Accessing and Making the Transition from FE to HE: important socio-economic and life course considerations

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The Study

- Set within the context of widening participation policy and Department of Health entry requirements for the BA Social Work introduced in 2003.

- A mixed method design using quantitative and qualitative approaches.

- A multidisciplinary theoretical framework.

Professional Tensions
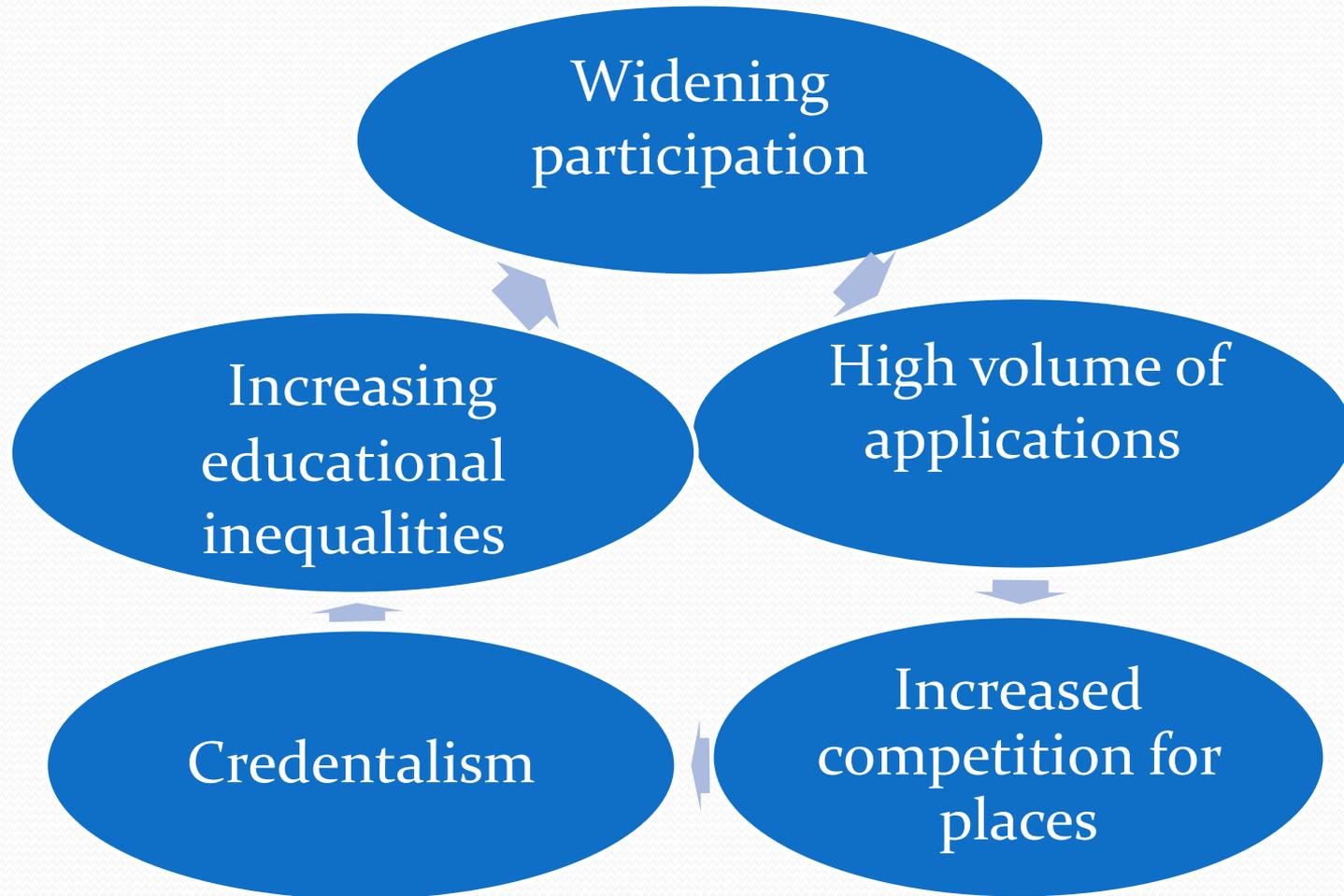
Finding 1: Social Factors

- 'Access to Social Work' courses are gendered, classed and raced, providing evidence of 'vocational stratification'.

- 'Vocational stratification' was reinforced by, 'institutional stratification' i.e. a lack of financial support from the State for some FE vocational courses.

Finding 2: Education and Career Decision-Making

- Influenced by 'forced', 'structural' and 'self-initiated' 'turning points'/life events.

- The cumulative effects of 'secondary turning points' had the most significant impact on students' trajectories.

Relevant Quote

I tried to do social work training 17 years ago but mentally I was not able to… I only ended up doing six months of the CQSW course because I had a young child to look after. I've done various caring jobs after that. 8 years ago I started working as a SEN (special educational needs) assistance, and then I worked my way up as a primary school learning mentor. I was already doing, I suppose 85% of the job of a social worker. I said, 17 years ago I tried, I felt, yes, I am now ready and this is the time for me to make that change. And as well, I suppose the age as well, you know, my children were settled, so…

(**Mary – Black British female).**

Finding 3: Barriers to HE

- Adverse socio-economic circumstances.

- Lack of financial support for access courses from the State.

- Issues with key skills development.

- Limited HE choices among students in general, but disproportionately for BME students.

Finding 4: Supportive Learning Cultures

- Supportive learning cultures can help to counteract social inequalities, by for example, raising students' aspirations.

- Support structures formed among students are important, especially during times of crisis or self-doubt.

Relevant Quote

I nearly left the course. It was a very brief – just personal stuff happened. It was a bit like err when you make a really rash decision. I sat with… [her tutor] *for about an hour and just went through why. It taught me how I've made rash decisions in the past. It seems like I'm running away. It made me realise how much I wanted this, enough to stick it through.*

(Sheba, Black/White dual heritage female)

Finding 5: Triumph Against Adversity

- Structure and agency factors are the catalyst for students' determination to achieve their education and career desires.

- The students were working hard to achieve 'A' level equivalent qualifications in half the time taken for conventional 'A' levels.

- Students were determined to overcome and put adverse socio-economic experiences to 'good' use by making a difference to people.

Relevant 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)

Relevant 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).

Key Messages

- Students education and career trajectories are complex and non-linear.

- Selection procedures need to be balanced and holistic, taking into account relevant contextual factors.

- Students unique life course experiences need to be seen as an asset to HE, in a learning and teaching context and more generally.

Small Group Discussion

How can we identify and take into account important socio-economic/life course factors of students:

a) When selecting students for HE

b) In a learning and teaching context

c) During assessment?

References

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