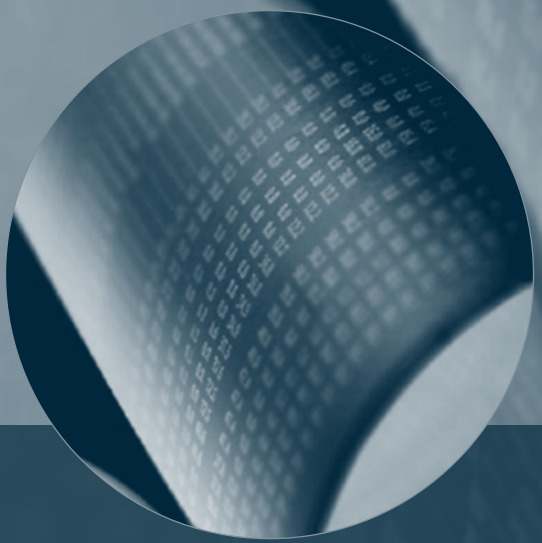
SWAP-East Tracking and Retention Project Report



2008

Tracking the progression of former Access students into university: what retention issues are raised for future Access provision?

Director's Statement

Established in 1988, SWAP pioneered the way to wider access and, over the years, the organisation has made a significant contribution to attracting adults back to learning. To date, more than 27,000 adults have used SWAP Access Programmes to gain entry to higher education.

SWAP is more than just an entry route, however. The programme model is built around the concept of preparation. The central aim is to provide adult returners with the knowledge, skills and confidence they need to succeed in higher education. To measure the effectiveness of the programme, it is necessary to look beyond the numbers of students participating and focus instead on how they actually fare on HN and degree courses.

The Tracking and Retention Project is also a response to one of the recommendations of the SWAP Consortia Aspect Evaluation commissioned by the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council in 2002. The report urged that participating students be tracked to provide data that would inform future strategies on progression, dropout rates and students "at risk".

Thanks to funding from the South East Forum, SWAP-East has been able to act on this recommendation. The Tracking and Retention Project Report could not come at a better time. In the context of a focus on retention and achievement resulting from the SFC's Learning for All, the findings, and the questions raised, will be of interest to everyone working to widen participation in Scotland, from those responsible for developing strategy to practitioners in colleges and universities.

This Report is particularly welcome to SWAP-East. It fulfils a long-held ambition to replace anecdotal accounts of the programme's effectiveness with robust evidence. Dr Winterton's work is a rich source of information about access students, complete with pointers for future development and further investigation.

Ruth Howard
Director SWAP-East

The Author

Dr Mandy Winterton is currently a lecturer in Sociology at Napier University, Edinburgh. Her PhD (2007) was a sociological analysis of non-traditional male students' trajectories to 'elite' Scottish universities. This was undertaken at The University of Edinburgh where Dr Winterton was a tutor in Sociology, and latterly in the Sociology of Education on the university's Access and Undergraduate courses. She has researched and published in the area of the non-traditional student HE experience.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the participants who gave their permission and also their time to provide the data and insight for this research. All of the institutions who helped by providing tracking data are also respectfully acknowledged. Particular thanks are due to Tracey Kerr from the SWAP-East Forum for her tenacity in pursuing and collating tracking data over an extended period, as well as for organising the student forums for this project. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to Ruth Howard, Director of SWAP-East, and again to Tracey Kerr for their helpful comments and consistent support during this research process.

Dr Mandy Winterton

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This report presents findings from a survey of 1,231 former SWAP students. This represents 56% of all SWAP students who enrolled on courses in the East of Scotland in the years 2004-5, 2005-6 and 2006-7. It analyses key characteristics of the SWAP intake, and goes on to track the progression of the latter two cohorts. Tracking data was obtained for 683 of the former SWAP students, amounting to 65% of respondents over those two years.

Just under half of the SWAP students were aged 21-30 and 31% were aged 31-40. Almost 60% of the respondents studied Humanities, 29% took Nursing and Allied subjects, and 11% took Natural Science subjects. Women accounted for 72% of all respondents. They possessed relatively more Highers than their male counterparts (which is contrary to the national pattern) and they were more likely to have been students immediately prior to their SWAP studies. Men were more likely to have been in full-time employment or to have been unemployed than the women, whereas women were more likely to have been in part-time employment or receiving state benefits.

A significant proportion of the respondent intake had familial experience of higher education (40%) with more men than women reporting this. This figure seems high when compared to the national picture of 28% of the population with an HE qualification.

Half of the participants had responsibilities for dependants whilst undertaking their SWAP studies. This was heavily weighted towards women in the case of responsibilities for children. However, men were proportionately more likely to have adult dependants compared to women (12% and 8% respectively). This may be a reflection of the male breadwinner role, whereby men are more likely to perceive their spouses/cohabiting partners as dependants. However, it is impossible to draw such a conclusion from the research data so far, and so it is recommended that further investigation of the 'male carer' phenomenon within SWAP provision is undertaken.

The SWAP respondent intake was slightly skewed towards those from more affluent postcode areas. Whilst SIMD deprivation categories should see the cohort equally divided into quintiles, the survey showed 46% of the cohort resided in the two most affluent quintiles, and 32% of the cohort resided in the two least affluent quintiles. However, tracking data revealed that those from the most affluent two quintiles were further over-represented among those who did not progress, and those from the two least affluent quintiles were slightly under-represented relative to their presence in the intake.

Half of those in this survey progressed to HE, 5% to FE, 9% did not progress. (There was no data for the remaining two thirds.) Those who progressed from SWAP courses to HE were four times more likely to be on Medical/Allied courses than the national pattern, and to be heavily concentrated within Humanities and Education also, compared to the national pattern.

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Business and Natural Sciences were weaker destinations than the national picture. In FE, SWAP students were more likely to enter Natural Science courses than the national average, but less likely to be on Education and Social Science courses.

Half of those for whom reasons for non-progression were found either did not start or withdrew from their expected FE/HE destination. Employment, non-completion of the access programme and postponement were cited as reasons for non-progression in (cumulatively) 10% of cases. Age and gender dynamics among non-progressions were consistent with the intake data.

SWAP courses were seen as overwhelmingly beneficial by those who progressed to university. Student Forums revealed an appreciation of the supportive environment, and of the space to develop the necessary skills (academic and practical) for their future trajectories. Bureaucratic processes were a hindrance for many students though, and problems with 'in-fill' IT and Maths classes were also cited as problematic. It is recommended that these three issues be addressed in future provision.

Despite an appreciation of SWAP provision, the transition to university was traumatic in many cases. Students felt overwhelmed by having to find out so many details of their courses, choices and implications so close to the start of term. This was a factor in non-progression and something which may be addressed in future by institutions releasing course details to students with familial commitments as soon as they are available. On reflection, students felt that SWAP could have increased the academic demands as the course progressed, so that students would have encountered some of the features of university study prior to their first year (i.e. greater autonomy, higher study skills expectations, more diverse assessment procedures).

Experiences of HE were diverse. Former SWAP students told of their encounters with HE staff and procedures that recognised their specific needs. But they also spoke of staff and processes that seemed ignorant of mature students' needs. Placements, lecture times and access to information (particularly financial entitlements) added to mature students' struggles in HE, and there was a sense of isolation in some cases. However, former SWAP students regarded themselves as an asset to the institution in terms of the enthusiasm they brought to their studies, the knowledge they contributed to the institutions and their encouragement of the younger university student cohorts.

Tables and Figures

Tables

Figures

1 Introduction

This study explores the dynamics of retention among 3 cohorts of former SWAP-East students. It is based on qualitative and quantitative data from students who enrolled on SWAP courses in 2004, 2005 and 2006. It highlights the factors that may have impacted on their post-SWAP trajectories and also aims to uncover the ways in which their access courses have helped in their progress in the further or higher education sector. It also reveals the first year experiences of university among former SWAP students to ascertain factors that may influence retention in that sphere, and to consider any adjustments to future SWAP provision in light of these.

Existing research on the experience of 'non-traditional' student populations highlights structural and cultural factors which affect progression through, and experience of, post-compulsory education. Qualitative research by for example, Archer, Hutchings & Ross (2003), Bamber & Tett (2000), Marks, Turner & Osborne (2003), Reay, Ball & David (2002) and Tett (2000) demonstrates the practical constraints faced by mature students (e.g. finances, timetabling, and the 'opportunity cost' of studying compared to undertaking full time employment).

The research also highlights the cultural and psychological effects of undertaking education as a mature student (e.g. cultural dislocation, isolation) and whilst all of this work is keen to foreground the benefits experienced by mature students (increased confidence, being positive role models, their expanding knowledge and horizons, their contribution to the institution) they also show how the mature student HE experience incorporates risk and fragility also, given the struggle to balance competing demands on their time and resources. Reay (1998) also criticises institutional inertia regarding widening participation, as her research reveals how mature students (and other non-traditional HE populations) are expected to fit into existing institutional frameworks rather than those frameworks being adapted to incorporate diversity.

There are many quantitative studies of the younger non-traditional HE student population (e.g. Iannelli & Paterson 2005, Paterson 1997, Raffe 2004) which identifies influential factors on retention, but as Roger (2004) identifies, there is a relative lack of systematic quantitative research on mature HE students. Roger claims (op cit) that any such research is being conducted primarily at the institutional level and also analysed primarily by entry route. Research commissioned by Universities UK (2005) examined student success according to socio-economic status and found that students from low socio-economic origins were relatively more successful than students from high socio-economic background in the post 1992 institutions and in the college sector.

It is also worth noting an emerging concern within the widening participation arena regarding the persistent under-representation of certain social groups, despite the general success of initiatives. Working class males in particular are cited as a cause for concern (Archer, Pratt & Philips 2001, Marks 2000, 2003).

This SWAP research adds to the understanding highlighted in the body of work cited above, by offering a quantitative overview of SWAP students' progress over a three year period, enhanced with a qualitative understanding of their experiences. Qualitative data were gathered from forums with a number of students from across all three cohorts. Collectively, such insight will assist in evaluating current and future access provision by SWAP partners. It will also be disseminated to a wider research community concerned with non-traditional students' experience in higher education.

2 Methods

Cohort data

All SWAP course participants take part in an ongoing survey. They are asked to complete a background questionnaire, known as Form B, which gathers information about previous educational and employment history, 'birth family' education history, and the familial and financial circumstances at the time the student began their access studies (i.e. number of dependants, source of funding etc). This study analyses Form B data from 3 cohorts of access students (2004-5, 2005-6 and 2006-7) in order to present a picture of the SWAP student body. In total, data from 1,231 students has been gathered. Table 1 below presents the breakdown of respondents per year, and contextualises this by presenting it as a percentage of all those enrolled on SWAP access courses for that year. It shows that, overall, this study gleans information from 56% of the total SWAP intake over this three year period.

Table 1 Number of responses by year

Access year	2004-5	2005-6	2006-7	Total
No of Enrolments	732	739	737	2,208
No of Responses	175	363	693	1,231
As % of SWAP intake	24%	49%	94%	56%

Tracking data

Permission was granted to track 315 students from the 2005-6 cohort, and 693 from the 2006-7 cohort. This process began in July 2007 when questionnaires were sent to the home addresses of the 2005-6 cohort that asked about their post SWAP trajectories. This process was repeated in February 2008 in order to obtain the most up to date information on that cohort. In September 2007 access providers and Scottish FE and HE institutions were contacted to confirm further details of the progress and first year outcome for those from this cohort who remained in the post-compulsory education sector.

Tracking of the 2006-7 SWAP cohort began in February 2008, when questionnaires were sent to the home addresses of the former students, and in June 2008 the process of contacting the universities/colleges began. As Table 2 below illustrates, this means the report has tracking data for 65% of those taking part in this study, although this varies according to the year under review.

Table 2 Respondents with tracking data

	2005-6	2006-7	Combined
Participants in study	363	693	1056
With tracking information	280	403	683
As % of participants	77%	58%	65%

2 Methods

Forums data

The postal tracking questionnaires included a question asking respondents to indicate whether they would be prepared to participate in student forums (or focus groups). The forums were designed to gauge students' reflections on what they found useful or unhelpful in their access courses, in relation to retention and where applicable, with respect to their subsequent studies. As Morgan (1997) highlights, the benefits of gathering data via focus groups include the potential to gather a diverse range of opinions and to reveal aspects that emerge organically as being important to the group (rather than those factors being pre-determined by the researcher). Five student forums were undertaken between July 2007 and June 2008. Two were held at the University of Dundee and three at the University of Edinburgh. This resulted in the participation of 21 former SWAP students. The volunteers came from a variety of disciplines (Humanities, Education, Nursing, Allied Medical and the Physical Sciences). In total, eleven women participated in the forums and nine men. (one female student participated in forums in 2007 and 2008, as a 1st year student and then as a 2nd year[1] student respectively.) At the time of the focus groups sixteen participants were in their 1st year of university, four were in their 2nd year, and there was one participant who had withdrawn from their university course during their 1st year.

[1] This reflects the student who participated during their 1st and 2nd years.

3 Cohort findings

Characteristics of SWAP cohorts

This section presents an overview of the SWAP student body in relation to key characteristics drawn from the Form B questionnaire. Where appropriate data has been separated by cohort, but elsewhere all three cohorts have been combined to present an overview of the SWAP student profile over the three year timeframe. Table 1 earlier (page 6) presented the breakdown of responses over the three years. Table 3 below discriminates according to gender.

Gender

Consistently over the three year period, women accounted for just over 70% of each respondent cohort, as Table 3 below illustrates.

Table 3 Number of responses by year, and gender

Access year	2004-5	2005-6	2006-7	Total
n	175	363	693	1 231
Female	122	269	491	882
Male	53	93	202	348
% female	70%	74%	71%	72%

Age

Table 4 below shows the age composition of each respondent cohort and, despite variations between the years, there is a consistent pattern of the significance of the 21-30 age group, with the 31-40 age bracket also emerging as being highly represented on SWAP courses.

Table 4 Respondent cohorts by age

Access cohort	2004-5		2005-6		2006-7	
* age	*n*	% of cohort	*n*	% of cohort	*n*	% of cohort
U21	-	-	25	7%	47	7%
21-30	78	45%	157	58%	334	48%
31-40	63	36%	116	43%	218	31%
41-50	22	13%	45	12%	79	11%
50+	6	3%	12	3%	9	1%
n/d	6	3%	8	2%	6	1%
Total	175		363		693	

Note: * age as at start of access course (01/10 2005, 2006, 2007 respectively)

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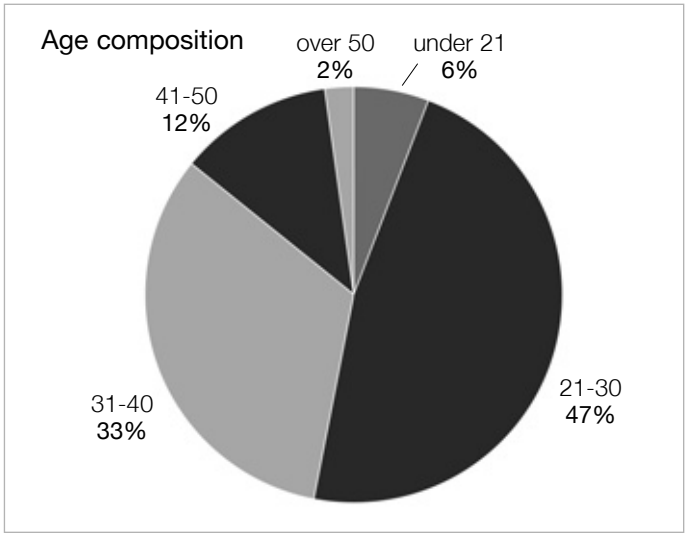
Combining all three cohorts, as Figure 1 below illustrates, almost 50% of SWAP course respondents are aged between 21 and 30 with just over a third falling in the 31-40 age bracket. The group with the next highest representation are older (41-50) and this group has twice the presence compared to those below 21.

Figure 1 Respondents by age, combined three cohorts



As Table 5 below shows, there is little change in the over-representation of women compared to men according to age across the cohorts. There is no discernable pattern in the variations that are evident between the cohorts, although the drop in female representation in the 21-30 age group (from 72% to 66% between 2004-5 and 2006-7) and the increase in female representation in the 31-40 age group (from 70% to 81% in the same period), may be worth noting. However, given the variability from year to year, this may prove to be nothing more than part of a regular fluctuation among the SWAP student intake.

Table 5 Respondent cohorts, by gender and age

Access year	2004-5			2005-6			2006-7		
* age	*n*	F:M	% F	*n*	F:M	%F	*n*	F:M	% F
U21	-	-	-	25	18:7	72	47	33:14	70
21-30	78	56:22	72	157	114:43	73	334	219:115	66
31-40	63	44:19	70	116	91:25	78	218	176:42	81
41-50	22	15:7	68	45	34:11	75	79	55:24	70
50+	6	3:3	50	12	6:6	50	9	4:5	44
n/d	6	4:2	-	8	6:2	-	6	4:2	-
Total	175	122:53	70	363	269:94	74	693	491:202	71

** age: At start of access course (01/10 2005, 2006, 2007 respectively)*

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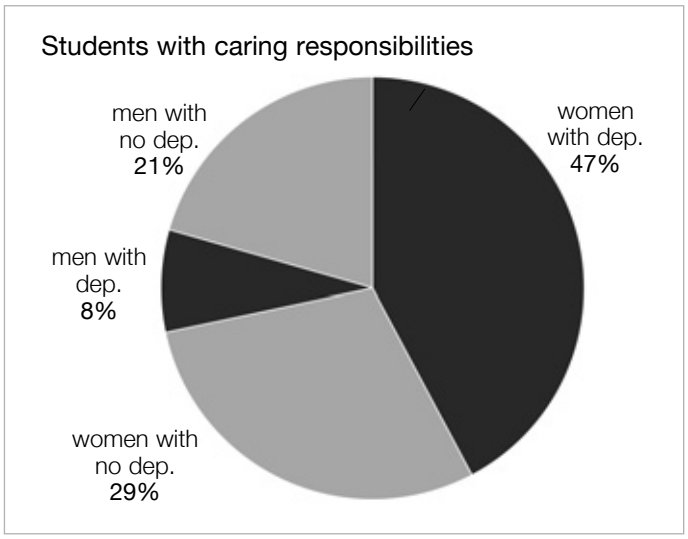
Dependants

Across the three SWAP respondent cohorts, approximately 50% of participants reported having caring responsibilities either for dependent children or adults. However, as Figure 2 below shows, this varied according to gender.

Figure 2 SWAP respondents with dependants, combined 3 cohorts



Discriminating between those with responsibilities for children and those with responsibilities for adults shows 51% of women and 15% of men reported having responsibilities for dependent children. However, there is a reversal in the gender (im)balance when it comes to those with responsibilities for dependent adults. Among these three cohorts 8% of women and 12% of men claim such responsibilities.

However, a word of caution is necessary regarding this latter data. Anecdotal evidence suggests that men may have included their wives/female partners within the category of adult dependant. This notion of 'dependency' could be related to the socially constructed male breadwinner role, meaning that men are more likely to regard cohabiting female partners as dependants whereas women may not regard cohabiting male partners in the same way. However, this cannot be tested, and it may be worth considering that having adult caring responsibilities is a more significant factor in men's capacity to return to education than it is for women in similar positions. As suggested by Marks (2000, 2003) having employment may be one reason that prevents men from returning to education, compared to women. He also suggests that a form of breadwinner masculinity can be seen to impact negatively on men's propensity to return. The SWAP statistics may add weight to this, as one might suggest that men with caring responsibilities are less likely to conform to the breadwinner masculinity and this could account for their presence on access courses. However, with such low numbers, and no qualitative data to test this assertion, it can only remain suggestive at this stage.

Family HE history

Quantitative research that examines the relationship between familial educational attainment and progression to higher education (e.g. Iannelli & Paterson 2005, Raffe 2004) finds that parental attainment remains a factor in HE progression, although it highlights how other factors (changing education and employment structures) are increasingly significant. However, most quantitative research examines this influence

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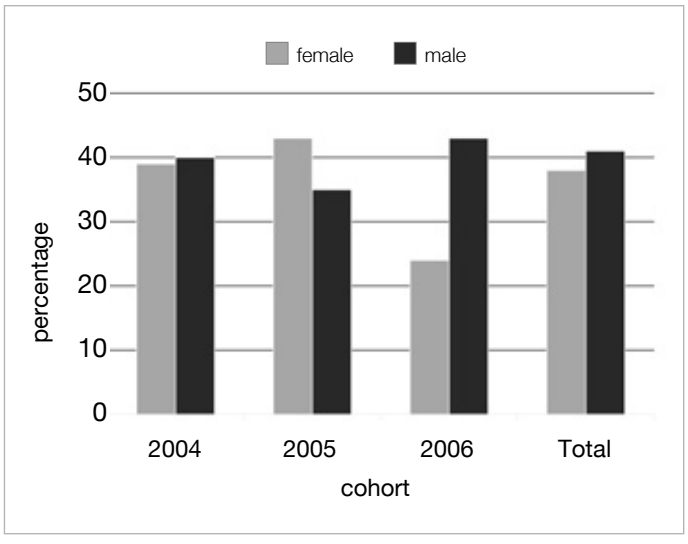
among school-leaver/youth cohorts. This SWAP research will explore if familial history emerges as significant for mature students. The evidence is presented in Table 6 below.

Table 6 Access respondents with family who had previously enrolled in HE, by gender, 2004-5, 2006, 2007

Year	2004-5		2005-6		2006-7		Combined	
	F:M	Total	F:M	total	F:M	Total	F:M	Total
n	122:53	175	269:93	363	491:202	693	882:348	1231
Familial HE	48:21	69	116:33	149	169:88	257	333:142	475
%	39:40	39	43:35	41	24:43	37	38:42	39

Trying to discern a trend according to familial experience of HE is difficult. In 2004-5 approximately two fifths of both the male and female cohort had family who had embarked on a HE level course. In the 2005-6 cohort, women were proportionately more likely than men to have some reported familial experience of HE (i.e. 43% of women, versus 35% of men). However, in the 2006-7 cohort, less than a quarter of the female intake reported having some familial experience of HE, whereas 43% of the men students that year highlighted their familial HE connection. Combining the three cohorts reveals that male SWAP respondents were generally more likely to have familial experience of HE than female SWAP participants; 42% of men, and 38% of women reported having a family member who had enrolled on a HE course of study.

Figure 3 Percentage of male and female respondents with family with prior HE enrolment



Given that the national picture in Scotland is that approximately 28% of the working age population possess HE level qualifications (SFCFHE 2005), these statistics appear somewhat high for the SWAP respondents. However as the form B survey asked SWAP participants to identify family members who had enrolled on a HE level course, this does not necessarily mean that all those who enrolled actually acquired such a qualification. Nonetheless, it is worth pursuing whether older people who embark on access studies are relatively more likely to have families with HE experience than those people in the general population.

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Prior education

This section provides a breakdown of prior educational attainment among the SWAP cohorts. It examines first the distribution of Standard Grade and Highers qualifications, and it then looks at other qualifications. Attention will be paid to gendered patterns, in order to compare the SWAP intake to the national pattern. For example, since 1997 in Scotland, women are more likely than men to possess an HE level qualification, as Table 7 below illustrates.

Table 7 Percentages of men and women in the labour force with an HE qualification, 1992, 1997, 2002

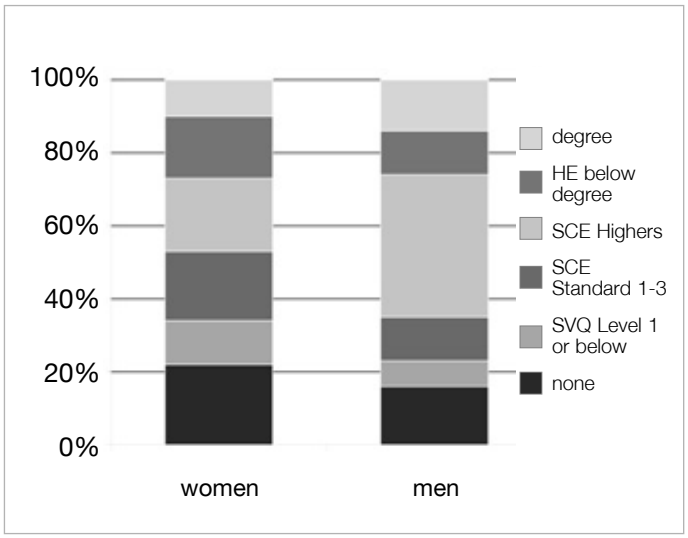
	Women		Men	
	Scotland	UK	Scotland	UK
1992	17	14	17	17
1997	23	19	22	21
2002	29	24	27	24

Note: Women: 16-59 years, Men: 16-64 years

Source: Extracted from SFCFHE 2005, pp29-30

Thus the over-representation of women on the access programmes may be seen as another mechanism that might contribute to this continuing trend. However, a look at the whole spectrum of education attainment in Scotland reveals a more complex picture, as illustrated in Figure 4 below.

Figure 4 Qualifications by gender, Scotland, 2001



Source: EOC (2001)

Figure 4 shows that men in Scotland are more likely to possess Higher level qualifications than women. For example, men have more degrees whereas women have more sub-degree HE qualifications; men have more Highers whereas women have more Standard Grade qualifications. Nationally it also shows that women are more likely than men to have no educational certificates whatsoever. It would be useful to see if the SWAP cohort reproduces the national pattern, or to consider whether they are unrepresentative.

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Among the three respondent cohorts, 9 SWAP entrants reported that they already possessed degrees (three males, six females) forty one stated that they had HNC/D qualifications, and two female students were Registered General Nurses. Tables 8 and 9 below present data on the distribution of Highers across the SWAP participants and, like the earlier cohort breakdowns, show some variation in patterns between the years. There are more similarities between the 2005-6 and 2006-7 cohorts, but the 2004-5 cohort frequently displays contrary patterns of distribution.

Table 8 Respondent cohorts, by Highers and gender

	2005		2006		2007	
	F	M	F	M	F	M
	122	53	269	94	491	202
None	82	31	199	74	334	161
1-2	22	10	41	10	104	20
3-4	13	11	24	5	41	12
5+	5	1	5	5	12	9
1-5	40	22	70	20	167	41
1-5 (%)	(33%)	(42%)	(26%)	(21%)	(32%)	(20%)

Table 9 Number of Highers, all respondents, by gender

	All three cohorts combined					
	Female		Male		Total	
n	882	%	348	%	1231	%
None	615	70	266	76	881	72
1-2	167	19	40	11	207	17%
3-4	78	9	28	8	107	9%
5+	22	2	15	4	37	3%
1-5	267	30	83	24	351	28%

As Table 9 above shows, 28% of those who embarked on SWAP courses over this three year period possessed Highers, with female students more likely to have them than their male peers (30% of women compared to 24% of men). This does not replicate the national gendered distribution of qualifications presented earlier (Figure 4, page 12) which clearly shows that men are proportionately more likely to possess Highers than women. Thus it may be suggested that SWAP students, from the results of this survey, appear to be unrepresentative of the wider Scottish population. Within this pattern, fairly equal proportions of men and women possessed three or more Highers, but women are over-represented among respondents with one or two Highers relative to their male peers (19% of women and 11% of men). The distribution is presented graphically in Figure 5 below.

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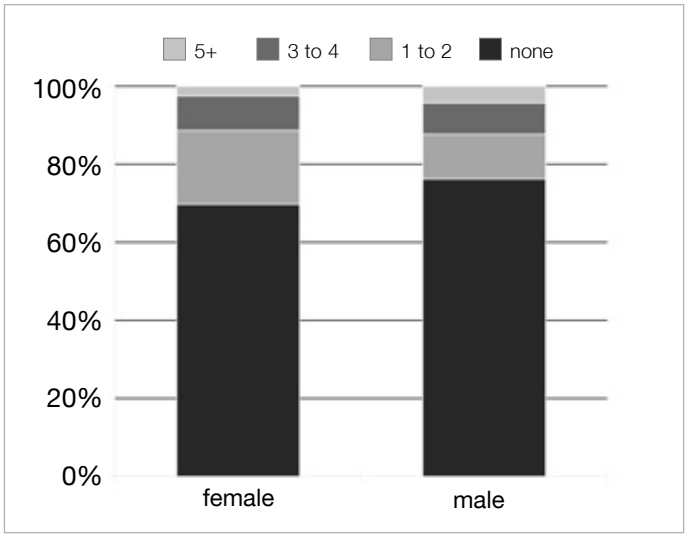
Figure 5 Highers by gender, all respondents



Over the three year period 70% of the SWAP respondent intake had Standard Grade qualifications on entry, although again women were more likely to have them than men (71% of women and 66% of men). This might be expected given the national picture presented earlier (fig 4, page 12), which showed approximately 18% of women and 12% of men nationally possessed Standard Grades. Table 10 below presents a summary of the numbers of these qualifications held by participants.

Table 10 Respondents by number of Standard Grades, and gender, combined cohorts

	Combined cohorts		
	F	M	F:M
n	882	348	%
None	254	117	29:34
1-3	196	64	22:18
4-6	214	88	24:25
7+	218	79	24:23

As can be seen above, the numbers of Standard Grades possessed by each sex was fairly evenly distributed for those with four or more. Below that, women were more likely to have between one and three Standard Grades than men (22% of the female respondents, and 18% of the male respondents).

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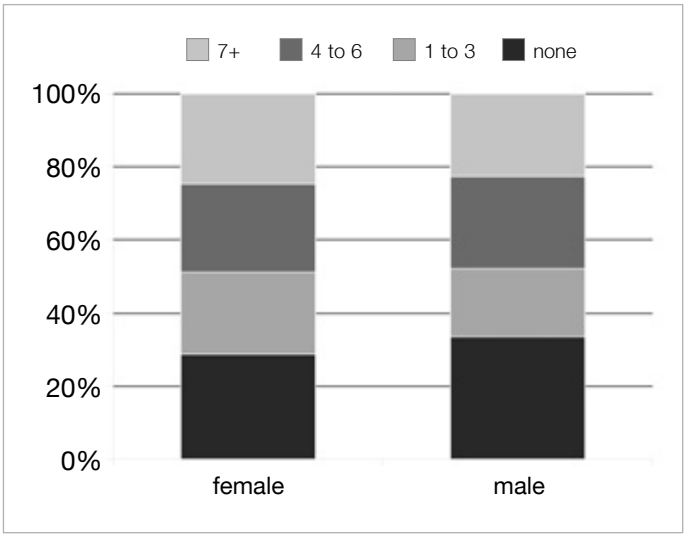
Figure 6 Respondents by number of Standard Grades, and gender



Taking Maths and English qualifications as measures of numeracy and literacy respectively among the cohorts, Table 11 below shows that half of the SWAP respondents have passed a Standard Grade in Maths and 63% have passed a Standard Grade in English.

Table 11 Respondents with English and Maths certificates, by cohort

	2004-5		2005-6		2006-7	
	F:M	F:M	F:M	F:M	F:M	F:M
n	122:53	%	269:94	%	491:202	%
English Higher	36:17	30:32	44:10	16:11	90:22	18:11
English O/Std Grade	84:43	69:81	180:47	67:50	314:109	64:54
Maths Higher	5:4	4:7	9:3	3:3	19:9	4:4
Maths O/Std Grade	66:33	54:62	145:40	54:43	255:102	52:50

As can be seen in the above data, there are similar discrepancies between the cohorts to that reported earlier whereby the 2004-5 cohort do not follow the trends of the 2005-6 and 2006-7 cohort. In the 2004-5 cohort, greater proportions possess qualifications in these subjects, with men relatively more likely to possess English and Maths qualifications than women. That is not the case in the two later cohorts, where women possess proportionately more of the qualifications than men. This may be due to the relatively smaller numbers in the 2004-5 respondent cohort, which means that smaller differences in numbers have a more significant impact on the calculations, and thus differences may appear exaggerated.

Combining the respondent cohorts shows that male and female respondents are fairly equal in terms of possessing Maths qualifications, as Table 12 shows, below. More than half of both men and women have Standard Grade in Maths. Table 12 also shows that female students appear to be relatively advantaged in terms of English qualifications compared to their male counterparts. Almost two thirds of the female SWAP respondents have passed English at Standard Grade level and almost 1 in 5 of them have passed it at Higher level. A majority of the male cohort also have an English Standard Grade (57%) and 14% have it at Higher level. It would be interesting to see how this compares to the adult population on a national level.

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Table 12 English and Maths qualifications, by gender, all respondents

	Combined		Total	
n	882:348	%	1231	%
English Higher/A Level	170:49	19:14	219	18%
English O/Std Grade	578:199	65:57	777	63%
Maths Higher/A Level	33:16	4:5	49	4%
Maths O/Std Grade	466:175	53:50	641	52%

Data on the possession of SQA modules was available for the 2004-5 and 2005-6 cohorts and is presented in Table 13 below.

Table 13 Respondents, by number of SQA modules and gender, 2004-5, 2005-6

	Female		Male	
	n	%	*n*	%
1 -2 modules	49	12	15	10
3-6	24	18	9	4
7+	56	14	10	2
Total	129	33	34	23

It shows that over the two cohorts 33% of women and 23% of men possessed SQA modules. 14% of women had seven or more, compared to 7% of men. For those with one or two modules, there was little difference according to gender with 12% of women and 10% of men reporting this. Again, this may be seen to add to the national pattern of women being more likely than men to hold lower level qualifications. However, within these qualifications, it appears from this data that the women on SWAP courses have nonetheless acquired more of them and that is worthy of note.

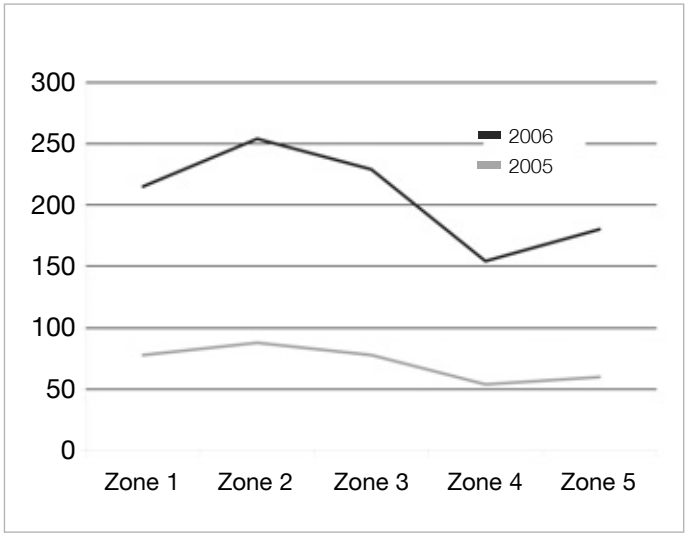
There were 149 former SWAP students in the study who reported possessing qualifications other than those presented in this section so far. Other post-compulsory education qualifications included 61 Vocational Qualifications (SVQ/NVQ), 32 National Certificates, 13 mentions of other kinds of Diplomas, 7 pre-entry course qualifications, 14 Nursing/Classroom Assistant qualifications, 4 ECDL and 27 qualifications awarded outside Scotland, but of school leaving or FE equivalence. Collectively, the above data sketches the variety of prior educational achievements brought into the SWAP arena by its students but is does not present an accurate picture of educational biographies. There are inherent ambiguities in the reporting and categorisations of such disparate certificates, and there is no mention of when these were obtained. Previous research suggests that access students tend to be those already established as active learners and that their access studies are another stage in an established learning journey. The data at present will not allow us to establish the validity of that claim here, although it is another possibility for establishing the relative uniqueness or otherwise of the Scottish picture.

3 Cohort findings

Socio-economics

The Scottish Indices of Multiple Deprivation Zones were applied to the addresses of the respondents from the 2005-6 and 2006-7 SWAP volunteers[2] . As Figure 7 below shows, there was very little difference in terms of the patterns of participation between the two cohorts on this measure.

Figure 7 Respondents by deprivation category, 2005-6, and 2006-7



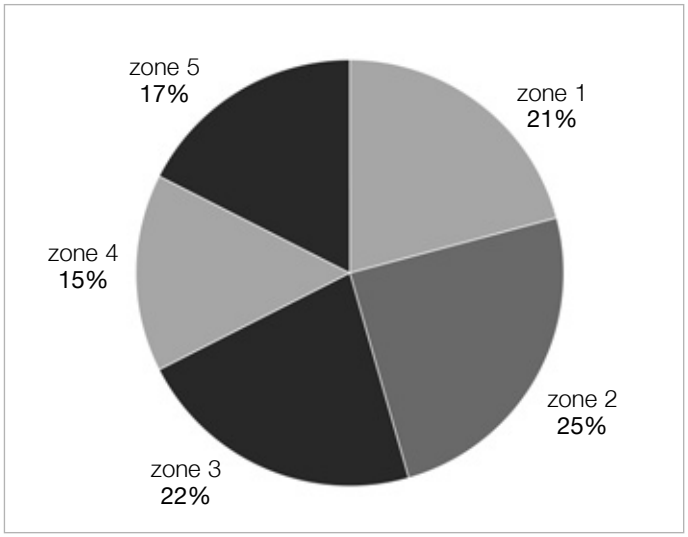
However, it is noted that there was a slight increase in the proportion of the respondent cohort from the most deprived category (Zone 5) between the two years, from 16.7% of those from the 2005-6 intake to 17.9% of those from the 2006-7 intake. During that time there was also a slight decrease in the proportion of the intake in the least deprived postcodes (Zone 1) from 22% in 2005-6 to 20% in 2006-7.

If participation were distributed equally among all social groups this SWAP student cohort would be expected to have close to 20% of students within each Deprivation Zone. However, as Figure 8 illustrates below, there is a distinct under-representation of participants from the two most deprived zones with 32% of the cohort (rather than the 40% that would be expected for a more socially representative sample). What is also noteworthy is that the over-representation of more affluent zones among the respondents occurs in Zone 2 rather than Zone 1, and that the next over-representation occurs in Zone 3. Thus it is the relatively privileged rather than the most privileged that are over-represented.

[2] All analyses exclude addresses outwith Scotland or with no known data.

3 Cohort findings

Figure 8 Respondents by SIMD zone, 2005-6, 2006-7



Raffe (2004) filters a variety of factors to ascertain the strongest influences on attainment in Scottish education (including post-compulsory education) albeit among school age populations. He finds residing in areas of deprivation a strong influence. Could that be the same for mature students? Later in this analysis, non-progressions will be analysed according to SIMD membership to ascertain if there is any relationship.

Prior occupation

Table 14 below shows the occupations among each respondent cohort immediately prior to their SWAP studies. Figure 9 immediately afterwards is more informative however as it represents each of these prior occupations as a percentage of female and male respondents.

Table 14 Respondents by prior occupation and gender

	2004-5	2005-6	2006-7	Combined	
	F:M	F:M	F:M	F:M	total[3]
F/T employed	50:20	92:42	149:89	291:151	442
P/T employed	30:8	62:9	160:42	252:59	311
Unemployed	18:13	38:20	66:44	122:77	199
'student'	12:2	35:8	112:36	159:46	205
'family man'	15:8	30:0	66:2	111:10	121
Other employment	4:4	8:3	23:13	35:20	55

[3] This amounts to 1333 responses, as some respondents reported more than one occupation.

3 Cohort findings

Figure 9 Prior occupational category, all respondents

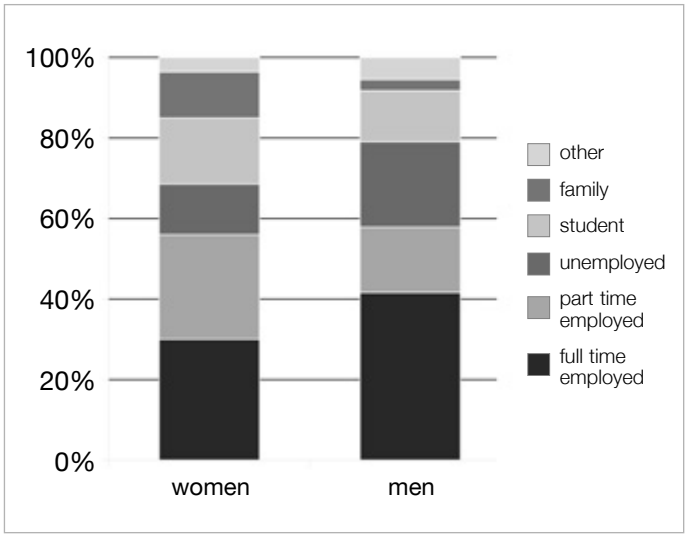


Figure 9 shows some interesting patterns among the SWAP students over the three year period. It shows that men are relatively more likely to have been in full time employment than their female peers, prior to their SWAP studies. It also shows that they were relatively more likely to have been unemployed than the female students. Looking at the female entrants it is evident that female SWAP participants were more likely to have been in part time employment relative to their male counterparts, and also more likely to have been students. Women were also more likely to have been a 'family carer' than men.

Such findings add weight to Marks' (2000) argument when he suggests that the nature of the employment market and domestic arrangements means that women are more free to re-engage with education compared to men. According to Marks (op cit), the decision whether or not to embark on HE is harder for men because they are far more likely than women to have to give up a full- time job in order to do it. Marks proposes that as women are more likely to be in part-time employment or at home as the primary carer the decision to return to education is made easier; their employment is easier to relinquish, they are less likely to be the familial breadwinner and/or they can continue with their part-time employment whilst they study. The fact that the men in the SWAP respondent cohort are also more likely to have been unemployed can be used to support Marks (2000). Yet a significant proportion of men have either relinquished (or rearranged) former full time employment in order to return to education, and it would be useful to find out why they made those decisions.

Type of support

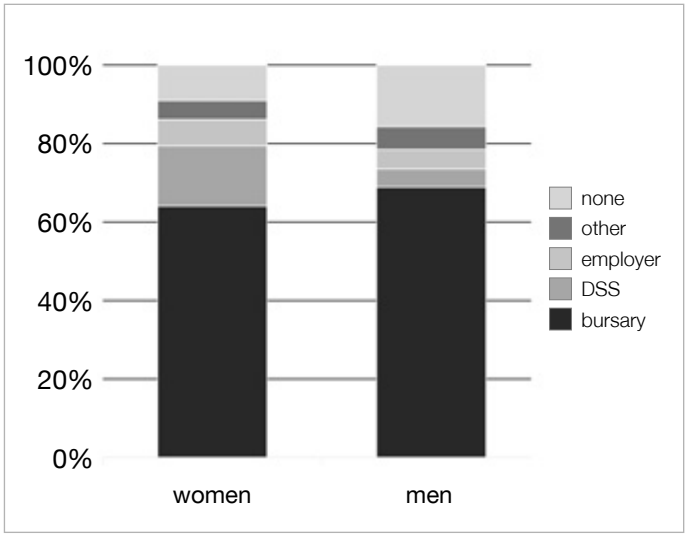
Table 15 below shows the numbers of men and women in the respondent cohort who were in receipt of various forms of financial support for their access studies. Following this, Figure 10 presents this graphically, and shows the relative weight of each type of support according to gender.

3 Cohort findings

Table 15 Respondents by type of support for studies, and gender

	2004-5 F:M	2005-6 F:M	2006-7 F:M	Combined F:M
Bursary	51:29	177:57	339:151	567:237
DSS	23:4	34:5	79:7	136:16
Employer	7:4	8:1	44:12	59:17
Other	9:5	6:5	28:10	43:20
No support	25:13	12:6	43:35	80:54

Figure 10 SWAP students by type of support, three years combined



Relatively speaking, it appears that men are more likely than women to undertake their SWAP studies without being in receipt of financial support for that purpose. The figures also show that women are more likely than men to fund their access studies with support from the welfare system (DSS). Anecdotally this may be due to the overrepresentation of women within the benefits system as lone parents. The previous page shows that men in this study are slightly more likely to be in receipt of a bursary than women, again, relatively speaking. The fact that more men than women have claimed to undertake their access studies with no financial support is interesting and may be a clue in the continued under-representation of men in HE. In the Student Forums, which were part of this research, two female participants spoke of being in a fortunate financial position where their husbands were supporting them financially through their studies. It is not known whether such instances would be registered as 'no support' or 'other' in the questionnaire. It may be useful to know this to try to discover whether this is another gendered factor which may have impacted favourably on women's capacity to return to education, compared to men.

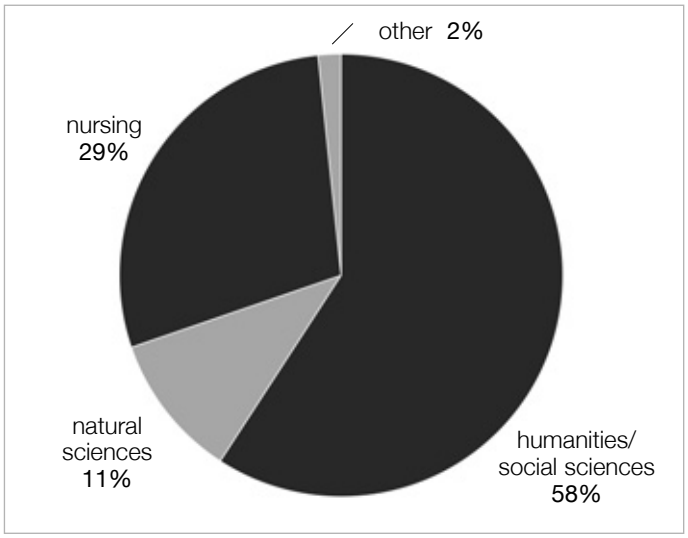
Subjects studied

Given the generalist nature of access studies it is more appropriate to construct broad subject categorisations rather than try to delineate according to a more precise coding system (e.g. the Joint Academic Coding System). Instead, access subjects have been grouped as Humanities/Social Sciences, Natural Sciences and Nursing (which was delineated because of its significance).

3 Cohort findings

Figure 11 below illustrates the distribution of each subject among the SWAP respondents across the three cohorts.

Figure 11 Subject groups studied, percentage, 2004-5, 2005-6, 2006-7 combined



The data shows that almost three in five of the survey respondents have studied within the Humanities/Social Sciences, almost a third have studied Nursing and that just over one in every ten have studied subjects within the Natural Sciences. The 2% of other subjects include Architecture, Planning, Graphic Design and Engineering. This picture is quite close to that of the larger SWAP intake. Over the three year period under analysis, 55% of SWAP students studied subjects in the Humanities and Social Sciences, 18% took subjects in the Natural Sciences, and 27% undertook Nursing courses.

Tracking data

Outcomes

It is important to contextualise the findings of this research against the background of the wider SWAP population over the two academic years being analysed. Table 16 below presents tracking data for the two SWAP cohorts from which this study has been drawn. It shows that the participants in this research are slightly less likely to have progressed to higher education or further education than the SWAP student body in general over this time. More significantly, participants in this study are far more likely to have passed their access course studies than the SWAP student body in general. (30% of the SWAP intake do not progress, whereas just 9% of those who are taking part in this research did not progress). It should also be noted that there is more missing data for those taking part in this study (35%), compared to just 2% within the SWAP cohort over this period.

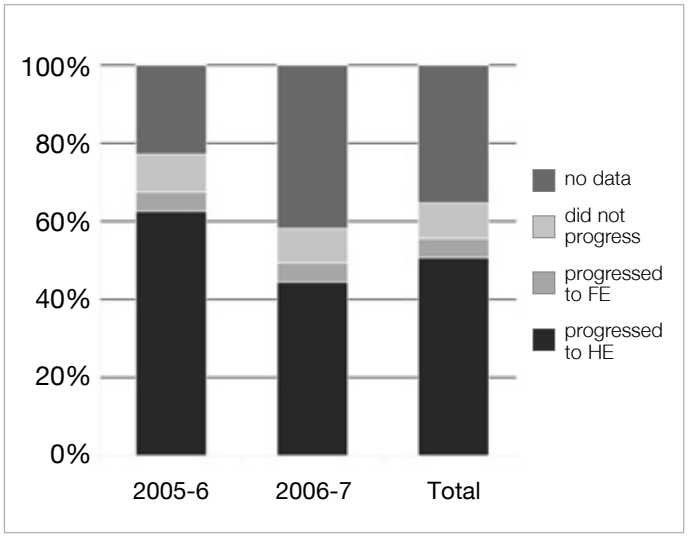
3 Cohort findings

Table 16 Outcomes, 2005-6 and 2006-7 combined, study sample and SWAP intake

	Participants in study		SWAP intake	
Destination	*n*	As % of respondents	*n*	As % of SWAP intake
	1056		*1476*	
Progressed: HE	530	50%	855	58%
Progressed: FE	52	5%	138	9%
Non progression	94	9%	447	30%
No data	376	35%	36	2%

Of the 363 participants in this study from the 2005-6 SWAP cohort tracking information was gleaned for 280, (which equates to 77% of the volunteers from that year). Of the 693 SWAP students from the 2006-7 respondent cohort destination data has been gleaned for 403 (equating to 58% of the volunteers from that year). Having less known tracking data for the 2006-7 participants is to be expected, as there has been a longer period to chase up missing data from the 2005-6 respondents. Figure 12 below presents what is known about each cohort graphically.

Figure 12 Respondents' post-SWAP destinations, by year



The remainder of this section focuses on those former SWAP students for whom some tracking data has been gathered.

Non progression from SWAP course

Across the respondents from the 2005-6 cohort and the 2006-7 cohort, it is known that 94 did not progress to either FE or HE. This represents 14% of all of those for whom information was gathered. Table 17 summarises the reasons that were cited for non-progression among these former SWAP students.

3 Cohort findings

Table 17 Reasons cited for non-progression from SWAP course

	2005-6 cohort	2006-7 cohort	Total
Did not start (no reason cited)	12	5	17
Withdrew application	2	12	14
Application rejected	2	9	11
Took a job	7		7
Postponed entry	1	5	6
Did not pass access course	4	2	6
Personal reasons (illness, childcare, finances)		4	4
Had a baby	1		1
Did not pass another course	1		1
Total	30	37	67

It is unfortunate that almost half of these responses require further investigation to gain meaningful insight into the reasons for non-progression. Almost half of the respondents either withdrew their applications or did not take up their place. Why? This kind of data may be easier to access by qualitative methods, as it requires sensitivity to the potentially emotive aspect of the insight that is sought.

Exploring whether the responses above contained gendered patterns was inconclusive with so few responses and an overall ratio of non-progression that reflected the established gender composition of the volunteers and SWAP cohorts. Non-progression was investigated to ascertain if deprivation was detectable as a factor in terms of those who did not progress. Table 18 below compares SIMD data for those in this research who did not progress and the SIMD data of all former SWAP respondents in this study.

Table 18 Non progression by SIMD category

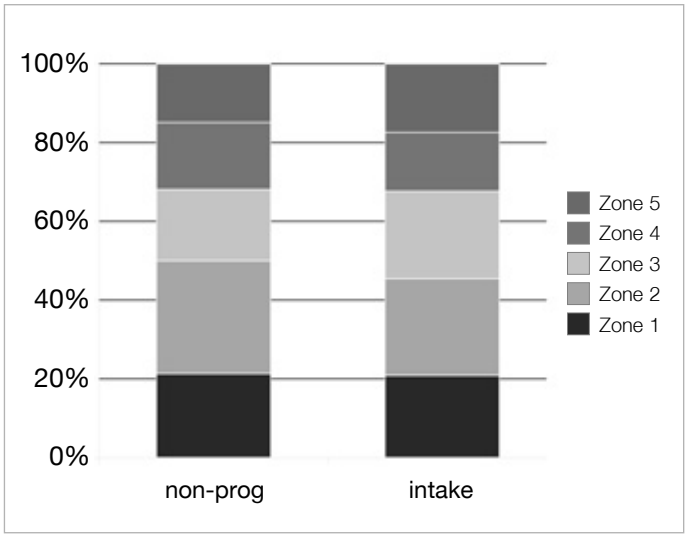
		Non-progressions	All respondents
SIMD category	*n*	As % non-progressions	As % of respondents
Zone 1	20	21	21
Zone 2	27	29	25
Zone 3	17	18	22
Zone 4	16	17	15
Zone 5	14	15	17

The above table shows that respondents from the least deprived postcodes (Zone 1) account for just over a fifth, both in terms of intake and of those who do not progress. This may suggest that their relative affluence offers such students no advantage in terms of their propensity to progress. Conversely, it may be suggested that those from the most deprived areas (Zone 5) are slightly more likely to proceed to further or higher education from their SWAP studies, as they are proportionately less present in the non-progression statistics than they are in the intake (15% and 17% respectively).

3 Cohort findings

However, the small numbers of students that this data involves limits any inferences here. Nonetheless, if the higher and lower deprivation categories are combined, it is possible to see that those from the two least deprived areas are indeed over-represented in the non-progression data. Zones 1 and 2 account for 46% of the respondent cohort, but 50% of those who did not progress, whereas those from the most deprived areas (Zones 4 and 5) remain consistently represented in the intake and non-progression data. Figure 13 below illustrates this. The point must be made that given the amount of missing data within the tracking research so far, this might be something that emerges as more or less significant, if the research continues.

Figure 13 SIMD data, as proportion of intake and non-progression, 2005-6 and 2006-7 combined



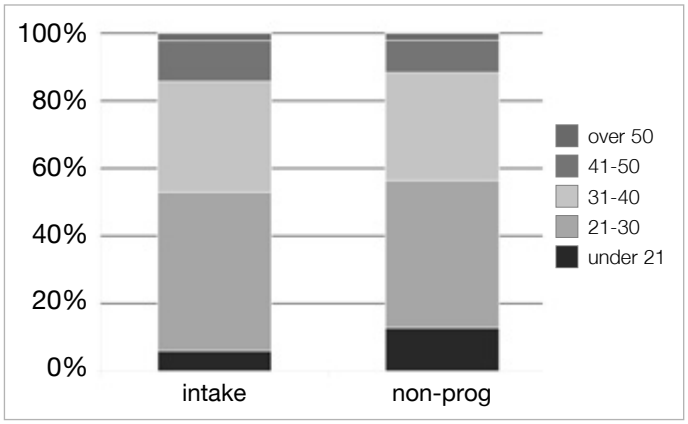
Examining the age profile of non-progressions over the two cohorts shows that younger students are slightly more likely not to progress than older students. Table 19 illustrates that under 21s account for 6% of the SWAP respondent intake, but almost twice as many in that age group do not progress (13%). There is a less dramatic increase within the next age category as those aged 21-30 account for 44% of the intake but 47% of those who are known not to have progressed. This is presented graphically in Figure 14, over.

Table 19 Non-progression by age, 2005-6 and 2006-7

Age	*n*	% of non-progressions	% of respondents
U21	12	13	6
21-30	41	44	47
31-40	30	32	33
41-50	9	10	12
50+	2	2	2

3 Cohort findings

Figure 14 Respondents by age, as proportion of intake and non-progressions, 2005-6 and 2006-7 combined



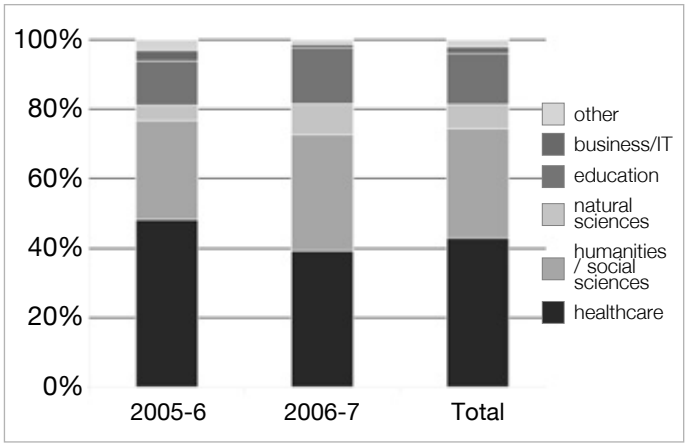
HE destinations, by subject

There were 530 respondents from the 2005-6 and the 2006-7 SWAP cohort who are known to have progressed to HE. Table 20 and Figure 15 below illustrate the subjects they chose to pursue. Subject categories have been broadly conceived at this point for ease of comparison.

Table 20 HE destinations, by subject groups, 2005-6 and 2006-7

Subject Group	2005-6	2006-7	Total	%
Healthcare	109	119	228	43%
Humanities/Social Sciences	65	101	166	31%
Natural Sciences	10	27	37	7%
Education	29	49	78	15%
Business/IT	7	3	10	2%
Other	7	4	11	2%
Total	227	303	530	100%

Figure 15 Known subjects for SWAP students in HE, 2005-6 and 2006-7



The above figure illustrates the importance of Healthcare (i.e. Medicine and Allied subjects) as a post-SWAP HE destination, with Social Sciences evidently another key area. Natural Sciences and then Education are the next most popular subject areas.

3 Cohort findings

Between the two years under review, there has been a decrease in the proportion of students taking Healthcare related subjects, with increases in Natural Science subjects, Education and Social Sciences evident. However, it remains to be seen whether this is an emerging pattern, or the consequence of viewing a snapshot of data over just two years.

It is important to contextualise the SWAP respondents' subject choice. The national picture[4] of subject HE choice for entrance in 2006 shows that:

- Medicine and related subjects accounted for 10% of all degree acceptances for 2006 in Scotland
- Education accounted for 3% of all degree acceptances for 2006 in Scotland
- the Natural/Physical Sciences accounted for 15% of all degree acceptances for 2006 in Scotland
- Humanities and Social Sciences accounted for 18% of all degree acceptances for 2006 in Scotland, and
- Business/Law/IT/planning accounted for 23% of all degree acceptances for 2006 in Scotland.

Whilst it is possible to delineate subject choice more precisely[5], this was deemed unnecessary for the task at hand. Greater demarcation may detract from the identification of broader trends and also produce more categories with smaller numbers of students therein. It is possible, as illustrated in Table 21 below, to construct a useful comparison of national trends and those within the SWAP respondent cohort.

Table 21 Proportionate subject choice, SWAP respondents and UK applicants

Subject group	SWAP respondents, 2005-6 and 2006-7 combined	% of UCAS degree acceptances, Scotland, 2006
	%	%
Medical & Allied Health	43	10
Humanities/Social Sciences	31	18
Natural Sciences	7	15
Education	15	3
Business/IT	2	23

The table shows the over-representation of Medical and Allied Health degrees among SWAP students, and this seems logical in view of the access to Nursing courses SWAP offers. It also shows that the SWAP participants are more likely to choose degrees in the Humanities and Social Sciences, and in Education, compared to the national picture. Conversely, the SWAP respondents in this research appear much less likely to select to study Business and related subjects at university, and are also less likely to study within the Natural Sciences in higher education.

[4] Statistics extracted from UCAS statistical services (www.ucas.co.uk/fandf00/index9.html).
[5] Such as JAGS for example.

3 Cohort findings

FE destinations, by subject

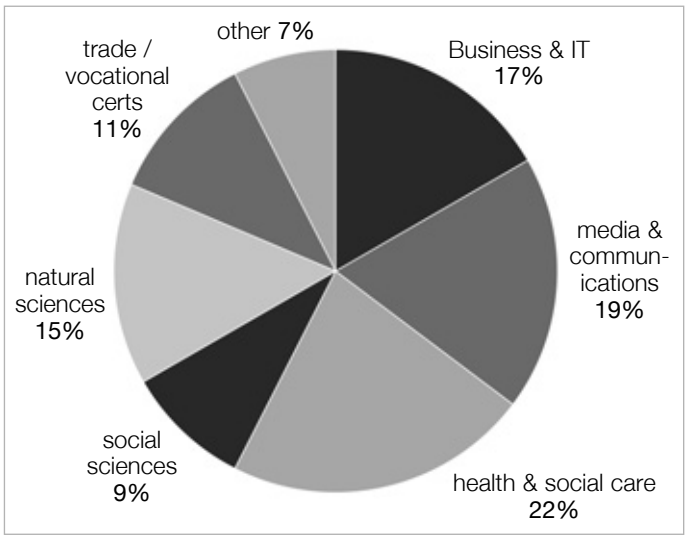
Among the 2005-6 cohort respondents, eighteen progressed to FE, and for the 2006-7 cohort thirty six followed the FE trajectory. Table 22 below illustrates the numbers of students who provided their subject choice over the two years.

Table 22 Respondents FE subject choice, 2005-6 and 2006-7 combined

	n
Business & IT	9
Media & Communications	10
Health & Social Care	12
Social Sciences	5
Natural Sciences	8
Trade/Vocational Certificates	6
Other	4
Total	54

Figure 16 below shows the relative representation of each subject across the two years. The subject choice among those who opted for FE is less heavily weighted in favour of certain subjects, compared to the HE patterns presented earlier (see page 31).

Figure 16 Respondents' FE subject choice, percent, 2005-6 and 2006-7 combined



The national picture of subject choice looks somewhat different. In 2005-6[6] in Scotland:

- 29% of those in FE were on Business and IT courses (compared to 17% of SWAP students)
- 13% of those in FE were on Healthcare courses (compared to 22% of SWAP students)
- 10% on Natural Science courses (compared to 15% of SWAP students)
- 31% were on Social Science courses (compared to 9% of SWAP students)
- 7% were on Education and related courses (compared to no SWAP students)

[3] Data extracted from Scottish Funding Council 'infact' database (www.scf.ac.uk).

3 Cohort findings

This shows that the former SWAP students in this research are significantly less likely to progress to Social Science courses or Business courses, and are more likely to choose Health and Social Care courses, and also to choose Natural Sciences compared to the national pattern.

First year HE outcomes

It is possible to track the 2005-6 to the end of their first year in FE or HE. Of the respondents who agreed to take part in this study from that year, it is known that 167 of them successfully completed their first year in university and 29 did not. There is no data for the remainder. Table 23 overleaf presents the known reasons for HE failure.

Table 23 Known outcomes from first year in HE, 2005-6 respondents

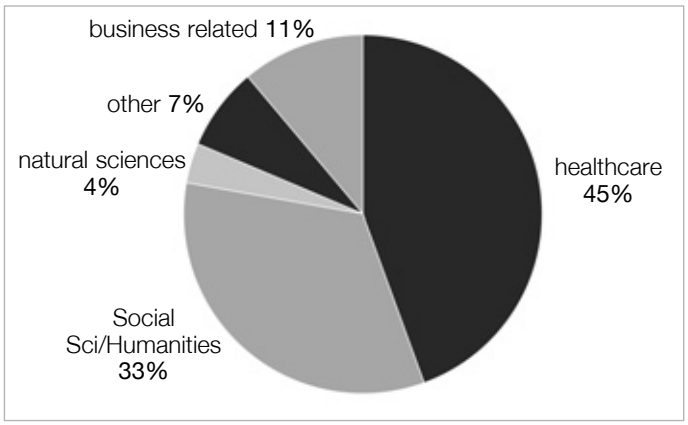
Pass	167
Withdrew	16
Fail	7
Break	2
Other	2
Incomplete	2

Analysis of those who did not complete their first year reveals that,

- 12 non-completions occurred on Healthcare courses
- 3 non-completions occurred on Business related courses
- 9 non-completions occurred on Social Sciences/Humanities courses
- 1 non-completion occurred on a Natural Science course, and
- 2 non-completions occurred on other kinds of courses.

Figure 17 below shows the significance of each subject proportionately.

Figure 17 HE withdrawals by course, percent, 2005-6



Comparing the proportion of the respondents studying each subject with the proportions of the respondents who did not complete their first year on that course, no significant anomalies were revealed.

3 Cohort findings

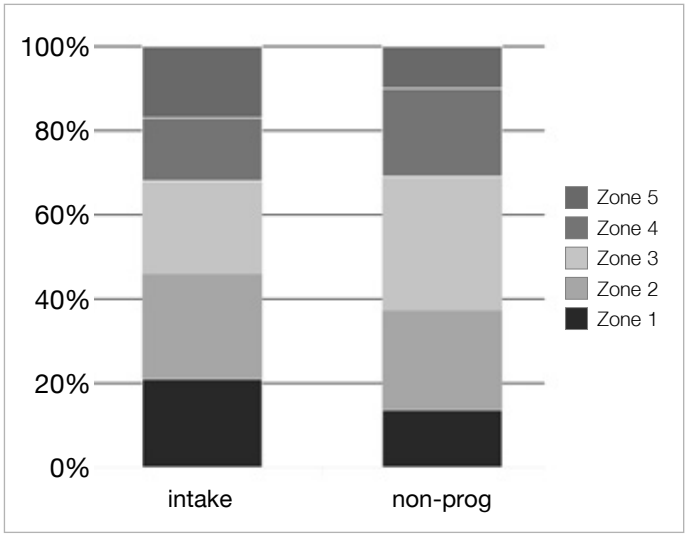
For example,

- Natural Sciences represents 7% of both subjects and non-completions
- Health and related represents 43% of destinations, and 45% of withdrawals.
- Humanities represents 31% of destinations, and 33% of withdrawals
- Business represents 2% of destinations, but 11% of withdrawals.

Only Business shows a discrepancy between the numbers that enrolled on the course and the percentage that did not complete it. However, the 11% who did not complete first year represents just 3 students, and so illustrates the degree of caution about making claims from small amounts of data.

Exploring those who did not complete their first year at university according to SIMD categories indicates that students from Zone 3 are at a greater risk of non-completion than those from other deprivation categories. This is evident in Figure 18 below, which shows their over-representation among those who did not progress compared to their proportionate representation in the intake. Figure 18 also highlights how students from the most and least affluent areas are relatively more likely to progress than those from other Zones, as each of these groups are under-represented in the non-progression column, relative to their presence in the intake.

Figure 18 Intake and non-progression by SIMD, 2005-6 respondent cohort



This suggests that, once on their courses, students from the least affluent postcodes are more likely to succeed than those from the more affluent areas. However, with such small numbers, some caution must be exercised at this point. It would be interesting to discover whether, over the course of their studies those from lower socio-economic groups become relatively more successful than their peers from more advantaged backgrounds.

A more startling revelation appears when the non-progression data is explored with reference to gender. As Table 3 (page 8) showed, of the 2005-6 respondents who were tracked in this study, 74% were female. But of those who did not progress, 21 were female and 5 were male. In this study, this makes women 81% of those who do not progress, compared to 74% of those who enrolled. Again, the study is dealing with relatively small numbers at this stage.

3 Cohort findings

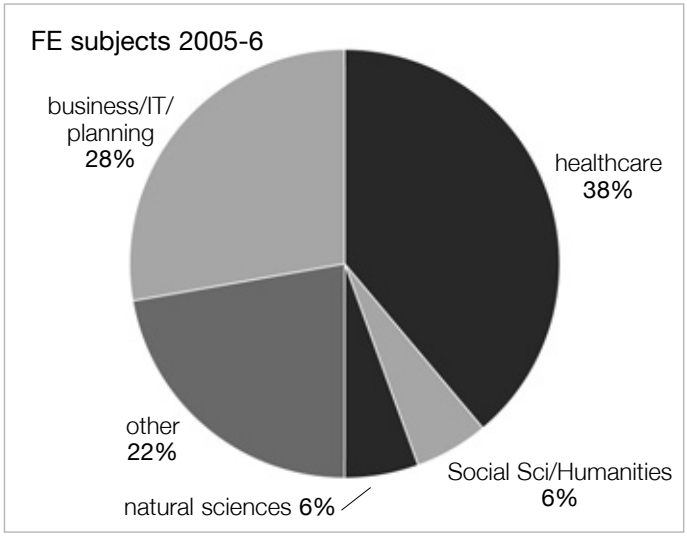
First year, FE outcomes

There are 18 members of the 2005-6 SWAP respondent cohort who progressed to FE after their access studies. The subjects studied are highlighted in Table 24 below and this is followed by the proportional picture in Figure 19.

Table 24 FE subject choice, 2005-6 respondent cohort

Health & Social Care	7
Social Science/Humanities	1
Natural Sciences	1
Other	4
Business/IT/Planning	5

Figure 19 FE subject choice, 2005-6 respondent cohort, percent



Data is known for 8 of these students; 6 of these students passed their courses and 2 students did not complete at the end of their first year. Both non-completions occurred in healthcare.

4 Focus Group Findings

In order to understand the dynamics of progression, focus group participants were asked to reflect on what was good and what was poor about their access course experience, and also whether it had helped or not in their subsequent endeavours. All 21 participants had progressed to university, (although one participant had withdrawn early in the first semester) and so were able to talk about their experiences to date in that arena. The groups were participant led, with researchers on hand to explain the purposes of the research and the focus groups, explain issues of anonymity, and occasionally to prompt the participants towards one of the themes if the conversations wandered too far from the topic. In addition to conversations, participants were also invited to write comments on post-it notes. Focus groups lasted from one and a half to two and a half hours. Of the 21 participants across the five groups, 17 were in the first year at the time of their participation, and 4 were in their second year[7]. Thus the research took an extended view of retention issues beyond the SWAP provision. This section of the report begins by presenting comments around the positive aspects of the SWAP access experience, and this is followed by an exploration of the more negative aspects identified by participants. It concludes with participants' account of their first year at university and any reflections they held for future SWAP provision.

Positive aspects of the SWAP provision

A supportive environment.

When asked what was good about their SWAP experience many students highlighted the amount of support they received (from both peers and staff). This tended to be reinforced at various points during the focus group conversations.

> *College was brilliant with support and help on studies.*
>
> *The access course was very supportive.*
>
> *The support from tutors was very constructive and informative whilst on the access course.*
>
> *My student advisor was fantastic and the other staff too. When we had to fill in the UCAS forms, we all went to the IT suite together. We had mock interviews, got advice on the personal statement. I can't fault it.*

The final comment above came from a forum which contained a diverse range of experience in terms of levels of support available on their access courses. In this group, as in the others, there were a few students who reported experiencing a lack of support during access studies (although the dominant discourse was the positive one). The discussion concluded that the small numbers involved in some access courses probably helped in the provision of more, and more personal, assistance to the access students on it.

One participant was particularly impressed by the level of support on her access course. She appreciated how her provider accommodated her pregnancy and subsequent motherhood during her access course. She told of bringing her baby to classes and of lecturers' efforts to ensure she did not fall behind. This level of support was encountered by a number of students who told of lecturers helping them when they had been absent. Further, the provision of resources from access tutors to their students (handouts, photocopied materials etc) was deemed to have helped them in their learning.

[7] A female student took part in 2007 as a 1st year undergraduate, and also in 2008 as a 2nd year undergraduate.

4 Focus Group Findings

Alongside this was another dialogue of how fellow students supported one another on the course. Despite their various commitments beyond their access studies, some students told of organised study clubs and support meetings, and of friends looking out for one another (i.e. taking additional handouts in the case of someone's absence). The importance of such relationships was explained in one forum: -

There were a few times when I wanted to throw in the towel. I'd had enough. But we'd grown so close on the course and it was like I would be letting my friends down too, so that helped me to stay.

Appropriate structures

There was endorsement of a variety of structural elements of access provision. The key examples were timetabling, the nature of classes, and workload demands. These will be addressed in that order.

Family friendly timetables: A common theme among the parents in the focus groups was that access timetables allowed students to accommodate their familial commitments more easily. From the notes:

> *Great child-friendly hours.*
>
> *Allowed school run.*
>
> *Good timing - fitted in with family.*
>
> *2 days per week - perfect along with caring for family.*

This was reinforced in the conversations and emerged as one of the most important positive aspects to be highlighted. Among all focus groups it was apparent that participants appreciated the fact that classes did not begin at 9am nor end at 5pm. It was beneficial for a number of related reasons: it allowed school runs to be accommodated, it avoided students having to negotiate and waste time in rush hour traffic, and it did not add exponentially to the cost of childcare. To illustrate this last point, one participant explained,

> *You might only need childcare for an extra 10 minutes to make an early class, but it doesn't work like that. You won't get charged for 10 minutes. Some [childcare] may charge for a half hour, but most charge for a full hour, no matter. So it can be expensive.*

However, it emerged that there was some variation among the institutions. Some participants stated that, where their classes were timetabled to end later in the afternoon, lecturers seemed to appreciate that many of their students needed to collect children from school and so ended the class before the due time. Despite the dominance of timetabling as a positive aspect of access provision, it should be noted that there were some contrary examples where participants still felt that the timing of their classes was not as amenable for those having to organise childcare and/or travel by public transport.

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Nature of lessons: With a few notable exceptions, focus group participants were happy with the content of their classes and most perceived the tutors to be knowledgeable and the courses to be interesting. There were positive endorsements of learning a variety of subjects and in a variety of ways. Students seemed to appreciate classes that were comprised of student led discussions, of tutors inviting the opinions of their students, of lecturers sharing their own experiences, and of tutors welcoming their students' life experiences as a valuable source of knowledge. As one student summarised:

> *What worked for me was that there were relaxed atmospheres. We were not treated like a child.*

There was some agreement that modularisation was a positive element in access provision as it allowed students the flexibility to organise their study time for their own benefit. For example:

> *I like the idea that when you've finished a module, that part of your timetable is free for the rest of the year, so you have space for other things. For example, I am quite good with a PC so I got through my ECDL in a few weeks and that part of my week was free. I focussed on the open Maths and then that freed up more time. So you can actually work your timetable to your advantage.*

Incorporating independent study and also (where applicable) practical work into the course structures was also highlighted as a positive element in the access provision. In both of these scenarios these kinds of lessons were seen as a great asset when students progressed to university. Relatedly, there were a few comments about the direct relevance of the access course to their subsequent university studies. A few examples,

> *I think the access course was absolutely brilliant in terms of preparing us for uni. Uni was all very much what we were doing in first year, all higher level stuff.*
>
> *Independent study in the second semester of the access course was excellent preparation for university.*
>
> *A broad range of subjects provided a good starting point for university.*

There were also some comments that the kinds of assessments encountered on access courses, such as continuous coursework, formative assessments, and peer reviews were welcome as a means of easing the way back into education, for students who were nervous and/or had experienced failure in their previous education undertakings.

Some students mentioned their appreciation of being able to acquire formal certificates within their access courses. For those whose courses enabled them gain such things as, for example, the European Computer Driving Licence, or Intermediate or Higher certificates, their opinions were positive. No-one mentioned this in a negative way.

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Manageable workload: Whilst there was some disagreement in the forums, a greater number of participants endorsed the workload encountered on access as a positive aspect of it. (There were two participants who saw the workload issue as a negative aspect of the course). However, the majority voice was that the demands of the access courses permitted students to fulfil family commitments, study and, for many, undertake paid employment also. No-one in the forums said it was easy to combine all these demands, but it was seen as manageable. There were suggestions in some groups that perhaps a number of students on SWAP courses began with an unrealistic expectation of the demands of an access course and this was seen to affect their perception of the workload. For example,

> *I think some people came to access thinking it was gonna be easy and it wasn't.*

A developmental space.

Another recurrent theme among participants focussed on the developmental processes that participants enjoyed in their SWAP endeavour. Although this included the acquisition of new knowledge this was a relatively minor discourse. Indeed, it was over-shadowed by talk of the access course facilitating an increase in self-confidence and also a recognition that the access course provided a space where students could test their capabilities to cope with higher education. Also it emerged that, for some, the access course presented an opportunity to fulfil a dream of higher education that they believed they could not have achieved otherwise.

Increase in confidence: This theme was weaved throughout the forums, appearing in the notes and at various points in the discussions. For example,

> *The access course gave me confidence. Made higher education more accessible and approachable.*
>
> *College gave me confidence about coming back into education.*
>
> *Doing IT at college gave me confidence. I was terrified of IT before - I shied away from computers. Now I don't have that problem and it was only through college that that happened.*
>
> *I was terrified of Maths. Now I'm not so bothered. In Nursing we have to use calculators all the time, so that was good.*
>
> *I got over my fear of numbers.*
>
> *It has given me confidence actually. I don't break out into a cold sweat when I have to convert something.*

Testing capacities: Within the forums quite a few participants commented on how an access course allowed them to learn how to study and manage their time, over the course of a year. They saw it as a way of seeing if they could cope with the demands of higher learning. This was related to both academic and practical demands, although developing the organisational skills was a more prevalent theme.

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> *You were testing whether you could get back into studying again.*
>
> *College was like a wee taster. It was nice to come in and get an introduction to the whole work/study balance, kind of thing. So access eased you into it, as opposed to going straight into first year and getting hit by it.*
>
> *If I hadn't done the access course, I don't think I would have managed at uni.*

Some comments showed that participants believed they would have failed had they tried to go straight into university.

> *I couldn't have made it to uni without access.*
>
> *The college access course was very good and allowed me to go to uni. Otherwise I could not have gone as I did not have the qualifications needed.*

And some participants were just grateful that the access course enabled them to progress. For example, notes on what was positive included,

> *Uni at last!*
>
> *I made it to university.*

The provision of Open Days/Study Skills Days was also highlighted as a benefit on the access courses, as it allowed students to experience some aspects of university life prior to enrolling.

Inclusion

Feeling included was never mentioned in those terms during the forums, but it is highlighted here as something which is implicit in many participants' accounts of their access studies. Feeling like a legitimate part of the learning environment runs through the earlier discourses (4.1.1 and 4.1.2) about the structures of the access courses. Quite a few participants felt included within the diverse student population that was found in access provision.

> *I was worried at 41 I would be seen as an old man. But no. Others were even older… mostly in their late 20s and early 30s but there was a range, all kinds - even a surfer!*
>
> *A positive aspect of the access course: 'a great group of people'.*
>
> *One woman I was friends with was worried about her age to begin with. But, she was fine on the access course. Loved it. Got caught up in the whole learning thing.*

When asked about their integration with the 'traditional' student body, there was some positive talk about how everyone learns from one another. Although there were no narratives of complete integration, this was generally seen as due to different lifestyle choices/constraints rather than any cultural antagonisms.

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Negative aspects of SWAP provision

Being 'spoon fed'.

This term was used a few times in forums ('molly-coddled' was another term used) and this issue was raised fairly consistently across the forums. Quite a few participants stated that they believed that students should have had greater autonomy on their access course. This was based on their subsequent HE undertaking, which they believe they were unprepared for in this respect:

For example, the Science module was all from one text book and that had all the answers in it. Other courses you got all the information and the answers from the lecturers.

> *It was all coursework on the access course. You do units as you go. All internal assessments. That's not a reflection on what goes on at university.*
>
> *There is so much to learn when you get to uni. There's terminology that you have to learn before you can progress. It's really hard, full on. So that could be a culture shock from being spoon fed.*
>
> *Perhaps we don't want to be treated like we were at school; we want to be more independent.*
>
> *Some access tutors treated you like you were 16 or 17 years old.*
>
> *We were spoon fed. That's OK at the start of the course. It's comfortable. But it does not prepare you so much for uni.*

Bureaucracy

This was another recurring theme within the forums. It was related to the financial aspects of returning to study. It was felt by some that there was a constant process of filling out forms in order to collect the financial support they were entitled to. For 2 participants, this bureaucratic process was time taken away from their studies.

> *The access course was absolutely appalling. Every single month I had to apply for travel expenses, childcare fees. Every single month. Everything had to be signed, and if you didn't get the forms in, you wouldn't get your money. They were so dogmatic about it.*
>
> *The main problem we got was filling out the bit about the childcare element. You'd think we were applying for millions of pounds! And they couldn't help you. My form was returned 3 times because I hadn't given them the right information. But they weren't allowed to tell you what they wanted.*
>
> *Every month the same thing. It takes a hell of a lot of time. One time the computers broke down and that's it - we didn't get our money. There must be a better way of organising this.*
>
> *Filling out the SAAS stuff online was very complicated. I ended up getting my pal, a Law student, to help me with it. It is really very daunting. So much of it is.*

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It should be noted that there were also positive experiences, relayed in the forums, of help with the bureaucratic processes involved in the access provisions and also in the procedures for progressing from access to further and higher education. Nonetheless, the more prevalent discourse was one of frustration, and of the need for assistance.

Irrelevant subjects

A few students were evidently frustrated at the requirement on their courses to study subjects which they were not interested in and which they saw as irrelevant to their course and future direction. One student emphasised a language course, and others highlighted irrelevant aspects of an IT course, which they believed could have been replaced with more relevant IT subjects.

> *It was stressful having to learn a language … why did we have to?*
>
> *On EDCL we didn't get taught 'Word'. Why not? That's what you need when you get to uni. Word. And Powerpoint. So you just had to do really stupid things instead.*

It should be noted that a number of students acknowledged that they thought they had studied irrelevant subjects on their access course, but had subsequently seen the relevance of them when they began their university course.

Some access modules were irrelevant. With hindsight. For example, Communications, and History. Although I suppose I do use the Communications now.

> *I chose to do a Local Investigation, and Communications. They didn't feel relevant at that time - but they have become so.*
>
> *I didn't understand the requirement for some modules, like Statistics, and resented the stress. But then after going to university I realised the benefits.*

Study Skills inconsistencies

Animated discussions took place about the confusion many students felt about the referencing and other academic conventions they were expected to follow on their access courses. It emerged that there are differing requirements between institutions, and between subjects and tutors within the same institution. Participants cited things such as writing in the first person, the need for word processing and word limits, and referencing as key concerns. There were examples of some courses that did not expect fully referenced work, and this was seen as inconsistent with university expectations, for which the access course was meant to be a pre-cursor. Many courses did expect it but some participants mentioned that some tutors made few demands while others were relatively strict. However, in the discussion in one forum the point was made that this inconsistency continued at university also, with different tutors and different disciplinary expectations. Therefore whilst some students continued to see this as a flaw in the access course, others saw it as another aspect of appropriate preparation for HE.

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Heavy workload

There were a number of students who believed the access course presented an unmanageable amount of work. This was summarised in one note;

> *WORKLOAD! College work, work, kids, study, housework - what!*

Relatedly, the variety of subjects on access courses was seen by some as adding to the workload.

'In-fill' lessons

There was a more unified voice among all focus groups on this issue. The consensus among those who had experienced open classes (generally in Maths and also in IT) was that they were largely ineffective and also detrimental to the students.

> *If you needed help, and a lot of people did, you had to raise your hand and wait for the tutor. But there were so many people and not enough tutors. So you'd wait for ages. In the end I gave up. They were not good lessons.*
>
> *Open Maths sessions were horrendous. A lot of people needed help with Maths and what they needed was 1-to-1 tuition and it wasn't available because of the numbers.*
>
> *If say, 10 people are doing the same part of Maths, why not take them away and take them through it stage by stage?*
>
> *Social Science students, their work is hands on and so they find the numbers side, they do have difficulty with that. This work is not academic and so they struggle with Maths. And computers. Number-orientated things, and the college didn't really address that.*

Whilst this was a common theme in the forums, not all institutions organised their core subjects this way, and there were positive comments from other students about a more structured and supported learning environment, with small classes, dedicated staff, and a whole class working towards the same level qualification. It is worth noting that there was no-one who saw the open learning classes as positive.

Non recognition

In one focus group there was some anger that some colleges had not sufficiently acknowledged the achievements of those who had completed their access course. This point stirred some emotion. Students felt their achievements had not been acknowledged.

> *I just felt, for everyone who was on the course that I was on - you should be here, at this ceremony. We've done this!*

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> *There were 66 people on my access course. Half passed it. 7 went to the ceremony. I only found out about it in passing. It was totally undersold to us. And it was quite moving, the ceremony. I'm proud to be getting this.*
>
> *We had to find out whether we'd passed our access course. It would be nice to acknowledge that we'd actually completed and done something, you know. And that it was worthwhile.*

However, within that session there were also students whose institution had organised a completion social event.

The use of peer assessment

Use of peer assessment was mentioned as being unsatisfactory, and others then agreed with them. It was believed that tutor feedback was more useful than comments from fellow students.

> *A lot of our essays were peer marked, which is all very well, except when everybody's at the same point, how are you supposed to know if you are right or wrong? You'd have thought feedback from the lecturers would be better.*
>
> *Yeh, I mean I can see that it is good to do this. But I think it was done too much. Getting feedback is important. That's what you learn from. It should be the lecturers more.*

Staff inexperience

On a couple of occasions there were suggestions that perhaps some access tutors were not as familiar with the HE environment as they should have been. It was proposed that universities may have changed since the access staff attended them, and that this meant they were not as well-equipped to prepare their students as they might have been. This led to a written comment in one forum,

> '*Send the tutors to uni*'.

Experience of the first year at university

Conversations about the former SWAP students' experiences of university presented a complex picture of positive and negative dimensions to their lives. It is worth remembering that there were quite a few tales highlighting supportive lecturers who acknowledged the complexities of being a mature student. However, it is fair to say that there was more of a focus in the forums on the problematic issues. Overwhelmingly, the most consistently negative comment was that university was so different from the supportive world of the access courses.

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The Transition

It seems there was a culture shock when many of the SWAP cohort entered university. Many emphasised how surprised they were that they had to be so pro-active in the organisation of their university lives. Students felt they were left to find out a lot of information for themselves. This was a consistent theme across the forums. To illustrate: -

> *College was brilliant with support and help on studies. University was less so and everything had to be accessed by the student.*
>
> *Even just working out your timetable, it's quite difficult.*
>
> *The first university year is really full on. More condensed…you have to hit the ground running. There's lots of work in a short time, crammed into semesters.*

Having to find out so much information for themselves in a very short period of time was evidently a great discomfort to many in the forums. Other issues that emerged as problematic for the mature entrant were trying to select classes that may fit in with domestic commitments and travel arrangements and other subjects; finding the locations of those classes within buildings and within different campuses of the same university; seeing if the travel can be accommodated; finding the structure, content and expectations of various courses to see if they are indeed suitable.

It emerged that this kind of trauma, loaded at the very beginning of the semester, had led to a few withdrawals among the SWAP cohorts. Indeed the forum participant who did not continue her university course gave a personal account of this and its impact on her decision not to continue.

Applying their study skills to the university environment was also commented on in the forums. There was an appreciation that access courses had equipped students well for their studies, and the quotes earlier testify to that. Nonetheless, it also emerged that the transition from access to university was not without difficulties.

End of course essays and assessments were perceived to be a burden and put additional pressure on students, compared to their SWAP experience. Some complained that they should have had prior experience of this. Also, students found it frustrating to be penalised for incorrect referencing, particularly when they were unsure of the demands. As the quotes below illustrate, students perceived differences between the practices of the access provision and those in HE.

> *The biggest shock for me was, when you are at college you are undoubtedly spoon fed and when you get to uni its 'well, this is what the next essay is about. Go do it'.*
>
> *I think autonomous learning was a huge shock for people on my course.*
>
> *The access did prepare us for college. But something like referencing. At college it's like - but when you come to uni it's completely different and you have to completely relearn and it's hard getting out of old habits of doing it one particular way.*
>
> *When you get it wrong they just mark that it's wrong. 'Needs attention'. They don't say what you've done wrong though.*

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> *You got a false sense of security from the access course. The coursework was not challenging enough.*
>
> *Access didn't have lecture style delivery and perhaps they could have. Learning how to write during lectures should be part of study skills.*

There were some examples of purposive and useful study skills provision in some universities. A Medical student revealed the concentrated study skills presented in a pre-entry course organised by his institution, and another institution was seen as an example of particularly good practice. Here a practical study skills course was embedded throughout the whole first year course.

There was also a comment about the lack of feedback from assessments at university, compared to the access courses. Feedback was experienced as inconsistent between subjects/tutors and also a long time coming. This was a source of frustration and a hindrance to future progress. It is also related to a sense expressed by some students that they were left to their own devices at university. The division between student autonomy and neglect was felt to be traversed at times.

It is unfair to end this section with such a comment as that would not reflect the more prevalent tone of the forums. Whilst there were many concerns raised by some students, it is evident that they are enjoying their higher education.

Financial issues

Issues of enduring financial hardship whilst studying were exposed in the participant forums. Within this a much stronger theme emerged, which focussed on the lack of available and accurate information about financial entitlements, and guidance on how they could be accessed. Many participants had paid employment as well as their university studies and in some cases had people to care for also. However, what was evident was the struggle to find out what they were due. There were many examples where students had to go through various agencies to try to find out the possibilities, where they were given conflicting or inaccurate information, and where they simply did not know what was available or where to go to find out. Thus the capacity to access financial benefits was extremely inconsistent and again, something of a trauma for many. For example,

> *It was a fellow student who told me I was entitled to 25% off my council tax. I didn't know about the discount when I was on the access course. I found out at uni. I claimed it back, but I wouldn't have known about it if it wasn't for word of mouth.*
>
> *I didn't know that I couldn't apply for hardship before I started uni. I was told I could. It's because of my partner's salary.*
>
> *This course has a bursary. But I didn't know that I can't then apply for hardship. So now I have to work weekends.*

In the forums, participants were discussing entitlement to travel and childcare costs, state benefits, hardship payments and bursaries and it became a place to share information.

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Structures

Many of those with familial commitments reported on the difficulties they faced because of university timetables. Whilst there were some narratives of lecturers/tutors trying to accommodate those with commitments (such as selecting appropriate tutorial groups), the dominant narrative was that it was hard to negotiate university and family life and/or travel arrangements. This related not only to the weekly scheduling of lectures but to the organisation of semesters and university holidays. For example,

> *At uni you're there 9-4, 5 days a week. That was a bit of a culture shock.*
>
> *I was told by my lecturer, 'we don't do bank holidays'. But the schools do!*
>
> *It would be good if they had the same holidays as the schools, sometimes.*

Whilst there were instances of good practice with individual lecturing staff acknowledging the competing demands faced by mature students, the more dominant discourse in the focus groups was that universities did not recognise the consequences of mature students learning.

> *Access staff were more understanding, if you need to take time off etc, because more of their class had children I suppose. Whereas at university, that is a completely different kettle of fish, completely.*

A number of students told of others that had left their studies or not progressed because of this kind of compromise.

The worst example revealed that a lecturer had explicitly stated in his first lecture that he would make no allowances whatsoever for those with children. In the focus group where this was revealed, a number of participants bore witness to the event.

> *And he said, 'for those of you that have got kids - I'm not interested, if your kids are sick, if you've got elderly relatives to see. You're here and you're here to work and if you don't like the sound of this - just leave now, because this course isn't for you.*

This was an extreme example of an explicit rejection of mature student needs. However, there were more frequent examples of an implicit lack of understanding from within the university structures. For example,

> *There is this implicit assumption that if you don't attend so much of your course, you are going to fail.*
>
> *If your friend is off and you ask the lecturer for the handouts, they won't give them to you. They say, 'tell her to collect them from me'. And the handouts are often different from what's on virtual learning. You need them. So you just end up photocopying your handouts for them.*

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An additional dimension occurred with students on courses which involved placements. Students lamented the fact that no consideration was given to their family lives, so that more local placements could be arranged. Thus: -

> *My placement was in Leith. I had to leave the house at 6.30 in the morning. I had 3 children at that point. I wasn't getting home til 6 at night.*
>
> *Trying to mix uni, study and [paid] work and placement. That's the trouble. I was working 14 hour days.*

Some students revealed they had the opportunity to defer placements until the end of their course. This may indeed have been useful. However, it then precluded them taking paid employment, so the 'opportunity' still presented a challenge to combining their studies with familial commitments. Again, it should be noted some institutions organised their placements so that in particular, those with responsibilities were given priority for local placement opportunities.

Relationships

Discussion of domestic relationships sometimes arose in the forums, where students spoke of their familial support and the implication of their university endeavour for those around them. The narratives to be presented here lie at either end of an emotive spectrum - students spoke of feeling isolated in their institution, and they also spoke of feeling like an asset to their institution. These will be explored in that order.

Isolation: There were 2 dimensions to this discourse. A social isolation and in other cases a geographical isolation. The first comments appeared on notes:

> *I find university quite solitary.*
>
> *I found my university quite 'cliquey'. There were lots of young affluent students who I had nothing in common with. It can be quite lonely.*
>
> *One person who left was a woman who thought she was too old for uni. She was 47.She was OK on the access course. But when she came here, I think that psychologically, she found it quite intimidating. She was the oldest in the class and I don't think that helped.*

A minor issue like not providing somewhere for students to eat a packed lunch illustrated the point. In one forum it was highlighted that mature students were less likely to be able to afford to pay a few pounds per day for a university meal and so were more likely to bring in packed lunches. Thus not allowing students to bring their lunches in to the canteen, and not providing any spaces where they could eat, made students feel unwelcome in their surroundings. On a larger scale, some students talked about the effect of being based at a campus geographically separate from the main campus. In three separate cases it was relayed that there were no support facilities in those smaller campuses.

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Comments included,

> *'you feel like that distant aunt who only ever gets a card at Christmas.'*
>
> *You feel like you're out on a limb.*
>
> *Being here, you don't feel like you are a part of the real university. We should have at least some lectures there.*

However, an alternative interpretation of a similar situation was presented. In this instance students from the smaller campus spoke of the intimacy and privacy of their campus, rather than the isolation. As someone explained,

> *There are benefits to being in a small campus such as the level of interaction with our lecturers. They know the faces to the names. You have a relationship with them.*

There was evidence that some mature students did not feel their families were seen as a legitimate part of the university environment (although some spoke of family members attending social events). For example: -

> *Would be good to have some IT spaces where you can bring children in.*
>
> *I showed my son the campus when I took some library books back. We call it 'my school'. But I didn't take him in though.*
>
> *I have older children who may want to go to university themselves soon and I thought it would be good to bring them in. But I didn't feel I could do that.*

One comment suggests that students may have developed 2 separate spheres of their lives. Thus: -

> *I have to split myself into 2 different lives. I've got the life where I go to uni. And then you finish uni and get to the car and you're mum again. So you have to be organised.*

The comment above is part of a discourse about how organised mature students have to be at university. In the following section, it is evident that this is seen as beneficial to the university.

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On being an asset: From the focus groups it is evident that generally, mature students regarded themselves as an asset to the institution. This was a prevalent theme in the forums, where many students spoke of their commitment as being a positive contribution to their university:

> *Your time is precious. You gave up a lot to be here.*
>
> *If you work in a group with some younger students, you are the one to keep them on task, to say 'come on, we need to get this done'. Your priorities are different. I know we've got to get this done.*
>
> *You have to do the work when you're there cos you've got so many other things to do outside uni. You're more focussed.*
>
> *Mature students have got a bigger gamble. They've got more to lose. The younger ones probably haven't had to make as many sacrifices to be here.*
>
> *It's like, when the young students ask what time the next lecture is! But you have to know. You have to be organised, or else …*

The quotes above hint at the relationships between mature students and their younger counterparts. There were varied examples, and a few (as the earlier quote states) felt isolated from the younger students. The more prevalent experience was one of respect where many in the forums sought to understand the young students' (apparent) lack of commitment to their studies. The mature students in this research evidently feel they bring commitment to the arena that helps to focus the younger students also (i.e. in group work). In some forums it emerged that they also felt their presence was beneficial for the teaching staff. For example: -

> *I think it's beneficial for the tutors to have older people on the course cos it [pause] it doesn't make it easier for them. Maybe it does. I think it makes it more balanced for them.*
>
> *It evens it out for lecturers. I think we have more of a commitment. We are always there, in the class.*
>
> *Sometimes, lectures seem like they are only being delivered to the mature students in the room. For example, one lecture is delivered to the left side of the room. That's where the mature students sit.*
>
> *I find it easier to talk to lecturers, probably because of my age. Mature students are the only ones to talk in class. Sometimes you are speaking for others who don't have the confidence to talk in class.*

5 Conclusions & recommendations

Noticeable findings from the quantitative data relate to the representativeness of the SWAP participants in this survey. To begin with it emerged that a significant proportion of the respondent intake had familial experience of higher education (40%) with more men than women reporting this. This figure seems high when compared to the national picture of 28% of the population with an HE qualification. It also seemed that women on SWAP courses were relatively more highly qualified than their male counterparts, given the proportions with Highers. Again, this is generally contrary to the national picture where men have more of these qualifications than women.

Half of the participants had responsibilities for dependants whilst undertaking their SWAP studies. This was heavily weighted towards women in the case of responsibilities for children. However, men were proportionately more likely to have adult dependants compared to women (12% and 8% respectively). This may be a reflection of the male breadwinner role, whereby men are more likely to perceive their spouses/cohabiting partners as a dependant. However, this remains speculative at this stage and so further investigation is needed to understand why there appears to be a significant proportion of male SWAP students with a caring role for adult dependants.

The SWAP respondent intake was slightly skewed towards those from more affluent postcode areas. Whilst SIMD deprivation categories should see the cohort equally divided into quintiles, the survey showed 46% of the cohort resided in the two most affluent quintiles, and 32% of the cohort resided in the 2 least affluent quintiles. However, tracking data revealed that those from the most affluent 2 quintiles were further over-represented among those who did not progress, and those from the 2 least affluent quintiles were slightly under-represented relative to their presence in the intake. Further tracking may throw more light on this, as it can only be tentatively suggested that those from least affluent areas are relatively more likely to pass their studies than those in more affluent areas.

Half of those in this survey progressed to HE, 5% to FE, 9% did not progress. (There was no data for the remaining two thirds.) Those who progressed from SWAP courses to HE were 4 times more likely to be on Medical/Allied courses than the national pattern, and to be heavily concentrated within Humanities and Education also, compared to the national pattern. Business and Natural Sciences were weaker destinations than the national picture. In FE SWAP students were more likely to enter Natural Science courses than national average, but less likely to be on Education and Social Science courses.

Half of those for whom reasons for non-progression were found either did not start or withdrew from their expected FE/HE destination. The reasons behind such non-progressions requires further research, as there is much to be learned from those who did not progress.

Experience of SWAP access provision is undoubtedly positive. It is seen as a (generally) supportive environment that seeks to accommodate the familial responsibilities of mature students, and affords them the opportunity to develop organisational and academic skills over a long time. Students report greater confidence as a result of their access experience, in particular when having conquered subjects that they felt intimidated by previously. The fact that access offers them a route to university is evidently appreciated.

5 Conclusions & recommendations

Negative aspects of access provision included burdensome bureaucracy and ineffective 'in-fill' lessons in key areas (Maths and IT). After listening to students' experiences of repetitive and complicated bureaucratic processes, it is evident that systems need to be developed that simplify and routinise such processes as far as possible.

The variety of subjects studied on some access courses could be seen as negative additions to workloads. However, it was found that the relevance of these subjects could be realised later when the students were at university. Perhaps links could be made within SWAP provision, so that students are aware at that point of why these particular subjects are being studied.

The transition to university was generally problematic, with students somewhat overwhelmed by the amount of information they need to find out for themselves. Students were also surprised by the different forms of assessment and other expectations placed on them at university compared to the access course. A constant theme in focus group discussions was the need to increase the academic demands of the access course as it progressed. This included the expectations to follow certain academic conventions (such as referencing requirements, and writing style) and also the move from being assessed by course work to being assessed by formal means. It was found that the transition to the academic and assessment demands at university level was quite steep, and that it would have been helpful to have encountered some of this before becoming an undergraduate.

The importance of IT skills at university was another key point that leads to a recommendation to provide more effective IT provision on the access courses. In-fill classes were unanimously criticised by participants, and they also called for IT training that is more directly relevant to the university demands to be included in SWAP provision.

The focus groups revealed how uncertainty prior to a post-access FE/HE undertaking impacted negatively on many student trajectories. It was a factor in non-progression, and was mentioned as an issue also for those who did progress. Suggestions from the former SWAP students themselves is that information about timetabling, locations, and course demands could be released earlier by institutions to those with responsibilities. This would give more time to make the more complex decisions and calculations that are inherent in many mature students' entrance to HE. Relatedly, the former students also believed that a pre-entry introduction to campuses and university expectations would have helped in their adjustment from a SWAP environment to their university studies. This was known to have occurred in the case of one Medical student, and it was agreed that this was good practice.

5 Conclusions & recommendations

Accounts of staff treatment of former SWAP students were diverse. Whilst it was pleasing to hear accounts of staff members who acknowledged the competing demands that mature students faced, and of those staff members who were seen to embrace the presence of mature students' opinions and life experiences, there were other cases where staff made no concessions, and were seen to regard mature students as problematic. In such cases there were reports that students felt they had no-one to turn to for advice or to act as an intermediary. Therefore, it may be useful to contemplate whether such a position may be incorporated into institutions (in addition to staff sensitivity training) so that such problems and concerns may be vented and resolved.

Despite narratives of isolation and struggling to fit in with the existing timetable of their destination institution, it should be noted that the narratives from the focus groups were overwhelmingly positive. Mature students generally believed themselves to be an asset to the HE environment. It was noted that the discourse of risk and of the fragility of continued participation was not part of the forum discussions. The former SWAP students seemed determined and convinced that their HE endeavour would be a success. This is in contrast to some studies with first generation students (e.g. Reay 2001, 2003, et al 2002), and may be a reflection of the SWAP processes that these students have been through. It may also be a result of the participants who volunteered of course; those who encountered the most risks may not have made it this far.

It is worth considering whether such patterns identified in this research reflect the Scottish context. The greater distribution of HE qualifications among the Scottish population relative to the UK generally, as cited earlier, provides an interesting dimension to this research and may reflect the more democratic nature of Scottish Education (c.f. Paterson 2003). National lessons may be learnt.

Perhaps the most important recommendation is to try to fill in the gaps in the data at this stage. More data will allow this research to begin to address the gap in quantitative data on mature students identified by Roger (2004). Also, collecting more data systematically will allow us to see if the processes that have tentatively been suggested in this research become more evident with further interrogation. They may or may not, and also new patterns of participation and non-participation may become identifiable.

Another important gap in our understanding of SWAP students is the lack of knowledge about those former SWAP students who did not progress to either further or higher education. It is the experiences of this group which may point the way to significant improvements in the transition process from the SWAP arena to continued education. The potential longitudinal aspect that is embedded in this research is novel and critical in gaining a more thorough understanding of retention issues within the mature student population. Relatedly, this research is well placed to focus attention on under-represented groups in higher education, in particular, men and those from lower socio-economic origins. The importance and potential of harnessing both quantitative and qualitative data over a number of years of mature student HE experience cannot be overstated.

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SWAP
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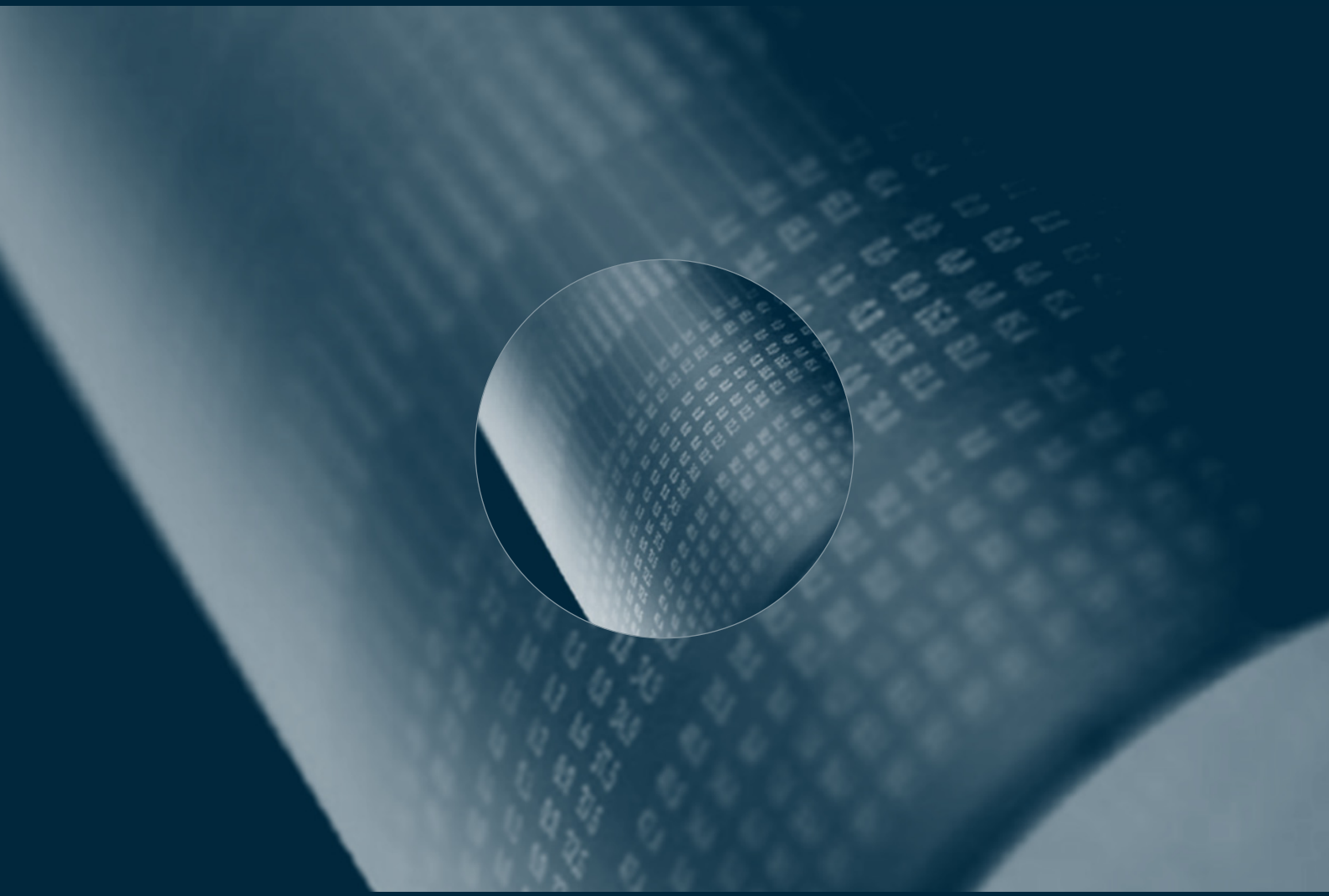

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