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Presentation

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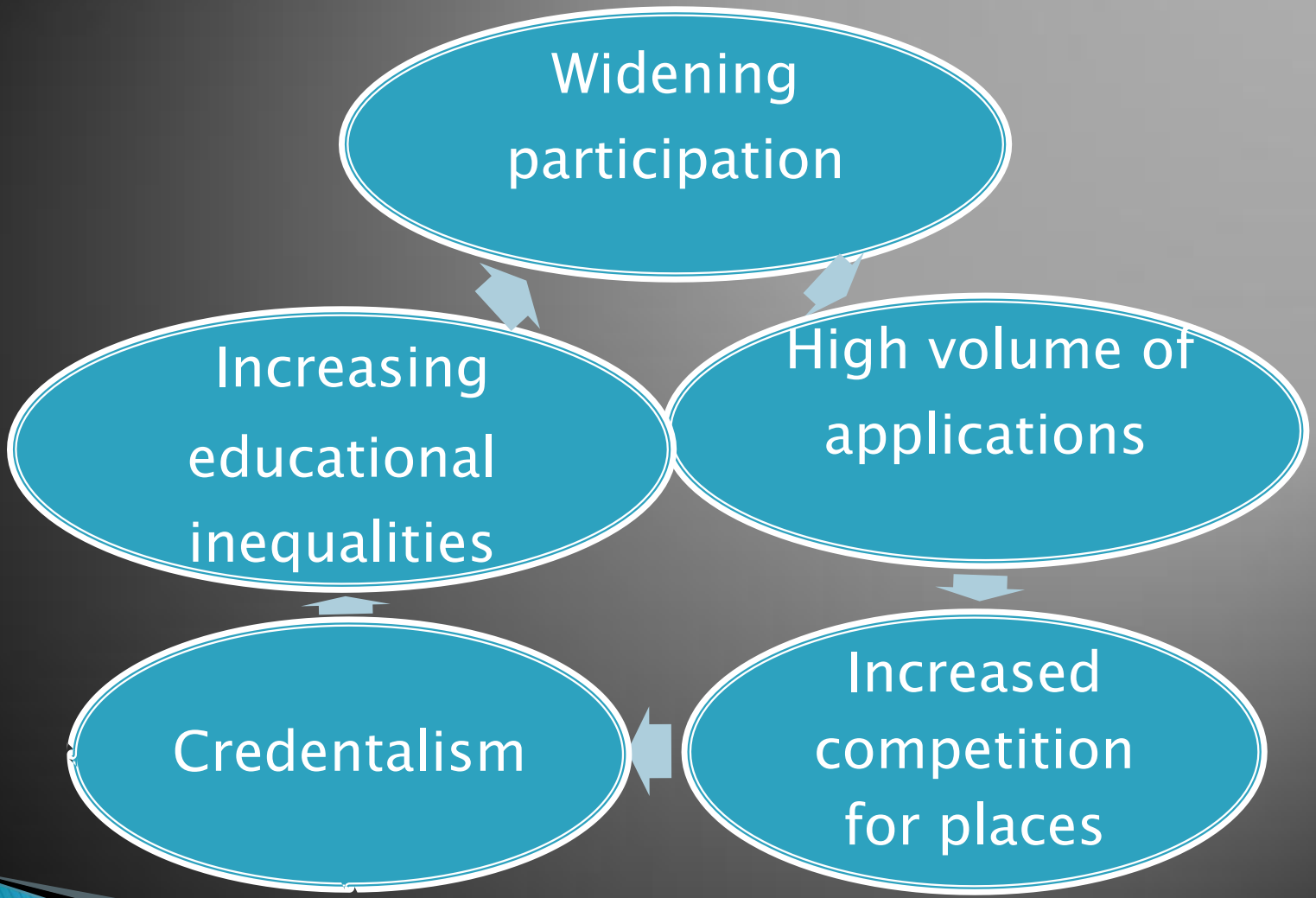
Accessing Social Work Education: Barriers and Triumphs

Dr Jean Dillon, Middlesex University

15th April 2010

Professional Concerns



The Study

- Set within the context of widening participation policy and more stringent DH entry requirements for social work education introduced in 2003.
- Mixed method design using quantitative and qualitative approaches.
- Multidisciplinary theoretical framework.

Finding 1: Social Background Factors

- 'Access to Social Work' courses are gendered, classed and raced.
- The students were generally experiencing adverse socio-economic circumstances e.g. poverty and low self-confidence.
- The majority of students were juggling several competing priorities, including work, study and family commitments.

Finding 2: General Barriers to HE

- Issues with key skills development, especially where English was a second language.
- Limited HE choices, but disproportionately the case for BME students = the inverse of the academic/vocational divide.
- A lack of State support for access courses.

Illustrative Quote

So what's happening, particularly for non-English speakers, non first language English speakers and others of those that have not had the advantages of sort of a full education, for whatever reason, is that they're not getting through our entry requirements… tests…to get onto the course, so they're falling there.

(College A Course Tutor – White British male)

Illustrative Quote

…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)

Findings 3: Admissions Barriers

- A lack of economic, social and cultural capital among students.
- Qualification inflation/credentialism.
- Cultural/attitudinal barriers, resulting in a perception that more is expected of access students, particularly those from BME backgrounds.

Illustrative Quote

What's happened here, and obviously, I can only speak for here, is that since social work training has become a degree we've upped the entry requirements to get onto Access. [In the past] *we set a very simple literacy and numeracy test and they had to get a certain amount right in each to get onto the course. We've upped the standard quite significantly; the difficulty of those two assessments is now filtering out a lot more people. Because, as you know,* [there is] *the absolute requirement for GCSE equivalence for maths and English that the Universities want now, before they'll admit people to a degree. So we have to be fairly certain that they've got a relatively basic understanding of maths, for example, before we let them onto the access course now.*

(College A Course Tutor – White British male)

Illustrative Quote

…social work is still seen as a closed middle class white area in terms of the number of students that actually get on to that programme from the ethnic minority. One typical thing is this year, you know, a lot more ethnic minority students are going into nursing because it is the old stereotype; they are nursing material because it's the area of caring, etc. But yet still they are not seen as social work material.

(College B Course tutor – African Caribbean female)

Finding 3: Enabling Factors

- The exercise of individual agency, characterised by strong determination to succeed and overcome adverse socio-economic experiences.
- Cumulative, often difficult, life course experiences translated into a strong motivation to make a positive contribution to society.
- Supportive learning cultures and aspiration-raising activities of course tutors.

Illustrative Quote

…coming from Africa, part of my area was being affected by the civil war. My area became so vulnerable, in the sense that children died, and adults died, and some were left to decompose because of the land mines. if I receive education In this country I'm able to go back to serve my people down there.

(Esmea – Black African female)

Illustrative Quote

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)

Illustrative 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.

(College A Course Tutor – White British male)

Key Messages (1)

- Educational inequalities are growing among particular groups of vocational learners.
- Access students' education and career trajectories are generally complex and non-linear.
- Access students demonstrate resilience and determination when striving to overcome socio-economic adversity and barriers to HE.

Key Messages (2)

- HEIs need to take into account social factors denoting personal suitability for social work, in addition to academic potential, when selecting students.
- 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 HEIs and to the social work profession.
- More understanding is needed of the role of access courses.