Widening participation: what can we learn from young people?

Harriet Dismore
University of Plymouth, UK
e-mail: harriet.dismore@plymouth.ac.uk

Abstract *The national Aimhigher initiative was introduced by the UK Government to widen participation in higher education by raising the aspirations and developing the abilities of young people from low socio-economic groups. This study sought to obtain an insight into the impact that the Aimhigher interventions have had upon young people within the Kent and Medway region. It draws upon data provided by 27 young people during paired and group interviews, particularly in relation to their level of awareness of higher education, the key influences in the decision making process and the additional sources of information that inform their understanding. The findings revealed that pupils were particularly benefiting from the support of Aimhigher learning mentors and were often influenced by their parents. Many of the pupils in this study indicated that obtaining a clearer idea of what universities were like and the work that would be expected of them was paramount to alleviating their fears and anxieties. However, the expectations that some pupils expressed, that gaining a higher qualification would undoubtedly lead to a better job and more income, might prove unrealistic. Furthermore, during discussions a number of pupils demonstrated a particular view of education and learning not in keeping with the notion of lifelong learning.*

Introduction

Ahead of the general election in 2001, the UK Labour Government used its election manifesto to announce a commitment to widen participation in higher education (HE) to 50 per cent of 18 to 30 year olds by 2010. Since this announcement, there has been a great deal of controversy about widening participation and, in 2002, the Committee of Public Accounts raised concerns that the target 'lacks clarity' (House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, 2002). More recently in 2008, the Director General for Higher Education stated that the Government would not hit the 2010 deadline and that 'we never thought we would' (Gill, 2008). Indeed, the HE initial participation rate for 17-30 year olds shows that the participation rate has risen by only 0.6 per cent to 39.8 per cent between 1999-2000 and 2006-7 (Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS), 2008). This potential shortfall cannot be attributed to lack of funds. Since the Government's 2003 White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education*, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has given institutions delivering HE £392 million in recurrent funding between 2001 and 2008 (National Audit Office, 2008). This is based on the premise that increasing the HE target will in turn instigate economic and social change: 'Our aim is to promote and provide the opportunity of successful participation in higher education to everyone who can benefit from it. This is vital for social justice and economic competitiveness' (HEFCE, 2008).

However, despite this seemingly straightforward aim, the very term 'widening participation' is complex and can be understood to have different meanings. For some, widening participation can relate just as much to retention of students as access for students because of a requirement not just to bring people into education, but also to enable people to progress through education (Stuart, 2002). Indeed, although UK universities have reportedly the most success at widening participation, they also have the highest drop-out rate (National Audit Office, 2007).

For some critics, the very process of widening participation threatens to further divide social groups. Wolf (2002), for example, claimed that education is used as a legitimate means of 'ranking' individuals and as more people attain higher level qualifications, employers raise the entry threshold. In other words, the people suffering from grade inflation are the people with the lowest levels of education to begin with. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) also argued this point, stating that academic devaluation increases the significance of social and cultural capital whilst

simultaneously devaluing human capital. In this vein, there remains concern for existing class inequality but, specifically, an over-representation of middle-class students within HE (Reay et al., 2001). Archer (2006) too has criticised the Government for failing to engage sufficiently with classed inequalities within the HE system and within wider societal structures. One way in which government is said to fail to engage with these inequalities is by locating lack of aspiration and self-esteem as personality deficits rather than as constructed through poverty and discrimination (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003), something which Jones and Thomas (2005: 617) described as akin to 'victim blaming'.

A number of measures have followed which are designed to counter these criticisms and to encourage young people to continue in their education after age sixteen and progress on to HE (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2003; DfES, 2005). One current Labour policy initiative, Aimhigher, is directed specifically at lower socio-economic groups (Aimhigher, 2008). Aimhigher is a programme introduced in the UK in 2004 which aims to widen participation in HE by raising the aspirations and developing the abilities of young people from under-represented groups. The programme is accessible to all young people in years nine to thirteen (thirteen to eighteen years old) who have the potential to go to university. Within this group widening participation students are targeted more specifically. These are students who have no family background of HE. Most Aimhigher activities take place at a regional level, which allows them to be tailored to the needs of specific communities. One regional community, Aimhigher Kent and Medway, works with existing initiatives to assist in developing post-fourteen progression routes from schools to further education (FE) and HE. The team works in partnership with schools, FE and HE liaison teams, admissions officers, widening participation units and local communities and businesses (Aimhigher Kent and Medway, 2008).

Research aim

The research reported here was carried out over a year and aimed to obtain an insight into the impact that the Aimhigher interventions have had upon young people in Kent and Medway. This article reports the data collected in relation to the following research questions:

- What is their general level of awareness of HE?

- What/who are the key influencers in the decision making process?

- How has participation in Aimhigher Kent and Medway activities affected a student's desire to progress into FE and HE?

Methods

The sample of pupils who participated in this project depended to an extent upon the availability of the different year groups. Target schools (schools serving particularly low socio-economic areas) were contacted by Aimhigher Kent and Medway in the first instance to arrange a suitable date for the researcher to visit. Schools were involved in different programmes of activities, including ones that focused specifically on languages; a school mentor programme (a mentor based in school, employed to work for Aimhigher with target students); and an ambassador scheme (university students employed by Aimhigher to visit schools and help to improve understanding about HE). Data gathering took place during the summer term at the end of the school year with pupils at various stages of their school career and interested in pursuing a range of professions. Table 1 presents the programme and participants of this research according to each school.

Group and paired interviews were then conducted with pupils participating in Aimhigher interventions

Table 1: Research participants

School	Participants	Age	Programme
S1	3 year 9	13	Language programme
S2	3 year 12	16	School mentor programme
S3	3 year 12	16	School mentor programme
S4	2 year 12	16	School mentor programme
S5	3 year 11 1 year 10	15 14	School mentor programme
S6	3 year 12	16	School mentor programme
S7	2 year 12	16	Ambassador scheme
S8	2 year 9 2 year 11	13 15	School mentor programme
S9	3 year 10	14	School mentor programme

in the nine target schools in Kent and Medway. A strength associated with group interviews is that the data is particularly rich, since it includes interaction between participants. Indeed, the support from peers in the group often encouraged a greater openness, and was carried out in such a way that not every participant had to respond to each question. All interview sessions were semi-structured so as to provide an opportunity for the researcher to explore a number of areas of interest without closing down the introduction of themes that were considered important to the interviewee themselves. All participants were asked for their consent to record the conversations.

The intention of the data analysis was not to make generalisations but to highlight and explore the emerging themes and patterns. Segments of data were categorised with an awareness of established theoretical concepts and ideas using 'provisional' code labels before classifying the data using more formal categories. The coding process required persistent checking for overlaps and inconsistencies until each segment was assigned to a category, and an important aspect of this process was to remain open to the discovery of new themes and categories as the process continued (Smith and Osborn, 2003). In order to maintain anonymity, codes are used to represent individuals and schools.

Findings

The findings presented here relate particularly to the first stages of the student life cycle during which, as stated by the Higher Education Academy (HEA, 2008), widening participation should be addressed. They particularly draw attention to the concerns of pupils about finance, although these were tempered by expectations of employment. They also emphasise the value of support received from Aimhigher and the family. However, certain responses raise questions about the pupils' regard for learning and how this might influence their transition to FE and HE.

Choosing to progress

In general, the older pupils had received a great deal more information about entry requirements and courses compared to younger pupils. Some of the year eleven (fifteen year old) pupils claimed that they would not even contemplate FE or HE until they had finished their exams (although these claims might have been due to the timing of the interviews). Of the older pupils' responses, it was clear that some still lacked confidence in their ability to continue into HE.

The following extracts were taken from interviews with older pupils who had decided to embark upon foundation courses before continuing into HE:

> Well I didn't apply for degree courses, I applied for three different ones first but then I decided to go for foundation to get a bit more experience, because I probably won't get in to a degree from here. I can apply, I think I have got enough UCAS [UK Universities and Colleges Admissions System] points, but the standard is completely different. (Yr 12, S3)

Although this extract shows that the various progression routes had been carefully considered by some of the older pupils, these concerns indicate a fear that, compared to their peers, they would be less prepared. Similarly, another pupil was of the opinion that other peers may have had an advantage because they had been studying for longer. This constant comparison to other peers is perhaps characteristic of the way that pupils from low socio-economic groups can perceive the HE environment and, as Reay (2005) found, their own place within that environment. That is not to say that there were no benefits in adopting this stance. Interestingly, this opinion seems also to have instilled a drive and motivation in one pupil that might otherwise have been absent:

> ...there have been kids who have been doing it since they were eight or something and they are better than me so I've got to keep pushing and pushing to get in front of them. When I'm in front, I can't rest, I've got to keep going. (Yr 12, S3)

These examples help to illustrate three points about the complexities of widening participation. Firstly there seems to be, according to this latter example, an added impetus to compete with peers if they are to 'get in front of them'. The second point is that pupils can continue to exhibit low self esteem despite the fact that the evidence of their own UCAS points suggests that they are capable of progressing to HE. This is a barrier that Aimhigher has been very active in trying to remove. Messages continually reinforce access to HE for young people from all backgrounds. For example, one Aimhigher resource produced for the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) is entitled *Don't Stop Doing What You Love* (Aimhigher, 2007).

The final point is the argument put forward by Jones and Thomas (2005), that by sending messages such as these, engagement or non-engagement with HE

is increasingly understood in attitudinal terms, with non-participation in HE being attributed to 'low aspirations'. This, they argue, can in turn denigrate other values and reasons for declining to participate. Evans described these as:

> a strong sense of family loyalty and family ties, a determination to use any skills acquired to further not just their individual situation but also that of their family, together with a perception of the distance between their worlds and those of prestigious universities. (Evans, 2008)

To help counter any feelings of inferiority, the same pupil was planning to undertake a foundation course because it would equip them with the evidence to demonstrate their work:

> Well this foundation, I will have so much work at the end of it. When I go to that degree interview, I will have so much work to show them and then I will feel better about it anyway. (Yr 12, S3)

Overall, these examples serve to illustrate a tension between how pupils viewed their own competence and the world of HE, particularly in relation to peers and the standard of work expected. This lack of confidence could be attributed, as Haggis and Pouget (2002) found, to an initial lack of academic success, possibly linked to an overall confusion about the nature and purposes of institutional learning. This is important if students no longer feel competent to be students and loose their secure learning identity built up during their time in FE (Christie et al., 2008). Inaccurate prior perceptions of HE can contribute to disengagement from the educational and social aspects of university life and, in turn, may have a direct impact upon student retention (Lowe and Cook, 2003). Similar tensions can also be observed in the ways that pupils responded to social and economic aspects of HE.

Funding

The recent publication on widening participation from the National Audit Office (2008) has stated that no claims can be made about whether financial factors have discouraged students from applying to HE institutions. At the time of this research, the average debt for first year students when they left university was predicted to be more than £17,500 (PUSH, 2008). Therefore, it was not a surprise to find that the greatest concern pupils had about

HE was funding and confusion about the different sources and systems of funding. For example, the following conversation occurred between two year twelve pupils:

> R1: I'm a bit worried about the finance and things.
>
> R2: Yeah.
>
> R1: Coz [sic], we're not the richest family in the world, there's [sic] all these bursaries and loans and everything, it's just a bit confusing. (Yr 12, S6)

There were a number of ways pupils could obtain the necessary information about finance, including career guidance, learning mentors employed by Aimhigher and websites. For example, some pupils had received information about working part-time to earn money whilst studying. The lessons they referred to were careers lessons but, as they discuss, information was also obtained by other means such as university prospectuses:

> R1: I thought lots of people who go to uni get a part time job because at uni, don't they have like a little job shop or something?
>
> I: How do you know about that?
>
> R1: We had lessons didn't we?
>
> R2: And in prospectuses they have them as well, about the job shop, to say what they do and how you get jobs.
>
> R1: Or in the university sometimes. (Yr 12, S4)

During some conversations, pupils attributed their knowledge about finance wholly to Aimhigher activities. After asking about the most useful thing they had learnt from Aimhigher, this pupil replied that:

> It would be probably about the finance because I was clueless on how the loans work, how I was going to pay off, if I was going to get any help at all with my fees, so that would probably be the most useful. (Yr 12, S4)

Interestingly, one younger pupil had not yet received any information about finance at HE level, but had received messages via the television programme, *Hollyoaks*. Yet, many of the pupils appeared to take a more pragmatic view of their situation by comparing

their own situation with that of their peers. This was expressed by a year eleven pupil, who said:

> Yeah, everyone's going to have money problems anyway. And the amount of people that do go and pull through it, it is something you've gotta [sic] do ain't [sic] it? You can't just not go just because there is one drawback. (Yr 11, S8)

The extent to which the financial barriers to HE can be addressed by initiatives such as Aimhigher appeared to rest with the end result, employment. To illustrate this point, a year twelve pupil stressed the need for more information about affording HE:

> I never thought that I would be able to afford university because I don't really come from a background where I could afford university. So I didn't really think about it so I think it should be put across to everyone that you can go, no matter what your background. You can go and pay it back later, that should be put across a lot more. (Yr 12, S3)

Among many of the pupils that participated in this study, the concerns about funding were alleviated by beliefs that HE would enable them to get a better job. Moreover, as this pupil explained, many of them were relying on getting jobs to pay off any debt once they began working:

> R: Well people say about money, but money, you're going to get that back after so it's not really much of a drawback is it?
>
> I: Right, Ok.
>
> R: So I'm not concerned about it. (Yr 12, S7)

As the following section shows, these beliefs were very much at the heart of the decision to continue their education at a higher level.

Employability

The perceived advantages of continuing on to FE and HE often related to future career prospects and income. This supports earlier research, finding that, on the whole, working class students regarded a degree as a means to an end (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003), compared to middle class students whose motivation is just as much the social experience as their studies (Crozier et al., 2008). For example, a common response to their reasons for continuing into HE during this study was 'To get a better job out of it, more money' (Yr 12, S3). Similarly, another put

emphasis upon getting a job for which a degree was a requirement and opposed the idea of getting a job that did not require a degree:

> ...at the moment I just want to make a proper career, I don't want to work in Sainsbury's.... Even if I did end up doing something like that, I've got my degree to fall back on if I need it. (Yr 12, S3)

To a certain extent, this reflects the policies and initiatives designed to increase participation in HE. As *Raising Expectations* stated, it is assumed that individuals who remain in education for two years post-sixteen 'will also become more productive economically' (DfES, 2007: 11). The Government perceives this to work on two levels. The first is that 'learning will increase our earning power' (Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), 1998: 13) and thus sustain financial independence. The second is that British workers need to improve their skills levels to maintain international competitiveness (DIUS, 2007). There has been criticism directed at both levels for different reasons. One reason is that by placing the worker and their own learning at the centre of policy, the focus shifts from structural economic concerns with industrial development to the individuals. In other words, 'individuals come to be held responsible for their own employability and consequently their own social inclusion' (Williams, 2008: 158).

Nevertheless, for those pupils having to make their imminent choice, this did not seem to matter. Competing with other peers for a job was a main reason to obtain higher qualifications. As one pupil commented:

> I think it will look really good on your CV. If you go to any job interview or if you have to go see a client, they will look at you and think 'oh, right what are your qualifications?' and if you haven't got qualifications and someone else has, so obviously they are going to go for the other person. (Yr 11, S5)

On the whole then, most pupils considered that a better job would inevitably follow obtaining a degree. Indeed, it is reported that more individuals who hold formal qualifications earn more than those without a formal qualification (Wolf, 2002: 21). In 2003, Walker and Zhu estimated that there may be as much as a ten per cent earnings premium per additional year of education. However, more recently, there have been reports that an increasing number of graduates

are overqualified for their jobs (Green and Zhu, 2008). If so, many of these pupils may be harbouring unrealistic expectations about their opportunities for graduate employment.

The very fact that many of the pupils in this study were regarding higher qualifications purely as a means of getting a better job signals a certain perception about learning. Rather than regarding learning as valuable for its own sake, learning was often perceived as valuable only in order to secure better employment and increase their income. Indeed, one year nine pupil took this further by stating that if they did not continue their education, their prior learning would be worthless:

> If you just stop learning you won't remember, I dunno [sic].... If you just stop school and then not do anything you've just wasted doing all your GCSEs. (Yr 9, S1)

This emphasises a view that the sole purpose of education up until this point is to prepare for obtaining a higher level qualification. Mann (2001) also found that often many students' choice to pursue a particular course had more to do with the value of the degree in the market place than any intrinsic value. The fact that these pupils all came from similar backgrounds, as is the point of Aimhigher, might of course be a contributing factor. However, another view of HE was as an increasingly natural and universally acceptable extension to compulsory schooling:

> I think university is starting to seem more and more necessary to get on in life, it's being more and more part of your education. You think 'I go to primary school, I go to secondary school, maybe I go to college then I have to go to university afterwards'. (Yr 12, S4)

Despite seeming to accept that pursuing HE was inevitable, it is interesting also to notice that the pupil used the words 'have to' to describe their progression to university, suggesting that they had no choice. This also supports Mann (2001: 9) who argues that more and more students are 'drifting' into HE because 'the life course has become institutionalised' and that education simply proceeds as expected. Whilst this may be directly attributable to the current educational climate that is geared increasingly to a knowledge-based society and economy (Haggis, 2004), another pupil believed university to be accessible only immediately following compulsory schooling:

> Well generally university is considered a once in a lifetime sort of...you're never going to get it again are you? ...Once you go into the world of work, and you come out with the status don't you? So, that's the reason for me. (Yr 12, S6)

This view is surprising given the increasing emphasis by government policy upon lifelong learning (Knapper and Cropley, 2000) and the opportunity for all to access education anytime and anywhere.

Independence

For many pupils, the idea of leaving home to attend university could be frightening or exciting and sometimes both. One pupil intended to live at home while attending university and, when asked about this, answered, '...that's one of the benefits, I'm not sure I would be able to survive on my own, I wouldn't be able to cook' (Yr 12, S4). Alternatively, one of the main attractions of moving to university was, for some, the promise of living independently. One year eleven pupil referred to conversations with friends already at university:

> ...they said that going to uni is like one of the best things they are doing because it's like living without parents and you can do what you want and you also get the help – funding, and you also get what you want at the end of it.... (Yr 11, S8)

According to other pupils, the location of the university often appeared to play a part in the decision making, although the quality of institution could be another factor for consideration. For example, when asked whether he would consider going a long way from home, a pupil answered:

> It would bother me slightly but it depends if it's a good university or not. If it was a good university then it would be a sacrifice that I would take, but I would have to do a lot of research into that university first before I made that final decision. (Yr 12, S4)

Some pupils were extremely keen to demonstrate their own decision making about their future: 'What has made me stay on is just the choice in career, but that's the only thing that has made me stay on.... I made that decision on my own' (Yr 11, S8). However, as a younger pupil also pointed out, they required accurate information in order to make an informed decision: 'If I knew more about it I would probably decide on my own but I don't actually know what I

have to take to get into beauty, so I probably want to know more about that' (Yr 9, S8). This highlights the important part that initiatives such as Aimhigher play, to equip pupils for making independent decisions about pursuing their education.

Family

The family, especially parents, was often an important factor that influenced decision making among pupils of all ages. Many of the older pupils demonstrated taking on board the views of their family:

> R: ...my uncle did his engineering degree a couple of years ago and now my sister is doing a degree so I think I need it. My parents are expecting me to go as well to get myself a good education.
>
> I: Do you think there's an expectation?
>
> R: No, not really, my parents just said to me it's my choice. If I get a job that I love and enjoy doing then we're all happy, and if I go to university, get a degree, then get a job, better paid and better job, then they would be equally as happy I think. So they just said, 'your decision, choose what you want to do'. (Yr 12, S4)

Not all pupils were supported by their parents. One pupil explained that although his mother supported him, his father was more sceptical about the need for him to continue his education. As he explained:

> I think the whole thing sort of baffles my parents because they sort of left at...well whatever the equivalent of GCSE level was then at fifteen/sixteen years old, so they haven't got a clue why I need to go or anything. So they support me, my mum supports it but I don't think my dad completely understands why I need to go.... (Yr 12, S6)

Interestingly, he suggested during this conversation that his father did not fully understand the need for HE and that more information for parents would be helpful.

For some, the location of their course was an issue for parents. As one year eleven pupil said:

> Well, my mum wants me to go somewhere in Canterbury but I was actually thinking that I could go somewhere else because I want to go to the best design school and I did think of

going abroad, but they are like laughing at that, so I was like 'fine, I'll just go to Canterbury'. I just don't want to be restricted to a certain area when I can get a better [design] school. (Yr 11, S5)

The decision pupils made to stay in the local area with their families was relatively common. As one pupil said, 'I think I want to stay local so I've got my family for support. I don't think I'd want to move out completely' (Yr 11, S8). Other considerations about location echoed findings of Reay and colleagues (2001), although they did not necessarily refer specifically to the costs of travel. Another pupil at the same school had considered the benefits that moving away from the locality might offer, adding that '...I'd rather like to get out of Chatham and go to a city like London because, you know there's more opportunity there' (Yr 11, S8).

Learning mentors

As this article illustrates, the Aimhigher initiative was implemented in different ways in each of the schools, depending upon a range of circumstances. Most of the pupils attended a school with a learning mentor scheme. Whilst many positive comments were made about the value of a learning mentor for guidance and advice, it was also clear that the personality and experience of the mentor had an important impact upon the delivery. At one school, the learning mentor had supported a pupil before she went for her first university interview. As she commented:

> If I hadn't gone to Aimhigher, when I went to my interview I would have just fallen apart... they taught me to just be confident and go in and basically show that I'm the person that they want. So I just went in there and I felt confident that [I] was going to get the place. (Yr 11, S8)

The pupils who appeared to be receiving the most useful support also felt that they could talk to their mentor or, as one pupil described, 'talk to her anytime I want, about anything really' (Yr 11, S8). In addition to providing personal support, some of the learning mentors had helped pupils write personal statements and prepare for exams, and arranged visits and taster days to local institutions:

> ...say like I ask her something and she says 'I'll find out about it'? As soon as she's got information about it she'll send for us to go down at lunchtime or break time to collect the

information and if there's anything that we don't understand she'll explain it. (Yr 11, S5)

Pupils at this school then indicated that the Aimhigher learning mentor had been the person responsible for raising awareness about alternative progression routes. As one pupil explained, 'I think if [the learning mentor] wasn't here then I'd probably just be going to Canterbury College and that would be it, because I never even thought about sixth form' (Yr 11, S5).

The value of face-to-face mentor support described here can be observed in other studies that point to a link between social interaction and retention (Haggis and Pouget, 2002; Krause, 2001). Just as these extracts illustrate, without support, most students may simply not feel confident enough to challenge advice about issues such as subject choice and progression route.

Social integration

Although for most pupils the benefits of the social life at university were attractive, some pupils remained pensive about moving into a new environment. Perhaps understandably, two pupils were concerned about leaving their family and friends and meeting new people. One was most concerned with '…sharing a new place with strangers, what if they are complete psychos?' (Yr 12, S4). It was not unusual to hear pupils express some anxiety about the social scene at university, especially if they already considered themselves to be shy. For example, this pupil said, 'I am a bit, I'm a very shy person as well, so I'm a bit nervous about the fact that I've just got to go on my own and like not know anybody…' (Yr 12, S6).

In rare cases, pupils acknowledged the fact that they had gradually changed their opinion about moving on from school, recognising that previously they had not considered themselves ready for HE.

> First of all, last year I was scared about making new friends but now I don't really care if I don't go somewhere everyone else does, I don't mind if I'm on my own as everyone is in the same boat. (Yr 12, S3)

Earlier research has shown that students tend to choose the university where they will find 'people like us' (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003: 601). For example, pupils from low socio-economic groups have tended to go to post-1992 universities with more open access and which encourage socially diverse students (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003; Reay et al., 2005).

Visits to institutions

Many of the pupils and teachers had visited the local post-1992 university and considered the visit a useful way of providing pupils with an insight into further study. In some cases, visits actually confirmed decisions about whether or not pupils would apply to a certain college or university:

> I've already been to see the geography department there and I really like it, I really like the lecturers and things so I will definitely be applying there. (Yr 12, S4)

According to one pupil, they had not seriously considered attending HE until they had visited the first HE institution in year ten. As they explained, 'It has really helped I think. Without it I would be completely clueless' (Yr 12, S6).

Many pupils remembered particular visits and seemed to value experiences that provided them with a true reflection of what HE might be like. For example, this year twelve pupil had enjoyed participating in a practical session of P.E.:

> When I went to [Canterbury] Christ Church [University] we did practical in P.E. because there was a sports one, so I did practical there. That really helped having a proper lecturer sort of thing to see how the lectures are structured. (Yr 12, S4)

More specific suggestions were made about visits to university, with a number of pupils wishing to meet more students and visit universities during term time. For example, one pupil wanted to spend some time 'basically sitting in the back of a lecture' (Yr 12, S6). Some pupils were finding that, due to exams, they could not always participate in visits or summer schools:

> R1: I think more opportunities to go to more universities and even if it's for a few days, if we could stay for a few days.

> R2: Yes, that would be good, they do a lot of summer schools but I can't go this year, it's really inconvenient for me. It would be better if it were more summer holidays because obviously I've got to start my A2 [second year 'A' level] maths and I can't have any time off for that.

Attending institutions for summer schools and short visits may well also help to familiarise pupils with the cultural aspects of HE that are often taken for granted by staff (Lowe and Cook, 2003). Moreover, it may provide a valuable insight into the approaches and attitudes that HE teaching assumes (Haggis and Pouget, 2002).

Conclusion

The findings, discussed in relation to government policies and findings from earlier research, show the complexities of the decision making process among young people from low socio-economic groups. The findings raise a number of questions relating to pupils' expectations of HE, particularly in terms of employment and to what extent pupils are adequately prepared for HE.

Students are most vulnerable in their first year at university (McInnis, 2001) and according to the National Audit Office (2007) students leave their courses early for a range of reasons which are likely to be a mix of personal (most common), institution and course related, and financial. Lowe and Cook (2003) echoed other researchers that have found students entering the HE environment with little preparation and little understanding of how university can affect their lives. Many of the pupils in this study indicated that obtaining a clearer idea of what universities were like and the work that would be expected of them was paramount to alleviating their fears and anxieties. Visits to institutions were very important to the majority of pupils in this study, as they helped to familiarise them with the physical surroundings and reassure them that the institutions were for 'people like them'. For many of these pupils, the support provided to them by Aimhigher was also key to their motivation and raising their aspirations.

Reay and colleagues (2002) discovered that for many 'non traditional' students, studying in HE is characterised by struggle. This study has highlighted the main concerns of pupils about continuing to HE and the information they use to help them navigate through the decision making process. Concerns about finance were in some cases offset by pupils' beliefs that they will gain much more return in the form of better employment. Whilst this might have been true in the past (Walker and Zhu, 2003), there has been a substantial growth in the proportion of graduates who are overqualified for their jobs and this differs across degree subjects (Green and Zhu, 2008). Although an excess of skill may well aid skill-upgrading, it is important that pupils such as these are provided with the correct information before choosing to progress to HE. Parents' concerns about finance are inextricably linked with the decision making process and, as suggested by one pupil, it may be just as important for parents to obtain the accurate information about these issues as pupils.

The way in which pupils in this study regarded HE may also have powerful implications for how pupils value learning and education. For most, it reflects a pragmatic view of learning as a means to an end. There is evidence to suggest that students with their sights on longer term goals tend to manage the transition to university life better than those studying for its own sake (Tinto, 1987). However, the view that education exists only within an educational institution could prevent pupils gaining a lifelong learning perspective.

Whilst this study did not go on to track these pupils into HE, there are clues as to how widening participation initiatives might be improved. Fewer comments were made about the social and academic environment compared to financial matters. Yet, Crozier and colleagues (2008) found that students from less privileged backgrounds with lower self esteem can strategically opt out of the university scene. As a result, these students risk further ostracising themselves from university life. For example, as Read and colleagues (2003) discovered, students can be shocked at the lack of supervision by lecturers compared to at college. In order to minimise this risk, some researchers have stressed the importance of addressing all aspects of the student experience as they progress to HE (Winter and Dismore, 2008).

The fact that many of the students appeared to be planning to attend their local post-1992 university supports the view that a polarised mass system of HE is developing (Reay et al., 2005). Yet, this is also indicative of post-1992 universities offering these pupils spaces where they feel welcome and that they have a sense of belonging (Read et al., 2003). So whilst inequalities continue to exist within the student population, students from lower socio-economic groups are accessing certain institutions to study in HE. Indeed, it is arguably a positive step that those students appear to feel increasingly welcome in what might have been considered historically a middle class world (Crozier et al., 2008). Consequently, there is a small but steady increase in participation among these groups (National Audit Office, 2007).

References

Aimhigher (2007) *Don't Stop Doing What You Love*, at http://www.aimhigher.ac.uk/resources/DontStop_PRE1608.pdf (accessed 27 August 2008).

Aimhigher (2008) *About Aimhigher*, at http://www.aimhigher.ac.uk/about_us/about_aimhigher.cfm (accessed 27 August 2008).

Aimhigher Kent and Medway (2008) *Aimhigher Kent & Medway Practitioners*, at http://www.ahkandm.ac.uk/Pracs/index.asp (accessed 27 August 2008).

Archer, L. (2006) 'Round Pegs into Square Holes? Critical issues for the widening participation agenda' in D. Jary and R. Jones (eds) *Perspectives and Practice in Widening Participation in the Social Sciences*, Birmingham: C-SAP.

Bourdieu, P. and Passeron, J. (1990) *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, London: Sage.

Christie, H., Tett, L., Cree, V. E., Hounsell, J. and McCune, V. (2008) '"A real rollercoaster of confidence and emotions": learning to be a university student', *Studies in Higher Education* 33, 5: 567-581.

Crozier, G., Reay, D., Colliander, L. and Grinstead, J. (2008) 'Different Strokes for Different Folks: diverse students in diverse institutions – experiences of higher education', *Research Papers in Education* 23, 2: 167-177.

Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) (1998) *Further Education for the New Millenium*, London: DfEE.

Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (2003) *The Future of Higher Education*, London: DfES.

Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (2005) *14-19 Education and Skills*, London: DfES.

Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (2007) *Raising Expectations: staying in education and training post-16*, London: DfES.

Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) (2007) *World Class Skills: implementing the Leitch review of skills in England*, Norwich: Stationery Office.

Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) (2008) *Participation Rates in Higher Education: academic years 1999/2000-2006/2007*, London: National Statistics.

Evans, M. (2008) 'Stranger than Fiction: Harry Potter and the Order of the Entitled', *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 31 July 2008, p. 25.

Gallacher, J. and Osbourne, M. (eds) (2005) *A Contested Landscape: international perspectives on diversity in mass higher education*, Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.

Gill, J. (2008) 'Labour concedes that it won't deliver its 50% target on time', *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 17 April 2008, p. 14.

Green, F. and Zhu, Y. (2008) *Department of Economics Discussion Paper 08/03*, at http://www.kent.ac.uk/economics/documents/research/papers/2008/0803.pdf (accessed 27 August 2008).

Haggis, T. (2004) 'Meaning, Identity and "Motivation": expanding what matters in understanding learning in higher education?', *Studies in Higher Education* 29, 3: 335-352.

Haggis, T. and Pouget, M. (2002) 'Trying to be Motivated: perspectives on learning from younger students accessing higher education', *Teaching in Higher Education* 7, 3: 323-336.

Higher Education Academy (HEA) (2008) *Student Lifecycle*, at http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/institutions/wp/lifecycle (accessed 27 August 2008).

Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) (2008) *Widening Participation*, at http://www.hefce.ac.uk/widen/ (accessed 27 August 2008).

House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts (2002) *Fifty-Eighth Report: improving student achievement and widening participation in higher education in England*, London: Commons Publications.

Jones, R. and Thomas, L. (2005) '2003 UK Government Higher Education White paper: a critical assessment of its implications for the access and widening participation agenda', *Journal of Education Policy* 20, 5: 615-630.

Knapper, C. and Cropley, A. (2000) *Lifelong Learning in Higher Education*, 3rd edition, London: Kogan Page.

Krause, K. (2001) 'The University Essay Writing Experience: a pathway for academic integration during transition', *Higher Education Research and Development* 20: 148-168.

Leathwood, C. and O'Connell, P. (2003) '"It's a struggle": the construction of the "new student" in higher education', *Journal of Education Policy* 18, 6: 597-615.

Lowe, H. and Cook, A. (2003) 'Mind the Gap: are students prepared for higher education?', *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 27, 1: 53-76.

Mann, S. (2001) 'Alternative Perspectives on the Student Experience: alienation and engagement', *Studies in Higher Education* 26, 1: 7-19.

McInnes, C. (2001) 'Researching the First Year Experience: where to from here?', *Higher Education Research and Development* 20, 2: 105-114.

National Audit Office (2007) *Staying the course: the retention of students in higher education*, at http://www.nao.org.uk/publications/nao_reports/06-07/0607616.pdf (accessed 27 August 2008).

National Audit Office (2008) *Widening Participation in Higher Education*, at http://www.nao.org.uk/publications/nao_reports/07-08/0708725.pdf (accessed 27 August 2008).

PUSH (2008) *Year of Study*, at http://www.push.co.uk/document.aspx?id=43120e95-7cc4-497e-a105-07a7dc702f63 (accessed 27 August 2008).

Read, B., Archer, L. and Leathwood, C. (2003) 'Challenging Cultures? Student conceptions of "belonging" and "isolation" at a Post-1992 University', *Studies in Higher Education* 28, 3: 261-277.

Reay, D. (2005) 'Beyond consciousness? The psychic landscape of social class', *Sociology* 39, 5: 911–928.

Reay, D., Ball, S. and David, M. (2002) '"It's Taking Me a Long Time but I'll Get There in the End": mature students on access courses and higher education choice', *British Educational Research Journal* 28, 1: 5-19.

Reay, D., Ball, S. and David, M. (2005) *Degrees of Choice*, Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books.

Reay, D., Davies, J., David, M. and Ball, S. J. (2001) 'Choices of Degree or Degrees of Choice? Class, "race" and the higher education choice process', *Sociology* 35: 855–874.

Smith, J. A. and Osborn, M. (2003) 'Interpretative phenomenological analysis' in J. A. Smith (ed.) *Qualitative Psychology: a practical guide to research methods*, London: Sage.

Stuart, M. (2002) *Collaborating for Change? Managing widening participation in further and higher education*, Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.

Tinto, V. (1987) *Leaving College*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Walker, I. and Zhu, Y. (2003) 'Education, Earnings and Productivity: recent UK evidence', *Labour Market Trends* March 2003: 145-152.

Williams, J. (2008) 'Constructing Social Inclusion through Further Education - the dangers of instrumentalism', *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 32, 2: 151-160.

Winter, J. and Dismore, H. (2008) 'The Experiences of Foundation Degree Students Progressing to University', Paper presented at the *2008 Annual Conference of the Society of Research into Higher Education*, 9-11 December 2008, Liverpool.

Wolf, A. (2002) *Does Education Matter?*, London: Penguin.