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‘Walking tall’: A critical assessment of new ways of involving student mothers in higher education

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research aimed to examine undergraduate courses run by Birkbeck and the Open University (OU) targeted at student parents. These courses were delivered in Children's Centres which were located in areas of multiple deprivation, including exceptionally low higher education participation. They were designed specifically to help overcome some of the 'barriers' faced by low-income and disadvantaged parents when accessing higher education in order to widen participation. The study sought to assess these courses and to explore their perceived impact on the women's lives and the lives of their families, especially in relation to their children's educational trajectories. It addressed these aims from three perspectives, those of: the participants; the staff responsible for organising and teaching the courses; and the Children's Centre staff.

A mixed method approach was adopted, which consisted of the following:

- A literature review
- Interviews with 9 Children's Centres staff
- Interviews with 10 Birkbeck and OU staff responsible for delivering the courses
- Analysis of Birkbeck's and OU's student records
- Survey of 115 course participants all of whom were women
- In-depth interviews with 30 female students conducted early 2013
- A discussion event with stakeholders focusing on interim findings

Most of the fieldwork was conducted between April 2012 and September 2012. This report brings together the findings from all elements of the study.

Widening participation in practice: Setting up the courses - key findings

- The Birkbeck and Open University courses run at the Children's Centres were informed by the desire to widen higher education participation, and especially for parents from low-income backgrounds.
- Their focus and conception went beyond 'traditional' ideas about higher education. They were designed to overcome some of the impediments to access:
- most students paid no tuition fees;
- they had access to free onsite childcare;
- the place of learning and its environment – the Children's Centre- was local, convenient, familiar and supportive; and
- the courses were part-time and ran during school hours so that the students could fit them around their other commitments.
- All these features were vital to the success of the courses. Without this combination of features, the courses would have been far less attractive to potential students. And it is threats to these 'winning' ingredients that endanger future provision.

- The collaborative partnerships formed between Birkbeck and the Open University and the Children's Centres were also very important to the courses' success.

- Essential to these partnerships was the synergy between the overall mission of the Children's Centres, and the aims and objectives of the courses run by Birkbeck and the Open University.

- There were mutual benefits to the partners in running these courses. The Children's Centres were the focus of both universities' outreach activities, targeting the sort of people both the universities and the Children's Centres wanted to attract. The courses offered educational benefits that the Children's Centres wanted to offer their community, while the Centres provided the free child care many students needed in order to participate.

- Central to the efficacy of these partnerships was the Children's Centre managers' commitment to these courses. The managers helped to make the courses happen and offered practical assistance in recruiting course participants and in supporting them once they started their course.

- The outreach activities of both Birkbeck and the OU were also an important part of these partnerships.

- Working with such partners and in off-site community-based locations, although an essential feature of the programmes, was challenging at times, especially for Birkbeck lecturers.

- Most pronounced were the variable facilities available at the Children's Centres, alongside the lack of access to a library; computing facilities; learning resources; and classroom space in some of the Children's Centres.

- The course participants all had socio-economic characteristics typically associated with 'widening participation' students with the majority being women, aged 25 and over, non-White and with low-level entry qualifications. Data from the survey on students' backgrounds also show how most were lone parents, were not employed before starting their course, had household incomes of under £15,000, left school under the age of 18, and did not have another family member who had studied for a higher education qualification.

- The community outreach work undertaken jointly by the universities and the Children's Centres was important for attracting these course participants. Particularly significant was the role of the OU's Community Partnership Manager, who had wide-ranging contacts within the local community.

- For many course participants the initial decision to join the course was an opportunistic one – the offer was there. They would not necessarily have sought it out themselves, hence the importance of the outreach work.

- Students' motivations for studying were primarily instrumental, as manifest in their desire for better opportunities in life through gaining an higher education qualification and using the course as a help towards a better job, possibly not immediately but at some point in the future.

- Their main reasons for choosing their course were pragmatic. They could fit their course around their family commitments while their course or study group was nearby, and the teaching hours were convenient and flexible. Additionally, for those with children under the age of five, the availability of a free childcare was also an important reason for taking this course.

Widening participation in practice: Setting up the courses - Recommendations and implications for policy and practice

- To help monitor widening participation initiatives aimed at parents, both HESA and HEIs should automatically collect data on students' family circumstances including whether students have children, and the age of their children.

- Such information would help HEIs develop targeted support for student parents such as places for parents and children to meet.

- For these sorts of initiatives, targeted at low-income parents, to work and flourish they need to:

- Have very low or no tuition fees;

- Provide very cheap or free onsite childcare;

- Take place in a community-based environment near their target population so that the provision is local, convenient, familiar and supportive; and

- Be run as part-time flexible courses, and face-to-face provision needs to be available during school hours so that the students can fit their studies around their other commitments.

- To provide these essential features, these courses will need to be heavily subsidised by HEIs or HEFCE, first because of the changes in higher education tuition fee regime and course participants' unwillingness to take out student loans introduced in 2012/13;[1] and secondly the pressures on Children's Centre budgets means that some cannot, or in the future will be unable to, provide free childcare.

- Given the costs associated with such provision, these programmes need a very high level of HEI commitment, at the most senior level of management.

- Setting up these programmes is labour intensive, and HEIs need to consider how they can provide sustained support for initiatives of these kinds via their widening participation/ fair access strategic planning and staffing/ resource allocation.

- Institutions providing face-to-face teaching in community-based locations should consider the on-costs of such provision and how these may vary from provision at the main university site. For instance, given the community-based location there should be no room hire charges. The money 'saved' could be used to help subsidise childcare.

- Collaborative community-based partnerships, based on shared values, are essential for the success of provision of this kind, as are outreach activities by the HEI and Children's centres.

- Outreach activities need to include, not only strategic work and identifying partners, but also an engagement in the actual operation in terms of contacting potential course participants.

[1] Callender, C. (2013) Part-Time Undergraduate Student Funding and Financial Support in Callender, C and Scott, P (eds) *Browne and beyond: Modernizing English Higher Education*, London: Institute of Education Press, Bedford Way Papers pp 130-158

- The OU model of a designated ‘hands-on’ (and highly dedicated) Community Partnership Manager who was locked into local networks and had extensive local connections, while resource intensive, proved very beneficial in terms of boosting and encouraging recruitment on to these courses. This meant that outreach activities could be extended beyond local schools to include other local services such as social services and health centres.

- Contact with individual students, which began during outreach work, was often maintained by the OU Community Partnership Manager through the enrolment process and during the course. A similar role was performed by the Birkbeck Programme Manager, and suggests the importance for students of a consistent HEI contact aside from their regular lecturers/tutors.

- The recruitment literature and activities could include illustrating the benefits of study and vignettes of students’ experiences.

- Some courses have open access and any student wanting to study is allowed to enrol, such as the OU Opening courses. Others, such as the ones run by Birkbeck at the Children’s Centre, have some element of selectivity, so that students are not set up to fail. There are pros and cons to both approaches, but where there is some selectivity there also needs to be a balance between openness and risk-taking by admitting those who might fail.

- When planning these courses in community-based locations, HEIs may need to be more flexible about providing learning resources outside their walls.

- HEIs should not assume that all students have access to computers. To complement electronic access to resources, HEIs may need to purchase a limited number of set texts for the subject modules which participants are able to borrow to support their studies, and provide all or most of the learning materials student require. This also could be done through a library-organised, community-based system of book boxes, which contained a range of relevant reading for course participants to borrow.

- Most students do have mobile telephones, and the Open University has developed a range of devices for mobile telephones to help students access learning resources and to provide learning support, e.g. Anywhere App. Other HEIs could create similar devices and integrate appropriate new technologies into provision in accessible ways. This may also require some provision in the curriculum to ensure students develop the confidence to use electronic learning resources.

- HEIs should ensure that data on students needed to evaluate the courses are collected systematically. For student parents, this includes collecting data not required by HESA, such as information on their family circumstances, number and age of children.

Widening participation: Learning and Teaching - key findings

- Birkbeck students were taught face to face, and generally had one three-hour session per week over the academic year. They were aiming for a 120 credit point Certificate of Higher Education (HE Cert), usually consisting of four modules worth 30 credits each. By the time this study was undertaken, most Birkbeck students surveyed were only able to undertake two modules at the Children’s Centre. If they wanted the full qualification they had to transfer to Birkbeck’s Bloomsbury or Stratford campus. Most often Birkbeck students surveyed took two or four modules.

- In contrast, Open University students’ 15 credit Openings course was ‘distance’ learning, all materials were provided to the student in advance and they could study at their own pace. Students were given telephone support from a module tutor for the duration of their module.

In addition, they were offered five study skills sessions and weekly peer and tutor support sessions at the Children's Centre. The majority of OU students surveyed (88%) had taken just one module.

- The teaching staff and their commitment to these types of programmes and students were important for their success.

- The inclusive pedagogic approaches to learning and teaching adopted by both the Birkbeck and Open University courses, sought to: enable learners to reflect on and move forward from what may have been less-than-positive previous educational experiences; help them re-engage with the learning process; and encourage and enable them to use their personal experience and those of others in theoretical and analytical ways. The approaches were characterised as critically reflective and inquiry-led active learning, which drew on social constructivist, critical and feminist ideas about the learning process, all of which were considered essential for widening participation and for creating inclusive learning opportunities.

- On both programmes, assessments were viewed as developmental and principally *for* students' learning rather than simply as a teacher's test *of* students' learning.

- Lecturers found the students challenging to teach, as the latter sometimes struggled with the course, especially in relation to academic literacy and the importance of critical thinking. This was primarily because of the level and nature of their educational backgrounds. Central to the teaching was building the course participants' confidence and competence in using academic communication conventions, particularly in their academic writing.

- The biggest challenges reported by the vast majority (87%) of course participants surveyed, especially lone parents, was juggling their studies with their the rest of their life because they were busy at home (75%) and had inadequate support at home (50%). Participants interviewed in-depth, also talked about the challenges of learning how to study and learning about what was expected of them.

- The vast majority of course participants surveyed reported that they had had very positive teaching and learning experiences, particularly in terms of the quality of their course and the learning support and feedback they received from staff.

- Eighty-seven per cent of the Birkbeck course participants surveyed completed the module they started at the Children's Centre, compared with 56% of OU students. The number of OU students surveyed is small, so this proportion should be treated with caution. However the OU's completion rate is broadly in line with other studies conducted by the OU.

- Significantly, data from Birkbeck's student records show that HEIS students studying at the Children's Centres were more likely than their peers based at the main Birkbeck campuses to pass their modules, and less often failed and deferred their studies. They were also more likely to gain their HE Cert qualification. This is a considerable achievement given that the students at the Children's Centre had lower entry qualifications than their peers studying at the main Birkbeck campuses. The differences are possibly related to first, the additional levels of support they received, and secondly to the careful recruitment process to the course run at the Children's Centres, whereas other comparable HEIS modules adopted an open enrolment policy.

- The main reasons students did not complete their course were associated with personal and domestic problems, especially their ill health or health problems with a family member, particularly for those with a disabled child and who were lone parents.

Widening participation: Learning and Teaching - Recommendations and implications for policy and practice

- Staff teaching on these types of programmes need to be fully committed to teaching non-traditional students who have been away from learning for some time and have low level entry qualifications, as they are likely to encounter considerable challenges teaching such students.

- Teaching staff on these courses need to be very carefully selected and nurtured, and given ample staff development opportunities.

- The inclusive pedagogic approaches used in such courses are an important ingredient to their success, informing the overall aims of the modules and their design.

- Any pedagogic approach adopted, needs to recognise that learning is an emotional as well as an intellectual activity (and has other dimensions too). This is particularly important for students for whom previous formal education may have been a negative experience and for whom owning the identity of 'student' may be complex. Amongst the many challenges in teaching these courses, there is a need to balance the provision of sufficient support and guidance with helping students become independent learners. This is done by providing learning opportunities which 'scaffold' their learning to a stage when the support they require can be removed and they function independently.

- The challenges that course participants faced in terms of juggling their studies with the rest of their lives suggests the importance of integrating the development and discussion of time-management skills within the course. Furthermore, the idea that the women 'deserve' time for themselves to study is particularly relevant to these students, since they are faced with multiple conflicting demands on their time and emotional energy from their families and others.

- The study skills challenges encountered by the course participants, point to the importance of integrating study skills into the fabric of the course and its design from its inception. However, it is also important to acknowledge that this is a process, during which students have to find out what works for them.

- As the majority of course participants found their course more time consuming than anticipated, it is important that they are given as much information as possible about the time commitment required, especially on independent study and assignments.

- The need for students to build their competences and confidence in academic communication conventions, especially in their writing, point to the importance of introducing them to these conventions and giving them opportunities to practise them within their course so that they become academically literate.

- The curriculum design needs to help the participants overcome any negative learning experiences they had while at school, by providing opportunities for them to reflect critically on these experiences.

- There is a certain inevitability to some withdrawal and non-completion for these courses, given the highly complicated and sometimes chaotic nature of the women's lives. However, support from other course participants, as well as the teaching and Children's Centre staff can help participants to complete.

- A significant source of support and help in learning how to study can come from other students on the course. Such peer support can be nurtured through the curriculum, for instance via group working.

- The higher retention and success rates of Birkbeck's HEIs students taking courses run at the Children's Centre compared with OU students, may be associated with an element of selectivity in the recruitment process.

- Giving potential participants the option of taking a few classes for a couple of weeks, before they make the commitment of enrolling formally in the course is a fruitful strategy that can give potential participants some time to develop a student identity, and improve completion rates. However, for many HEIs this may lead to administrative challenges and potential problems for students, especially with the increasing use of VLE to communicate with students. In many HEIs, students are not allowed access to the library or the VLE system until they have formally registered at their HEI.

- Both the courses at Birkbeck and the OU were classified as a first year undergraduate course. There was no evidence that the Birkbeck HEIS course were beyond the ability of the students recruited, although this may have contributed to the withdrawal of students not captured in this study. This raises broader issues about the educational level at which courses at the Children's Centre were pitched, or should be pitched, in the future. The OU's Openings courses run at the Children's Centres provided a stepping-stone onto to higher level undergraduate courses. At Birkbeck, the HEIS HE Cert courses were designed as a stepping-stone to a First Degree, and not as an Access Course. The recent student funding changes may provide an opportunity to reconsider the level of provision in Children's Centres.

Widening Participation: The Outcomes and Impact of the Courses - key findings

- A minority (39%) of students surveyed progressed on to further study once they had finished studying at the Children's Centre. However, the vast majority (77%) of survey respondents planned to take another course or qualification in the next three years, suggesting that their course had whetted their appetite for further study.

Impact of the course on the participants

- The courses proved very successful in meeting their planned learning outcomes in terms of the academic and other skills the participants had learnt, and much more than planned or anticipated.

- The majority of course participants surveyed reported that their skills had developed 'a lot', especially, their ability to think about their own learning (83%); their knowledge about a particular subject (80%); analysing and respecting people's different views and perspectives (76%); and improved writing skills (75%).

- These outcomes point to the success of the pedagogical approaches adopted by the courses.

- Arguably, some of the most significant findings from this whole study relate to the wider benefits of learning for the course participants.

- Eighty-eight per cent of the course participants surveyed reported that as a result of the course they realised they could get a higher education qualification, while 87% said they enjoyed learning more. These findings alone are testament to the success of these courses. The courses had increased the women's confidence in their capability of gaining a degree, which was the main aim of the Birkbeck and OU programmes.

- In addition, the vast majority of respondents believed that as a direct result of their course they were more self-confident (83%); felt more positive about their future (76%); were more interested in the world around them (70%); and had better life opportunities (60%). So the course had helped to raise their aspirations.

- When these outcomes are compared with the women's motivations for studying, we see that the courses largely fulfilled the participants' key reasons for taking them.

- The in-depth interviews with the women (and the programme directors, lecturers and Children's Centre staff) reiterated these impacts and suggested how the courses had led to a strong sense of achievement and opened up new opportunities while raising the women's personal ambitions. The women felt more self-confident, had developed a stronger sense of themselves, had improved their parenting skills, and they had gained new friendships and support networks furthering social cohesion.

- Arguably, the most important finding from the qualitative interviews was the transformative nature of the women's study experiences – their studies had changed the way they understood the world in a way that could not be reversed or forgotten. The women were more critical about the world around them (for good and for ill) and had absorbed higher education values in the way that they respected diverse opinions and had developed ways of debating them. Some course participants had started reading broadsheet newspapers and books, going to the theatre, going to the opera, watching foreign language films, and one got rid of their television.

- The HEIS and OU courses had whetted the participants' appetite for further study too. The course participant survey revealed that two out of five participants engaged in further study after they had finished studying at the Children's Centre.

- A much higher proportion of course participants surveyed, (over three-quarters) intended to take another course within the next three years, especially those from poor households, suggesting that for this group of students the decision to progress may need to be part of longer term planning.

- The courses did not have an immediate impact on the women's labour market activities, but it should be recalled that many of the women (41%) had children aged five or under when they started their course and a number of women were intending to have other children in the foreseeable future. However, 72% of course participants surveyed planned to get a job or another job in the next three years, especially those studying at Birkbeck.

Impact of the course on participants' children and family

- Part of the rationale of Children's Centres is to raise parents' aspirations for their children alongside improving their parenting skills. Research suggests that a key way of combating educational inequalities, and specifically poor children's attainment, is through improving both parents' and children's educational aspirations.

- Thus particularly noteworthy and significant findings were that 84% of the course participants surveyed believed that as a result of their course, they had higher educational aspirations for their children, and half reported that their children were more interested in learning. This is particularly encouraging given the correlation between parental attitudes, aspirations, and their children's educational outcomes, suggesting that these courses may contribute to reducing educational inequalities.

- Nearly a half of the survey respondents thought that their relationship with their children had improved.

- These impacts exceed the survey respondents' initial motivations for studying. For instance, nearly two in five respondents started their course because they wanted to be a role model for their children, and under a quarter because they wanted to help their children with their education.

- Again these findings are re-iterated in the qualitative in-depth interviews with the course participants. Particularly striking was how the women felt about themselves had changed, and how this was seen as beneficial to their children - they were calmer, more patient, and more knowledgeable, while their understanding of their children increased. Many participants helped their children with their school work with far greater confidence, and the visible effort that parents put in to studying made them a role model for studying for their school age children. Some parents also used their earlier educational experiences as a cautionary tale, , advising their children to make the most of their opportunities to study while young.

- The impact of the course on the women's relationship with their partners was less positive, with the women surveyed most often reporting that their relationship had deteriorated in some way – a finding evidenced in other studies.

Impact of the course on the community, volunteering and the Children's Centres

- Only a minority (39%) of course participants surveyed had become involved in community based work as a direct result of their course. However, the proportion participating in such activities before and after their course did increase threefold.

- Women's motives for volunteering varied. Some women volunteered at the Children's Centre to become more involved in the Centre and to give something back to it because they were grateful for the benefits they had reaped from their involvement. Others engaged in voluntary work because it was part of their modules on child development.

- Some women used what they had learnt on their course, especially those studying Law at the OU, to engage in local activism and to become a resource for the local community.

- Several of the Children's Centre managers reported that course participants played a more active role in their local community and in the running of their Centres, again one of the overall aims of Children's Centres.

- In the eyes of Children's Centre managers, the Birkbeck and OU courses also helped their Centres to meet their overall mission and targets, and the outcomes for the women, mostly fulfilled the managers' criteria for success.

Widening Participation: The Outcomes and Impact of the Courses - Recommendations and implications for policy and practice

- Data on progression to further study need to be collected systematically by HEIs to help in the evaluation of the outcomes of such programmes.

- The decision by Birkbeck to provide just the first year of the HE Certificate qualification programme (i.e. two modules) at the Children's Centres and then expecting the students to continue their qualification at the main Birkbeck campuses raises a range of practical problems regarding progression. Some of the main attractions of the courses associated with their Children's Centre location are lost: free childcare; their localness and proximity to the

women's home; and the day-time teaching hours. Birkbeck is currently unable to provide free childcare or day-time courses for these students. These issues need to be considered if such a model of provision is adopted.

- Birkbeck might consider running HEIS courses during the day at their main campuses to encourage parents to progress so that they can fit their studies around their domestic responsibilities.

- Progression might be improved if Birkbeck students, while still studying at the Children's Centres, had greater exposure to the main Birkbeck campuses. Not only would this help them develop a greater sense of being part of a university community but also might help them overcome any concerns about studying at the main campuses in an unfamiliar environment. Also, students could be taken to the library and given additional help to compensate for the limited learning resources at the Children's Centres.

- Where Birkbeck students progress on to a second year at one of the Birkbeck campuses, every attempt should be made to keep the cohort together so that the women could build on the support networks they developed while at the Children's Centre in their first year of study.

- Courses need to ensure that they prepare students to make the transition from the highly supportive learning environment of the Children's Centre to a less supportive one that they may encounter at other HEIs, and in other courses not particularly designed for 'widening participation' students.

- Students might benefit from more help when making online applications to courses and on-line applications for student financial support from the Student Loans Company. (Students even when continuing their studies are now expected to enrol online, and to apply online for student support and student loans). Research from the US,[2] illustrates the beneficial aspects of such help in terms of college attendance, persistence, and aid receipt.

- Where students do progress from studying at the Children's Centre to studying at another location or institution, Children's Centres could consider developing a learning hub for their 'ex-students' so that they can gather regularly and support each other.

- UK Commission for Employment and Skills argues that 'skill acquisition which does not enhance employability, earnings, labour market progression or which does not bring other economic and social returns, is a waste of public and private resources'.[3] It is quite clear that these courses did lead to considerable social returns in terms of the wider benefits of learning for both the participants and their children and thus are not a waste of public resources. Indeed, arguably they are an investment in the future lives of the women and probably their children, and in efforts to tackle the educational under-achievement of children living in poverty.

- Moreover, in line with current debates about skills utilisation, that just increasing the supply of more skilled people is inadequate - the skills also need to be used and bring real, sustainable benefits to the individuals concerned. It is clear that the vast majority of women in this study had used the skills they learnt in their daily lives and that these skills brought sustainable benefits.

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[2] Bettinger, E., Long, B., Oreopoulos, P., and Sanbonmatsu, L. (2012) The Role of Application Assistance and Information in College Decisions: Results from the H&R Block FAFSA Experiment. Quarterly Journal of Economics 127(3): 1-38.
[3] UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES). (2010). *Ambition 2020: World class skills and jobs in the UK.* London and Wath-upon-Dearne, UKCES p 109

- However, the policy rhetoric regarding lifelong learning, and indeed the policy changes regarding the role of Children's Centres, focus on employment outcomes. Higher education policies stress the private financial returns to individuals and the extrinsic, economic goals while largely ignoring the wider private and public benefits of higher education. In part, this is because of on an underlying premise that HE students tend to be young single school leavers studying on a full-time basis who enter the labour market for the first time on graduation.[4] In part, it is because of the marketisation of higher education, which valorises private returns at the expense of the wider benefits of learning.

- This study suggests that these underlying assertions informing HE policy may be inappropriate for adult learners, especially for the students in this study - those with family commitments, who enter higher education with very low education qualifications, and who have multiple and complex needs, often living in poverty. Given, the women's starting point they may not gain employment immediately after completing their studies, but their capacity to take advantage of any employment opportunities are likely to have been improved as a direct consequence of their studies.

- The wider social, and enduring, benefits of the course reaped by the participants, went well beyond their initial expectations. Many of these benefits are hard to quantify and measure, but remain highly significant for the course participants, their children, and for society as whole.

Challenges Ahead

The changing higher education landscape is contributing to shifts in institutional priorities and the organisational culture, and with them different understandings of success. Since this study was undertaken, both the Birkbeck and OU courses have failed to recruit any students to the courses run at Children's Centres in 2013/14, despite their obvious benefits. In both cases, this is an outcome or fall out of the 2012/13 reforms of higher education and associated HE policy changes. In Birkbeck's case it is primarily linked to the withdrawal of HEFCE teaching funds, higher tuition fees and the move from grants to student loans, and subsequent cuts in the National Scholarship Programme funds. In the OU's case, it is also related to the withdrawal of HEFCE teaching funds, fees, and NSP cuts, but also to the cuts in the Widening Participation Premium and the need to demonstrate its impact, as well as issues related to student funding. This has meant an end to the OU's scheme run through the Children's Centres, while Birkbeck remain committed to these courses. How they can be funded in the future remains a central issue.

[4] Callender, C and Little, B (forthcoming) The hidden benefits of part-time higher education study to working practices: is there a case for making them more visible? *Journal of Education and Work*

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Students who are parents face significant obstacles in accessing and completing courses in higher education. These issues are reflected in the growing literature on widening participation in higher education and in successive governments' desire to promote greater social mobility. Both the research and government policies focus on 'non-traditional students' - defined as those groups which historically are under-represented in higher education. However, often this research and these policies fail to differentiate and identify the specific needs of particular groups when engaging in post-compulsory education, especially student parents. The needs and interests of student parents are often lost because research fails to place them with their family context.

The limited research about students who are mothers[5] shows that most are aged over 25 and a high proportion are single parents. They tend to engage in vocational courses, often on a part-time basis. But even among part-time students, female parents are underrepresented compared with male parents[6]. They often struggle within higher education institutions which take little note of their gendered and classed positions[7] , or of the demands of mothering. For example, the scheduling of classes ignores school hours, and there is a severe lack of crèche and other facilities.[8]

The challenges to participation and success women encounter, according to this existing literature on student parents include: lacking confidence and motivation; finding appropriate courses; accessing affordable childcare and paying for childcare; negotiating their way around the complex system of student and other government financial support towards the costs of living and study including childcare, which can contribute to financial hardship; fitting in their learning around their existing family and work commitments and having to juggle these responsibilities, which has implications for course organisation, timetabling, and travel; and being unfamiliar with the educational culture and context which has implications for their retention and course design. Moreover, institutional policies and practices may hinder rather than facilitate the higher education participation of mothers. Indeed, Brooks[9] shows how the structural support available to student parents in UK universities tends to be far less accommodating compared with the support in Danish universities, where it is prescribed by government and underpinned by state policy. In turn this impacts on cultural and attitudinal factors, which affect how student parents are understood and treated within institutional cultures. Again, Danish universities tend to be more sensitive to potential diversity within the student body than UK

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[5] Callender, C., Hopkin, R., and Wilkinson D. (2010) *Futuretrack: part-time students career decision-making and career development of part-time higher education students* Manchester: HECSU,. 132 pp; National Union of Students (2009) *Meet the parents: The experience of students with children in further and higher education.* London: NUS; Hinton-Smith, T. (2008) *Lone parents: Addressing barriers to participating in post-compulsory education.* Proceedings of Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE) conference December 2007. London: SRHE. http://www.equal-works.com/resources/contentfiles/4221.pdf (accessed 21 February 2010); Callender, C and Wilkinson, D (2003) *2002/03 Student Income And Expenditure Survey: Students' Income, Expenditure And Debt And Changes Since 1998* (2003) Research Report No 487, Department of Education and Skills, Nottingham, pp148; Callender, C. (2000) *The Barriers to Childcare Provision* DfEE Research Report RR231, Department of Education and Employment, London, 153 pp; Moreau,M.P and Kerner, C (2012) *Supporting Student Parents in Higher Education: A Policy Perspective*, London: Nuffield Foundation

[6] Feinstein, L., Anderson, T.M., Hammond, C., Jamieson, A. And Woodley, A. (2007), *The Social and Economic benefits of part-time, mature study at Birkbeck College and the Open University*, Report of Survey, Birkbeck,

[7] Reay, D. (2003) A risky business? Mature working-class women students and access to higher education. *Gender and Education* 15: 3, 301-317; Jackson, S. (2003) 'Lifelong Earning: lifelong learning and working-class women': *Gender and Education*, 15:4, 365-376

[8] Jackson, S. (2004) *Differently academic? Developing lifelong learning for women in higher education*, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Press; Moreau, M and Kerner, C (2012) *Supporting Student Parents in Higher Education: A policy analysis* London: Nuffield Foundation

[9] Brooks, R (2012) Parent-students and higher education: a cross- national comparison *Journal of Education Policy* 27:3 pp 423-439

universities. However, there is considerably more variation among UK HEIs than among Danish HEIs both in terms of the structural support offered student parents and the university/institutional culture.

Together, these 'facts' raise broader theoretical issues, which have informed this study. Particularly significant is the contested and shifting discourse on widening participation and social mobility. The 2011 White Paper *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System* subtly redefines the parameter and scope of debate, and its policy focus. Concerns about improving access to higher education among groups under-represented in higher education and widening participation are trumped by 'relative social mobility' defined in terms of fairness. 'For any given level of skill and ambition, regardless of an individual's background, everyone should have a fair chance of getting the job they want or reaching a higher income bracket.'(Para 5.2). So fairness rather than disadvantage is to steer policy. Hence the focus in the White Paper on the fair access agenda – of trying to get more high ability disadvantaged students into the most selective universities rather than opening university doors to a wider cross-section of students. This discourse reinforces meritocratic views of widening participation.

This illustrates well the way both the concept and practice of widening access and participation have many meanings and different forms of implementation[10]. However, as Burke[11] reminds us 'widening access to and participation in higher education is primarily a project of social justice, which must attend in detail to complex issues of inequality, exclusion and mis-recognition.' Theoretically and conceptually, it is helpful to distinguish between *access* to and *participation* in higher education.

Access is about who enters the higher education, why some do and do not including their characteristics, and ' barriers' to entry. Many widening access and participation initiatives and policies such as the now abandoned government sponsored Aimhigher,[12] are informed by the idea of 'raising aspirations'. This discourse is based on a deficit and individualistic model. It constructs the main problem of widening access in terms of individuals and communities failing to recognise the value of participating in higher education. These individuals therefore are seen to lack certain skills, values and aspirations. In addition, the 'raising aspirations' discourse ignores the operation of power, privilege and inequality. Consequently poverty and inequality are reconfigured as poverty and inequality in aspiration. This overlooks the contexts within which aspirations are formulated and the social relations within which they are embedded.

For those with no previous experience of post-compulsory education, or who would not have considered entering education through the conventional processes, research into adult education and motivational factors highlights the importance of a range of life course factors, including the educational setting and importance of external encouragement and inducements to overcome the obstacles they experience, especially for women.[13] Educational motivation in adulthood is influenced negatively by earlier experiences as well as family background. However, this potentially can be changed with the right setting, especially community based settings.

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[10] Burke, P. (2012) The *Right to Higher Education: Beyond Widening Participation*, Abingdon: Routledge; Stevenson, J., Clegg, S. and Lefever, R (2010) 'The Discourse of Widening Participation and its critics: an institutional case study'. *London Review of Education*, 8: 2, 105-115; Thomas, L. and Quinn, J. (2007) *First Generation Entry into higher education*. Maidenhead: OUP; Nelson, A. and Wilkinson, S. (2010) 'Now or never: possible responses of English universities to the changing context of adult widening participation' in *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning* , 12, 115-129; Watson, D (2006) *How to think about widening participation in UK higher education* Discussion paper for HEFCE pp13 http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/RDreports/2006/rd13_06/

[11] Burke (2012) op cit p177

[12] For details see http://www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/wp/recentwork/aimhigher/ Accessed 10/11/2013

[13] Davey, J and Jamieson, A (2003), Against the Odds: Pathways of early school leavers into higher education. Evidence from New Zealand and England, *International Journal of Lifelong Education, Education*, 22: 9, 266-280; Jamieson, A. and Adshead, L (2008) 'Educational decision-making: rationality and the impact of time', *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 40: 2, 143 – 160

Another dominant concept in the literature on access to higher education is 'barriers' to entry with policy and practice focusing on 'lifting these barriers'.[14] Gorard et al's review of these barriers includes costs, time and travel, motivation and institutional barriers such as entry procedures, timing and scale of provision and a general lack of flexibility. All these barriers, according to research specifically on student parents, affect them and to this list access to affordable and flexible childcare and the additional costs of childcare can be added.[15] This usefully reminds us of some of the challenges and difficulties under-represented groups in higher education might face. Theoretically, if these barriers were removed then their access to and participation in higher education would rise. Yet such a focus on 'overcoming barriers' ignores subtle exclusions and misrecognitions, assuming instead that these barriers can be removed. However, in reality, removing these barriers is difficult and it is questionable how far these barriers can explain patterns of non-participation in higher education. This has led to some commentators to suggest that we need to look beyond these 'barriers' to the personal, social and economic determinants of participation and non-participation in higher education.[16] Others call for a perspective that acknowledges the concerns raised by 'barriers' to participation but which also considers 'the politics of access and participation, in terms of academic, disciplinary and institutional practices, as well as the process of subjective construction, in which certain subjects can be recognised as (potential) students in higher education'.[17] This requires exploring the dynamics of power and inequality and highlights the need to transform educational structures, practices and cultures.

In contrast to access to higher education, participation in higher education is about what happens once students enter the higher education door, and whether the higher education experience is inclusive and participative. Central to this is students' learning experiences, and in turn, ideas about teaching and learning, the curriculum, and assessment. The pedagogic aims and principles informing 'widening participation' courses, particularly inclusive educational practices, are critical to their success.[18] These concerns go well beyond those aimed at 'raising aspirations'. Issues about, and critiques of, educational processes,[19] higher education practices,[20] and the gendered and classed values, culture and ethos of higher education[21] are similarly important for widening participation provision. These critiques challenge the construction of 'widening participation students' through a deficit discourse - lacking certain skills, competences or appropriate attitudes and aspirations. Others question conventional approaches to teaching and learning in academia and the view of teaching as the transmission of objective knowledge.[22] They also highlight the centrality of identity within the construction and practice of academic knowledge making. Moreover, they lead to a consideration of, not only how but also who teaches students, develop courses, and engage in knowledge production and who is 'represented and/or silenced in pedagogical processes, relations and practices'.[23]

Just as important is the impact of higher education on parents' lives and their families both while studying and on leaving their course – beyond any material and employment benefits. A recent study of higher education part-time students shows that an important trigger in the mothers' decision to start

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[14] For example see Gorard ,S., Adnett, N., May. H., Slack, K., Smith, E., and Thomas, L (2007) *Overcoming the barriers to Higher Education,* Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books

[15] NUS (2009) op cit; Moreau and Kerner (2012) op cit.

[16] Gorard et al (2007) op cit

[17] Burke (2012) *op cit* p. 137

[18] David, M. (2010) (ed) *Improving learning by widening participation in higher education*, Abingdon: Routledge; Burke, P.(2002) Accessing Education: effectively widening participation, Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books.

[19] Ivanic, R., (1998). Writing and identity: the discoursal construction of identity in academic writing, Amsterdam: John Benjamins; Ivanic, R (2009) Improving Learning in College- Rethinking Literacies across the Curriculum, London, Routledge;Lillis, T (2001) Student Writing: Access, Regulation, Desire London: Routledge.

[20] Evans, M (2004) *Killing Thinking: the death of the universities*, London: Continuum

[21] 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(17)

[22] Burke, P. and Jackson, S. (2007) *Reconceptualising lifelong learning: feminist interventions*, London: Routledge

[23] Burke (2012) *op cit* p. 152

studying was to be a role model for their children and to help with their children's education.[24] This is important because research strongly suggests that children's educational outcomes are directly related to their parents', especially their mothers', educational attainment alongside a rich home learning environment and mothers' educational aspirations for their children[25].

1.2 Aims of the research

While some research exists on mothers' experiences of higher education[26], there is practically no research that examines the provision of courses targeted at student parents from an organisational and institutional perspective, or outlines 'what works' to attract and retain this particular student group. This research aimed to fill that gap by examining courses run by Birkbeck and the Open University targeted at student parents. It sought to assess these courses and to explore their perceived impact on the women's lives and the lives of their families, especially in relation to their children's educational trajectories. It addresses these aims from three perspectives, those of: the participants; the staff responsible for organising and teaching the courses; and the Children's Centre staff.

1.3 Birkbeck and Open University Courses

1.3.1 Birkbeck - Higher Education Introductory Studies

Higher Education Introductory Studies at Birkbeck, University of London is a modular, Certificate of Higher Education level programme which offers a variety of learning pathways covering the Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences, Social Work, Business or Nursing, Midwifery and Health related studies. A majority of students study the programme at Birkbeck's 'main' campuses in Central London or at Stratford. It is an award-bearing programme which, once successfully completed, enables learners, who frequently do not have traditional university entrance qualifications, to progress to completion of an undergraduate degree.

In 2007, as part of Birkbeck's commitment to broadening higher education participation and contributing to social inclusion, the Higher Education Introductory Studies (HEIS) team began collaboration with two Sure Start Nursery Education Centres in East London to provide opportunities for parents of young children to access higher education. These centres were located in areas with exceptionally low higher education participation and the collaboration aimed to make higher education learning available to parents who were unlikely to access such opportunities through more traditional routes offered by higher education providers. The location of Sure Start centres in areas of high-density social housing means that they are embedded in their local communities, which makes them easy to reach and often avoids the need to use costly public transport. The provision was subsequently extended to other Sure Start centres in locations to the east and south of London, where there was similar limited involvement in higher education. Between the academic years 2007/8 and 2011/12 (the period to which this study refers), 145 student parents, almost exclusively women, participated in these part-time courses in a total of nine Children's Centre education centres.

These courses were taught face to face and were usually scheduled to take place in once weekly three hour morning sessions commencing at a time that allowed parents to drop older children at school prior to attending their class. In some locations classes continued after a lunch break and concluded in good time for afternoon pick-up of older children attending local primary schools. The course schedule also aligned with school holidays meaning that, unlike conventional university courses, half term holidays were built in. So these courses were designed for disadvantaged students, especially parents.

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[24] Callender *et al* (2010) *op cit*

[25] Goodman, A and Gregg, P (2010) *Poorer children's educational attainment: how important are attitudes and behaviour*? York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation

[26] For the most recent research see projects sponsored by the Nuffield Foundation - http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/student-parents-and-womens-education

The Open University - Community Partnerships Programme

The Open University (OU) through its Community Partnerships Programme (CPP) also works in Children's Centres. Launched in 2008, CPP was an outreach and support programme in England and Northern Ireland targeted at areas of high deprivation (based on the IMD) and which focused on recruiting students with no previous higher education experience.

The objectives of the Community Partnerships Programme are:

- To enable more students from disadvantaged communities to undertake and be successful in studying with The Open University.
- To work with a range of partners to help develop cultures of learning in families, communities and workplaces.
- To create positive learning experiences for these students by raising self esteem and building confidence.
- To raise the visibility and profile of The Open University and work with partners to foster change in excluded communities.
- To help the University better understand and respond to the needs of these students.
- To meet recruitment and completion targets for students who live in disadvantaged communities as defined in the Widening Participation Strategy.

Programme staff are regionally based and work with a range of community based partners, such as Schools, Children's Centres, community and voluntary organisations and trade unions. At the time this research commenced, the OU was operating in partnership with eight Children's Centres in England. However, this study focuses on two cohorts in two locations: students who had enrolled since 2008 at Blackburn and at Barking and Dagenham, which included 103 students.

Like all OU study, the modules the respondents took are 'distance' learning, all materials are provided to the student in advance and they can study at their own pace and convenience. Students are given telephone support from a module tutor who supports them for the duration of their module. In addition, the students in this study were offered group support sessions based at the children's centre. These sessions provided additional study skills support and ensured that students had contact with others in their locality. They were not 'lectures' as such, all the content, including the 'teaching' of the module was provided in written and on-line materials, but students were supported around developing skills such as note taking, essay writing and time management. This additional support was funded as an element of the University's widening participation strategy. So overall the course were designed for disadvantaged students.

1.4 Research questions

To meet these aims the study addressed the following research questions:

- What, if anything, does existing literature from the UK and other countries, tell us about the needs of student mothers, and ways in which they have been addressed?

1.4.1 Institutional and organisational perspectives – higher education providers and Children's Centres

- What are the institutional, organisational and educational challenges of establishing and running such programmes in partnership with (for Birkbeck off campus) Children's Centre,

especially in the current context of higher education policy changes, which are putting such provision at risk?

- Are the programmes effective in terms of recruitment, completion, and progression, and how could they be improved? From differing higher education institutions' perspectives have the courses been successful and met their aims?

- What are the pedagogic challenges for learning and teaching in these contexts? How have lecturers and those responsible for designing courses worked with these challenges, and how successful do they feel they have been? How does this vary by mode of delivery namely, face-to-face and distance learning, and by different approaches to course design?

- In what ways do the Children's Centres see the courses as contributing to their provision and to the communities in which they are located? From their perspective, have the courses been successful?

1.4.2 Student parents' perspective

- What sort of parents enrol, withdraw, and succeed in completing modules – what are their key socio-economic characteristics, their cultural, language, and ethnic backgrounds their family circumstances including the number and age of their children, and their prior educational experiences including their educational hinterlands?

- Why do some parents decide against enrolling in higher education course, and what can this tell us about the barriers to access?

- What were the processes by which the mothers became engaged in the courses? What attracted them to these particular courses, what were their motivations for studying and what do they hope to gain and achieve from participating? Was their choice influenced by the courses' location, financial support, and childcare provision and/or by their children and the mothers' educational aspirations for their children?

- What was the study experience of mothers: What educational challenges did the mothers face while studying, and what facilitated and hindered successful study including pedagogic, cultural and economic factors?

- What impact, if any, has participation in the courses had on a) the women's self- and learner identities; b) their employment ambitions and prospects c) their relations with their children and their children's experiences, including their aspirations for their children's education?

1.4.3 Implications for policy

- What lessons can be learnt from existing provision for other potential providers in terms of: setting up and running such courses; the resources required; student support; curriculum design; pedagogical approaches and methods of assessment?

- What value is there (if any) in maintaining and developing projects of this kind, which exist to one side of more standardised higher education provision? What evidence is there of their benefit for mothers, their families, and higher education institutions, and to what extent could these benefits be provided by mainstream higher education at a time of increased pressure on budgets in both the higher education and Early Years sectors?

- What do the findings tell us about dominant discourses and theoretical understandings of widening participation and social mobility?

1.5 Methodology

A mixed method approach was adopted which consisted of the following:

- A literature review
- Interviews with Children's Centres staff
- Interviews with Birkbeck and OU staff responsible for delivering the courses
- Analysis of Birkbeck's and OU's student records
- Survey of course participants
- In-depth interviews with student
- Discussion event with stakeholders focusing on interim findings

This report brings together the findings from all elements of the study.

All of the nine Children's Centres where Birkbeck had run courses since their start in 2007 were included within the remit of this study, alongside two of the seven Children's Centres in England were the OU had had partnership since 2008. As discussed below, staff at these centres were interviewed along with those who had taught on the courses run thorough these Children's Centres, and students who had participated in the courses. A total of 145 Birkbeck course participants and 103 OU course participants fell within the remit of the study and these included different cohorts of students who had started their studies in different academic years.

It was not possible to include within the remit of the study all seven of the Children's Centres with OU partnerships or all of the OU students involved in these partnership courses since their launch in 2007/08. This was because the OU have very strict rules about surveying their students, and some of these students had already been involved in OU research, which precluded their involvement in further research. This measure is designed to protect students from being overloaded, as studying at a distance necessarily requires frequent communication. Some of the consequences of this restriction are discussed below under 'Limitations of the research'.

1.5.1 Literature Review

A literature review on student parents in higher education including institutional practices and policies for encouraging and supporting such part-time higher education study, was undertaken to contextualise the findings, ensure the research capitalised on existing evidence, and identified relevant factors to feed into tool design and data analyses. The findings from this review have been integrated throughout the report.

1.5.2 Interviews with Children's Centres staff

Interviews were conducted with staff, between April and June 2012, at seven out of the nine Children's Centres where Birkbeck has run courses since 2007, and at both of the two Children's Centres with OU partnerships. The nine structured interviews were carried out mainly face-to- face, lasting approximately one and a half hours with either the Children's Centre manager or the person with responsibility for education and training. All the interviews were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed. In order to preserve anonymity the Children's Centre Managers are identified only as MOU1, MOU2 and MBK1, MBK2 and so on to MBK7.

These interviews covered the following areas:

- Background material on the Children's Centres and their missions
- Involvement with Birkbeck/OU courses and motivation for running/hosting courses
- Administration and organisation of the courses, including recruitment
- Type of course participants
- Criteria for assessing the success of courses

1.5.3 Interviews with Birkbeck and OU staff responsible for the courses

Ten structured interviews were carried out mainly face-to- face, lasting approximately one hour each, in April and May 2012. In total, there were six interviews with lecturers (five Birkbeck and one OU) and four with programme directors (one Birkbeck and three OU). All the interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed.

The Birkbeck programme director interviewed (Table 1.1) had overall responsibility for the Higher Education Introductory Studies (HEIS) programme from its inception in 2007 until the person left Birkbeck in 2011.[27] The OU community partnership programme directors had various positions of responsibility, including widening participation and inclusion. As table 1.2 shows, Birkbeck lecturers work, and frequently concurrently worked or had previously worked, on a range of modules for the HEIS programme at between one and three different centres. The OU lecturers undertook a minimum of four presentations a year in the community partnership programme.

For more information about the Birkbeck and OU programmes see section 3.4. In presenting the findings, lecturers are identified by code, but programme directors (PDs) are not, in order to maintain anonymity and confidentiality.

Table 1.1 Programme directors

Institution	Code	Role
BBK	PDBK1	Responsible for HEIS
OU	PDOU1	Roles in OU include Community Partnerships Programme (CPP) and WP
OU	PD0U2	CPP Manager in London
OU	PD0U3	Responsible for CPP and inclusion

[27] A new programme director took over in 2011.

Table 1.2 Lecturers

Institution	Code	Role	Children's Centre	Modules
BBK	LBK1	Lecturer on HEIS and other BBK programmes	1 centre	Approaches to study
BBK	LBK2	Lecturer on HEIS and other BBK programmes	3 centres	Approaches to study Sociology
BBK	LBK3	Lecturer on HEIS and other BBK programmes	2 centres	Approaches to study Sociology ICT
BBK	LBK4	Lecturer on HEIS	2 centres	Approaches to study Approaches to study with English language support ('intensive group')
BBK	LBK5	Lecturer on HEIS	3 centres	Approaches to study
OU	LOU1	Works on community programme and 'Openings'		4 presentations per year in CPP

1.5.4 Analysis of Birkbeck and OU student records

Basic information about the socio-economic characteristics of 139[28] Birkbeck students who enrolled on courses held at Children's Centres since their inception in 2007/08, and the 103 OU parent students accessing courses via Children's Centres in Dagenham and Barking, and Blackburn since 2008 was collated and analysed (Appendix 1 Table A1; A2).

This revealed that Birkbeck and OU students taking courses at Children's Centres had very similar socio-economic characteristics, although their ethnic mix was slightly different. This lends confidence to our approach in various parts of the report of discussing the course participants together rather than disaggregating them by their higher education institution.

However, there were some interesting differences:

- in the characteristics of Birkbeck students taking HEIs courses at Children's Centres compared with those taking HEIS courses at the main Birkbeck campus; and
- in the characteristics of OU Community Partnerships Programmes (CPP) students taking courses via Children's Centres compared with those taking courses at other CCP sites.

In particular, Birkbeck HEIS course participants studying at Children's Centres were significantly more likely than their peers studying HEIS courses at the main Birkbeck Campus to be female, older, to come from an ethnic minority group and a non-EU country (Appendix 1:Table A1). OU course

[28] Data were missing on 6 students.

participants taking CCP course via Children's Centres were similarly significantly more likely than their peers on other CCP courses to be female, older, to come from an ethnic minority group and a non-EU country, and to have lower-level entry qualifications (Appendix 1:Table A2).

1.5.5 Survey of course participants

All 145 Birkbeck students who had enrolled in courses at children's centres since their inception in 2007/08 and 103 OU students who had studied via a Children's Centre in Dagenham and Barking and Blackburn were sent a web-based on-line questionnaire. Non- respondents were then followed up with a telephone call and the interviewer conducted the on-line questionnaire with the course participants. The online survey was launched on 27 July 2012, and after several reminders were sent out, it was closed mid-September. The follow-up interviews were conducted between September and December 2012.

Of the 248 course participants included in the remit of the survey, 115 responded to the survey.[29] However, the course participants' contact details, extracted from Birkbeck and the OU's student records were not always accurate. Some email addresses were invalid and we received messages to that effect from 38 (25 Birkbeck, 13 OU). A greater problem is email addresses that exist but are no longer used, sometimes the student address provided by the university, but there is no way of assessing how many email addresses were no longer used. We also had most course participants' telephone numbers, and where no response was received from the email we telephoned every participant, but for 28 participants there was no valid phone number (8 Birkbeck and 20 OU). Of the 145 Birkbeck course participants we contacted, 79 responded to the survey either online or over the telephone and of the103 OU participants we contacted, 36 responded to the survey. If we discount students for whom we had no valid phone number, this gives a response rate of 58% for Birkbeck (79/137) and a lower rate of 43% for the OU (36/83).

It is unclear why responses were so much poorer among OU course participants. More of these students relied on OU email addresses rather than personal email addresses, which no longer operate once students have completed their studies. So emails 'bounced back' (an issue with Birkbeck students too) and some telephone numbers were also unobtainable - both somewhat predictable issues. It may be the case that OU students were more likely to reject emails, as they were more likely than Birkbeck students to receive emails, since this was the key form of OU communication with students. However, another unforeseen issue related to the 'vulnerability' of the survey respondents and their worries about answering emails and receiving telephone calls from people they do not know, or whose telephone number they do not recognise.

Consequently we decided to re-open the survey. OU staff agreed to contact the course participants on our behalf to encourage them to participate in the re-opened survey, which also contained an approach letter from a familiar member of OU staff. However, this generated only a handful of additional responses.[30]

The characteristics of the course participants surveyed

Tables 1.3 to 1.4 provide some basic information about the survey respondents by the institution they attended. All the respondents had children.

Table 1.3 shows that the majority of course participants surveyed were:

- women;
- aged over 30 at the start of their course;

[29] Given the small number of respondents the data have not been weighted.
[30] For resource reasons these responses were not added to the reporting of the survey.

- Lone parents;
- had children;
- not in paid employment immediately before starting their course;
- left full-time education before the age of 18;
- their highest qualification when starting the course was Level 2 or below; and
- did not have a family member who had studied for a higher education qualification.

All the respondents had children and for nearly half, their youngest child was under the age of five. So for these women in particular, the onsite crèche at the Children's Centre was very important.

It is noteworthy that just under a half (46%) of the respondents had gross household incomes below £15,000. Nationally, in 2010/11, the UK median household income was £419 a week or £21,788 per annum.[31] Using the poverty line of less than 60% of median household incomes (£251 per week, £13,052 per annum), a sizable proportion of the respondents and their children were in poverty. This relative income measure fails to capture wider indicators of child poverty and gives an incomplete picture of the material living standards of low-income households and their children, such as quality of housing or access to local or public services.

The socio-economic characteristics of the respondents are also very different from those of part-time undergraduates nationally. For example, according to 2009/10 HESA data, 63% of all UK domicile part-time undergraduates are female; 64% over 30; 18% from an ethic minority; 7% are disabled; and 17% have entry qualifications of Level 2 or below.[32] Other research shows that around 81% of part-time undergraduates are employed, mostly full-time and in part as a consequence, only 33% have household incomes of under £25,000 per annum.[33]

It is clear, therefore, that these courses, in line with their mission of widening higher education participation, attract students who are financially, socially and educationally disadvantaged, especially when compared with the part-time undergraduate population nationally.

Table 1.3 along with Table 1.5 also shows the differences in the characteristics of course participants studying at Birkbeck and those studying at the OU. Those at Birkbeck were significantly more likely than their OU peers to come from an ethnic minority, to be living with a partner or spouse, and to have started their course with a Level 3 or higher qualification.

[31] Cribb, J., Joyce, R., and Phillip, D (2012) *Living standards, poverty and inequality in the UK: 2012* London: The Institute for Fiscal Studies http://www.ifs.org.uk/comms/comm124.pdf (Accessed 15/01/2013)
[32] Pollard, E, Newton, B, and Hillage, J (2012) *Expanding and improving part-time higher education*. BIS Research Paper No 68, London: Department of Business Innovation and Skills p. 118-122
[33] Callender, C., Hopkin, R., and Wilkinson D. (2010) *Futuretrack: part-time students' career decision-making and career development of part-time higher education students,* Manchester; HECSU 132 pp

Table 1.3 Characteristics of course participants by institution attended

Characteristic	Birkbeck		OU		All	
	%	N	%	N	%	N
Gender						
Female	88	70	92	33	90	103
Male	4	3	8	3	5	6
Missing	8	6	0	0	5	6
Age at start of course						
30 and under	38	30	47	17	41	47
Over 30	62	49	53	19	59	68
Ethnicity						
White	27	21	61	22	37	43
Not White	53	42	39	14	49	56
Missing/refused	20	16	0	0	14	16
Disability						
Yes	9	7	3	1	7	8
No	54	43	94	34	67	77
Missing	37	29	3	1	26	30
Family type						
Lone parent family	44	35	69	25	52	60
Two parent family	47	37	31	11	42	48
Missing/refused	9	7	0	0	6	7
Age of youngest child when started course						
Under 5	39	31	44	16	41	47
5 and over	43	34	56	20	47	54
Missing	18	14	0	0	12	14
Economic status before starting the course						
In paid employment	30	24	17	6	26	30
Not in paid employment	63	50	83	30	70	80
Missing	6	5	0	0	4	5
Gross annual household income						
Under £14,999	43	34	53	19	46	53
£15,000 and over	30	24	11	4	24	28
Missing/refused	27	21	53	19	30	34
Age left full-time education						
Under 18	48	38	61	22	52	60
18 and over	39	31	36	13	38	44
Missing	13	10	3	1	10	11
Highest qualification on entry						
Level 2 or below	51	40	86	31	62	71

Level 3 or above	39	31	11	4	30	35
Other/missing	10	8	3	1	8	9
Family member studied for an higher education qualification						
Yes	43	34	53	19	46	53
No	53	42	47	17	51	59
Missing/don't know	4	3	0	0	3	3
All	**100**	**79**	**100**	**36**	**100**	**115**

Base: All respondents (N=115)
Source: Survey of course participants, 2012

Table 1.4 shows that 82% of survey respondents received government tuition grants and institutional bursaries to pay for their tuition fees, which is a very high proportion compared with national data, reflecting the atypical socio-economic characteristics of the course participants surveyed. Nationally, only a minority (15%) of all part-time undergraduates and those studying for a bachelor's degree (35%) received any government funded financial assistance.[34]

Table 1.4 also shows that the majority of course participants surveyed had completed the module they had started at the children's centre. However, Birkbeck course participants were significantly more likely to have done so than their OU colleagues. This is discussed in more depth later in the report as well as issues related to progressing on to further courses.

Table 1.5 also highlights how, unsurprisingly, course participants who started the course with a Level 2 qualification or below were more likely than those with higher entry qualifications to have left full-time education aged under 18, to be under the age of 30 when they started their Birkbeck or OU course, and to be a lone parent.

[34] Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2010) *Interim equality impact assessment: urgent reforms to higher education funding and student finance* http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/higher-education/docs/i/10-1310-interim-equality-impact-assessment-he-funding-and-student-finance.pdf (Accessed 1 December 2010).

Table 1.4 Course and institution characteristics by institution attended

Characteristic	Birkbeck		OU		All	
	%	N	%	N	%	N
Who paid for tuition fees						
No fees paid – received help with the costs of tuition	76	60	94	34	82	94
Myself (from salary, savings, loans etc)	14	11	3	1	10	12
Family and friends	2.5	2	0	0	2	2
My employer	2.5	2	0	0	2	2
Missing	5	4	3	1	4	5
Study status when surveyed						
Currently studying	28	22	22	8	26	30
Completed studying	58	46	42	15	53	61
Did not complete module	9	7	33	12	16	19
Missing	5	4	3	1	4	5
Completed module undertaken at Children's Centre						
Yes	58	46	42	15	53	61
No	9	7	33	12	16	19
NA/missing	20	26	25	9	31	34
Progressed to another HE course						
Yes	29	23	19	7	26	30
No	38	30	50	18	42	48
Not applicable – still studying module	28	22	22	8	26	30
Missing	5	4	9	3	8	7
All	**100**	**79**	**100**	**36**	**100**	**115**

Base: All respondents (N=115)
Source: Survey of course participants, 2012
*Birkbeck students only

Table 1.5 Demographic variables – Pearsons Chi square matrix (values) using Fisher's Two tail test

	Gender	Ethnicity	Disability	Entry qual	Status[35]	Age youngest	Age left FT Ed	Income	Activity before	Completion	Progression	Age group	Family type
Institution	16.67 0.000**	79.48 0.000**	1.89 0.254	0.19 0.701	11.26 0.013*	0.099 0.836	0.58 0.531	2.79 0.134	3.04 0.110	9.64 0.004**	1.70 0.221	0.99 0.326	4.22 0.043*
Gender		3.92 0.052	1.16 0.276	2.97 0.096	1.19 0.768	2.21 0.214	0.19 1.000	0.64 0.646	0.24 0.638	0.04 1.000	0.00 1.000	13.74 0.000**	0.54 0.652
Ethnicity			0.38 0.640	0.61 0.462	3.73 0.291	0.15 0.833	0.42 0.529	0.41 0.622	0.67 0.480	0.01 1.000	0.98 0.440	0.97 0.342	0.68 0.530
Disability				0.01 1.000	1.81 0.630	0.08 1.000	0.19 0.725	2.00 0.204	0.58 0.426	0.01 1.000	0.35 1.000	8.74 0.003**	2.91 0.122
Entry qual					4.04 0.261	0.59 0.516	8.32 0.006**	1.63 0.309	1.40 0.334	0.79 0.556	1.77 0.199	9.83 0.002**	7.80 0.009**
Status						6.19 0.100	4.19 0.226	7.71 0.049	3.43 0.344	80.00 0.000**	67.56 0.000**	5.18 0.159	7.22 0.063
Age youngest							2.13 0.210	0.76 0.479	3.01 0.107	3.13 0.104	2.60 0.142	11.70 0.001**	1.14 0.314
Age left FT Ed								0.36 0.641	0.42 0.520	2.27 0.164	0.70 0.459	2.56 0.153	0.21 0.687
Income									1.18 0.330	1.12 0.332	0.02 1.000	0.22 0.817	11.70 0.001**
Activity before										0.04 1.000	0.30 0.593	0.31 0.666	0.48 0.516
Completion											3.98 0.053	4.42 0.056	1.92 0.194
Progression												0.36 0.630	0.26 0.642
Age group													2.65 0.117
Family type													

[35] Note that as study status is a categorical variable Fisher's exact test is not applicable and Pearsons Chi Square has been used. All values are Pearson Chi Square.

1.5.6 Follow-up in-depth interviews with course participants

Just over a half (N=40) of the 76 Birkbeck survey respondents agreed to participate in the follow-up interviews and gave telephone contact details, and a similar proportion of all OU respondents (N=36) agreed and provided contact details (N=18). An attempt was made to select a mixture of course participants including those who were still studying; those who had completed their studies who had and had not progressed on to further study; and those who had withdrawn from their studies and not completed the module they started at the Children's Centre.

A total of 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted - 21 with Birkbeck course participants and a further nine with OU course participants between January and March 2013. All these interviews were recorded and transcribed. In order to preserve anonymity the participants are identified only as OU1 to OU9 and BBK1 to BBK21. Table 1.6 below gives details of the key characteristics of the course participants interviewed in comparison to survey respondents who were not interviewed.

Table 1.6 Characteristics of course participants interviewed in-depth

Characteristic	Interviewed			Not interviewed
	%	N	%	No
Gender				
Female	96.7	29	88.4	76
Male	3.3	1	5.8	5
Unknown	0	0	5.8	5
Age at start of course				
30 and under	20	6	47.7	41
Over 30	80	24	52.3	45
Ethnicity				
White	30	9	39.5	34
Not White	50	15	48.8	42
Unknown	20	6	7	6
Family type				
Lone parent family	70	21	46.5	40
Two parent family	30	9	45.3	39
Unknown	0	0	8.1	7
Age of youngest child when started course				
Under 5	50	15	37.2	32
5 and over	46.7	14	47.7	41
Unknown	3.3	1	15.1	13
Economic status before starting the course				
In paid employment	26.7	8	26.7	23
Not in paid employment	70	21	68.6	59
Unknown	0	0	4.7	4
Age left full-time education				
Under 18	46.7	14	37.2	32
18 and over	40	12	53.5	46
Unknown	13.3	4	9.3	8

Highest qualification on entry[36]				
Level 2 or below	63.3	19	60.5	52
Level 3 or above	33.3	10	30.2	26
Unknown	3.3	1	9.3	8
Family member studied for an higher education qualification				
Yes	43.3	13	46.5	40
No	53.3	16	50	43
Unknown	3.3	1	3.5	3
Completed module				
Yes	43.3	13	57	49
No	20	6	15.1	13
Currently studying	36.7	11	25.6	22
Unknown	0	0	2.3	2
All	**100**	**30**	**100**	**86**

29 of the 30 interview respondents had completed the survey, so the data presented here are taken from survey responses, and registry data for the single respondent who did not complete the survey.

The subgroup of survey respondents was broadly representative of those who responded to the survey.

1.5.7 Discussion event with stakeholders focusing on interim findings

All the individuals involved in the research including all those interviewed and surveyed, along with members of the Steering Group were invited to a roundtable discussion to discuss the interim findings and to help formulate our findings and recommendations. The event was held on the 18 April, 2013 at Birkbeck and was attended by 15 people including Programme Directors, Lecturers, Children's Centre managers and course participants, and members of the Steering Group.

1.6 The limitations of the study

This is a small-scale study based upon the experiences of a sub-set of course participants at just two higher education institutions. It could be criticised, as many assessments of widening participation initiatives have, as being descriptive and overly reliant on 'soft' measures from practitioners and participants. The study relies on subjective self-reports from practitioners who arguably have a vested interest in proving the success of an intervention. It was not possible to demonstrate objective changes to student outcomes or behaviours.[37] All we can report on are various groups' perceptions about the women's experiences and the outcomes and impact of study. We cannot prove that these initiatives caused any reported changes for instance, in the women's behaviour or attitudes. However, debates about the relationship between attitudes and behaviour have a long history in social science.[38] The potentially powerful impact of perceptions of actuality on behaviour is well established,[39] which is particularly significant when discussing the course participants' perceptions of the impact of their course.

[36] Level 2 equates with GCSE, Level 2 with A Levels
[37] Gorard et al 2007 *op cit.*
[38] Potter, J & Wetherell, M (1987) *Discourse and Social Psychology: Beyond Attitudes and Behaviour*. London: Sage
[39] Kettley, N. Whitehead, J. and Raffan, J. (2007) Worried women, complacent men? Gendered responses to differential student funding in higher education, *Oxford Review of Education* Vol 34:1 pp 111-129

One objective of the study was to explore courses with similar aims and target groups but run by two different providers – Birkbeck and the Open University, and to assess the pros and cons of their varying approaches, especially in terms of the mode of delivery. As discussed, all Birkbeck courses are provided through face-to-face teaching while OU courses are distance learning supplemented by additional face-to-face support. Thus we had hoped to assess which of the two models works 'best' for different types of course participants, and identify any common elements which contribute to positive outcomes for parents and families across the two models.

However, we have been unable to exploit this 'comparative' element of the study to the extent we would have liked. This is primarily because of the poorer response rate to the student survey among OU course participants. We had hoped that a key variable for analysing the survey data would be the higher education institution course participants attended. However, the small number of OU survey respondents makes such analysis problematic.

In addition, the small number of OU survey respondents had a knock on effect on the size of the pool of course participants willing to engage in follow-up in-depth interviews, and thus the actual number of achieved interviews (N=9).

Turning specifically to the survey of course participants, the overall number of respondents was small, especially the number of OU course participants. Consequently, the sample may not be representative of OU students who had taken Opening courses via the Community Partnerships Programme (CPP) at Children's Centres. Thus, care should be taken when interpreting the findings and in making generalisations from them.

In light of the small sample size, we only report on findings where there are a minimum of 25 cases. As a result, the analysis of the survey data we could undertake was limited. In addition, we only report on differences that are statistically significant. Differences that are statistically significant at the 5% level are described as significant, and differences at the 1% level as strongly significant.

A further limitation associated with the small sample size is that it was not possible to analyse any differences between students by cohort – by when they started their studies. As discussed below, there were some changes in the courses since they first began in 2007/08 and in the broader policy context. However, our analysis of course participants' experiences was unable to capture the impact of such changes over time. Moreover, it is important to note that both the women surveyed and subsequently interviewed included those who were still studying and those who had completed their studies, some years ago. We have been unable to differentiate between these different groups in our analysis and narrative.

1.7 Outline of the report

The rest of this chapter briefly describes the changing policy context exploring developments since the Birkbeck and OU courses were set up in 2007/8, and over the lifetime of this research study. Chapter 2 examines issues associated with the setting up of the courses including recruitment and the challenges of working in partnership. This chapter, like the subsequent chapters, will provide three perspectives, those of: the staff responsible for delivering the courses; the course participants; and the Children's Centre staff. Therefore, it will call on data collected from all the different elements of the study (see section 1.5). Chapter 3 focuses on learning and teaching. It discusses the pedagogic approach of the courses, the learning and teaching challenges, views on teaching and learning and retention. Chapter 4 concentrates on the impact and outcomes of the courses for the women and their children and families and in terms of progression on to further study. Chapter 5 contains the conclusions and policy recommendations.

1.8 The changing policy context 2007-2012

This research relates to the period 2007–2012 when specific policy and institutional contexts were both the background and impetus for the development of the widening participation initiatives that are the focus of this study. Our critical assessment of the innovative ways developed by Birkbeck and the Open University to involve student mothers in higher education began at a crucial time of changing funding systems and budgetary contraction in both higher education and in the Sure Start Children's Centres with which the higher education institutions were collaborating.

1.8.1 The changing higher education landscape

Table 1.7 drawn from a recent HEFCE/OFFA report[40] highlights the changing fortunes and nature of Government led widening participation policies and initiatives. This table does not differentiate comprehensively between policies aimed at part-time students and those focusing on full-time students. Arguably over the 2007-2012 period, the most important policies aiding part-time and older students were the widening participation formula funding allocation, and the now defunct Aim Higher, and Lifelong Learning Networks. (The most valuable initiative in monetary terms - institutional funds delivered to access measures through OFFA Access Agreements - did not affect part-time providers until the introduction of the 2012/13 reforms of student funding, discussed below.) So between 2007-2012, widening participation policies and rhetoric concerning 'raising aspirations' and 'lifting barriers' arguably were at their peak at the start of this period of affecting this research study, but have subsequently waned and refocused on social mobility and meritocratic ideas underpinning fair access – ensuring that more disadvantaged students access the 'best' universities.

It is open to debate just how successful these widening participation initiatives have been.[41] The majority of the most significant studies and statistical analyses assessing changes in the participation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds have focused on young people.[42]

The current thinking is that more emphasis should be placed on outreach work rather than direct financial aid to help widening participation. Specifically, the HEFCE/OFFA report[43] concludes that

- Outreach activity should start early in the educational career and should be progressive in nature.
- Delivering outreach to mature learners presents challenges, not least in terms of a lack of easily identifiable target institutions outside FE colleges.
- The progression rates for learners with vocational or non A-level qualifications are significantly lower than those for learners with A-levels.
- Evidence points to a continuing need for structured, co-ordinated approaches to outreach.
- The academic sphere is crucial in fostering a sense of belonging to aid student retention and success.
- Evidence points to the need for investment in inclusive learning, teaching and student support practices and environments.

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[40] HEFCE/OFFA (2013) *National Strategy for Access and Student Success*: Interim report to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills by the Higher Education Funding Council for England and the Office for Fair Access http://www.hefce.ac.uk/news/newsarchive/2013/name,78843,en.html Accessed 12 August 2013

[41] Harrison, N. (2012) The mismeasure of participation: how choosing the 'wrong' statistic helped seal the fate of Aimhigher. *Higher Education Review*, 45 (1).

[42] For example the much cited HEFCE studies using Polar data Higher Education Funding Council for England (2010) *Trends in young participation in higher education: core results for England*, Report 2010/03, Bristol: HEFCE.

[43] HEFCE/OFFA (2013) *op cit* p 9

- Institutions still need to do more to evaluate the impact of their widening participation activity.

Finally, other significant changes across all of the educational sectors may impact on widening participation into the future. These include the reforms within HE itself affecting student number controls, higher tuition fees and a much more diverse and competitive sector.

Table 1.7 Timeline of investment in widening participation

Year	Funding stream	Level (£M)	Purpose
1995-96 to 1998-99	Non award-bearing education programme	18.4 over lifetime of programme	Support of non award-bearing provision for liberal adult education and widening access programmes
1997-98 to 2000-01	Disability strand projects	7.3 over lifetime of programme	Special funding initiative to develop and embed good practice in provision and support for disabled students
1998-99	Widening participation programme	1.5 over lifetime of programme	Programme to build partnerships and help lay the foundations for effective institutional strategies
1999-2000 to present	Widening participation formula funding allocation	20 in 1999-2000 rising to 60 in 2012-13	HEFCE's first recurrent formula funding for WP based on fulltime students from disadvantaged backgrounds
2000-01 to present	WP allocation plus further formula for part-time students	24 in 2000-01 rising to 67 in 2012-13	Recurrent formula funding for WP based on part-time students from disadvantaged backgrounds
2000-01 to present	Mainstream disability allocation	7 in 2000-01 rising to 13 in 2012-13	Recurrent formula funding for provision and support for disabled students
2002-03	Additional funding for WP	20 (Jointly funded by HEFCE and Learning and Skills Council)	Funding for the development and delivery in 2003-04 of Partnerships for Progression
2003-04 to present	Improving retention allocation	217 in 2003-04 rising to 224 in 2012-13	Recurrent formula funding to recognise costs of supporting students at greater risk of withdrawal

Year	Funding stream	Level (£M)	Purpose
2004-05 to 2010-11	Aimhigher	84 per year on average (HEFCE, BIS and Learning and Skills Council / Skills Funding Agency main funders)	National outreach programme developed from the integration of the Excellence Challenge initiative and Partnerships for Progression
2004-05 to 2011-12	Lifelong Learning Networks	100 over lifetime of programme	Partnerships between HE institutions and FECs to support the progression into HE of learners with vocational Level 3 qualifications
2006-07 to present	Institutional funds delivered to access measures through access agreement commitments	424 in 2010-11 Rising to 672 in steady state under the new arrangements	OFFA was created in 2004 to ensure that higher fees introduced in 2006-07 did not deter people from entering HE for financial reasons and that institutions were explicitly committed to widening participation
2012-13 onwards	National Scholarship Programme	50 in 2012-13 rising to 150 by 2014-15	Provision of individual financial benefit for students with a residual household income of £25,000 or less, who meet individual institutional criteria and are selected for an award

1.8.2 Changing tuition fees and funding

Tuition fees and funding of part-time undergraduates until 2012/13[44]

There is a growing body of research examining the complex interaction of social, economic, and cultural factors and inequalities underpinning students' educational 'choices', including whether to enter HE, their choice of HEI, subject, and qualification.[45] As we have seen, the costs of higher education are often identified as a key barrier to widening participation. Studies, both in the UK and US, suggest that financial concerns and material constraints affect student decision-making,[46]

[44] The following discussion relates to the funding of part-time students in England only.

[45] .Bates, P. Pollard, E. Usher, T. and Oakley, J. (2009) *Who is heading for HE? Young People's Perceptions of, and Decisions about, Higher Education* BIS Research Paper 3, London: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills Reay, D. David, M. and Ball, S.J. (2005) *Degrees of Choice: social class, race and gender in higher education,* Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books.

[46] Usher, T. Baldwin, S. Munro, M. Pollard, E. and Sumption, F. (2010) *The role of finance in the decision-making of HE applicants and students* BIS Research Paper No 9, http://www.employment-studies.co.uk/pdflibrary/bis10529.pdf Accessed 30/02/2010

especially among low-income and 'non-traditional' students,[47] although financial issues are just one of a range of factors influencing higher education participation.

The primary goal of all student financial support policies is to lower the cost of going to university whether to address social externalities, credit constraints, or information failures. However, the financial support available to full and part-time undergraduates is very different. Here we focus exclusively on the support aimed at part-timers because all the students included in our study were studying part-time.

Until 2012/13 and at the time our study was undertaken, part-time tuition fees were unregulated and providers were able to charge whatever fees they liked (unlike those for full-time courses), however, no national data were systematically collected on part-time tuition fees. When full-time undergraduate fees were increased to £3,000 a year in 2006, following the 2004 Higher Education Act, some universities set their part-time fees at a pro rata rate of full time fees, some did not raise their fees, while others set them in line with the maximum level of public fee support available for low-income students.[48] HEFCE data from 2007/08 suggest that the average undergraduate part-time full-time equivalent fee was £1,805,[49] significantly less than the undergraduate full-time fee of £3,070, while survey data suggest that in 2007/8 fees averaged at around £1,166[50].

Since 2004/5 (and at the time of our study), the government has provided part-time undergraduates with two means-tested grants: a grant for tuition fees of between £820 and £1,230 (in 2011/12) with the amount varying depending on a student's intensity of study[51]; and a course grant to meet the costs of books, travel and other course expenditure of up to £265 (in 2011/12). Eligibility for these two grants was restricted to a narrow and arbitrary definition of part-time student and part-time study. The grants were limited first to students taking designated courses and qualifications; secondly, to UK and EU nationals and those with certain residency statuses; thirdly, to students who did not already hold an equivalent level or higher qualification, and fourthly, to students studying 50 per cent or more of a full-time course across their years of study. In addition, the grants were means-tested and depended on the students' own income, their partner's income, and the number of dependent children. The income threshold for the receipt of a full tuition fee grant was under £16,845 in 2011/12 and for a course grant under £26,030.[52]

If a student had a partner, their partner's gross income was added to the student's income. Then, just like income tax, deductions were made from this amount as follows:

Student's personal allowance	£16,845
Allowance for partner	£2,000
Allowance for first/eldest dependent child	£2,000
Allowance for each subsequent dependent child	£1,000

[47] Archer, L. Hutchings, M. and Ross, A. (eds) (2003) *Higher Education and Social Class: Issues of Exclusion and Inclusion*. London: Routledge Falmer

[48] Brown, N and Ramsden, B (2009) *Variable tuition fees in England: assessing their impact on students and higher education institutions: A fourth report,* London: Universities UK

[49] Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2010a) *Interim impact assessment: urgent reforms to higher education funding and student finance* https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/32410/10-1309-interim-impact-assessment-he-funding-and-student-finance.pdf (Accessed 1 December 2010).

[50] Callender et al 2010 *op cit* Note this is an average figure and will vary by intensity of study.

[51] In 2011/12 students studying 50% to 59% of a full-time course could get a maximum of £820, those studying between 60% and 74% could get up to £985, and those studying 75% or more can get up to £1,230.

[52] Students studying in earlier years would have received smaller grants and the income thresholds were also lower.

Consequently, access to financial support was not driven by financial need, but was determined initially by a student's existing qualifications and how many hours they studied.

In 2009/10, 57,000 students received a fee grant of an average value of around £700 a year and 59,000 benefited from a course grant worth an average of £260 a year.[53] Consequently, only a minority (15% of all part-time undergraduates and those studying for a bachelor's degree (35%) received any government funded financial assistance.[54] Nationally, the majority of part-time students paid their tuition fees up-front. For these students, higher education was not free at the point of access and students rather than the state were expected to meet their costs. Cost sharing was limited, so the financial burden rested primarily on the shoulders of individual students.

In addition to these two main sources of financial support, part-time students also had access to discretionary Access to Learning Funds if experiencing financial hardship and in need of extra help to start a course or stay in higher education. Although Access to Learning Funds were financed by central government, a student's university decided if they were eligible to receive any funds and how much money they were awarded. Among the priority groups were students with children - especially single parents, mature students - especially those with existing financial commitments, and students from low-income families.

2012/13 reforms of tuition fees and funding for part-time undergraduates

All these financial arrangements for part-time students changed for new entrants in 2012/13.[55] Consequently they did not affect directly the course participants included in this study. However, the impending changes to higher education finances and student financial support, as we will see, loomed large in the narratives of the Children's Centre staff and the staff working at Birkbeck and the OU. These reforms represent a significant change to the previous funding 'culture' and raise some fundamental issues for the courses run at the Children's Centres; hence they will be discussed below.

Following Lord Browne's review of higher education Independent *Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance*, the Coalition government published the 2011 White Paper *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System*[56]. The one paragraph in the White Paper devoted exclusively to part-time students reads

> 'For the first time, students starting part-time undergraduate courses in 2012/13, many of whom are from non-traditional backgrounds, will be entitled to an up-front loan to meet their tuition costs so long as they are studying at an intensity of at least 25 per cent, in each academic year, of a full-time course. This is a major step in terms of opening up access to higher education, and remedies a long-standing injustice in support for adult learners. Up to around 175,000 part-time students will benefit. Under the new system, distance learning students studying full-time will also benefit from a loan to cover their tuition costs'.[57]

[53] Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2010a) *op cit*

[54] Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2010b) *Interim equality impact assessment: urgent reforms to higher education funding and student finance* http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/higher-education/docs/i/10-1310-interim-equality-impact-assessment-he-funding-and-student-finance.pdf (Accessed 1 December 2010).

[55] For a critique of the 2012/13 reforms for part-time undergraduates see Callender, C. (2013) Part-Time Undergraduate Student Funding and Financial Support in Callender, C and Scott, P (eds) *Browne and beyond: Modernizing English Higher Education*, London: Institute of Education Press, Bedford Way Papers pp130-158

[56] Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2011) *Higher education: Students at the heart of the system*, Cm 8122, London: Stationery Office.

[57] BIS (2011) *op cit* p61. The government subsequently announced that there will be no age limit for the receipt of tuition fee loans.

The rationale for this change is discussed in Lord Browne's 2010 report, *Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance*[58]. One of the principles informing the Browne Report was:

> 'Part-time students should be treated the same as full-time students for the costs of learning. The current system requires part-time students to pay upfront. This puts people off from studying part-time and it stops innovation in courses that combine work and study. In our proposal the upfront costs for part-time students will be eliminated, so that a wider range of people can access higher education in a way that is convenient for them'[59].

Browne also observed:

> 'The lack of support for part-time study makes it much more difficult for this country to catch up with other countries on the skill levels of the existing workforce. Individuals who are already in work and do not have a higher education qualification are usually unlikely to give up their jobs and enter full-time study. Part-time study may be a realistic option for them, but access to part-time study is hampered by the lack of Government support. The potential exists to combine the experience of individuals already in work with the skills that higher education can provide; but it is not being exploited'[60].

This policy change has to be located alongside the other finance reforms introduced in 2012/13; specifically, the withdrawal of universities' teaching grants for most undergraduate courses and its replacement with higher tuition fees; and the raising of the government-set cap on full-time undergraduate tuition fees from £3,290 to £9,000 a year including for the first time a cap of £6,750[61] on part-time tuition fees. This maximum part-time fee is independent of intensity of study, so in theory a university could charge this for a course of only 25% of a full-time course. All full-time students as before, and now some part-time students for the first time, can repay their tuition fees through government-subsidized income-contingent loans.

To reduce the government's costs of extending loan provision to part-time students, the interest rate on loans was increased so that both student loan repayments and the interest charged on the repayments vary depending on a graduate's earnings. Both graduates from part- and full-time study do not repay their loans until they are earning £21,000 [62] a year (up from £15,000 for full-time students), while the interest on their loan is limited to the rate of inflation. Graduates earning between £21,000 and £41,000 per annum are charged interest on a sliding scale up to a maximum of inflation plus three per cent when earnings exceed £41,000 per year. Both graduates from part- and full-time study will pay nine per cent of their income until they have repaid all their loans, with outstanding debt written-off after 30 years (up from 25 years for full-time students).

A key difference in the treatment of part- and full-time students is when loan repayments commence. Part-time students are liable for repayments four years after their course begins, or in the April after their course ends, if their courses last for less time. This means that students on courses lasting more than four years, most bachelor degree programmes, start repaying their loans while still studying and before graduating, bringing into question the notion that higher education is free at the point of access. In contrast, graduates from full-time study start repaying their loans in the April after they graduate, irrespective of the duration of their course.

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[58] Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance (2010) *Securing a sustainable future for higher education: An independent review of higher education funding and student finance.* 62 pp www.independent.gov.uk/browne-report Accessed 12/10/2010

[59] *Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance* (2010) *op cit* p 5

[60] *Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance* (2010) *op cit* p 22-23

[61] This is equivalent to 75 percent of the maximum full-time fee of £9,000.

[62] For the tax year ending 5 April 2011, the median gross annual earnings for full-time employees were £26,200, for men they were £28,400, and for women £22,900 (ONS, nd).

Loan eligibility, like part-time student grants before them, is restricted. Only part-time students who do not have an equivalent or higher qualification (i.e. do not already hold a Bachelor's degree or higher qualification) qualify for the new loans.[63] This criterion excludes about 54% of all part-time undergraduate students. In addition, entitlement is limited by students' intensity of study – only those studying more than 25% of a full-time course can get the new student loans eliminating a further 15 % of students from qualifying.[64] Consequently, as before, access to financial support is not driven by financial need, but is determined initially by a student's existing qualifications and how many hours they study.

According to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, twice as many part-time students could benefit from tuition fee loans compared with those receiving fee and course grants. Government calculations suggest 30% of all part-time undergraduates will be entitled to student loans in 2012/13, and around 67 % of those aiming for a bachelor's degree.[65] Other estimates are not as optimistic. Whichever estimate proves correct, the majority of part-time students do not get the new loans and their upfront costs are not eliminated.

The pre-2012/13 tuition fee and courses grants have been abolished for new part-time entrants and new part-time students can no longer get help with tuition fees from the Access to Learning Fund. In addition, HEFCE's part-time premium, which sought to compensate institutions for the additional costs associated with part-time provision, has also been cut considerably. However, for the time being there is no cap on part-time student numbers, unlike the cap on full-time student places.

Following these reforms, undergraduate part-time tuition fees have risen[66], while enrolments have fallen dramatically. The numbers of part-time undergraduate entrants in England dropped by 33% in the year that fee loans were introduced (2011/12 to 2012/13). This means that numbers had fallen by 40% since 2010/11, equivalent to 105,000 fewer students.[67] In addition, the take-up of student loans amongst part-time students has been lower than anticipated with only around 22% of students taking advantage of them[68] in comparison to the predicted 30%.

In addition, higher education institutions with large part-time provision are experiencing other squeezes in their income due to reductions in monies received from central government and from HEFCE. In 2012-13:

- No teaching funding was provided for students studying arts or social sciences - these courses are primarily funded through student fees, for all students whether full-time or part-time
- £52 million was provided as recognition for the additional costs of part-time provision (dropping to £26 million in 2013-14)
- £67 million was provided in funding to widen access to part-time provision for people from disadvantaged backgrounds (dropping to £38 million in 2013-14)
- There was no additional funding to support growth in employer co-funded provision, as had been available in previous years (from 2008-09).

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[63] In October 2013, the government announced that this restriction would be lifted for students wanting to study engineering and computer science.
[64] Pollard, E, Newton, B, and Hillage, J (2012) *Expanding and improving part-time higher education.* BIS Research Paper No 68, London: Department of Business Innovation and Skills.
[65] BIS 2010a *op cit*
[66] No accurate or comprehensive national data are currently available on part-time fees.
[67] For comparison, numbers did go down between 2011-12 and 2012-13 in Wales and in Scotland, but by much smaller percentages. Between 2011-12 and 2012-13 part-time undergraduate enrolments decreased by 20% in England compared to 4% in Scotland and 6% in Wales.
[68] Hansard (2013) Student loans – House of Commons Written answers for 5 June 2013, 5 Jun 2013:Column 1162W http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmhansrd/cm130605/text/130605w0002.htm (Accessed 7 July 2013).

Birkbeck Higher Introductory Studies Courses – funding and student support

During the period which this research covers, students who joined courses in Children's Centres were eligible to apply either for a Birkbeck Stratford Bursary (a fund in part contributed to by donors and the Access to Learners Fund, and aimed at supporting any student wanting to access Birkbeck courses in East London) to cover course fees for government funded fee and tuition grants, described above. The former bursary scheme was initially not means assessed but subsequently became so. It operated as a way for those students who were not eligible for government funding (because their income was only just above the means-tested threshold, or they held a previous qualification at a similar level, or their intention was to study 'credits' to a value below the 50 % of a full time course (60 credit requirement)) to be eligible for financial support to pay their fees. Those that held a qualification at a similar level were a very small minority, but in almost all cases they were students who had taken a qualification some time ago in another country that had little or no value/relevance for them in their current situation.

The availability of government funded grants and the Birkbeck bursary meant that, in practice, nearly all participants were able to join the courses in the Children's Centres free of charge. In addition, a significant proportion of participants studying in the period this research covers also received a course grant to assist them in buying books and other course-related resources.

Furthermore, those students who wished to progress to the completion of full undergraduate degrees were able to do so with continued grant funding from government sources since, in nearly all cases, their family income fell below the threshold at which the payment of fees was required.

The removal of means-assessed grants and the introduction, in September 2012, of a loan system to cover the payment of fees for part-time undergraduate study consequently represents a significant change to the previous funding 'culture'. Students in this study, because they commenced study before the changes were introduced, were still able to look forward to grant support if they continued to study towards completion of an undergraduate degree.

With the withdrawal of government funding for the teaching of these courses, fees have increased considerably. For instance, the standard tuition fee for one module (Approaches to Learning) in 2012/13 for students already studying with Birkbeck and continuing on courses started prior to 2012, the cost was £325 for this 30 credit course. However, the tuition fee for the *same* module for a new entrant starting their studies in 2012/13 was £950, in 2013/14 it was £1,000, and by 2015/16 is scheduled to rise to £1,500 to bring this fee in line with other undergraduate degree modules. The fees for Higher Education Introductory Studies (HE Cert) at Birkbeck rose to £3,800 in 2012/13 (for 120 credits) up from £1,300 in the previous academic year. By 2015/16 an HE cert will costs £6,000. However, most of those participating in HEIS courses at the Children's Centres are eligible for some fee waivers and bursaries.

Open University 'Openings' Courses – funding and student support

During the period of the study, the Openings modules, which were available across all four nations of the UK, were £195 for 15 credits at Level 1[69] (QCF Level4, SQCF Level 7), subsidised against a standard 15 credit fee of £400. OU fees covered all course materials, tuition and assessment and students do not have to purchase any other materials or equipment. For students eligible, on grounds of income, financial support was available in the form of fee waivers on a graduated scale, funded by the University. The income threshold for a full fee waiver was based on the national part time grant financial criteria of £16,845 income, plus allowances of £2000 for a partner, £2000 for a first child and £1000 for each additional child. While some students in this research might have had to make a small financial contribution, the majority will have received full fee waivers.

[69] The OU differs from the sector in its use of levels.

The tuition model for Openings modules comprised pro-active telephone support by a tutor. This could be supplemented by email interaction and, for the students in this research, by the additional face-to-face support provided by the Community Partnership scheme. Thus, in addition to support and encouragement from a Community Partnership Manager, skills development sessions were provided by Associate Lecturers (ALs) resourced as an element of the University's Widening Participation strategy.

The changes to fees and funding in England in 2012 had far-reaching effects for the OU, in that loan eligibility is contingent on qualification registration, as well as study intensity. Until that point, students had registered on a module and drawn down a qualification once sufficient relevant credit had been accumulated. Openings had always been considered a low cost, low risk means for a potential student to test the water before making a major financial commitment to HE study. With the increase in fees necessitated by the withdrawal of direct teaching funding for these modules, the price increased to £625 and, because the credit size was below the minimum study intensity, the modules were not eligible for loans.

Because the OU is open access (there are no entry qualifications required), registering for a full qualification and committing to a loan is highly risky for some students, particularly those represented in this research. The decision was therefore taken to develop new access curriculum at Level 0 (The courses taken by the women in this study were at Level1) and thus three new interdisciplinary modules have been developed for presentation in 2013/14. The University has agreed for the fee to be set at 50% of the standard module fee and a generous fee waiver scheme, supported by the National Scholarship Programme, was put in place, reducing the fee for eligible students (household income of less than £25k and no prior higher education qualification) to £25.

An interim solution was put in place for 2012/13, with a fee waiver to £25 for an Openings module, although students had to register for a qualification in which their first full Level 1 module would be fee waived to £50 from £2,500. Subsequent removal from the NSP funding stream and a need to create a clear, consistent and accessible offer across all four nations has resulted in a single UK-wide offer of a fully fee waived (i.e. zero contribution) 30 credit access module, funded entirely by the University.

1.8.3 Changes in Children's Centre Policies 2007-2012[70]

The Sure Start programme was part of a large and ambitious strategy to prevent present *and* future social exclusion and contribute to the New Labour government's a commitment to halve child poverty by 2010 and abolish it by 2020.[71] When Labour was elected in 1997, three in ten children were living in poverty (defined as living in a household with an income less than 50% of average household income) compared with one in ten in 1979. Children in lone parent families were twice as likely to be poor and poor for longer than those living with two parent families.[72] Families with children under five years, large families and families from some black and minority groups were also at greater risk of poverty. There were 'work-rich' households in which both parents worked and 'work-poor' households with no earners.

The Prime Minister explained: *'The levels of child deprivation are frightening...We need to break the cycle of disadvantage so that children born into poverty are not condemned to social exclusion and deprivation. That why it is so important that we invest in our children''.* [73] Social exclusion was the result of lack of *opportunities* as well as of material resources. *'We want children to be ready to learn when they start school. So we are expanding childcare and nursery care, with a special Sure Start*

[70] This section of the report was written by Hilary Land. For a fuller examination of the development of Sure Start – see Appendix 2

[71] Blair, T (1999) 'Beveridge re-visited: a welfare state for the 21st century' in Walker, R (ed) *Ending Child Poverty*, Bristol: The Policy Press p17

[72] Hills, J, 'Beveridge and New Labour: poverty then and now' in Walker, (ed) *op.cit* p.41

[73] Blair, T (1999) *op cit* p 16

programme for children at risk of social exclusion. These new services will also help parents who wish to return to work'. (Idem)

Initially the purpose of Sure Start did not include helping mothers back to work, for it was agreed early on that new policies for *children under four* should be the key focus. The research reviewed by the policy makers at the time convinced them that the earliest years in life were the most important determinant of a child's development into a productive adult; poverty had a lasting impact on young children; services for the under fours were patchy and of uneven quality across localities and the provision of a comprehensive community based programme of early intervention could improve child development and 'help break the cycle of social exclusion'.

In April 1999, 250 Sure Start Local Programmes (SSLPs) with a ring-fenced budget of £450 million for the first three years commenced. Funded for 10 years and run jointly by the Department of Health (DH) and the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), the overall objective was: *To work with parents and children to promote the physical, intellectual and social development of pre-schoolchildren-particularly those who are disadvantaged-to ensure they are ready to thrive when they get to sch*ool'.[74]

Using poverty indicators 20% of the poorest wards in England were chosen, thereby including a third of all poor children. In order to minimise stigma *all* children up to the age of four years in a programme's (smaller) catchment area within each ward would be eligible to use the services. The emphasis was on:

- strengthening parenting with respect to bonding between parents and children;
- caring for their children;
- promoting health development;
- encouraging stimulating and enjoyable play
- improving language skills
- identifying early and providing support for children with learning difficulties, emotional or behavioural problems.

Both Tessa Jowell and David Blunkett, the ministers responsible for Sure Start at the outset had strong views about the programmes' priorities. Jowell wanted the focus to be on mothers and very young children as well as on the support women can give each other: *'...what you need when you have a new baby is nurture, and what you need to be able to give your baby is nurture, and you need to have enough confidence to be your baby's first teacher*'.[75] Blunkett was most interested in the involvement and development of the local community: '*... this was a capacity-building and social capital programme which was going to transform the lives of families and communities, and not just looking after children.'* (Ibid. p 39) Community and parental participation in shaping and managing SSLPs were essential elements.

Pressure to expand SSLPs and align their objectives more closely with the government's commitment to ending child poverty and increase employment rates, particularly among lone mothers, became irresistible. During the 1990s women's employment rates had risen from 60 % to nearly 70%. *'For those with young children the rise is quite dramatic. Rates of employment have risen from 19% to nearly 56% for women with a youngest child under the age of 2 and from 33% to 64% for women*

[74] HMT, 1998 cited in Eisenstadt, N. (2012) *Providing a Sure Start*, Bristol: The Policy Press, p32
[75] Quoted in Eisenstadt, op cit p31

whose youngest child is aged between 3 and 5 years'.[76] Moreover, these increases were accounted for almost entirely by mothers with working partners. Among lone parents or mothers with a non-working partner the rises were 'miniscule' (Idem).

In 2000, SSLPs acquired another objective: '*Reduce the number of 0-3 year olds in Sure Start areas living in households where no-one is working by 2004'* [77]

The budget was doubled so that by 2004, there would be 500 SSLPs reaching half of all poor children. In contrast to the managers of the Sure Start Children's Centres in this study, at the time this employability agenda was controversial because SSLP staff found little interest among parents either in childcare provision, which many did not trust, or in employment. Services had been designed to strengthen parenting capacities and self esteem in order to improve child outcomes. Others, however, argued the employability agenda was consistent with raising aspirations and providing people with opportunities to improve their situation (Ibid. p51).

A year later the DfEE's employment responsibilities were moved to the new Department of Work and Pensions (DWP). Resisting pressure to move childcare across too, a new unit integrating responsibility for childcare, early years, and Sure Start in new the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) was created. It was the joint responsibility of the DfES together with the DWP instead of the DH. The ten year strategy for childcare was published.[78]

In 2003, the government published a Green Paper *'Every Child Matters'* containing radical proposals to improve the wellbeing of young children. After wide consultation with children and young people themselves, 'wellbeing' was defined according to the *outcomes for children* of being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and making an economic contribution. The new Minister for Children explained: '*The vision we have is a shared one. Every child having the opportunity to fulfil their potential, and no child slipping through the net. A step change in early years' provision, with health, education, and social care closely integrated through Sure Start Children's Centres. Parenting support embedded at every stage'.* [79] The Green paper formed the basis of the Children Act 2004.

The implications for SSLPs were profound: they were to be folded into Sure Start Children's Centres. The devolution of control for delivery and funding of childcare services to the LAs was contentious.[80] It did little to diminish some managers' fear that their core services, designed to improve parenting skills and mothers' self esteem, would be overwhelmed by the employability agenda and that the different ethos, practices and standards underpinning paid-for childcare provision might not sit easily with nursery education's focus on children and educational outcomes.[81] The review also recommended the creation of Children's Centres for pre-schoolchildren in the poorest 20% of areas. The main difference between these Centres and the earlier 300 SSLPs already in operation was the greater emphasis on providing childcare for working parents, including support for childminders and providing for a wider age range. Their larger catchment areas would inevitably spread funding more thinly. The ring-fence around SSLPs' funding seemed in danger of crumbling. Even worse, to some this marked the end of Sure Start. Norman Glass, the senior civil servant who had played a key role in the Treasury in developing Sure Start, was dismayed. He regretted the end of neighbourhood control

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[76] Desai,T Gregg, P Steer, J and Wadsworth, J 'Gender and the Labour Market' (1999) in Gregg,P and Wadsworth,J. (eds) The State of Working Britain, Manchester: Manchester University Press, p173

[77] Eisenstadt, (2012), *op cit* p50

[78] HMT(2004) *Choice for Parents, the Best Start for Children: a Ten Year Strategy for Childcare*, TSO,

[79] Margaret Hodge/ (2003) *Every Child Matters: the Next Steps*, Foreword, London:HMG, p3

[80] Eisenstadt (2012) *op cit* p73

[81] Lloyd,E, (2009) '*The Interface between Childcare, Family Support and Child Poverty Strategies under New Labour: Tensions and Contradictions' Social Policy and Society* 7:4.

and '*its capture by the 'employability agenda'. For poor mothers work was the answer, and Sure Start was to play its role as a sort of New Deal for Toddlers'*.[82]

Sure Start Children's Centres 2006-2010

By 2006 there would be 2,500 Sure Start Children's Centres covering the 30% most deprived communities and including 70% of children in poverty. These Centres had to offer the following core services:

- Integrated full-day childcare and early learning;
- drop-in sessions and activities for parents, carers and children;
- access to child and family health services, including antenatal care;
- outreach and family support services;
- links with Jobcentre Plus for training and employment advice;
- support for childminders;
- support for children and parents with special needs.

Childcare services based at the centres were to be funded from parental fees, together with government funding for free part-time early education places for three and four year olds and, in SSLPs in future, two year olds. The Childcare Act 2006 introduced a requirement on LAs to ensure there was sufficient childcare for working parents as well as for those in education and training. LAs themselves would only be 'providers of last resort' although they could charge for any childcare service they did provide. In practice, providing full-time childcare services has proved to be a continuing drain on many Centres' resources and as this study shows, they have had to develop imaginative strategies to fund them.

The first impact report[83] of the early SSLPs [84] had not found many positive outcomes for children and worse, showed that children from workless households or of lone mothers fared *worse* than children in the control group. The second impact report[85] was much more positive. Half of the 14 outcomes showed significant, positive differences between SSLPs and non Sure Start areas. These included improved child positive social behaviour, improved child independence and self-regulation, less harsh discipline from parents, less home chaos, and improved home learning environment, more activities in the home conducive to learning like reading, singing and rhymes. This time there were no significant differences between different types of family or household[86]. There were fewer workless households in SSLPs but this was in line with national trends. It was not until the next evaluation, published in 2010, found *fewer* families remained workless in SSLPs compared with families from the Millennium Cohort Study[87]. By 2010 there were 3,500 Sure Start Children's Centres as planned.

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[82] Glass, 2005, 'There must be some mistake' in *The Guardian*, 5 Jan 2005

[83] The National Evaluation of Sure Start was one evaluation with 4 different modules (Implementation, Local Context, Impact and Cost Effectiveness) and a number of reports over a period of nearly 10 years.

[84] National Evaluation of Sure Start Research Team, (2005) *Early Impacts of Sure Start Local Programmes on Children and Families*, Sure Start Report 13, London: DfES,

[85] National Evaluation of Sure Start Research Team, (2008) , *The Impact of Sure Start Local Programmes on Three Year Olds and their Families*, Sure Start Report 27, London: DfES

[86] Eisenstadt, (2012), *op cit* p133

[87] Eisenstadt, (2012) *op cit* p134

The numbers of children in poverty fell but not sufficiently to meet the 2010 target set by the government in 1998. One reason for this was recession from 2008. However, changes in parental employment prospects and earnings over the *whole* of this period are also important. '*The overall reduction in child poverty since 1998-99 has been helped by higher lone parent employment rates; and the overall rise in child poverty since 2004-05 has been most concentrated on children of one earner couples, whose real earnings have fallen*'[88]. By 2004-05 for the first time since the early 1970s, over half of lone parents were in employment compared with 46% in 1998-99. In 2009-10 the proportion in work was 55%. Since then they have experienced reductions in hourly earnings and pay, although the proportion in work had risen to 58% by 2012. Work however, has become a less certain route out of poverty: three-fifths of children in poverty live in a household with at least one adult earner compared with half in 1998. Nevertheless lone parents in receipt of benefits must now be available for work as soon as their youngest child is in school. At the same time, benefits for children have been cut. In 2011-12 in the UK, 3.5 million children (27%) were living in poverty [89].

Sure Start Children's Centres from 2010 and beyond: continuities and change

The Coalition government continued a commitment to early years' services. The increase to 15 hours of the universal offer of free nursery education for all three and four year olds, promised by the previous government, was implemented and starting in autumn 2013, free part-time nursery education is being extended to the 130,000 most disadvantaged two year olds. However, the 'core purpose' of a Sure Start Children's Centre has changed since 2010, emphasising *targeted* interventions to 'improve outcomes for young children and their families and reduce inequalities between families in greatest need and their peers.' In future, Centres should play an important part in supporting '*the most disadvantaged groups struggling at the bottom of society*'[90]. This is to be achieved by improving child development and readiness for school, supported by raising parents' aspirations, self esteem and parenting skills as well as improving both child and family health and life chances. There is greater emphasis on links with health services. However the much narrower target will overlook the needs of many children[91].

In 2010 budgets for Children's Centres and other services for children and young people were merged into a single LA Early Intervention Grant, representing an 11% cut in money terms. However in contrast to the beginning of Sure Start, these cuts are taking place in the context of an *increased* birth rate over the past decade. A census of Children's Centres in 2012[92] shows the effects of these cuts. Altogether 281 centres had closed, 16 outright. The rest had either merged or adopted a 'hub and spoke' model. A further 10% were struggling to survive. Half believed they were offering broadly the same services as before, and a quarter fewer. Nearly one in five were planning to cut services in the following year and over a quarter were planning both staffing and service reductions (Ibid, p11) Universal services, such as Stay and Play, healthy eating and baby massage classes and often the first point of contact for families (Ibid, p14), were facing a reduction in the frequency of classes. A fifth had started to charge for services previously provided free. Priorities were shifting to targeted services and expanding outreach services and family support workers. In 2011 all Sure Start Children's Centres ceased being required to provide integrated early years and childcare services on site. A year later 2,000 of the centres had stopped offering any childcare. Half of those still offering childcare were over-subscribed.

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[88] Brewer, M, Brown, J Joyce, R and Sibieta, L (2010) Child Poverty in the UK since 1998-99: lessons from the past decade, IFS Working Paper 10/23, London: IFS,

[89] DWP, (2013) *Households below average income. An analysis of the income distribution 1994/95-2011/12*, London: DWP, Tables 4.1tr and 4.3tr

[90] DWP/DfE, (2011) *A New Approach to Child Poverty: Tackling the Causes of Disadvantage and Transforming Families' Lives*, Cm 8061, p. 8

[91] Washbrook, E and Waldfogel, J, (2011) On Your Marks: Measuring the school readiness of children in low to middle income groups, London:Resolution Foundation; Pordes Bowers, A and Strelitz, J with Allen, J and Donkin A, An Equal Start. Improving Outcomes in Children's Centres-the evidence review, UCL Institute of Health Equity 2012

[92] 4 Children, (2012) *Sure Start Children's Centres Census 2012*: London

The agencies with which centres collaborated also faced tighter budgets. Over two-fifths of the 121 centres in the ECCE study[93] covering the same period, had had staff withdrawn by partner agencies, including by Job Centres Plus. The same proportion had lost funding from partners thus diluting their multi - agency work. In order to reduce child poverty and increase social mobility, centres are expected to work with Job Centre Plus, providing adult learning, including language, literacy and numeracy support as well as with advice organisations, schools and voluntary and community sector organisations. However, '*providing services 'through' a children's centre does not mean that all services should actually be delivered in a children's centre'* [94]. Rather, Children's Centres should facilitate *access* to them. This is a very different interpretation of section 2 of the Childcare Act 2006 and fails to understand the importance of close proximity of services. For example, as the director of the Sure Start programme for the first seven years, Naomi Eisenstadt, told the House of Commons Education Select Committee, the absence of childcare on site dilutes the focus on increasing the employability of parents: '*because if parents do not see the childcare, if they do not see it as a reality, they are much more reluctant to go into work and the childcare in children's centres tend to be higher quality'*.[95] This study also illustrates the importance of *free* as well as on-site childcare (pp38, 43 and 52-53).

Increased parental involvement in decisions affecting a Centre's future plans as well as its activities is a key government objective. Parents must continue to be represented on Centres' Advisory boards. Greater participation in volunteering is encouraged. In 2012, three fifths reported increased use of volunteers, particularly in Stay and Play sessions and self-help groups. Three quarters of volunteers provided up to 10 hours a week[96]. A third of centres were using fathers as volunteers. With careful training and support parents as volunteers are valuable resources. Increasing their skills and aspirations can also help them go on to more formal training and employment as an early National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) study found.[97] If parents feel included and valued by the Centre staff this has a beneficial influence on their parenting behaviour[98], which in turn has a positive impact on their children. This study illustrates some of the very positive effect educational achievements can have not just on individual parents but also on the ethos of the Centre as a whole and can contribute to 'outreach' activity.

All this takes experienced and skilled staff time. However, not only are centres losing qualified and experienced staff but the previous government's strategy starting in 2006, of investing in the skills of the early years workforce is stalling. As Cathy Nutbrown, whose government commissioned report, [99] recommending further improvements in training was largely ignored, wrote: '*So yet again, babies, toddlers, young children and their families, have to be content with something different, something not quite the same in status as that offered to older pupils and students in the education system, something confused and confusing.' [100]* Meadows and Garbers' study[101] (2004) reported centre staff discouraging mothers from choosing employment in childcare because pay and prospects were so low. Regrettably this study a decade later, reported similar actions.

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[93] Goff, J, Hall J, Sylva, K, Smith, T, Smith, G, Eisenstadt, N, Sammons, P, Evangelou, M, Smees, R and Chu, K, (2013)ECCE, Strand 3: Delivery of Family Services by Children's Centres, DfES,

[94] DfE, (2013), DfE House of Commons Select Committee, *Foundation Years: Sure Start Children's Centres,* Uncorrected Oral Evidence Session 2012-13, p13

[95] Uncorrected oral evidence, 5 Jan 2013.

[96] 4 Children, (2013) *op cit* p26

[97] Meadows, P and Garbers, C, (2004) *Improving the employability of parents in Sure Start Local Programmes*, National Evaluation Summary, London: DfES, This thematic report on Employability was one of the reports of the Implementation module of NESS.

[98] Melhuish,E Belsky, J , Anning and Ball,I, (2007), 'Variation in Sure Start Local Programmes: consequences for children and families' in Belsky, J, Barnes, J and Melhuish, E (eds) *The National Evaluation of Sure Start. Does Area-Based Early Intervention Work?* , Bristol: The Policy Press

[99] Nutbrown , C, (2012*) Foundation for Quality: The independent review of early education and childcare qualifications*. Final Report, London: DfE,

[100] Nutbrown, C, (2013) *Shaking the Foundations. Why 'childcare' policy must not lead to poor quality early education and care*, University of Sheffield, p. 8

[101] Meadows and Garber (2004) *op cit* p 40.

Conclusion

The Children's Centres in this study opened when the Sure Start programme was expanding rapidly into areas to reach 70% of disadvantaged children. This was more inclusive than targeting the *most* disadvantaged children. Unlike the later centres they all had a remit to provide integrated early years and childcare services, which this study shows is so important to support mothers wanting to acquire qualifications prior to returning to work as well as making a direct contribution to the well being of their children. The evidence from this study suggests the employability agenda is less contentious than in the early days of Sure Start, not least because since 2008, lone mothers with school age children have gradually lost the right to claim means-tested benefit without being available for work. At the same time paid work has become a l*ess* certain route out of poverty than previously, so the acquisition of qualifications has become more important. In addition, the employability agenda is not seen as being in conflict with improving parenting competence. Indeed it is argued that raising the educational aspirations of parents is likely to raise those of their children. Moreover as this research study shows, the importance of nurturing mothers and encouraging them to nurture each other need not be lost by focussing on improving their education. At the same time valuable social capital which benefits the local community as well as mothers and their children can be generated. Sure Start Children's Centres face many and complex challenges as their budgets and staffing continue to be cut at a time when the need for their services is increasing. Some are in danger of being 'hollowed out'. Those which survive without losing sight of the wellbeing of children are likely to do so because, as those who pioneered Sure Start intended, they are positively embedded in the communities they serve.

2 WIDENING PARTICIPATION IN PRACTICE: SETTING UP THE COURSES

This chapter calls on data from all elements of the study (section 1.5) in order to provide the perspective of programme directors, lecturers, Children's Centre staff and the course participants. It focuses on the ideas underpinning the Birkbeck and OU courses and how they were set up in partnership with the Children's Centres. It includes a discussion of how students were recruited onto the courses, and how the women interviewed found out about these courses. It then charts the socio-economic characteristics of the women recruited, and discusses why they decided to take these courses. It concludes by examining some of the challenges for higher education institutions of working in community based partnerships, and with the Children's Centres in particular.

2.1 Ideas informing the Birkbeck and OU courses at Children's Centres

The Birkbeck and OU courses developed to run at the Children's Centres were informed and shaped by the desire to widen participation especially for the target group of student parents from low-income backgrounds. They were designed to help overcome some of the impediments to access faced by student parents (see section 1.1). Firstly, the costs - very few students had to pay any tuition fees or incurred additional costs related to their studies. The majority of students were eligible either for government tuition fee and course grants and/or institutional bursaries, discussed above (see section 1.8.2) which were transferred directly to Birkbeck to pay for the student's tuition fees. (Table 1.4). There was a clear consensus among the programme directors, lecturers and Children's CentreChildren's Centre managers that 'None of these parents had any money, or enough money and would not attend if they had to pay fees.' (MBK4). And as we will see, a key reason some women did not enrol in these courses was that they could not access or were ineligible for this government funding.

Secondly, the students had access to free childcare whilst attending their course or attending support sessions, which all the literature on student parents, both in the UK and elsewhere, highlights as a major issue. The lack of flexible and affordable childcare is a key impediment to access, participation and retention to higher education for parents, especially those with pre-school children like the women in our study.[102] In all locations used by Birkbeck and the OU, childcare for under-five year olds was provided free of charge by the Children's Centre itself. This was usually provided in an existing crèche which would be made available specifically for course participants during class hours. The availability of the on-site crèche was very important given that, according to our survey, nearly a half of the respondents had a child under the age of five and so would need to use these facilities. In some centres, the potential to offer additional free childcare time, whilst parents completed study tasks arising from the classes, was explored. However, statutory requirements for parents to remain on the premises and limited availability of space for quiet study meant this was often impossible to arrange. However, in one location, it was possible for parents to use laptops for completion of work in the building, whilst their children were cared for on one additional afternoon a week. Again, all the programme directors, lecturers and Children's Centre managers agreed that 'Childcare is an issue. It is a BIG one' (MBK4) and it needed to be free.

> And the thing that was good with us was that we were able to offer them a crèche and that's one of the big problems. They'll go to the colleges and there isn't always a crèche or sometimes if there is a crèche they have to pay for it but at the Children's Centre here they don't have to pay for the crèche, so that's another bonus, a BIG bonus for them. (MBK2)

Thirdly, the learning environment and the location of the course/study group – the Children's Centre - was a familiar and supportive one. This is very significant given findings from other research on student parents and mature working class students, which highlights the alienating environment of

[102] E.g NUS (2009) *op cit*; Moreau and Kerner (2012) *Op cit;* Lynch, K (2008) Gender roles and the American academe: A case study of graduate student mothers *Gender and Education* 20:6 p 585-605

many higher education institutions, student parents' sense of isolation, their experiences of 'not fitting in' and 'standing out'.[103] Instead, for the course participants in this study, the Children's Centres were geared towards them and their needs – they were not 'fish out of water'.[104]

Finally, the contents of the course were designed for those with no or limited exposure to higher education and the culture and conventions of higher education. The pedagogic ideas informing these courses are discussed in greater depth in the next chapter. At Birkbeck, all the HEIS modules are taught face to face and use a variety of learning and teaching approaches, in particular small group interactive learning. All the modules offered provide support and guidance to help students succeed and plan their progression. Since Birkbeck is located in a very culturally diverse city, HEIS students come from a variety of cultures and backgrounds, and engagement with debates about diversity and (in) equality is an interdisciplinary theme running through the modules that make up the programme.

The missions of the Open University are to be open to people, open to places, open to methods and open to ideas. It is this ethos which informs the open access model but even with the inclusive pedagogic approach to curriculum development, Level 1 courses are often too great a leap for students with low or no prior educational qualifications and distance learning is very different from a face-to-face experience: it requires a level of discipline and self-confidence which needs to be developed. Because of the Open University's history – it was launched as the university of the air in the 1960s – and because of its geographic spread, there are very high numbers of 'non-traditional' students. All are part time and most are mature, with above average representation of disabled students. Inclusivity in the curriculum has therefore been of paramount concern, as is student support. However, as early as the 1970s OU research showed that students with no experience of higher or further education were less able to cope with the demands of Open University foundation courses than other students. At that time the need was met through provision of preparatory courses by the National Extension College at the request of the University. The Openings programme was introduced in the 1990s to address that same need and at its peak was recruiting 20,000 students a year.

As we have seen (section 1.1), there are numerous ways in which the notion of widening participation is conceptualised and informs policy initiatives. The Birkbeck and OU programme directors consistently represented their work as a form of widening participation aimed at advancing social justice, inclusivity and transformation. One of the programme directors stated that widening participation is not about increasing the numbers of students who participate. Rather:

> it's about changing the very nature of the profile of students in HE; it's just about transforming ... there are whole communities that are excluded at the moment ... there are huge swathes of the country where people don't have these options (to have a pathway into HE). (PD)

Another programme director agreed:

> it's not about piling more and more people into HE. It's not about saying that anyone can go and they should do anything. It's about ensuring that everybody has an equal opportunity to be able to participate. So it's more about fairness and equity, for me, and social justice. (PD)

A third programme director developed the notion of participation further:

> is about inclusivity ... constructing inclusion ... in terms of what it feels like for the students themselves ... (it's about taking) into consideration what the students bring to the learning

[103] Diane Reay , Gill Crozier & John Clayton (2010) 'Fitting in' or 'standing out':working-class students in UK higher education, *British Educational Research Journal*, 36:1, 107-124; Archer, L., Hutchings, M. & Ross, A. (Eds.) (2003). *Higher Education And Social Class: Issues Of Exclusion And Inclusion*, London: Routledgefalmer; Moreau and Kerner (2012) op cit;

[104] Bourdieu, P. and Passeron, J.C. (1977), *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, London, Sage

> environment, which may be different to what ... the dominant student group ... have brought to the learning environment. So it's about creating learning spaces for what those students bring. (PD)

The lecturers who taught on the courses in the main defined widening participation as reaching otherwise hard to reach groups, 'about giving access to a wider range of people' (LBK1). Widening participation for the lecturers was more often about inclusion in terms of an individualised access model. They talked about opening possibilities for those who have previously encountered barriers to learning, especially in socially deprived areas. Widening participation is about ensuring 'that everyone has access to higher education and particularly students who may be considered non-traditional' (LBK3), including mothers of young children:

> although there are lots more women now ... within higher education I still think there are still issues regarding access, choice, progress and other things really'. (LBK3)

There was unanimous agreement that the role of the respective programmes in the institutions' widening participation work was 'hugely important' (LOU1), 'absolutely fundamental' (LBK1), a 'gateway' to higher education. (PD)

So both the Programme Directors and the lecturers called upon the discourse of 'lifting barriers' and fairness but mostly located these within broader structural factors rather than pathologising or blaming individuals for not participating in higher education.

The Children's Centre managers also called upon similar ideas underpinning widening participation when discussing their views on the purpose of the Birkbeck and OU courses and their main aims and objectives. For example, several managers talked about raising aspirations alongside a related recurrent theme of expanding opportunities and broadening women's horizons. Furthermore, they recognised the importance of the way the courses were designed to facilitate the students' engagement in higher education and to boost their confidence, and especially their personal development.

> I think this type of work is HUGELY, HUGELY important….. I think it gives the students an opportunity. It gives them an opening basically, so it's VERY important. It really is VERY important. (MOU1)

> So I'm saying raising aspirations. Offering some idea that you can shape your own future and an idea that I think what I like best about it, start EARLY. So while your child is a year or so, get going no. Because what has happened in the past I think for a lot of people, they wait till their children start school. Well you've lost about three years, when you could have been doing something and what Birkbeck offers and the OU and similar, the opportunity to do it step-by-steps and by the time your child is in full-time education you are three quarters of the way there…….. [...] I think it changes people's lives. (MBK5)

> The main thing is for parents to see their own potential and improve their aspirations and how this impacts on their children. So the idea is that they would then support their children through education better because (1) They understood the value of education and (2) They felt more confident and able themselves. (MBK4)

> I think it's more about building your confidence, 'Actually yeah, I could become something better than I am'…. So I think the Openings is more about raising aspirations….what I see is that the Openings courses are, 'Let's just make people realise that they have got potential and that they're not just 'mums' with no other skills' basically. (MOU1)

Other managers referred to raising aspirations regarding employment as well as gaining specific and transferable skills and progression on to other courses in relation to personal development. As the managers observed, the courses were seen as a way into HE, and HE was seen as a way into

‘graduate’ work like nursing or teaching which was far better paid and opened up more opportunities than say childcare. Indeed, the ‘graduate premium’ for women is much higher than for men, because of the extreme gender segregation and women’s concentration in very low paid work (like catering, cleaning and childcare).

> I think that doing an Access course like that one, with someone's support for a year is very, very beneficial and could be very, very beneficial ‘cos it trains you in those learning skills that people don't have if they've never been in education. And once they've learnt, 'Okay this is how I do a report, this is how I do an essay, this is how I do this' you are opening doors for them and they're not petrified. The number of people who actually start courses and then drop out because they really cannot understand the basic language of the tutor and expectations of coursework ... I get ... now every mum wants to work in childcare ... seriously ... I spend an hour with each one ... 'But why, it's the lowest paid work in the country, why are you aspiring to this, if you are going to spend three years or two years doing this, why can't you do something else?' It's the longest hours and lowest paid but it's just their mind-set is that because it's the only thing they see. That's where places like Birkbeck can be useful. (MBK3)

> I think developing individuals to further develop themselves ... the transferable skills of achieving qualifications that they hadn't had before and the option or increased options to make informed decisions on whether they want to go into university ... they didn't have those options before. It's all about, you know, either the sort of personal development ... Okay, just doing this course and then progressing further on or using it as a stepping stone to then think, 'Well I can now go to university, I can do a Nursing degree, I can do a degree to become a teacher'. All those things that would have been completely out of reach or not even thought about. (MBK1)

2.2 Setting up the Birkbeck and OU outreach programmes

Working in partnership can help to widen participation and develop inclusivity, making higher education institutions visible to disempowered groups and individuals[105] Outreach work, it has been argued, is essential in developing widening participation policies,[106] and in reaching more diverse student bodies.[107] It has been suggested that it is particularly important to make the right contacts, working with community gatekeepers.[108] More emphasis on partnerships and better communication between universities and their local communities have been argued to be key to widening access to higher education.[109]

In aiming to reach groups of young mothers on low incomes who might not otherwise access higher education opportunities, both Birkbeck and the OU extended their existing outreach work by developing partnerships with Children’s Centres. This development of partnerships was linked to the universities’ widening access agendas and courses were mostly located in ‘target areas of high disadvantage’ (PD) and where participation in higher education is well below the national average.

2.2.1 Birkbeck

Initial contact with an interested Children’s Centre manager was often made by a member of Birkbeck’s generic widening participation/outreach team. Through outreach and publicity work,

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[105] Stuart, M (2002) *Collaborating for Change? Managing Widening Participation in Further and Higher Education*, Leicester: NIACE

[106] Lewis, B (2002) ‘Widening Participation in Higher Education: The HEFCE Perspective on Policy and Progress’ in *Higher Education Quarterly*, 56:2, pp204-219

[107] Yorke M and Thomas L (2003) ‘Improving the retention of students from lower socio-economic groups’ in *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 25:1 pp 63-74

[108] McGivney, V (2000), *Recovering outreach: concepts, issues and practices*, Leicester: NIACE

[109] Watt, S and Paterson, L (2000), ‘Pathways and Partnerships: Widening access to higher education’ in *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 24:1 pp107-166

across the communities served by Birkbeck, they are well placed to initially gauge whether Children's Centres may be interested in a collaborative educational project. Once a firm initial interest on the part of the Children's Centre was identified, the building of the collaborative relationship was handed over to the Higher Education Introductory Studies team. The Programme Director and Children's Centre manager negotiated practical matters such as course start date and timings, crèche provision and how best to make local communities aware of the provision. At the same time, a formal agreement about facilities and roles was drawn up by the HEIS Administrative team for signing by both parties. This agreement underpinned the subsequent development of each project.

A series of 'Information, Advice and Guidance Workshops' took place (generally between May – July and again in early September) in those Children's Centres where managers hoped to offer the course. (Most courses started in October but in some locations the courses commenced at different times of year but the process remained the same.) These events were generally facilitated by the programme director, sometimes with assistance from other HEIS teaching staff. The aim of these events was to provide the information and guidance their title implied but, as importantly, to explore the interests and goals of potential learners, as part of a process of mutually determining the suitability of the provision for each learner. Informal assessment of potential learners' suitability for the level and demands of the programme occurred during group discussion and subsequent one-to-one conversations. Potential students were also asked to complete a short piece of autobiographical writing during the workshop, which was used during the one-to-one conversations as a guide to whether the student had an adequate level of English Language proficiency for them to benefit from the programme. At well-attended workshops, it was not always possible to meet one-to-one with every potential learner. Instead, they were contacted after the workshops when the programme director had opportunity to assess the potential course participant's aims, interests and language level as represented in the workshop written activity.

From the full menu of modules available on the Higher Education Introductory Studies programme, the aim of the workshops was also to identify module combinations that suited particular contexts and student groups rather than to impose a pre-decided plan. Potential students for whom the course was not suitable were given advice and guidance about alternative provision in their locality, with this sometimes being suggested as a valuable way to prepare to join the HEIS course at a later date. Those for whom it did appear suitable were invited to enrol by completing the Birkbeck enrolment form, which they were sent through the post to return either to the HEIS administrative team or to bring to an Introductory workshop immediately prior to the start of their course. In addition to an enrolment form, students had to complete application forms for grant support. It became apparent early in the development of the provision that the extent of the forms to be completed was a deterrent to students enrolling on the programme and the course team experimented with a number of strategies to assist new learners with the process. The most successful was for an administrative member of the HEIS staff team to attend the introductory workshop and meet each learner one-to-one to assist with queries around form completion and answer other questions about eligibility for financial support.

A decision as to whether a particular course would start was invariably taken quite close to the proposed start-date. This reflected a recurring pattern in these contexts where potential participants, even if they showed an interest by attending an Information, Advice and Guidance workshop in the months preceding the start date, would only be ready to make a commitment in the three to four weeks before the start of the course. This posed a considerable organisational challenge in running courses in Children's Centres.

2.2.2 Open University

The Community Partnership Manager, who provided publicity material and offered to run 'taster' sessions, made initial contact with the Children's Centres. An important part of the relationship was the link between the Children's Centre and local schools, and some learners were recruited to the scheme through leaflets distributed via the pupils and sessions held in the schools. There was, however, a significant difference with the Birkbeck scheme in what students were being recruited to.

There were nine Openings modules (discussed in more detail in section 3.4.2) and these were presented four times a year, starting in September, November, March and June. Outreach work consisted of providing a taste of what might be expected, helping students with the registration process and with the financial assessment forms. Each presentation was preceded by three pre-registration sessions, the first being a general information session, the second a 'taster' and the third to help with registration. In the week before module start a short induction session was held. The students in a single support group could be registered on any of the nine modules, and the activity in the Children's Centres was designed to provide generic study skills development as well as peer and pastoral tutorial support.

The OU's Community Partnership Managers were actively involved in the on-going support of students. They had a much more operational and 'hands-on' role than Birkbeck's generic outreach and widening participation team. As one Community Partnership Manager said….

> You do end up getting involved on the sort of much more face-to-face level with students and kind of being an unofficial mentor as people go through and I'm always there, I have a work mobile and people can always contact me when they're struggling … because of the nature of the people that we're working with and because it's Distance Learning, sometimes people are intimidated right from the beginning of contacting their tutor and they think, 'Oh they're academic, they're going to think I'm silly!' So in the very beginning I have a bigger role and then once people are settled in, although I'm always there, I find they are not contacting me so much and they don't need ... I am proactive in the beginning anyway but it kind of trails off once people are settled into that course ...(MOU1).

So the OU's Community Partnership Manager had both a strategic and an operational role. They provided a level of continuity and an additional level of support for the students. By contrast, in the case of Birkbeck, the widening participation team did not have on-going contact with the students and did not usually have direct involvement in the pre-course workshop activities. Their remit to work on enhancing recruitment to courses across the university precluded the spending of too much time on one set of courses, given their finite resources. The Programme Director for HEIS was a point of contact for students who were having difficulties that they did not wish to speak to their tutor or the Centre manager about. So the way in which the courses were set up by Birkbeck and the OU was different. The role of a Community Partnership Manager specifically to support the development and operation of partnerships using the Openings suite of courses was not replicated at Birkbeck. On the other hand, another key difference was that the OU's Community Partnership Manager was not involved in the development of the Openings courses, while at Birkbeck the Programme Director worked directly with tutors on the development of the curriculum and tailoring of teaching to suit specific groups of learners in different Children's Centres.

2.2.3 Children's Centres

There was considerable synergy between the overall mission of the Children's Centres and the courses offered by Birkbeck and the Open University, which helps explain why the courses were attractive to the Centres, and why they were successful.

The Children's Centres' activities still were largely guided by the *Every Child Matters* five Outcomes, despite the shift in policy since the Coalition came into power (see section 1.8.3). These outcomes included: be healthy[110]; stay safe[111]; enjoy and achieve[112]; make a positive contribution[113]; and achieve

[110] This outcome included: Physically healthy; Mentally and emotionally healthy; Sexually healthy; Healthy lifestyles; and Choose not to take illegal drugs

[111] This outcome included: Safe from maltreatment, neglect, violence and sexual exploitation; Safe from accidental injury and death; Safe from bullying and discrimination; Safe from crime and anti-social behaviour in and out of school; and Have security, stability and are cared for.

economic wellbeing.[114] An important part of this agenda included improving the skill levels of the mothers to reduce worklessness, especially among their priority groups which included vulnerable families; families on social security benefits who had been socially excluded; lone parents; and hard to reach families. Although one manager (MOU 1) observed 'I'm not sure they (lone parents) are even hard to reach because they're the majority' in the Centre's catchment area.

However, a few managers discussed the new government agenda in relation to the policy of payment by results. As one observed:

> Our priorities at the moment and ALL the Centres are the same, it's that we are now piloting the Government's Payment by Results Strategy …..The Government is now going to pay Local Authorities, Colleges and other people on the amount of work that they actually produce. So you won't bid for money just because you think there's a bid going. Basically you would say, 'I got this many people a job last year, I got this many people into training last year'. So the Government will look at that and pay you accordingly…. So our main priority now is to get as many people into training as possible (and) to provide employment and training advice. (MBK3)

Another talked about how the new government agenda was unlikely to actually change what their Children's Centre did – although the terminology would change and there would be more paperwork.

> At the moment Barking & Dagenham is piloting a new funding stream called Payment by Results. So we think that these outcomes: The Be Healthy; Stay Safe and Enjoy &Achieve are changing to a new, what they're going to be calling a basket of measures ... I think it's just Government… they change the Titles of things but basically we are still doing the same stuff. But they will call it something different, … instead of Enjoy & Achieve it's now going to be called 'School Readiness' you know. So you'll have a whole new set of paperwork come through and a whole new set of guidance books come through but for me what I believe in and what we're passionate about in this Centre, to me it remains the same. How we evidence it I think is changing slightly. We really are having to drill down to tracking people because we can't just say, 'We had fifteen people with the OU'. We have got to say where did those people go, what did they do, what did they achieve, how does that impact on the community. So really evidencing everything. (MOU1)

Others talked about the fit between the courses and the Children's Centre Mission.

> 'It's a perfect fit really, the fit between Centre's target groups and the sort of women who go on the course – those getting grants…. the focus for parents isn't a mum into work or a dad into work, it's really the implications for the family of these people going into work and how it affects all the children and the family structure, the family income and everything else like that.' (MBK1)

> Well because it was providing something that my parents needed…….. they are very, very anti-training and anti- everything yeah…. one person by just walking into the training with a folder is showing every resident that, 'Look I'm getting somewhere'. So that's the reason

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[112] This outcome is about enabling learners to make good progress in their work and personal development and to enjoy their education. It included: Ready for school; Attend and enjoy school; Achieve stretching national educational standards at school; and Achieve personal and social development and enjoy recreation.

[113] This outcome included: Engage in decision making and support the community and environment; Engage in law-abiding and positive behaviour in and out of school; Develop positive relationships and choose not to bully and discriminate; Develop self-confidence and successfully deal with significant life changes and challenge; and Develop enterprising behaviour

[114] This outcome included: Engage in further education, employment or training on leaving school; Ready for employment; Live in decent homes and sustainable communities; Access to transport and material good; and Live in households free from low income

> behind me asking them (Birkbeck) to do the course over there. So it's more inspirational, to inspire the community to aim higher, it's not that if you are born here and you live here all your life it doesn't mean this is what you are going to be resigned to. To raise aspirations. (MBK3)

Some discussed the importance for the women of providing childcare:

> …the children access childcare so we are hitting 'this' Enjoy & Achieving, the children that are using the crèche whilst the parents are studying. We know that those children are more likely to come out of school with better results at the end of their Reception ... We refer those parents on to other courses, parenting programmes, so it hits our Stay Safe Agenda ... Be Healthy runs through everything that we do, that those parents might come to Healthy Eating courses that we run; it's about them knowing about the Centre and once you've got people in they can access anything.' (MOU1)

> The fact that we have a crèche; it enables parents to have time for themselves to concentrate on something without having to worry about childcare because that is a big issue. So it enables them to be able to concentrate. It's also good for the children because they get that chance in a crèche, which prepares them for when the parents have to leave children when they go back to work either in a Nursery or with somebody, a child-minder. It gives them the opportunity to prepare themselves, which is another thing they have to think about when they go back to work and also it's good for us because it shows how we are working together with the parents in a partnership. It shows the worth of Sure start Children's Centres. (MBK2)

Another manager highlighted the significance of the personal development elements of the course.

> It (the course) does fit with the mission of the Centre cos it's about empowering people and giving them confidence that they can do things ... when you listen to some of the stories you will understand how it fits really well with Children's Centres (MBK6)

The managers were also particularly attracted to working in partnership with Birkbeck and the OU rather than other potential partners because of these institutions' reputation regarding adult education, and their understanding of the educational needs of adult students.

> I did a two-year Masters part-time and just felt really confident that the learners were really important to Birkbeck and just had confidence that it was a good University or College or whatever and that its ethos was very good. (MBK4)

> Because Birkbeck, and this sounds really marketing, the brand ... the Birkbeck brand ... it's well recognised as being very supportive for adult learners and the other thing is the staff. …the Director of Studies was particularly good. So she really understood people's lives and it's not going to be neat, ... and Birkbeck understand that, whereas an Institution that are used to getting 19 year-old carefree ... with their carefree lives, might get quite frustrated but Birkbeck understand that people are fitting in their studies around a million and one other things. So they're very supportive and I knew that because I taught on Access courses, so when I got here I didn't say, 'oh what we doing with those!' ... I was like, 'Oh great we've got Birkbeck' So that was possibly why we are still trying to keep it going really. (MBK5)

> I think if Birkbeck is one of the best adult education institutes in London. (MBK3)

Most Children's Centre managers were also attracted to the courses run by Birkbeck and the OU because they were offering something different from the courses their Centre already provided.[115] A

[115] The other courses run by the Children's Centres were varied and included, for instance,; 'Skills for Life'/Basic Skills" – including numeracy, literacy, and ESOL language classes; First Aid; Paediatrics; Food Hygiene; and Craft classes

particular attraction was that the courses were at a higher level, which in turn would lead to more opportunities for the women at their centre, and help keep the women engaged and involved in their Children's Centre.

> We consider it (Birkbeck course) as a jewel in the crown, because we do the Literacy and Numeracy but it's a higher level. ... we're passionate about the Literacy in the same way AND the Numeracy AND the IT but it's like, 'Well you don't stop there, there is this on offer, so you can keep going in the Centre'. Because the worst thing for a lot of people, they start something and then they say, 'Oh well if you want to do something you have to go somewhere else'. So to be able to have it here as the kind of the end of the progression, for now, works really well for us, so they don't have to go to the other side of Hackney to do the next stage ... and given the low level of qualifications, it gives people a very valued qualification. (MBK4)

> I had been to Hackney (Children's Centre) and had seen the same course operating there and they were kind of really 'full of it' let's say, how transformational it is. So if you looked at our Programme we had a lot of very low-level qualifications that people could get but nothing that was really very aspirational, so this seemed to fit within our Programme, to offer a different level of qualification. So, in terms of my Programming Planning, it seemed to fit really well. (MBK4)

> I think a lot of the courses that we do are things like First Aid, Paediatrics, Food Hygiene and things like that, which don't seem to actually change the mind-set. They give people skills and confidence but they don't change the mind-set of the people doing it…. what I actually found was that the Birkbeck Approaches to Study course gave an insight to the parents who were involved of what their potential was and also made learning something that they could suddenly identify with. Whereas a lot of them had been put off schooling in the past and therefore we thought in terms of how their approach to life would change and how that would affect their children was transformational. And our responsibility is ultimately the children, the next generation of people. So we thought, instead of just giving people skills which they may or may not use, we actually wanted to change their mind-set and that's what was most important to us, is that they would be more aspirational for themselves and for their children. (MBK4)

> It's not sort of an introductory vocational course. It's a higher level and for us it's been good because we've tended to be a lot of 'Skills for Life', 'Basic Skills' or 'Introductory' courses, Level 1s and stuff because they're the easiest to do, they're the smallest courses, they're the easiest to manage before you get onto work experience and stuff like that. But I'd like to have a wider range. There's obviously a lot of parents, even though they maybe are in a situation where they are on a low income living on an estate or whatever else, there's a lot of hidden potential. I think this has shown that, is that they wouldn't have expected them to do so well here and I wouldn't probably have expected them to do so well but put them in the situation and they are suddenly coming out with those skills so it would be good if we could have as wider range as possible to be able to show what people can do. (MBK1)

> We had done everything we could with (name of local adult learning and training provider) with them. So we either hold them or we give them an option to move on. BBK offer high level course. (MBK6)

> Well it's about to encourage learning basically and it's beyond the beginner's stage because it is quite easy to put on things at the beginner's stage, there's a lot of provision like that. It's as you get further up the scale it's much harder. (MBK5)

Other attractions were the practical elements of the course in terms of the absence of tuition fees, the availability of childcare, and the familiarity of the learning environment all of which facilitated parents' access.

> I think because firstly because of what Birkbeck offered, so if people wanted to go to University ... there was a progression for them. And secondly because of the funding that Birkbeck had, that they could use …that they (courses) were free to us. (MBK1)

> …residents don't have to travel all the way to London because they have to pick up their children, they have to drop them and pick them up at eleven o'clock, then they have to do this, then they have to do this and you have to fit everything in (MBK3)

> They've got very young children, they wouldn't be very comfortable about putting their child in a college crèche or some of the colleges don't have crèches. This is where they feel safe, they could do it with their friends whereas if they go off to [name of college] College they are probably on their own. They perceive colleges as being about teenagers and they can be really scary…… (MBK6)

> We've had young, teenage parents that because the OU were here they've managed to go on to study and they wouldn't have dreamed of Higher education but because it's in a building that they know and they're familiar with. (MOU1)

Clearly there were mutual benefits in the partnerships between the Children's Centres and Birkbeck and the OU in the running of these courses. A key benefit for the university in working with partners was in enhancing and developing their widening participation agenda in the community, recognising that women with children face particular barriers to entering higher education. The benefit for partners was seen as being the necessity for the Children's Centres to develop opportunities for their community members, including educational benefits. Working with educational institutions enabled the Centres to achieve these goals and they were therefore keen to develop these partnerships. The Centres also see value added through having an HEI as a partner, offering higher education programmes in their centres that enhance their community work.

According to one of the Programme Directors, partnerships were most successful when 'minds met as it were'….

> ... we were talking about providing opportunities for a community that had huge potential but that didn't always have access to the opportunities ... to develop that potential ... so the manager would be thinking in terms of all the women and people that came through the doors of the nursery or they saw around in the area and feeling it was an important addition to their learning provision and perhaps, usefully in some cases, seeing that they were offering already some basic literacy, numeracy and other forms of classes ... this could provide another step (PD).

Challenges and difficulties can be overcome and 'if you have someone who is very passionate and committed in that organisation it often works, and that's the bottom line' (PD). It is therefore important that the Children's Centre partners shares a similar agenda to the HEIs with regard to learning and teaching that widens access and participation.

2.3 Recruiting students

2.3.1 Birkbeck

In the more recent years covered by this study, courses at Children's Centres were included in Birkbeck's website. However, this was never a significant means of recruitment. The extended process described above (section 2.2.1) aimed gradually to build the interest and confidence to

participate of those for whom the course is suitable. Children's Centre managers and their staff are key to the initial generation of interest in attending an IAG workshop. Their knowledge of the Centre users and their ability to offer face-to-face encouragement and advice are key for recruitment. This is complemented by other forms of local publicity. Flyers were jointly composed drawing on the Centre Staff's awareness of how best to address the local community, and these were distributed in the Centre and to nearby schools. Birkbeck's generic Outreach and Widening Participation team would also distribute these flyers in shopping centres and other contexts where they were publicising Birkbeck's provision. Text was provided by the HEIS Programme Director for inclusion in local School newsletters and in free listings sections of community newspapers and similar publications. Over time, Centre managers were able to invite the local press to end of year celebrations and this coverage provided locally based publicity focussed on the success of women from the community. So Birkbeck was very reliant on the Children's Centre for recruiting their students as, time and again, it was found that local contacts suggested by Children's Centre Managers were more important in generating awareness of the provision than standard HEI recruitment processes.

Although the aim of Information, Advice and Guidance workshops was to ensure a 'fit' between what the programme could provide and potential students' aims, interests and capability to benefit from the course so that enrolment could be completed prior to the start of the programme, this was not always possible. Would-be students who were in the process of enrolment or who had shown an interest in the course at a very late stage were often able to participate for up two weeks of the course, before administrative staff finalised their enrolment. This was in recognition of the fact that parents on low incomes and with caring responsibilities can find it difficult to commit too far in advance of a course start date so flexibility may be needed to try out the course and avoid a demoralising experience of failure or withdrawal.

2.3.2 OU

Recruitment to Openings courses is conducted through standard OU procedures, including dedicated brochures, web presence, and targeted marketing campaigns. Recruitment through partnership activity is very specifically targeted to support outreach to the 'hard to reach' as a means of meeting the University's own widening participation targets. The OU has always performed above its HESA benchmarks but has additional stretching targets, which, in England, focus on those living in the lowest quintile IMD, with no prior higher education experience. The Community Partnership Managers pool their expertise in designing flyers, information, advice and guidance leaflets and other materials, which speak to their target population and use the student voice and students' stories to raise aspirations. So these Community Partnership Managers were also a vital resource in generating interest in the course. As indicated in 2.2.2, above, the close relationship between the Children's Centres with which the OU worked, and the local schools was an important part of the scheme. The development of trust encouraged a positive view of the OU and the Openings modules among the school heads, the Parent Schools Advisers and the Children's Centre staff. Leaflets were distributed through the schools, the Children's Centres and local community centres, directing potential learners to their local scheme.

2.3.3 The importance of the Children's Centres in recruiting students

As already mentioned, part of the HEIs' and Children's Centre partnership included recruiting students and the Children's Centre staff were central to this. The Centres used their staff, networks and connections to encourage parents, some of whom were already involved in the Centre's activities, to enrol in the courses. For both Birkbeck and the OU, by working with Children's Centres, mothers changed from a hard-to-reach to an easy-to-reach group. As the quotes below from the Centre managers illustrate, there was a considerable level of commitment and initiative taken to get the partnerships up and running.

The Children's Centre managers explained how they went about recruiting students:

> I was doing Outreach in the community ... I was going to the In-House sessions we were running at the Centre and through the Parent's Forum as well ... through the Parent Forum and then when (outreach worker) says, 'Yeah it would be really good for you' they will take that leap of faith that it would be good for them and I think that's part of what the Children's Centre is really good at; is building really good, solid relationships with the people that we work with……..And Birkbeck did a taster session which was very, very helpful. Twenty people turned up for the taster session. (MBK4)

> Oh it's quite easy (recruiting) because we usually put flyers up if there's a new course or an activity. We have our Quarterly publicity, which is a leaflet that goes around our whole catchment area so it would be advertising that but we'd also have other individual flyers advertising it and obviously the Outreach Officers are using word of mouth. (MBK2)

> We basically run, in the Centre we will deliver *Taster sessions*, so we will invite people along ... 'Is studying with the OU something that you're interested in?' We'll advertise that and we'll support (name of OU outreach worker) to advertise that. People will come along and say, 'Yeah' and then (name of OU outreach worker) takes it from there and if they want to come and use the Study Group on a Wednesday lunchtime then they're more than welcome to and if they want to book their child into the crèche we'll part-fund the crèche. ….Yes well if they (OU) give us flyers, which they do, we'll hand them out at the front desk and we'll badger people to come. We *do* do that but we have so many things to badger people about. 'Come to this, come to this!' There is always something to sell them. (MOU1)

One Children's Centre manager talking about a particular potential student, explained:

> I said, 'I don't know your life, I can't make that decision for you but this may be your ONLY opportunity [name of students] and it's about actually valuing yourself as a person for you because everyone sees you as (son's name) carer and you do everything for (name) ... it's about making time for, if you really want to do it, about making time for you to do it'. (MBK6)

Many of these Children's Centres were close to, or attached to, primary schools, and the courses were advertised in these primary schools. Hence the availability of HE locally while children were cared for (sometimes in schools) was a significant factor.

The ethics of Widening Participation in Practice

Staff at both the OU and Birkbeck showed keen awareness of the need for responsible practices in recruitment, as did staff at the Children's Centres.

> …….at the Children's Centre you (parent) see a course and 'I'll just do it just to get involved and to do something and there's a crèche and I'll get a bit of respite from the baby and everything else'. That's OUR risk and we have to make sure that people are going to commit to finishing the course, so they are there for the right reasons but that's the initial work that we would do with them, to make sure that they are going in there for the right reasons. (MBK1)

> We would be very realistic and say to you, 'This is NOT going to work'. (MBK3)

The selection of potential students was an issue for the HEI Programme Directors too. The HEIs have particular agendas regarding recruitment with regard to widening participation, working with centres in 'high disadvantage areas'. This can be a challenge:

> We have had huge debates about what (WP) actually means and there are a lot of ethical considerations ... Do you just recruit numbers or do you then have a responsibility to them, to continue to support that student through into the Level 1[116] should they choose to go on. Because what we found is that we recruit students and they can just about get through the (course) and then ... they're absolutely at sea because the jump is too big. So really there's a sort of institutional target but what we're actually looking for is students who (are) confident enough to master some of the basics, so they are not totally at sea and sometimes we'll say to people, 'Maybe you should go and do a Level 3 or do something else first before you come' (PD).

In some instances, parents for whom the course would have provided significant benefits were not able to participate. This situation sometimes proved challenging for staff who could perceive the potential value of studying the course for these students. A particular issue was that some parents for a variety of reasons could not access government grants to pay for their fees.

> ... some of the parents who attended the taster session, they didn't have recourse to public funds so they couldn't access the grant ... because of their refugee status. Most of them dropped out because of that and they couldn't afford it as well, to pay for the course. (MBK4)

> We struggled with a couple of parents who wanted to do it but financially didn't fall within the right (income) bracket. We had two, one is [name of student redacted] who she was a bit upset at the time and we did work around it and she's now on my staff team. She only does casual work but she's actually got Level 3 Childcare and she's got five kids. Hubby works and he works for the Council, so he earns just that little bit (too much) so they don't get any benefits. I would love to have given her that opportunity to run with Birkbeck and she could do it, but...things were happening and she couldn't afford it. (MBK6)

A programme director specifically talked about the 'ELQ trap' (PD) – and problems associated with the ruling that students with an equivalent or higher qualification (ELQ) to the course they planned to take were not eligible for financial support, which meant they were unable to participate in the courses.

> The ELQ trap. These were women - often those who had studied in other countries prior to having children)- who were deemed to have an ELQ. However, it was sometimes difficult to ensure that the previous qualification was equivalent (despite NARIC) and, in any case, the qualification was often taken many years ago in a subject that did not qualify the students for equivalent work in the UK. There were quite a few women who simply never started because they could not afford to pay fees but were required to do so because they had a Level 4 qualification in for example, accounting from Bangladesh or India which was not regarded as a sufficient qualification for work in the UK but was considered ELQ. And the other, were a group of women who were perhaps born in the UK but were more mature and many, many years ago had studied perhaps in art or something of this kind but because they had the qualification they then had to pay but in those cases ... they were very much people for whom the qualification was providing a way back into learning but also something that was quite important for their own identities, self-esteem and they had to make choices around whether they would pay or not and that was a major issue. Then there were the women who were turned away because they did not have indefinite leave to remain… (PD)

This highlights several issues. First the catch 22 that overseas degrees or professional qualification are not necessarily recognised in this country but may exclude a student on ELQ grounds. Secondly, the indefinite leave to remain requirement, impacts on for any funding.

[116] FHEQ level 4, 1st year undergraduate

One PD commented on an 'uneasy fit' between community providers' expectations of when potential course participants would be ready to commit to joining a course and the expectations of HE providers that joining a course will generally be part of more advanced planning on the part of the individual student. The PD noted that for all the courses which were part of this study, enrolment was completed face to face rather than on-line, very often as part of the 'introductory' session in the week immediately before the first class. The tendency for course participants to complete their formal enrolment very near to, or even on or immediately after, the start date of the course may be accounted for by factors which have a particular impact on many of these course participants' lives: for example, uncertainty around benefits; other calls on their time as carers; giving priority to their children settling into school in September.

> For both the community-based nurseries and for individual course participants, the higher education 'culture' of enrolment many weeks in advance of a course start-date is alien. The HE organisational culture is understandable, given the scale of the operation that HE institutions are involved with and the need to provide acceptable conditions of service for part-time lecturing staff (including sufficient notice should a class seem unlikely to recruit students). However, time and again, my experience has been that it is only in the 3-4 weeks before a course is scheduled to start that potential students are ready to commit and the nurseries can focus their attention on supporting recruitment. Every year, activities towards generating interest will start much earlier but interest at this stage bears little resemblance to what enrolment eventually looks like in late September/ early October. The step towards starting a university course would appear to be a very big one for many of our students in nursery settings and the initial workshops where prospective students express their goals and concerns and hear about the course often require follow up by letter or phone to remind the students that the start date is coming up and what they need to do to enrol. (PD)

2.3.4 How the women interviewed found out about the courses

Of the 30 course participants interviewed in depth about their experience it was striking how very few of them reported that they had been actively searching for courses or comparing different courses. They found out about the courses through the outreach work of Birkbeck and the Open University; through posters and leaflets at the Children's Centres, leaflets sent home with school age children, coffee mornings for parents at school, suggested by Children's Centre staff or word of mouth. This encouraged potential participants to attend Birkbeck's 'Information, Advice and Guidance' sessions and the Open University's 'taster sessions' where detailed information was available and they had the opportunity to talk to a tutor. Many were already attending the Children's Centre with their children, and some had attended other courses at the Centre such as literacy, numeracy or CPD for childminders.

2.3.5 The women's experiences of the recruitment process

The recruitment process seems to have been welcoming and open from the accounts of the course participants interviewed in depth, although for many their first enrolment was several years ago and they seemed unsure of details. An example from each HEI:

> I got in contact with them and came to the children's centre to have an interview and stuff and had to do the taster and then everything was explained to me, all the support that you get and stuff like that, because I wasn't very confident because I hadn't studied since school; I've never done an exam or anything like that. So when I got there it was friendly and they supported you, showed you how to do tuition skills and all sorts of stuff like that. (OU2)

> She explained what it was and she asked me if I was interested and I said I was and she gave me an application form and I filled it out there and then and then she got back in touch saying that the course would be starting at such and such a day and the place where it would be taking place. (BBK10)

Only one course participant had a negative comment; she felt that Birkbeck's advertising was poor and she only learned about the course from a magazine produced by the council listing opportunities, and there had been a miscommunication about starting dates.

2.4 The characteristics of the students recruited on to the Birkbeck and OU courses

Tables A1 and A2 in Appendix 1, based on data from Birkbeck and OU student records, show the demographic profile of the students recruited on the HEIS and OU CPP Openings course since 2007. Overall, they have socio-economic characteristics typically associated with 'widening participation' students with the majority being women, aged 25 and over, non-White and with low-level entry qualifications. Data from the survey on students' backgrounds (Table 1.3) also show how most were lone parents, were not employed before starting their course, had household incomes of under £15,000, left school under the age of 18, and did not have another family member who had studied for a higher education qualification. All these groups (except women and those from minority ethnic groups) are under-represented in higher education.

2.5 Reasons for taking the course at the children's centre

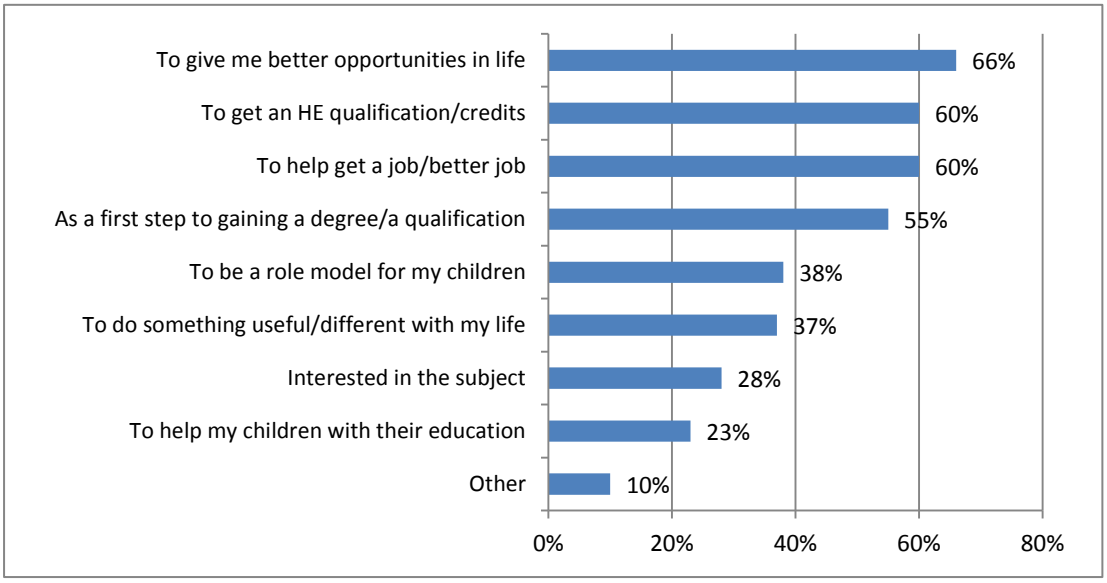
The course participants surveyed reported that their prime motivations for taking the course at the Children's Centre were instrumental (Fig 2.1). Survey respondents could select as many reasons as they felt relevant and they said they wanted to improve their life opportunities, get a higher education qualification/credits, and wanted their course to help them get a job or better job.

These motivations largely reflect those reported in other studies[117] on undergraduates' reasons for entering higher education and taking higher education courses, whether studying full or part-time. However, these other studies tend to report a higher proportion of students appreciating the intrinsic rewards of studying in terms of wanting to do something new and different, their interest in their subject of study, and for mothers especially, acting as a role model for their children.[118] Yet, these differences may not be surprising given the contrasting backgrounds of most undergraduates and the mothers in our study, and in the way these courses were promoted as benefiting the mothers rather than their children. And as we will see (section 4.4), one of the outcomes of the mothers' studies was as a role model for their children, although the women did not necessarily use that term.

[117] For full-time students motivations see for instance Purcell, K., Elias, P., Ellison, R.,Atfield,G., Adam, D., and Livanos. I. (2008) *Applying for Higher Education – the diversity of career choices, plans and expectations* Manchester; HECSU, http://www.hecsu.ac.uk/applying_for_higher_education.htm (accessed 8/2/2012); and for part-time students see Callender, C., Hopkin, R., and Wilkinson D. (2010) *Futuretrack: part-time students' career decision-making and career development of part-time higher education students,* Manchester HECSU. 132 pp http://www.hecsu.ac.uk/futuretrack_part_time_students.htm (accessed 8/2/2012)

[118] NUS (2009) *op cit*

Figure 2.1 Reasons for taking course at the Children's Centre



Base: All respondents (N=111)
Source: Survey of course participants, 2012

For the 30 course participants interviewed in depth about their experience, their reasons for deciding to study were extremely diverse, and multiple, and it should be remembered that some had started studying five years before the interview and must be coloured by their subsequent experience of studying. An important starting point was the realisation that it was *possible* to study with family responsibilities, as virtually none were actively searching for courses, the opportunity presented by the courses offered in the Children's Centres opened up new possibilities.

Some course participants had left school with no qualifications while others had degrees from other countries. While some had long held ambitions to study which had been previously frustrated, others had not previously considered higher education and decided to try it quite spontaneously. The fee waiver, part-time commitment and short duration of the courses were all factors that reduced the initial commitment from course participants and made them willing to try out studying.

The range of reasons given included:

- To set a good example for their children
- To become a better parent
- To gain a qualification/to gain a UK qualification
- To move towards a specific vocational ambition
- To help return to the labour market after a break to raise families
- Intellectual stimulation

To illustrate how different factors are woven together in a single account:

> Because I've got two children of my own as well, and I enjoy working with children, so hopefully when I've finished [Openings Understanding Children] I might be able to work with children. (OU8)

> I wanted to do Open University before but I kept on putting it off, putting it off, so my son told me the lady from Open University will be there, so that's why I went because I was eager to study the course. (OU8)

> Because he [partner] passed away in March 2009. I think after, because I said I needed to do something so I can get a good job and support the children. And also for the children to see me studying then it may be to put some sense in them to study as well! (OU8)

The desire for intellectual stimulation appeared to be an important factor for many, and as it runs counter to the instrumental policy discourses it seems worth considering here. Caring for others is emotionally demanding, unending and isolating,[119] and many participants occupied in this all-consuming caring work spoke of their studies as 'something for themselves', something that took them away from their family responsibilities for a brief respite of intellectual and social stimulation. The subjects that course participants chose to study; psychology and sociology on HEIS and Understanding Children Openings was so directly related to their life experience that it provided a moment to step outside and reflect upon it.

> Sometimes you feel like that, you feel like, I think sometimes it all comes on you and you just get lost in it all, and it's no one's fault, it's just the way life is sometimes, everything just gets on top of you, and it's my way of sort of thinking, 'Well this is for me and I'm going to go and do it.' So that was my main reason really. [...] It was just something for me, because at the moment all of my life is around my kids and my husband, and this is just for me, just to do something for me, just to see if I could do it basically. (BBK19)

> Yes, and do something with my mind, other than children [laughter] and being mummy! (BBK11)

> I've got a Special Needs child, which is the youngest one, so I couldn't go back to work at the minute because of getting called up to the school, so I really wanted to do something like to keep my mind sort of going over in achieving something else for me personally. (BBK12)

In contrast the more vocational reasons demonstrated an awareness that low paid jobs would not make their families better off financially, and a willingness to invest time in education now to achieve better paid, and more rewarding, work later perhaps when children were older.

> I'd decided to study because I'd left school with no qualifications and basically to try and make a better life for myself really, gain some qualifications and go on to get myself a proper job. (OU2)

> I've always wanted to be a primary school teacher but I've never had the time or the... I've always thought I haven't got the time, and I've always thought I haven't got the help, and when the girls were younger I went to work in a restaurant and stuff because I thought, 'I need the money now.' But you know, as you get older, you realise that short term is quite rubbish! So I thought even if it takes another, it's going to take another three years after I finish this to fully qualify but it will be worth it, instead of going back to work in a bar. (BBK4)

> Well, my goal was getting onto there [the HEIS course] would have helped me because I'm quite keen on becoming a nurse, maybe a midwife. So I thought getting onto that course would just be a stepping-stone to get to where I want to get. (BBK8)

[119] Ribbens, J (1994) *Mothers and Their Children: A Feminist Sociology of Childrearing*, London**:** Sage Publications Ltd

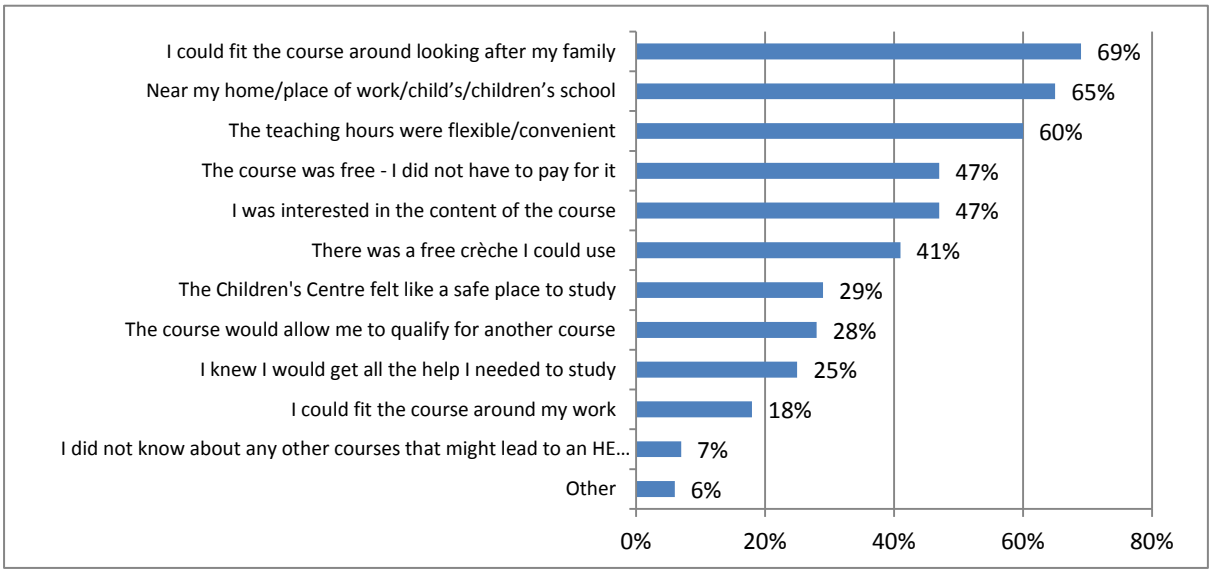
Of the 30 course participants, approximately half mentioned their vocational ambition in relation to their decision to study at the Children's Centre. Nursing, midwifery, care work, teaching, teaching assistant, advocacy and legal work, charitable work and social work were all mentioned as vocational aspirations and the courses run at the Children's Centres were seen as a first step towards achieving these ambitions. Course participants experience of caring, for their own children and other relatives, previous work experience, and for some their experience of caring for those with disabilities and mental illness informed these aspirations to work in related areas. Consequently they adopted a very gendered approach to their employment opportunities and the range of options considered were similarly limited. This was despite efforts to encourage the participants to consider other work possibilities that they may have considered were 'not for them…' (PD).

2.6 Reasons for taking that particular course at the Children's Centre

The Birkbeck course and OU modules were not specifically developed for parents but have been tailored and adapted to meet their needs. These adaptations included amendments to the modes of teaching and learning; to the specific focus of the syllabi; and to the practical arrangements for study.

For instance, childcare provision is available for Birkbeck students while attending the course and for OU students when attending their study groups held at the Children's Centres. The courses/ study groups were scheduled to take place during school hours and allowed sufficient time for parents to drop off and pick up children from local schools before and after class. The course participants surveyed seemed to appreciate these features and reported that they were particularly attracted to the courses primarily for pragmatic reasons, because they could fit it around their family (69%); it was near their home/ place of work/child/rens' school (65%)[120]; and the teaching hours were flexible (60%). In other words, convenience was an important factor. Although a minority of respondents identified the free crèche as an attraction to the course, the majority (66%) of those with children aged under five highlighted this feature.

Figure 2.2 Reasons for taking that particular course at the Children's Centre



Base: All respondents (N=111)
Source: Survey of course participants, 2012

The 30 course participants interviewed in depth overwhelmingly reported that the convenience of the course being offered in the Children's Centre was the decisive factor in their choosing to study. The

[120] The wording for Open University students was slightly different and asked about the location of the students' study group as the courses is delivered via distance learning.

vast majority had considered that higher education would not be possible for them at the time, given their circumstances and parental responsibilities, and the unique offer from the OU and Birkbeck made them reconsider their assumptions. The factors that made the Children's Centre courses so convenient were:

- Classes were during school hours rather than in the evening, as evenings were particularly difficult for single parents.
- Childcare was provided free for pre-school children on site in the reassuringly familiar setting of the Children's Centre so they did not have to worry about their child.
- The closeness of the Children's Centre to their homes or in a few instances workplaces.
- The fee remission for study (subject to income and residency), and additional availability of bursaries.
- The flexible and limited commitment of the courses being part-time with face-to-face classes no more than once a week allowing course participants to mainly study at home.

There was a strong consensus among course participants on the convenience of study at the Children's Centre:

> I thought well, it's round the corner from my house, it's convenient, the hours and days are great for me, I don't have to think about any kind of childcare, so it just fitted in nicely with my life as well so that's another reason why I felt, 'This is perfect.' (BBK16)
>
> It's the information that I was given at the open day, which was, most importantly, that I could study with my daughter, I could go with her, rather than finding a childminder, and it suited me well because I could drop my older daughter to school and take my younger one with me to the centre, which provided a crèche. (BBK15)
>
> And the convenience, we started at 10 and finished at 3, so you had half an hour before and after to walk to the centre. It was good. It fitted around the school day. Whosever idea it was, it's a brilliant idea! Honestly. (BBK20)
>
> I would not, with the problems my son's got with his eyesight, I won't leave him with anybody so because I knew he was next door in the crèche, I didn't mind that because if anything had happened I'd walk next door and my son's there, but with University or college there's no way I'd have left him with a childminder or anybody I didn't know because I don't know the area. (OU4/5)

2.7 The challenges of working in partnerships

2.7.1 The administrative challenges

The managers of the Children's Centres experienced very few administrative challenges in running the Birkbeck and OU courses at their Centre. As the managers explained, the key issues were providing a room for teaching and the crèche for the students' children. The Centres varied considerably in terms of space and facilities. At the one end of the spectrum was a large modern purpose-built community centre with excellent facilities and a nursery and crèche, and at the other end of the spectrum was a somewhat dilapidated Centre with just a few rooms adjacent to a large local authority housing estate with cramped space and very limited facilities such as computers. Pressure on space also varied.

> From our point of view it's arranging the crèche and the administration around the rooms and the rooms set-up, the specific ... the IT and the laptops and other technologies that are in the

> rooms and what sort of services are needed and I think it's kind of, that's the main thing, because we've taken on the role of engaging with the people and also making sure that they turn up and I'm also running, alongside people doing the Programmes, one-to-ones if they (the students) want extra mentoring or whatever and things like that. The only other thing I would say for us is that we only have a finite number of rooms. If we need room space, the priority has to be to commercial lettings…. if we're not generating income then we wouldn't be running any services anyway. So that would be an issue sometimes ...(MBK1)

Other managers highlighted the importance of having a key contact with the university rather than having to deal with a series of people and of the excellent working relations that they had developed with the university representative, which meant they could deal with most challenges. In particular the OU had a Community Partnerships Manager who was an outreach worker and liaised with the Children's Centre staff.

> I haven't had any negative experiences with the OU and that is ... I would say and I've got nothing to hide, the relationship with the OU as far as I'm concerned has been amazing. it's been fantastic. (Name of Community Partnerships Manager) is there if I need her, she texted me this morning, you know. So I've built up a very good relationship with her. … There's only really (Name of Community Partnerships Manager) that I deal with and I can't speak highly enough of her because she's really, really easy to work with, does what you ask of her. Yeah and I think that has really helped in that when you're just dealing with one person ... cos it's really easy in my job to lose track of people, 'Who is it this ...?' If it's one organisation, one person, that's fantastic, so no, it's been brilliant and I haven't got any concerns about that. (MOU1)

2.7.2 The learning environment and access to resources

Some Programme Directors faced other sorts of challenges in working with partners. These included partners sometimes giving poor advice to potential students (PD), who then ended up on unsuitable programmes, despite the recruitment process aiming to discourage those least likely to succeed, pointing them instead towards level 3 qualifications. Other challenges included the funding difficulties childcare centres increasingly faced, leading them to having to look to cutting budgets, including as to whether or not they could continue to offer free childcare.

From the lecturers' perspectives Childcare Centres did not always provide the ideal learning environment, especially when compared to those available at the main Birkbeck site. However, these were part and parcel of teaching outside of a university setting and providing community based opportunities that, as we have seen, would otherwise not be available to the women, and attracted the women to the courses. The lecturers' concerns reflected the realities of widening participation policies in practice. It was not possible, and arguably, not desirable, to replicate a university learning milieu in a Children's Centre designed for very different purposes. Indeed, part of the strength of delivering courses in such community environments is that they do not replicate what 'disadvantaged' students often perceive as an off-putting and alienating university environment.[121] So while students may not develop the dispositions and expectations of higher education that might be acquired through the activities and experiences of being within a higher education institution rather than outside its recognised spaces, they have access and opportunities to engage in higher education studies in what they perceive as a familiar, safe, and convenient local location.

As discussed, the Childcare Centres facilities varied considerably, and so the lecturers' experiences in part, depended on in which Centre they taught. The lecturers' worries included a lack of library, ICT facilities and other learning resources in some Centres; the nature of the classroom spaces which were sometimes cramped or barely fit for purpose; the lack of 'private' space for tutorials; and invasive

[121] Archer, L., M. Hutchings and A. Ross (eds). (2003) *Higher Education and Social Class: Issues of Exclusion and Inclusion*. Routledge Falmer, London.

noise from the Centre, at some but not all the Centres. One Birkbeck lecturer stated that she felt very strongly about this. The lack of access to resources such as books and computers, 'even on a very basic level' …really does bother me because I think it's an equal opps issue. I can't see a way around it. (LBK4).

In addition, some lecturers felt that the mothers were too frequently called out of the classroom to attend children: to breastfeed, for example, or change nappies, or care for a fretful child. One lecturer noted that there could be tensions working in the Children's Centres, with centre staff not always appreciating the effects of this on students. (LBK4)

These are some of the challenges of teaching in community based locations, which need to be kept in mind when planning such courses. All Birkbeck students did have access to their nearest HE library; they could access the Birkbeck library remotely, and librarians in local libraries agreed to stock core texts used in the Birkbeck courses. So a lot was done to try to mitigate these challenges, but the lack of on-site resources remained real. Consequently, HEIs may need to be more flexible about providing resources outside their walls.

This is one aspect of provision where the OU and Birkbeck differ significantly, and the experience of the 30 course participants interviewed in depth appears to be different. OU courses require access to computer resources and students are advised of the specification before they register. Openings modules were designed in such a way that no computer is needed at the start of the course and students are gradually supported in developing the IT skills needed, through course content. Guidance on where to access computers, such as local libraries and UK Online Centres was provided to students. It should be noted, though, that very few students did not have access to computers and the majority provided a personal email address at registration. Furthermore, OU students did not necessarily need access to libraries for their learning materials. All the learning resources needed are included 'in the box' and therefore library access is not essential at this stage.

In contrast, Birkbeck courses, the HEIS programme and courses taught at the Children's Centres were designed for face-to-face teaching. The courses did make use of a Virtual Learning Environment for HEIS modules and in recent years has made more use of it. During most of the period covered by this study, tutors provided participants with hard copies of learning materials on a week by week basis. In addition, the HEIS course team purchased a limited number of set texts for the subject modules which participants were able to borrow to support their studies.

All Birkbeck students are issued with library cards which allow access to library and computing facilities at the main Stratford or Bloomsbury campuses. Some but not all Children's Centres offered computing facilities at certain times. Travel to the main Stratford or Bloomsbury campuses is particularly problematic for course participants at the Children's Centres. A Birkbeck-wide policy to help mitigate this type of problem was withdrawn over the lifetime of this study. This involved a library-organised system of book boxes, which contained a range of relevant reading for course participants to borrow. The book box provision had been a standard procedure for Extra-Mural courses in the past but was suspended (without exception) during the period covered by this study.

Birkbeck course participants reported making use of local public libraries, both as a place conducive to study, and for access to computing resources and texts, and they also reported buying books. While few course participants did not have access to a computer and the Internet, for the minority who did not this seems to have had a severe adverse effect on their ability to study effectively:

> We don't have computers at home, do you understand? When you are with your children, the little time you have, you can easily make use of the computer at home, do one thing, but when you are with the children, you can't leave them and say you want to go out, there's no one to stay with you. So that computer, you don't have. Even if they go to bed in the midnight, you can use... So when you don't have it, you'll be behind. (BBK7)

> At that time I didn't have access to a computer so I had to go my cousin's house and go up onto the internet to get information. Most of my work was done with newspapers and leaflets that would have some sort of thing to do with what we were doing at the time in class. (BBK8)

> I think, being based at a children's centre, the one that we were based at, the environment was very small, tight, everybody was huddled around the table, the facilities were very old, we didn't have any computers. So really we were studying, but we were nowhere near the kind of study that goes on at university; all the hi-tech equipment. (BBK17)

> The only challenging thing, … I didn't have a laptop so it would have been nice, because I normally go to the library and sometimes [...] or they want to close the library, the times and all that, so again we didn't have books, we didn't have access, there is no library in the children's centre. [...] They gave us some book names so we went to the bookshop to get them, and they gave us a library card to go to Birkbeck. [...] a long way, so if you wanted to read you go there. [...] it was a challenge getting access to the library there. (BBK18)

Open University course participants did not report such problems with resources, as this course participant highlighted:

> If I want to sit up at 3 in the morning listening to podcasts on my iPhone then I can. If I want to sit there watching videos, I can. They've got these new apps where you can have your books on your phone, they've got an OU Anywhere app and I've got all my books on my phone. [..] Yes, sat on the train I can just pull my phone out and it's so, especially like the podcasts and there's iTunes and all the OU, that station, it's just… There are so many different avenues where you can get all the information and get support and information and research information that… Even the OU library, it is so vast, their online library, and you can find information that would take hours to go through the local library trying to find it there. So to be sat there online…and to buy them, they are so expensive. [...] The suggested reading list for my new module, to buy them second-hand off Amazon it would cost me over £200. (OU4/5)

The Children's Centre at which OU students from different Openings courses and more advanced study met weekly for peer support was viewed entirely positively by all course participants interviewed, although one respondent did express a wish for a physical space locally that could be dedicated to OU students as the Children's Centre faced an uncertain future due to funding changes.

2.7.3 The costs to the Children's Centres

On the whole, the managers rarely viewed the courses, and specifically providing a room and crèche, as 'costs' to the centre. They absorbed these costs into their existing budget. However, there were some exceptions. As we have seen in one Childcare Centre, the Centre's Employment and Training Manager based in a large modern Community Centre, had to generate income though hiring out the accommodation in the building and estimated that the additional costs of supplying the crèche for the Birkbeck course was in the region of £116 a week, and the room hire £250.

This manager explained the costs associated with the crèche, as follows:

> I mean the costs were incurring are …the room hire cost that we're picking up and the crèche cost and all of the admin costs, which is my part, my salary.

> So it would be part of my salary. The crèche costs would be on average for those courses we have we have to bring in ... crèche workers, some of them will be people that are from the Nursery, that would transfer over, on average we would have to bring in two extra workers from an agency to cover the crèche and they'd be anything up to £14.50 per hour, so the

> Birkbeck course is three hours add a half an hour each end, four hours. So four hours at £14.50 per week X 2 would be the crèche cost. The room costs are anything up to about £250 for the half-day rate. That is something that has been absorbed within (name of centre) itself and the refreshments are a couple of quid per person or something like that and then proportionately the IT costs that are in there and the laptop and the Smartboard and everything else like that but again that goes into the absorbed room costs. (MBK1)

Birkbeck did not make any contribution to the costs of running the crèches at the Children's centres while the OU did, as one Children's Centre manager explained in relation to crèche facilities for OU students' study group sessions.

> Only things like crèche bookings. Some students will say they are going to book their child into the crèche and then they don't turn up and we're not fully funded for it, so I'm paying a member of staff to be here and the child is not here, it's not cost-effective for me. I kinda made a stance from the very beginning ... we learnt the hard way ... I don't become too involved, so if they want to turn up to the Study Group, fabulous. Little things like we let them help themselves to tea and coffee in the kitchen. ……..We'll absorb the costs of that because it meets our key objectives. The only difficulty of that is that if we're not getting many attending, if they're not using it, then I will pull it…..the OU give us a contribution towards the crèche, whatever they can and whatever is in their budget basically. They will say ... I think last year they gave us about £800 towards our crèche. This year we've had about £3250 out of them so far. You know, whatever they've got, so I'm being quite 'leaning' in saying, 'Actually I could invoice you for £1,500 because that's actually how much it cost me'. (MOU1)

This manager continues to explain how she also needs to generate money.

> I'm working in partnership with (name of OU outreach worker) and I see her struggles and she sees mine …, 'I WANT these children in my crèche, I WANT these mums to come to my Centre'. I'm not going to put barriers up ...and if I've got that money in my budget, which I have, obviously I've got an allocated crèche budget and wherever I can get people to pay for crèche I will. Any contributions I can get towards it, it just means that I can run more crèche another day, so I can't put on crèche for absolutely everything but I choose to put it on for that (OU study groups) because I believe in it and I think that those students will, hopefully, go on and do better things. (MOU1)

Another manager explained how she was able to offset and limit the crèche costs. In addition she helped the course participants by buying some course books – but this was exceptional.

> Well the only costs really apart from we did put some money behind buying some books; not this year we haven't but the first year, I got the tutors to email me a reading list of what they thought were the best books and we bought a couple ... several of them and we had a little library, so they could borrow them and we bought the USB... the only real cost has been, apart from tea and coffee, has been the crèche. That's not as bad this year because there's not so many. Crèches are expensive but then if we're not paying for the course then it's easier to pay for a crèche. It's when I'm paying out for a course and a crèche at the same time that it eats into my budget. But some of the children are now in school and some are in pre-school and we don't have as many babies and what I tend to do is try and put things on at the same time. So we've got a big crèche running and the staff can then be shared across the children. (MBK6)

However, it is questionable if with tighter budgets Children's Centres will be able to absorb these costs in the future, and whether in future HEIs might need to contribute towards these costs. Indeed, the costs were seen as an impediment to expansion and a future challenge, because of the squeeze on Children's Centre budgets. At one Centre that used to run Birkbeck courses and was no longer doing

so, the manager explained how funding was the main reason they were not currently running courses. Specifically, the costs of the room and the crèche were issues because, unlike the other shorter courses they ran, the Centre had to make a financial commitment for the duration of the course – for an entire year. She explained:

> It was all down to funding, as well…the difficulty we all had (about) who was going to bear the cost of the crèche. That would need a local commitment from the local manager to commit to whether a crèche would be paid for. For a whole year. It was quite a huge commitment as well. That's right, it was the room and the ... it was also generally because we had to provide the training room and the crèche room and the crèche staff for a year. So it was a year's commitment. Most of our programmes are planned on a three-term ... so we might change something three times in a year, whereas this was a commitment for a whole year, so it meant ... it's about space ... a training room, a crèche room and the staff for one year. (MBK4)

2.8 Summary of key findings

- The Birkbeck and Open University courses run at the Children's Centres were informed by the desire to widen higher education participation, and especially for parents from low-income backgrounds.

- Their focus and conception went beyond 'traditional' ideas about higher education. They were designed to overcome some of the impediments to access:

- most students paid no tuition fees;

- they had access to free onsite childcare;

- the place of learning and its environment – the Children's Centre- was local, convenient, familiar and supportive; and

- the courses were part-time and ran during school hours so that the students could fit them around their other commitments.

- All these features were vital to the success of the courses. Without this combination of features, the courses would have been far less attractive to potential students. And it is threats to these 'winning' ingredients that endanger future provision.

- The collaborative partnerships formed between Birkbeck and the Open University and the Children's Centres were also very important to the courses' success.

- Essential to these partnerships was the synergy between the overall mission of the Children's Centres, and the aims and objectives of the courses run by Birkbeck and the Open University.

- There were mutual benefits to the partners in running these courses. The Children's Centres were the focus of both universities' outreach activities, targeting the sort of people both the universities and the Children's Centres wanted to attract. The courses offered educational benefits that the Children's Centres wanted to offer their community, while the Centres provided the free child care many students needed in order to participate.

- Central to the efficacy of these partnerships was the Children's Centre managers' commitment to these courses. The managers helped to make the courses happen and offered practical assistance in recruiting course participants and in supporting them once they started their course.

- The outreach activities of both Birkbeck and the OU were also important part of these partnerships.

- Working with such partners and in off-site community-based locations, although essential feature of the programmes, was challenging at times, especially for Birkbeck lecturers.

- Most pronounced were the variable facilities available at the Children's Centres, alongside the lack of access to a library; computing facilities; learning resources; and classroom space in some of the Children's Centres.

- The course participants all had socio-economic characteristics typically associated with 'widening participation' students with the majority being women, aged 25 and over, non-White and with low-level entry qualifications. Data from the survey on students' backgrounds also show how most were lone parents, were not employed before starting their course, had household incomes of under £15,000, left school under the age of 18, and did not have another family member who had studied for a higher education qualification.

- The community outreach work undertaken jointly by the universities and the Children's Centres was important for attracting these course participants. Particularly significant was the role of the OU's Community Partnership Manager who had wide-ranging contacts within the local community.

- For many course participants the initial decision to join the course was an opportunistic one – the offer was there. They would not necessarily have sought it out themselves, hence the importance of the outreach work.

- Students' motivations for studying were primarily instrumental as manifest in their desire for better opportunities in life through gaining an higher education qualification and using the course as a help towards a better job, possibly not immediately but at some point in the future.

- Their main reasons for choosing their course were pragmatic. They could fit their course around their family commitments while their course or study group was nearby, and the teaching hours were convenient and flexible. Finally, for those with children under the age of five, the availability of free childcare was also an important reason for taking this course.

2.9 Recommendations and implications for policy and practice

- To help monitor widening participation initiatives aimed at parents, both HESA and HEIs should automatically collect data on students' family circumstances including whether students have children, the age of their children.

- Such information would help HEIs develop targeted support for student parents such as places for parents and children to meet.

- For these sort of initiatives, targeted at low-income parents, to work and flourish they need to:

- Have very low or no tuition fees;

- Provide very cheap or free onsite childcare;

- Take place in a community-based environment near their target population so that the provision is local, convenient, familiar and supportive; and

- Be run as part-time flexible courses, and face-to-face provision needs to be available during school hours so that the students can fit their studies around their other commitments.

- To provide these essential features, these courses will need to be heavily subsidised by HEIs or HEFCE because of the changes in higher education tuition fee regime; concern about these course participants' unwillingness to take out student loans introduced in 2012/13; and the pressures on Children's Centre budgets which means that some cannot, or in the future will be unable, to provide free childcare.

- Given these costs associated with such provision, such programmes need a very high level of HEI commitment, at the most senior level of management.

- Setting up these programmes is labour intensive and HEIs need to consider how they can provide sustained support for initiatives of these kinds via their widening participation/ fair access strategic planning and staffing/ resource allocation.

- Institutions providing face-to-face teaching in community-based locations should consider the on-costs of such provision and how these may vary from provision at the main university site. For instance, given the community-based location there should be no room hire charges. The money 'saved' could be used to help subsidise childcare.

- Collaborative community-based partnerships, based on shared values, are essential for the success of provision of this kind, as well as outreach activities by the HEI and Children's Centres.

- Outreach activities need to go beyond playing primarily a strategic role and in identifying partners. Those involved also need to play an operational role in terms of contacting potential course participants.

- The OU model of a designated 'hands-on' (and highly dedicated) Community Partnership Manager who was locked into local networks and had extensive local connections, while resource intensive, proved very beneficial in terms of boosting and encouraging recruitment on to these courses. This meant outreach activities could be extended beyond local schools to include other local services such as social services and health centres.

- Contact with individual students, which began during outreach work, was often maintained by the Community Partnership Manager through the enrolment process and during the course. A similar role was performed by the Birkbeck Programme Manager, and suggests the importance for students of a consistent HEI contact aside from their regular lecturers/tutors.

- The recruitment literature and activities could include illustrating the benefits of study and vignettes of students' experiences.

- Some courses have open access and any student wanting to study is allowed to enrol, such as the OU Opening courses. Others, such as the ones run at the Children's Centre, have some element of selectivity, so that students are not set up to fail. There are pros and cons to both approaches but where there is some selectivity there also needs to be a balance between openness and risk-taking by admitting those who might fail.

- When planning these courses in community-based locations, HEIs may need to be more flexible about providing learning resources outside their walls.

- HEIs should not assume that all students have access to computers. To complement electronic access to resources, HEIs may need to purchase a limited number of set texts for the subject

modules which participants are able to borrow to support their studies, and provide all or most of the learning materials student require. This also could be done through a library-organised, community based system of book boxes, which contained a range of relevant reading for course participants to borrow.

- Most students do have mobile telephones and the Open University has developed a range of devices for mobile telephones to help students access learning resources and to provide learning support, e.g. Anywhere App. Other HEIs could also create similar devices and integrate appropriate new technologies into provision in accessible ways. This may also require some provision in the curriculum to ensure students develop the confidence to use electronic learning resources.

- HEIs should ensure that data on students needed to evaluate the courses are collected systematically. For student parents, this includes collecting data not required by HESA such as information on their family circumstances, number and age of children.

3 WIDENING PARTICIPATION: LEARNING AND TEACHING

3.1 Introduction

This chapter, which focuses on learning and teaching, draws upon data collected in all elements of the study (see section 1.5). It starts by exploring the overall aims of the Birkbeck and OU courses and the pedagogic approaches to learning and teaching adopted. It then outlines the courses' qualification aims (where appropriate) and the modules that the course participants took, including the number of modules. Next, the chapter examines the learning and teaching challenges associated with these courses encountered first, by those responsible for teaching the courses and secondly, by the women taking the courses. It also charts the women's views on their courses and some of their learning and developmental outcomes. The chapter concludes with a discussion of retention including how many course participants completed the modules they started at the Children's Centre, how many were awarded a qualification, and why some students did not complete.

3.2 The key aims of the Birkbeck and OU courses

Both the Birkbeck and OU courses aim to prepare students for higher education and/or further study. A distinctive difference between them is their mode of presentation. All Birkbeck HEIS modules are taught face to face and use a variety of teaching approaches, in particular small group interactive learning. All the modules offered are designed specifically for students who are unfamiliar with the culture and conventions of HE and provide support and guidance to help students succeed and plan their progression. The programme adopts a particular approach to learning, which encourages learners to become active critical inquirers into their own learning experiences and into the social world in which they live. Alongside this inquiry-based learning, students are guided to develop the kinds of oral, written and information literacy skills and processes which they will need to succeed in this environment.

In all contexts, students begin with an 'Approaches to Study' module and follow this by taking modules which introduce them to a variety of disciplinary and inter-disciplinary themes. The modules that are studied in the Children's Centres are selected by potential participants with the guidance of the programme director, who explores potential participants' interests and goals with them. The week-by-week module topics are frequently adapted for facilitation in Children's Centre settings so as to draw on the experiences and interests of the participants. For example, the sociology and psychology modules pay particular attention to issues related to child development. However, the modules retain the same aims, outcomes and assessment pattern as other HEIS modules of the same title. Many learners embark on the course with aims for future employment in fields such as social work, health, and early childhood studies and see the course as a foundation for further study.

Students at Birkbeck generally had one three-hour session every week between October and July of each academic year apart from school holidays (all observed, including half terms). Occasionally, the programme ran for four and a half hours per week within school hours so there was a morning and afternoon session.

In contrast, like all OU study, the modules the respondents took were 'distance' learning, all materials were provided to the student in advance and they could study at their own pace and convenience. Students are given telephone support from a module tutor who supports them for the duration of their module. In addition, the students in this study were offered group support sessions based at the Children's Centre. The Openings courses, at the time of this study, lasted five months, normally had four starting points a year, and were supported with five study skills sessions and weekly peer and tutor support sessions at the Children's Centre. These sessions provide additional study skills support and ensure that students have contact with others in their locality. They are not 'lectures' as such, all the content of the module is provided in written materials, but students are supported around developing skills such as note taking, essay writing and time management. These important

differences in Birkbeck and the OU's approach to teaching and learning may influence course participants' views on their experiences.

3.3 Qualification aim

The qualification aim of those taking Birkbeck courses at Children's Centres has changed over time. In recent years, all Higher Education Introductory Studies (HEIS) students studying at Children's Centres aim for a Certificate of Higher Education (Cert.HE). To gain the award, students must successfully complete modules worth 120 credit points, which usually equates to four modules (i.e. 30 level 4 credits per module). As discussed in a subsequent chapter, not all of them progress to a Certificate of HE.

However, earlier cohorts of Birkbeck students studying at Children's Centres aimed for either an Extra Mural Certificate (Preparation for HE) = 90 credits or an Extra Mural Diploma (Preparation for HE) = 120 credits. The Extra Mural Certificates and Diplomas were phased out over several years as part of a wider move within Birkbeck to convert all its non-degree awards to Certificates of HE. The key driver for this change was to enable low-income students to qualify for a grant to cover their fees and a small additional grant to cover course-related expenses (See section 1.8.2). It also meant that students with disabilities could apply for the Disabled Student Allowance.

Because of the modular, flexible nature of the programme, it took quite a few years for the Extra Mural awards to be phased out. For a short while students had the option of which award they wished to be certificated for.

In contrast, the OU's 'Openings' courses, which are introductory 20-week courses worth 15 credits (level 4 equivalent), can contribute towards a qualification, but the Openings courses have no specific qualification attached to them. As indicated in Section 1.8.2, at the time of the research, OU students registered on modules and not qualifications. Students were invited to indicate a qualification aim when they registered, but were not required to do so. Of those who did, many opted for an Open Qualification (at Cert. HE, Dip. HE or degree level) in which they can build their own programme of study from almost the entire suite of Open University Modules. Thus students can 'design' their own qualification to meet their personal and career needs. One advantage of starting with Openings is that students get the opportunity to try a subject before making a longer term and more expensive commitment to a specific study pathway. At that time, there were other 15 credit modules available, which students could use to make up into the 30 or 60 credit blocks of which OU programmes consist, but the lack of loan eligibility for this study intensity, from 2012/13, has resulted in all of these modules being withdrawn.

3.4 Modules and number of modules taken

3.4.1 Modules available at Birkbeck

At Birkbeck, all students on the HEIS course (and its predecessor) take a compulsory core module 'Approaches to study' and follow this with optional modules in different subjects. These modules are worth 30 credits at NQF level 4, although a few modules are worth 15 credits. The number of modules Birkbeck students can study at a Children's Centre has changed over time. Initially when the courses were started at Children's Centres in 2007/08, the courses ran for two years and students were able to take four modules over the two year period to gain their Extra-Mural Diploma (equivalent to Cert. HE). However, in most locations, it was decided to run the programme in a one year cycle with students taking 2 x 30 credit modules ('Approaches to Study' plus another). This was to encourage participants to make a supported transition to study at one of the Birkbeck campuses (Bloomsbury or Stratford) and build participants' confidence to continue to a full undergraduate degree, should they wish to do so.

In practice, many students were able to study 3 x 30 credit modules in the Children's Centre setting since the module available in the second half of the year changed each year. Some students, therefore, completed a Certificate of Higher Education by taking just one module away from the Children's Centre setting. When travel to a campus was impossible for a student, it was occasionally possible for the student to complete their Cert. HE either by taking an Independent Study module or by travelling to another nearby Children's Centre location. Occasionally too, 15 credit modules in either ICT, Career and Professional Development or Independent Study were made available in some locations to enable students to complete their programme at the Children's Centre. The flexibility that is suggested here related to recognition that the transition from day time study with accompanying childcare in the Children's Centre setting to evening study which involved travel to a more distant campus and more limited childcare options was a significant transition for students to make.

As a result of the processes described above, modules were chosen to suit particular learning contexts and learning groups. In all cases, it was appropriate to schedule the core module 'Approaches to Study' first and in the vast majority of cases either the Sociology or Psychology module became the choice of second module. Both subjects provided for on-going development of students' learning processes and provided an introduction to disciplines which would complement a student's future study whether they chose to subsequently continue on a humanities, business, social science, social work or health pathway. However, recognition of the importance of responding to the needs and interests of particular learning groups also extended to modification of topic areas in the modules which were facilitated in the Children's Centres whilst the same overall aims, outcomes and assessment pattern as other HEIS modules with the same title were retained. For example, during the pre-enrolment period, many learners expressed aims for future employment in fields such as social work, health and childcare so that it was appropriate for the sociology and psychology module to focus on topics such as child development or the family.

Assessment on the programme follows a similar pattern on all of the 30 credit modules. There are four pieces of coursework designed to assist students to develop the approaches and skills they need for successful HE study. A shorter more focussed piece of written work (with lesser 'weighting') is followed by an essay. The remaining two pieces of course work are a one hour timed piece completed in session and a short oral presentation and reflective account. For the oral presentation, students apply their learning during the module, to research of a relevant topic which they present and critical discuss with their peers.

3.4.2 Modules available at the Open University

OU students can take as many Opening courses as they wish, and each course is worth 15 credits at OU Level 1 (equivalent to NQF Level 4). The most popular Openings course among the OU students surveyed was 'Understanding children and young people'. However, at the time of this study, Openings courses were available in eight other topics: Introducing environment; Making sense of the arts; Starting with law; Starting with maths; Starting with psychology; Understanding health; Understanding management; and Understanding society. Each module follows the same model: soon after registration students receive their pack containing the core texts, a DVD with audio-visual materials and other supporting material including assessment information, a 'Where to Start' leaflet and access to podcasts of former Openings students talking about their experience. Immediately after the module start date, the student is telephoned by their tutor for their first tutorial.

3.4.3 Core modules' aims

Birkbeck

Birkbeck's 'Approaches to Study' core module provides a flexible introduction to the process of studying and invites individual learners to explore topics of relevance to their life and work experience. The module aims to:

- enable students to develop effective approaches to study through the acquisition of a range of oral, written, visual, analytical, and team working skills,

- encourage critically reflective active learning in academic, work-related and broader lifelong learning contexts,

- introduce students to some contemporary concepts, debates and perspectives that are relevant to the study of social science /arts /humanities subjects.

Open University

The specific aims of Openings modules are:

- to provide a flexible and innovative curriculum which recognises the need for diversity and which underpins social inclusion and widening participation in higher education,

- to maintain the quality of the Openings core model so that it meets the needs of the core audience and is also applicable to a variety of contexts and presentation models,

- to provide a range of pedagogic models that encourage participation in higher education,

- to increase the proportion of students from widening participation target groups and improve their retention, achievement, progression and performance on subsequent key introductory modules and beyond,

- to increase students' subject knowledge, study skills and confidence to enable successful progression on to key introductory modules.

3.4.4 Number of modules taken

The course participants who were surveyed were asked how many modules they had taken at the Children's Centre (Table 3.1).[122] Birkbeck students were most likely to have taken two or four modules, while the majority (88%) of OU students had taken just one module. This reflects the difference in the two schemes in that there is only one module available in the OU programme, and students are discouraged from taking more than one module at a time. On completion of the module, students may move onto any other OU module at Level 1. Consequently, Birkbeck students took an average of 2.83 modules while OU students took an average of 1.19.

[122] As discussed above the modules attracted a different number of credits. For Birkbeck students, 5 modules would be 3 x 30 credits plus 2 x 15 credits. It is also feasible that a student who did 2 modules at a Children's Centre could have gone on and done 4 x 15 credits at Birkbeck - the students would have had to do an out of programme module to do that but some did.

Table 3.1 Number of modules studied by course participants surveyed

Number of modules	Birkbeck		Open University	
	%	N	**%**	**N**
1	12	8	88	28
2	41	28	9	3
3	12	8	0	0
4	27	19	3	1
5	7	5	0	0
6	1	1	0	0
All	100	69	100	32

Base: All respondents (N=101)
Source: Survey of course participants, 2012

3.5 Pedagogic approaches to learning and teaching

It has been argued that the pedagogic approaches of programmes with an agenda for widening participation are crucial in determining their success or otherwise.[123] It was evident that ideas from the large literature on this topic were informing the overall approaches adopted by the Birkbeck and OU courses and were integrated within them.

3.5.1 Learning and identity

Programme directors and lecturers expressed their awareness that complex factors related to students' sense of their identities needed to be taken into account in their approach to learning, teaching and the design of the curriculum. As one PD put it, they are

> ..helping students to see themselves *as* students ... 'cause from the kind of people we work with, there's very much the sense that 'I shouldn't be here, I never thought I was good enough' kind of thing. (PD)

Lecturers describe using pedagogic approaches designed to enable learners to reflect on and move forward from what may have been less-than-positive previous educational experiences. One lecturer acknowledged that a lot of students are engaging with learning for the first time in many years and 'many are terrified' (L01). Another lecturer described their teaching style as flexible, informal, 'approachable and as un-teacher-like as possible' (L01). A commitment to the importance of acknowledging the emotional as well as intellectual dimensions of the learning process, and that students' previous experiences of learning may create barriers to current learning, was evident in many responses from lecturers and PDs. One Children's Centre education and training manager talked about what she perceived as a need to overcome the barriers to learning through a practice-based approached to learning:

> So it's really looking at ... maybe going back and looking how people learn initially. What experiences they've had in learning and taking a very positive approach in developing learning tools to meet those needs. So very 'hands-on' approach. I think, especially in communities such as Blackburn, where communities have had a lot of deprivation, barriers they've not always had very good learning experiences or they've seen learning as not for them or they don't know how to learn sometimes as well or they feel they can't learn. It's

[123] David, M (2010). Diversity, Gender and Widening Participation in Global Higher Education: a feminist perspective. Learning and Teaching: *The International Journal of Higher Education in the Social Sciences*, 3(2), 19-38

> really taking it back and just looking at what are the barriers they faced and making learning easier really. (BBK4)

Recognition of the significance of previous experiences of learning and the value of students' explicit reflection on how they learn is also directly alluded to in the learning outcomes of the HEIS Approaches to Study module (see Section 3.4.3): ' it is anticipated that learners will be able to identify their own learning experiences, reflect on these and develop strategies to further enhance their learning'. This is accompanied by a second learning outcome anticipating that learners will be able to 'identify the impact of factors such as 'race', ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, disability and age on their own and others' experiences of learning.' These outcomes suggest that students are encouraged not only to explore their individual learning experiences and strategies but also to situate those experiences with reference to external factors that may have influenced their opportunities to learn. It has been shown that for many non-traditional students, there is little that is familiar or recognisable within higher education institutions and their pedagogic styles and methods.[124] For example, working-class women learners often construct themselves as undeserving of higher education. [125] There is also alignment with discussions in an extensive literature exploring students' engagement with academic literacy practices in higher education institutions. Roz Ivanic'[126] research study '*Writing and Identity; the discoursal construction of identity in academic writing'* [since developed through the work of academic literacy researchers such as Lea,[127] Lea and Street,[128] Lillis, [129] and in Ivanic's later research[130] conducted in further education colleges] suggests that the generation of a sense of confidence and inclusion amongst so-called 'non-traditional' students is only likely to occur if the complex ways in which students' identities become implicated in their struggles with academic literacy practices are acknowledged and engaged with in the pedagogic context. Similarly, Jackson and Burke[131] have argued that learner identities are fluid, intersected and contested, and there are complex ways in which people come to understand themselves as 'learners', or 'non-learners'.

Various pedagogic strategies and processes are used on the programmes to facilitate students' reflection on their learning experiences and processes including learning journals, logs, reflective summaries and learning plans: 'There's quite a regard on the programme to the principles of reflection and reflexivity with a sense of a more critical edge' (PD). These principles and practices appear to align with long-standing arguments that reflexive, ethical and participatory pedagogies are key to disrupting power relations and challenging differences and inequalities.[132] From her research Ivanic[133] draws the conclusion:

> Students need to develop a critical awareness of their own life-histories, and the sorts of social constraints which may be responsible for any difficulties they have with acquiring particular discourse types. If someone is able to blame the inequities of society for the fact that a certain discourse doesn't come easily to them, and recognise the political implications

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[124] Jackson, S (2004) 'Widening participation for women in lifelong learning and citizenship', *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning:* 4:1 , April 2004, pp5-13

[125] Reay, D (2003) A risky business?: Mature working class women students and access to higher education, *Gender and Education* vol 15 no 3, 301- 318

[126] Ivanic, R., (1998). *Writing and identity: the discoursal construction of identity in academic writing*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins;

[127] Lea, M., (2004) 'Academic Literacies: A pedagogy for course design' in Studies in Higher Education, 29, 6, 739-756

[128] Lea, M. and Street, B. (2006) 'The 'Academic Literacies Model': Theory and Applications' in Theory into Practice, 45, 4, 368 –377

[129] Lillis, T (2001) *Student Writing: Access, Regulation, Desire* London: Routledge

[130] Ivanic, R (2009) *Improving Learning in College- Rethinking Literacies across the Curriculum*, London, Routledge;

[131] Burke, P J and Jackson, S (2007) *Reconceptualising lifelong learning: feminist interventions* (2007) London: Routledge

[132] Ellsworth, E (1992) 'Why doesn't this feel empowering? Working through the repressive myths of critical pedagogy', in Luke C and Gore J (eds) *Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy*, New York: Routledge; Gore, J (1993) *The struggle for pedagogies: critical and feminist pedagogies as regimes of truth*, New York: Routledge; Lather, P (1991) *Getting Smart: feminist research and pedagogy with/in the postmodern*, New York: Routledge

[133] Ivanic (1998) *op cit* ; Ivanic (2009) *op cit*

> of this inequity, they are likely to stop taking the blame on their shoulders for the difficulties they face. This might be a lot more enabling than thinking they must just try harder… [134]

3.5.2 Developing inclusive pedagogies

Another Centre manager expressed her perception of the distinctive features of the first module of the Birkbeck programme in the following terms:

> Approaches to Study (a core Birkbeck module) was quite a broad thing incorporating their personal experiences and for them to work on their personal experiences ... not just bringing in a new module or something that is changed ... that would have scared them away anyway. It was because it was something to do with their everyday experiences and for them to develop on that and then find a way of getting into something more structured and I think that's why it was very, very interesting for the parents when they started the course and that was why they were sustained doing the course, you know, up to the end. Because if it was something like you just go into a college or university, doing this module ...it was just gently introduced ... is how you can think and how you can process information, how you can demonstrate your knowledge and understanding . It was all done very gently. I think the fact that they started from the point where the parents were at ... they seemed to, you know, invite the parents to bring in stuff that was relevant to them and then move them from that point, so they got to know the students themselves and what their interests were and then moved the Programme forward, as opposed to making assumptions about what parents or having expectations about what the parents wanted. (MBK4)

This comment not only echoes both the written aims and outcomes of the module but also many of the ways in which the lecturers and PDs described the principles and practices which underpinned their approach to learning and teaching on this specific module and across the programmes as a whole. There is, as described above, recognition that for students who have often been away from formal learning for a long time, the first modules are about enabling them to re-engage with the learning process. The process of starting 'from the point where the parents were at' and the invitation to 'parents to bring in stuff that was relevant to them …as opposed to making assumptions …or having expectations about what the parents wanted' were aspects of pedagogic practice that were repeatedly referred to.

As one lecturer put it:

> We'll often use topical issues ... Also using people's experiences can be very powerful because ... you will have people from different nationalities, ethnic origin or ... different ages and will have a range of religious and gender issues ... So we will definitely talk about that and then ... point out 'Oh there's a different perspective'. (LBK1)

Another spoke of 'applying the ideas in sociology to actual real life situations' (LBK5) and another about considering how feminist theory has influenced the family, 'starting from knowledge that students have' (LBK3). These practices align with what Crosling and Thomas argue should be the use of tasks which are 'challenging and relevant to students' lives and futures'.[135] Hunt[136] also argues that working explicitly with the life experiences of course participants is usually as important as imparting subject knowledge and Mark[137] contends that students need to draw on their lived experiences to

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[134] Ivanic (1998) *op cit* p 339

[135] Crosling G and Thomas L (2009) 'Improving student retention in higher education: improving learning and teaching' *Australian Universities Review*, 51:2 pp 9-18 p. 11

[136] Hunt, C (2007) 'Diversity and pedagogic practice: reflections on the role of an adult education in higher education' Teaching in Higher Education, 12:5 pp765-779 p. 767

[137] Mark, R (2011), 'Literacy, lifelong learning and social inclusion: Empowering learners to learn about equality and reconciliation through lived experiences' in Jackson, S (ed) *Lifelong learning and social justice: communities, work and identities in a globalised world*, Leicester: NIACE

develop greater understandings of power and equality. Jackson concurs with this principle of making subjects relevant to students' lived experiences, encouraging and enabling the use of personal experience in theoretical and analytical approaches.[138]

Through the process of opening up and acknowledging different students' experiences, attitudes and understandings of the world, lecturers saw themselves as facilitating further exploration of contemporary issues by encouraging participants to develop their understandings of competing perspectives. As one lecturer put it, the teaching draws attention to 'across the curriculum notions of diversity and thinking about how ... society addresses a diverse population and meets the learning needs of a range of people' (LBK1). Another lecturer articulated this process from the learner's perspective:

> The point of the class isn't for any students to persuade others of their point of view but to listen to a variety of views and I constantly see students reassessing their views on issues. (LBK3)

The facilitation of this process was represented as not being without challenges with one lecturer describing it as being 'a kind of balancing act' and that 'the challenge is challenging (unacceptable) views without losing a student' (LBK4). However, another lecturer spoke of this process as helping students through 'working together and challenging and questioning and it is ...about knowing how not to offend ... so that students know how to provide support to each other and they are respectful of each other' (LBK2). The commitment to the facilitation of interactive peer learning aligns with what Jackson has referred to as an opportunity for: 'the accumulation of collective stocks of understandings that arise from the relational understandings of and between the different voices, histories and memories.'[139]

Learning and teaching practices which develop peer support and encourage small group working were seen as an important means to encourage students to move from dependence to independence. The Children's Centre settings, one lecturer suggested, offer a safer space for the development of collaborative learning as 'there is a higher incidence of a shared background, all female group ... with children' (LBK4), which can then be developed into the sharing of different perspectives. One lecturer described how students had set up 'a Facebook group … and they're in constant touch with each other ... they do give each other a lot of support' (LBK3). It was felt by the lecturer that this kind of group support could help students continue with programmes of study through times of personal challenge and difficulty. This pedagogical commitment to the value of peer group learning and support also reflects more recent challenges to views of the learning process that focus exclusively on the individual learner. The acknowledgement that much learning occurs during interaction with others and is therefore relational, embodied and impacted by other 'material' aspects of the specific learning environment/context (such as the learning materials with which the students work or the physical space in which they learn) has been argued to deserve closer attention than much traditional individualist learning theory has given to these processes.[140]

Staff described how academic skills were integrated into teaching and learning as part of the broader pedagogic approach. For example, one lecturer described activities to develop note-taking skills whilst students are exploring 'issues in so-called developing countries' (LBK4). A 'total integration of learning development with the topic' (PD) was implemented by lecturers as part of planning their teaching programme and facilitating their module. One programme director stated that the OU has no

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[138] Jackson, S (1999) 'Learning and teaching in higher education: the use of personal experience in theoretical and analytical approaches' *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 23:3, pp351-358

[139] Jackson (2010) *op cit.*

[140] For example for example, Boud, D. (2010) 'Relocating reflection in the context of practice' in Bradbury,H. Frost, N.,Kilminster, S. and Zukas, M. (2010) Beyond Reflective Practice: New Approaches to Professional Lifelong Learning' London, Routledge

standardisation of pedagogic approaches and individual tutors work with their own preferred styles. However, the specific design and modification of the OU programmes for Children's Centre settings suggests a similar commitment to the integration of study skills' development and reflection on the learning process with an introduction to particular themes and topics. Students need to be encouraged to read critically, to make notes, to reflect – 'it's all to do with engagement' with the learning materials. (L01)

It was also evident that a key criterion for tutors to be recruited to teach on the programmes was that they would feel comfortable with the pedagogic 'culture': student-centred; responsive to students' needs and previous experiences of learning; encouraging of students to work with and learn from each other (PD), enabling students to have a 'collective experience' (PD). Tutors were recruited 'on the basis that they are actually quite approachable as well as academic', with an ability to respond to diverse student needs and requirements (PD). The pedagogic principles and practices underpinning the Birkbeck programme were discussed between the programme director and potential tutors during the selection process and were subsequently further developed through dialogue with lecturers during induction, team meetings and team staff development seminars. Consequently there was on-going discussion about teaching and learning amongst the teaching team as part of evaluation of how best to achieve the aims of these programmes.

The underlying pedagogic model for the OU Openings modules has three core strands: embedding skills development in subject content; an iterative assessment strategy; and a reflective log. The module material is written with accessibility as a driving feature, supported by student exercises and activities and interactive quizzes. The pro-active tutor support (the tutor telephones the student at regular intervals for one-to-one tutorials) is a key element of the approach and this relationship is crucial as the tutor provides 'feed forward', rather than feedback, on assignments. Each Openings module follows the same model, differing only in subject matter and in some skills areas. At the beginning of the module, students complete a' learning plan' with the support of their tutor in which they identify the areas they feel they need to develop. At the end of the module students submit an on learning review, with their final assessment. Assessment comprises two tutor marked assignments (TMA), an online assessment and an end of module assessment (EMA). All three written assignments are similar and designed to provide opportunity for iterative feedback which guides students on what they need to do in their next attempt, rather than focusing on what was 'wrong' in their previous attempt[141].

Therefore on both programmes assessments are viewed as developmental and principally *for* students' learning rather than simply as a teacher's test *of* students' learning. The variety of assessment methods used on the Birkbeck course were described as 'to optimise the opportunities for learning' in ways that are consistent with the programme's pedagogic aims. For example, oral presentations as the final module assessment were described as enabling students to reflect on ways to integrate their own interests with learning from the module (PD). One OU lecturer spoke of students being encouraged to use assessment to test new knowledge (L01), placing the emphasis on students' assessment of their own learning.

The descriptions which lecturers, programme directors and managers gave of the approach to learning and teaching on the programmes aligned with social constructivist ideas about the learning process.[142] These ideas originated from critique of a view of learning that implied a simple process of transmission of objective knowledge from teacher to learner. This approach was famously derided by

[141] For a more detailed discussion of the model, see Marr, L. Curry, G. and Rose-Adams, J (2013) 'Autonomy, Legitimacy and Confidence: using curriculum to successfully widen participation in Murray, N & Klinger, CM (eds), *Aspirations, Access and Attainment: International perspectives on Widening Participation and an Agenda for Change*, Oxon, UK: Routledge

[142] Vygotsky. L.S. (1978) Mind in Society: the development of higher psychological processes, London, Harvard University Press; Vygotsky L.S. and Kozulin A (1986) Thought and Language Cambridge Massachusetts, MIT Press.

Paulo Freire[143] as a 'banking approach' to learning. Social constructivist ideas about the teaching and learning process have been subsequently developed in various strands of critical pedagogic theory and practice.[144] To some extent these ideas have now achieved a kind of 'orthodoxy' in mainstream higher education. Key set texts for Higher Education Academy accredited teaching and learning courses explicitly draw on social constructivist understandings of the learning process to frame the teaching techniques that are promoted. For example, in their chapter on 'Understanding Student Learning' Fry et al.[145] argue that all learners approach and experience learning in different ways and teachers need to understand where learners are starting from, drawing on their prior knowledge, and keeping to the forefront an awareness of the impact of cultural backgrounds and beliefs.[146] Fry et al[147] also advise that the lecturer cannot assume that there is a common understanding by students on the purposes of higher education or the nature of studying, as each student will approach learning from their own perspective, experiences and understandings.[148] Hence, some of the principles which underpin lecturers' talk about their practice in this study might be regarded as widely accepted within UK higher education culture. However, Freire persistently argued that in current dominant cultures education continues to be primarily delivered in terms of training, 'pure transfer of content' [149] and that 'new pedagogical proposals become necessary, indispensable, and urgent'.[150] Furthermore, as has been suggested above and throughout this report, successful participation in higher education remains the privilege of a limited group and processes which involve on-going exclusions are at work. What was distinctive in our research was the way in which staff involved in the design, organisation and facilitation of the courses in Children's Centre settings all particularly foregrounded curriculum design and pedagogic practices as requiring careful consideration if the aim of widening participation and creating inclusive learning opportunities were to be achieved. In doing so, they implicitly but firmly grounded their current practice in relation to principles and practices associated with social constructivist, critical and feminist pedagogies which they were re-working for their current contexts. There was a distinctive tone throughout the interviews of enthusiastic commitment to putting into practice a set of principles, which they regarded as essential components of inclusive curricula and pedagogy. Lecturers also describe making explicit within the curriculum and pedagogy questions about the construction of 'knowledge', which are implicit to their learning and teaching principles and practice. As two of the lecturers put it, students learn through discussing questions such as 'What is bias?' or 'What is knowledge' (LBK1) with 'knowledge' becoming 'a more dynamic thing' (LBK4).

The pedagogic approaches described by lecturers, managers and programme directors align with arguments that successful diversity depends not on 'normalising' students – i.e. slotting non-traditional entrants into traditional structures and practices. Rather, it is a matter of recognising different backgrounds, experiences and interests in order to develop more progressive, responsive forms of HE.[151] Learners, it has been argued, need to be able to recognise themselves as co-constructors of learning and, as Elizabeth Ellsworth has contended, to 'locate the experience of the

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[143] Freire, P. (1968) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* New York: Seabury Press; Freire, P. (1972), 'The Adult Literacy Process as Cultural Action for Freedom' in Maybin, J. (1994), *Language and Literacy in Social Practice*, Buckingham: Open University Press

[144] Brookfield, S. (1995) Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher, San Francisco, John Wiley; Brookfield, S. (1995) Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher, San Francisco, John Wiley; hooks, B. (1994) Teaching to Transgress; Education as a Practice of Freedom, New York: Routledge.

[145] Fry, H, Ketteridge S and Marshall S (2003) 'Understanding student learning' in Fry, H, Ketteridge, S and Marshall, S, *A handbook for teaching and learning in higher education*, London: Kogan Page, pp 9-25

[146] Fry, H, Ketteridge, S and Marshall, S, (2003) *A handbook for teaching and learning in higher education*, London: Kogan Page,

[147] Fry, H, Ketteridge, S and Marshall, S, (2003) *Op cit*

[148] Gosling, D (2003) 'Supporting student learning', in Fry, H, Ketteridge, S and Marshall, S, *A handbook for teaching and learning in higher education*, London: Kogan Page, pp 162-181

[149] Freire, P (1994) *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group p.84

[150] Freire, P *op cit.* p 107

[151] Thomas, L and Jones, R (2007) *Embedding employability in the context of widening participation*: Learning and employability series 2, York: Higher Education Academy p 5

learning self as a self not in compliance but in transition and in motion towards previously unknown ways of thinking and being in the world.'[152]

As noted earlier in this report, Stevenson, Clegg, and Lefever[153] found a 'confusion of tongues' suggested by the contradictory discourses/understandings of widening participation expressed in the in–depth interviews conducted during their case study research with staff working in one particular HE institution. However, what is distinctive about the findings of our study is that staff working on these programmes all regarded the challenge to create inclusive curricula and pedagogies to be a key aspect of their work with parents in Children's Centre settings. Three themes emerged from the interviews with the lecturers and programme directors. One was a commitment to critical reflexivity as a process through which learners' can consider not just difference but also inequalities; another was perception of the value of different peer perspectives as a way of exploring one's own thinking and understanding. Thirdly, a perception of the importance of supporting students to develop the skills required for successful academic study without compromising the stimulation of active, student-led inquiry and learning.

3.6 Challenges in learning and teaching

The pedagogic approaches adopted by these courses are not without challenge, which one programme director described as:

> Huge ones, huge challenges, huge ... These students may have a lot of ability and they may have motivation ... but their starting point is way, way back from the average student's starting point ... (Students) struggle, they really struggle. They struggle with language ... Some of our students really, really struggle ... (it is a) massive challenge ... (PD)

Lecturers experienced challenges in enabling students to work through the 'steep learning curve necessary to complete the module' (LBK3). There was recognition that it can be difficult to balance the need to support learners to familiarise themselves with academic conventions and practices whilst either not stifling differing student approaches and individual creativity or producing over-reliance on the individual tutor. 'What I'm always trying to do is to get them to be independent learners, to ask questions and not just answer them' (LBK4). There is a danger that students become too dependent on tutors (LBK2) and lecturers 'share the need to gradually deal with independence' (LBK2).

There is a structural or institutional challenge for the OU in working with the non-traditional students who access their programmes in the centres due to a separation of those who write and develop programmes from those who deliver them and it can be a struggle 'getting the people that are writing the courses to really, really think about where the students are'. (PD)

Several lecturers and programme directors noted the challenge of working with ICT. As discussed, not all students have access to computers, Children's Centres do not have the resources to make these available and students are not always able to get to the home institution (not at all for OU students). Students are directed to a UK Online Centre by the OU, but are not always able to take up opportunities, including due to lack of childcare. Other problems with resources include insufficient books and students' reluctance to use the virtual learning environment.

In addition, there are challenges of working with dis/ability or learning difficulty:

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[152] Ellsworth, E. (2005) *Places of Learning; Media, Architecture, Pedagogy*, New York: Routledge p 16

[153] Stevenson, J., Clegg, S. and Lefever, R (2010) 'The Discourse of Widening Participation and its critics: an institutional case study'. *London Review of Education*, 8: 2, 105-115;

> Many of our students find out on these courses that they are dyslexic. We've had students in the past, quite common, to have a mental health concern. I remember a number of students who have bipolar syndrome ... (and) students need different support. (LBK2)

Lecturers note the need to be flexible and responsive, being prepared to change methods of presentation or learning and teaching in working with the challenges they describe. A number of students do not have English as a first language, especially those attending Children's' Centres located in areas with a high proportion of immigrants and/or ethnic minorities. This can present a challenge in the classroom (LBK1). One lecturer stated that 'probably 75% have got English as a second language, so that there's that barrier as well' (L01). Lecturers work with cultural difference, including different cultural expectations of learning and teaching and different cultural expectations from families, which can be very demanding on students' time (LBK4). Lecturers also need to have a realistic expectation of the time students can give to study, and 'it's very difficult with students who are juggling voluntary work and children and everything else. (LBK3)

A Children's Centre manager discussed some of the challenges regarding distance learning and overcoming individuals' preconceived ideas about the need for face-to-face teaching as against distance learning.

> There's a mist ... I think a lot of people, initially when I've been talking to people and saying, 'Yes the Open University can provide this but it's distance learning and your tutors ring you' ... they don't want ... get it initially but once they're in the model and see how it works I think it's a better way of learning because they get that one-to-one. But initially I think this is one of the reasons that we maybe ... don't have a bigger take-up as we should really because a lot of people think face-to-face, 'I need to see somebody; I don't know how it's going to work if I don't have anybody there teaching me ...' Until they start getting into teaching and learning and seeing, 'Well learning is a lot of your 'own' learning' and they begin to see learning in a different way. I think a lot of people think they have got to be taught and they've got to be taught like they were taught at school. Higher Education is all about reflective learning and learning yourself, so once they move away from that they can see the beauty of distance learning. (MOU1)

3.7 The challenges of learning encountered by course participants

In our survey of course participants, all respondents who had completed their modules at the Children's Centre or were currently studying, were asked about the challenges they faced while studying (Figure 3.1). By far their greatest challenge, encountered by nearly nine out of ten respondents, 'a lot' or 'to some extent', was juggling study with their the rest of their life. Particular pressures were being busy at home (75%) and inadequate support at home (50%), which as we will see, made finding time for studying hard and often demanded well developed time management skills, all of which were often stressful for the women. Lone parents were significantly more likely than women with partners to feel these pressures, and we should remember that a majority of participants were lone parents. Juggling studying with other commitments, and its consequences, are major issues found in other studies of part-time students too, although unlike the respondents in this study, some of these others studies report the pressure of paid employment.[154] Indeed, Brooks[155] discusses the various strategies used by student parents to find time and space, within the home, to pursue their studies.

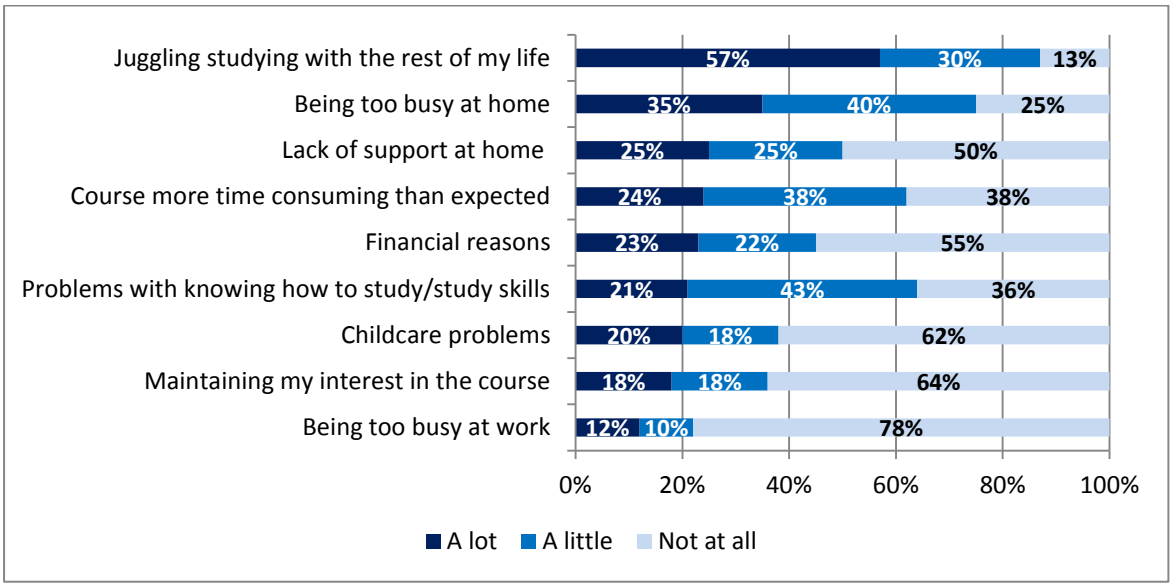
[154] Callender, C and Wilkinson, D (2012) op cit; Yorke, M and Longden, B (2008) *The experiences of part-time students in higher education: A study from the UK* , York: HEA, http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/research/surveys/Part-time_student_experience_of_higher education.pdf (Accessed 06/02/2013); NUS (2009) op cit; Moreau and Kerner (2012) op cit; Marandet, E. & Wainwright, E. (2010) Invisible Experiences: Understanding The Choices And Needs Of University Students With Dependent Children. *British Educational Research Journal*, 36(5), 787-805.

Other things that made part-time study a challenge for a majority of both Birkbeck and OU course participants surveyed were problems with knowing how to study and study skills (64%) and the course being more time consuming than expected (62%). The number of OU course participants is very small, but a significantly higher proportion of OU than Birkbeck course participants experienced problems with study skills.

The first finding might seem surprising because both the Birkbeck and the OU courses have integrated study skills and provide a starting point for those new to study. Consequently, study skills are an important component of these courses. However, the integration of study skills and exploration of the learning process into a course means that this is content as well as process. The process of trying things out as the student studies, to find out what works for them is hard. Learning how to study, when the students have lots of things to juggle, is likely to be difficult too. Consequently, it is unsurprising that the course participants find this challenging at an early stage of their learning. That said, of course, there might be ways to improve the study skills support.

The second finding - the unexpected workload suggests that course participants were not necessarily given enough information about their course and the workload in advance, and before starting their course. Another contributing factor is simply that many of these mothers had little experience of study and were unable to judge the level of the challenge entailed until they actually experienced it.

Figure 3.1 The challenges of studying



Base: All respondents who had completed their modules (N=84)
Source: Survey of course participants, 2012

For the 30 course participants interviewed in depth about their experience of studying, finding time to study, seems to have been the single biggest challenge given the demands of parenthood. This may be particularly a problem for single parents or parents who have paid employment or both, but the difficulty of finding time for children, household chores and studies was a universal problem.

> Each time I took my book, I want to read, I hear the baby, I leave it, I go for the baby. And I always come again to the tutor, 'Can you please, I *beg* of you, can you give me more time, can you give me more time?' (BBK3)

[155] Brooks, R (2013) Negotiating Time and Space for Study: Student-parents and Familial Relationships *Sociology* vol. 47 no. 3 443-459

> It was a bit daunting at first because I remember them saying about how much time we had to commit to homework and things, thinking, 'How on earth am I going to juggle it?', because when you're in baby mode, you know, it's quite full on, isn't it? [Laughter]. So I thought, 'Okay, how am I going to do that?' – because my husband works long hours, so I knew that he wouldn't be able to have them while I studied. (BBK11)

> Finding time to do the homework, that was one of the hardest things. Basically, my kids are 24/7 and so trying to squeeze in the time to actually sit down and actually do it, that was really hard work, especially towards the end when we found out my Dad had cancer about a month before I finished, and homework was the last thing on my mind, and that's one of the main reasons I didn't complete the last bit of it. (BBK19)

> I used to do that [study] at night when they were asleep. But that's the only time I could fit it in, in the night. (OU7)

> it's not just the actual studying, it's also the time management, it teaches you that. ….as a mum I thought, 'Yes, I can do it when the kids have gone to bed,' but sometimes you're just so tired and you just want to watch something and don't want to do any studying, but having deadlines and things and doing this openings course made me realise that, 'No, I've got to be self-disciplined.' (OU9)

This could easily be a dilemma, or even a conflict between spending time with children and spending time studying, as these mothers discuss the difficulty of finding time for both:

> I think it impacted on both of them. I didn't give them the time that they needed at home because I've gone to work, come back and done this course, I'm in the house doing housework, cooking etc. and I think we kind of drifted a little bit apart because I think she wanted, even though she's the age she was, she wanted my attention, and in the evenings I had to do my homework so I think she was a bit resentful of what I was doing and felt it wasn't necessary for me to do that …she played up a lot and constantly wanted my attention. So it was very difficult, but I was determined to plough through with it. (BBK16)

> Being a full time mum, working part time, trying to manage the home, the family life, making sure I give equal amounts of time, so all of that, and trying to get my own study done, that was quite a *tough* challenge to meet really. So I had to be making sure that I gave equal time to all those important things in my life. So sometimes, when there's an assignment due and the children *did* get neglected sometimes, like, no, you're just going to go off and do something in the corner for an hour! So it was quite tough. (BBK17)

But as well as anxiety or guilt over their perceived neglect of children, many course participants reported support from their children for their studies. With younger children this might simply be a pride that their mother was going to university, or practically that they would spend time reading or doing homework together. Older children encouraged and assisted their parents, helping with technology such as PowerPoint. Parents enthusiastic about their studies would also bring up issues they were studying to discuss and form opinions with their older children.

> Birkbeck University visited his school and he goes, 'Oh, my mum's doing the course at the [Children's Centre name redacted]!', they said, 'What's your mum's name?' and he said, 'My mum's name's [name redacted] and she's attending the course!' and he was quite excited when he came home and was telling me and it really let him feel good and give him a sort of motivation in going to Uni when he's finished, it motivated him. (BBK13)

> They've been *very* good. And I was writing the essays and I would be asking them questions and putting there, 'What do you think about this? And what if this will happen, what do you think?', so it was very good. (BBK21)

> And they are interested, they do ask and say, 'Oh how did you do in your assignment?' so that's nice. (OU3)

> I think we help each other. Sometimes he'll say, 'Mummy, can I do my words?' and I'm like, 'You do your words and I'll do some studying.' It's really good. [...] And the good thing is, when I was trying to get my EMA done for my last module, I was like, so procrastinating with it, 'No, I can't do it…I'll do it tomorrow, never mind' and I went to tuck my little boy in and he went, 'Mummy, you can't lay here hugging me; you've got an assignment to do. Go and do your assignment.' (OU4/5)

> When I got 'Understanding Children', my little boy, I think he was 7 or 8, he came and gave me a hug and said, 'Well done!' Because it was put in a frame as well, the Certificate, and when he saw it, he came and hugged me and said, 'Well done for passing!' [...] This week I'm working on my essay, so I normally sit on the bed and type. My son will bring his homework and if he needs help he will ask me, so we're working together, yes. (OU8)

The second most prevalent challenge reported by course participants was the difficulty of studying itself, not necessarily that the work was intellectually challenging, but the challenge of learning what was expected, the conventions of academic writing in this context. Writing assignments to deadlines was the focus for this, but the presentations and exams required by the Birkbeck HEIS programme also seem to have been particularly challenging for participants.

> To start with I did struggle because these were new methods I was having to use, researching things, planning my day, planning what I needed to do, have a timeframe, and I did struggle with those, but as time went on I found that I'd got a better understanding of what the teacher wanted me to do and I found it easier to work. But I used to get a lot of books on how to structure your essays and things like that, so that I knew how to do those things, because those things, I had to learn a lot of new things when I started that course. (BBK16)

> I didn't know how to reference, I didn't know how to do an essay, I didn't know how to use a computer and so I didn't know anything. So the study groups are good, they did one on computers, one on referencing, even, it was like, you pick the book up and it says, 'You must write in the third person' and I'm like, 'What's the third person?' and so it's like, even though it was English it was a foreign language to me and I didn't understand what it meant. But now I do, they have helped me so much! I couldn't do it without study groups. (OU4/5)

Other challenges less frequently mentioned include lack of support for those with English as a second language, difficulties with a particular tutor, lack of access to childcare and lack of access to a computer.

Some challenges were less directly connected with studying and more about their life circumstances. So, problems with their own health, the health of their children or immediate family were serious challenges that sometimes made it impossible to continue studying.

There may be systematic differences in the challenges described by those who ultimately overcame the challenges and those who found them insurmountable and didn't complete their target programme – issues discussed below (section 3.8).

An education and training manager at one of the Children's Centres also described the pressures the mothers experienced. He too highlighted the time pressures, the heavy work load, and juggling studying with other commitments while learning how to study.

> It's the pressure of having to get things done on time. I think what they're finding is that for them it's a lot of work but I think … they're having to do is a lot more preparation before they actually get to writing the essay. Then it's taking loads of time and at the same time they have

> got family commitments and stuff like that and some of them have limited access to IT, so they've got a whole lot of things which they are taking home that are tied to actually trying to do the final product. (MBK1)

Another education and training manager, provides further insights into the pressures, especially in relation to students' very steep learning curve in mastering academic writing conventions. .

> I think the difficulties have initially been the amount of learning they've got to absorb. Although the Openings Programme is written in a very familiar way to them they've got to apply learning and be able to at the end of the Programme put together an extensive assignment, 1000 words, 2000 words referenced correctly and written in the correct format. So it's been within a short space of time, the learning journey has been quite fast really…… I think the hardest is putting pen to paper initially… writing assignments and getting their thoughts down in a structured format; so it's all the study skills really…….. Within the Openings Programme we take them step-by-step, so we will look at how you develop note taking, how you develop essay, how you reference correctly. So we take them from not knowing anything about how to put an assignment together to looking at how to study effectively and so ... initially it's quite shocking for them but once they start taking the smaller steps probably within a six-week period they are able to put an assignment together. (MOU1)

These Children's Centre managers' observations are particularly relevant to the overall aims of the courses (see section 3.4.3). They point to one of the most significant challenges for these women learners – the need to build confidence and competence in using academic communication conventions, particularly in the written genres. This highlights the importance of firstly, making an introduction to, and practice of, these conventions a key part of the content of the courses. Secondly, more indirectly, they highlight the importance for students' confidence of them contextualising this learning 'need', so that they do not perceive it as a demoralising individual incompetence but rather as a set of conventions which their previous educational experience had not given them access to (frequently through no fault of their own.) This reinforces the need to build into the courses opportunities for students to reflect critically on their learning experiences before and during the course. The HEIS interdisciplinary thematic interest in debates about equality and diversity provides another context to which students can relate their thinking about their skills development.

3.7.1 Course participants' views of their course

As discussed, Birkbeck and OU courses are presented in very different ways, and this may have led to different teaching and learning experiences. Overall, all the course participants surveyed reported that they had had very positive teaching and learning experiences particularly in terms of learning support; their experience of the learning environment; and individual daily experiences of being a student (Figure 3.3). Regarding their overall learning experience, nearly nine out of ten course participants said that they agreed with the following statements: 'My experience of studying had been positive' (93%); 'Overall I am satisfied with the quality of the course' (90%); and 'The course was intellectually stimulating (88%). A higher proportion of Birkbeck course participants than OU course participants 'agreed strongly' rather than 'agreed' with the first and third statements.[156]

[156] The OU's End of module surveys of all OU Openings students in 2010/11 (N=1467) responded as follows :

Course quality rated as excellent	96%
Study experience rated as excellent	95.2%
Course was good value for money	89.5%
Tutor support excellent	93.6%
Teaching material excellent	95.6%
Workload higher than expected	22.4%
Learning outcomes met	94.8%

Similarly, there were very high levels of satisfaction reported with the support course participants received from the academic staff. Again nearly nine out of ten respondents agreed with the statements: 'The support I received from my course tutors helped me to succeed' (88%) and 'Feedback on my work helped me clarify things I did not understand' (87%). There were no differences in course participants' views by the higher education institution they attended.

Respondents were somewhat more ambivalent about the help they received from their peers. Even so, the majority said they agreed that 'The support I received from other students on the course helped me to succeed' (60%), and as we will see (section 3.8.3), under some circumstances helped students complete their studies. Peer support and an inclusive approach to learning were important dynamics in the pedagogy and design of the Birkbeck courses. This may explain why Birkbeck course participants in the survey were significantly more likely than OU course participants to agree with this statement (70% compared with 39%). Yet, central to the OU's study groups was peer support. However, while both the Birkbeck and OU encourage collaborative ethos, students' marks and assessments are based on an individual student's work and discriminate between individual students – a contradiction at the heart of many programmes that adopt collaborative learning approaches.

Not surprisingly, given the structure of Birkbeck and OU courses and how they were taught, Birkbeck course participants were significantly more likely than OU course participants to agree that they benefited from face-to-face teaching (91% compared with 67%).

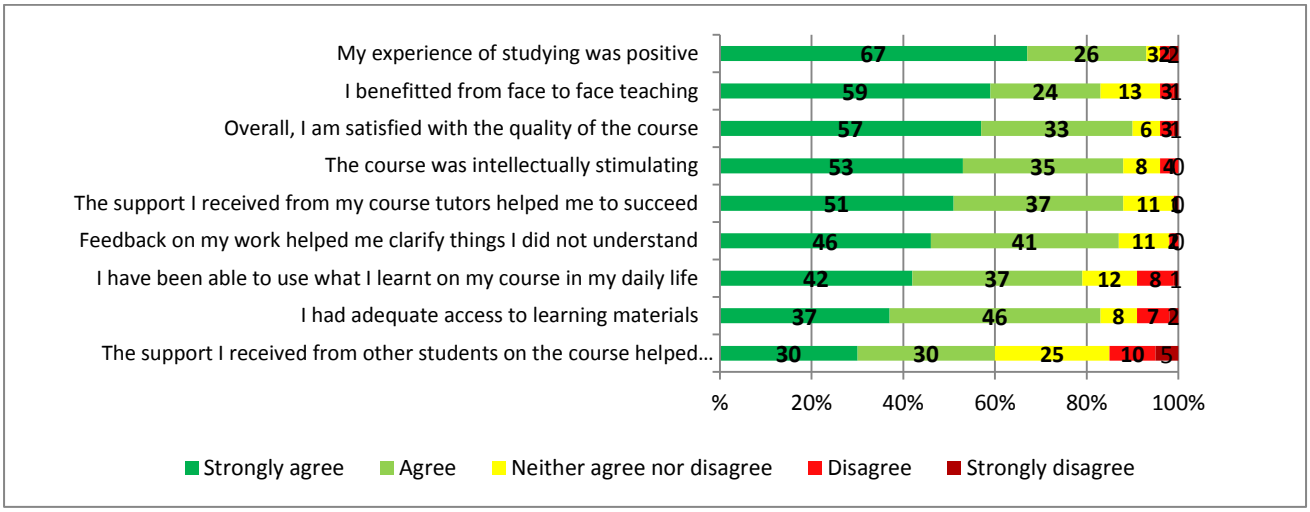
Respondents' evaluation of the learning environment was just as enthusiastic. Over four in five agreed that 'I had adequate access to learning materials' (83%), and especially OU course participants (94% compared with 78%). The lower satisfaction amongst Birkbeck students suggests that the OU are better equipped to work in contexts remote from a main campus resource centre. So the lecturers' concerns about a lack of resources (see section 2.7.2), especially books and articles do not seem to be reflected in the course participants' eyes. Finally, and given the generic nature of the skills developed through the course, four in five respondents agreed with the statement 'I have been able to use what I learnt on my course in my daily life.'

The only question in this survey which mirrored exactly any of those asked in the National Student Survey (NSS) is 'overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course'. According to the results of the 2012 NSS for part-time students in England, 88% were satisfied,[157] slightly fewer than the 90% recorded in our survey, suggesting that the Birkbeck and OU courses were on a par with national quality thresholds.

Would recommend to others	92.9%
Met expectations	91%
Enjoyed this course	94.2%

[157] HEFCE (nd) *2011 National Student Survey summary data* http://www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/lt/publicinfo/nationalstudentsurvey/nationalstudentsurveydata/2011/ Accessed 18/07/2012

Figure 3.3 Course participants' views of their course



Base: All respondents (N=108)
Source: Survey of course participants, 2012

Again the staff at the Children's Centres were also an important source of support for the students.

> We do what we can to support them. Sometimes they come in as a group and go, 'oh we've got to do a presentation next week' and I'm saying. 'AND?' and they're going (in scared tones) 'Oh we've got to do a presentation' and I'm, 'Who are you doing it to?' They were like, 'Well to each other' and I was, 'Are any of you going to be horrible to each other about your presentations?' ... 'Well of course not!' ... .'So it's a really supportive environment and if you mess up then you mess up, it's not going to be a problem'. (MBK6)

> It (the course) can be quite stressful, deadlines and submitting the work. It was funny, whenever there was a piece of coursework to be submitted attendance drops a bit and I think between all of us we keep them on track. We ring them up or we see them ... 'Come back next week' 'Oh I haven't finished my work'. 'Oh just come back, don't worry so much'. You have to be very reassuring and it brings back all that school behaviour ... comes out again and it's, 'Oh I haven't done it'. So I think for some people it is another thing in their lives that can add some stress. (MBK5)

The above quote highlights how the course aims and pedagogic practices of the course acknowledge that learning is an emotional as well as an intellectual activity. Thus, critical reflection on learning experiences in the past provide a pedagogic 'space' to acknowledge this and start to shift the factors that may be underpinning the women's lack of confidence.

3.8 Retention

This section examines whether students completed the modules they had started, and whether Birkbeck students gained the qualification they were working towards.[158] Retention has become an issue of huge concern to higher education institutions, especially with regard to part-time and non-traditional students such as those on the Birkbeck and Open University programmes.[159] Only 40% of

[158] It will be recalled that for OU students, there is no qualification attached to Openings courses.
[159] Callender, C, Wilkinson D, and Mackinon, K. (2006*) Part-time students and part-time study in higher education in the UK: a survey of students' attitudes and experiences of part-time study and its costs*, London: Universities UK and Guild HE; King, C (2008) *A report on part-time study in higher education*, London: Department of Business, Innovation and Skills

students commencing first degree programmes at UK HEIs (other than the Open University) at 30 per cent or higher intensities of study go on to complete that programme within seven academic years.[160] Yet, retention rates are one measure of the success of a course. And this was recognised by the lecturers and programme directors as well as the Children's Centre Staff.

As one Children's Centre manager said in relation to what makes the course a success from the mother's perspective:

> Well the obvious answer would be 'achievement', so that ... how many people start and how many people finished? Given that there are lots of reasons why people don't complete but I always think ... enough people completed ... because ... so that kind of thing is quite an obvious one. ….. Well I just see their pleasure ... just seen their pleasure ... the buzz when I hear them coming out of the session and I'm often around and hearing that buzz and in the kitchen and talking to them and, 'How's it going?' That's how I see it and it is maybe a little bit dramatic to say they walk differently but you can almost say that. (MBK5)

Students' learning and teaching plays a central role in the retention of students from under-represented groups.[161] Furthermore, part-time and mature students are affected by a range of issues as part of their overall learning career responsibilities[162] including their past educational experiences; identities as 'learners' or 'non-learners';[163] and their home and work responsibilities which may affect their ability to complete their course. As we have seen (section 3.7), one of the biggest challenges facing the student we surveyed was juggling their studies with the rest of their lives – a finding echoed in Moreau and Kerner[164] study of student parents. Some students may 'stop out' rather than 'drop out', taking a break from their studies and then returning (or intending to return) to study.[165]

Exploring retention is a complex issue, especially regarding questions of non-completion - 'students leave as a result of a combination of inter-related factors' [166] All students, but especially mature and part-time students, bring a complex mix of factors into HEIs. Existing research suggests that students' choices to stay or not, are shaped by material, structural and cultural realities and identities embedded in gender, social class, 'race' and ethnicity;[167] life experiences and issues of confidence;[168] and discourses and practices of the academy, including pedagogic approaches adopted for learning, teaching and assessment.[169] For example the NUS study of student parents found that difficulties with course organisation, finances and a lack of support and information make student parents a high-risk group in terms of retention.[170]

3.8.1 Completion and non-completion of module

Data from Birbkeck's student records but not the OU's[171] shown in Table 3.2, compare the module results of HEIS students who began their studies at Children's Centres with HEIS students studying at

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[160] HEFCE (2009) *Part-time first degree stud: Entry and completion*: issues paper 2009/18, Bristol: HEFCE

[161] Yorke, M (2008), 'Is the first year experience different for disadvantaged students?' in Ferrier, F and Heagney, M (eds), *Higher Education in Diverse Communities: Global Perspectives Local Initiatives*, Dublin, Higher Education Authority, pp.113-12

[162] Callender, C., Hopkin, R., and Wilkinson D. (2010) *Futuretrack: part-time students career decision-making and career development of part-time higher education students* Manchester: HECSU. 132 pp

[163] Burke and Jackson, (2007) op cit

[164] Moreau and Kerner (2012) *op cit*

[165] Thomas, L and Quinn, J (2006) *First Generation Entrants in Higher Education: An international analysis*, Maidenhead: Society for Research in Higher Education and Open University Press

[166] Crossling and Thomas, 2009 *op cit* p.10

[167] Burke and Jackson, (2007) *op cit*

[168] Quinn, J., Thomas, L., Slack, K., Casey, L., Thexton, W. and Noble, J. (2005) *From Life Crisis to Lifelong Learning. rethinking working class 'drop out' from higher education* York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation

[169] Jackson, 2004), *op cit* Crosling and Thomas, 2009). *op cit*

[170] NUS (2009) Meet the parents- op cit

[171] The equivalent data from the OU were not available.

the main Birkbeck campuses in Bloomsbury and Stratford. It excludes students who enrolled in 2011/12 as students were not expected to have completed modules at this point. Some results remain outstanding as students who enrolled in 2010/11 and took modules over two years were not expected to have completed their recent modules at this point. Table 3.2 shows that course participants who began studying at the Children's Centres deferred less, failed less, and passed more. This is counter-intuitive, as many of the Children's Centre participants were undoubtedly facing difficult personal circumstances and had lower entry qualifications than their peers at Bloomsbury and Stratford campuses (Appendix 1), so the higher rates of failure or deferral might be expected.

We speculate that this might be explained by the extremely careful recruitment to the HEIS programme at the Children's Centres, where the course team avoided formally enrolling participants until up to two weeks into the course, when they were more confident that participants would be able to commit to the course in order to avoid a demoralising experience of failure or withdrawal. As noted above, many participants were themselves not ready to commit to attending the course until very near the start date, as they needed to assess the viability of an additional commitment alongside other factors impinging on their lives. Hence the opportunity which the course team had to enrol participants formally after the official start date proved beneficial from both the participants' and the HEI's perspective. However, this is a very large sample size, with data from four-year cohorts, and a 13% increase in pass rates, so it appears both a robust finding and a substantial effect.

Table 3.2 Birkbeck - Module Results for Children's Centre and other HEIS cohorts

	HEIS Children's Centres		**HEIS Birkbeck /Stratford Campus**	
Module Result	No	%	No	%
Outstanding results	44	10.5	391	10.8
Passed	331	79.0	2403	66.1
Failed	42	10.0	802	22.1
Deferred	2	0.5	37	1.0
N	419	100	3633	100

Source: Birkbeck Student records 2007-2010/11

In addition to the completion data gained from student records, the survey of course participants also collected data on whether respondents had completed the modules they had taken at, or through, the Children's Centre. Respondents who were not currently studying at a Children's Centre were asked whether they had completed the modules (Table 3.3). Only 80 of the 101 course participants who had taken a module and who were not still studying, answered this question. Overall, three quarters of these course participants had completed their modules.

The number of OU course participants responding is very small, so the following findings should be treated with caution. However, a significantly higher proportion of Birkbeck than OU course participants completed their modules (Table 3.3). There were no significant variations in Birkbeck and OU course participants ' levels of entry qualifications, so these different completion rates cannot be explained by differences in entry qualifications which is a key factor highlighted in other research on non-completion.[172] However, other OU findings show that those who make no financial

[172] National Audit Office (2007) *Staying the course: The retention of students in higher education* Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, HC 616 Session 2006-2007

contribution are less likely to complete than those who do. Also, OU data for completion and achievement for Openings as a whole in 2010/11 give a slightly better picture.[173]

Non-completion may, however, be associated with the recruitment process at the two higher education institutions and the way in which the courses were delivered and students supported, as discussed above. It should also be noted that completion and achievement of Openings was not a pre-requisite for students to register on other Level 1 modules in future, although it is the case now for anyone in receipt of National Scholarship Programme funding.

Table 3.3 Completed modules studied

Completed modules	Birkbeck		Open University		All	
	%	N	%	N	%	N
Yes	87	46	56	15	76	61
No	13	7	44	12	24	19
All	100	53	100	27	100	80

Base: All respondents (N=80)
Source: Survey of course participants, 2012

The support that course participants received appeared to be a critical factor in staying with their programme of study, support from staff, support from peers and support from their children and families. However, there was also a determination to pursue their original goals in commencing their studies. Course participants also seem to have found their studies supportive and sustaining in the face of adversity, rather than simply an additional burden or demand on their time. Again this relates to the support they received, but is also due to the fact that course participants found it deeply rewarding, gaining a sense of self-worth, which seems to have led to remarkable persistence.

> Well, I'd enrolled for these courses and then [youngest child's name redacted] was only nine months old and his Dad left and he caused a lot of problems and he was really horrible. Everyone said, 'Why are you still going on the course? Haven't you got enough on your plate?' And I did think about not bothering but I'm so glad I did it, you know, it really, really helped, a lot. So the whole thing of having something to do, having somewhere to go, and feeling like you're achieving something and then socialising as well, it was invaluable really, especially at that time. (BBK4)

> I still have problems but I'm not going to give it up because I love it, love the people, and also it's something for me, and also when my children get older, if I have a Degree and some education then that becomes my life, I can go back out into the workforce. If it wasn't for the OU all I would have had would be bringing up children, with no education. And when they got older, where would I be? (OU4/5)

[173] End of module surveys of all OU Openings students in 2010/11

	2010/11
Registered	18316
Completed	11624
% Completed	63.5%
Pass	10696
% Pass	58.4%

Support from tutors

The majority of the Birkbeck participants interviewed in depth about their experience were extremely positive about the support they received from their first HEIS tutor. Many had been out of education for a long time and lacking confidence, they described their tutor support as central to their continuation and success on the programme. The HEIS programme leader carefully selected tutors for the first 'Introduction to Higher Education' module for their ability to be understanding and supportive, and this seems to have been effective.

> Because most of us hadn't studied for so long, we almost thought we were too thick to do it, you know, [laughter], so she [tutor] just gave us lots of confidence and support, making us feel that we're learning from scratch, 'So don't worry', you know, going back to basics kind of thing. (BBK11)

> I remember the first teacher, I wish I remembered her name…[...] She was *fantastic*, really, It was just a *nice* place to be, a positive atmosphere, all the group was lovely and it just gave you time to chat about your studies and help each other and do a bit of team-building exercises and yes, it was a really nice atmosphere and positive experience, it was good. (BBK11)

> The tutor was good, she was very encouraging because she knew that we are mature students and we have been out of education for a while, and she encouraged us a lot, she was the reason I went in every day because every Monday she… She was cool about everything and you were looking forward to it, she encouraged our assignments, and I enjoyed her teaching as well. (BBK15)

> Even the lady that worked at the centre, they were all fantastic, the tutors and everybody were really supportive, helpful, I couldn't have wished for a better setting really. And that was one of the reasons, maybe that was one of the reasons I stayed as well because everything was in place and I didn't feel that I couldn't go and ask my tutor anything, I didn't feel that I couldn't ask one of my colleagues anything, I felt that at any time I was struggling or felt that things were getting a bit, you know, I could actually go and speak to someone, and that was a big bonus, yes. (BBK16)

However, the successful support for participants from their first tutor was sometimes contrasted with subsequent tutors for subject specific modules.

> The teacher wasn't as good as the first teacher. [...] well not only me, but with the whole class, we didn't find her very helpful or as understanding as our first module. [...] about three left. But I really wanted to… I wasn't there because of the teacher, I was there for me, I wanted to do it so I encouraged myself and where I didn't understand I had to go and do it myself. (BBK15)

Similarly BBK4 describes the difficulty she experienced in transferring from modules at the children's centre to the main campus of Birkbeck.

> And the teachers were really nice and helpful, that helped a lot. Even when you thought things were really difficult, they would help you. [...] being at Birkbeck now, it's very different to how we were there [in the children's centre]. Even though it was Birkbeck teachers, they just understood and they were good enough to adapt to a different scenario and different people, because it's very hard at Birkbeck, it's completely different. At [Children's Centre name redacted] it was more at a slower pace and making sure we understood everything before we moved on; I don't know, it's just different. (BBK4)

Another theme from the participants' accounts of their experience was the practical support offered by

Birkbeck, particularly for students with disabilities, some of whose specific learning difficulties were diagnosed for the first time during their HEIS studies. Support with the childcare in the Children's Centre was mentioned, but BBK15 also highlighted tutor support in asking Children's Centre staff not to ask parents to leave class to comfort children. Support through the £200 Student Finance Grant for books and the provision of Study Skills support were also cited as examples of the practical support Birkbeck offered.

> They were outstanding! I've never seen anything like that, never seen a college or office, in particular the Disability Office, so supportive and friendly, and mature student friendly, they talked to me in confidence because it's something I don't disclose to people. (BBK6)

> I got good support because even when I was complaining about my grammar, I told them that I need support in my spellings, my grammars, you know I want to improve it. I spoke to the tutor and she said that there is a provision for it, at Stratford. I was so glad during that period that I will attend it. (BBK7)

> I have dyspraxia and dyslexia and writing was never my forte and it's something I never wanted to face but I have. [...] Birkbeck are brilliant. They are very good. If I get confused in the library finding books, I get someone to help, I give them the list of books I want and they can find them for me and put them on the side for me. I got the laptop, which was installed with software for spellchecking and all that, for dyslexia, and I have a dyslexia tutor I meet whenever I want; I have to make an appointment with her, the Birkbeck Disability Office. (BBK20)

Three Birkbeck students did not report that tutors had been supportive, and all had experienced personal difficulties and failed to complete their programme of study. BBK13 did wonder if the subsequent tutor had been as supportive as her first tutor, if she would have managed to stay on the programme, suggesting the critical role that supportive tutors play for at least some participants.

> Nobody ever tried to find out what's the problem, why I never completed it, would I like to continue it. (BBK8)

> I think the person that was teaching us then was not particularly helpful in terms of finding out personal circumstances surrounding my absence or my situation, why I'm not doing some of my work and all that. So that really was discouraging. [...] So I just decided to pull out, even with the fact that I'd paid some money. [...]. The person teaching us then, like I said, was not really approachable for me to explain my situation, like, 'Look, the baby is going to come out very soon, I don't think I can go on; what can I do?' (BBK9)

> I can remember one particular morning and I think that really cheesed off a lot of people that morning; the tutor was late, we agree, buses, traffic and all of that, you can be a bit late but when she comes in and the attitude that she's got that morning, it cheesed us off and a lot of people stormed out the class and got upset and all that because she came in late and she didn't apologise, she was just, 'Oh, what are you sitting there talking about!? You should be doing your work!'! (BBK13)

The OU model of supporting students on Openings is different as it is distance learning with enhanced support via the Children's Centre. All OU students have the access to the full range of student services offered by the OU to distance learners, and those who had used them had nothing but praise for them. All Openings students have a subject tutor with whom they are in contact by phone and email, and five face-to-face study skills sessions. But the Children's Centre also offered a weekly place to study with a member of OU staff on hand to support participants face-to-face. The study skills sessions seem to have been incredibly useful to all participants; some of those who have progressed report that they still use the materials regularly. As with the Birkbeck participants, the qualities of the individual

staff supporting participants seem to have been crucial in encouraging them and building their confidence to enable successful completion.

> And as I said earlier on, there's always support there, I did have computer problems and it's a phone call away and it got sorted within an hour so that was nice, you know. (OU3)

> Even there was a time where I had problems, I actually phoned the OU and they helped me over the phone. Their student support… They've got computer, how to get student finance, even… They are just so good! They will help you through everything, and everyone at the OU, they're never busy, they will always have time for you and they always feel like, when you ring them up, 'No it's not a problem, don't be silly. There are loads of people who don't understand this' and that gives me more confidence, because sometimes you think, 'Oh is it just me? Am I silly?' and they don't make you feel that way and they are always so pleasant. 'How can I help you? Oh sorry, I don't know that but I promise you I'll speak to someone and get them to ring you back…' (OU4/5)

> About the tutor experience, when I was studying my Openings module, my tutor was fabulous and unfortunately she was unable to be there when I did my final assignment; she broke her ankle. But she was so supportive and said to me, 'I've got you another tutor to deal with while you do your final assignment' and I didn't need to access that, but she was so good, phoning me up, and when I was totally lost at one point she was like, 'No, you can do it, let's discuss the notes you've made' and it was so nice to have someone at the other end of the line who made plans to phone me every other week or whatever, just to talk through things with me and I was really lucky that I managed to get a Distinction on my Openings modules, and I credit that to her because she was the one who put in all the hours phoning me and things, and listening to me going, 'Oh I can't do this…' (*Mocks sobbing*), 'It's all on Post-It notes everywhere!' I find that in general the tutors have been fabulous, even not just, well, for the other modules as well. (OU4/5)

> Once a month you have a tutor come in to point you to do actual study skills, then the rest of the week you have a tutor or someone there who actually runs a study session where you can all go in and talk about how you're studying and different ways that people are studying differently to you, and you think, 'Hold on a minute; that might work! I'm going to try it that way.' (OU6)

Support from peers

In addition to family support and tutor support, the support of peers on the programmes came through strongly as a factor in retention. From the 30 in depth interviews the extensive use of group work in class was reported as extremely helpful and supportive. The group work seems to be particularly beneficial in helping participants understand different points of view on an issue, offering companionship to feel that they are not alone struggling with the challenges of studying and interaction to help understanding difficult concepts.

> It was just, I think because at work I have a different set of people that are at work, doing their job and going home, but I was with people that wanted to learn and wanted to get something out of it, wanted to better themselves, and there was also a support network as well, each one supported the other one, we were all in the same boat and it was nice to be around people that knew your flaws and weaknesses and strengths and they pulled on your strengths and weaknesses, which I felt was a nice little network, so that helped in itself. (BBK16)

Only one participant expressed any reservations in relation to group work or collaborative study, and

this was in relation to struggling student whose needs she felt had unbalanced the class work.

> We did, and it was nice socialising, but also, being where it was and having the free child care and stuff, it was open to anybody, so we were a mix of people on different levels. Sometimes it was frustrating and difficult. There was one lady, bless her, she was really nice but I don't think she was ready to be there. That's the point of the 'Introductory Studies', but she got through that – I don't know how – and, you know, I know the teachers are there to help us but she would get a lot of help and a lot of leeway and her essays were always late and she was never on time; I just thought it was unfair, because we're adults now and we've gone to do something at a certain level and if you're not ready, then maybe you need to start somewhere else. So for the other people, it was frustrating, I think. (BBK4)

However, the peer support through group work was so valued that many participants went beyond group work in class and formed groups to study together outside the Children's Centre timetabled classes. Several also reported forming friendships with other participants that had outlasted the completion of their modules.

> It's like one I'm not the only one going through that thing, and some of them, it motivates. So there are people like myself out there, 'Oh that's good!' so sometimes we went beyond what we went there to learn about maybe mothers' issues, children's issues, we will share that experience together in our private time. [...] Well if we have got any assignments to do, we call on each other and say, 'How are you getting on? Have you had a look? How far have you got? Do you understand it better? This is my view? This is what I thought' and we shared our opinions and experience. (BBK2)

> I think it helped all of us because we could ask each other bits that maybe we were stuck in and to see their point of view of it kind of helped us quite a lot with our work I think; having someone to work with, like in your own surroundings, is quite different to working in a classroom as such.' (BBK12)

> And one of my other friends, who's also in the same position as me, she's been a mum for quite a few years and always been thinking… She done her A Levels but then she had her three children and always wanted to go back into study but didn't have the opportunity. So both of us said, 'Do you know what? Let's support each other, let's *both* go and do it', so we both enrolled on it at the same time and that really, really helped, to have someone else to do it with. [...]We had groups that we went to the library together. When we did our Psychology module it was quite hard to get our heads around some of the concepts and ideas, so after each of the sessions we would then go and have another session in the library and just go over our notes and make sure that we all understood it, you know, just exchange ideas together. **(**BBK17)

> I think if I tried to do a course on my own, I'm less likely to do it than if there's someone there sort of with me doing the same thing and encouraging you me to keep going. That was the fun bit about it. (BBK19)

One participant did describe the formation of independent study groups as an attempt to compensate for poor tutoring on later modules, not the initial 'Introduction to HE Studies' module.

> You go into a course because you know it's going to be a challenge, but when things are challenging you expect some kind of support, and I expect they expected that. Because what I found was, a lot of mature students don't want to ask questions, but I'm thinking, well if you don't ask questions, how are you going to learn? And if you're not understanding it well what is the point of even being there? You're not going to enjoy it, you're never going to grasp it, so you have to ask the questions. And I find that she'd do a lecture and then when she's gone they'd be going, 'What did she mean?' and I'm thinking, 'Why didn't you ask here that when

> she was here?' So then we'd all have to sit down and spend an extra half hour discussing it or meet up afterwards and discuss it. (BBK5)

However, in itself this may have created further problems as she said that the issue of plagiarism had been raised in relation to her written work resulting from collaborative study.

> But then, and when I had to write it up they said I plagiarised, which I thought was so stupid. That means if I plagiarised then all my colleagues all my colleagues have plagiarised because we've had this massive learning, a whole group of us. [...]So we all study together just to get through because it was a hard module and the teacher wasn't, she wasn't that good and she really had an issue with pupils. (BBK 5)

While the tension between encouraging collaborative study and assessing individual work is present in many HE programmes, it may be that this needs particular attention when studying academic conventions forms a substantive part of the curriculum for those who are unfamiliar with them, as is the case with the HEIS.

Again the OU distance learning model was slightly different to the BBK provision in that the weekly study group at the children's centre mixed those studying different disciplinary versions of Openings, and later modules, and only one a month would there be a planned workshop on study skills. For the rest of the time the study groups at the children's centre operated more flexibly and responsively, like independent study groups but generally with an OU tutor available. Like the Birkbeck participants, the OU participants experienced this as extremely supportive, an integral part of their learning experience.

> Sometimes it would be just a group of you and if you were all studying the same thing you'd all sit there together and put your own opinions across to each other, which helps because then you get a different perspective on things in your subject. Then other times you would come there'd be certain tutors there able to help you if you weren't that confident with English and Maths and writing, other ones to show you how to do study skills and exercises and stuff like that, so… Even though you wouldn't realize it subconsciously, you would know, you could see a difference in your learning over the time, from when I first started there to when I finished there, I was a lot better, a lot better prepared and more confident to go on and continue to study. (OU2)

> The three of us that are on the Law course are really interested in it and we contact each other outside the study group and talk about it. (OU3)

> When I refer to the OU students, especially in [location redacted], we're like a little family, we know that if one of us is feeling down then the others will be there to pick them up. We've got a little Facebook group now for parents so I can remind them when the study group is and we put things like, 'Good luck on your TMA or EMA' on there, and it's just like, you've got that extra support; your family supports you, friends support you but no one else understands what it's like to study from a distance other than other students who are doing it. (OU4/5)

> Then with the Openings course, because we had the weekly study group in the children's centre, it's two hours every Wednesday and I was getting the college experience, seeing other students, discussing the subject, getting feedback on what I was thinking in the subject. Quite often we'd sit there and I'd mention something that's in my book and Law students would have an opinion, Psychology students would have opinions, because everything somehow interlocks. And the Childcare students would have an opinion and we'd all sit there having a discussion about it, and it was the same if there was anything to do with Law, they'd start a discussion and I'd come in with my Psychological ideas and the Childcare people would say, 'Oh but from the child's point of view…' And so it was quite freeing to have people to study different modules, it gives a different perspective. (OU4/5)

> I remember sometimes, maybe it was too much, you want to give up, but other students will encourage you not to give up or they will help you. (OU8)

From their accounts the element of peer support through planned and independent study groups seems to be an important factor in retention and successful completion.

3.8.2 Award/qualification gained

Data from Birkbeck's students records[174] shown in Table 3.4, examine the proportion of students awarded an HE Certificate. They compare HEIS students who began their studies at Children's Centres with HEIS students studying at the main Birkbeck campuses in Bloomsbury and Stratford. They include students in three cohorts (2007/8, 2008/9, 2009/10) as only these students would have had the opportunity to complete their qualification, which usually takes two years to complete. They show that a greater percentage of the Children's Centre course participants achieved a qualification. This is particularly impressive, given the lower entry qualifications of students studying at the Children's Centres compared with those studying at the Bloomsbury and Stratford campuses (Appendix 1).

Table 3.4 Birkbeck - Qualification Awarded by location of study

	HEIS Children's Centres		**HEIS Bloomsbury /Stratford Campus**	
Awarded qualification	No	%	No	%
Yes	42	48.8	264	32.4
No / Missing	44	51.2	551	67.6
N	86	100	815	100

Source: Birkbeck Student records 2007-2009/10

3.8.3 Programme directors, lecturer and Children's Centre staff's views on non-completion

There was a degree of ambivalence from both the lecturers and the programme directors in discussing retention. The majority of students entered the programmes with low educational qualifications (see Appendix 1) and, whilst there was agreement that these students needed to be supported in their studies, there were differences in the way such support was conceptualised, including whether study skills should be embedded in the course content. As discussed above, there is a need for lecturers to tread carefully between too much 'hand-holding' and a level of support that introduces participants to an intellectual world and academic conventions from which they have previously been excluded. The difference between the Birkbeck and the OU programmes has some bearing: whilst students at Birkbeck were enrolling on a programme of Higher Education Introductory Studies, students with the OU's Community Partnerships Programme were receiving additional study skills support to enable them to progress to further study. As indicated above, however, non-completion did not impact on students being able to register for further study.

[174] There is not qualification attached to Opening courses.

Most lecturers did not state what the retention rates were for their programmes and when they did, the expectation of what was acceptable differed. For example, one lecturer stated that retention was fine, describing how the modules start with 12 and might drop down to five, but that these rates are not unusual for outreach work. A programme director agreed that 'retention is not as high ... in the community settings as it has been on the main ... programme'. Another programme director said that a retention rate of 50% was mainly due to open access and students' resultant lack of motivation, whilst a third programme director noted wider issues of retention for part-time students. However, a lecturer stated that whilst 'in the mainstream programme there's always going to be some loss ... in the Centres everybody's turned up and been retained' (LBK3). This lecturer reiterated that there is 'excellent attendance and retention' and, with all students completing, there were no challenges to retention. These differences largely depend on the module on which the student was enrolled. At Birkbeck, withdrawal, when it occurred, tended to happen in 'Approaches to Study' – the first module of HEIS. Once participants had achieved 30 credits, they were more confident and motivated to achieve the next 30 credits.[175]

Several lecturers noted that there will always be some withdrawal from students due to 'an inevitable combination of factors' (PD), although this was 'rarely individual failure, but circumstances' (L01): 'we do reach people for whom the challenges of life are quite extreme' (PD). These might include family problems, health issues, domestic violence, homelessness and the difficulties of managing complex lives. 'Time is a big factor and organising their time ... a lot of them are single mums ... it isn't easy for them (LOU1). It could be difficult for a tutor to intervene in these circumstances, as 'you don't want to actually push them when they're already possibly being pushed from other sides'. (L01)

One of these pushes is cultural factors, where for some women 'the role of the woman is to support not only the children but also to support the parents and the extended family'. Consequently conflict can emerge for women between their developing identities *as students* who are aiming to improve their individual qualifications and the identities they perform in their local communities. Gender, it has been argued, and its intersections with social class and 'race' is both subjective and structural and about social positioning and everyday practices.[176] Another lecturer, recognising these factors, stated that although the women 'have to cope with a lot':

> I can't recall any kind of external factors that have prevented people from completing (such as) a husband walking out or the mother-in-law refusing to let her continue the course. They don't even let pregnancy stop them. (LBK4)

A further issue leading to retention issues was the women's lack of confidence. Here the lecturers felt more empowered to intervene to keep the student on the programme. Lecturers described giving advice and guidance; encouragement; equipping the students with skills; action planning; and taking a 'gentle approach' (L01) to 'instil with them that they can do it'. (LBK1)

> All they need to do is get their ducks in a row and they can move forward and they're actually very bright but they have to consolidate and organise. (LBK1)

Also important to retaining students was the support (and sometimes pressure) from their peer group, and students' determination to prove to themselves that they could stay the course. Funding issues also impact on retention with a few students leaving as the reality that they have to pay comes into force. As one Children's Centre manager observed peer support helped students meet the challenges they faced.

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[175] On the 'main HEIS programme' during the final two years of this study, a participant could simply enrol on line onto any course with the result that some would ignore guidance to do 'Approaches to study' first and simply enrol on the subject module they fancied. Thus they may have missed out of key elements of the courses designed to help students overcome issues associated with withdrawal and non-completion.

[176] Burke and Jackson,(2007), *op cit*.

> And she has struggled, on and off she has struggled and sometimes she misses lectures but what's been really brilliant is they all take each other copies up, they take notes for each other. [Name of student] has got a Dictaphone cos if ever she has ... Birkbeck sorted that out for her, they're brilliant Birkbeck for her, absolutely brilliant! Because of her epilepsy, if she has fits she can't come in the next day because they're quite bad and they sorted all sorts of things out for her but one is a Dictaphone and one of the others brings it in and just they tape the session, so she's got it afterwards. They have been working for each other; they share books, really, really supportive. So [name of student] with that support has got through it. (MBK6)

It might also be that some of the students recruited onto the courses, just had too steep an educational ladder to climb, in that they were simply not equipped to start their studies at this level, and /or that the focus of the course may have been inappropriate. In fact, there is no evidence to support this from the interviews we conducted with programme directors, lecturers or the students. It was not discussed by lecturers, probably because they wanted their students to succeed and to give them opportunities to do so. At Birkbeck, where there was an element of selectivity in recruitment, unlike the OU Opening courses, the Programme Director had to ensure a balance between openness and admitting those who might fail: a balance all courses aimed at widening participation students have to strike. However, we recognise that this may have been an issue for those women who withdrew from the course – only a handful of whom were interviewed.

3.8.4 Students' reasons for not completing modules

According to data from the course participants survey, around a quarter (n=19) of the course participants who responded to the question on completion (N=80), did not complete the modules they had started at the Children's Centre. These course participants were asked to give their main reasons for deciding to stop studying.

The most frequently cited reason was personal ill health or the ill health of someone close to the course participant, something which was mentioned by well over half of those who did not complete their studies. Other common reasons, mentioned by at least a quarter of respondents, included:

- Personal or domestic problems
- Financial reasons
- Could not juggle studying with the rest of their life

Interestingly none of the women reported having withdrawn from their course because they could not cope with the level of the course, and only two women mentioned that they did not like the course.

The mix of reasons respondents gave for withdrawing are fairly similar to those reported in other studies of full and part-time undergraduates.[177] However, in other studies students are far more likely to report problems with their course and are less likely to report issues around ill health. This is probably because most full-time undergraduates do not have caring responsibilities or multiple responsibilities, unlike the mothers in our study. Nor do they have children, and young children vulnerable to ill health, unlike the mothers in this study.[178]

As one programme director noted:

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[177] Callender, C and Wilkinson, D (2012) *Futuretrack: Part-Time Higher Education Students - the benefits of part-time higher education after three years of study* Manchester: HECSU. pp 93 http://www.hecsu.ac.uk/futuretrack_part_time_students.htm (Accessed 26/11/2012); National Audit Office (2007) *Staying the course: The retention of students in higher education* Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, HC 616 Session 2006-2007

[178] There are not national data available on whether students have children.

> Child ill health for a few weeks made it very difficult for students to pick up the thread even though we sent them learning materials in an attempt to keep them involved. If you miss one morning a week at such an early stage of developing your confidence around learning it is a big deal. So child ill health could easily feed into symptoms of depression often felt by these mothers. (PD)

One Children's Centre manager expanded at length on the multiple caring roles of the students and how this could affect the demands of study, and in turn had led to drop-out. She also emphasised the way in which these women had 'very chaotic lives', making 'time management' an issue. Underpinning this is the extent to which the women can carve out time for themselves to engage in their studies and the extent to which their caring roles take precedence over their student role (MBK4).

> There was one woman who was also caring for her father, who was very ill. Yeah, the sole carer, yeah. so she had a young child. She also had a father who was very ill and very dependent on her to take him to hospital and meet his day-to-day needs and that was impossible for her. She was very reluctant to drop it but she had to. She had no choice really.

> It [the course] was once a week but they still found it very difficult and having to meet targets ...Yes, some of them [parents] found it difficult to complete their assignments. It was really, really difficult. And I think it's because they were not used to a routine or a pattern at all ... it was out of their world …. No I think it was the requirement to come up with the assignments. At a given time and date. Even if they were given more time, they were just not used to it… it's a problem. It's family responsibilities ... their role is seen very much around the domestic area and they may live in very crowded housing, so they don't have time and space to put other things aside, so they can just think about their studying. Overcrowding is a really big deal in Tower Hamlets and then they might live in a house where there is multiple-generations, so they are carers ...And they don't even have ... access to computers and so on ... they can go to the library ... getting up and going to the library is a HUGE challenge for them to actually think about. But that's difficult if you've got a child. (MBK4)

As we have seen (section 2.3.3), staff at the Children's Centres played an important role in helping to recruit students. However, the enthusiasm of some Children's Centre managers in encouraging women to participate in the course could backfire. One manager candidly admitted that she had urged a woman to join the HEIS course when, in fact when she was not ready for it. To avoid withdrawal, it is the student rather than the Children's Centre staff who need to make the decision to join.

> Now she's a very practical person and she sees herself fairly practical and she's very able. She found it (the course) really very difficult ... I think she found it a bit stressful. She did a Maths course and was quite happy with that - and it's exactly for people like (name) in many ways ... It was a big change ... I think she hadn't thought about it enough and we'd kinda said, 'This would be great for YOU'. Myself and the Community Development worker, both ... 'You should do this, this is great for you'. She'd not exactly had the time herself to think, 'Oh I really want to do this'. So I think that was possibly the problem. It didn't come initially from her, it came from us and much as that works for some people it didn't in this case. (MBK5)

The children's centre managers, often alongside the lecturers, frequently tried to give additional support to prevent withdrawal.

Of the 30 participants who were interviewed in depth about their experience there were eight who were expected to complete who had not, and looking at their cases holistically confirms the reasons cited in the survey and illustrates the scale and severity of the ill health, and personal and domestic problems experienced by participants who did not complete. Difficulties arising from the disability of a child, combined with other caring responsibilities is a factor in many cases. Those who had not completed did not necessarily experience this as a failure, but as a prioritisation of their caring

responsibilities over studying at a particular moment. They stressed how much they had gained from their studies, and often expressed an ambition to return to study in better times. In the case of BBK14, studying with HEIS inspired her to seek a career in social work, and while her success in this prevented her completion of HEIS it is difficult to interpret this as a failure in any sense. BBK14 was on schedule to complete her degree in social work and said she would never have embarked on it without the experience and confidence gained from HEIS.

The following vignettes of women's experiences give some flavour of the issues they faced and place these within the context of their backgrounds.

Birkbeck Completed secondary education in Africa and arrived in the UK with her husband and two children. When she enrolled on HEIS in she was working as a beautician with two pre-school children, and she was pregnant with her third child. She successfully completed two modules of HEIS but failed the third. She was not entitled to any financial support because of her immigration status, and her husband was unable to pay the Birkbeck fees so she was forced to withdraw and the family moved house, away from the Children's Centre. She subsequently took a Level 3 Diploma in childcare and hopes to run her own childcare centre one day.

Birkbeck Originally from the West Indies she moved to the UK in her teens and took GCSEs but only passed one in English with a C grade. She then took a one year childcare qualification and worked as a carer for several years and she moved to London with another caring job. A serious injury has prevented her working for the last six to seven years, and she has suffered from depression since. When she started the HEIS programme in she was a single parent with a pre-school child.. She had handed in work for the first module but she received a letter from Birkbeck saying she could not complete it as she missed too many classes when her child was sick, requiring surgery. She still hopes to go into nursing.

Birkbeck Completed her education until 17 in West Indies, came to the UK and worked full-time, studied to gain a Level 3 care qualification and worked full time as a care home manager for many years. She is married with two children. After her second maternity leave she was forced to work three out of four weekends, she had great difficulty finding childcare at weekends. Her eldest child was admitted to hospital with a serious injury sustained while she was at work one weekend as a consequence of the child's disability. She felt she was forced to stop work when her flexible working request was refused. She enrolled on the HEIS programme with the ambition to become a nurse and she was exempt from fees, as she was not working. She completed the first module but did not complete the second, describing her tutor as unsupportive. She was simultaneously studying to achieve Level 2 Maths and English, which she achieved. She now hopes to become a teacher as she recognises nursing would also require shift work with consequent problems of childcare. She was completing a course to qualify as a teaching assistant at the time of the interview, which she hoped would be more compatible with her caring responsibilities.

Birkbeck She was educated and employed in full-time work in Europe before moving to the UK. She got married and had two children and became a full-time childminder. At the time of enrolment on HEIS in both her children were secondary school age, which prompted a reconsideration of her career options. She was exempt from fees and successfully completed two modules, but she found a new job in social work as an assistant which prevented her completion of the HEIS course. As a consequence she decided to start an OU degree in Social Work. She was due to complete her degree at the end of the year and had been told by her current employer that

she would be considered for a fully qualified social worker position when an opening arose.

Birkbeck She is working as a registered child-minder and has an NVQ Level 3 in Childcare. She is a single parent of five children, but only the youngest is under 18. She enrolled on HEIS and successfully completed three modules but needed to complete one more on a Birkbeck campus rather than the Children's Centre. She had no access to books or a computer at home or the Children's Centre. She was in receipt of a fee waiver due to low income, but was confused and distressed by fees demands. She would like to start a degree in Early Years and Childhood Studies, but if she is unable to obtain a place with her current qualifications she would like to complete the HEIS course, if the fees issue could be resolved.

Birkbeck She had left school with no GCSEs A-C and worked as a nursery nurse before getting married and having two children. Her eldest child is severely disabled and she is his full-time carer. She enrolled in HEIS as her youngest child started preschool. She successfully completed the first two modules and two half modules, but while studying the final module her father was diagnosed with a terminal illness and she did not submit a final assignment. Her caring responsibilities are so demanding that she feels she may not be able to return to work or study until her eldest child is old enough to enter residential care.

Open University She worked full time, and continued to do so after the birth of her first child. After the birth of her second child who is a severely disabled child requiring 24-hour care from a team of carers she has been unable work. She is now a single parent. She started an Openings and undertook some assignments, but after her youngest child was hospitalised for a prolonged period she could not keep up her studies while caring for her eldest child and visiting her youngest in hospital. She feels that she is unemployable because of her age, her lack of economic activity for four years of caring, and the reality that her disabled child may fall dangerously ill at any time and take weeks to recover, which would require her to take unpredictable and extended periods off work. Therefore she thinks that self-employment may be the only way for her to work, which she desperately wants to do.

What is clear from these vignettes is that the ill health and disability of a child was a major factor contributing to non-completion. For those with a disabled child, what may have been a minor illness for a non-disabled child, often was a major issue for a disabled child. And many of these women were also lone parents who had to take all the burden of caring for their children.

3.9 Summary of key findings

- Birkbeck students were taught face to face, and generally had one three hour session per week over the academic year. They were aiming for a 120 credit point Certificate of Higher Education (HE Cert), usually consisting of four modules worth 30 credits each. By the time this study was undertaken, most Birkbeck students surveyed were only able to undertake two modules at the Children’s Centre. If they wanted the full qualification they had to transfer to Birkbeck’s Bloomsbury or Stratford campus. Most often Birkbeck students surveyed took two or four modules.

- In contrast, Open University students’ 15 credit Openings course was ‘distance’ learning, all materials were provided to the student in advance and they could study at their own pace.

Students were given telephone support from a module tutor for the duration of their module. In addition, they were offered five study skills sessions and weekly peer and tutor support sessions at the Children's Centre. The majority of OU students surveyed (88%) had taken just one module.

- The teaching staff and their commitment to these types of programmes and students were important for their success.

- The inclusive pedagogic approaches to learning and teaching adopted by both the Birkbeck and Open University courses, sought to: enable learners to reflect on and move forward from what may have been less-than-positive previous educational experiences; help them re-engage with the learning process; and encourage and enable them to use their personal experience and those of others in theoretical and analytical ways. The approaches were characterised as critically reflective and inquiry-led active learning, which drew on social constructivist, critical and feminist ideas about the learning process which were considered essential for widening participation and for creating inclusive learning opportunities.

- On both programmes assessments were viewed as developmental and principally *for* students' learning rather than simply as a teacher's test *of* students' learning.

- Lecturers found the students challenging to teach as the students sometimes struggled with the course, especially in relation to academic literacy and the importance of critical thinking. This was primarily because of the level and nature of their educational backgrounds. Central to the teaching was building the course participants' confidence and competence in using academic communication conventions, particularly in their academic writing.

- The biggest challenges reported by the vast majority (87%) of course participants surveyed, especially lone parents, was juggling their studies with their the rest of their life because they were busy at home (75%) and had inadequate support at home (50%). Participants interviewed in-depth, also talked about the challenges of learning how to study and learning about what was expected of them.

- The vast majority of course participants surveyed reported that they had had very positive teaching and learning experiences particularly in terms of the quality of their course, and the learning support and feedback they received from staff.

- Eighty-seven per cent of the Birkbeck course participants surveyed completed the module they started at the Children's Centre compared with 56% of OU students. The number of OU students surveyed is small, so this proportion should be treated with caution but the OU's completion rate is broadly in line with other studies conducted by the OU.

- Significantly, data from Birkbeck's student records show that HEIS students studying at the Children's Centres were more likely than their peers studying at the main Birkbeck campuses to pass their modules and less often failed and deferred their studies. They were also more likely to gain their HE Cert qualification. This is considerable achievement given that the students at the Children's Centre had lower entry qualifications than their peers studying at the main Birkbeck campuses. The differences are probably related to first, the additional levels of support they received, and secondly to the careful recruitment process to the course run at the Children's Centres, whereas other comparable HEIS modules adopted an open enrolment policy.

- The main reasons students did not complete their course were associated with personal and domestic problems and especially their ill health or health problems with a family member, particularly for those with a disabled child and who were lone parents.

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3.10 Recommendations and implications for policy and practice

- Staff teaching on these types of programmes need to be fully committed to teaching non-tradition students who have been away from learning for some time and have low level entry qualifications, as they are likely to encounter considerable challenges teaching such students.

- Teaching staff on these courses need to be very carefully selected and nurtured, and given ample staff development opportunities.

- The inclusive pedagogic approaches used in such courses are an important ingredient to their success and informed the overall aims of the modules and their design.

- Any pedagogic approach adopted, needs to recognise that learning is an emotional as well as an intellectual activity (and has other dimensions too). This is particularly important for students for whom previous formal education may have been a negative experience and for whom owning the identity of 'student' may be complex. Amongst the many challenges in teaching these courses, there is a need to balance the provision of sufficient levels of support and guidance with the need to facilitate students to become independent learners by providing learning opportunities which 'scaffold' their learning to a stage when the support they require can be removed and they function independently.

- The challenges that course participants faced in terms of juggling their studies with the rest of their lives suggests the importance of integrating the development and discussion of time-management skills within the course. Furthermore, the idea that the women 'deserve' time for themselves to study is particularly relevant to these students, since they are faced with multiple conflicting demands on their time and emotional energy from their families and others.

- The study skills challenges encountered by the course participants, point to the importance of integrating study skills into the fabric of the course and its design from its inception. However, it is also important to acknowledge that this is a process during which students have to find out what works for them.

- At the outset of the course, participants need to be given as much information as possible about the time commitment required, especially on independent study and assignments, to counter the findings that the majority of course participants found their course more time consuming than anticipated.

- The need for students to build their competences and confidence in academic communication conventions, especially in their writing, point to the importance of introducing students to these conventions and giving them opportunities to practise them within their course so that they become academically literate.

- The curriculum design needs to help participants overcome any negative, demoralising, learning experiences while at school, by providing opportunities for them to reflect critically on these experiences.

- There is a certain inevitability to some withdrawal and non-completion for these courses, given the highly complicated and sometimes chaotic nature of the women's lives. However, support from other course participants, as well as the teaching and Children's Centre staff can help participants to complete.

- A significant source of support and help in learning how to study can come from other students on the course. Such peer support can be nurtured through the curriculum, for instance via group working.

- The higher retention and success rates of Birkbeck's HEIs students taking courses run at the Children's Centre compared with OU students, highlights the importance of an element of selectivity in the recruitment process.

- Giving potential participants the option of taking a few classes for a couple of weeks, before they make the commitment of formally enrol in the course is a fruitful strategy that can give potential participants some time to develop a student identity, and improve completion rates. However, for many HEIs this may lead to administrative challenges and potential problems for students, especially with the increasing use of VLE to communicate with students. In many HEIs, students are not allowed access to the library or the VLE system until they have formally registered at their HEI.

- There was no evidence that the Birkbeck HEIS course were beyond the ability of the students recruited, although this may have contributed to the withdrawal of students not captured in this study. This raises broader issues about the educational level at which courses at the Children's Centre were pitched, or should be pitched, in the future. The OU's Opening courses run at the Children's Centres were foundation or Level 1 courses. They provided a stepping-stone onto to higher level undergraduate courses. At Birkbeck, the HEIS HE Cert courses were designed as a stepping-stone to a First Degree, and not as an Access Course. The recent funding student changes may provide an opportunity to reconsider the level of provision in Children's Centres.

4 WIDENING PARTICIPATION: THE OUTCOMES AND IMPACT OF THE COURSES

4.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the outcomes and impact of the Birkbeck and OU courses on the women, their children and families, calling on all elements of the fieldwork, including the survey of the course participants, to provide differing perspectives on the perceived impact. It first discusses progression and whether the course participants who had finished studying engaged in further study after completing the modules they had taken at the Children's Centre. Next, it explores the learning outcomes for the course participants and the wider benefits of learning experienced by them. In addition, the chapter discusses the impact of the women's courses on their children and especially, their educational aspiration for their children. Given this focus, it is the women's perspectives that drive this chapter, although findings from the interviews with programme directors, lecturers, and Children's Centre staff are also included.

4.2 Progression

A key aim of the Birkbeck and OU programmes is to enable students to develop the skills and confidence necessary to progress onto degree programmes or further study. At Birkbeck, activities to support students' progression expanded during the period covered by this research in response to lower than anticipated levels of progression to either Birkbeck or to other undergraduate programmes. The decision to limit the availability of credits in some locations and develop the culture of a one year as opposed to two year cycle in the Children's Centres has already been described. However other activities became integrated into the annual cycle of provision:

- invitation to attend progression evenings at Birkbeck, Central London
- scheduled talk in the Children's Centres by the HEIS Progression Tutor and subsequent group discussion
- availability of one to one telephone guidance sessions with the Progression tutor
- access to progression area of the Virtual Learning Environment where information about subsequent learning opportunities was posted regularly.

During the period covered by this study, progression opportunities at Birkbeck developed considerably as a result of institutional re-organisation and the launch of some degree programmes that aligned well with the multi/interdisciplinary ethos of HEIS. For many students who successfully completed the Certificate of Higher Education, there were opportunities to progress to second year (equiv.) study on degrees in Social Sciences, Business and Arts and Humanities. However, for the latter two degrees, progression agreements were still in the early stages of implementation at the start of the academic year 2011/12.

At the OU, guidance on progression is provided by the module tutor who will use some of the tutorial time to discuss next steps with their students. All students who complete their Openings module receive a letter advising them on options and encouraging them to contact the OU for further information advice and guidance and to look at the web sites and other material. This is in addition to the standard progression information all registered OU students receive by letter, email or telephone.

Within the Children's Centre scheme, a progression session is held after the module end, which comprises both group and one-to-one interaction. Some of the students progress onto NVQ L2 courses, some into volunteering and others may take some time out before progressing to the next OU module.

Despite these concerns, neither Birkbeck nor the OU were able to provide us with comprehensive data from their student records about the number of HEIS and Openings students[179] at Children's Centres progressing onto further study since 2007.[180] Instead, we have had to rely on data collected in the student survey.

4.2.1 The number of course participants surveyed progressing on to further study

All the course participants surveyed who were no longer studying (n=78) were asked if they had taken another course at a college or university after they had finished studying at the Children's Centre. (Note that for Birkbeck students this could include completing their HE Cert at the main Birkbeck campus.) A minority, some 39% had progressed to another course.[181] Unsurprisingly, those who had completed their modules at the Children's Centres were significantly more likely to progress to another course.

Of those taking a further course after finishing their Birkbeck and OU courses at the Children's Centre, the vast majority had taken the new course as a direct result of their earlier course at the Children's Centre. A half were taking these new courses at other HEIs, rather than at Birkbeck or the OU, and were most often aiming for a Bachelor's degree.

In addition, all course participants surveyed, irrespective of whether they had finished studying at the Children's Centre were asked if they planned to take another course or qualification in the next three years. Well over three-quarters (77%) intended to take another course, especially those currently studying, and those with household incomes of £10,000 or under. A further one in five had not yet decided. So clearly the HEIS and Openings courses had whetted the students' appetite for further study in the longer term.

4.2.2 Programme directors' and lecturers' view on progression

Programme Directors talked about the way in which the HEIS and Openings modules aimed to enhance progression by enabling students to develop the skills and confidence necessary to progress onto degree programmes. Lecturers were not always sure about numbers progressing onto degree programmes. However, they would not necessarily know when students make a decision to progress. One Birkbeck lecturer indicated that she believed a good number do progress onto degrees, evidenced by the numbers of references she is subsequently asked to write.

There was a range of factors that impede progression, including lack of childcare once the women complete their initial programmes of study and continue their studies outside of the Children's Centres. There were also barriers to progression due to the lack of choice of part-time degree programmes available to students outside of Birkbeck or the OU. Other barriers included location and finance. Lack of confidence may be perceived as a barrier.

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[179] 'Raw' progression (rate of re-registration within 12 months of end of conflation period of Openings module, all students) for 2011 was 33.8%. Within two years of conflation (ie confirmation of results) the progression rate increases to around 55%. There is no data on progression for students recruited by CPMs in partnerships schemes for 2010-11 but for 2009-10 it was 26%, much lower than the average and perhaps a reflection of the vulnerability of this group of students in a distance learning context.

[180] These data have only recently been collected systematically.

[181] Note this excludes those who were still studying at the time of the survey. Among Birkbeck students this would include those continuing to study after the summer break who would have been a mix of those completing 120 credits that summer, and those completing 60 credits.

> I think it's a bit unfair just to say 'Oh they didn't go on to Higher Education because they're not confident'. It could be just that 'Well actually I'm just not ready to do that. I've very happy with what I've done, I need some space, I need to take a year or two or whatever to decide'. (LBK1)

There are certainly 'aspirations to continue to study' (LBK3) but it might not be possible at that particular time in the women's lives. Progression can be difficult to track, and 'people may not progress on now, they might progress on in five years or longer and to me that's a kind of progression' (LBK5). Women make informed choices about whether or not to progress from the certificate to a complete degree programme. Whilst

> The vast majority of students ... see the course as progressing them to move onto a degree ... I've had many students just take a module just to find work. (LBK2)

Birkbeck's decision to provide just the first year of the HE Cert qualification programme (i.e. two modules) at the Children's Centres meant that students wanting to get this qualification had to continue their studies at the main Birkbeck campuses. Consequently, some of the main attractions of the courses run at the Children's Centre were lost: free childcare; their localness and proximity to the women's home; and the daytime hours. It is likely that this had an impact on progression rates.

4.2.3 Course participants' views on progression

Of the 30 participants interviewed in depth about their experience, eight had failed to complete their programme. Another five were currently studying but on track to complete their programme. Of the remaining 16 participants who had successfully completed there were a variety of outcomes.

For the Birkbeck participants a fundamental problem was that no further study would be both local and during school hours. Depending on what modules were offered at the local Children's Centre they may have been forced to take later modules of their programme at the Bloomsbury or Stratford campuses in the evening and this presented problems, as these participants discussed:

> A lot of people did them because they were offered at the centre, because a lot of people couldn't make it to Central London. 'This is gonna cost me' and that was the first thing people mentioned, the travel fee to get into Central London. And then you could go to East London but then, because it's after 7, what are you going to do for childminding if you're a single parent? (BBK5)

> The only thing is that I struggled to carry on in the second year because it was no longer happening at [Children's Centre name redacted] in the daytime, so I had to look at coming in the evening. I don't earn a lot of money, [...] I can't find childcare, can't afford it. So at the moment a friend is… And Saturday session I struggled but at least it's in the daytime, now it's in the evenings. [...] Someone is helping and is coming all the way from outside of London to come and pick up my son here and stay then go back, and by the time I get home it's 10 at night and she has to find her way back, sometimes she don't reach home until quite late in the evening. And she's the one who offered, I was just talking on the phone, like, 'I'm really struggling' and she offered to help. 'Gosh!' Amazing. (BBK6 currently studying)

If they wished to progress to a Birkbeck Social Sciences degree they were entitled to direct entry to the second year with their 120 HEIS credits. BBK17 and BBK20 had done so without problems and BBK21 intended to on completion, although it is notable that all three had partners willing to take on evening childcare so that they could attend evening classes, and all three worked during the day making traditional university inaccessible.

> I'm on that pathway to go on to Social Science and by doing these four modules over the two years, that qualifies me to go on to the second year of a Social Science Degree, so that has been

> *definitely* beneficial and that's really given me that sort of push to carry on with it, because I've come this far. (BBK17)

> I decided to continue and go to Birkbeck in the evening because it suited me best, because after I could go to it after work. (BBK20)

> I said, 'Okay, because now I've done the two years, if I go straight into the second year then I can manage to finish it off' - because I've got the support of the children and my boyfriend, he is saying, 'You can't give up, you have to finish!' He is very, very supportive, a big encouragement. (BBK21 currently studying)

For those that did not wish to progress within Birkbeck there was no single obvious route, several pursued long held ambitions and had enrolled on or completed a variety of other courses, including a British Wheel of Yoga 3 ½ year programme to qualify as a teacher, and an OU degree in Social Work. BBK15, a current student, was applying to a local university degree in Mental Health & Disability Nursing and another wished to study Health Services Management at a local university. This participant had very much struggled with the transition to full-time study at a local university and compared the lack of support and pressure of study there unfavourably with her experience studying at the Children's Centre.

> It's like, the tutors says it's adult learning, and they are not there to spoon-feed us and we have to search for the knowledge ourselves, we just come to lectures on the topic and the wider reading should be done individually. (BBK2)

She also reported struggling to balance full-time study with her caring responsibilities, and particularly felt her interaction with her children about their school work had suffered as a result of her no longer being able to collect them from school.

> While I am furthering my career, I still have that opportunity to look after them [my children] as I wanted to. But going to the University, far away from home, deprives me of that opportunity. By the time I pick them up it will be late in the afternoon, say 5 or 6, and by the time we get back they are already exhausted for the day, give them dinner. I myself am stressed out already, I have got my essay to look at, I have got to do a little bit of, what is it called? Go through what I have achieved, what we have learned at school for the day, and prepare myself for tomorrow again. So to do that is very, very difficult for me to have the strength. And if you want to study with children then you have to be patient and gentle, and that takes a lot of courage and time, which I haven't got much. If I have to do it with them, I leave everything until the weekend and it makes the weekend very, very busy, going through all I've done for the week, Monday to Friday, do the house chores as usual, shopping, and coming back, I was sort of thinking behind my brain that I shall have my own work to do as well, my assignments from Uni, so it's very, very hard. (BBK2)

Only one participant reported that she felt they had needed more support with progression. BBK10 did not wish to go on to study Social Science at Birkbeck, and was keen to progress straight to university to study midwifery. However, she did not know the title of her HEIS certificate, or how many credits it was worth, or if it would gain her partial exemption at any other university. She had missed the deadline for applying to UCAS for midwifery at local universities and ended up studying an HND in Business Administration by happenstance as it was offered as evening study and she was frustrated not knowing how to progress to her goal.

> I think we should have got more support after we finished the course. After the course we were just left to do whatever. We weren't given the support to say, 'You know what? You can apply for this course at this University' because a lot of Universities at the moment don't even recognise the qualification that I've gained anyway. (BBK10)

Others had reached a decision not to progress at this point due to their other responsibilities. Some had been inspired to progress to further study, but in the case of BBK1 a new baby had put plans on hold. Similarly BBK16 had been exhausted by studying, working and caring for two children, one with special needs, and put her own plans on hold for her children, but now felt her age was against her.

> I am tied up with my family. I am even busier. But now I want to… Because of the course I want to come back to education, I still don't know what to do and am not ready now because I have to wait until he's [youngest child] going to nursery at least, or maybe at school. (BBK1)

> I think at the time when I was around everybody that was doing that course, and we were in that moment, it was that, then we were actually, myself included, thinking, 'Oh yes, this is a possibility, I could go on to University and do something with it,' but since I finished my course it kind of all fizzled out and I've not actually thought about that. Maybe I've just thought about, maybe because I'm with my daughter and she's at that time where she's, it won't be long before she goes and does what she needs to do, I'm kind of putting my, I'm looking to her to now do what she needs to do. (BBK16)

Of the OU participants, eight out of nine had completed their Openings course, and all eight had progressed to further study. The seven London based OU participants had all progressed to further study with the OU. They continued to use the Children's Centre as a place to study on a weekly basis, and they support each other with their further studies, several forming a committed long-term study group, as well as supporting new Openings students and acting as local advocates and recruiters for the Children's Centre based Openings programme. The only Blackburn based OU student had progressed to a degree offered by a university at a local FE college in the evenings, preferring face-to-face study to distance learning.

4.3 Outcomes and impact of the course on the course participants

The UK Commission for Employment and Skills argues that 'skill acquisition which does not enhance employability, earnings, labour market progression or which does not bring other economic and social returns, is a waste of public and private resources'.[182] However, government and higher education policy rhetoric focus nearly exclusively on the economic, or private financial returns to higher education. From this perspective, lifelong learning and part-time higher education study are seen mainly as a driver of economic growth and competitiveness.[183] Similarly, widening participation policies including increasing social mobility, especially in relation to mature students, are seen as core to the government's wider skills strategy. Blanden *et al*[184] note that the notion of the development of work-related skills as the primary driver for participation in lifelong learning has been criticised, because it focuses on extrinsic, economic goals and ignores wider private and public benefits. They suggest that human capital theories view education as an investment, and earnings as one of the returns to that investment; and yet, 'focusing solely on monetary returns....may lead us to neglect other important social outcomes, such as higher levels of social status, work autonomy and social capital, all of which have been shown to have positive knock-on effects for the individual, their household and the community'.[185]

[182] UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES). (2010). *Ambition 2020: World class skills and jobs in the UK.* London and Wath-upon-Dearne, UKCES p 109
[183] Blanden, J., F. Buscha, P. Sturgis, P. Urwin. (2010). *Measuring the returns to lifelong learning* (CEE DP 110). London: Centre for the Economic of Education, London School of Economics. p.1
[184] Blanden et al (2010) op cit
[185] Blanden et al (2010) op cit p 8

Schuller *et al*,[186] focus on these wider, non-financial, benefits of learning. Following Bourdieu,[187] they classify the benefits along three main dimensions in terms of three sets of capital, namely human capital, identity capital and social capital. Jamieson *et al*[188] in their study of HE study for part-time students based at Birkbeck and the OU, set out to explore the impact of part-time study. Building on Schuller *et al's* three-way classification, Jamieson *et al* used a four-way classification of outcomes and benefits of study, namely employment-related benefits; generic skills (ability to work in a team, research skills, problem solving communication, writing); identity capital which refers to tangible assets such as qualifications, and intangible assets such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, improved self-confidence, attitudes to learning, further learning and happiness, and social capital (networks, ability to help children's education, relationships with children and civic participation).[189] They suggest that part-time graduates reported identity capital benefits more than any other category of benefits. Similarly other studies specifically on student parents report how engagement in studying improves students' self confidence and aspirations.[190]

However, Jamieson *et al* recognise that 'It is by no means straightforward to maintain a strict classification of the benefits within the capitals framework.'[191] Indeed, our attempts to analyse our data in accordance with the capitals frame proved unhelpful. Specifically, it demanded separating out the benefits, outcomes and impacts in ways that meant that their interconnectivity and reinforcing nature was lost. Thus, we have adopted a thematic approach.

4.3.1 Learning outcomes and academic skills

Core modules planned outcomes

The planned learning outcomes of Birbeck's 'Approaches to Study' course were as follows:

By the end of the module it is anticipated that students will be able to:

- identify their own learning experiences, reflect on these and develop strategies to further enhance their learning,
- identify the impact of factors such as 'race', ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, disability and age on their own and others' experiences of learning,
- recognise and employ the skills necessary to complete written assignments, undertake oral presentations, and prepare for and complete written tasks under timed conditions,
- use time management strategies to enable them to effectively balance the demands of study with other aspects of their lives,
- independently - and as part of a team - research and analyse information from a variety of sources (including electronic sources) and represent the findings in oral and written forms,
- recognise the benefits of working in groups and employ strategies to increase their individual effectiveness when working in group contexts,

[186] Schuller, T., A. Brassett-Grundy, A. Green, C. Hammond, and J. Preston. (2002) *Learning, continuity and change in adult life*. Research Report 3: Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning. London: Institute of Education.
[187] Bourdieu, P (1986),The Forms of Capital in Richardson, J., (ed) *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*,Westport, CT: Greenwood, pp. 241–58, p 243
[188] Jamieson, A., R. Sabates, A. Woodley, and L. Feinstein. (2009) The benefits of higher education study for part-time students. *Studies in Higher Education*, 34, 3, 245 – 262.
[189] Jamieson et al (2009) for a full list see p 10.
[190] NUS (2009) op cit
[191] Jamieson et al (2009) p.4

- critically analyse, debate and evaluate differing perspectives on relevant topics and produce structured arguments in written and oral form.

Subsequent modules also embed these learning outcomes.

The Learning Outcomes of the Openings modules are closely linked to assessment, as follows:

Subject content

- LO1 You have used relevant specialist words and phrases from the module
- LO2 You have applied relevant ideas from the module
- LO3 You have selected relevant evidence, examples and/or information from the module
- LO4 You have produced a relevant, reasoned answer

Learning skills or study skills

- LO5 You have communicated effectively in writing
- LO6 You have used an appropriate structure or format
- LO7 You have followed relevant academic conventions
- LO8 You have thought about your own learning
- LO9 You have demonstrated an understanding of and an ability to use the skills needed to use a computer to learn

Students are not awarded percentage scores, but instead are given detailed descriptive feedback on their achievement in relation to the learning outcomes (against four sub-levels). The sub-levels are: achieved, just achieved, not quite achieved and not achieved; of which the first two denote evidence of performance at Level 1 for that particular learning outcome.

Course participants' views on courses' learning outcomes

We have already seen that the vast majority (79%) of course participants surveyed were using what they had learnt on their course in their daily lives (Figure 3.3). So what had they learnt and what skills had they acquired? All survey respondents, irrespective of whether they had completed their module, were asked the extent to which their course had helped them to develop a wide range of generic transferable skills and approaches to learning. These largely reflect the aims (3.4.3) and anticipated learning outcomes of HEIS's core module, itemised above, which the women can apply to their lives beyond the specific study context. Several of the aims and outcomes of the HEIS core module are intended to enable students to use their learning in a wide range of contexts.

The majority of the respondents thought that their courses had developed these skills 'a lot'; with the exception of computer skills (Figure 4.1) while over 90 per cent believed that their course had enabled them to develop these skills 'a lot' and 'a little.[192] The high proportion of course participants indicating that the programmes had provided an opportunity to 'think about my own learning' 'a lot' (83%) (Figure 4.1) would appear to endorse the centrality that is given to critically reflective learning in both the Birkbeck and OU provision, and the aim of helping students to situate their feelings about and experiences of learning in a broader context. Students are frequently encouraged to complete reflective diaries and, on the Birkbeck course, write a reflective account about the learning that has occurred as a result of completing what is often regarded as one of the most challenging elements of each module: the oral presentation. The OU students are required to complete a reflective log and to submit a learning review with their final assessment.

The course learning outcomes also suggest the value given to the kinds of collaborative reflection that can occur when working in groups/teams. Reflection can, however, also be a process through which a learner identifies how they have achieved a particular goal or how they might achieve a goal they have not yet achieved more successfully in future. This meaning of 'reflection' (which has become somewhat dominant in educational and professional contexts) is more linked to individual skills improvement. The 'ethos' of the HEIS programme (as evidenced through the aims and outcomes) is to facilitate a variety of inter-connected kinds of reflective process/practice.[193]

Whilst significant attention is given to the process of learning on the modules, it is also consistent with the aims of the programme that course participants experience development of their knowledge about particular subjects. Four out of five participants reported that the course had 'develop[ed] my knowledge about a particular subject' a lot (Figure 4.1). It is this knowledge that will contribute to the women being able to make an informed choice about future study. Equally, the number of respondents answering 'a lot' to 'analyse and respect peoples' different views and perspectives' (76%) (Figure 4.1) suggests the impact of a pedagogical process which encourages peer learning and interaction between lecturer and students in the classroom setting through exploratory rather than didactic talk, in line with the ideas informing the pedagogic approaches to learning and teaching discussed above (see section 3.3)

Only 45% of course participants thought that their computing skills had improved 'a lot' (Figure 4.1). The relatively low score for 'computer skills' is not surprising in relation to Birkbeck course participants, since first, these did not form part of Birkbeck's initial core courses, and only those who completed further modules may have taken a module in ICT. Second, some course participants would already have quite good computer skills, and the course would not have added to their existing level of skills.

There were some differences among respondents by the higher education institution they attended, but great care must be taken when interpreting these differences because of the small number of OU respondents. The majority of Birkbeck course participants claimed that their course had helped them develop the skills assessed 'a lot'. In particular, Birkbeck course participants were significantly more likely than OU course participants to report that their courses had helped them 'a lot' to improve their spoken communication (75% compared with 34%); to improve their writing skills (83% compared with 58%); to think critically about the world around them' (72% compared with 48%); and to work in a group (68% compared with 48%). In part, these variations reflect differences in the mode of presentation at the two HEIs, since spoken communication and group work were not such essential parts of the OU's Opening courses but were part of the study group activities. It is unclear, indeed, whether OU student responses reflected their perception of the module itself or the Community Partnership support programme.

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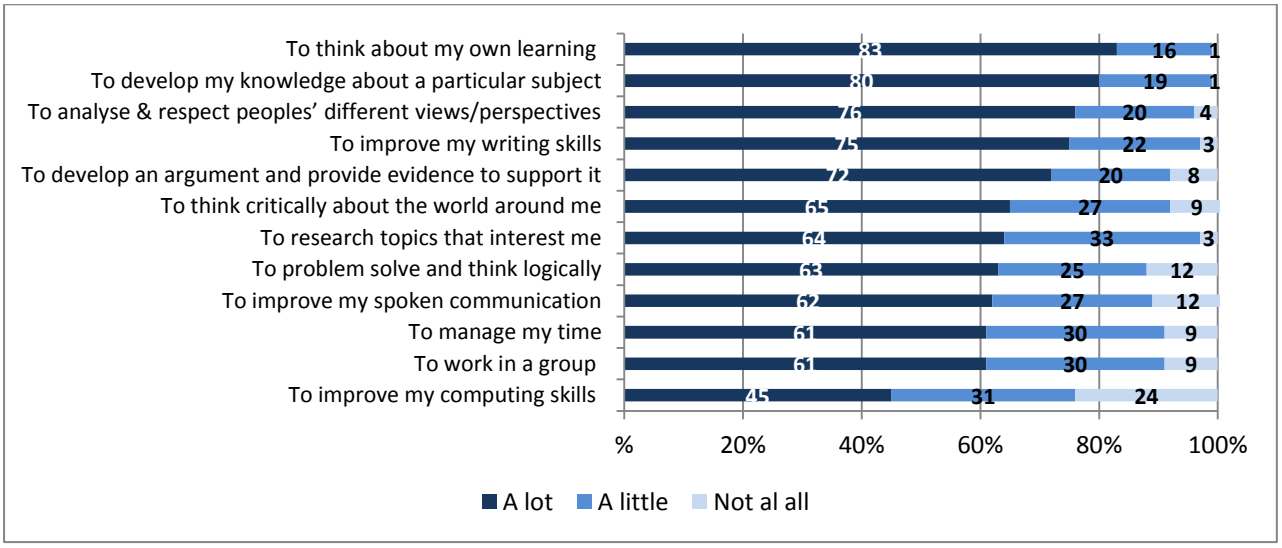
[192] An internal OU survey of all Openings students in 2010/11 – not just those studying at Children's Centres, showed that 94.8% of students (N= 1467) perceived the modules to equip learners with the study skills they need to continue in HE.
[193] Bradbury, H. (et al) 2010 *Beyond Reflective Practice: New Approaches to Professional Lifelong Learning,* Abingdon, Routledge

These findings, however, do suggest that there was a relatively close alignment between the aims and predicted learning outcomes of the Birkbeck courses and the outcomes that the participants reported they had experienced.

Perhaps surprisingly, there were no statistically significant differences between OU and Birkbeck course participants' views on the development of their computer skills.[194] The capacity of the Birkbeck courses to offer computer skills development was determined by availability (or lack of) computers in the Children's Centres, as the course participants rarely had access to a computer at home. In two Centres where access to computers was available, an ICT module was scheduled into the programme. In other cases, course participants were either encouraged to enrol for a local computer literacy course or to complete the ICT module at Birkbeck Bloomsbury or Stratford.

Figure 4.1 Learning outcomes



Base: All respondents (N=105)
Source: Survey of course participants, 2012

And the learning developments identified by the survey participants are confirmed in the 30 in-depth interviews with course participants.

> I was bad at time management and things like that, so I found a way to… Because I work with the one to one teacher for study skills and time management and all those things and have written things, all of that, and it helps and improves. And my writing skills are through the roof compared to what they were and I have so much more confidence and I put myself forward at work to do projects, reports and stuff that I would shy away from. And talking in front of people was another thing I didn't think I… I can talk to you if I know you, on a one to one basis, but you hear me like this, but put me in front of people and I freeze, like an audience that I don't know, I can't do it, I muddle up and am all over the place. As a result of the experience I've had, presentation, I speak out at team meetings, if they say that there's a project, outreach project there, I will willingly offer to go and do things that I would shy away from and leave to the very able people or people that are better. (BBK6)

[194] An OU survey of all Openings students had a similar finding but when respondents were disaggregated by 'Widening Participation students ' and 'non- Widening Participation students', the OU found the former group more likely to say their computer skills had improved.

> I even like presentations, because I am now bold enough to do it but before, I was very shy to stand in front of people. The boldness is there and I can do any presentation, even in the church. (BBK18)

> When I went, I did the taster course, the best thing I loved was, if it had been in the University or a college, I wouldn't have gone because I wouldn't have had the confidence and it was just too scary for me. I found the children's centres is a nice group and the people that go there all have children, which makes you feel a bit more comfortable, also what I find, which was really helpful, at the study groups, the problems I was facing others were too, and I used to think I was silly. Because of my age, because I'm older, I never did computers at school and so that was a hindrance, and instead of facing it, which the OU have helped me, the students and the weekly group helped me face it so now I can actually use a laptop and I'd never have been able to do that. (OU4/5)

Perhaps because the topics covered in the courses and the pedagogical model drew heavily on participants' personal and social experience, the knowledge and skills that they had acquired through their studies were reported as affecting every aspect of their lives. Those who had progressed to further study reported how useful what they had learned in the courses was in their later studies, but there were also many examples of how participants could apply what they had learned to their parenting.

> I'm more able to deal with things differently and understand why things are happening, the way they are happening, and dealing with them differently. Before, I didn't know how to handle my daughter, in a sense that it's calmer, more patience and because if I apply it to… The way we were learning it is to apply it to our daily lives, so if you apply it and reflect to your daily life then I have learnt a lot, it's changed a lot. I approach things differently and I look at things differently. (BBK15)

Children's Centre managers' views on courses' learning outcomes

Children's Centre managers suggested that participants had learned transferrable skills, such as how to use IT, make a presentation and write an essay. Their successes as learners built their confidence and they discussed how the students reacted to the various elements of their course, and what they gained from the different modules.

> I think the whole 'Giving a presentation' is very powerful because people are incredibly nervous ... they have never stood up and spoken in front of anybody before and ... seeing that they can do that ... and the nerves before and afterwards, the elation ... 'I did it, I did it!' is really ... and I think they just go on after that then, once you've done that, there's no stopping you is there?

> I'd say it wets people's appetites for more. I think they become a lot more curious and a lot more interested in their children's education. So a huge level of understanding that the exposure ... because the course offers ... the Psychology they love, Sociology they love, those two ... Approaches to Study is a hard slog but then they do the presentation and then it all makes sense. The IT they love because often people are very nervous around IT and then they did another module on Planning Your Future and I think that was very good. They really enjoyed that as well because it was like somebody was listening to them and that they could have hopes and dreams and nobody was saying, 'Oh you won't be able to do that' it was like, 'So, well how are you going to do that then?' and making them think about, 'Well I need to do this, this, this ... yeah that's what you do!' (MBK5)

> They're getting to see themselves in a situation they never would have thought they'd be in and they're given a LOT of transferable skills and a lot of IT skills in fact, using PowerPoint. A lot of kind of organisational skills; there is a lot of work in the first module and a lot of them are glad that they stick it really, but there is a lot for them to do and to focus on and they have to do presentations that they'd never done before. ….. (MBK1)

A Children's Centre manager working with the OU particularly talked about the benefits of distance learning while recognising the importance of the face-to-face interaction in the study groups.

> I think just by doing the Openings Programme, they have developed this confidence through just being with the Open University. They have found that CAN do assignments and they can study at home, so the perspective of them wanting just a face-to-face all the time sort of disappeared in a sense. Once they came onto the Programme they've found that this is a different way they can learn and it's been successful and they've taken to it like a duck to water. All students come with their own personal experiences and sometimes it's just confidence and because of lack of confidence they feel they can't draw on those but once they get going and they're in a group situation and they hear other people talking about their experiences I think that's helped quite a bit. (MOU2)

The number of survey respondents who had not completed their modules is small, but the majority claimed that their course had helped them develop their skills 'a lot', with the exception of computing skills and time management. Indeed, as we saw, a lack of time was a factor contributing to students deciding to stop studying. In turn, this relates to issues about the students making time for themselves, when their identity is totally wound up with caring for others.

4.3.2 The wider benefits of learning

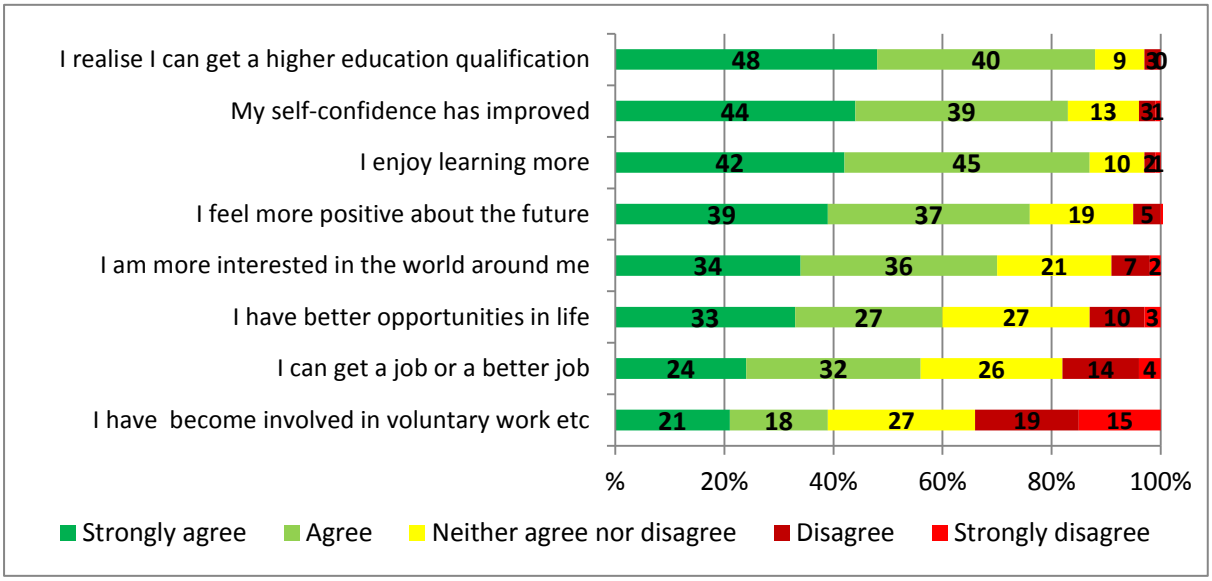
To assess course participants' perceptions of the wider impact of their courses, all were asked in the survey the extent to which various aspects of their lives had changed as a result of their Birkbeck and OU course (Figure 4.2). The majority agreed with most of the statements.

The perceived educational benefits of the course for the women are clear. The vast majority of respondents agreed that as a result of the course they realised they could get a higher education qualification (88%) while most also thought they enjoyed learning more (87%). These findings alone are testament to the success of these courses amongst the participants surveyed, because this was the main aim of the Birkbeck and OU programmes.

Furthermore, the vast majority of respondents claimed they were more self-confident (83%) as a result of their course; felt more positive about their future (76%); were more interested in the world around them (70%); and had better life opportunities (60%). So the course had helped to raise their personal aspirations. Through these women's participation in the course they had enhanced their cultural and identity capital.[195]

[195] Jamieson et al (2009) *op cit*

Figure 4.2 The impact of the courses of the participants



Base: All respondents (N=104)
Source: Survey of course participants, 2012

When course participants' responses to the impact of study are compared with their reasons for taking the courses at the Children's Centre (Figure 2.1), the results are encouraging. For instance, 60% of respondents said they had taken the courses because they wanted to get a higher education qualification and 55% as a first step towards gaining a degree (Figure 2.1). As a result of the course, 88% of respondents now realised they could get a higher education qualification. This is a particularly important finding given that the overall aim and purpose of the HEIS and Opening programme was to increase confidence in the participants' capability to take a degree. This more immediate realisation of the capability to study in HE is of considerable significance.

Two-thirds of course participants surveyed had embarked on their course because they wanted better opportunities in life, and just under that proportion (60%) now believed that their opportunities were better as a result of their course. These findings could be seen as expected. It will be recalled that some of the participants were still at an early stage of their journey, having only recently completed their course, and it is likely to be too early for them to say that they feel they have better opportunities in life. Their responses suggest that they realised that the course itself was just a stepping stone on their life's journey.

These benefits were echoed in the in-depth interviews with the course participants. They revealed that the courses had a huge impact in many different ways. An increased confidence in their own abilities, a sense of achievement, not just in the particular course that they took but affecting their whole lives with a sense of their own capability to do other things.

Sense of achievement, opening up new opportunities and aspirations

As is clear, from Figure 4.2 the majority of the course participants surveyed not only had gained a sense of achievement, but with this feeling came a sense of new openings and possibilities and new aspirations for themselves and their children, of further study and employment.

> And also we learnt about cognitive behaviours, it's got to do with what I want to go into in Nursing, child development delays, that's what actually encouraged me to go ahead and do the Learning Disability Nursing [degree]. (BBK15)

> I found the first one very useful because I think I lacked confidence and I was with a group of like-minded people and I felt that I was gaining a lot from just the work itself and felt that even if I didn't go any further it was just that it boosted my confidence, it kind of made me more aware of my surroundings and I started to view things in a different way from watching the TV, the news, things like that, because I know it had an impact on what work I was doing as well, at college, so it just opened my eyes up to a lot of things. (BBK16)

> It's opened my mind up a *lot* because I was in this little box, of taking my children to school, coming home, doing the housework, doing a little bit of my teaching assistant job a couple of days a week and I really didn't know that much about the world out there and all the academia. It *has* enlightened me and it *has* made me want to, almost want to learn a lot more; anything that's going on I sort of take a particular interest to, whereas before it was like, 'Oh, that doesn't bother me; I don't need to know about that.' [...] I would say definitely go and do it because it enlightens you, even if you don't want to carry on doing higher education or further education, it might open your eyes to other avenues or you might meet people that influence you or help you in a different way, you make good connections with other people. (BBK17)

Again, the programme directors, lecturers, and Children's Centre staff often talked about these new opportunities. In particular, they argued that women who re-engage with education have an increased awareness of the opportunities available to them. The programmes have a 'huge impact really in opening up the possibilities in terms of their futures and what they can see themselves doing' (LBK3). 'There's a lot of people here who haven't had the chance or even the inclination to think, 'I would ever go to University or do any sort of Higher Education'…. and giving opportunities where they would never have thought that they'd have before.' (MBK1). They talk too about a very personal sense of achievement (LBK4).

Some Children's Centre managers talked more broadly about the benefits of study:

> Going on to other study; in their parenting; in their relationship with the school; being able to have the confidence to talk to the teacher because you are concerned about your child's welfare. All of those things; the community cohesion thing, so they've built friendships and met people who they didn't know before who might have only lived two doors down, 'But actually I know you now and we're both studying together'. (MOU1)

Another Children's Centre manager observed how students' achievements not only opened more doors, but also gave them more confidence in terms of seeking out opportunities. She saw these changes and outcomes as indicators of the success of the programme from the mothers' perspective.

> I think achievement of getting an Accredited Certificate of a Higher Level, having more options, I think being in situations where you are in a position where you CAN have options; you can think about whether you want to go to University and you've got more to put on your CV to think about where you want to go… so it's also a process of knowing that you've got more options than you first thought and that more things than you first thought are achievable. ….a large part of what we do is signposting to mainstream services to push people out there and one big thing is confidence and it's a big thing, not just personal confidence but confidence being able to go out then and seek out what you want and then go to that institution and apply to it where you wouldn't have done before. (MBK1)

Self-confidence and self-esteem

Closely related to both a sense of achievement, and a transformation of the self, the most commonly reported impact that participants reported in their in depth interviews was an increase in confidence. Although the cause of this was their achievement in their studies, with the return of marked

assignments a source of wonder and pride to many, it seems to have an effect beyond confidence in their ability to study.

> I think it has made a big impact on my confidence, to believe that I can actually study towards a Degree, which I had never really considered before, which is what I'm doing now, I'm in my third year of doing a Social Work Degree. (BBK14)

> I think my successful outcome was the fact that I finished my course and what I got out of it was, I got my confidence soaring when I did that course, it really did, and my self-esteem too, and I felt that I was able to… If I wanted to go on and do other things, I think that I felt I had the confidence to actually tackle other things, so it did give me a lot, that course, not just academically but other things as well. Even though I was very stressed by the course I am so glad I did it, I really am, because I know I needed to do something other than working, where I was working, and it not only filled a gap but it gave me a wider outlook about, you know, there are other things that you can do out there and there are other thing you can achieve, you just have to put in the work and it's there for you. (BBK16)

> I'd say I'm more confident and I think about things more and try to consider things before I do it rather than just do it! (BBK19)

> It's something I cannot explain, it's something in me. When I'm on a bus going there and back at night, 10 o'clock, it's something I feel proud to have done for myself, for me. It's like when you go to the gym and do a workout and you feel good, you can't explain to someone why but I just feel I have this knowledge and I fit in and understand what people are talking about. I can chat with anybody. It's put me in a position where I am comfortable with what I say because I understand most things. My confidence is greater and I can talk to anyone now. (BBK20)

> I have changed because it has brought me confidence and I think this is the reason why I have changed. I have felt like… I don't know how to explain it… I think it's the self-esteem, you get it higher, you get more confident. (BBK21)

> I definitely feel so much more *liberated!* Yes, I do feel a lot more free within myself and a lot more… I don't know how to put it, but you know when you just feel intelligent? [Laughter]. I don't want to make any fancy words up but I do feel, yes, if someone's going to ask me something then I might be able to answer it! (OU9)

And this self-confidence was also noticed by the Children's Centre managers too which spilled over into other aspects of their lives:

> Their self-confidence. Even the Head Teacher who knows some of them, she said, 'What have you been doing with them up there? They're all about an inch taller!' They do, they walk taller and people used to say these things and I was, 'Yeah!' but they DO. Yeah their confidence, their ability to cope with things. (MBK6)

> I think a number of outcomes [of the course] really. Sometimes it's a very personal outcome for themselves that they are able to do something that gives them the confidence. Some of the students have moved into employment more or less straight away and have got jobs in schools, having done Understanding Children, so that's been a good outcome. Some have moved into Higher Education and gone on to complete degrees, whereas initially they might have never thought of even doing a degree. So they've had huge outcomes in different ways but they've all had success, I would say they've all had successful outcomes through having done Openings, it's really boosted their confidence and the way that they think and do things. (MOU2)

The Children's Centre managers also deemed improved self confidence and esteem as indicators of the success of the programme from the mother's perspective.

> From their [the women's] perspective I think if they've been able to open up or become a little bit more broad-minded about their own skills and abilities, that's been a huge step forward for them. So confidence I think and looking at their abilities in a different light and thinking, 'Yes' they CAN do something. Cos I get students who at the end of the course think, 'Yeah we've really achieved something here, we can do it!' (MOU2)

> Well, the qualifications were important to the parents. Their change in attitude about themselves from having a view of themselves as being uneducable to someone who is potentially successful in education. One of the students, getting an award ... going to the [name of Centre] Centre to study ...being able to achieve that ... they commented on that a lot you know. Getting a boost to their self-esteem. So yeah, raising self-esteem generally and confidence. (MBK4)

Transformation

For some course participants their experience of studying seems to have been transformative, in Mezirow's[196] sense of changing the way they understand the world, in a way that cannot be reversed or forgotten. This transformation could be characterised as a more critical understanding of the world, though the academic study of social sciences, and endorsement of foundational values of higher education such as the respect for diverse opinions and ways of debating them. Examples of this were course participants who started reading broadsheet newspapers, reading books, going to the theatre, going to the opera, watching foreign language films, and one got rid of their television. Although there were many moving accounts of this transformation, they were not entirely positive. One impact for those in poverty gaining a critical understanding of how society functions could be a new dissatisfaction with their current circumstances, including their jobs, their homes, their economic situation, the accounts of the world offered by news media and even with their partners. This is certainly enmeshed with course participants' desires to improve their circumstances, through studying at the Children's Centres and further study beyond it. However, it is extremely striking that one area of their lives with which none of the interviewees expressed any dissatisfaction whatsoever, was their children; if they were transformed then their children were too, and any hopes for a better life involved a better life for their children also.

> Yes, group work, living in society with people, taking people for what they are, understanding people from their point of view; that is from group work, and respecting other people's views and being able to cater for other people as well, treat them the same way I would like to be treated. (BBK15)

> It does, it does change you. I mean, before I was in this other little world; I'm a mum, I'm going and dropping my children at school and this is the world that I know, I'm not aware of everything that's going on around me or the decisions that are being made in political life and things like that, I didn't really take note of what's going on but really, when you hear things and there's things that you've looked at on your course and you think, 'Oh, okay, so I understand what they mean.' Like we're doing an essay on the 'Benefit cap and the impact on children', so that is very current at the moment, so when there's things on the news, when there's things in the papers, it sort of makes me take note and think that, 'Oh, hold on, this is what's going on around me, this is what the government are doing – how do I feel about it?' (BBK17)

[196] Mezirow, J (2000) Learning as Transformation, San Francisco: Jossey Bass,

> Best decision of my life, next to having my two children! [Laughter]. I just think, 'Oh what would I have done with my life if I hadn't done this?' Really. It's changed my life immensely. In what way? In a lot of ways, the things I'm interested in these days, be it on TV or in the media, be it the people I follow on Twitter, it's all changed. I don't follow Victoria Beckham, I'm following Owen Jones! [...] The news, you know, before I didn't care but now I'm always watching Question Time and I don't miss what's going on. After that the Daily Politics. I know the BBC Politics Channel with the Westminster debates. Oh it's just given me… Even the *books* I read these days. [...] It's understanding things, the social world. It's like before I didn't see the point of volunteering but now I do that, I started 2 years ago, but I didn't see the point of demonstration and marches and all this, or petitioning for something, I didn't understand the point of it. But you find more interest in things around you. (BBK20)

> Because then I started bringing the Telegraph in there and we all had a go at reading it and at the beginning I thought I couldn't understand a *thing*, I didn't know why and then I realised that it's because they didn't *tell* us what to *think*, obviously! (Laughter). They just said, 'This is this and this is that' *but* if you continue reading, you will know what they think in the end of the day – yes, they do want you to fight against this or fight against that but they don't say it in your face. (BBK21)

> Loads; learning new things, and also, with Law, when you are learning you'll be sitting there and you'll realise watching the ITV News that something will come on and it's like, 'Oh I understand that! I learnt that at the OU! I learnt that from my Law course!' The politicians, I understand what they're saying now where before, I'd have been really interested and think, 'But what does that mean?' But because I've learnt it, it's brilliant and I can understand what's going on with the EU, Parliament; it's lovely! (OU4/5)

> It was only later on that problems started arising due to me going out and getting myself an education and when you start learning then you start asking questions, you start challenging, and that's what happened with me, I think. Before, I was just a puppet, but slowly when I started educating myself and started questioning first of all my children's education, you know, are they getting the right things, I could help them with their homework and I can listen to them talking, and Understanding Children, the course I did, there were quite a few Openings course but I chose that one because I love children and had children when I was only 17 [...] I mean the problem actually started arising a lot before when I actually thought of going back into education but I hadn't addressed it, I just brushed it under the carpet, but as I got more and more educated I felt more liberated and for that reason I'd talk more and ask more questions and was more curious, and some people don't like changes, some people don't like challenges, and I didn't know that my husband was one of those people… (OU9)

A recurrent theme of the interviews with the programme directors and lecturers was how the course was so transformational. End of term modules evaluation sheets contained comments such as 'This has transformed my life', with the most frequent comment being 'I never thought I could do it and now I realise that I can' (PD).

Similarly, the Children's Centre managers had witnessed these transformations among the course participants.

> [Name of student] said everything [had changed], she said, 'It's things like I watch the News and I get it and I want to watch the News and I didn't used to ... I read different newspapers, I'm much more interested in stuff, my daughter has noticed a change in me, I go to the library more'. She showed me books, 'I would never have read this before, I wouldn't have even thought about taking it off the shelf'. I think that's what it does, it makes people see what they're capable of because for one reason or another they have been led to believe they're not capable or, 'That's NOT for you' But they've found, 'Oh I can pick this up'. (MBK5)

Some Children's Centre managers described how their students had changed and empowered as a result of their course, such as their view of the world and their confidence to tackle the world and to question things around them.

> Without sounding really corny, seeing them carrying books is really nice to see or talking about ... 'I've got it on my memory stick ... ' because books are a bit old-fashioned now aren't they? But knowing that it's ... and I don't want to undermine ... but instead of the wet wipes and the nappy and the bottle there is a memory stick in there with some information or a book or a leaflet in that bag with everything else. (MBK5)

> And maybe we get more questioning about the school their children are at and they want more for their children and they start to say, 'Oh ...' so they become more, you can make people more demanding. Cos that's what education should be about but I'm not sure that's what people WANT it to be about ... cos the more educated people are the more they can ask questions can't they? And once they start to get critical ... people often start the course with quite fixed ideas about things and they know that it's either ... red or blue! And actually they find that most things are purple and that can be unsettling because people can be quite secure in their lives and say, 'Oh we've always done that and that's how it is and that's how it is ….what education does it raises doubts and so people will make stereotypical statements and we all do; I do ... generalisations, I think that's the bit ... it doesn't allow you to create generalisations, so ... 'ALL young people, they are ...' So if you're doing a Sociology module and you look at deviant behaviour or whatever and you suddenly think, 'Oh it's not so simple as I thought it was!' ... (MBK5)

> A huge impact really because it raises their aspirations so much that they feel they are very capable, they feel they can move away from their social and educational background at a higher level. It has a huge impact on their families, on themselves, on their confidence, they can almost feel they can do and they are somebody and they can move into almost a different world sometimes. (MOU2)

Identity and sense of 'self'

Some studies on student parents report that students engage in complex 'identity practices' to manage the potentially conflicting roles of being a 'good mother' and a 'good student'.[197] This involves downplaying their maternal role while at university and hiding the student role outside university. There was little evidence of this in our study. Other studies,[198] find that taking on an identity as a student does not necessarily create a tension with that of being a parent, and that many were keen to share their university lives with their partner and children. In our study, the course was important in terms of giving the women an alternative identity from being 'a mum' – a finding echoed in other studies of student mothers.[199] Ultimately, some of these women were questioning their gender roles.

The sense of an independent self, separate from caring responsibilities, was a powerful thread through participants' accounts. In section 2.5 on motivation for enrolling there were moving accounts of participants expressed need to find 'something for themselves' apart the all-consuming identity of mother. In section 3.7 on the challenges of studying, a substantial challenge for many for participants was finding time for both study and caring for their children, as well as paid employment for some. This presented more as a dilemma about how to spend time rather than a conflict about competing identities in these accounts. As noted in section 3.7 rather than a dilemma, the roles of student and parent were described as supporting each other. As BBK11 expresses below, perhaps time away from caring responsibilities for children may make parents value time with their children more.

[197] Lynch (2008) *op cit*
[198] Brooks (2013) *op cit*
[199] E.g Moreau and Kerner (2012) *op cit*

> Just different things I learnt, particularly in Psychology - I remember reading a book called 'Why Love Matters', so that had an impact on how you look at your relationship with your kids and your family, friends, everyone else. And just having time away from them, then you appreciate time with them a bit more, don't you, having that head space to just not be mum? (BBK11)

> And I don't think you are ever too old to learn and I think your brain likes to learn and it gives you something in life other than children. (OU4/5)

However, a number reported a new sense of themselves as students, and connected with this a sense of pride in their achievements as students, as sections above on confidence and achievement discuss. Interestingly the pride was often expressed as vicarious pride in their children in their achievements. However, there were other elements to their pride in their new role as students, as conferring a new status, particularly if they had been economically inactive while caring for their families previously.

> Assignments, they give it, it comes back, you read for it, go to the library, you know, it gives you a sense of belonging as well, to that group study, even my son he says, 'Oh mummy, you are reading!' and I say, 'Yes, I'm a student!' *I: So you're a student now?* [Laughter] Yes, and then I say, 'All of us are students, you need to read.' *I: Your children are studying too?* Yes. They are all in Uni, it's fun for them to see that mum is doing this at that age. I see them doing their assignments and I'm doing mine, I bring out my own and start reading. (BBK18)

> They say, 'That's very good, you are studying.' Because some of my neighbours, they are teachers. Normally, I'll go and ask for help. I did an essay one day, you know the introduction, I went to my neighbour so that they can check and they said, 'Who did this for you?' and I said, 'I did it on my own.' They said, 'That's a very good introduction.' He was very impressed I'd done it. (OU8)

> You know one thing that happened is, I don't want to offend anyone but one thing that came when I actually started this University course is, I went off benefits and I was no longer known as, 'She's on benefits,' and stuff and 'She's not doing anything.' *I: Is that because you have your student loan now?* Yes, but because of the student finance I can't have benefits, but it's made me happier than anything else because I just feel like I'm a student and it's my own efforts, I'm doing something about it, about myself. (OU9)

There was evidence that course participants saw their studies as enhancing their 'good mother' role, as so many were learning about child development, or felt more able to help with homework, or felt that they were role models inspiring children to study. These issues are discussed below in section 4.4.1.

They lecturers also talked about the student identities. They reported that women have written on their evaluation forms that 'This course has enabled me to be me'.

> I've been involved in this kind of work for many, many years and it ... that statement ...'I'm not just somebody's mother!' ... or ... 'I'm not just somebody's wife!' ... comes back again and again and it might be ... it's about that movement into newer spaces.(PD)

Similarly, the Children's Centre manager had witnessed changes in how the students viewed themselves and their sense of self.

> Yes I've seen some of their posture and their sense of themselves and I make a big point of saying, 'You're students, what's it like being a student?' and treating them like a student because when you're mum you're a mum and everybody calls you 'Mum' and you're seen as a mum but ... 'You're students. So what's life like as a student?' and things like that so it gives them another sense of their identity I suppose. (MBK5)

> ..to have time for themselves as well because as a mother you are concentrating on your family all the time. (MBK2)

> Finding a voice, I think getting a voice ……I suppose, it (the course) just lights something or triggers something from being a mum pushing a buggy coming in and 'not sure how to spend the day' to, you know, one morning a week, suddenly they're setting the world alight and I think that's great. The other thing what happens to people when they change and it's a bit of the Educating Rita model I'm afraid because I've taught on Access courses, it can make people dissatisfied because they suddenly start to look around and see things that perhaps they tolerated but after a little bit of in-depth reading and things they're not quite as, I wouldn't say 'satisfied' but whatever the word is, they want more and sometimes getting people to want more can be difficult. (MBK5)

And, as one Children's Centre manager observed, such changes to women's identity can be disconcerting for them.

> ' I think once people go a layer or two below things stop being so concrete and you get onto a bit of shaky ground and ...'Ohhhh!' and I think that is perplexing for people and for everyone isn't it? That can knock people sideways a little bit... for instance one women she listened to the radio, just music, and I said, 'Have you ever thought about listening to Radio 4 ...' and she said, 'I wish ... because it makes me 'think' too much!' And I think sometimes it makes people think too much and question ... and that is a concern for people.... I think if we're not aware that that is going to happen or it is happening and we don't have some kind of safety net in place, whatever that might be, even just acknowledgement that you are going to feel differently, then we are leaving people a bit high and dry and it's not fair ... it's a bit like therapy isn't it? We start and then, 'Oh okay, you're on your own now'. (MBK5)

Some Children's Centre managers talked about how the course helped some women overcome adversity.

> There was another mum who was very depressed, very isolated ... she was a teenage parent and was very self-destructive and the change in her. Everything changed, yeah. in terms of her outlook on life and diminished depression, access to other services ... all sorts of things just completely changed over that period. (MBK4)

> And seeing people, we had one woman who was a survivor of domestic violence and it made her feel so much better about herself to do the course. (MBK5)

Parenting skills

As described previously, the programmes often focused on subjects such as child development, psychology or sociology. Therefore it is unsurprising that an important impact of participation was on the parenting skills of participants.

For example, BBK20 provided a moving account of how what she had learned about children through her studies had led her to consciously break with what she described as traditional cultural practice of using physical punishment for children. Reading about the ineffectiveness of punishment had made her observe other parents who did use physical punishment, and that their children were no better behaved, so she decided to test what she learned in practice. She tried to use rewards, ignoring or distraction techniques instead. Her husband also became part of her experiment and would call her at work for parenting advice:

> If he is with the kids and they give him a hard time when I'm at work, he will call me and go, 'What should I do?' Laughter] 'Because in a minute I'm going to whip them!' *I:So he doesn't want to smack them either?* Actually I think he's one of them who doesn't believe in smacking either. (BBK20)

She reflected that the HEIS programme had given her new parenting strategies:

> Yes, because I'm think if it was before I did this course I would have been, 'I've told you THREE times!!!' but then I realise that when I think about it, try another technique. If you've told someone twice and they cannot learn that way then maybe try another way. (BBK20)

In practice it is difficult to differentiate between the development of parenting skills as a result of participation in the programme, and the consequent impact of the parenting skills on the children, and the impact on families and children is considered in more detail in section 4.4.1 below.

Children's Centre managers also commented on how the courses affected the course participants' parenting skills and the synergy between studying and 'good' parenting skills. One observed

> There's a big drive for Parenting at the moment, around people's parenting skills and I would like to argue with somebody in Government that doing a course like for Higher Education, you are getting parenting skills because you're managing your time, you have to be organised, you're doing these things ... all of those are parenting skills; it's not about getting your child to do what you want them to do or keeping your child off the streets and out of trouble, which is how people equate parenting skills. I think the whole package that goes with studying IS a parenting skill actually. A lot of parenting is about organising isn't it and studying is about organising, as my children have found out. But I think that is probably the threat most, that an agenda is driven from somewhere else. (MBK5)

Friendships and support networks

Another impact of the course was the support networks they developed, which were encouraged in the overall approach to learning at Birkbeck and the OU, in relation to students' regular meetings at the Children's Centres. As we have seen, 60% of students believed that the support they received from other students on their course helped them to succeed (Figure 3.3).

As discussed in detail in section 3.8.1, the support received from peers through the formation of independent study groups was critical to the retention and success of participants from Birkbeck and the OU.

For many of the Children's Centre managers and lecturers, the new friendships, bonds, and networks the mothers had developed as a result of the courses what important.

The lecturers talked very broadly about the relationship their students developed.

> I only have personal accounts, anecdotal evidence for this but better relationships they say, with partners, with parents, with their children and that they make contacts. They make friends and they feel much less isolated, much less lonely because they've met this group and a number of them, that I know about, have met in the module and then have maintained their friendships. (LBK4)

However, the Children's Centre managers talked more specifically about the bonds the women developed with other course participants.

> Success is watching a group ... often they're not friends when they start a course. They don't all know each other, they often don't know each other or they may have seen each other at a school playground or in the Centre at Stay and Play but they don't know each other and then seeing these bonds of friendship made and then hearing them say, 'I'll call you and we'll get together' and I think the course is designed around group work as well. So I think for some doing group work is a HUGE development because maybe back at school they weren't encouraged to do things together as a group to produce something and the course as far as I'm aware, there is a lot of doing things together and they're not in competition with each other. So I love seeing those bonds, I think that's a real success story. (MBK5)

Another manager talked about the course and the friendships the women had made, as 'being a lifeline'.

> [Name of student] she's got a boy who's got autism. She's an older mum who's already had her family ... new relationship, young baby. She's quite a lot older than me and when I first met her I thought she was a grandmother. She's lovely but she's got this child with a whole range of Special Needs but autism is one of them and ..she was struggling ... not only having him but her husband had died …and she's in every day now, she lives here, it's her life. I've not heard for the last year, 'I can't come in I'm doing too much'. And she talks openly about, 'This is her lifeline, these are her friends'. And she gets on with all the really young mums. There are no boundaries in this place, I don't know what we've done to get rid of them but there are no boundaries. (MBK6)

And one manager suggested that the friendships the women developed were enhanced by the courses' learning ethos.

> I think what works well in any kind of access-type of provision as well is the group ethos and sharing things together and learning together and I think that has been very empowering for people because at home, on your own, with two kids usually or even one, you can feel very lonely. Then to come into a room with other people who are on the same journey as you is VERY supportive and I think we've seen people being very supportive and some have said they have made really close friends and that's been lovely to watch and you watch the friendships form and when you see people, 'Oh I'll contact you' ... or ... 'Can we come to the Centre and do some work together here?' Because often people haven't got the facilities ... and that kind of thing, that people get that real ... taking control of their own study, it's lovely and a couple also got the Adult Learner's Award through Birkbeck or was it UEL who gave it? (MBK5)

Employment

The women did enhance their job opportunities following the course. We have already seen how many of the learning outcomes of the course included skills that were transferable into employment (Figure 4.1). In addition, 57% of respondents believed they could get a job or a better one as a result of their course (Figure 4.2) while some 60% of respondents had started the course to help them get a job or better job (Figure 2.1). All respondents were asked about their employment status before they started their course, while those who had finished studying at the Children's Centre were asked if they were working since finishing their course. Of those who had finished studying, 22% had worked immediately before starting their course while 28% had worked since finishing their course – suggesting the course had led to a very slight boost in employment. Furthermore, all survey respondents also were asked if they planned to get a job or another jobs in the next three years. Some 72% of them did, especially those who had studied at Birkbeck, and were more highly qualified when starting their course at the Children's Centre. These findings suggest that jobs and careers were often longer term aspirations for these women. Their responses suggest that they realised that the course

itself was just a stepping stone on the way to employment, and they were guided on how to include the course on a CV.[200] It is also important to keep in mind that around a half of the women surveyed had a child aged five or under when they started their course (Table 1.5), and so were still full-time carers. Significant numbers of the women were still planning their families as well as their careers, and were thinking about when to have another child (or having a child). So for some, their course was enhancing the women's potential economic capital.

There was some limited evidence for impact on employment from the 30 in depth interviews. Because five cohorts from 2007/8 to 2011/12 were included in the study, very few could have, for example, progressed to a part-time degree programme and completed it in time to commence a new career. The very practical constraints of caring for preschool children or children with disabilities as a single parent made employment practically impossible and made it unlikely for many participants to reap any financial benefit at that point. As a result the impact on employment was most apparent in those already in work.

Instead, there was some evidence that the increased confidence of participants changed their employment aspirations. BBK6 was already employed, but as a consequence of participation began to take on more responsibility at work and applied for an employment advisor role rather than her current one as an assistant:

> I think with this course it will help me. Before I think, the workload is ridiculous and it's, you know, their client group, they deal with a lot of very impossible clients and so it's stressful as a job, but I like it so much that I think I would want to do it and I didn't think I had enough skills, I didn't feel confident about that. As a result of doing the careers development course I think I can, the module… That tutor was amazing, [...] I actually made an application since for employment advisor role because I support them now and it's like, 'Wow!' I didn't dream I was able to do it. (BBK6)

Similarly , BBK14 was a childminder in order to care for her children while working, but she decided to change to a career in social work while studying:

> Well I started a job in social work but as a social work assistant, in 2008, and within my first year I decided that I would study towards a Degree in Social Work, and I don't think I would have done that without the confidence of going through the Birkbeck course. (BBK14)

Participation seems to have both inspired a change of career and given the confidence to pursue it for several participants.

> It's given me the confidence… Since I was a teaching assistant, I applied for a job at Christmas and I got a job as a Family Support Worker at a Children's Centre, believe it or not!? ([Laughter] [...] No, not the same Children's Centre but that was more in line with if I'm going to do a Social Science Degree then that's the kind of area I want to work with; communities, organisations like that, with families, and it gave me that confidence to think that, 'Hold on, I've done a teaching assistant job for quite a while now, my children are growing older, a bit more independent now, they can get on with things, maybe I should try and get another job.' And I applied for it and having done the Approaches to Study and the courses, there was a lot more that I could put on my CV and put on my application. (BBK17)

> As much as I enjoy my job I want to change because I've been doing it for 15 years. *I: That's a long time.* Yes, and it's a job you don't feel… I feel more, although I get paid fine, but I feel more fulfilled when I do my volunteer work than for my work that I get paid for. So I would like to do a job which I'd find both fulfilling and pays me! (BBK20)

[200] A minority of the Birkbeck students took the 15 credit module 'Career and Professional Development' which focussed on longer term planning of how to progress to a HE course and then into work.

> I would have been just the same, just looking for another dead end job and it's alright having a job but if I get a Degree then a career is something that's very different from a job. A job is a one-track thing that you do every day, which I probably wouldn't enjoy anyway. (OU2)

> I've changed, once I've done my Psychology Degree, I'm going to do the PGCE to go into teaching adult learners, study skills and stuff like that, so that… I actually enjoy, at the moment I can go into study groups and help out Openings students, and there was an Openings student last year who was really struggling with her confidence and she was… You knew she had it in her to do it but she was so negative on herself, so down on herself. To see her face when she found out she passed her Openings, it was just… I was in tears, she was so proud of herself doing it and it just brought back that feeling of how I felt when I opened up that email to see that I passed and got a Distinction, and I was like, shocked! To see that every year with new students and know that you've helped and contributed by either discussing a subject and maybe… Because when you're reading a book you interpret the information how you want to interpret it, but someone else might interpret it differently, so to have someone sit there and discuss it with you gives you a more well-rounded argument when you're writing your assignment, and it's so nice to sit and watch someone else… (OU4/5)

However, the constraints of childcare were central to all discussions of employment.

> I got a lot of study skills that I am trying to use now in this TA course that I'm doing - because I'm now doing a Teacher's Assistant course because at least getting a job in the school will help me to work full-time and be there for the kids on weekends, because school is not on on weekends, so it'll give me a totally different attitude in looking towards the job direction. (BBK13)

The findings from this study suggest that returning to higher education can be very powerful for student mothers, and there was a widely shared view among the programme directors and lecturers that the programmes have a 'huge impact' on women's lives (LBK3). This includes the development of confidence to progress onto a degree; to engage in vocational education and training; and to develop a career or find paid work.

> We've had informal feedback about people moving into different careers and having the confidence to change their jobs and do something new ... And this idea of a broadening of horizons and opening up of possibilities that weren't there before. When you talk to women it's very inspiring. You see enormous changes in their lives ... for the women who did complete, their personal transformation did seem to be quite profound; they felt they had improved their self-esteem, their confidence (PD)

There were cases, reported by Children's Centre managers, of women starting a new career, which often involved further study:

> One of the [students] is actually studying to be a midwife. And it all started with 'Approaches to Study' and she went on to do her GCSE in Maths and now she's into Midwifery and it wouldn't have happened without this course. So even if it's only one person, at the end of the day, to me it was a huge, huge achievement because these are very low-level parents with no aspirations as all. Without the 'Approaches to Study' there is no way this particular mum would have gone into something like that. (MBK4)

> I've actually got a perfect example with my parent forum Chair, a lady called [name of student]…. She came to us on a Parenting programme and was struggling really with attachment issues with her son and was crying in the corridor because she didn't want to leave her child in the crèche and just went on and on and on and eventually became Chair of our parents' forum. Volunteered here for about four days a week on our front desk…. and she started with the OU and now she's stopped volunteering with us because she is studying too

> much [laughter]! Damn ... but she's gone on and is doing Psychology and has really got an issue and is now doing Counselling and I think is going to set herself up. So she was one of those that, 'Actually, yeah, I'm going to do something with this and I'm going to really make a profession out of it'. (MOU1)

Other managers talked about how sometimes the courses acted as enabler, giving the women the confidence and tools to apply for a job.

> Well they gained through getting further training, broadening their educational knowledge, confidence definitely and giving them the tools to apply for further jobs and jobs that perhaps they might not have thought of applying for previously. (MBK2)

> I always want them (students) to go on and do a degree and everything and we very ambitious, for some people it's just what they need to make them think about applying for Teaching assistants jobs, because they haven't even had the confidence to do that, you know. And not to say that Teaching Assistant is the 'end of the road' it's like their thirst to do something and to use what they've got. So at the end of the course, you get three or four people who get jobs immediately ... (MBK5)

One Children's Centre manager discussed the imperative of paid employment for some women, who simply could not afford to engage in further study on completing their studies at the Children's Centre.

> [name of student], she's young but she's got four children and the oldest one is probably about thirteen or fourteen but she's a young mum and ... money is a struggle.... partner works but I think he's on the buses and I don't think there's much money coming in and they really struggle and she can't work with the children although the youngest now will be at school come September and she's now looking to go back to work. So the Birkbeck course to go on her CV is going to be a huge thing… and I think she will get snapped up quite quickly (MBK6)

Another highlighted the employment conundrum of women with small children and how these courses helped to break 'the cycle of unemployment'. (MBK1)

> It's really about the kind of missing group of people, parents, who are being told to go back to work but I think for some reason, when you have children, people tend to ignore the fact that you've been out of work because YOU DECIDED to have children, you know. But at the end of the day there are still people that have had a break from work or are looking for a career change or are looking to go into work for the first time and have got a lot of commitments as well… (it) is breaking the cycle of unemployment. (MBK1)

However, one Children's Centre manager warned about the need for realism in terms of the jobs women could get after a relatively short course. Instead she emphasised the way in which the course helped mothers acquire the attributes to get, and hold down a job by 'being able to get up in the morning and actually attend a course, dress up properly and get yourself organised and motivated to go and work…that's an achievement.' (MBK3)

4.4 The impact of the courses on participants' children and family

In making decisions about part-time study, students value the intrinsic rewards of studying in terms of wanting to do something new and different, their interest in their subject of study and, for mothers

especially, acting as a role model for their children.[201] Lone parents in particular are likely to identify a strong impetus to re-engage with education, devoting 'ever-increasing energy to nurturing children's emotional, creative, intellectual and social potential'[202] Other studies specifically of student parents also find positive impacts of parents' study on younger and older children's learning, emphasising being a good role model for children[203] while also highlighting the problematic notion of being a role model.[204]

However, arguably, enhancing children's learning could have far a broader impact. Indeed, as the review of Sure Start and the development of Children's Centres shows (section 1.8.3), the overall objective of Sure Start was *'To work with parents and children to promote the physical, intellectual and social development of pre-schoolchildren-particularly those who are disadvantaged-to ensure they are ready to thrive when they get to school.'*[205] Moreover, an important finding in the first evaluation, consistent with other research studies showed that positive outcomes for children were mediated by improved parenting practices. The 'core purpose' of Sure Start Children's Centres however had shifted somewhat, with more emphasis on targeted interventions that would improve the most disadvantaged children's development and readiness for school. These aims were supported by raising parent's aspirations, self-esteem and parenting skills as well as improving both child and family health and life chances. As discussed above (Section 4.3), the mothers believed, as did the programme directors, lecturers and Children's Centre staff, that their aspirations, self-confidence and self-esteem were enhanced by their participation in the Birkbeck and OU courses. So what impact did the mothers' participation on these courses have on their children?

4.4.1 Course participants' views on the impact of their course on their children and family

To assess course participants' perceptions of the impact of their courses on their family and children, all were asked in the survey about the extent to which their attitudes towards their children's education and their relationship with their partner (where relevant) had changed as a direct result of their Birkbeck and OU course (Figure 4.3).

Children

The most noteworthy and significant findings are that 84% of the women believed that as a result of their course, they had higher educational aspirations for their children, a half reported that their children were more interested in learning, and nearly a half thought that their relationship with their children had improved (Figure 4.3). These impacts exceed the respondents' initial motivations for studying. For instance, nearly two in five respondents started their course to be a role model for their children, and under a quarter to help their children with their education (Figure 2.1).

The findings are important in terms of the overall mission and ideas underpinning the rationale for Children's Centres (see section 1.8.3). They are also central to helping to reduce child poverty and educational inequalities. It is well established that children growing up in poorer families leave school with substantially lower levels of educational attainment. Such 'achievement gaps' are a major contributing factor to patterns of social mobility and poverty. These educational deficits emerge early in children's lives, even before they start school, and widen throughout childhood. Research suggests that the aspirations, attitudes and behaviour of parents and children potentially play an important part

[201] Callender *et al*, (2010) *op cit.*
[202] Hinton-Smith, T (2012) *Lone Parents' Experiences as Higher Education Students: learning to juggle*, Leicester: NIACE p. 3
[203] NUS (2009) *op cit;* Moreau and Kerner (2012) *op cit*
[204] Moreau, M. P. (2011). The societal construction of 'boys' underachievement' in educational policies: A cross-national comparison. *Journal of Education Policy*, 26(2), 161-180.
[205] Eisenstadt, N, Providing a Sure Start, The Policy Press, 2012, p 32

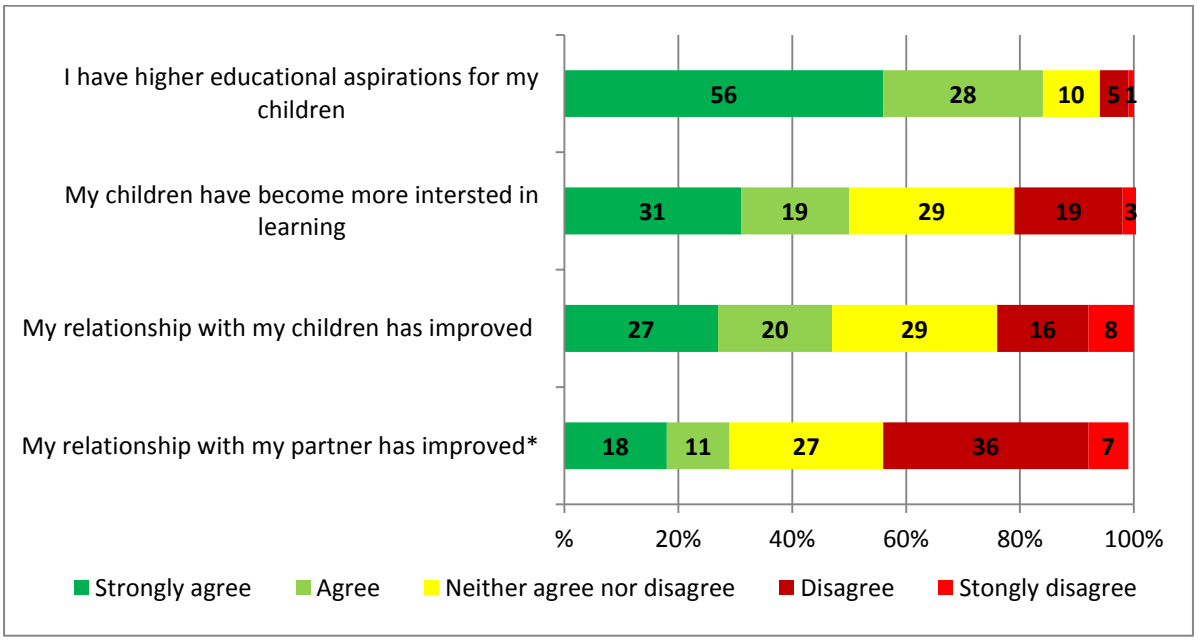
in explaining why poor children typically do worse at school.[206] Other research suggests that it is not possible to establish a clear causal relationship between aspirations, attitudes and behaviour and educational outcomes in part because of the poor evidence base. However, interventions focused on parental involvement in children's education, especially their early education, have demonstrated evidence of impact on raising attainment.[207] Indeed, research suggests that two of the major areas of policy and practice that could make a contribution to reducing educational inequalities are:

- parents and the family home: Improving the home learning environment and helping parents from poorer families to believe that their own actions and efforts can lead to improved outcomes.

- children's attitudes and behaviours: Raising families' aspirations, reducing children's behavioural problems and engagement in risky behaviours, and helping poorer children believe that their own actions and efforts can lead to improved outcomes.

This study only assesses respondents' perceptions of the outcomes of their course, rather than their actual behaviour. Debates about the relationship between attitudes and behaviour have a long history in social science. Yet, the potentially powerful impact of perceptions of actuality on behaviour is well established.[208] So these courses may contribute, in their small way to helping to reduce child poverty and educational inequalities.

Figure 4.3 The impact of the courses on participants' children and family



Base: All respondents (N=104)
*Only respondents living with a partner (N=44)
Source: Survey of course participants, 2012

[206] Goodman, A and Gregg, P (2010) *Poorer children's educational attainment: how important are attitudes and behaviour?* York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation
[207] Cater-Wall, C and Whitfield, G (2012) The role of aspirations, attitudes and behaviour in closing the educational attainment gap York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/education-achievement-poverty-summary.pdf (Accessed 07/023/2013)
[208] Kettley, N. Whitehead, J. and Raffan, J. (2007) Worried women, complacent men? Gendered responses to differential student funding in higher education, *Oxford Review of Education* Vol 34:1 pp 111-129

From the 30 participants interviewed in depth about their experience there were many accounts of the ways in which their studying had affected their families. A very important feature of this was the impact on their ability to parent their child. This is closely related to the impact on the participants themselves as discussed in section 4.3.2 on 'Parenting Skills' above. As the courses very frequently covered child development and psychology, many participants felt a benefit was their increased knowledge and understanding about their child. However, the benefit also extended beyond this to an increased awareness about communication, and respect for others' point of view. As no children were interviewed in this project, the impact on the children cannot be evaluated directly, but the parents described the changes in themselves: as calmer, more patient, and more knowledgeable, as being beneficial to their children.

> I learned a lot about children, looking after children. Because sometimes when you are talking to a child, you don't understand that child also has its own emotional feelings. Do you understand? Before, I don't think about it. I just think, 'I have to ask the child to do this. You have to do it.' But now I've realised that while you are telling the child to do it, you have to explain to the child the reason you want him to do it. Even if you shout at that child, you have to tell him the reason why you shout at him, so that he will understand and he won't say, 'Mummy hates me.' He will see that mummy loves, him, they attach. I really learned a lot, it's nice. (BBK7)

> When I was doing Psychology I realised that even with me and my son we are using Psychology every day in the way we talk, think and perceive, so you become more aware. [...] I think we did a scenario about children's upbringing and the way you talk to your child at a young age, they will grow up with that same mentality, so if you talk to them rough or soft or something they will grow up with that same mentality. (BBK10)

> How my son kind of works, how his mind works, with his autism and things like that [...] Yeah, it did help me a lot with that, yeah, with him. (BBK12)

> I'm more able to deal with things differently and understand why things are happening, the way they are happening, and dealing with them differently. Before, I didn't know how to handle my daughter, in a sense that it's calmer, more patience and because if I apply it to… The way we were learning it is to apply it to our daily lives, so if you apply it and reflect to your daily life then I have learnt a lot, it's changed a lot. I approach things differently and I look at things differently. **Interviewer: Could you elaborate on that?** Like I would focus more on my daughter if there was something I wasn't understanding about her, I would, before I would just scream and not be able to help her, so we are both screaming; but now I've learnt that I can calm down and approach it in a calm and different way, so I don't scream anymore. (BBK15)

> We did Psychology, Sociology, so a lot of it that I learnt helps with the kids and how to bring them up and it makes me think about what I'm saying and doing and I'm hopefully learning from my mistakes, and that I can help… It makes me feel a bit more aware of what's going on around me and as a parent you do make mistakes and you realised, 'Ah, maybe I shouldn't have done that,' and so you try not to do it anymore. So yes, I think that's my main thing, helping me more with my kids. So Psychology definitely helped with that especially. (BBK19)

In addition to an increased understanding of their children, many participants mentioned their increased confidence in helping children with their school work. With younger children this could take the form of helping with reading, and a better understanding of the school curriculum, with older children this could take the form of helping with homework or projects. More generally there was an increased confidence in parents' ability to search for information and to write academically, which enabled them to assist their children with many different aspects of their school work.

> And the other thing is, it impacted my children's lives as well because now I can, I help them with their work rather than find a way to get someone else to do it. [...] I used to find a tutor, someone in church that is academic, and tell them the situation and 'Oh he's struggling and needs a bit of support' and get someone to do it. But now I sat, 'What is this?' and I look and support him, give him advice and guidance around each of these assignments, things like that. With my younger son we sit and do the homework together, I support him, look at his written work, presentation as well. Sometimes he needs to give presentations and now I'm supporting with all of that! It's amazing! That's the greatest thing for me, that I can support my children with their education now. (BBK6)

> So getting on to the course and having to do assignments and essays and stuff, having him now in Reception where he comes home with a book every day, it helps me because I could actually deal with him. If I didn't get on to that course, maybe I would say, 'Oh, later, mum will do it later.' And later never comes. And then him now, getting into the thing that he has to do his school work, I don't like it, this is me having to be on it all the time because I know what it's like to be doing something in school and you're not keen on it at the time but it's going to come in handy eventually. So it's helped us quite a lot. Even to dealing with parent's meeting and having to fill out forms and explain certain things, getting on to that course really helped me. To do an essay, you have to explain yourself and all of these things. (BBK8)

> Yes, I was more confident with grammar and use of punctuation, so I could help my youngest one with homework more, because I was more confident. [...] Or how to structure an essay and things like that, I was more confident in helping them when they got stuck, both of them really, and reading through their work I could comment more and in a more constructive way. (BBK14)

> Just a lot of things, in terms of being able to support my children in their studies, so it's given me that kind of like, 'Oh, maybe we could do a research on the internet', 'Oh, you need to look at this.' So I've used the skills that I've been taught on how to study, how to look up different sources of information, 'Oh, you don't just need to go on the internet, let's go to the library', 'Why don't we go on a trip and look at this?' So those sort of areas really. And also like reading newspapers like the Guardian and taking a bit more… [Laughter]… you know, you can't get away with the Daily Mail! (BBK17)

> We do sit down now and I feel like I have the confidence to help them with their homework when they had certain issues, but I can take them on the computer, where I was a bit wary of the computer before now I've got more confidence with it so I can go and search through their work, print things off for them, take them through it, explain things to them, and once I've read it I can explain it to them. (OU6)

In addition to practical assistance with study skills and academic work, the visible effort that parents put in to studying made them a role model for studying for their school age children. Discussing the ideas they were studying with teenage children seems to have inspired an interest in pursuing higher education in the same disciplines in some cases.

> I think the way I am determined is reflecting on my children, on my daughter, because sometimes when I'm going out and I request for a newspaper, she requests for a newspaper as well. And she only looks at the pictures and if she saw something funny, she says, 'Mummy, look,' and I say, 'Yes', and I guide her by doing that because I want her to finish education earlier than me. I don't want her to still be, at the age of maybe 26 years old, still in Uni. (BBK3)

> I think as well it's good for your child to see you studying, if you've got kids of that age, because then them picking up a book and actually studying and sitting down and writing and looking things up on the computer, it won't be such an alien concept. They've seen you do it

or done it with you then it teaches them, it instils something in them, .. and it's all par for the course because then when they do get challenged you can say, 'Well have you thought of doing it this way, looking at it like this?' and if they've got an essay it's so much easier for you to teach them how to break it down or how to decide what you're going to write your essay on and how to research your essay and put things together, your beginning, middle and end and all of that sort of stuff. I think it's really good to teach them that from an early age so then it's not like, okay, when they get to secondary school and they've got exams, because they'll be used to it, they won't feel all that much pressure, because it's something that they've done from primary, if you like. (BBK5)

I just want a better life, a career, a career in nursing because I've always wanted to do that, and with that I know I'll be able to provide for my children and they'll have a better future, because when you are studying you are also able to help the children as well. When I'm doing my assignments, when their homework time is done, we do it together. So it helps the children as well, not only me but it's helping them as well. (BBK15)

I do love learning and my daughter's got that from me because she actually took Sociology because when I did it she thought, 'I love this subject and I'm going to do it,' (BBK16)

I'm very lucky with my older daughter because she's never needed prompting, she's always, 'I need to do this. I need to do be on top of this, need to do my homework,' and also I've actually been quite lucky with both of them because my younger daughter, as her homework comes out on Friday, .., as soon as she comes home she wants to do it. And they are very much education wise, my older daughter is very focused about, she's at college, wants to go on to University, she's… There's no two ways about it. That's her goal and she hasn't thought about anything else and that's what she's going to do. [...] I think she's always been like that but when I was doing the course, she saw what I was doing, especially when I was doing Sociology, it did make her decide that that was one of the subjects she wanted to do, she'd found a great interest in it as well and I just introduced her to the subject and she thought, 'This is fantastic' because she is a person that loves debates and it seems that's what she loves. (BBK17)

Yeah, we were exchanging ideas and she was telling me, 'Oh, this and this' – because one of the things that she does quite a lot, with studying Health & Social Care, is all these psychological things that she learns, she said, 'Oh, do you know this yet?' so she kept on coming to me before and saying, 'Oh, this and this', so now I am going as well to her and saying, 'Oh, did you know this?' and then she says, 'Yes, and …', you know, we could exchange our ideas. And she has her own ideas obviously and then I can pick on her and say, 'Oh, if this and this happens it's because *you* think this is also correct!' and she could say, 'Oh… Oh' and I say, 'Yeah, but you have to defend your own ideas!' (BBK21)

And I've sat there before, and I've got two daughters and they're sitting there and they'll be studying and I'll be sitting there studying with them, a little trio. **Interviewer: They like that?** Yes, I suppose they think, 'Yeah, well Dad's been doing it so I suppose we should do it.' (OU2)

You love your children, and don't get me wrong, the most important thing to me is my children, it's so nice though, even this morning my little boy said he didn't want to go to school and I said, 'Well you've got to because mummy's got to go to school today.' And it's nice for him to know that I'm learning and studying and it encourages him to want to go. He knows mummy's got to do it. (OU4/5)

My daughter respects me more because my daughter was at University and all she saw was me at home and so then she encouraged me as well, 'Education Mum!', and also I have my daughter to help me and also, we did laugh because my daughter is doing a Sociology Degree

> and some of my Law comes into her Sociology and so instead of her just seeing me as mum, it's, 'My mum's clever and she's studying and she can help me as well' and I think that's brought us closer together. (OU4/5)

> My children are doing fantastic at school, because they see me studying they now are doing their homework and are studying harder and their grades have gone up at school as well. (OU6)

> This week I'm working on my essay, so I normally sit on the bed and type. My son will bring his homework and if he needs help he will ask me, so we're working together, yes. [...] They are working harder on homework. I think they feel proud as well, to see me studying. [...] They are learning something from my course as well, to work hard. (OU8)

When participants were asked about their children's education, they often reported that their children were already doing well, and that they try to support them. However, some parents also exhorted their children to work hard at school, using themselves as a warning of the consequences of failure to study when young, and the many difficulties of returning to study as an adult and a parent. This warning could be deployed in conjunction with the parent as a role model studying in the present. So some parents presented themselves as a cautionary tale, as transgressors who have seen the error of their ways and become reformed characters, advising their children to make the most of their opportunities to study while young.

> it gives you more *push* to help them and so let them realise that they can accomplish things, they don't have to wait until they get older - because I wasn't fortunate enough to have the sort of schooling that they're getting, so I want them to be aware of how important it is for them to accomplish what they want before they start having kids - because I said to him, 'You see, it's because I've got so much on my plate, I can't really cope and I don't want that for you, I want you to be able to, when you've finished high school, you go into college or you go to University because that's the way you will rise above things.' (BBK13)

> The expectation has always been that our children will go to University because they are both quite able and they have, well in this country, without a University Degree you haven't got much of a chance really. But because I've done, at least started higher education, I could relate to it more. (BBK14)

> I see how valuable education is, so I'm even *more* pushing them – maybe I've become a bit more pushy really. I have become more pushy in the sense that I know they can do better, I know, I want to push them and give them that kind of aspiration that, 'You can do it, keep going, keep going.' [...] yeah the youngest is seven and the oldest is going to be going to secondary on September, so he needs a bit of motivation sometimes and he's not *really* that interested in university but then all of them now have got it into their head that, 'We need to go and do our A Levels, pass those, then go to university', so that's like an option for them now. (BBK17)

> It's kind of like, I was saying to them, 'Don't do what I did and wait until your 40 to do it, do it now the first time round and pave the way earlier and make your life easier.' (OU3)

However, at least one parent felt reluctant to impose their choices in relation to education on their children.

> I hope, I feel like I can't make decisions for them but I would like them to go on and do further education and maybe get Degrees and stuff, but I don't think it is necessary. It's their choice. I say that only because it is their choice completely, something that I didn't get, I had no choices and I don't want that for my children. They can do whatever they want in life as long as it's not hurting anybody or themselves, as long as it's safe and something good, and as

> long as they are paying their own bills. [Laughter] That's all I'm bothered about. I just want them to be good human beings. And before my education, all I could think about was them getting good jobs and being educated and stuff, but now, since I've got my education all I want for them is to feel as liberated as I do. (OU9)

Partners

Among those women living with a partner, only 29% believed that their relation with their partner had improved, while 43% disagreed with the statement, suggesting that their relationship had deteriorated in some way (Figure 4.3). This is not a surprising finding and is evidenced in other literature that draws attention to the way in which women's increase in confidence and sense of their potential can lead to stresses in relationships.[209] This is often associated with women's changing perceptions of gender roles.[210]

It is not possible to make any generalisations about the impact of participation on family members other than children from the in depth interviews. Parents of participants were very occasionally mentioned as being supportive (OU9) or discouraging (BBK3). Many participants were of course single parents, but some were in relationships, and partners were surprisingly rarely mentioned. Only one mentioned any practical support with family responsibilities to enable her to study, through cooking a meal when an assignment deadline was due. Only one mentioned discouragement of their studies, which was framed in terms of the need for her to prioritise their children's education over her own and postpone her higher education until the children were older. In fact when probed by interviewers, ambivalence was sometimes the only response.

> He was neither here nor there really. He didn't say anything negative but he wasn't over enthusiastic either. (BBK4)

For OU9, studying appeared to be implicated in the ending of her marriage, although she explicitly stated that it was not a result of the OU, she also stated that it her marriage would have ended if she had studied anywhere else.

> It was me... I mean the problem actually started arising a lot before when I actually thought of going back into education but I hadn't addressed it, I just brushed it under the carpet, but as I got more and more educated I felt more liberated and for that reason I'd talk more and ask more questions and was more curious, and some people don't like changes, some people don't like challenges, and I didn't know that my husband was one of those people. (OU9)

4.4.2 Programme directors', lecturers', and Children's Centre staff's views on the impact of the courses on participants' children and family

Lecturers stated that mothers reported a strong impact of their study on their children. This included confidence both in helping children with homework and in presenting themselves as role models for

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[209] Jackson, S (2004) *Differently academic? developing lifelong learning for women in higher education* Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Press; Hinton-Smith, T (2012) *Lone Parents' Experiences as Higher Education Students: learning to struggle* Leicester: NIACE

[210] Bryant, A (2003) 'Changes in attitudes towards women's roles: predicting gender-role traditionalism among college students' *Sex Roles* 3-4, 131-142; Eccles, J (1987) 'Gender roles and women's achievement-related decisions' *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 11:2, 135-172; Quinn, J (2003) *Powerful Subjects: are women really taking over the university?* Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham

the importance of study, ‘showing your children that learning doesn’t just stop when you leave school’ (L01).

Some Children’s Centre managers talked about how the course participants had greater aspirations, especially educational aspirations, for their children:

> I think it does make people want more for their children, it makes them more ambitious for their children ... whether [laughter] some children would prefer not to get more involved with .... homework, now there's another contentious issue. But I think the raising of confidence and I would like hard facts but I'm sure that what parents feel ...(MBK5)

In addition, the managers observed how the mothers were acting as a role model for their children, converging with the participants’ accounts of this.

> I think the kids are benefitting hugely, the role modelling of their parents doing courses and qualifications. Seeing their mums studying at home and reading. I mean [name of student] came and collected her books this morning…. She's bought a set of, they're children's versions of Shakespeare books and she said, 'Oh she [daughter] loves reading these' and she showed me all these pictures on her phone and there's her kid sitting in the middle of the playground at school reading a book. Every other kid is waiting for their mum to pick 'em up and she's sitting in a playground reading a book, that's how she found her. And that's the middle one, who is four and a bit, going into Reception. Her children just love reading and I think that's because [name of student] understands the importance of it because of what she's done and because she's at home reading, she's doing her work. So I think the educational level of those children will step up a gear. (MBK6)

This particular Children’s Centre manager, along with lecturers talked about also talked about the way their Centre nurtured the idea of the mothers as role models and celebrated the mother’s achievements, demonstrating to others the possibility of raising their aspirations:

> We graduate the parents so if they've done some sort of ... qualification, we get them up and if they want to put gowns on they can because we've got grown up gowns and hats. Some of them go, 'Ohhhhhhhhhh!' and others want to do it and they want their photo taken and they want to be on the board and everything. We either do lunch beforehand or lunch after so everyone comes together and they're allowed to bring families and friends and [name of HEIS student] came with her mum, and her mum was just so proud of her. She is about one of ten kids, a big family with lots of issues and she's the only child who's ever gone to uni, so for her it was a HUGE thing and she had her children with her to watch. …We usually get a dignitary from the Local Authority to come along to do a little speech and it's just about raising aspirations that you CAN go to University, it's NOT out of your reach. (MBK6).

The opinions of both lecturers and Children’s Centre managers converged. Lecturers are also told by their students about just how proud they are about their achievements and telling their children, as did Children’s Centre managers:

> 'I'm going to be so proud to tell my children that I've studied at higher education’ ... I think ... they are thinking ahead and they understand social mobility on the ground and they understand it has an impact on their children and it gives them the confidence to say, 'I want you to go to university'... 'to entertain the idea of going to university'. (LBK1)

> I think the women who have done it and they've involved their partners and they've involved their children. A great deal of pride really ... mum is doing something very special and they almost move the bar slightly as to the whole family really. So even the children are very proud of the mothers and that sort of has an effect on their own learning as well. If mum's

> decided to learn they also are beginning to think as a family how important learning and education is. (MOU2)

Some Children's Centre managers commented that mothers are more confident about supporting their children at school, again collaborating participants accounts of this.

> I think they feel more confident to talk to teachers. They know some more of the jargon actually because it's jargon in education. So the terminology is a bit more, not that its school terminology but there is a certain vocabulary that you use and they also see themselves differently, 'That I can support my child'. So I think they're a bit more questioning and definitely more involved and again one woman said, 'Oh I always look at her [daughter] books more now and I'm really interested' ... and she said ... 'I'm not sure I was that before' ... because she wasn't connecting with it. (MBK5)

A recurrent theme was the way in which learning at home and homework often became a joint activity.

> Many of the students actually learn together with their older children in the sense that we hear so many stories about how their learning journeys are really taking on board new meaning because of the fact that they are at the nursery and being involved in other activities. (LBK2)

Homework can become 'a family affair' (LBK4) with mothers and children sitting down to work together, with children saying 'come on mum – we've got to sit down and do homework' (PD). Mothers reported that they had not appreciated how difficult it is to sit down and do homework, and now better understood their children (LBK5). Whilst mothers had renewed confidence to help with their children's homework, children also helped their mothers with homework, for example in preparing PowerPoint presentations (LBK2).

> The ones [mothers] with older kids they've come back with stories like, 'oh my daughter wanted to do my presentation and she was saying, ' Let me do it, let me do it!' ...' They really ... they're finding this link with the kids that are going to school and particularly Secondary school and what their mums are doing and what they've never done before; they are finding the sort of bond with them because they're both sitting there doing homework! They have never been in that situation before ... and doing a lot of Literacy stuff, the same sort of thing. yeah, fair enough, it will get you into getting a course and improving your literacy but at the same time it is going to improve an interaction with your children as well and what they bring home from school and how they speak and the homework that they're doing. So now, those parents are certainly seeing a link between what they're doing and having ... it's a bonding process, two people doing homework. (MBK1)

Some mothers were engaging in new activities with their children, enhancing their children's education and cultural capital.

> I know one parent who said, 'She went to museums and she felt more ABLE to go because she didn't feel she could before' ... because ...'I didn't understand it and I'm not sure I understand it any more now but I feel more able to go'. So I think the children often get a different experience of family life where parents are a bit more, 'Oh we'll go to the library' ... or ... another parent said that her daughter, who was at Secondary school, loved watching her mum writing because ...'It was great to see mum studying' and I think in THAT sense it is really good and value to education and also knowing about where to get information from because of the course is about accessing information and HOW to access information. So if they've got concerns about their child or they're thinking, 'I'm not sure my child's ... I don't know ... achieving what they could ...' they know where to find out and then they can support their child better. So I think the children really benefit. (MBK5)

One programme director reported that the course gave the women more confidence as parents ‘and it feeds into them being a better parent and the truancy goes down ... the absenteeism at school goes down’ (PD). ‘Women want to improve both their own lives and the lives of their children through education, which takes on a renewed importance’. (PD).

> It [course] broadens the parent's horizons so they are passing that onto their children and the ethos of better education and training is a better lifestyle that all gets passed on as well. (MBK2)

For those mothers using the crèche at the Children’s Centre while they studied, there is a direct benefit to their children.

> I think the children get some period time away from their parents, so they start to build confidence as independent people in the crèche and it’s a step towards going into education because we have really well-planned play sessions. and then there's longer term, if the family ... they're just more aspirational I think.(MBK4)

In addition, an increase in confidence and enhanced sense of feeling better about themselves through doing the course leads to better relationships between mothers and their children, with home life becoming ‘more harmonious’ (LBK5). But this could also lead to friction with partners as one Children’s Centre manager explained:

> I think sometimes, well there has been an impact on their family. If their family has not been supportive it's been frustrating with a student if the partner is saying, 'well you don't really need to do this' and is being a bit negative and she really wants to do it and there's been some friction. So there has been downsides to it. Impact on children's times initially until they get that time management right. So sometimes when I've had students start the courses, 'Oh I can't do it, it's taking too much time ...' but when they've looked at time management and they can do it and they can fit it in and it's not having such a big impact then it’s worked out ... but there have been ... situations, it has caused friction. (OU2)

According to the lecturers, the women report that the course can give them strength to deal with adversity such as difficult relationship and domestic violence (LBK4). However, the course can sometimes act as a ‘tipping point’ (LBK4) in already difficult relationships:

> ..in cultures ... very intelligent women who have moved to this country ... but are actually trying to find their place within British culture and often living in sorts of cultures where the man is actually ... has control over an awful lot of what's going on in the family. Those tensions can emerge ... have always emerged in terms of learning in terms of women's place in the family and those sorts of things. (PD)

4.5 Impact on the course on the community, volunteering and the Children’s Centres,

Social capital, the networks, shared norms and ties and groups that people formulate are said to contribute to social cohesion and inclusion.[211] Adult education is said to lead to greater community participation, contributing to a greater sense of social justice.[212]

[211] Field, J (2000) *Lifelong learning and the new educational order,* Stoke-in-Trent: Trentham Books; Baron, S, Field, J and Schuller, T (2000) *Social Capital: Critical Perspectives* Oxford: Oxford University Press

[212] Coare, P and Johnston, R (2003) *Adult learning, citizenship and community voices: exploring community-based practice,* Leicester: NIACE

The survey of course participants suggests that only a minority of participants became involved in voluntary, community, and campaigning work as a direct result of their course. Some 39% agreed they were involved in such work as a result of their course, and 34% disagreed (Figure 4.2). However, some women were already involved in such work and in reality, a lot of them would not have had time to do this alongside their existing commitments. According to these data the course may not have enhanced this aspect of their social capital, although there was other evidence in this study of increasing involvement in voluntary work. Of those survey respondents who had finished studying, 11% were doing voluntary work immediately before starting their course but this proportion rose to 32% since finishing their course.

For the 30 participants who were interviewed in depth the effect on the wider community was discussed much less frequently than the impact on the individual student and their family. However, there were cases of those who were clearly having a positive impact on their community.

BBK20 had successfully completed the HEIS programme in 2009/10 and continued her studies, expecting to complete her degree in the summer of 2013. Her changing understanding of society, the transformative effect of her study had led her to take action to address the inequality that she studied. She had begun volunteering with a local charity that assisted families in need of support to manage everyday life. However, her desire to act upon the understandings she acquired through studying social sciences was not limited to charitable activity also extended to a changed understanding of campaigning, and her research for her final dissertation was inspired by this.

> It's like before I didn't see the point of volunteering but now I do that, I started 2 years ago, but I didn't see the point of demonstration and marches and all this, or petitioning for something, I didn't understand the point of it. (BBK20)

> Actually my reason for doing my dissertation when they were saying about cuts and cuts and cuts, and they were saying about all of that and I thought about maybe this would be one of the things being cut because being funded, the local Children's Centre, because most of those centres are closing down. I would go and sit at the gates of the House of Commons and say 'NO! Don't close them!' (BBK20)

OU2 had successfully completed Openings in Law and gone on to study for a Law degree with the OU. He described how he had become a resource for his community, whom he felt were unaware of their legal rights, which was exploited by debt collectors and bailiffs who misrepresented their powers to community members.

> Now everyone comes and asks advice and stuff, because I'm studying. [...] 'You know the Law!'. So you end up helping people with their problems in their personal lives because they come to you for advice. (OU2)

> Obviously I'm from a poor area and a lot of people have things like, well basically I've helped them with debts, with sorting things out and that, different bailiff companies and things like that. This is a pretty poor area. (OU2)

OU6 had also completed Openings in Law and continued to study for a Law degree with the OU. Through her experience of disability she had become aware of the obstacles facing disabled people in accessing services to which she felt they were entitled. She has both acted as a disability rights activist in contexts such as the local school, raising awareness of the needs of disabled people, and acted as an advisor on rights and benefits to many disabled individuals. She has used her legal knowledge, and growing experience on disability to act as an advocate in dealing with branches of government and even a fundraiser for individuals. She intended to establish a local disability rights charity on graduation.

> I've been in to see the headmaster and we've sorted out a few disability issues with the school, with their parents' evening; they weren't leaving enough room between chairs and stuff for disabled people to get through and it was overcrowded, and we explained that to the headmaster and he's now changed it… (OU6)

> I find that as soon as you go onto the telephone to one of the Council departments, or wherever, and they start giving you all their flannel and saying this, that and the other, and you go, 'Well hold on a minute, under Law blah blah blah, subsection so and so, this is wrong' and then they go, 'Erm… erm… Hold on a moment…' and then you have a total different reaction like that and they come back and go, 'Oh hold on a minute, yes, we can do something about that. Just wait…' Because if you don't know what you're talking about with these people then they'll walk all over you. But as soon as you start quoting laws at them they know what you're talking about and you can quote that Law and subsection to them, and they may go away and come back a couple of days later going, 'Well hold on a minute…' or they might do it instantly because they know that you know what you're talking about, and it's done. (OU6)

> The changes from day to day and to see someone's face when you've got a result for them, like, they've received a Disability Living Allowance or have sorted out the housing issue or have even just got a lift for the bath or a pillow for their bed, they've got those small changes that they desperately need. (OU6)

Several lecturers and programme directors commented on the benefits of the courses to the community. For example, two lecturers noted that the programmes have the potential to get people to become more involved in their communities, including through volunteering, but also developing a greater sense of how stereotypes work, 'bringing people together from different groups ... (and) communities (LBK5). They increase the chances of 'social mobility or a person's ability to live economically independent or to thrive in terms of family' (LBK1).

It also became clear that several students were volunteering as a direct result of undertaking the programme. 'Quite a lot of them are volunteering ... A lot of them are volunteering in primary schools' (L01) and many of them are on the Parents' Board (LBK2). A programme director agreed that a benefit of the course is

> …people going out doing volunteering. We've currently got eight ... now doing placements as teaching assistants volunteering and one that has led to a job there directly. Someone else who has got a job in the Children's Centre who did some volunteering. So [the programme] leads to volunteering and to work as well as further qualifications .... I'd say at least 40% of our students end up moving into volunteering. (PD)

Some women were helping with reading groups and 'the group are involved or just about to be involved in volunteering now, which I think has a lot to do with this course' (LBK3), which examines the welfare state and the voluntary sector. This 'has been a particular interest to these groups and ... that focus has certainly led to at least a couple of this group who hadn't already been involved getting involved now in voluntary work'. (LBK3)

Similarly, some Children's Centre managers talked about how the women involved in the Birkbeck and OU course had become involved in the running of the Children's Centre and especially the Parents' Forum.

> Some of the OU people have come in and become part of our parent's forum. So they've become heavily involved in the Centre. (MOU1)

One Children's Centre manager talked about how students on the Birkbeck course – 'wanted to give something back because they've done the Birkbeck and the difference it's made to them'. (MBK6)

> Then the opportunity came up last summer for [name of student] to be a Literacy Champion as part of Boris Johnson's Big Literacy Campaign. So her, [names of students], three out of my first Literacy Champions are on the Birkbeck course and they run it on the Friday morning with [name], who is one of our other mums and they've grown doing that course as well so much but they wanted to give something back because they've done the Birkbeck and the difference it's made to them. (MBK6)

Even students who dropped out of the course still reaped benefits

> [Name of student] who dropped out, her writing skills improved a lot and she still sits as a stakeholder offering to take Minutes for the stakeholder's meeting ... which would never have happened before. Actually it's volunteering ... all because of that. (MBK4)

Benefits for the Children's Centre

As discussed in Chapter 2, essential to the success of the courses was the overall synergy between the Children's Centres mission and aims and the Birkbeck and OU course objectives. From the Children's Centre managers' perspective, as we have seen, the courses were successful for the mothers when the mothers' aspirations were broadened; their confidence and self esteem improved; new opportunities could emerge; and when the participants completed the course and gained a qualification. Also, as discussed above, there was considerable evidence from both the survey of course participants and the in-depth interviews with the mothers that these changes had occurred.

In addition, these Children's Centre managers adopted other complementary criteria for judging the success of these courses, which were linked more closely to their Centre's work. The managers were concerned about the impact and outcomes of the courses in terms of meeting their Centre's mission and targets. So when assessing and evaluating these courses' success, the managers examined both tangible and non-tangible outcomes and achievements, what happened to the women on completing their studies at the Children's Centre, and whether the programmes helped fulfil their Centre's programme of work.

For example, one manager discussed how they were evaluating achievement as follows:

> We're going to be looking at ... how many achievements people get and we're going to be looking at the sort of intangible aspects of 'How has your confidence changed?' 'What has this course enabled you to do in your community?' 'How has this had any difference in your interaction with your children?' Those are all the kinds of things that we've collected. The idea is you can see where improvements are but also to see how things are linked. ... There will be things like confidence; there will be things like personal development and communication skills or interactional aspirations and things like that. (MBK1)

Another manager focused on what she termed progression.

> We'd look at progression. We'd see what that person has actually achieved…Family Support would put this as their priority and see that, if as a result of this Mum coming out of this training, has been more confident and is able to do more then we can lead her onto a better course or into actually a course that leads to employment yeah? Or if she's ready to look for work now, so we'd look at the next stage. Then you would get the other side, where they would be coming in specifically asking for training and if that's the case we would see, 'what are they trying to achieve?' (MBK3)

However, a further manager counselled for a need to be realistic when assessing what happened to the women on completing their studies at the Centre.

> But you can't expect a year to bring anything like that but if it brings them enough confidence to actually start work in Primark. By being able to get up in the morning and actually attend a course, dress up properly and get yourself organised and motivated to go and work in Primark that's an achievement and then you'd also find that, let's say twenty people, maybe four or five would lead onto a University course. But that's how we have to measure it. I don't think you will get twelve starters all going into University, that's not going to happen but you will get three or four who will come onto the course with a view….. So I think it all depends on how you look at what you aim for. So each family would have a different objective. (MBK3)

Another Children's Centre manager talked about the role the courses played in terms of the course participants' continuing involvement in the Children's Centre, as well as the overall outcomes for the women and their progression.

> For the Children's Centre I'd be looking at whether we were keeping people engaged with the Programmes or were we keeping attendance, which is what we look at everything because things have to got to be cost effective even if we're not paying for them, somebody else is paying for them. So in term of the Children's Centre it would be that and then in term of I need to measure outcomes, in terms of where people have got to so how many have passed, how many have moved on to something else so if I can evidence that. Out of the say fifteen that started ... where are they all now, what have they all done? That would be more outcomes. (MBK6)

One manager related the success of the courses to Every Child Matters outcomes:

> From the nursery perspective, yes, we just need to be able to demonstrate them and evidence them and that's an outcome in itself. Because we're only here for the ECM [Every Child Matters] outcomes. We are only here for them, so if we can see any change in them. (MBK4)

Perhaps surprisingly, given the current policy focus of Children's Centres, few of them talked about employment outcome for the mothers. One did say that a measure of success was if the mothers:

> 'Got a job out of it. Employment is a big thing for us…or gone on to further study and have gained confidence in parenting'. (MOU1)

Another Children's Centre manager rated the course a success when there was further demand for such courses:

> I think that when people have said, 'Are you doing that Birkbeck course again?' So I know it's been a success if people are wanting to do it and people are asking about doing it, so that's definitely a success. I think as much as ... I suppose I've never used this phrase but I should have done because what it does is widens people's horizons and I think it widens our horizons as a Centre because we could get a little inward-looking and a bit caught up in ourselves. So having this link with an established Institution with a good reputation is good for us. So I think it's good for us and I suppose ... that's a success in itself, does that make sense? (MBK5)

This led one Children's Centre manager to conclude:

> They [the courses] are massively important because I think it is showing the Children's Centres in a positive light. That it's more than just a nursery, which is what they've been considered for years and years and years. (MBK1)

4.6 Summary of key findings

- A minority (39%) of students surveyed progressed on to further study once they had finished studying at the Children's Centre. However, the vast majority (77%) of survey respondents planned to take another course or qualification in the next three years, suggesting that their course had whetted their appetite for further study.

4.6.1 Impact of the course on the participants

- The courses proved very successful in meeting their planned learning outcomes in terms of the academic and other skills the participants had learnt.

- The majority of course participants surveyed reported that their skills had developed 'a lot', especially, their ability to think about their own learning (83%); their knowledge about a particular subject (80%); analysing and respecting people's different views and perspectives (76%); and improved writing skills (75%).

- These outcomes point to the success of the pedagogical approaches adopted by the courses.

- Arguably, some of the most significant findings from this whole study relate to the wider benefits of learning for the course participants.

- Eighty-eight per cent of the course participants surveyed reported that as a result of the course they realised they could get a higher education qualification, while 87% said they enjoyed learning more. These findings alone are testament to the success of these courses. The courses had increased the women's confidence in their capability of gaining a degree, which was the main aim of the Birkbeck and OU programmes.

- In addition, the vast majority of respondents believed that as a direct result of their course they were more self-confident (83%); felt more positive about their future (76%); were more interested in the world around them (70%); and had better life opportunities (60%). So the course had helped to raise their aspirations.

- When these outcomes are compared with the women's motivations for studying, we see that the courses largely fulfilled the participants' key reasons for taking them.

- The in-depth interviews with the women (and the programme directors, lecturers and Children's Centre staff) reiterated these impacts and suggested how the courses had led to a strong sense of achievement and opened up of new opportunities while raising the women's personal ambitions. The women felt more self-confident, had developed a stronger sense of themselves, had improved their parenting skills, and they had gained new friendships and support networks furthering social cohesion.

- Arguably, the most important finding from the qualitative interviews was the transformative nature of the women's study experiences – their studies had changed the way they understood the world in a way that could not be reversed or forgotten. The women were more critical about the world around them (for good and for ill) and had absorbed higher education values in the way that they respected diverse opinions and had developed ways of debating them. Some course participants had started reading broadsheet newspapers and books, going to the theatre, going to the opera, watching foreign language films, and one got rid of their television.

- The HEIS and OU courses had whetted the participants' appetite for further study too. The course participant survey revealed that two out of five participants engaged in further study after they had finished studying at the Children's Centre.

- A much higher proportion of course participants surveyed, (over three-quarters) intended to take another course within the next three years, especially those from poor households, suggesting that for this group of students the decision to progress may need to be part of longer term planning.

- The courses did not have an immediate impact on the women's labour market activities, but it should be recalled that many of the women (41%) had children aged five or under when they started their course and a number of women were intending to have other children in the foreseeable future. However, 72% of course participants surveyed planned to get a job or another job in the next three years, especially those studying at Birkbeck.

Impact of the course on participants' children and family

- Part of the rationale of Children's Centres is to raise parents' aspirations for their children alongside improving their parenting skills. Research suggests that a key way of combating educational inequalities, and specifically poor children's attainment, is through improving both parents' and children's educational aspirations.

- Thus particularly noteworthy and significant findings were that 84% of the course participants surveyed believed that as a result of their course, they had higher educational aspirations for their children, and half reported that their children were more interested in learning. This is particularly encouraging given the correlation between parental attitudes, aspirations, and their children's educational outcomes, suggesting that these courses may contribute to reducing educational inequalities.

- Nearly a half of the survey respondents thought that their relationship with their children had improved.

- These impacts exceed the survey respondents' initial motivations for studying. For instance, nearly two in five respondents started their course because they wanted to be a role model for their children, and under a quarter because they wanted to help their children with their education.

- Again these findings are re-iterated in the qualitative in-depth interviews with the course participants. Particularly striking was how the women felt about themselves had changed, and how this was seen as beneficial to their children - they were calmer, more patient, and more knowledgeable, while their understanding of their children increased. Many participants helped their children with their school work with far greater confidence, and the visible effort that parents put in to studying made them a role model for studying for their school age children. Some parents also used their earlier educational experiences as a cautionary tale, as transgressors who had seen the error of their ways and become reformed characters, advising their children to make the most of their opportunities to study while young.

- The impact of the course on the women's relationship with their partners was less positive, with the women surveyed most often reporting that their relationship had deteriorated in some way – a finding evidenced in other studies.

Impact of the course on the community, volunteering and the Children's Centres

- Only a minority (39%) of course participants surveyed had become involved in community based work as a direct result of their course. However, the proportion participating in such activities before and after their course did increase threefold.

- Women's motives for volunteering varied. Some women volunteered at the Children's Centre to become more involved in the Centre and to give some back to it because they were grateful for the benefits they had reaped from their involvement. Others engaged in voluntary work because it was part of their modules on child development.

- Some women used what they had learnt on their course, especially those studying Law at the OU, to engage in local activism and to become a resource for the local community.

- Several of the Children's Centre managers reported that course participants played a more active role in their local community and in the running of their Centres, again one of the overall aims of Children's Centres.

- In the eyes of Children's Centre managers, the Birkbeck and OU courses also helped their Centres to meet their overall mission and targets, and the outcomes for the women, mostly fulfilled the managers' criteria for success.

Widening Participation: The Outcomes and Impact of the Courses - Recommendations and implications for policy and practice

- Data on progression to further study need to be collected systematically by HEIs to help in the evaluation of the outcomes of such programmes.

- The decision by Birkbeck to provide just the first year of the HE Cert qualification programme (i.e. two modules) at the Children's Centres and then expecting the students to continue their qualification at the main Birkbeck campuses raises a range of practical problems regarding progression and students gaining a full HE qualification. Some of the main attractions of the courses associated with their Children's Centre location are lost: free childcare; their localness and proximity to the women's home; and the day-time teaching hours. Birkbeck is currently unable to provide free childcare or day-time courses for these students. These issues need to be considered if such a model of provision is adopted.

- Birkbeck might consider running HEIS courses during the day at their main campuses to encourage mother to progress so that they can fit their studies around their domestic responsibilities.

- Progression might be improved if Birkbeck students, while still studying at the Children's Centres, had greater exposure to the main Birkbeck campuses. Not only would this help them develop a greater sense of being part of a university community but also might help them overcome any concerns about studying at the main campuses in an unfamiliar environment. Also, students could be taken to the library and given additional help to compensate for the limited learning resources at the Children's Centres.

- Where Birkbeck students progress on to a second year at one of the Birkbeck campuses, every attempt should be made to keep the cohort together so that the women could build on the support networks they developed while at the Children's Centre in their first year of study.

- Courses need to ensure that they prepare students to make the transition from the highly supportive learning environment of the Children's Centre to a less supportive one that they

may encounter at other HEIs, and in other courses not particularly designed for 'widening participation' students.

- Students might benefit from more help when making online applications to courses and on-line applications for student financial support from the Student Loans Company. (Students even when continuing their studies are now expected to enrol online, and to apply online for student support and student loans). Research from the US,[213] illustrates the beneficial aspects of such help in terms of college attendance, persistence, and aid receipt.

- Where students do progress from studying at the Children's Centre to studying at another location or institution, Children's Centres could consider developing a learning hub for their 'ex-students' so that they can gather regularly and support each other.

- UKCES argues that 'skill acquisition which does not enhance employability, earnings, labour market progression or which does not bring other economic and social returns, is a waste of public and private resources'.[214] It is quite clear that these courses did lead to considerable social returns in terms of the wider benefits of learning for both the participants and their children and thus are not a waste of public resources. Indeed, arguably they are an investment in the future lives of the women and probably their children, and in efforts to tackle the educational under-achievement of children living in poverty.

- Moreover, in line with current debates about skills utilisation, that just increasing the supply of more skilled people is inadequate - the skills also need to be used and bring real, sustainable benefits to the individuals concerned. It is clear that the vast majority of women in this study had used the skills they learnt in their daily lives and that these skills brought sustainable benefits.

- Yet the policy rhetoric regarding lifelong learning, and indeed the policy changes regarding the role of Children's Centres, focus on employment outcomes. Higher education policies stress the private financial returns to individuals and the extrinsic, economic goals while largely ignoring the wider private and public benefits of higher education. In part, this is because of on an underlying premise that HE students tend to be young single school leavers studying on a full-time basis who enter the labour market for the first time on graduation. In part, it because of the marketisation of higher education, which valorises private returns at the expense of the wider benefits of learning.

- This study suggests that these underlying assertions informing HE policy may be inappropriate for adult learners, especially for the students in this study - those with family commitments, who enter higher education with very low education qualifications, and who have multiple and complex needs, often living in poverty. Given, the women's starting point they may not gain employment immediately after completing their studies, but their employment opportunities are likely to have been improved as a direct consequence of their studies.

- The wider social, and enduring, benefits of the course reaped by the participants, went well beyond their initial expectations. Many of these benefits are hard to quantify and measure, but remain highly significant for the course participants, their children, and for society as whole.

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[213] Bettinger, E., Long, B., Oreopoulos, P., and Sanbonmatsu, L. (2012) The Role of Application Assistance and Information in College Decisions: Results from the H&R Block FAFSA Experiment. Quarterly Journal of Economics 127(3): 1-38.

[214] UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES). (2010). *Ambition 2020: World class skills and jobs in the UK.* London and Wath-upon-Dearne, UKCES p 109

5 CONCLUSIONS

This chapter discusses the challenges ahead for courses run by Birkbeck and the OU, and revisits the research questions this study set out to address.

5.1 Challenges ahead

5.1.1 Changing HE policies

Since this study was undertaken there have been numerous changes in the higher education landscape. Most important are those arising from the 2011 White Paper *Students at the Heart of the System*.[215] Particularly significant is the withdrawal of most HEFCE funding for the courses HEIs teach, and the assumption that universities can recoup this lost income through raising its tuition fees, increases to be paid for by students taking out student loans (discussed in more depth below.) These reforms need to be located within the broader policy agenda of the marketisation of higher education, which in turn has contributed to changes in the organisational cultures of HEI's and institutional priorities. As a result, there is a greater emphasis on the bottom line and the cost effectiveness of courses, the reallocation of resources away from teaching, and a more managerial approach to provision with performance measures and management targets.[216]

Another consequence of these changes is the financial pressures brought by the 2012/13 funding reforms on some HEIs. As discussed (see section 1.8.2), both Birkbeck and, to some extent, the OU, like the rest of the part-time sector have seen considerable falls in student enrolments, and with that a loss of income. Both institutions have examined ways of reducing costs, including assessing the financial viability of courses and a re-assessment of its subject portfolio.

At risk, for Birkbeck, are courses with low or reduced levels of recruitment. In 2012/13 only 23 students were recruited to HEIS courses run in Children's Centres compared with over twice that number in 2010/11. And the number of Children's Centres involved in running these courses has also reduced because of the failure to recruit students. Much more significantly, in 2013/14 **no** students were recruited, despite more extensive outreach work and newly introduced 'taster sessions' for potential recruits. Demand for these courses, despite their clear benefits, has collapsed.

At the Open University, there was also **no** recruitment to the scheme in 2013/14 and very limited numbers in 2012/13. There were two main reasons for this. In 2012/13, the tuition fee for Openings increased from £195 to £625 in line with the overall fee increases necessitated by the shift from direct to indirect government funding. Although financial support was still available, it was entirely income-based and thus less flexible than the previous financial support scheme and required students to sign up for a full qualification. Then, in 2013/14, the work of the Community Partnership Managers was re-focused on supporting students on qualifications through subject based student support teams, so in essence the Community Partnership Scheme was disbanded.

In addition, the full economic costs of running the OU scheme were very high and included not just the staffing of the study skills sessions , but also the overhead costs associated with managing the scheme, including the time of a dedicated Community Partnerships Manager and contribution to costs of crèches. The funding for this was accounted for against the Widening Participation premium but the gradual reduction in this funding stream in the last two years and the uncertainty over its

[215] Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2011) *Higher education: Students at the heart of the system,* Cm 8122, London: Stationery Office

[216] For a more detailed discussion of the 2012/13 reforms see Callender, C. and Scott, P. (eds) (2013*) Browne and beyond: Modernizing English Higher Education*, London: Institute of Education Press, Bedford Way Papers, especially the chapter by Watson and the concluding chapter by Callender and Scott.

continuation for 2014/15, combined with a desire to reach out to a wider number of potential learners have resulted in a revised OU strategy for outreach at a national, rather than a regional level, working through national partnerships. Yet as this study has shown, the local knowledge of the regional Community Partnerships Manager of their area was central to the success of these partnerships with Children's Centres. There is, however, a tension between the cost of developing and maintaining such partnerships and the schemes that operate within them and the numbers who might benefit from them. Outreach in any format is costly and the need to demonstrate 'value for money' can militate against many worthwhile initiatives where the definition of success is not necessarily shared. The OU experience also points to the way in which changes in the supply of part-time courses may have a direct impact on the demand for part-time courses. As one person from the OU commented: 'The OU has a huge commitment to Outreach work but it's the constraints of the funding really that are the difficulties at the moment ...' (LOU1).

Furthermore, the increasing emphasis on evidencing impact of the Widening Participation spend in HEIs also creates a tension when set in a broader policy context.

Justifiably, there was a unanimous concern amongst programme directors and lecturers about the current context of higher education, and a perceived risk to the programmes being delivered. It is worth remembering that these individuals were interviewed in the spring of 2012, before the impact of the changes could be properly assessed. One lecturer noted that it was important for institutions to aim to work with, rather than against, new agendas. If current policy emphasises 'single parents returning to work and parents working ... mothers working in particular' then it was important 'to connect with that agenda' (LBK3), although the lecturer noted that the financial burdens on students will have an impact. A programme director, too, suggested that institutional strategy needs to align with government policy and was pleased to note that 'HEFCE is now talking about building active Outreach programmes'. However,

> We are going to get a very different type of student, very different numbers ... I think we'll have less students but I'm hoping that they will still come from the same categories ... and I think we might get students who do have slightly higher levels of qualifications ... I think students who aren't so confident might have to go and do FE courses. (PD)

There were concerns too about whether the programmes themselves had been compromised in current cultures of vocationalism and training (Freire, 2004), as the 'ethical imperative [of the programme] sits uneasily with the market-driven culture of HE' (PD) (see section 4.1).

The current financial climate means that the majority of lecturers used in such schemes have short, fixed term or zero hours contracts; and they had concerns about job security. If an insufficient number of students enrolled on the course, some may have no work or less work and income.

5.1.2 New student funding – student loans and higher fees

All programme directors and lecturers, and most Children's Centre staff expressed concern about the changes in funding and the replacement of grants for tuition fees with student loans.

Prior to the 2012 funding reforms (see section 1.8.2) most students participating in the HEIS Birkbeck courses and the OU Opening Courses at the Children's Centres paid no fees (Table 1.4) because they received a government funded grant for their fees, or, in the case of the OU, were in receipt of fee waivers. As we have seen, since 2012/13, the OU have opted to keep the tuition fees of their Openings courses to just £25 for these 15 credit courses for eligible low-income students, on condition that they register for a qualification. The new scheme to be launched for 2014/15 makes a full 30 credit access

module available free of charge to eligible students, again subject to qualification registration.[217] So these courses would be free of change, which in theory should help improve recruitment. However, as discussed above, these funding changes alongside other OU policy decisions to refocus the work of Community Partnership Managers on providing support to students on programmes through the subject-based Student Support Teams has meant an end to the scheme run through the Children's Centres. [218]

Birkbeck's fees policy is heading in the opposite direction. Unlike the OU, fees are going up rather than down. In 2013/14 Birkbeck charged £1,000 for a 30 credit module and this will rise to £1,500 in 2015/16. Some students may be eligible for the student loans to cover these fees, but they must sign up for the whole HEIS/Degree course and be studying 25% or more of a full-time course (i.e. 30 credits), and not already have a an equivalent or lower higher education qualification. However, fee waivers were available in 2012/13 and 2013/14 for two 30 credit modules (i.e. in the modules taken in the Children's Centres).

However, as we have seen, this help was not enough to encourage parents to join the Birkbeck courses in 2013/14 when potential students have appeared to be unwilling to commit to a pathway which will, for future progression, involve them taking out a student loan. And with the recent announcements concerning the future of the National Scholarship Scheme and large reductions in funding, one of the key sources for subsidising both Birkbeck and OU students will be lost.

Whilst some programme directors and lecturers commented on the benefits of loans for part-time students, there were severe reservations as to whether potential students would be willing to accumulate student loan debt, even if in some cases (perhaps many cases) loans may not be repaid, at all or in full. As one PD stated, 'the mothers are always concerned about whether to take shorter more vocational routes and this may become more intensified'. 'It's easier for women to get some sorts of jobs ... I think people may well look ahead and say 'oh what's the point' [in accumulating debt]' (LBK5).

The Children's Centre staff expressed similar views, regarding the new loan as a potential barrier to participation.

> The funding for the parents because there's no more grant for them, they have to get a Student Loan ... I don't know how it's going to pan out really because the idea of leaving them to cope alone, I don't think the parents ... it will take a lot of convincing that ... to go for a Student Loan….. I don't think the parents will go for a Student Loan. Because we are talking about parents, they don't work. They all live on benefits and they are struggling as it is and asking them to commit to a Student Loan, they may never pay it back but the understanding that they might not accept the Student Loan. As you can imagine, the thought that even if they did get a job there would be that [loan debt]... so much of what they were earning would disappear ... Anything to do with money is a huge .... a real anxiety. (MBK4)

There was also a view that it was not the loan itself that would act as a barrier per se, but 'the red tape behind actually applying for it' (LOU1), although both institutions were actively finding ways to support students in their applications. Indeed, the OU have now recognised that even the processing of the £25 contribution introduced for 12/13 has created a barrier to access and has therefore removed this for 2014/15. Birkbeck, unlike the OU, is not in a position to provide such a high level of subsidy, and indeed the OU is currently rethinking its policy in light of the government's decision to cut spending on the National Scholarship Programme. Birkbeck, however, think that the lack of information about eligibility to student loans may inhibit enrolment. Consequently it has made a

[217] Eligibility will be the same as for NSP, i.e. household income of less than 25k and no prior experience of HE. This scheme will offer 5000 places across whole of UK and will be paid for from OU funds.
[218] At the time of writing the scheme was being changing again, due to cessation of National Scholarship Programme and massive reduction in NSP funds for 2014/15.

‘promise’ to potential students that if they can answer yes to three questions, which in essence confirm they are entitled to a loan, then Birkbeck reassures them that they do not have to pay their fees upfront and that Birkbeck would not chase them for fees.

One Children’s Centre manager thought loans might not be a deterrent to participation for some.

> I think it is a problem. I think some will. I think it's interesting because we do get a range of people. It's also, we've got a lot of students who are predominantly ... the students are from Africa and because education is highly prized and valued and well-regarded people will take out loans to get an education because education is seen as a good thing and is seen as a chance to improve your future. So I think they would take the risk but at the cost of something else, so something will have to give. (MBK3)

The introduction of loans also put some Children’s Centre staff in a difficult position, because they did not want to advocate any form of borrowing.

> I think the difficulty is that if people are coming to us and saying, 'I want to do a course and find out where I can get some money to build my course'. I could signpost them to finance and find out about loans for them and that but if we're going out promoting a course from here and then saying , 'Now you've got to go out and get a loan'. This is a slightly different kind of thing. With student finance, we could host people to let people be aware of exactly what's involved but we can't be seen to say it's a good idea …..We are in a situation where we don't want to be advocating borrowing money in ANY sense however good it might be. (MBK1)

However, even the Children’s Centre managers working with the OU identified problems with funding and the new charge of £25, as a potential barrier.

> I guess it’s all going to ride on this, the introduction of the payments and whether or not people will sign up. If the OU find the people I am more than happy to continue running the group. If there's no people, I'm not going to keep an empty room for them. Most parents around here would gladly get into debt to buy them the new and latest 3D TV but I can't see them wanting to get ... I'm making ... I'm being slightly stereotypical but, you know, but are they really going to want to get themselves massively into debt to go and study because they might get a good job out of it? Well I can't see it myself, so it will be interesting to see. So I think that's why the OU are sort of going down this route of the ... I think it's about £25 but don't completely quote me on that ... But I don't know cos you can have all the qualifications in the world but it doesn't always get you a great job or a great earning job nowadays does it. (MOU2)

> It's still a relatively new partnership [between the OU and the Children’s Centre]. By the time something's three, maybe four years old people in the community really get to know about it. So from that perspective I would like to think it [participation in the course] would increase because word of mouth is the biggest form of advertising as we know. So a lot of people would know about it, so I would say it would increase but looking at the funding issue, I don't know, time will tell I guess. Some will ... it's a commitment isn't it. It's alright to say to a parent, 'Why don't you give it a go; you've got nothing to lose, give it a go!' They haven't got to pay for crèche ... 'Come along, come to the Taster session ... [get your books or whatever it is you do with the OU] and ... give it a go!' If you've got to put £25 down ... 'Do I really want to do it? Shall I pay £25 ... oh no it's not for me'. We don't know. I think it depends on how good the advertising is isn't it? (MOU1)

For both Birkbeck and the OU, the need for students to pay higher fees, and for Birkbeck students with the aid of student loans, has had a very negative impact on recruitment to these courses. However, it is difficult to know if the collapse in recruitment can be attributed exclusively to the changes in student funding, without further research.

5.1.3 Cuts in public expenditure and changing Children's Centre budgets and agenda

There was recognition of the ways in which local community centres, including community partnership programme centres and Children's Centres, were affected by changes in funding, with the results of funding cuts already being experienced. Centres are already 'cutting back on space and only doing the basics' (LBK5). However, the centres 'have a certain obligation to provide a range of opportunities' (LBK4) despite cuts to funding. Nevertheless, those opportunities may diminish and 'with the best will in the world the institution may not be able to do what they want to do because of constraints over them' (LBK4).

As one Children's Centre manager explained

> If you are going to expand. At the moment we have one training room which is exclusively for Children's Centre services. So it's in a closed-off area where the public can't walk through and so we're sharing that room from day-to-day. Luckily for us the Birkbeck courses have been one morning per week so it fits in with that and all the other courses and stuff. But if we wanted to go beyond that there would be an issue of ... we'd have to then think about funding for room hire which we don't at the moment. Do you see what I mean? We'd then be competing with a commercial client. (MBK1)

The viability of the Birkbeck courses was also affected by broader government changes and views about the role of Children's Centres, as discussed (section 1.8.3), and especially the shift to encourage more mothers into paid employment.

> Changes in the benefit system, which pushes more into work…. I know there's going to be universal credit and there's going to be changes in the Benefits system. So if there is a change in the benefits system, whereby people are pushed more to go into employment then I think education will suffer. (BK1)

Indeed, recently numerous Children's Centres have been closed altogether or are no longer providing childcare.[219]

5.1.4 The perfect storm and the end of courses run at Children's Centres?

The combined impact of: the changes in higher education policies; the introduction of higher tuition fees and student loans as against grants to pay for the fees; the cuts in public expenditure and Children's Centres' budgets; and the recession has been a disaster for the courses run at Children's Centres by Birkbeck and the OU. Neither university recruited any students to these courses in 2013/14. And unless there are radical changes, it is doubtful if they will run in the future, although Birkbeck remains committed to them.

5.2 Addressing the research questions

This research examined courses run by Birkbeck and the Open University targeted at student parents. It aimed to assess these courses and to explore their perceived impact on the women's lives and the lives of their families, especially in relation to their children's educational trajectories. It addressed

[219] http://www.theguardian.com/society/2013/jan/28/sure-start-centres-closed-labour

these aims from three perspectives, those of: the participants; the staff responsible for organising and teaching the courses; and the Children's Centre staff.

This study sought to address a range of research questions outlined above in section 1.4. It is to these that we now turn.

What, if anything, does existing literature from the UK and other countries, tell us about the needs of student mothers, and ways in which they have been addressed?

The existing literature from the UK and other countries outlines the needs of student mothers. Particularly significant for recruitment to these widening participation initiatives is the design and organisation of courses aimed at mothers from low-income and disadvantaged backgrounds, especially when the mothers have young children. The literature highlights the importance of low tuition fees; cheap or free on-site flexible childcare provision; a convenient and local learning environment located near to the target population, and which is familiar and supportive; and part-time flexible courses which mothers can fit around their existing commitments. The literature also discusses some of the pedagogic challenges of teaching those with no or limited exposure to higher education and academic conventions, and calls for pedagogic approaches which acknowledge these issues. All these features are especially important in terms of widening higher education participation. The courses run by Birkbeck and the OU aimed at student parents, the focus of this study, provided all these essential ingredients.

5.2.1 Institutional and organisational perspectives – higher education providers and Children's Centres

What are the institutional, organisational and educational challenges of establishing and running such programmes in partnership with (for Birkbeck off campus) Children's Centre, especially in the current context of higher education policy changes which are putting such provision at risk?

These issues were addressed in Chapter 2. We showed that collaborative partnerships between HEIs and the Children's Centres were central to the success of the courses as was the synergy between the overall mission of the Children's Centres and the aims and objectives of the HEI's courses. Setting up these programmes was labour intensive, and so HEIs need to consider how they can provide sustained support for such initiatives. Extensive outreach work was needed to nurture these partnerships and to ensure they ran smoothly. Birkbeck staff, in particular, encountered a range of challenges in working in a community-based teaching environment. In part, this was because of the lack of facilities available at some Children's Centres and in part, it was because of difficulties in providing adequate learning resources for face-to-face teaching outside the HEI's walls.

Above all, these courses are costly for HEI's to run if they are to provide the 'essential ingredients' for success: community based; low or no fees; and free/low cost nursery provision on-site. They therefore require a high level of institutional subsidy if the costs of participation are to be kept low, and the courses are to be run effectively. This is by far the greatest challenge, especially in the current economic climate of higher education with financial pressures on some HEI's budgets, and changes in the organizational cultures of HEI's and institutional priorities.

Are the programmes effective in terms of recruitment, completion, and progression, and how could they be improved? From differing higher education institutions' perspectives have the courses been successful and met their aims?

Recruitment

As discussed in Chapter 2, until the changes in higher education policy especially student funding policies introduced in 2012/13, recruitment to the courses run at the Children's Centres, based on

extensive outreach work, was relatively effective. The course participants all had socio-economic characteristics typically associated with 'widening participation' students entering with low level qualifications and coming from low-income backgrounds.

However, the numbers of students recruited onto the courses run at the Children's Centres were never very large, but the group sizes were deemed viable at the time. Between 2007/8 and 2010/11, Birkbeck recruited around 150 parent students onto HEIS courses run at the Children's Centres, so they made up around nine per cent of all HEIS students recruited by Birkbeck. At the OU, between 2007/8 and 2010/11, only about three per cent of all students taking Openings courses were part of the Community Partnership Programme, and the Children's Centre work accounted for only a proportion of these. The key impediment for both Birkbeck and the OU in scaling up such provision was the resource intensive nature of such widening participation initiatives.

Recruitment was a joint effort between the HEIs and the Children's Centres, and in the case of the OU the Community Partnership Manager played a crucial role with her extensive knowledge of the local area and local contacts. These outreach activities are very important because for many women the decision to join the course was an opportunistic one – they had not sought out these courses. Recruitment could be improved if far greater resources were devoted to outreach work. These outreach activities need to go beyond playing primarily a strategic role and in identifying partners. Those involved also the need to play an operational role in terms of contacting potential course participants. Again such outreach work is costly. In addition, recruitment might be extended if a greater profile was given to the benefits of such learning. However, ultimately the costs of study for participants and limited outreach work are likely to be the greatest impediments to recruitment, and there is no easy solution to reducing the costs to participants or the costs of outreach.

Completion

As discussed in Chapter 3, data from Birkbeck's student records show that course participants who began studying at the Children's Centres deferred less, failed less, and passed more modules than students who began their HEIS studies elsewhere in Birkbeck. Survey data show a higher Birkbeck completion rate (87%) for modules started the Children's Centre, and although the number of OU survey respondents is small, the completion rate for Birkbeck students was higher than those for OU students (56%). The main reasons students did not complete their course were to do with personal and domestic problems and especially their ill health or health problems with a family member. Particularly marked was the high proportion of women who withdrew who had a disabled child. For them, what may be a minor illness for a non-disabled child was a major illness for their child. Further, their situation was exacerbated by the fact that many were lone parents.

Completion rates could be improved by being more selective in terms of who is recruited on to the courses, but this is contrary to the OU's philosophy of open access and runs counter to the overall approach to higher education widening participation. However, arguably, a balance may need to be struck so that already educationally disadvantaged individuals are not set up to fail. Support from staff and other students also proved important in helping students complete, suggesting the value of a pedagogical approach that nurtures such collaboration.

Progression

As discussed in Chapter 4, only a minority (38%) of students surveyed progressed to another course once they had finished studying at the Children's Centre. Most of these students had taken a further course as a direct result of the course taken at the Children's Centre. In other words, their course had whetted these women's appetite for further study, with half taking another course outside of Birkbeck and the OU. In addition, well over three-quarters of survey respondents intended to take another course in the next three years.

At Birkbeck some of the impediments to both completion of a qualification and progression included the fact that in recent years only two modules have been available at the Children's Centre. Despite it sometimes remaining possible for students to complete their award at the Children's Centre, their module choice was inevitably severely limited, and for many to continue studying for their full Cert. HE they would have to attend Birkbeck's Bloomsbury or Stratford campus. This was just not possible for some of the women because it is too far away from where they lived, the courses were run in the evening, and no free childcare facilities were available. This could be overcome by putting on daytime course, but there would remain the issues of distance and childcare. It might be possible to allow parents to use Children's Centres crèche while studying at the main Birkbeck campuses, although it can sometimes be a Children's Centre regulation that parents making use of temporary crèche facilities, as opposed to a regular nursery place, are required to remain on the premises whilst their child is being cared for.

Progression might also be improved if Birkbeck students, while studying at the Children's Centres, had greater exposure to the main Birkbeck campuses. Not only would this help them develop a greater sense of being part of a university community, but it might also help them overcome concerns about studying at the main campuses. Attendance at a session introducing library facilities could be made mandatory and more additional help given to compensate for the limited learning resources at the Children's Centres. In addition, Birkbeck students might well benefit from more help to make online applications to courses. (Students even when continuing their studies are now expected to enrol online and to apply online for student support and student loans). Research from the US,[220] illustrates the beneficial aspects of such help in terms of college attendance, persistence, and aid receipt.

From Birkbeck's and the OU's perspective, have the courses been successful and met their aims?

Assessing success from an institutional perspective is complex. As discussed in Chapters 2 and 4, both the Birkbeck and the OU courses had a range of aims and planned learning outcomes. The survey data and interviews with the mothers confirmed that the courses had successfully met the courses' objectives and learning outcomes and improved participants' academic skills. So the courses had met these aims.

In addition, Chapter 4 shows the very powerful impact of the courses on participants' lives, and on their children. Most significant was the very high proportion of survey participants who, as direct result of their course, realised that they could get a higher qualification, and enjoyed learning more. The interview data also pointed to the enduring transformative power of the courses in terms of the changed way the women understood the world. These findings alone are testament to the success of the course. Another very important finding was the large proportion of survey participants whose educational aspirations for their children had risen as a result of the course. So if success is measured in terms of the impact of the courses on the participants and their families and communities, then clearly there were many benefits, and the courses were a resounding success.

The courses were also a success in terms of who was recruited onto the courses. Both the Birkbeck and the OU courses were widening participation initiatives and successfully recruited their target populations.

However, as discussed, the number of participants recruited onto these schemes was small, especially for the OU in relation to total recruitment on Openings courses. While most courses at Birkbeck are run on a far smaller scale than OU courses, the numbers recruited to Birkbeck's HEIS course at Children's Centres were also small compared with the number of students recruited onto HEIS

[220] Bettinger, E., Long, B., Oreopoulos, P., and Sanbonmatsu, L. (2012) The Role of Application Assistance and Information in College Decisions: Results from the H&R Block FAFSA Experiment. *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 127(3): 1-38.

courses run at the Birkbeck campuses in Bloomsbury and Stratford. Also, in recent years recruitment has plummeted.

The lack of centralised data on progression makes it difficult to assess the Birkbeck and OU courses' strength in terms of progression in their own right, and relative to other courses run by these two institutions. However, only a minority of students surveyed did progress on to further courses, and only half of these continued their studies at Birkbeck and the OU. Yet from an institutional perspective, one of the purposes of these courses, especially for the OU, was to recruit students to other courses run by these institutions. The explicit aim of the Community Partnership Programme was to encourage disadvantaged groups to study at the OU and to meet the OU's widening participation targets, rather than raising people's aspirations and encouraging progression to learn anywhere. Birkbeck's courses adopted a somewhat broader interpretation of the widening participation agenda, especially when the courses at the Children's Centres were first set up. However, gradually Birkbeck has also been concerned about encouraging progression onto other Birkbeck courses. It was for this reason that the provision at the Children's Centres was restricted to just two modules. The hope was that this policy change would encourage more participants to move onto other courses at the main Birkbeck campuses, and then to progress on to yet further Birkbeck courses.

So, in terms of scale of the provision, the courses run at the Children's Centres by both Birkbeck and the OU were weak relative to comparable courses. No data are available on the actual costs of running these courses and how they compare with other courses. But by their very nature they were more resource intensive and more 'expensive' in terms of staff time to get them up and running than other similar or equivalent courses. So for the OU, in terms of measuring the impact of their widening participation allocation spend, the courses were less successful because they were very expensive to run and progression was probably low. Yet, for the small number of individuals participating in the courses they were very successful.

Thus the success of these courses from a higher education institution's perspective depends on the measures used to assess success, and institutional priorities. Higher educational institutions have to weigh up whether the benefits of the course for the participants and others outweigh the institutional costs. This is a political and ideological calculation, not just an economic one.

What are the pedagogic challenges for learning and teaching in these contexts? How have lecturers and those responsible for designing courses worked with these challenges, and how successful do they feel they have been? How does this vary by mode of delivery namely, face-to-face and distance learning, and by different approaches to course design?

We discussed at length in Chapter 3 the importance of developing inclusive pedagogic approaches to learning and teaching. The inclusive approaches adopted by both the Birkbeck and Open University courses, aimed specifically to tackle the challenges faced by these widening participation students. They sought to: enable learners to reflect on and move forward from what may have been less-than-positive previous educational experiences; help them re-engage with the learning process; and encourage and enable them to use their personal experience and those of others in theoretical and analytical ways. On both programmes, assessments were viewed as developmental and principally *for* students' learning rather than simply as a teacher's test *of* students' learning.

The curriculum needed to be designed to provide opportunities for students to reflect critically on their learning experiences, past and present, so they can build their confidence whereby they do not perceive previous demoralising learning experiences as related to individual incompetence. In other words, the curriculum needed to help the participants to overcome any negative learning experiences while at school.

Lecturers found the students challenging to teach as they sometimes struggled with the course, especially in relation to academic literacy and the importance of critical thinking. This was primarily because of the level and nature of their educational backgrounds. Central to the teaching was building the course participants' confidence and competence in using academic communication conventions, particularly in their academic writing and other study skills, all of which were integrated into the courses.

Amongst the many challenges in teaching these courses, there was a need to balance the provision of sufficient levels of support and guidance with the need to facilitate students to become independent learners by providing learning opportunities which 'scaffolded' their learning to a stage when the support they required could be removed and they functioned independently.

The success of these approaches can be assessed by the extent to which the courses, from the mothers' perspective, fulfilled their aims and objectives and learning outcomes. As described in Chapter 4, they were largely successful.

There were some differences in learning outcomes between Birkbeck and OU students, which reflected the different modes of teaching – face-to-face and distance learning. In particular, Birkbeck course participants were significantly more likely than OU course participants to report that their courses had helped them 'a lot' to improve their spoken communication (75% compared with 34%); to improve their writing skills (83% compared with 58%); to think critically about the world around them' (72% compared with 48%); and to work in a group (68% compared with 48%). In part, these variations reflect differences in the mode of presentation at the two HEIs, since spoken communication and group work were not such essential parts of the OU's Opening courses, but were part of the additional face-to-face support and study group activities. It is unclear, indeed, whether OU student responses reflected their perception of the module itself or the Community Partnership support programme.

The OU's approach to providing learning materials through a variety of media with considerable electronic resources was one of its distinctive features. It is also one that could be adopted more widely for face-to-face provision. In particular, the Open University has developed a range of devices for mobile telephones, which most students have, to help students access learning resources and to provide learning support, e.g. OU Anywhere App. Other HEIs could also create similar devices and integrate appropriate new technologies into provision in accessible ways. This may also require some provision in the curriculum to ensure students develop the confidence to use electronic learning resources – something which is embedded in the OU new access modules.

In what ways do the Children's Centres see the courses as contributing to their provision and to the communities in which they are located? From their perspective, have the courses been successful?

In chapter 2 we discussed the synergy between and the overall mission of the Children's Centres and the overall aims and objective of the Birkbeck and OU courses, including the type of women attracted to the courses. The courses provided educational benefits that the Children's Centres wanted to offer their community and that they could not supply themselves. The Children's Centres recognised the substantial benefits reaped by the course participants, and particularly important for the Children's Centre's agenda, how their children also benefited.

In Chapter 4, we discussed how the Children's Centre managers adopted two overlapping sets of criteria for assessing success. The first set of criteria was associated with the impact of the courses on the mothers and their children. The second set was related to the success of the courses in meeting the Children's Centre own aims and targets. Turning to the first measures, the managers reported that the courses were a success when the mothers' aspirations were broadened; their confidence and self esteem improved; new opportunities emerged; and when the participants completed the course and

gained a qualification. And as discussed above, there was considerable evidence from this study that these changes had occurred.

The Children's Centre managers' second set of criteria for success were institutional and related to the outcomes of the courses in terms of meeting their institutional targets. The managers examined both tangible and non-tangible outcomes and achievements, what happened to the women on completing their studies at the Children's Centre, and whether the programmes helped fulfil their Centre's changing 'core purpose' of improving child development and readiness for school, supported by raising parents' aspirations, self esteem and parenting skills as well as improving both child and family health and life chances. The managers appreciated how enhancing the women's educational achievements had a direct impact on these. They regarded the courses a success because of these outcomes. Moreover, the increased involvement of the mothers in the running of the Children's Centres was another goal of the Centres that the courses helped to fulfil. Indeed, this study illustrates some of the very positive effect educational achievements can have on the ethos of the Centres as a whole.

5.2.2 Student parents' perspective

What sort of parents enrol, withdraw, and succeed in completing modules – what are their key socio-economic characteristics, their cultural, language, and ethnic backgrounds their family circumstances including the number and age of their children, and their prior educational experiences including their educational hinterlands?

In Chapter 1, we provided a detailed breakdown of the profile of the students enrolled on the Birkbeck and OU courses. Data from Birkbeck's and the OU's student records show that they have socio-economic characteristics typically associated with 'widening participation' students. The majority were women, aged 25 and over, non-White and had low-level entry qualifications. Data from the survey on students' backgrounds (Table 1.3) also showed how most were lone parents, were not employed before starting their course, had household incomes of under £15,000, left school under the age of 18, and did not have another family member who had studied for a higher education qualification. All had children, and 41% had a child under the age of five when they started their course. All these groups (except women and those from minority ethnic groups) are under-represented in higher education.

A comparable level of detail on students who withdrew from the courses is unavailable because of the small numbers involved. Similarly, it was not possible to undertake any tests of significance amongst those students who do and do not complete, to highlight any differences in characteristics.

What were the processes by which the mothers became engaged in the courses? What attracted them to these particular courses, what were their motivations for studying and what do they hope to gain and achieve from participating? Was their choice influenced by the courses' location, financial support, and childcare provision and/or by their children and the mothers' educational aspirations for their children?

We discussed these issues in Chapter 2. For many course participants the initial decision to join the course was an opportunistic one – the offer was there. They would not necessarily have sought it out themselves, had it not been for the outreach activities of the higher education institutions and the Children's Centres. Students' motivations for studying were primarily instrumental as manifest in their desire for better opportunities in life through gaining an higher education qualification and using the course as a help towards a better job, possibly not immediately but at some point in the future. Their main reasons for choosing their course were pragmatic. They could fit their course around their family commitments while their course or study group was nearby and the teaching hours were convenient and flexible. Finally, for those with children under the age of 5, the availability of free childcare was also import in their reasons for taking this course.

Some women who wanted to enrol could not do so primarily because, for a variety of reasons, they were ineligible for student financial support and could not afford the tuition fees without such help.

What was the study experience of mothers: What educational challenges did the mothers face while studying, and what facilitated and hindered successful study including pedagogic, cultural and economic factors?

As discussed in Chapter 3, the biggest challenges reported by the vast majority (87%) of course participants surveyed, especially lone parents, was juggling their studies with their the rest of their life because they were busy at home (75%) and had inadequate support at home (50%). Other things that made part-time study a challenge for a majority of both Birkbeck and OU course participants surveyed were problems with knowing how to study and study skills (64%) and the course being more time consuming than expected (62%). Participants interviewed in-depth, also talked about the challenges of learning how to study and learning about what was expected of them, including, the conventions of academic writing.

The vast majority of course participants surveyed reported that they had had very positive teaching and learning experiences particularly in terms of the quality of their course, and the learning support and feedback they received from staff.

Successful study was facilitated through the integration of study skills within the course. However, the integration of study skills and exploration of the learning process into a course means that this is content as well as process. The process of trying things out as the student studies, to find out what works for them is hard. Learning how to study, when the students have lots of things to juggle, is likely to be difficult. Other things that helped successful study were peer support and support from tutors.

What impact, if any, has participation in the courses had on a) the women's self- and learner identities; b) their employment ambitions and prospects c) their relations with their children and their children's experiences, including their aspirations for their children's education?

The impact of the courses on the women and the wider benefits of learning reaped from the course were substantial, as described in Chapter 4. Most significant was the transformative nature of the women's study experiences – their studies had changed the way they understood the world in a way that could not be reversed or forgotten. The women were more critical about the world around them (for good and for ill) and had absorbed higher education values in the way they respected diverse opinions and had developed ways of debating them. Some course participants started reading broadsheet newspapers, reading books, going to the theatre, going to the opera, watching foreign language films, and one got rid of their television. In turn, this had an impact on their self- and learner identities. As a result of the course, 88% of the course participants surveyed reported that they realised they could get a higher education qualification while 87% said they enjoyed learning more. The courses had increased the women's confidence in their capability of gaining a degree, which was the main aim of the Birkbeck and OU programmes. This increased confidence and self-esteem spilled over into other aspects of their lives whereby survey respondents felt more positive about their future (76%); were more interested in the world around them (70%); and believed that they had better life opportunities (60%). Their strong sense of achievement opened up of new opportunities and raised their aspirations and employment ambitions and prospects. The outcome of these changes was that 72% of course participants surveyed planned to get a job or another job in the next three years, especially those studying at Birkbeck, and more were involved in volunteering; and there was a sense of a shared 'journey' with course participants which brought new friendships and support networks.

Part of the rationale of Children's Centres is to raise parents' aspirations for their children alongside improving their parenting skills. Research suggests that a key way of improving educational inequalities, and specifically poor children's attainment, is through improving both parents' and children's educational aspirations. Thus particularly noteworthy and significant findings were that

84% of the course participants surveyed believed that as a result of their course, they had higher educational aspirations for their children, and half reported that their children were more interested in learning, while nearly a half of the survey respondents thought that their relationship with their children had improved. These findings are particularly encouraging given the correlation between parental attitudes, aspirations, and their children's educational outcomes, suggesting that these courses may contribute to reducing educational inequalities.

5.2.3 Implications for policy

What lessons can be learnt from existing provision for other potential providers in terms of: setting up and running such courses; the resources required; student support; curriculum design; pedagogical approaches and methods of assessment?

The lessons for other potential providers are clear from this study in terms of setting up and running these courses, the extensive support required, and an inclusive pedagogy and curriculum. By far the most significant lesson relates to resources. The courses are expensive to run and need a high level of institutional investment. The key policy implications and question are: how to fund such courses; and how economies of scale can be achieved? One possibility is bringing in other vulnerable groups and their support services.

What value is there (if any) in maintaining and developing projects of this kind, which exist to one side of more standardised higher education provision? What evidence is there of their benefit for mothers, their families, and higher education institutions, and to what extent could these benefits be provided by mainstream higher education at a time of increased pressure on budgets in both the higher education and Early Years sectors?

There is enormous value to maintaining these courses because of the very clear evidence of the benefits of these courses for the mothers and their families. There was also evidence of benefits to the institutions in terms of meeting their widening participation targets. Some or all of these benefits could be provided by mainstream higher education if sufficient resources were devoted to the courses. As we have seen, central to their success was their overall design and their pedagogic approach. In theory, some of these could be replicated by mainstream higher education, such as the low fees, childcare provision, flexible part-time provision, and the pedagogic approach. However, by definition the community-based element of the course would be lost and with it a local, non-threatening, familiar and convenient learning environment which, through the involvement of the Children's Centres, reached a group of students that mainstream higher education would find very difficult to reach.

What do the findings tell us about dominant discourses and theoretical understandings of widening participation and social mobility?

There is a lot to be learnt from this study in terms of the limitations of dominant discourses and theoretical understandings of widening participation and social mobility. The policy discourse regarding widening participation and social mobility has been divorced from the policy discourse around Sure Start and Children's Centres and their efforts to reduce child poverty and inequality. This study and the courses the HEIs provided in the Children's Centres, help bring together these two policy discourses and the thinking underpinning them. In a sense, both Birkbeck and the Open University acted as a bridge between these two interconnected policy arenas.

Policies regarding widening participation to higher education focus on outreach, information, advice and guidance, flexible provision, and enhanced student support as mechanisms for encouraging under-

represented groups to enter higher education.[221] They recognise the need to start early and to engage young people at different stages of their educational careers. Indeed, of late there have been initiatives aimed at primary school children, as well as work with young people in colleges and secondary schools. Reaching mature aged potential students through outreach activities is much more problematic and cross-sector and inter-sector partnerships are seen as a way of overcoming these issues. Flexible and part-time provision is similarly seen as a mechanism for widening participation, especially for those with family and/or work commitments. In many ways this type of thinking underpinned both Birkbeck's courses run at Children's Centres and the Open University's Community Partnership Programme with their partnerships with Children's Centres.

Other research on higher education participation and social mobility stresses that the main determinant of participation is educational attainment, and that social class differences in attainment are formed early in children's lives, leading commentators to suggest greater investment in early years education, and by implication a more constrained HEIs role in directly influencing widening participation.[222] It is well established that children growing up in poorer families leave school with substantially lower levels of educational attainment. Such 'achievement gaps' are a major contributing factor to patterns of social mobility and poverty. These educational deficits emerge early in children's lives, even before they start school, and widen throughout childhood. Research suggests that the aspirations, attitudes and behaviour of parents and children potentially play an important part in explaining why poor children typically do worse at school.[223] Other research suggests that it is not possible to establish a clear causal relationship between aspirations, attitudes and behaviour and educational outcomes in part because of the poor evidence base. However, interventions focused on parental involvement in children's education, especially their early education, have demonstrated evidence of impact on raising attainment.[224] Indeed, research suggests that two of the major areas of policy and practice that could make a contribution to reducing educational inequalities are:

- Parents and the family home: Improving the home learning environment and helping parents from poorer families to believe that their own actions and efforts can lead to improved outcomes.

- Children's attitudes and behaviours: Raising families' aspirations, reducing children's behavioural problems and engagement in risky behaviours, and helping poorer children believe that their own actions and efforts can lead to improved outcomes.

Other research also focuses on the intergenerational transmission of skills. It discusses the widespread evidence of a strong correlation between a variety of parent and child outcomes in the UK, including income, education, social class, cognitive ability and basic skills. In so far as there is a causal relationship between these outcomes, interventions that improve parents' skills are likely to have a positive impact on the outcomes of their children as well.[225] This sort of thinking informed the development of Sure Start Centres and their efforts to tackle child poverty and inequality.

Our study suggests the courses participants' parenting skills did improve as a result of the course and many 'parenting skills' were encapsulated in the course curriculum, and the more general demands of the course. Further, the course enhanced the participants' educational aspirations both for themselves

[221] For a good example of this overall approach see…Moore, J., Sanders, J and Higham,L. (2013) *Literature review of research into widening participation in higher education*, Bristol: HEFCE

[222] Vignoles, A. (2013) Widening participation and social mobility in Callender, C and Scott, P (eds) (2013) Browne and beyond: Modernizing English Higher Education, London: Institute of Education Press, Bedford Way Papers pp 112-139

[223] Goodman, A and Gregg, P (2010) *Poorer children's educational attainment: how important are attitudes and behaviour?* York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation

[224] Cater-Wall, C and Whitfield, G (2012) The role of aspirations, attitudes and behaviour in closing the educational attainment gap York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/education-achievement-poverty-summary.pdf (Accessed 07/023/2013)

[225] Crawford, C., Johnson, P., Machin, S and Vignoles, A. (2011) Social Mobility: A Literature Review, London: BIS.

and their children. The mother's involvement in the courses contributed to an improved home learning environment and more activities in the home conducive to learning, all of which benefited their children. Thus educating mothers from disadvantaged backgrounds may be a more effective widening participation strategy in the longer term than current widening participation activities focusing on for instance, outreach among school and college pupils. Educating mothers, as the Birkbeck and OU courses did, meant that many acted as educational role models for their children and helped raise their children's educational aspirations. This may have a lasting impact of their children's attainment and future access to higher education. So educating mothers, not only widened their access to higher education, but also potentially their children's access to a university education and the prospects of a better future for them.

6 APPENDIX 1: SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS OF BIRKBECK HEIS STUDENTS BY LOCATION OF STUDY

Table A.1 Socio-economic characteristics of Birkbeck Higher Education Introductory Studies (HEIS) students by location of study

Demographic analysis of HEIS students from 2007/8 to 20010/11 total n=1757 of whom 139 were based in the Children's Centres and 1618 others.

	HEIS Children's Centre	HEIS Birkbeck/Stratford Campus
Gender		
Women	93.5%	71.1%
Men	5.8%	27.8%
Not known+	0.7%	1.1%
Age On 31 Aug On Year Of Entry		
< 25	15.1%	35.0%
25-34	46.0%	33.6%
35-45	27.3%	22.9%
>46	11.5%	8.6%
Not known	0.0%	0.2%
Ethnicity		
Asian	15.8%	9.0 %
Black	38.8 %	40.2 %
Other/Mixed	5.8 %	10.1 %
White	25.2 %	33.1 %
Not known+	14.4 %	7.5 %
Disability		
No Disability	62.6 %	74.8 %
Disabled	7.9 %	10.0 %
Not known+	29.5 %	15.3 %
Highest Qualification On Entry *		
No formal qualification	9.4%	6.6%

Level 1	7.2%	6.6 %
Level 2 (GCSE or equivalent)	41.7%	31.9%
Level 3 (A Levels or equivalent)	25.2%	27.0%
Level 4 or above (Undergraduate qual or equiv)	9.4%	12.8%
Other/not known+	7.2%	15.2%
Nationality		
UK**	61.9%	59.1%
EU	6.5%	15.5%
Non-EU	23.0%	18.8%
Not known+	8.6%	6.6%
N	139	1,618

Source: Birkbeck Student Records, 2007/8 to 20010/11

* Qualifications were coded at the highest level they might count as ie GCSEs were counted as Level 2 although it was not known if there were 5 at A-C. Similarly A/AS levels were counted as Level 3 although it was not known if they held 2 or more A levels or 4 or more AS Levels. Similarly any undergraduate qualification, even if only a Cert higher education or foundation degree was counted as Level 4.

** including British Antarctic Territories and British Nationals Overseas

+ combines categories 'information not sought', 'information refused' and 'Not Known'

There is a significant association between gender and whether students were from the Children's Centre or Non-Children's Centre group.

Chi Square (df=2) =32.93, which was significant p=0.000

There is a significant difference in the average age of the Children's Centre and Non-Children's Centre group.

The Children's Centre group mean age =32.9 SD=8.7, Non-Children's Centre mean age=30.4 SD=9.6. Levene's test for equality of variance found equal variance F(1,1751)=2.70, p>0.05. An independent t test found the difference in the means was significant t(df=1751)=2.98, p=0.003.

The 'Not Known' category was excluded as missing data for Ethnicity, Disability, Highest Qualification on Entry and Nationality.

There is a significant association between ethnicity and whether the students were from the Children's Centre or Non-Children's Centre group.

Chi Square (df=3) =11.28, which was significant p=0.010

There is no significant association between disability and whether the students were from the Children's Centre or Non-Children's Centre group.

There is no significant association between Highest Qualification on Entry and whether the students were from the Children's Centre or Non-Children's Centre group.

There is a significant association between nationality and whether the students were from the Children's Centre or Non-Children's Centre group.

Chi Square (df=2) =8.53, which was significant p=0.014

Table A2: Socio-economic characteristics of Open University Openings Students

Demographic analysis of CPP students from 2007/8 to 2010/11 total n=1078 of whom 103 were based in the Children's Centre in Barking and Dagenham (n=70) and Blackburn (n=33) and 924 others. A further 51 students from other Children's Centres were excluded from the analysis but it is possible some of the 924 may have studied at other Children's Centres, OU records at this period did not record this data.

	Children's Centres	Other CPP
Gender		
Women	92.2%	77.6%
Men	7.8%	22.4%
Not known+	0.0%	0.0%
Age On 31 Aug On Year Of Entry		
< 25	17.5%	20.0%
25-34	44.7%	32.8%
35-45	35.0%	30.7%
>46	2.9%	16.5%
Not known+	0.0%	0.0%
Ethnicity		
Asian	32.0%	12.9%
Black	17.5%	8.8%
Other/Mixed	1.9%	4.3%
White	45.6%	66.8%
Not known+	2.9%	7.2%
Disability		
No Disability	82.5%	89.2%
Disabled	12.6%	7.8%
Not known+	4.9%	3.0%
Highest Qualification On Entry *		
No formal qualification	11.7%	7.8%
Level 1	4.9%	0.3%
Level 2 (GCSE or equivalent)	52.4%	44.2%

Level 3 (A Levels or equivalent)	24.3%	24.1%
Level 4 or above (Undergraduate qual or equiv)	4.9%	12.7%
Other/not known+	1.9%	0.9%
Nationality		
UK**	73.8%	59.2%
EU	6.8%	2.5%
Non-EU	6.8%	2.8%
Not known+	12.6%	35.4%
N	103	924

Source: Open University Student Records, 2007/8 to 20010/11

* Qualifications were coded at the highest level they might count as i.e. GCSEs were counted as Level 2 although it was not known if there were 5 at A-C. Similarly A/AS levels were counted as Level 3 although it was not known if they held 2 or more A levels or 4 or more AS Levels. Similarly any undergraduate qualification, even if only a Cert higher education or foundation degree was counted as Level 4.

** including British Antarctic Territories and British Nationals Overseas

+ combines categories 'information not sought', 'information refused' and 'Not Known'

There is a significant association between gender and whether students were from the Children's Centre or Other CPP group.

Chi Square (df=2) =21.09, which was significant p=0.000

There is a significant difference in the average age of the Children's Centre and Other CPP group.

The Children's Centre group mean age =32.2 SD=7.9, Other CPP mean age=34.5 SD=10.8. Levene's test for equality of variance did not find equal variance F(1,1025)=16.50, p=0.000. An independent t test with equal variance not assumed found the difference in the means was significant t(df=148.3)=2.67, p=0.009.

The 'Not Known' category was excluded as missing data for Ethnicity, Disability, Highest Qualification on Entry and Nationality.

There is a significant association between ethnicity and whether the students were from the Children's Centre or Other CPP group.

Chi Square (df=6) =47.66, which was significant p=0.000

There is not a significant association between disability and whether the students were from the Children's Centre or Other CPP group.

There is a significant association between Highest Qualification on Entry and whether the students were from the Children's Centre or Other CPP group.

Chi Square (df=10) =39.68, which was significant p=0.000

There is a significant association between nationality and whether the students were from the Children's Centre or Other CPP group.

Chi Square (df=4) =10.59, which was significant p=0.032

7 APPENDIX 2 THE HISTORYAND DEVELOPMENT OF SURE START CHILDREN'S CENTRES

Hilary Land

THE STORY OF SURE START

> *'By its nature, early childhood policy is a complex field covering both social and educational issues. Child poverty, family well-being, gender and labour force issues, the professional education and professional development of educators, the needs of diverse children within services, the interface between early childhood services and the school, are all challenges that early childhood policy makers must face while focussing on the central task of enhancing the well-being and learning of young children in services. This complexity is likely to continue.* ' (OECD, 2006:222)

Thus concluded a report on the care and education policies for young children in twenty countries, including England, conducted by the OECD between 1998 and 2004.The story of the Sure Start programme in England illustrates this complexity very well.

7.1 Background

In the early years of the British welfare state the care of children was the private responsibility of mothers in contrast to universal free education funded from general taxation. The majority of children (95%) were born within marriage and their mothers were not expected to take employment until their children started school aged five. Until the 1970s, lone mothers attracted little attention from the policy makers for most were in paid employment, relying on their extended families to provide childcare and accommodation. The numbers subsequently grew as a result of divorce law reform and changes in attitudes towards unmarried motherhood. With diminishing employment opportunities for those lacking qualifications and reduced access to informal childcare, by the end of the 1980s the majority were dependent on means-tested social security benefits. The issue of childcare in relation to lone mothers' employment became more prominent in the policy debates of the 1990s, although their right to claim means-tested benefits, provided they were not cohabiting, did not depend on being available for work until their youngest child was 16 years. This remained the case until 2008.

In contrast, the economic activity rates of married mothers with pre-school children grew and by the early 1980s, for the first time, exceeded those of lone mothers. The opinion of most parents and professionals alike that young children were best looked after at home by their mothers full-time (Bowlby 1951) was changing. In the 1960s, the government actively encouraged the creation of part-time jobs in the public sector and later in the private sector in order to encourage mothers to return to employment once their children were in school (see Kiernan, Land and Lewis, 1998). The proportion of part-time employees increased from five per cent in the early 1950s to 20% by the end of the 1970s and a quarter in the 1990s. The majority were and still are, women, and women with caring responsibilities.

Childcare was found either on the margins of the labour market, in the form of childminders, or among family and friends. Attempts were made to make child care a collective responsibility both by the women's movement and the TUC in the 1970s (TUC Working Party, 1976) so mothers could work *and* because it was good for the development and wellbeing of children. Mothers themselves were creating new systems of shared child care, for example in the Pre-School Playgroups Association. The voluntary sector and some LAs, often in partnership, pioneered nurseries and family centres which made links across health and education services as well as providing a rich environment for pre-school children (For examples see Penn, 2000; Brennan and Moss, 2003; Holterman, 1995 and Fawcett, 2000.) Of relevance to the Sure Start programme, these later inspired some key Ministers and civil servants including crucially, Norman Glass (Glass, 2005), by demonstrating how 'joined-up

thinking' could work in practice as well as the possibilities opened up by community led development and management of local services. (See Eisenstadt, 2012, chap 3)

Pre-school education was growing slowly (Cmnd. 5174, *Education: a Framework for Expansion, 1972*) but there was little public childcare provision. The Children Act 1989 gave local authority (LA) social service departments a *general duty* to provide services, including day care, for children they identified as being 'in need'. They still had *discretion* to fund day care for children of working mothers irrespective of whether or not they were 'in need'. Given their tight budgets, LAs focused on their increased duties to regulate childcare services, most of which were in the growing private sector. By the mid 1990s expenditure on private provision for the under fives, including playgroups and childminders as well as private nurseries and schools, was almost equal to expenditure on LA nurseries and maintained pre-compulsory education -in total £3billion(see Audit Commission, 1996).

7.2 New Labour, Child Poverty and Social Exclusion.

When Labour was elected in 1997, poverty and inequalities were growing. In 1979 one in ten children was living in poverty (defined as living in a household with an income less than 50% of average household income). By 1997 this had increased to three in ten children, the highest child poverty rate in the EU. Children in lone parent families were twice as likely to be poor and poor for longer than those living with two parent families (Hills, 1999 p41). Families with children under 5 years, large families and families from some black and minority groups were also at greater risk of poverty. There were 'work-rich' households in which both parents worked and 'work-poor' households with no earners.

Poverty was not confined to those outside the labour market: a third of poor households had some income from employment (Ibid, p40). During the 1990s women's employment rates had risen from 60 % to nearly 70%. *'For those with young children the rise is quite dramatic. Rates of employment have risen from 19% to nearly 56% for women with a youngest child under the age of 2 and from 33% to 64% for women whose youngest child is aged between 3 and 5 years'* (Desai, Gregg, Steer and Wadsworth, 1999, p173). However, these increases were accounted for almost entirely by mothers with working partners. Among lone parents or mothers with a non-working partner the rises were 'miniscule' (Idem). Moreover, although part-time employment had increased, mothers with more qualifications were more likely to be working full-time (Ibid. p175)

The government called for a new welfare contract between the citizens of the country based on 'Work for those who can work, security for those who can't' (DSS, 'New ambitions for our country: a new contract for welfare', Green Paper Cm 3805, 1998.) Child benefit and child additions in Income Support were increased. A new child tax credit was introduced. There was a New Deal for Lone Parents incorporating advice and support for training and job search. The national minimum wage, implemented in 1999 together with the Working Families Tax Credit would help to 'make work pay'. Free part-time nursery education would be extended to all four year olds and later to all three year olds; new Early Excellence Centres integrating education and childcare would be piloted and neighbourhood nurseries established in disadvantaged areas. Childcare services needed by working parents, would continue to rely on the voluntary and private sectors which would receive help with start-up costs and staff training grants. Instead of the vouchers introduced in the mid 1990s, parents would get help with the fees from a new Childcare Tax Credit.

In 1999, the Prime Minister explained: *'The levels of child deprivation are frightening...We need to break the cycle of disadvantage so that children born into poverty are not condemned to social exclusion and deprivation. That why it is so important that we invest in our children''* ('Blair, 1999, p16). But this was not all. *'We want children to be ready to learn when they start school. So we are expanding childcare and nursery care, with a special Sure Start programme for children at risk of social exclusion. These new services will also help parents who wish to return to work'.* (Idem) In the same speech he made a commitment to halve child poverty by 2010 and abolish it by 2020 (Ibid, p17)

‘Social exclusion’, ‘deprivation’ and ‘poverty’ were terms used by Blair interchangeably (see Levitas, 2007 for a discussion of their different meanings), but New Labour’s discourse on social exclusion focussed as much on lack of *opportunities* as on lack of material resources. Anthony Giddens, at the time a close adviser to Blair, wrote: ‘*Redistribution should be redefined as the redistribution of life chances-providing the possibilities for individuals to realise their potential. Hence the centrality of education, and active labour market policy’* (Giddens, 1999, pp51-52).The Sure Start programme was therefore part of a large and ambitious strategy to prevent present *and* future social exclusion. The government was also determined to develop evidence-based policies and encourage public services to be ‘*close to the user, flexible, user- not provider-led... A key aim of the government was to break down traditional silos*.’ (Eisenstadt, op cit p29)

7.3 The beginning of Sure Start

The government quickly established a Social Exclusion Unit to use *‘a cross-government approach with a concentration on a particular group and a focused approach on a relatively neglected policy area, which was developed with a large and active group of outsiders’* (Ibid, p20). The Sure Start programme was set up in a similar way, but located in the Treasury rather than in the Cabinet Office. In the autumn of 1997, Norman Glass, at the time the chief micro-economist in the Treasury, led the official review of services for children from conception to seven years. This would set the parameters of the initial Sure Start programme. A ministerial steering group chaired by Tessa Jowell, then Minister for Public Health, was established in parallel. It was agreed early on that new policies for children under four should be the key focus. This was ‘a policy-free zone’ with minimum competition from other departments and little ‘established political baggage’ (Glass, 2005). However, the commitment-and rivalry- of both the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of Exchequer; rapid changes in ministerial responsibilities for the programme and the re-configuration of the functions of central government departments meant Sure Start neither stayed free of ‘political baggage’ nor uninfluenced by policy priorities concerning the employability of mothers and ending child poverty.

The groups concluded from their research reviews that the earliest years in life were the most important determinant of a child’s development into a productive adult; poverty had a lasting impact on young children; services for the under fours were patchy and of uneven quality across localities and the provision of a comprehensive community based programme of early intervention could improve child development and ‘help break the cycle of social exclusion’. More productive adults would generate income thus saving the Exchequer money in the long run. They were particularly influenced by American studies that had found ‘*early years provision, if high quality and relevant to parents and children, pays off in reduced costs in later life: fewer teen pregnancies, less crime, better staying-on rates at school’* (Eisenstadt, 2007,vii)

In July 1998 250 Sure Start Local Programmes (SSLPs), costing £450 million for the first three years starting in April 1999, were announced. Programmes would be funded for 10 years (with a declining budget after year six) and run jointly by the Department of Health (DH) and the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE). The overall objective was: *To work with parents and children to promote the physical, intellectual and social development of pre-schoolchildren-particularly those who are disadvantaged-to ensure they are ready to thrive when they get to school.*’(HMT, 1998 cited in Eisenstadt, op.cit p32)

The programme would be based in ‘areas of significant unmet need’ and the emphasis was on:

- strengthening parenting with respect to bonding between parents and children;
- caring for their children;
- promoting health development;

- encouraging stimulating and enjoyable play
- improving language skills
- Identifying early and providing support for children with learning difficulties, emotional or behavioural problems.

Using poverty indicators 20% of the poorest wards in England would be chosen, thereby including a third of all poor children. In order to minimise stigma *all* children up to the age of 4 years in a programme's (smaller) catchment area within each ward would be eligible to use the services. An individual SSLP would be overseen by a Partnership Board of representatives from all the key statutory services, voluntary sector and private providers in the area and local parents. This Board would identify a 'lead body' to act as the contact for all the partners. Although Ministers at the time wanted the lead body to be chosen from the voluntary sector or a local Primary Care Trust, in the event the vast majority were LAs. The core services which SSLPs were expected to deliver included outreach and home visiting; support for good quality play, learning and childcare experiences for children; primary and community health care and advice about child health and development and family health and support for families and children, including helping those with special needs to access specialised services. However, funding was based on plans to achieve specific child *outcomes* rather than on developing specific *services*. The targets each SSLP had to meet included a reduction in low birth weight babies, language development at age two, reduction in hospital admissions and parental satisfaction.

The Sure Start Unit was based in the Department of Education and Employment (DfEE) and funded from a *ring-fenced* budget. The lead Minister was Tess Jowell, still Minister for Public Health in the DH. She continued to chair the ministerial steering group. Sure Start's Cabinet level Minister was David Blunkett, Secretary of State for Education and Employment. The Head of the Sure Start Unit, Naomi Eisenstadt, reported to three senior civil servants in the Treasury, DfEE and DH. Norman Glass continued to chair the cross-departmental group of officials.

Both Jowell and Blunkett had strong views about the programmes' priorities. Jowell wanted the focus to be on mothers and very young children as well as on the support women can give each other: *'...what you need when you have a new baby is nurture, and what you need to be able to give your baby is nurture, and you need to have enough confidence to be your baby's first teacher*' (Quoted in Eisenstadt, op cit p31). Blunkett was most interested in the involvement and development of the local community: '*... this was a capacity-building and social capital programme which was going to transform the lives of families and communities, and not just looking after children.'* (Ibid. p 39) Community and parental participation in shaping and managing SSLPs were essential elements. Another key player was Margaret Hodge who, at the time, was the Minister in the DfEE responsible for nursery education and childcare. She sat on the ministerial steering group and did not want to keep early education services completely separate from SSLPs.

7.4 Rapid expansion, the introduction of the employability agenda and the assertion of LA control

The first 60 'trailblazer' SSLPs were announced in 1999. They took much longer to establish than had been anticipated, because meaningful local engagement and partnerships across the relevant agencies took time to establish. Eisenstadt later acknowledged that '*a major failure was to underestimate the skill set required to deliver a high quality Sure Start programme'* (Ibid p.144). At the end of the first year the Sure Start budget was under-spent and the evaluation had not even been commissioned. Despite this and against the advice of Norman Glass and other officials involved, the budget for the programme was doubled in the Comprehensive Spending Review 2000 so that by 2004, there would be 500 (phase I) SSLPs reaching half of all poor children. Sure Start was not allowed to be a small-scale pilot programme to establish 'what works'. SSLPs were recognised as being innovative and

popular locally. Their expansion was likely to win votes for Labour in the forthcoming 2001 general election.

Eisenstadt argues (chap 4), however, that the main pressure came from those in government who believed an expanded Sure Start programme could be more closely aligned with the government's commitment to ending child poverty in a generation. *'Employment is not just the foundation of affordable welfare. It is the best anti-poverty, anti-crime and pro-family policy yet invented.*' (Labour Party Manifesto 2001, p24) Yvette Cooper replaced Jowell at the DH in the autumn of 1999. She extended the SSLPs' remit to include pregnant women, adding an objective to reduce smoking during pregnancy. She also supported the employability agenda and regretted the lack of childcare in SSLPs. Hodge, still at the DfEE believed some of the capital investment in Sure Start should be for the promised expansion of childcare facilities for working parents. These views prevailed and Sure Start acquired another objective : '*Reduce the number of 0-3 year olds in Sure Start areas living in households where no-one is working by 2004'* (HMT, 2000 cited by Eisenstadt, 2012, p50).

The employability objective was controversial among SSLP managers who had found that there was little interest among parents either in childcare provision, which many did not trust, or in employment. Services had been designed to strengthen parenting capacities and self esteem in order to improve child outcomes. However Eisenstadt argued the employability agenda was consistent with raising aspirations and providing people with opportunities to improve their situation (Ibid. p51).

After the 2001 election the DfEE became the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and its employment responsibilities were moved to the new Department of Work and Pensions (DWP). Childcare policies were now so closely associated with the welfare to work programmes there was pressure to move childcare across too. Estelle Morris who had replaced Blunkett, succeeded in keeping childcare in the DfES. Later that year Blair when commissioned an interdepartmental childcare review, it was chaired by the minister in charge of early years and childcare in the DfES, Catherine Ashton, and included the DWP, Treasury and the Women's Unit but not the DH (HMG, 2002). The review concluded that greater joined-up thinking and delivery of services for young children would be achieved by integrating responsibility for childcare, early years, and Sure Start in a new unit in the DfES. Created in 2002, it became the joint responsibility of the DfES together with the DWP instead of the DH.

Baroness Ashton supported the employability agenda, believing working mothers could provide more for their children for social and psychological, as well as economic, reasons. In future all the activities in the new unit –Neighbourhood Nurseries, Early Excellence Centres, SSLPs and nursery education would all be covered by the *Sure Start* brand. Naomi Eisenstadt became the new director of the unit accountable solely to Baroness Ashton, who was both a minister in the DWP and in the DfES. The unit would be responsible for 'a £1.5billion combined budget for childcare, early years, and Sure Start by 2005-2006, including more than doubling the spending on childcare'(DWP p85).

The review recommended the devolution of control for delivery and funding of childcare services to the LAs. This 'proved particularly contentious, both to Sure Start managers and to champions of neighbourhood control' (Eisenstadt, 2012, p73). It did little to diminish some managers' fear that their core services, designed to improve parenting skills and mothers' self esteem, would be overwhelmed by the employability agenda and that the different ethos, practices and standards underpinning paid-for childcare provision might not sit easily with nursery education's focus on children and educational outcomes. The review also recommended the creation of Children's Centres for pre-schoolchildren in the poorest 20% of areas. The main difference between these Centres and the earlier 300 SSLPs already in operation was the greater emphasis on providing childcare for working parents, including support for childminders and providing for a wider age range. Their larger catchment areas would inevitably spread funding more thinly. The ring-fence around SSLPs' funding seemed in danger of crumbling.

7.5 Every Child Matters

In 2003, Lord Laming's report on the death of a child, Victoria Climbie, from family abuse and neglect despite being known to a number of agencies which should have protected her, vividly drew attention to the failings of services for vulnerable children and added further impetus for reform. Better co-ordination and collaboration across services for children as well as greater accountability at the local level was needed. The government published a Green Paper *'Every Child Matters'* containing radical proposals to improve the well being of young children. After wide consultation with children and young people themselves, 'wellbeing' was defined according to the outcomes for children of being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and making an economic contribution. In order to achieve these aims LA children's services would be restructured involving the creation in every LA of:

- a Director of Children's Services, accountable for LA education and children's services;
- a Children's Trust formed through the pooling of budgets and resources across children's services, education, Connexion and certain health services and used to commission services for children and young people;
- a Lead Council Member for Children's Services;
- a statutory Local Safeguarding Children Board to replace Area Child Protection Committees.

A Children's Workforce Unit would be created along with a Sector Skills Council for Children and Young People's Services in the DfES. There would be a Children's Commissioner in England to act as an independent champion for children. To facilitate the sharing of information across agencies an electronic file for every child would be created. A common assessment framework would also be established. These proposals formed the basis of the Children Act 2004. It was later conceded it would not be mandatory to amalgamate education and children's services.

In 2003 the DfES took over responsibility for social care for children, including teenage pregnancy, from the DH together with family policy and family law, including CAFCASS, from the Home Office. A new Minister of State for Children, responsible for children's policy was created within the DfES . Margaret Hodge became the first Minister for Children. Baroness Ashton reported to her on matters concerning Sure Start, early years and childcare.

The implications for SSLPs were profound: they were to be folded into Sure Start Children's Centres. The new Minister for Children explained: '*The vision we have is a shared one. Every child having the opportunity to fulfil their potential, and no child slipping through the net. A step change in early years' provision, with health, education, and social care closely integrated through Sure Start Children's Centres. Parenting support embedded at every stage'.* (Margaret Hodge, *Every Child Matters: the Next Steps*, Foreword, 2003, p3)

By 2006 there would be 2,500 (Phase I and II) Sure Start Children's Centres covering the 30% most deprived communities and including 70% of children in poverty. These Centres had to offer the following core services:

- Integrated full-day childcare and early learning;
- Drop-in sessions and activities for parents, carers and children;
- access to child and family health services, including antenatal care;
- outreach and family support services;

- links with Jobcentre Plus for training and employment advice;
- support for childminders;
- support for children and parents with special needs

The funding of the Phase I Children's Centres based on the first 500 SSLPs and the Early Excellence Centres was contentious. In the long run Sure Start Children's Centres would be less generously funded than the original SSLPs, not least because of the urgency to invest in childcare provision for working parents, prompted by the Chancellor of the Exchequer and those wanting to meet their targets to reduce child poverty.

Childcare services based at the centres were to be funded from parental fees, together with government funding for free part-time early education places for three and four year olds and, in SSLPs in future, two year olds (announced in the 2004 Spending Review). The Childcare Act 2006 introduced a requirement on LAs to ensure there was sufficient childcare for working parents as well as for those in education and training. LAs themselves would only be 'providers of last resort' although they could charge for any childcare service they did provide. Eva Lloyd concluded from her study of New Labour's early years policies: '*The coupling of early childhood provision with parental employment status and its link to markets in integrated childcare and family support, appear particularly problematic at both a pragmatic and a principled level'*.(Lloyd, 2009 p488). In practice, providing full-time childcare services proved to be a continuing drain on many Centres' resources.

Those involved with the first SSLPs were concerned with the control, as well as the level, of the funding. Their worst fears were confirmed by the review*: Choice for Parents, the Best Start for Children: a Ten Year Strategy for Childcare* (HMT, 2004). Its broad remit gave parents a real choice of how to balance their work and family lives by improved maternity benefits and leave, the right to ask to work flexibly. The increased entitlements to free nursery education could be combined with the childcare, which they needed to work. The quality of childcare services would be improved by strengthening the inspection and regulation of early years' services and investing £125 million a year in training and developing the skills of the childcare and Sure Start Children's Centres' workforce, in particular, by introducing a new qualification, the Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) which was intended to be equivalent to graduate teacher level. For those managing Children's Centres a National Professional Qualification in Integrated Centre Leadership (NPQICL) was introduced. By 2012, three-quarters of the centre managers held a degree or higher and nearly four out of five had a NPQICL (ECCE, 2013, p49). By 2010 there would be 3,500 Sure Start Children's Centres, one for every community. Sure Start Children's Centres were going to become part of a mainstream set of services, and ' *all would come under the control of LAs, who would have the discretion of distributing early years and childcare money much more flexibly*' (Eisenstadt, 2012, p106). In 2008 their Partnership Boards would become advisory.

To some this marked the end of Sure Start. Norman Glass was dismayed. His experience had convinced him that it was necessary '*to involve local people fully in the development and management of the programme if it was to take root and not simply be seen as another quick fix by middle class social engineers'* (Glass, 2005). He regretted '*its capture by the 'employability agenda'. For poor mothers work was the answer, and Sure Start was to play its role as a sort of New Deal for Toddlers.'(Idem).*To others the transfer of control to local government would '*ensure that Sure Start children's Centres would become embedded within the welfare state by government statute and would thus be difficult to eradicate by any future government'*(Melhuish and Hall, 2007, p17). The duty the Children Act placed on health agencies to co-operate with LAs to improve the well-being of children would give child health a much needed higher profile. (Idem)

The Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009 confirmed the duty on LAs contained in the Childcare Act 2006 to improve the well-being of young children and to secure sufficient childcare.

In future LAs would be required to: *so far as is reasonably practical, include arrangements for sufficient provision of children's centres to meet local need (5A(i))*' The services relating to young children and their parents which a Children's Centre were expected to provide included early years provision ie integrated childcare and early learning for Phase I and II centres only; health services and LA social services ; services to assist or encourage parents to obtain or retain employment and information services for parents providing advice and assistance to access early childhood services elsewhere. If childcare was not available on the site, a centre would have to provide activities involving children such as 'Stay and Play'. By early 2010 the government had achieved its target of 3,500 locally based Sure Start Children's Centres across England.

7.6 Evaluating Sure Start

The Treasury had insisted from the outset that the Sure Start programme would be evaluated by an independent team of academic researchers (see Eisenstadt, 2012).[226] The task was a daunting one because politicians, including the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, were in such a hurry to expand the programme. The Sure Start areas had not been chosen randomly and the decision to double the number of SSLPs before the first 260 had been firmly established made it difficult to find a control group. In the event, 150 of the original SSLPs were compared with 50 from the second round but yet to be established - 'SSLP's in waiting'. Outcomes were compared using data for children aged nine months and at 36 months. Later impact study reports from the evaluation team used comparable data on children from the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS). In addition, there was no clearly defined set of 'interventions'- within certain parameters what was done in each programme was left to the local participants. SSLP boundaries did not necessarily coincide with administrative units so area data were hard to find in official data sets. Finally, most SSLPs did not yet have robust data recording systems.

Despite these difficulties, the evaluation team made 'an impressive silk purse out of a sow's ear' (Rutter, 2007 p207). The National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) started in 2001. It confirmed that the SSLP areas selected were indeed areas of concentrated disadvantage. For example 45% of children under four years of age were living in workless households and a quarter of births were to lone mothers compared with 23% and 14% respectively for England. A much higher proportion (41%) of residents in SSLPs had no qualifications compared with the national average (29%). Outcomes for children were worse for example 37% attained 5 good passes at GCSE compared with the national average of 50%. Of particular interest was the variability between SSLPs. They identified five sub-groups of SSLPs: less deprived (21%); typical (34%); more deprived (11%); ethnically diverse (23%); high proportion from the Indian sub-continent or large families (11%). (Barnes *et al*, 2003; 2004).

The impact study (Belsky and Melhuish, 2007) pursued the following questions:

- Did the use of services differ and did parents rate SSLP communities more positively
- Did families in SSLP areas function differently
- Did child health and development differ between SSLP and comparison areas
- Did effects of SSLPs on parenting mediate effects on child functioning

The findings which hit the headlines in late 2005 (National Evaluation of Sure Start Research Team, 2005) were those which found children from workless households and of lone parents showed *adverse*

[226] The National Evaluation of Sure Start was one evaluation with 4 different modules (Implementation, Local Context, Impact and Cost Effectiveness) and a number of reports over a period of nearly 10 years.

effects. Overall out of 14 outcomes for nine month olds there was only one significant difference –a lower rating on home chaos (eg regular routines) and for three year olds significantly less use of scolding, slapping and physical restraint. However, three year olds of teen mothers scored higher on behaviour problems and lower on social competence and verbal skills than those in 'SSLPs-to-be' areas. These findings suggested that SSLPs were not reaching those most in need of the services and support offered. Not only was more effort needed to engage groups such as teenage mothers but care should be taken not to inadvertently put them off. SSLPs led by health organisations were more successful at engaging the more disadvantaged groups. Outreach policies and practices to involve the hardest to reach families were subsequently emphasised in the Sure Start Children's Centres, although these were not as successful as hoped (NAO, 2009). Further studies raised concerns that SSLPs were failing to reach deprived families from black and minority ethnic groups, (Craig, G, 2007)

The second impact study report (National Evaluation of Sure Start Research Team, 2008) was much more positive. Half of the 14 outcomes showed significant, positive differences between SSLPs and non Sure Start areas. These included improved child positive social behaviour, improved child independence and self-regulation, less harsh discipline from parents, less home chaos, and improved home learning environment, more activities in the home conducive to learning like reading, singing and rhymes. This time there were no significant differences between the sub-groups (Eisenstadt, 2012, p133). There were fewer workless households in SSLPs but this was in line with national trends. It was not until the next impact study report (National Evaluation of Sure Start Research Team, 2010), found *fewer* families remained workless in SSLPs compared with families from the MCS.

An important finding in the first impact study report, consistent with other research studies showed that positive outcomes for children were mediated by improved parenting practices. Moreover, improvements in parenting practices were significantly affected by how SSLPs functioned and the proficiency with which they operated (Melhuish, Belsky, Anning and Ball, 2007). The study demonstrated not only that better implemented programmes exerted a greater beneficial impact on the children and families but also identified which features of programme efficiency were responsible for such an effect. The findings suggested that: *'strengthening programme activities relevant to empowerment should improve their effectiveness in influencing parenting'* (Ibid. p167). Empowerment was a measure of community groups' and parents' involvement in the planning and delivery of services; parent representation; staff training opportunities; clear exit strategies for users; services to include self-help groups; evidence that staff and users constituted a learning community and evidence of mutual respect for all parties. These are important findings in the light of a renewed emphasis on parental involvement in the running of Children's Centres, and the ongoing need for well qualified staff and experienced leadership.

7.7 2010: Continuity and Change

7.7.1 Child Poverty

A major theme in the Sure Start story is the Labour government's commitment to reduce child poverty-by a quarter by 2005 and by half in 2010.The first target was narrowly missed, the second by 600,000.This cannot be explained solely by the recession. Changes in parental employment prospects and earnings over the *whole* of this period are also important. '*The overall reduction in child poverty since 1998-99 has been helped by higher lone parent employment rates; and the overall rise in child poverty since 2004-05 has been most concentrated on children of one earner couples, whose real earnings have fallen.*' (Brewer et al 2010, p45). By 2004-05 for the first time since the early 1970s, over half of lone parents were in employment compared with 46% in 1998-99. In 2009-10 the proportion in work was 55% increasing to 58% in 2012. However, they have experienced reductions in hourly earnings and pay.

Work has become a less certain route out of poverty. In 1998-99 half of children in poverty lived in a working household. In 2012 this had increased to over three-fifths (62%) (DWP/DfE, 2012,p13).Single parents still made up one in four of families with children and their children were

twice as likely (43%) to be poor as children in couple families(22%). (If the real income of the median household had not also fallen during the recession, the numbers of children in relative poverty (defined as living in a household with an income less than 60% of the median household before housing costs) (IFS, 2011), would have been higher.)

The Coalition government accepted the commitment in the Child Poverty Act 2010 to 'eradicate' child poverty (defined as reducing relative poverty to 10%) by 2020. Sure Start Children's Centres would play an important part in supporting '*the most disadvantaged groups struggling at the bottom of society'* (DWP/DfE, 2011, p8). The increase to 15 hours of the universal offer of free nursery education for all three and four year olds, promised by the previous government, was implemented. Starting in autumn 2013, free part-time nursery education would be extended to the 130,000 most disadvantaged two year olds. Benefits for children, however, were cut. In 2011-12 in the UK, 3.5 million children (27%) were living in poverty (DWP, Tables 4.1tr and 4.3tr, 2013)

7.7.2 Sure Start Children's Centres: less of the same or different?

Since 2012, the 'core purpose' of a Sure Start Children's Centre emphasises *targeted* interventions to 'improve outcomes for young children and their families and reduce inequalities between families in greatest need and their peers.' This is to be achieved by improving child development and readiness for school, supported by raising parent's aspirations, self esteem and parenting skills as well as improving both child and family health and life chances. Children's Centres are to be engaged in:

- assessing need across the local community
- providing access to universal early years services in the local area including high quality and affordable early years' education and childcare. Crèche facilities and support networks for childminders might also be provided.
- providing targeted evidence-based early intervention for families in greatest need, in the context of integrated services
- acting as a hub for the local community, building social capital and cohesion
- Sharing expertise with other early years settings to improve quality

These activities should be underpinned by respecting and engaging parents and working in partnership across professional/agency boundaries, particularly social workers and health visitors. In order to reduce child poverty and increase social mobility, centres are expected to work with Job Centre Plus, providing adult learning, including language, literacy and numeracy support as well as with advice organisations, schools and voluntary and community sector organisations. However, '*providing services 'through' a children's centre does not mean that all services should actually be delivered in a children's centre'* (DfE, 2013, p13).Rather Children's Centres should facilitate *access* to them. This is a very different interpretation of section 2 of the Childcare Act 2006 (see p7).

7.7.3 The impact of Budget Cuts

In 2011-12 the new Early Intervention Grant (EIG) for LAs in England, which replaced most DfE funding streams for services for young people, including that for Sure Start Children's Centres was 10.9% lower than the grants it replaced. In April 2013, the EIG was abolished. In future funding for early intervention and family services will be included in the LAs 'General Fund'. By 2014-15 it will have fallen to £1.6billion (All Party Parliamentary Sure Start Group, 2013, p11).

A census of Children's Centres in 2012 (4Children, 2012) shows the effects of these cuts. Altogether 281 centres had closed, 16 outright. The rest had either merged or adopted a 'hub and spoke' model. A further 10% were struggling to survive. Half believed they were offering broadly the same services

as before, and a quarter fewer. Nearly one in five were planning to cut services in the following year and over a quarter were planning both staffing and service reductions (Ibid, p11) Universal services, such as Stay and Play, healthy eating and baby massage classes and often the first point of contact for families (Ibid.p14), were facing a reduction in the frequency of classes. A fifth had started to charge for services previously provided free. Priorities were shifting to targeted services and expanding outreach services and family support workers.

The agencies with which they collaborated were also facing tighter budgets. Over two-fifths of the 121 centres in the ECCE study (Goff et al, 2013,) covering the same period, had had staff withdrawn by partner agencies, including by Job Centres Plus. The same proportion had lost funding from partners thus diluting their multi -agency work. Centre leaders and managers did not see the reduction in co-location of services on a single site and the development of the hub and spoke model as a barrier to well-integrated multi-agency work. Altogether 80% of Centres anticipated further funding reductions in 2012-13(Ibid. p23). This is happening in the context of a growing population of children under five as well as growing child poverty.

Working in partnership with different professionals is not facilitated by the perpetuation of large differences in qualification levels, pay and status. The progress made since 2006 in narrowing the gap and creating a progressive career path for those who wish to work with very young children is stalling. Cathy Nutbrown's government -commissioned report on developing the children's workforce (Nutbrown, 2012) was largely ignored in the latest government proposals. She wrote: '*So yet again, babies, toddlers, young children and their families, have to be content with something different, something not quite the same in status as that offered to older pupils and students in the education system, something confused and confusing'* (Nutbrown, 2013, p8).

7.7.4 Childcare

The integration of pre-school education and childcare is far from complete and not helped by its removal from 2,000 Children's Centres within a year of ending the requirement on centres to provide it. Moreover, '*if parents do not see the childcare, if they do not see it as a reality, they are much more reluctant to go into work and the childcare in children's centres tend to be higher quality'* (Eisenstadt Oral evidence House of Commons Education Select Committee Question 5 Jan 2013). Childcare staff and qualified teachers were the most likely either to have faced redundancy or had not been replaced (4 Children, op cit p22). Good outcomes for young children however, depend on the *quality* of the care they receive and a key factor determining quality is staff qualifications (Sylva, 2010, Melhuish, 2013). Improved school readiness is now a key objective for the *most* disadvantaged children, in keeping with the coalition government's residual model of the welfare state. But young children fare best in day nurseries where children come from a wide range of family circumstances (Sylva, 2006). The Institute of Health Equity's research on the part which Children's Centres can play in improving the development and well-being of young children, emphasised that '*attention is needed across the social gradient not simply for the most disadvantaged, although this is where most intensive support may be required'* (Pordes Bowers et al, 2012, p9).

7.7.5 Parental involvement and Volunteers

Increased parental involvement in decisions affecting a Centre's future plans as well as its activities is a key government objective. Parents must continue to be represented on Centres' Advisory boards. Greater participation in volunteering is encouraged. In 2012, three fifths reported increased use of volunteers, particularly in Stay and Play sessions and self-help groups. Three quarters of volunteers provided up to 10 hours a week (four Children, p26). A third of centres were using fathers as volunteers. With careful training and support parents as volunteers are valuable resources. Increasing their skills and aspirations can also help them go on to more formal training and employment as an early NESS study found. (Meadows, P and Garbers, C, DfES, 2004) As discussed above (p10), if parents feel included and valued by the Centre staff this has a beneficial influence on their parenting behaviour which in turn has a positive impact on their children. All this takes staff time.

7.8 Conclusions

The Sure Start programme has come a long way in the 15 years since its inception. Without generous and assured funding in the early years it might not have succeeded in creating innovative ways of working with disadvantaged children and their parents. Its novel position in the Treasury at the outset was crucial and there are interesting parallels with the creation of LA Children's departments in 1948. The Ministry of Health and the Home Office both laid claims to these new departments. The Home Office won allowing a much cleaner break with the Poor Law than was possible for old people's services, which stayed with the Ministry of Health (see Townsend, 1962). The new children's officers were a group of very able women graduates and together with the new children's inspectorate in the Home Office *'provided a mixture of experience, determination and freshness which also played its part in the generation and dissemination of new ideas and new expectations'* Parker, 1986, p25). Children's services and the associated professions, however, had over 20 years to become established before they were swept into the generic Social Services departments in 1971. In contrast SSLPs had to develop and change at a much faster pace without a well-trained workforce. The complexities and challenges facing early years' policies still exist, but if the Centres which creatively resist the cuts are those which are embedded in their communities and keep a focus on the well-being of young children *in their own right*, then those who pioneered Sure Start will be vindicated.

Hilary Land September 9 2013

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