

## **HILARY ENGLISH**

### **TRANSITION OF STUDENTS FROM ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED BACKGROUNDS TO RESEARCH LED UNIVERSITIES**

#### **Abstract**

This paper presents the findings of a study on software development students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds that have dropped out of universities which have a strong research emphasis. In the UK, these universities are generally part of the Russell Group of Universities. The participants were all male, mainly black, working class and had studied software development for two years post-sixteen at an inner city further education college in London. This study is the result of interviews, discussions and feedback from students who have a very different experience of the higher education system than students from middle class backgrounds. As Macrae and Maguire (2002) have argued, a system of support is required for these under-represented groups, in order that they may successfully access and complete higher education studies.

Economically disadvantaged students' transition to research led universities is especially difficult, as in these environments there is a habitus of middle class students for whom the social norms are very different as many have had very different life experiences. The dramatic increase in University fees from £3,000 to £9,000 per year has made many economically disadvantaged students worry about applying to university. It is also the case that students from the lower social classes are more debt averse than those from higher social classes (Callendar & Jackson, 2005).

While many universities have made considerable steps to assisting transition, the findings are that these working class students who came to university from a vocational course and have very limited experience of exams, believe that they would be helped by having an introductory course at the start of the academic year to give additional support. A mentor from the same social, economic and ethnic background to support them from the start of their course would also be of great benefit. It is noted that additional financial help in the form of more non repayable bursaries and available part time work at the university would also be beneficial.

#### **Introduction and Background**

This paper is an investigation and study on the reasons for drop out of economically disadvantaged, mainly black, male students from research led universities. The 15 students in the study were all male: there are very few females on this course each year and they generally apply for Business Information systems courses, so they were not included. The students were mainly black and were all from economically deprived homes. They were in receipt of EMA (Education Maintenance Allowance) which is given to students whose families are in receipt of a low income, so this was used as an evidence indicator of economically disadvantaged background. They were all at a London inner city further education college on a vocational software development course, which is the equivalent of three A Levels - the necessary prerequisite for university. UCAS, the university and

colleges admissions service, which is the centralised application system for UK universities advises that there has been a drop in applications from UK born students of 12% (UCAS 2012) since the news of tuition fee increase which will come into effect from October 2012. With the projection of the number of 18 year olds in the UK decreasing by around 11% over the next 10 years it is important for universities to continue to have in place as much student support as possible for students to reduce the dropout rate.

From October 2012, university fees in the UK for home students will increase from £3,000 to £9,000 per year, which means an economically disadvantaged student who drops out incurs a heavy financial loss with nothing to show for it. The dropout rate of working class students has been recognised as a serious issue in higher education. Powedthavee and Vignoles (2009) suggest that, in the UK, as in the US, there is a significant gap in the dropout rate between economically advantaged and disadvantaged pupils. Powedthavee and Vignoles (2009) state that the dropout rate is increasing in the UK and that this will widen the socio-economic gap in degree completion, as poorer students will be more likely than richer ones to drop out. However many universities have taken some steps towards supporting economically disadvantaged students and this has been noticeable in the feedback of this study. If a student goes to university it is critical that they do not drop out, especially as there are very few jobs available in the current economic market in the UK. *'In the period September-November 2011, 1.04 million young people aged 16-24 were unemployed'* (Rhodes, 2012, p. 1). On average 85% of all students who complete this software development course go on to attend university. Nearly all are the first in their family to do so. The concept that this course will lead on to university is embedded into the teaching. We keep in touch with the students to monitor that we are properly preparing them for university. We also get feedback from them on their experiences at university through discussions.

Everyone should have equal access to a university education. Rawls (1971) sees social justice as the equal distribution of goods in society. Here the goods are the availability of and access to university education. Bourdieu (1990) has described how we reproduce our social conditions and so children frequently have similar educational and employment opportunities to their parents. This research shows that there is a correlation between background and education but, this is true only up to a point. Bourdieu's (1990) concept of habitus accounts for how a person's environment influences their behaviour and choices. This can be both familial and institutional. In this study, one can see how habitus can affect students. Most of those who participated in the study do not have a familial habitus of going to university; the majority did not have parents who wanted them to go or assumed that this would happen. Nearly all the cohort were the first in the family to go to University. For disadvantaged inner city students who may only have been out of London on school trips this is very alien, they go from a world of slang to talking *'proper'*, from rarely travelling out of the city environment to meeting people their own age who go to France for shopping expeditions and go to Europe and further afield for their holidays. Money is a serious concern and for these students who are often from a background of benefits, a large debt is a frightening concept. There is no parental back up for them. To then drop out of university with a debt and no degree is of serious concern.

*'Students from poor families who get preferential places at top universities are three times more likely to drop out of their courses than their counterparts who win places by the ordinary route'.*  
(Henry, 2009, p. 1)

Additional help and feedback from the first term onwards would greatly alleviate students' anxiety about their work and provide them with additional moral support.

## Method

This study is the result of interviews, discussions and feedback from these 15 students who have attended the software development course prior to attaining places at research led universities. This was a qualitative study in the form of questions to find out reasons for dropping out as a qualitative study allows for empathetic understanding (Jones, 1997). The questions were checked to ensure they had been understood. Here the qualitative study was chosen to yield answers rich in data as students could express themselves freely. In qualitative research, interviews can be face to face or by telephone and both of these methods were used for this study. A quantitative study was not used as it would not allow for detailed answers (Bell, 2005) as students need to be able to fully explain themselves (Cohen et al, 2003).

This was insider research as the researcher was known to the students as their former tutor on the software development course; it was believed that this would enable the student to be more open in their answers. It is acknowledged that researchers have a significant role in interpreting data (Gillham, 2000). As the researcher did not attend their university, it was anticipated that they would find it easier to talk to her in a more open and honest manner than discussing a similar issue with their university lecturer. Semi structured interviews were selected, there was a list of questions as a guide but the *'interviewer is prepared to be flexible in terms of the order which topics are considered ...to let the interviewee develop ideas and speak more widely on issues raised by the researcher'* (Denscombe, 2007, p. 176). The research questions were open such as

'Can you tell me about any problems you experienced in your first term at university?'

'What would have helped you to overcome these problems?'

'At what point did you start to feel that you wanted to leave the university?'

Although interviews take time, the aim is also to understand individual perceptions (Denscombe, 2007) and if the researcher needs to learn about people's feelings, experience and emotions (Denscombe, 2007) qualitative methodology is a means to enable this.

## Findings

As increasing and widening participation brings in more students from under-represented groups, they may need more support to complete their courses. If there are few other economically disadvantaged students at the university support is even more critical. Economically disadvantaged students often feel alienated at university as it is an unfamiliar culture with very different values; as Mann (2001) has said

they are '*outsiders in a foreign land*'. The more research focused the university the harder it can be for these students to be part of that milieu.

Early support for fresher (first year) students is critical as 75% of students found that attending university was initially very difficult and stated they would have liked to have more support from other students from a similar background. Finding friends was a problem especially others of a similar background which covered their language, music and the availability of food to which they were accustomed. The following interview quotes from the students interviewed are representative of the answers that were given

*'There was nowhere to buy plantain'. 'No one liked rap or hip hop they just liked cheesy music.' 'They all talked posh and proper and with long words' and they were always talking about 'skiing and what they did in Asia and all these other places I had never heard of'. 'I just felt on the edge of it when everyone was talking together'. 'They were all very nice but I was right out of it'. They all talked about their holidays I don't even go on one, I have never been to Europe.'*

Receiving a low mark for the first piece of coursework submitted was demoralising and students felt that extra help with this would have helped their confidence in their academic ability. *'When I got a low pass mark I just felt what's the point? This is not for me I will never be any good'. 'I just stayed a lot in my room and did not go to lectures I found it very lonely'*. All of the students interviewed had serious concerns about money and the debt that they were incurring. *'I find my student loan frightening and worry about how much it has cost me'. 'I wake up in a sweat thinking of all that money I owe'*.

### **Evaluation of Findings and Recommendations**

Due to the findings of this study it is proposed that universities introduce an initiatory course for students with vocational qualifications and those on bursaries which would also enable them to form a support network. Many non A level entrants to universities have little experience of exams, as many vocational courses are coursework based. To have the opportunity to take a course providing help with examination techniques, revision techniques and advice on how to succeed in assignments would be a great support to these less advantaged students.

Additional support in the first term is likely to boost disadvantaged students' confidence at a time of anxiety. Becoming accustomed to the type of academic writing and literature referencing and the standard that is expected would be highly beneficial as prior to attending university many non A level students are used to small groups and to receiving a lot of support.

A further finding of this study was a students' desire for a mentor. Some economically disadvantaged students who had enrolled in prestigious universities said they had trouble '*fitting in*' (Forsythe and Furlong, 2003, p. 1). This mentoring should also start in the first week. Second and third year students could be encouraged to be mentors which they could put on their CVs. The mentors would need to be from the same social and preferably ethnic background as the mentored students so that they speak the same 'language'. Initial support from someone who

understands what they are going through is critical to a successful transition from college to university for economically disadvantaged students.

As money is one of disadvantaged students' main concerns, those allocating part time work at the universities could give preference to those students. Although these students may have a bursary this is only a small amount of the total fees paid. There are many other costs such as accommodation, food, stationery and socialising. Those who can barely afford to go out are also less likely to then meet and make friends with other students putting them at a further social disadvantage. Allocating part time work to those who qualify for bursaries would help to lessen these students' financial concerns. Although it is recognised that most students worry about money, these students' parents are in receipt of income support and there is very little money given to their children. '*Better financial help, especially non-repayable bursaries, would enable more of them to complete their degrees*' (Forsythe and Furlong, 2003, p. 1).

However it should be noted that many universities do provide extra classes and in this case, software development students who were weak in maths were offered extra maths classes which they had found very supportive. Forsythe and Furlong (2003) have found that students' unfamiliarity with higher education, as they were the first in the family to go to university, meant that they often got poor advice and often enrolled on unsuitable courses. This was not the case in this study as all the students had taken computer science for two years and in effect had three A levels in computing so had very good knowledge of the computer science/software development degree for which they had enrolled.

Finally, it has been found that all of the students who dropped out of the first university they enrolled in then went to other universities so did not give up on higher education. They all went to universities where there were more students from their background and milieu. They fitted in better there and succeeded in gaining a degree. These universities may not have had the prestige, status and easier access to the graduate job market but the students were happier, made more friends and completed their degree.

## Conclusions

Supporting economically disadvantaged students at research led universities is critical if they are to gain their degree. It is recommended that these universities should run introductory courses at the beginning of the academic year aimed at vocational students and those on bursaries, and also introduce a mentor system with that mentor being of the same background and cultural milieu as the student. Additional support during their first term is likely to encourage and help these students. Increased financial support and help with part time work at the university would also be a considerable benefit.

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