Title Attainment and transition experiences of students progressing from an evening access programme to undergraduate study

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Attainment and transition experiences of students progressing from an evening access programme to undergraduate study

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Widening Participation, Access Programmes, Transition, Attainment

Abstract

The under-representation of particular sections of society in Higher Education is a driver for the current widening participation agenda. The Scottish Government has an ambition that 'by 2030 students from the 20 per cent most deprived backgrounds should represent 20 per cent of entrants to higher education' (COWA, 2016). However, there is recognition that in order to achieve this target there may need to be a range of entry routes and contextual offers available. According to Scottish government figures, Abertay is one of Scotland's leading HE centres for wider access (SFC, 2016). The university has offered a free part-time evening access course (Access to Higher Education Abertay Dundee (AHEAD) for a number of years but it underwent significant restructuring in 2012. This study considers the progression, attainment and experiences of students transitioning from the revised access route to their chosen undergraduate degree programme and through subsequent stages of study.

Outline

The under-representation of particular sections of society in Higher Education (HE) has driven the widening participation agenda. The Scottish Government has an ambition that 'by 2030 students from the 20 per cent most deprived backgrounds should represent 20 per cent of entrants to higher education' (COWA, 2016). Socio-economic disadvantage remains the primary barrier for entry into higher education but access may also be affected by other markers of disadvantage such as care experienced individuals, people with physical or sensory disabilities, those with poor physical or mental health and those from different ethnic groups (Department for Business, Innovation & Skills 2014, Scottish Government 2015). These barriers are often reinforced by the complex processes of social reproduction (Bourdieu 2010; Leese 2010) that ensure that many feel that higher education is "not for the likes of us".

Abertay University defines its purpose as:-
- To offer transformational opportunities to everyone who has the ability to benefit from Abertay's approach to university education;
- To inspire and enable our students, staff and graduates to achieve their full potential.

According to Scottish government figures, Abertay is one of Scotland's leading HE centres for wider access (SFC, 2016). The university has offered a free part-time evening access course

(Access to Higher Education Abertay Dundee (AHEAD) for a number of years, as the university's foundations are rooted in offering educational opportunities to Dundee citizens to help enhance the economic prosperity of the city. The programme aims to develop study skills and increase levels of confidence prior to university entry. AHEAD is delivered two evenings a week during the academic year guaranteeing entry to an Abertay degree course upon successful completion.

While the programme had had some success, the increased focus on widening participation accompanied by Regional Coherence Funding resulted in a significant restructuring of the course in 2012, with ownership shifting from student support services to the academic schools. Student transition was also an emerging HE theme consequently the research team were keen to chart the attainment and the experiences of students on the revised programme. A successful bid was made to the Abertay Teaching Learning Enhancement Fund to support the costs of employing research assistants to undertake the qualitative aspects of the study.

The study's aims were to:-
- Investigate student attainment and experiences on transitioning from the AHEAD programme to full-time undergraduate study
- Use the findings to enhance the student experience, retention and achievement.

Method

Following ethics approval student record data was extracted to examine the former AHEAD students' progression and attainment patterns during their undergraduate stages of study. Grade point average (GPA) was calculated for the AHEAD cohorts at each stage of study and compared with the GPA for their year group. Three students in their final year of study were recruited to run focus groups and semi-structured interviews with former AHEAD students who were e-mailed and invited to participate in the study by the programme leader. Two focus groups involving 16 former AHEAD current Abertay students were conducted by two of the student researchers. The third student researcher arranged and conducted face to face interviews with a further 9 students to enable a more in-depth investigation of the students' experience of the AHEAD programme and transition to higher education.

Results (N.B. Include AHEAD annual report data on the nature of the student enrolment)

Of the 103 students who have enrolled on the revised AHEAD programme, 55 students registered for Abertay degree programmes – a progression rate of 53% (range 44-63%) (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Patterns of progression from the AHEAD programme

Figure 1 chart: Progression of AHEAD cohorts
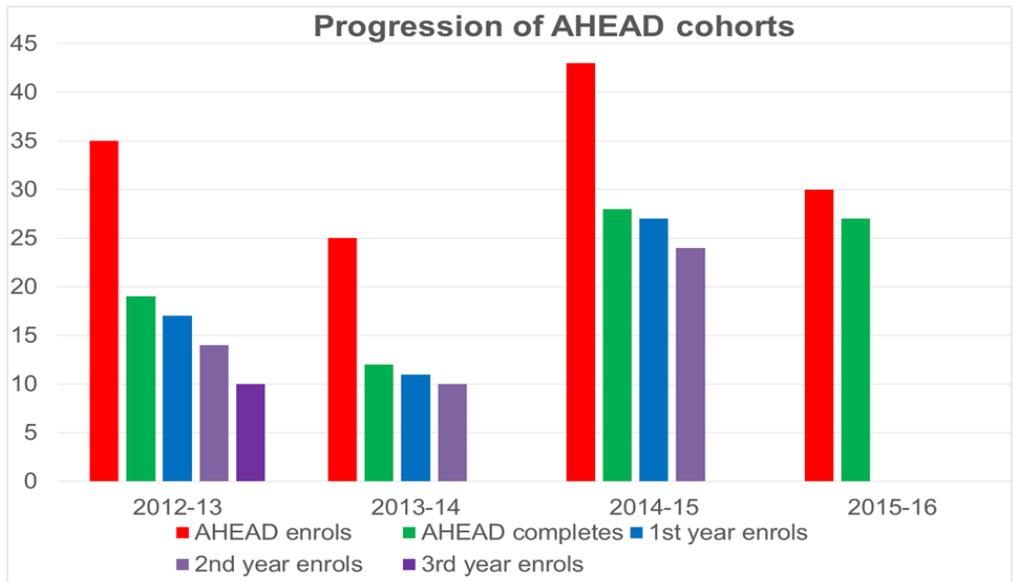
A comparison of attainment (Figure 2) reveals that the AHEAD students' performance aligned with that of their year group. The one exception was the smaller cohort that progressed to first year in 2014-15 who were significantly more likely to have a GPA of 3 or better (2:1 profile) ($\chi2$ =4.94, p<0.05).

Figure 2. AHEAD Student Attainment using GPA as the Comparator (15-16 all year group data is not yet available)
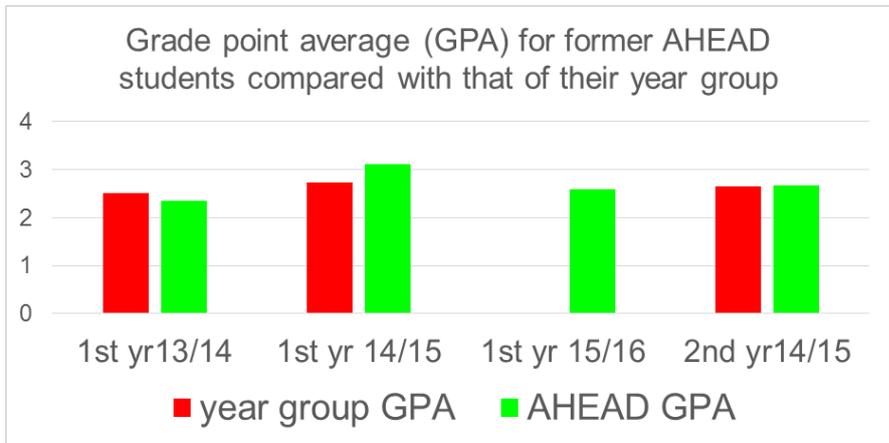
Interview & Focus Group Findings

Students spoke of AHEAD being a positive transformative experience, offering students the opportunity to embark on a university career.

> "I think it's brilliant, I recommend it to everyone that's my age group, because I think when you've been at home with kids for a while you start to doubt your ability, and you see young people, and even a lot of my friends they'll look at me and go 'I couldn't do that', but you could, you should go and do the AHEAD course cause it

really gives you that, it gives you that confidence in yourself that you've got the ability to do things like that like, like chemistry and maths, things that are maybe out your comfort zone" . (Student K)

Absolutely, unbelievable, I thought I'm not going to be able to do this, I thought this is for clever people, I thought that this was for people that are naturally clever, I didn't realise that I actually had it in me to produce what was asked of me … but I never actually thought I had potential to do something other than, especially studying… it's a whole new world of opportunity and having to use your brain, I honestly think my brain has doubled in size in the last two years, it's crazy… (Student D)

The key positive features of the AHEAD programme included:

- Developing Key Study Skills.
- Building Confidence and self-esteem.
- Learning the University Systems: 'getting a head start'.
- Evening study.
- Free 'no risk' return to education.
- Supported Degree Choice.
- Building Social Relationships.
- Supportive staff.

The negative features highlighted included:

- Poor understanding and knowledge of AHEAD amongst some staff members
- Not feeling fully part of the University
- Pace & level: for example the 'Access to Science' input
- A sense of abandonment at the end of the course
- Some module specific delivery and content issues.

Improving Transition
Aspects of AHEAD and the transition and support processes that have been adjusted post-study:-
- Better alignment of AHEAD subject options and first year undergraduate programme content.
- An end of course meeting to providing information on applying for SAAS funding, the registration process and timetables.
- End of course celebration and certificate.

- Strengthening the relationship with student support services and earlier identification of available extra support.
- Information sessions for academic staff eg. within the PGCert HET programme to raise awareness of the significance of this student group.
- Providing more information about degrees and related career opportunities during the first semester.
- Arranging degree taster sessions and talks with programme leaders.
- Developing a peer mentoring scheme for all former AHEAD students during their 1st year of undergraduate study.
- Having a dedicated academic staff member to support AHEAD students with any academic issues during their 1st year in order to support retention.
- Emphasising the importance of induction week to AHEAD students

Limitations

Interviews were not conducted with those AHEAD students who initially made the transition to an Abertay degree programme but did not complete their studies. It is acknowledged that for completeness this group's voice also need to be captured within the project's output.

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