

## Non-participation in Higher Education: Decision-making as an embedded social practice

Little previous research has focused on the decision-making of adults (21-plus) who have not participated in Higher Education (HE). This project examined how adults' decision-making about higher education is embedded in networks of family, partners and friends, and the extent to which they see future participation as being within the bounds of possibility. Central to the research was a group of individuals who were 'potentially recruitable' to HE, defined for the purposes of our research as those whose highest level of qualification is at Level 3, the level normally required for entry to HE. These subjects acted as entry points to their 'networks of intimacy', which consisted of people with both lower and higher educational attainment than their own.

- No single agency has the widening of participation in HE across the life course as its core mission. → There is untapped need for professional information, advice and guidance for adults across the life course.
- The 'potentially recruitable' in our research are living comfortable, stable lives and usually see little need to participate in HE. → The potential benefits of HE need to be made more apparent to this group.
- HE experiences within social networks critically shape the perceptions of 'potentially recruitable' adults across and within generations → Identification with entrants to HE who are 'people like me' in terms of education, social and employment background influences decision-making across and within generations
- There is an appetite for high quality, work-related and employer-supported provision, and for recognised qualifications that offer recipients tangible returns → If more employers were to make this sort of provision available, the latent employee demand that our research is uncovering could be released.

# The research

Our project involved two overlapping and interacting phases. Phase 1 involved desk research and interviews with 32 key informants representing a range of national, regional and local organisations. The interviews investigated their policy and practice interests in supporting greater HE participation. Phase 2 consisted of interviews with 16 entry point individuals and members of their networks of intimacy. A total of 107 people took part in the second stage of the research. The entry points were interviewed twice and members of their networks once. In addition to our entry points, we found that 28 network members were also qualified to Level 3 and so the size of our Level 3, 'potentially recruitable' sample grew to 44. Most in this group had left full-time education before the age of 18 and many had acquired their Level 3 awards after the age of 21. 90 per cent of them had obtained vocational rather than academic qualifications at this level. Just under one third of the total Phase 2 sample had achieved qualifications at Level 4 (sub- or bachelors degree) or above, the rest had lower levels of attainment (up to Level 2).

## Conceptual lenses

Our research shows that educational decision-making is deeply embedded within social networks. Network members' attitudes and behaviour are strongly influenced by their educational, social and historical positioning in relation to others. The lens of 'social capital' has allowed us a clearer view of the value of interpersonal ties and the extent to which network membership can provide introductions to other networks, for example through employment. Contrasting forms and patterns of social capital appear to increase or decrease the potential for HE participation within networks, particularly for our 'potentially recruitable' sample.

Network discourses on educational decision-making can be linked to generational and cohort effects, particularly with respect to gender and class. The inter-generational dimension of many networks indicates the significance of the specific policy context in which successive generations have made their initial, typically 'standardised,' post-compulsory decisions, as well as their later decisions to gain further qualifications. Engagement in and dispositions towards education are strongly associated with members' experiences of educational participation and achievement and their 'collective learning identities', although there are instances where individuals 'break the mould'.

Our focus on life stage and life course has revealed many of our interviewees to be life-long learners. Many members of the 'potentially recruitable' sample achieved their Level 3 qualifications later in their lives, and several of the network members with Level 4 qualifications attained them as mature learners. Both these groups have achieved mainly vocational or occupational awards that they link to labour market aspirations and employment requirements, rather than solely to personal development and educational progression. Highlighting the life stage at which a decision is made has provided essential context. In particular, we have strong evidence that gender and class norms surrounding domestic responsibilities exert a powerful influence on women's participation decisions.

## Sources of advice

Evidence from our key informant interviews, corroborated by the accounts of our research participants, indicates that no agency is currently taking responsibility for providing impartial advice and guidance on education and employment decisions to adults across the life course, or more specifically, in relation to opportunities for higher level study. As a consequence, the adults in our sample are

mostly reliant on the advice and influence of members of their informal networks: family, friends and work colleagues. This finding reinforces the insight that decision-making is an embedded and collective social practice. We have found no evidence of universities directly reaching out to the type of people who participated in our research.

## Relevance of HE

Our 'potentially recruitable' individuals are largely located in social networks characterised by relative economic and employment stability. Most see little need to disturb their current employment and domestic circumstances through pursuing Level 4 qualifications. For many of the older members of this group, the acquisition of Level 3 qualifications provided them with the career opportunities and trajectories that, under current labour market conditions, are increasingly perceived only to be available to younger people with Level 4 qualifications.

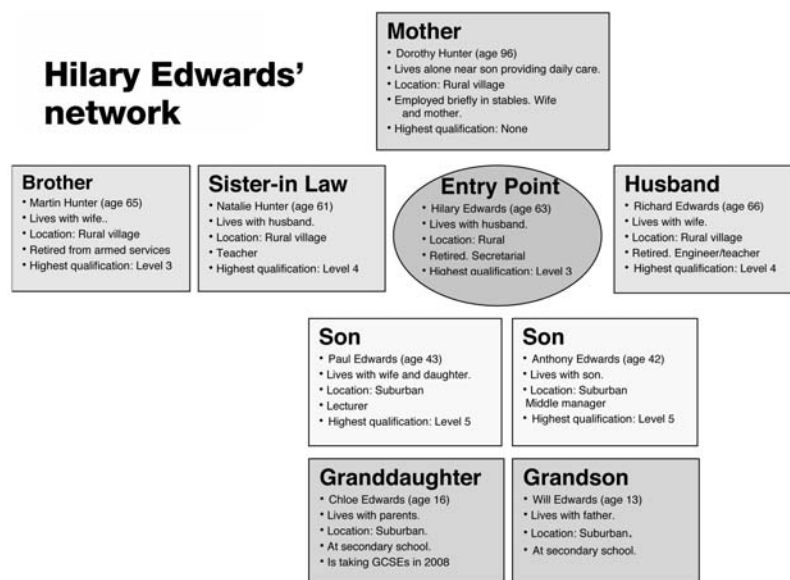
Our 'potentially recruitable' sample, then, is a population of 'ordinary' people whose participation or otherwise in HE has not hitherto been considered a public issue. They will increasingly become the focus of government attention in pursuit of the Leitch Review target that at least 40 per cent of the workforce should have attained Level 4 by 2020. Policy makers will need to demonstrate to this group, particularly those in their forties and fifties, that there are clear benefits to be gained from participating in HE. It is not readily apparent to them that this might be the case. In addition, higher education institutions (HEIs) will need to address the issue of providing an undergraduate curriculum which is responsive to the needs of these potential learners including flexible delivery, appropriate credit accumulation and content which is valued by learners and employers.

## The multi-directionality of network influence

HE is an increasingly common experience among younger network members, reflecting expansion in HE in recent years. They are often the first members of their immediate families to participate in HE. The HE experiences and perceptions of these 'participation pioneers' appear to be critical in shaping the perceptions of older network members, and not always in positive directions. Many older sample members, for example, expressed concerns about what they perceived to be the poor 'returns' from participation in HE, and the difficulty their younger relatives and acquaintances had had achieving graduate-level employment.

By contrast the example of individuals within networks who have experienced HE as mature learners exerts a generally positive influence on the attitudes of other members. There is some evidence that if the network contains at least one person who has experienced or is experiencing

Figure 1: An intergenerational network



HE as a mature learner, their example helps create educational, career and lifestyle aspirations ('imagined social capital') within the network. Potential recruits are more likely to respond to exhortations to participate if it is clear that they are part of the target audience for expansion and if they can imagine themselves following similar routes to people like themselves who have already gone into HE.

These findings illustrate both the nuanced nature of network influence and its multi-directionality. There can be 'trickle up' and 'trickle across' effects, as well as 'trickle down'. Social capital can be transferred between and within generations, and not solely from older to younger generations, as is often assumed within public policy and in some approaches to theorising social capital.

## Perceived value of learning

Despite having predominantly negative experiences of their compulsory schooling (for example, widespread experience of bullying, unsupported and undiagnosed learning disabilities, feelings of being invisible to teachers and family bereavements at critical moments), the potentially recruitable have extensive experience of informal and formal learning as adults, and overwhelmingly positive attitudes to it. In relation to informal learning, there was a very high incidence across our sample of self-directed and non-certificated forms of learning in pursuit of personal interests.

By contrast, our sample's support for formal educational opportunities is strongly associated with the perceived worth and utility of specific courses and qualifications. This applies to both older and younger generations, including first generation entrants to HE. Potential participants see the value of lifelong learning, but need to be convinced that participation in formal courses and qualifications, particularly at higher levels, will yield tangible and easily articulated returns, such as increased job security, promotion, higher salaries and new career opportunities. This perspective on formal education should not be conflated with a rejection of learning for its own sake. There is a strong appetite for informal learning across much of our sample, which can be met though ensuring that opportunities for self-directed learning are widely available.

In contrast to the expectations implicit in government policy, the predominant discourse amongst 'non-participants' in HE does not revolve around barriers to take-up. Instead, it relates to the perceived relevance of further or higher education to their personal and working lives, and the likelihood that they will acquire new skills and knowledge, not simply accreditation for what they already know. Moreover, participation in formal learning is not widely viewed in terms of straightforward progression through the qualifications framework. Our research indicates that adults are quite likely to

# Major implications

Institutions that can provide 'linking social capital,' including colleges, universities, employers, family learning centres, Learn Direct, and the new government sponsored adult careers initiative, need to develop impartial adult information, advice and guidance (IAG) services and ensure that these are readily available to those currently not participating at Level 4. IAG services made available through the workplace are likely to be particularly appealing to employees as they would be easily accessible. The value of the service, including its impartiality, could be established through word of mouth reports between colleagues. Similarly, making provision available in the community, for example in family learning centres and at schools to reach parents, could extend the take-up of this service. Our research has shown that there is currently no agency with responsibility for increasing and widening participation in HE across the lifecycle.

The Labour Force Survey indicates that there are currently around 6 million adults (20 per cent of the workforce) with Level 3 as their highest formal qualification, providing a large pool of people, the majority over 30 years old, who are 'potentially recruitable' to HE. Following the government's acceptance of the Leitch Review recommendation that at least 40 per cent of the workforce should be qualified to Level 4 or above by 2020, up from the current 30 per cent, this group has become a new target for expanding HE.

Our research indicates that policy-makers face a challenge in convincing those already qualified to Level 3 to pursue higher-level awards. In relation to the government's goal, there are three particular areas that require attention. First, many in the target group have vocational awards at Level 3 rather than A levels, and they often do not perceive these as having the currency required to study at undergraduate level. The Lifelong Learning Networks are starting to tackle this issue among young people, but only a few projects focus on older groups. Second, given that the potentially recruitable are often living comfortable and stable lives and see little need to acquire Level 4 qualifications, they will need to be persuaded that there are tangible benefits to doing so, such as increased job security,

pursue awards at similar or lower levels to their current highest level of attainment. We also have evidence to suggest that opportunities in the workplace exert a powerful pull on career aspirations and participation decisions, and that there is an appetite for high quality work-related provision. Encouraging sectors and employers to make connections between workforce development (upskilling), the sustainability of organisations and the fulfilment of business goals will also help create needs-driven reasons for employees to participate. Increasing the availability of work-related, higher level development options with direct employer support in funding and time is likely to

promotion, higher salary and new career opportunities; and that they will be able to fit further study in with their existing personal and employment commitments. A third, related, point is that increasing take-up at Level 4 will depend on the availability of accessible and affordable programmes which allow flexible and part-time modes of delivery. For the potentially recruitable adults represented in our sample, the quality of provision and the currency of the resulting qualification are important. They are attracted to meaningful education, training and career development but do not automatically associate this with gaining higher-level qualifications. Gaining credentials for the sake of having credentials does not appeal to this group.

Our findings suggest that the network approach to researching decisions on education and careers could provide the sort of nuanced messages to policy makers that would help them intervene more effectively. The research indicates that the work of practitioners seeking to widen participation would benefit from a deeper understanding of the embedded nature of education decision-making, the variety of pulls on people, and the consequent limitations of approaches which exclusively target individuals rather than social networks and which are mainly directed at younger generations. It has also revealed that the social networks included in our sample generally exhibit very positive attitudes to non-certificated forms of lifelong learning that lie outside the government's new widening participation agenda. From the policy perspective, it would be helpful to know more about two things: the relationship between adults' perceptions of more and less formal types of participation; and the extent to which the policy concept of progression expressed in terms of qualification levels maps on to adults' personal and collective concepts and values.

Our findings suggest that the network approach to exploring educational decision-making is a very productive one, yet is under-utilised within educational research. Without such an approach it is hard to see how a comprehensive understanding can be reached of the historically dependent, relational, personal and collective aspects of decision-making.

encourage employee take up as they respond to evidence of employer demand.

Provision developed jointly by HEIs and employers, which includes credit-bearing work related learning, would enable potential learners to participate in higher education in a way that builds on the culture of learning we have identified in many of the networks in this study. Additional factors that influence the decision to participate, and might increase take-up at Level 4, include easily accessible and affordable provision in the community or via flexible delivery modes.

## Further information

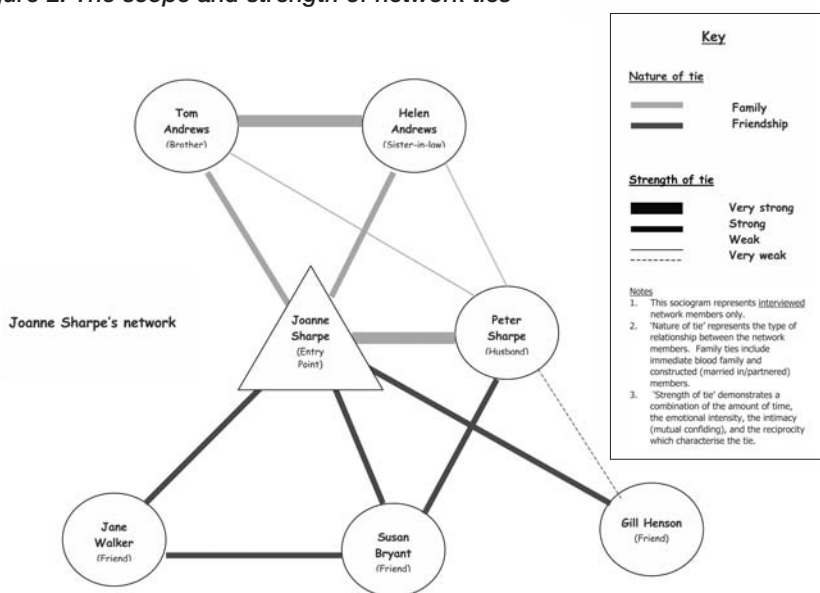
The best source of further information about the project, including access to our extensive Working Paper series and details of future publications, is the website: [www.education.soton.ac.uk/nphe](http://www.education.soton.ac.uk/nphe).

Details can also be accessed via the TLRP website: [www.tlrp.org](http://www.tlrp.org). Two of the project's papers are being published as follows:

Heath, S., Fuller, A., Paton, K (2008, forthcoming) Network-based ambivalence and educational decision-making: a case study of 'non-participation' in Higher Education, *Research Papers in Education*, Vol. 23.

Fuller, A., Foskett, R., Paton, K., and Johnston, B., (forthcoming) 'Getting by' or 'getting ahead'? Gendered educational and career decision-making in networks of intimacy, forthcoming in *Gendered Choices and Transitions in Lifelong Learning: part-time pathways, full-time lives*, S. Jackson, I. Malcolm and K. Thomas (eds), Leicester: NIACE

Figure 2: The scope and strength of network ties



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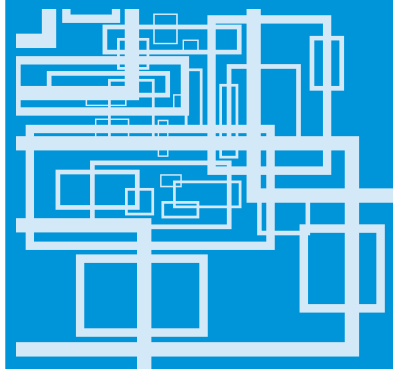
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