these students experienced obstacles to entry to social work programmes. The issues identified here suggest problems of ethnocentricity and eurocentricity *vis-à-vis* social work education selection processes, and of BME students having more restricted career choices and problems associated with them having limited economic, social and cultural capital.

Other barriers to social work education reported by the course tutors included deficiencies in key skills in mathematics and/or English. This was particularly the case where English was a second or third language and for those with previous limited academic attainment; for example, students making the leap from NVQ to 'A' level equivalent courses such as the access course. Issues with basic or key skills were also found among a minority of black African students who already had first degrees awarded overseas. Other reported obstacles related to the general impact of social disadvantages over the life course, and the demands and challenges of the access course, which proved insurmountable for some students, thus resulting in them having to leave or dropping out from the course. This was reflected in high attrition rates; of the seventy seven students who had originally enrolled on the three access courses, nearly half (44%) had dropped out.

Problems of what the author refers to as *vocational stratification*, characterised by the interplay of social factors relating to ethnicity, gender and class, appear to have both created and reinforced the barriers to social work education experienced by some students. These educational inequalities were considered by the course tutors to have intensified since the introduction of more stringent entry requirements for the BA Social Work in 2003, and the Government's increased emphasis on key skills and employability (DWP, 2009). An increased focus on the acquisition of key skills, particularly in mathematics and English, has also resulted in changes to Access to Higher Education provision; a new Access to Higher Education Diploma, with level three requirements in English and mathematics, was introduced from 2008/09 onwards. As a response, one of the colleges introduced tougher admissions criteria, which resulted in a higher percentage of students failing to gain entry to this particular access course. This finding suggests that educational inequalities among some students are being compounded by the increased emphasis now placed on key skills in English and mathematics.

Issues of *vocational stratification* were exacerbated by some students receiving less financial support from the State with their studies compared to those pursuing other 'care' related courses such as childminding or a BTEC award, as the following comments illustrate:

...with the BTEC, you get £15 week training money, and Jobcentre Plus will pay for childcare for you as well. And if you needed help with books, they were also willing to help with that as well. But for this course, if they ask you to a work focus interview you have to go or you'd be penalised. And if they ask you to go on a training course, you have to go. They don't put any value on this course whatsoever (Joni – White British female student).

As Joni said they were quite happy helping me to be a childminder; they'll quite happily give you all the resources and all the help, all whatever you need and a little bit of training chucked it. But when you want to do something – I mean I'm not putting that down, I was a childminder for a few years – but I want to use that experience to do more now, to be focused in another area and to be able to make it more personalised (Sheba – Black/White dual heritage female student).

As a consequence of the access course not being recognised as providing a viable route to gainful employment, several students had to demonstrate to the Jobcentre Plus¹ agency that they were actively seeking work by attending work focus interviews. To be able to continue with the access course, one student reported that she had provided inaccurate information to Jobcentre Plus about the course she was attending. These dynamics provide evidence of another form of stratification which the author refers to as *institutional stratification*; namely, jobs such as childminding - that are already highly gendered and associated with limited career prospects and low remuneration - being encouraged and reinforced by government policy, while those offering more status and scope for professional development are not. These findings not only suggest that some 'caring' careers choices are historically socially reproduced, but that new forms of social inequalities are becoming apparent within some areas of vocational education and training.

However, on a more optimistic note, the students in the study were working hard to overcome obstacles experienced and to improve their life chances. Whilst many of them were working part-time within low paid social care or other welfare services, which was also generally the case for one or more of their parents, they were also aspiring to careers in social work that would improve their economic status and provide additional professional prestige. This is an important finding, suggesting that social inequalities relating to the interaction of ethnicity, gender and class can be overcome over generations of families and across the life course.

Influences on students education and career trajectories over the life course

Wanting to make a difference, or having a passion for working with people was a strong motivating factor influencing the majority of the students' decision to become social workers, which concurs with findings from other studies (see Audit Commission, 2002; Moriarty and Murray, 2005; Scottish Executive, 2005 and GSCC, 2009). Whilst the number of men was relatively small (four in total), they shared similar motivations and aspirations to the women in the study. To illustrate further, several students employed within the field of social care wanted additional responsibility and power to be able to make more of a difference when working with service users. This desire had led to growing aspirations over time due to an increased awareness and, at times, frustration with current limited career opportunities open to some of the students. Essentially, the awareness accrued from previous work experience and the knowledge and understanding gained from undertaking the access course, translated into students having increased determination and self-confidence to pursue particular education and career objectives.

Key 'turning points' influencing students' education and career decision-making were found to be 'structural', 'self-initiated' or 'forced', as previously illustrated by Hodkinson et al (1996).

¹ Jobcentre Plus is the government-funded employment agency facility and the social security office for working-age people in Great Britain (Department for Work and Pensions, 2009).

Structural inequalities, linked to poverty for example, frequently compounded by the interplay of ethnicity, gender and class, formed the catalyst in the 'self-initiated' education and careers decisions of the majority of the students and their attempt to improve their material conditions, and in wanting to make a difference to those experiencing similar or other adverse socio-economic circumstances. It was also evident that earlier 'forced' inhibitory factors such as lack of qualifications and adverse social circumstances had prevented an earlier prioritisation of the self and a focus on self-development.

However, key motivational factors linked to significant life events were often more complex and can be subdivided into what the author has termed 'primary' and 'secondary' 'turning points'. Whilst primary 'turning points', such as time spent in care during childhood were significant, it was often the more cumulative effects of 'secondary turning points' occurring at later points in the life cycle that had the most impact on shaping students self-identity, dispositions and their education and career trajectories. For example, students who had come to the UK as refugees and who had also experienced racism on arrival in the UK were particularly sensitive to personal suffering and social problems in society. They were also strongly motivated to support others and alleviate suffering, as the following comments illustrate:

Initially I was just hoping to get a degree of any discipline. Em, but the fact is that I focused back on my...where I come from, the problems of my families, friends and I faced. I thought oh social work is the best programme I should do. Em and yes, once I qualify to be a social worker, I think I would help not just myself but many other people (Alanda – Black African male student).

...coming from Africa, and part of my area was being affected by the civil war. And I found that down there my area became so vulnerable, in the sense that children died, and children and adults died, and some were left to decompose because of the land mines. The thing is down there, there is not enough resources, for example like medication, education was sabotaged, and hospitals and the factories, everything. People were able to cultivate their own food where they could get a source of income; it was all destroyed. And from that time I say, if I receive education in this country I'm able to go back to serve my people down there (Esmea – Black African female student).

These findings suggest that students' education and career trajectories are often complex and non-linear, and that decision-making in these areas is a highly reflexive process influenced by a multitude of factors relating to experiences and events occurring over the life course. However, it was these very experiences that one of the course tutors considered make these particular students a valuable future asset to the social work profession because of insights accrued, and the more advanced empathy skills they are more likely to demonstrate when working with service users. These findings have implications for the selection methods used for selecting students for social work education. Those programmes who initially select and reject students for social work education on the basis of literacy and numeracy skills, for example, and then only proceed to interview candidates demonstrating proficiency in this area, are not providing the opportunity for some students to demonstrate the interpersonal skills and personal qualities that may make them suitable for social work during individual or group interviews. A predominant focus on literacy and/or mathematics skills during initial admissions assessment processes means that broader important aspects of suitability for social work are perhaps seen as secondary and are not being sufficiently considered or assessed during all aspects of social work education admissions processes.

Supportive learning cultures as a counterbalance to social inequalities

Supportive learning cultures, including learning support with basic skills development, career guidance and support from college tutors, were important counteracting factors to the social disadvantages experienced by the majority of the students in the study. This resulted in growing self-confidence, better academic results over the duration of the access course, and increased

education and career aspirations. One of the tutor's contributions was particularly significant in raising the aspirations of black African students who had come to the UK with limited understanding of the distinctions between social care and social work. Two of the tutors came from BME backgrounds which illustrates both the benefit and the importance of having teachers from a range of different social and ethnic backgrounds. Such teachers may have an enhanced understanding of what the issues are for students from different ethnic and social backgrounds, and are also recognised as providing important role models, particularly for BME students (Cropper, 2000). Informal support structures formed among the student body were considered by the students to provide an important source of emotional and academic support. This was seen as particularly important when students were struggling academically, during times of personal crisis, and when financial concerns potentially became too pressing. Some students were not only instrumental in supporting their peers, but in also deterring them from leaving the access course. The value of this kind of support is identified in the research literature (see Jones, 2006; Moriarty et al, 2009) and is critical for students from less privileged backgrounds striving to overcome social disadvantages, and who may be lacking in self-confidence.

Whilst this study has illustrated some of the challenges and barriers experienced by some students when endeavouring to fulfil their education and career desires, the exercise of agency was strong among students. This was demonstrated by the self-initiated actions of students to fulfil their education and career aspirations despite previous and current socio-economic difficulties. The crucial role of access courses in supporting students' education and career aspirations is illustrated by the following quote:

I think Access courses generally are for the less privileged, and absolutely crucial in getting them into higher education. I think we give them the confidence to move on to university, to believe in themselves that they can be practitioners. A lot of these guys come on wanting to do social work but never believing that they have the academic credentials or the confidence to do social work. And I think we are very influential as a team, not me, a team of people, and it's not just the tutors; it's all the support, the careers staff and all the support staff as well. I think as a team we are very influential yeah, in giving them the confidence to move on to the next stage (Course Tutor – White British male).

A central finding from the study is, therefore, the triumph over adversity demonstrated by the students. Whilst the majority of the students were not at the same 'starting point' as those from more privileged social backgrounds, demonstrated by their lack of economic, social and cultural capital, they were striving to complete the 'A' level equivalent standards of the access course in half the time generally taken for traditional 'A' levels. In addition to working hard to overcome socio-economic disadvantages and other obstacles experienced over the life course, they were passionate about wanting to work with, and make a difference and a contribution to service users, the social work profession, and to society. The kinds of struggles that are experienced and overcome by some BME students in particular are illustrated by Edwards and Polite (1992: 3), '...black achievement inevitably remains a triumph over the odds, a victory over struggle'. Both this statement and my study poignantly indicate that much more still needs to be done to help students from less privileged backgrounds fulfil their education and career objectives.

Discussion

The findings from this study suggest a need for greater awareness of the strong motivations and intrinsic value of recruiting students from different ethnic and social backgrounds to social work education. They also indicate that more needs to be done to both facilitate and support students from less privileged social backgrounds gaining entry to social work education. The issues identified in this study are especially important when it is considered that a commitment to social justice, widening participation and diversity are an essential part of the underpinning value base of social work. Indeed, the General Social Care Council's

Codes of Practice for Social Care Workers and Employers stress the importance of inclusiveness through social workers respecting diversity, different cultures and values (GSCC, 2002). This is an equally important consideration for social work education. It is, however, recognised that there are tensions for social work education in striving to fulfil a commitment to social justice and widening participation whilst also ensuring that social work students are competent in literacy and numeracy, and more generally, at the point of entry, during training and at the point of qualification. Indeed, related concerns have been outlined in previous and more recent independent inquiry reports of social work intervention relating to high profile child protection cases in England (Laming, 2003; Laming, 2009). This has resulted in policy objectives to facilitate 'better trained' and professionally competent social work practitioners. Indeed, the final report of the Social Work Task Force (2009) calls for reforms in social work education and training that should:

...begin with clear, consistent criteria for entry to social work courses – with a new regime for testing and interviewing candidates that balances academic and personal skills – so that all students are of a high calibre (Social Work Task Force, 2009: 7)

To this end, the following recommendations are made to facilitate a more rigorous and balanced approach to support the selection of students to social work education from a range of social and ethnic backgrounds, and greater collaboration and joint-working between further education and higher education:

- The introduction of national admissions criteria for the BA Social Work which provide a robust, balanced and holistic assessment of candidates' academic competence and personal suitability for social work
- Greater awareness among social work educators of the social background factors of prospective students, facilitated by admission procedures such as interview schedules for individual interviews addressing these specific areas (e.g. specific questions about candidates social backgrounds/experiences, how they have made sense of these, and what they have learnt from these experiences)
- More assessment by social work educators of the potential of students from less privileged social backgrounds to succeed not just at the point of entry, but over the duration of the three year BA Social Work.
- More reflexivity among social work educators when making admissions decisions to help avoid issues of ethnocentricity and eurocentricity.
- Social work educators to explain the differences between pre-1992 and post-1992 universities during college talks so that prospective students are able to make informed choices about which universities to select on their UCAS forms.
- Further education and higher education to provide more academic support for students experiencing difficulties with key skills development.
- More collaborative work between further education and higher education to help prepare and facilitate access students' entry and transition to social work programmes; for example, mentoring schemes and taster days.

Conclusion

This paper has illustrated some of the structural, policy driven, and situational barriers inhibiting some access students' entry to social work education. It has demonstrated how the interplay of social factors relating to ethnicity, class and gender can compound issues of social disadvantage and sometimes limit the education and career choices of students. The inter-relationship between structure and agency in relation to key 'turning points' in students' lives has been demonstrated, with agency acting as a strong motivating factor in students' education and career decision-making. The importance of supportive learning cultures, including support from tutors and peers, and access courses per se play a fundamental role in helping students to overcome social disadvantages and to pursue particular education and

career goals. However, it is these very experiences that make such students a valuable future asset to the social work profession. Finally some recommendations were made for admissions policy and practice and for higher education and further education in general.

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