

## Rethinking working-class 'drop out' from university

**Access to university has been seen as a route out of poverty for young working-class people but, more recently, many who have entered higher education have been choosing to leave early. This research used a range of participative qualitative methods and international perspectives to explore the concept of 'working-class drop out'. Looking at four new universities in disadvantaged areas in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland the research found:**

- Policy and media tend to portray 'dropping out' as a symptom of working-class 'failure'.
- Seminars with local stakeholders ('research jury' days) revealed 'drop-out' could be a self-fulfilling prophecy, colouring the way young working-class people regard university and affecting regeneration.
- Interviews with ex-students revealed that young men felt they had been channelled by schools and careers services into stereotyped subjects that didn't engage them.
- Interviews showed that 'dropping out' was not a disaster. Students had sound reasons for withdrawing early. All but one intended to return to education.
- Most students interviewed had gained skills, confidence and life experience from their time at university.
- 'Research jury' days showed universities have support systems but interviews indicated these are difficult to access. Students often took the decision to leave on their own, without support or advice.
- The current system does not facilitate flexible lifelong learning. International comparisons, which formed part of the study, indicate the benefits of a more flexible system.
- Interviews with students and a survey of admissions offices indicated that universities do not encourage students to change courses, go part-time or take time out; nor did students have the confidence to negotiate. In addition, their families did not have the resources to navigate the system.
- Interviews and jury days with students, employment agencies, employers, and University Careers Services revealed a lack of focused services for students who drop out. Students were mostly offered a choice between dead-end jobs and unemployment.
- The researchers conclude that working-class students who withdraw early to refocus and re-enter education are real lifelong learners: institutions and policy-makers have yet to catch up with them.



## The 'problem of 'drop out'

Increasing university attendance to 50 per cent of those under 30 by 2010 is a government priority. This policy is seen as playing a key role in promoting social justice and redressing poverty. The seemingly high rates of withdrawal amongst working-class students, particularly in universities founded after 1992, are seen as a threat to this goal.

Fewer young men than women participate in higher education, particularly in disadvantaged areas outside London. Of those who do, a higher proportion of young men than women withdraw early. Overall, participation in higher education amongst working-class men from minority ethnic groups is disproportionately high. 'Drop-out' is an issue for these students too, but patterns differ nationally. It is young white working-class provincial men who are causing policy-makers most concern.

## How 'drop out' becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy

Policy-makers have cast retention as a moral imperative for institutions, with policy documents describing non-retention as "unacceptable" and "setting students up to fail". In addition, policy-makers and the media often portray students' decisions to leave higher education early as a lack of moral fibre. For example, headlines in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* have included 'You can't count on the carefree' (29.03.02) and 'Paisley calls for probe of *quitters*' (04.04.03) [researchers' italics]. Some portray 'dropping out' as a foregone conclusion: the working-class lack the will and ability to succeed, particularly if they are young, male and white.

Such attitudes and judgements help to shape the expectations and actions of students, institutions and communities, creating a story of early withdrawal read in terms of inevitability, failure and disappointment. Interviewees were aware both of how they had themselves been influenced by the label of 'drop-out' and how it positioned them in the minds of others:

"When you drop out of uni' there's a stigma. You're a university drop out." (Male)

The study included 'research jury days' involving a range of stakeholders from university, employment and community organisations as well as current and former students. Jury participants saw 'drop-out' as having a "knock on effect" on the local community and as spreading disillusionment to networks of families and friends. They felt it added to a climate of confusion for communities which have lost the certainties of traditional industries and are caught between the pull to employment, the lack of real job opportunities and the supposed promises of education:

"I live on a council estate ... people from that kind of place think that education isn't important and you're

getting that drummed into you all the time, that you don't need to get an education - get a job, go into an industry but industry is very low now in this area. The effect of drop-out on the community is morale as well ... they hear you saying 'Oh I couldn't manage it at university' and they think, oh maybe I shouldn't go either." (Female)

Participants felt that the term 'drop-out' perpetuated the negative perception of the area and its occupants as unsuccessful.

"I think it's part of a perception of a failing area with things like being labelled the worst city." (President, Students Union)

Participants felt that the notion of 'drop-out' had a disproportionate impact on working-class young people, affecting the motivation of potential students, who were aware of it as a possibility from the outset. Participants also viewed middle-class students as being already cushioned and on track to enter university, whereas preconceptions that working-class students 'drop out' counteracted efforts to 'raise aspirations' and participation rates in their communities, particularly in disadvantaged areas where local universities took most of their intake from the local population.

## What the research adds to the debate on male underachievement

Forty of the ex-students interviewed were white men. These interviews showed that gender had an impact on both their original choice of subject and the decision to leave early. Young men were more likely to be distracted by social opportunities than women. They also found it harder to admit to difficulties, particularly if their peers were not willing to speak out.

"We were doing programming, I just couldn't understand it. My friends found it a bit iffy too but nobody would say anything so I didn't want to stand out. In the end they got to grips with it but I never did." (Male)

They seemed more reluctant to seek student support and more fearful of "looking like an idiot" (male).

Gender also had an impact on their views of the labour market. Young men were nostalgic for the security of traditional industry and felt pulled towards the remaining opportunities:

"I keep telling myself if I hadn't went to university I could have learned a trade and be earning good money." (Male)

Stereotypes of young white working-class men as not only rough and dangerous but also weak and feckless affected their educational progress. Sometimes it diverted

them from the educational path that might have led to success.

Researcher: "Were you encouraged to go to university from the sixth form?"

Ex-student: "No. I was good at Maths but at parents' evening the Maths teacher turned up and said he didn't think I suit Maths because mathematicians are clever people. I sat with my jaw at the floor and thought fine. Was he saying I didn't suit being a clever person?"

These young men often demonstrated enthusiasm for informal learning, contradicting the view of some that they lack the 'correct' learning dispositions. But their enthusiasm had not been taken seriously and they had been given poor careers advice:

"I told them I wanted to make films for a living but they told me I'd never be able to do that. They made me tick boxes on a computer. The number one jobs the computer came up with were stonemason, police officer and mechanic." (Male)

Often they left university to rekindle their original interests, demonstrating considerable persistence and belying the image of young white working-class men as 'quitters'.

### **Why leaving early doesn't have to be a disaster**

Some in the study had not chosen to leave early: they had drifted into it, sometimes to avoid taking exams they felt they would fail. However, for most it was a rational decision in response to circumstances that made studying unproductive at that time. Nevertheless, because withdrawing from education was presented as a dead end, it was a disempowering experience, even for those who described it as *"a burden taken off my back"*.

However, those who left higher education found dropping out an experience they could learn from. Most believed that, were they to return to study, they could use this knowledge. Rather than being serial 'failures' they felt well-equipped to make the most of university in future.

Students experienced mixed emotions following their withdrawal:

"In a sense I feel I have let myself down. In another, I feel I have been a bit brave in deciding it wasn't for me and that I wanted to do something else and not waste time." (Female)

They also felt they had gained a lot from their time in university in terms of decision-making, valuable life experience, improved communication skills and increased self-confidence:

"I know I can make my own decisions. I was always a bit dubious about that. Now I know I can do things for myself." (Male)

This research does not support the view that students who drop out are permanently 'lost' to education. Only one student interviewed said they would never want to return to university:

"Would you recommend going to university to other people?"

"I would recommend it but I would not push anyone into it. If they want to go I would give them advice. It isn't for everyone. People need to know what they want to do and what they want to get out of it. Not just jump in." (Male)

Interviewees now viewed education more strategically: *"It has just made me wake up and think about what I want"* (male). They wanted flexible opportunities to change course, to go part time, to return at a more appropriate time and place.

However, they and their families found it very hard to access relevant information or negotiate the system. The study included international reports which revealed more flexible systems elsewhere. For example, in the UK, a student is deemed to have withdrawn from higher education after a comparatively short period. In Canada, a much longer time frame is employed. In other countries, such as Germany, longer periods of non-study are also allowed.

Interviews with careers staff and a survey of admissions offices found that university staff were very wary about promoting what support was available to students who want to change or withdraw:

"We felt that to talk about dropping out at Induction would give a negative impression." (Careers Adviser)

Not talking about exiting and re-entering higher education reinforces the idea that movement and change are not the norm and are problematic. It is also counter-intuitive for those students who know well that early withdrawal is commonplace. A lifelong learning model of higher education would require institutions to talk about routes into and out of education and employment, and provide support for them.

"I think the University is a long way from being a genuine lifelong learning university. It has a pre-occupation with full-time study and it would require a major change in direction to be regarded as a lifelong learning institution – its shape would have to change significantly and the structure of funding [from central government] would have to facilitate this." (Admissions Officer)

The interviews with employment agencies showed that those working with students who have dropped out make little attempt to build on skills gained or chart a path back into education and lifelong learning.

“Because they haven’t got a recognised skill or previous job they’re not allowed to restrict their job choices and must accept the minimum wage. It’s almost as if: ‘I’m down and you’re keeping me down here’.” (Job Centre Plus Adviser - Research Jury day)

#### *Conclusion: ‘from life crisis to lifelong learning’*

The researchers conclude that leaving early need not be seen as a disaster: the negative implications of early withdrawal for students, institutions and the local area are not intrinsic, but are created by higher education policy and cultural norms. They suggest the following measures to promote lifelong learning:

- a wide range of higher education sites, with parity and transferability between them;
- multiple entry and exit points;
- flexible entry requirements;
- no distinction between full- and part-time study, with all courses offered in different modes;
- wide range of exit opportunities (including, but not restricted to, qualifying);
- effective credit accumulation and transfer scheme within and between higher education institutions;
- tracking of students’ progress and transition into and out of education and employment;
- no restrictive assumptions about duration of study and longer time lapses before students are deemed to have withdrawn;
- an effective and fair extenuating circumstances system;
- comprehensive provision of childcare and other services;

- no financial penalties for institutions or students who take different routes through higher education;
- fees payable for units studied, rather than number of years of registration;
- a commitment to maintaining the breadth of the curriculum and expansion as necessary;
- improved teaching and assessment to support a more diverse and dynamic student body;
- follow-up of people who have exited at all points and encouragement for them to re-enter at a wide range of levels;
- transparent policy for students at all stages and staff, in particular admissions officers, personal tutors and guidance and support staff.

#### **About the project**

The research involved a range of participative qualitative methods:

- research jury days at each university involving a range of stakeholders: current working-class students, working-class students who had withdrawn early, lecturers and student support staff, employers and employment agencies and representatives from the community and voluntary sector (120 people in total);
- 67 in-depth interviews with working-class students under 25 (40 of whom were white men);
- a set of commissioned international studies, and an international colloquium and seminar involving researchers, practitioners and policy-makers;
- interviews with university careers services and employment agencies and a survey of flexibility in admissions practices.

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#### **For further information**

The report, **From life crisis to lifelong learning: Rethinking working-class ‘drop out’ from higher education**, was researched and written by a team originating in the Institute for Access Studies, Staffordshire University – Jocey Quinn, Liz Thomas, Kim Slack, Lorraine Casey, Wayne Thexton and John Noble. It is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (ISBN 1 85935 412 2, price £15.95).

For further information please contact: Dr Jocey Quinn, School of Education and Lifelong Learning, Exeter University, EX1 2LU. Tel 01392 264926. [j.t.quinn@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:j.t.quinn@exeter.ac.uk)

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