



**H A V E R I N G  
C O L L E G E**

Communities and Widening  
Participation in Higher Education in  
The London Borough of Barking and  
Dagenham

By Jo Finch (Curriculum Manager)  
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## Contents

Contents .....	1
List of Tables .....	3
Executive Summary.....	4
Introduction .....	4
The Research Process.....	4
Research Findings – Level 3 Learners.....	5
Research Findings – Higher Education Learners.....	5
Recommendations .....	6
Conclusion .....	6
Introduction.....	7
Background to Research.....	9
Background to Research – The Commissioning Process .....	9
Background to Research - Policy Context.....	10
Havering College of Further and Higher Education .....	12
Who are the learners?.....	13
Barking and Dagenham FE Level 3 Learners .....	14
Barking and Dagenham FE Level 3 Learners – Characteristics.....	15
Barking and Dagenham HE Learners – Programme of Study.....	16
Barking and Dagenham HE Learners - Characteristics.....	17
Barking and Dagenham Learners – picture over last 5 years.....	19
Concluding Comments about Barking and Dagenham Learners .....	19
Methodology.....	20
Introduction .....	20
Methodology.....	20
Research Questions.....	20
Research Method .....	22
How participants were sought.....	22
Range of Students Surveyed .....	23
Ethical Issues .....	27
Data Analysis .....	28
Findings – FE Students .....	29
Introduction .....	29
Experiences of Living in Barking and Dagenham.....	29
Pathologising “Others” in Barking and Dagenham .....	31
Experiences of School.....	32
Experiences of School - Friendships.....	34
Experiences of School – Relationships with teachers .....	35
Experiences of School – Positive Stories .....	37
Schools outside of the borough.....	38
Post 16 Choices and Decision Making Process .....	39
Post 16 Choices and Decision Making Process - Reasons for Choosing Havering College.....	43
Post 16 Choices and Decision Making Process – Sources of Support and Information .....	46
Perception of Self as Learner - Being “Clever”, “Lazy” and “The Stupid One in the Family”.....	49
Perception of Self as Learner - GCSE results .....	51
First Generation Higher Education Learners .....	53

Cultural and Social Capital .....	53
Specific Interventions .....	55
Aims, Aspirations and Future Plans .....	57
Havering College of Further and Higher Education .....	58
Why Barking and Dagenham has low participation rates in Higher Education .....	59
Concluding Comments .....	61
Findings – HE Students .....	62
Introduction .....	62
Relationship with Borough .....	62
Experiences of Education .....	63
Why Learners Doing an HE Programme? .....	65
Why Havering College? .....	66
First Generation Higher Education Learners .....	67
Goals and Aspirations – self and family .....	67
Low participation rates in higher education .....	68
Concluding Comments .....	69
Conclusions and Recommendations .....	70
Introduction .....	70
Social, Economic and Cultural Factors .....	70
Effective ways of engaging with local communities and schools .....	71
Longer term planning and strategic development .....	72
Transferable Models of Intervention .....	72
Concluding Comments .....	73
Bibliography .....	74
Appendices .....	77
Appendix 1 - Consent Form .....	77
Appendix 2 – Interview Schedule – FE Learners .....	79
Appendix 3 – Interview Schedule – HE Learners .....	80
Appendix 4 – Information about the Project .....	81
Appendix 5 – Information about the project for Research Participants .....	82

## List of Tables

Table 1: Distribution of Learners on all Programmes at Havering College....	13
Table 2: Barking and Dagenham Learners on all courses in comparison with all other students (2008-2009).....	14
Table 3: Distribution of Level 3 Barking and Dagenham Learners on different types of types of Level 3 programmes.....	15
Table 4: Distribution of Barking and Dagenham HE Learners in Wards.....	18
Table 5: Distribution of Barking and Dagenham Learners across all levels of study at Having College (2008-2009).....	18
Table 6: Barking and Dagenham learners on Level 3 and HE courses from 2004/2005 to 2008/2009.....	19
Table 7: FE Research participants – an overview.....	23/24
Table 8: HE Research Participants – an overview.....	25/26

## Executive Summary

### Introduction

This report documents research undertaken between January 2009 and June 2009 at Havering College of Further and Higher Education. The research is part of a suite of research undertaken by University of East London (UEL) and Barking College. The research was commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE) and led on from “The Four Cities Research” undertaken in 2006. The research focuses on the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham and considers the issue of low participation rates amongst young people in higher education (HE) in this community.

The research aims to:

- Provide a clearer understanding of the social, economic and cultural factors which lie behind low participation rates in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham.
- Help HE providers to develop different and effective ways of engaging with their local communities, particularly schools.
- Provide evidence for longer term planning and strategic development of widening participation in selected areas and possibly provide lessons and models for potential transfer.

### The Research Process

The research initially drew upon existing quantitative college data to provide a context within which the qualitative research was situated. The research itself focused on Havering College and considered learners from Barking and Dagenham on Level 3 and Higher Education courses. The research explored a range of interconnecting issues, such as: experiences of school, choice of further education and the choice of course, support and guidance, future

career aspirations and goals, as well as other issues that emerged from the research process.

The methodology was firmly located within qualitative paradigms and the research aimed at capturing the authentic voices of the learners. In all twenty six learners from Havering College were interviewed, of which twenty were from Level 3 programmes and the remaining 6 from a range of higher education programmes.

### **Research Findings – Level 3 Learners**

- The area of Barking and Dagenham is not well liked by young people; it has a very poor reputation and there was a fear of crime.
- Most learners interviewed had a negative or indifferent experience of school.
- Learner identity is often poor or lacking in confidence.
- Mentor programmes at school and the Aim Higher scheme appeared successful although limited numbers of learners were part of these schemes.
- Learners interviewed did not seem to be part of Gifted and Talented programmes and when they were, were negative about the programme.
- Some students made good use of career guidance service and Connexions.
- Students also reliant on own resources to find out about college courses.
- Parental/carer support seems key in helping young people achieve educationally.
- Most young people, (seventeen) were considering university – all vocational courses, mostly in Post 1992 universities.

### **Research Findings – Higher Education Learners**

- Learners are more positive about the borough and the facilities

- Experiences of school are generally more positive although those educated in the borough had indifferent or negative experiences.
- Learners chose to undertake a Higher Education course to progress their careers although some were required to undertake courses due to changes within their profession.
- Studying clearly linked to future career goals and aspirations.
- Most learners were first generation Higher Education students.

## **Recommendations**

The report makes a number of recommendation, these include:

- An urgent “re-brand” Barking and Dagenham to develop a sense of community pride and cohesiveness.
- For institutions in the borough to consider how the population may be pathologised.
- Havering College to re-consider its marketing strategy in relation to Barking and Dagenham Level 3 learners.
- Havering College should consider ways at developing a “presence” in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham.
- Continuance of mentoring and Aim Higher programmes in the borough.
- Further work and development of the G&T programmes in the borough.
- The continued development of good teaching practice and understanding of the needs of such learners.

## **Conclusion**

The report concludes that whilst things are improving in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham, there seems key areas where development is required. In particular, the problem of the image of Barking and Dagenham, which is reinforced by those living and working in the borough. This clearly impacts adversely on participation in higher education, although the learners interviewed, were clearly able to resist what they considered to be the dominant culture in the borough.

## Introduction

This report documents research undertaken between January 2009 and June 2009 at Havering College of Higher and Further Education. The research is part of a suite of research undertaken by University of East London (UEL) and Barking College. The research was commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE) and led on from “The Four Cities Research” undertaken in 2006. The research focuses on the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham and considers the issue of low participation rates amongst young people in higher education (HE) in this community. That there is a low participation rate in HE is well publicised in the borough; for example, a recent leaflet on libraries in the “Citizen”<sup>1</sup> magazine, made explicit reference to the fact that Barking and Dagenham has the lowest percentage of adults with HE qualifications in London.

This report documents the process of the research undertaken at Havering College and details the methodological issues including the design, research questions and the ethical issues. The research largely draws on a qualitative approach although draws on quantitative data to situate and contextualise the research. The report details the findings from the research and considers the implications for policy and practice in terms of the widening participation debate. The research aims overall to:

- Provide a clearer understanding of the social, economic and cultural factors which lie behind low participation rates in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham.
- Help HE providers to develop different and effective ways of engaging with their local communities, particularly schools.
- Provide evidence for longer term planning and strategic development of widening participation in selected areas and possibly provide lessons and models for potential transfer.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a magazine produced by the local authority and delivered to all households in the borough.



The report begins by providing a detailed account of the background to the research undertaken. It then moves on to consider Havering College in more detail, looking in particular at the critical question of who are the learners. The report briefly documents the types of learners, in terms of level of study and considers the wide geographical background from where these learners are sought. Using a quantitative approach, this section also considers in more detail the defining characteristics of the Barking and Dagenham learners at the college. The report then details the qualitative findings from the research process. The numerous stories, discourses and themes that emerged from the research process are considered in detail. Lastly, the report considers the research questions in light of the findings and offers some tentative recommendations.

## Background to Research

### Background to Research – The Commissioning Process

“The Four Cities Research” (2007) as it has come to be known, explored the various reasons why young people did not participate in higher education and focused on areas of the England that had very low rates on HE participation, i.e. constituencies in Birmingham, Bristol, Nottingham and Sheffield (Cooke et al, 2007; Raphael-Reed et al, 2007; Gates, et al, 2007; and Kay et al, 2007). The authors of the summary report (Raphael-Reed, Gates & Last, 2007), made twelve recommendations, one of which concerned the need for a “sound understanding of the local area” in respect of evaluating interventions.

In May 2008, HEFCE proposed funding a further round of research in other geographical locations with a focus on how HE engagement could be facilitated and maintained as well as considering the development of transferable models of practice. The geographical areas were identified in terms of, “HE cold spots and rural/coastal locations and regional diversity” (Whitson, 2008).

The areas chosen to participate in the new round of research included constituencies in:

- London Borough of Barking and Dagenham
- Newcastle Upon Tyne
- Brighton
- Leeds
- Salford
- Cambridgeshire

HEFCE have been instrumental in specifying that the research undertaken in each of these areas is qualitative in design and with a degree of compatibility in the six regions. In line with qualitative research methodologies, HEFCE are keen that the research in each area captures rich data and individual “stories”

of young people's aspirations and experiences of education as well as parents and professional stories. Thus, at the heart of all the research, is the authentic voices of learners, parents and professionals. In terms of the institutions invited to undertake this research, all HE providers in or nearest to the specified geographical location were invited to participate.

In the context of the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham, UEL, Havering College and Barking College were invited to participate, with the University of East London as the lead agency. For Havering College the research project was interesting in itself as it related to HE development within the college and so would support the college in meeting its strategic aims, and would provide other benefits to the college, both externally and internally. Additionally, there are growing numbers of Barking and Dagenham learners on both FE and HE programmes at the college, and so the research could potentially help both improve the experience for learners as well as aid the college in critically considering its widening participation strategy and relationship with key stakeholders in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham.

### **Background to Research - Policy Context**

The research is framed within the widening participation debates. The government has set a clear target that 50% of 18-30 year olds should have higher education qualification by 2010 (Morris, 2002; Layer and Duke, 2005). Previous government inquiries and reports focusing on education have also raised a number of issues, not least the expansion of higher education, the funding of Higher Education, the role of tertiary education and to a lesser extent the role of Further Education Colleges in providing HE (Dearing, 1997; HEFCE, 2003a, HEFCE, 2003b, HEFCE, 2006; Foster, 2005).

Whilst this report will not detail the widening participation debates which are numerous and controversial, at its heart, the widening participation agenda focuses on how HEIs can increase numbers of students from non-traditional backgrounds. Although the label "non-traditional" equally raises debate and

controversy, not least in the potential pathologising impact of this label (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003). The debate recently has moved from Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) being solely responsible for increasing widening participation to communities, schools and families<sup>2</sup>. Debates range from consideration as to what are effective "strategies" to increase participation in HE as well as a consideration as to what might be the "barriers" in preventing people from participating in HE (Layer, 2005), although these "debates" are criticized in themselves (Sheeran et al 2007). The report now goes on to briefly consider Havering College of Further and Higher Education.

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<sup>2</sup> The Guardian newspaper ran a series of articles on the many controversies and debates within Widening Participation in October and November 2008.

## Havering College of Further and Higher Education

Havering College is based across a number of sites in the London Borough of Havering (Ardleigh Green Campus, Quarles Campus, Hillman Close and Thames Gateway College - CEME). The college also has satellite sites in Brentwood, Rainham and the London Borough of Redbridge. Havering College offers a wide range of courses, from basic skills, pre-entry GSCE to postgraduate diplomas. There are approximately 12,000 (FTE) learners at Havering College.

The Further Education (FE) provision is varied and includes a range of Pre-entry, Levels 1, 2 and 3 programmes. This research focuses on learners from Level 3 programmes. Again, the Level 3 provision is varied and includes NVQs (level 3) BTEC Certificates and Diplomas as well as A'levels (AS and A2) and CACHE Diplomas. Within these qualifications, there are very wide ranges of subjects covered as will be explored later. Level 3 learners account for approximately 22% of the college's educational output, (approximately 2918 learners).

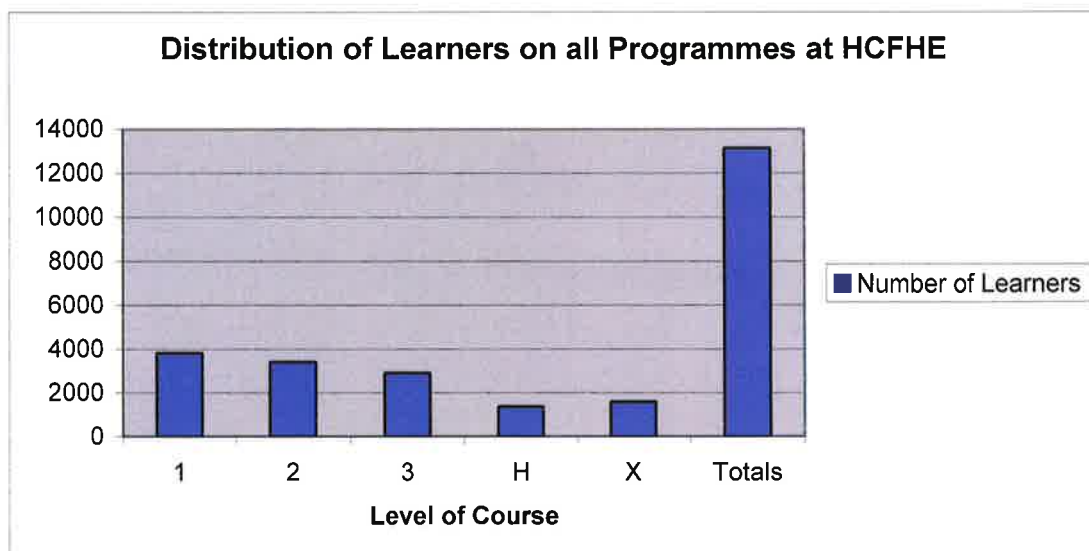
The HE provision currently accounts for approximately 12% of the college's educational output. Approximately thirty-five HE programmes are on offer, including Higher National Certificates (HNCs) Higher National Diplomas (HNDs), Foundations Degrees, Honours Degrees and Post Graduate Courses with further degree programmes currently in development or going through the validation process<sup>3</sup>. In May 2008, Havering College were validated to run a Post Graduate Certificate and Post Graduate Diploma in Practice Education, part of the General Social Care Councils new post qualifying awards in Social Work. Again as with FE the programmes at HE level are diverse, including Youth and Community, Social Work, Art and Design, Childcare, Graphic Design, Engineering and IT to name but a few. The

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<sup>3</sup> Havering College has no awarding powers and therefore a University must validate all HE programmes. Havering College is working towards validation by Open University Validations Services on all its HE programmes. Currently there are a range of validation providers, including London South Bank University, Greenwich University and UEL.

following chart shows the distribution of all Havering College learners on all levels of programme.

**Table 1: Distribution of Learners on all Programmes at Havering College**



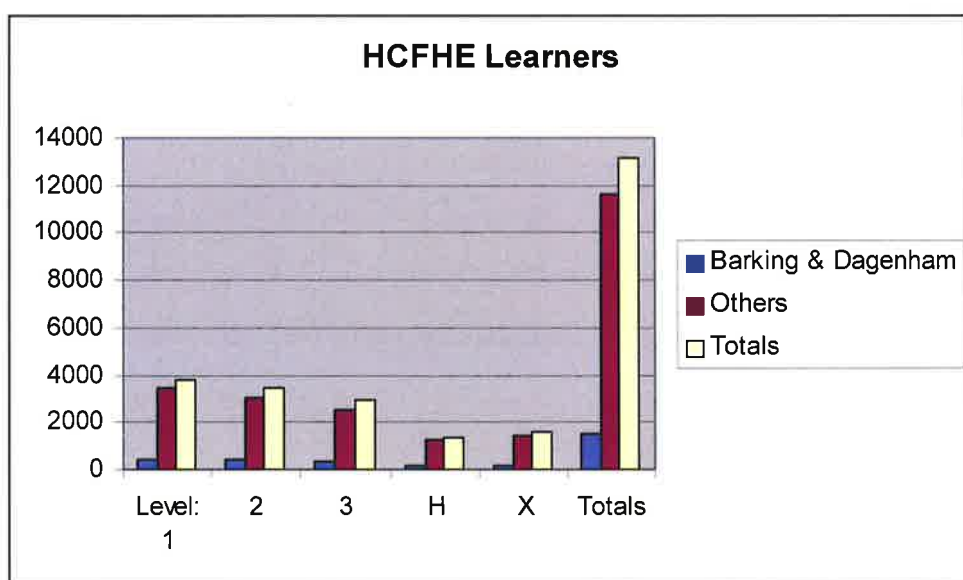
### **Who are the learners?**

Finch (2006) discussed the diversity of learners on both FE and HE programmes in the college although the report focused on HE learners. The college attracts both “traditional” learners and non-traditional learners<sup>4</sup>. The college also attracts learners from a wide range of geographical areas, including the London Boroughs of Barking and Dagenham, Redbridge, Newham, Tower Hamlets and Havering as well as Essex and other counties, including Kent and Surrey to name but a few. Learners are diverse in terms of age, ethnicity and previous educational backgrounds. This poses potential challenges to Havering College although ensures that widening participation is an often taken for granted phenomena – that the college attracts such diverse learners is indicative that widening participation strategies in both recruiting and retaining learners is in operation. There appears therefore to be a deeply embedded culture of widening participation although articulation of this ethos in terms of specific policies, attitudes and in teaching and

<sup>4</sup> Full a full discussion of what is meant by these terms, please refer to Finch (2006)

learning strategies is less tangible. To some extent, the research aims at “uncovering” these largely, deeply embedded and taken for granted practices as well as highlight areas for further development and consideration. The report now goes on to consider the learners from the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham in more depth. As can be seen from the chart below, Barking and Dagenham learners are found on all levels of programmes across the college.

**Table 2: Barking and Dagenham Learners on all courses in comparison with all other students (2008-2009)**

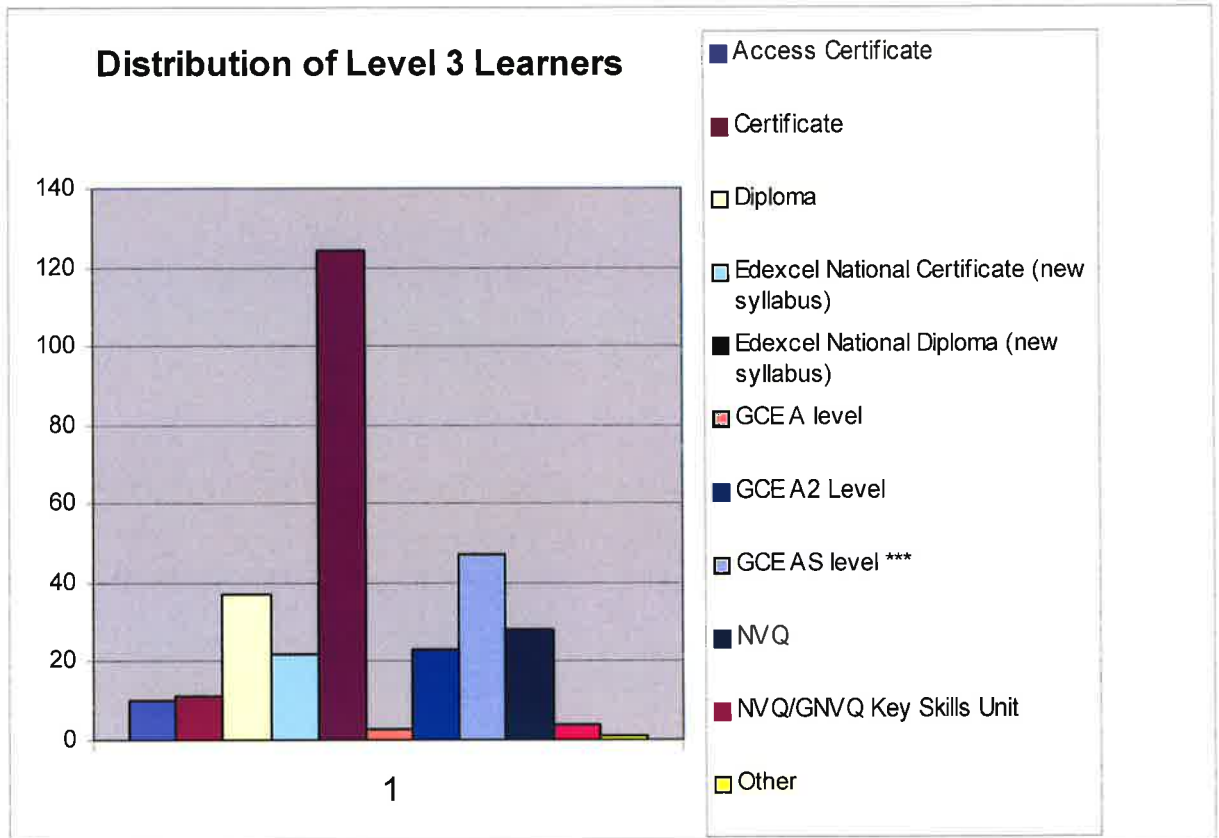


### **Barking and Dagenham FE Level 3 Learners**

There are approximately 310 (Hollyoake, 2008) Level 3 learners from Barking and Dagenham<sup>5</sup>, spread across a wide range of level 3 courses. As can be seen from the table overleaf, the most significant Level 3 provision for learners residing in Barking and Dagenham are BTEC National Diplomas.

<sup>5</sup> This figure needs to be treated cautiously, as there were some anomalies in the hard data provided. A number of students are also on two or more programmes of study, mostly, though not always, A level students.

**Table 3: Distribution of Level 3 Barking and Dagenham Learners on different types of types of Level 3 programmes.**



As it can be seen, the biggest numbers of learners are found on BTEC National Diploma programmes. These include, Media, Sport, Motor Sports, Engineering, Art and Design, Graphic design and IT.

### **Barking and Dagenham FE Level 3 Learners – Characteristics**

In terms of gender, male learners account for approximately 49.5% of all Barking and Dagenham learners. The biggest ethnic group were learners from White backgrounds (White British and White Other) comprising 55% of Barking and Dagenham learners. The next biggest group were learners from Asian backgrounds, (14%), closely followed by learners from Black African backgrounds, (13%). The rest of the students account from those of dual heritage backgrounds, other ethnic groups or those whose ethnicity is not known or recorded.



The age of the FE students were very varied, ranging from 17 to 54. The majority of students were found in the 17 to 21 age group, approximately 73%, with the next significant age band, 21-30 (11%). The 41-50 age group accounted for 8% of Barking and Dagenham learners, the 31-40 age group accounted for 4% and 51-60 age group accounted for 3%. As it can be seen, the college is successful in attracting a diverse array of learners in terms of age.

### **Barking and Dagenham HE Learners – Programme of Study**

The most popular Higher Education programme for Barking and Dagenham Learners was the BA (Hons) in Social Work (35 learners). However Barking and Dagenham HE learners were also found on the following programmes:

- Post Graduate Certificate in Education
- BSC/BA in Learning Disability Studies
- BA (Hons) Person Centred Counselling
- BA (Hons) Behavioural Studies
- BA (Hons) Graphic Design
- BA (Hons) In Music Practice and Technology
- BA (Hons) in 3d Design
- BA (Hons) Pastoral Counselling and Psychology
- Foundation Degree in Electrical Engineering
- Diploma in Higher Education in Youth and Community Work
- BA (Hons) Youth and Community
- HNC in Electrical Engineering
- Foundation Degree in Childcare

(Adapted from Tindall, 2009)

It is clear that Barking and Dagenham learners are not spread evenly across all HE provision in the college; indeed there are a number of programmes with no representatives from Barking and Dagenham. This may be because of the

type of programme or the type of learner that these programmes may attract. What is clear however is that Social Work is a popular choice amongst Barking and Dagenham learners.

### **Barking and Dagenham HE Learners - Characteristics**

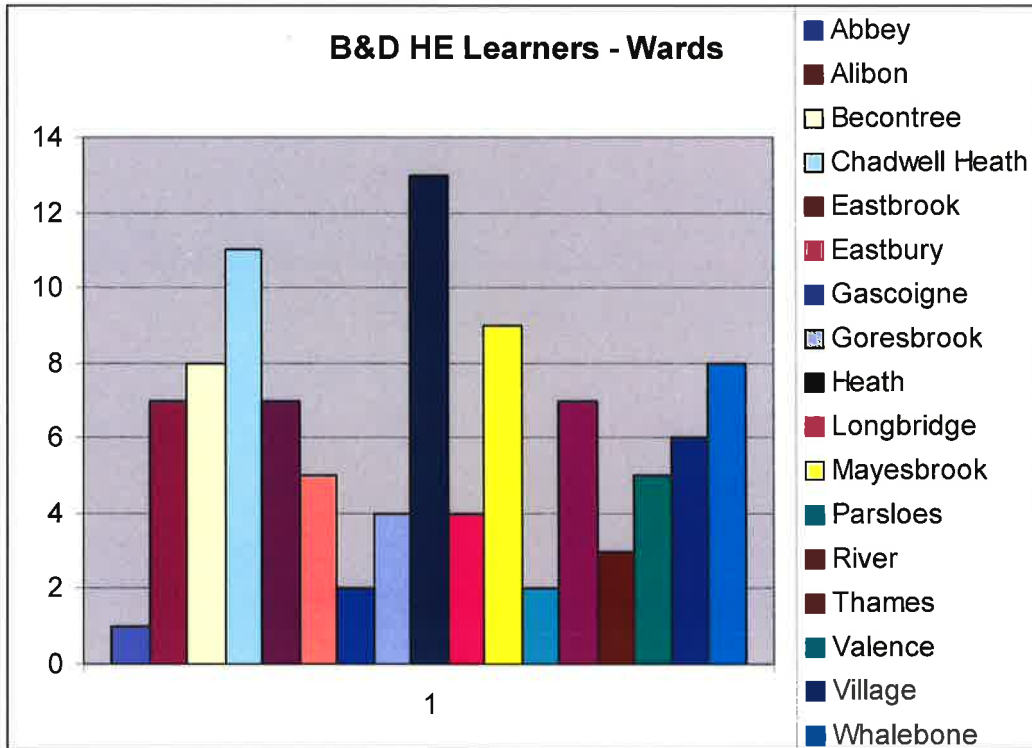
In terms of ethnicity, learners who describe themselves as Black African or Black British account for just under half (48%) of all Barking and Dagenham HE learners. People of White British origin, accounted for 41% of Barking and Dagenham learners. People of Asian origin accounted for a very small percent; just under 5% with the remaining numbers being made up of people who did not state their ethnicity, classed themselves as white other or dual heritage.

In terms of gender, 33% of learners from Barking and Dagenham are male, and so the majority of learners are female. In terms of disability only two learners described themselves as having a disability however anecdotally, mature students often have undiagnosed dyslexia or other specific learning disabilities. It would seem important then, that official data recording systems are flexible enough to account for diagnoses after initial registration. This is to ensure an accurate picture of the types of disabilities that learners may have and to ensure students receive the necessary support and help.

In terms of age, the 30-39 age group account for the largest number of students (approx 34%), closely followed by the 40-49 age group (30%) with the 20-29 age group accounting for 26% of Barking and Dagenham HE Learners. The youngest learner was 20. The 50-59 age group accounted for 7% of learners and there was 1 learner in the 60 plus age range.

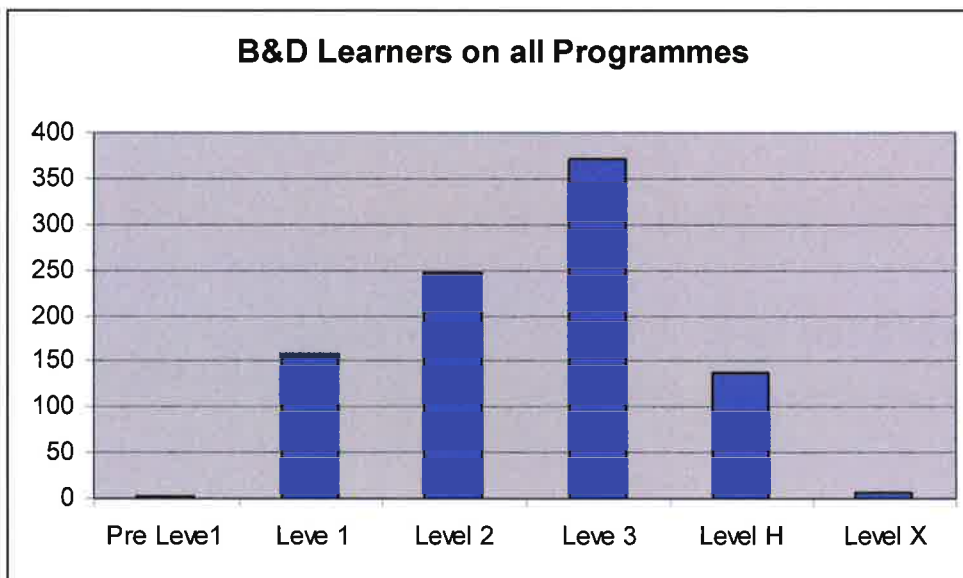
In terms of the wards that HE learners come from in Barking and Dagenham, the largest group reside in "Heath ward" – but they are reasonably well distributed in the borough. This can be seen overleaf;

**Table 4 – Distribution of Barking and Dagenham HE Learners in Wards**



Geography may be important in terms of being able to travel to the college, i.e. bus routes. Barking and Dagenham learners are distributed across all levels of study as follows:

**Table 5 Distribution of Barking and Dagenham Learners across all levels of study at Having College (2008-2009)**

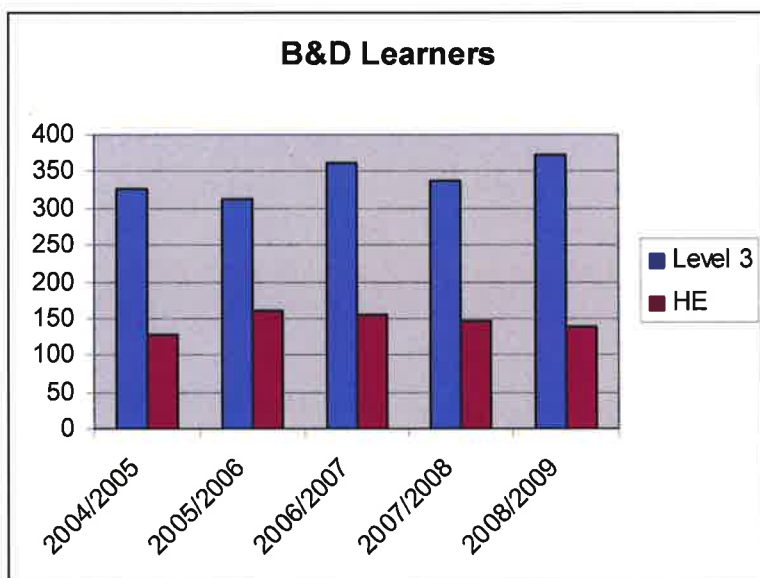


As it can be seen, Level 3 programmes attract the biggest number of learners from Barking and Dagenham, approximately 40%. In total there are 922 learners from Barking and Dagenham at Havering College.

### **Barking and Dagenham Learners – picture over last 5 years**

It was interesting to note that there has been a small growth over the last five years in terms of Level 3 Barking and Dagenham learners although HE learners appear to have suffered a small decline.

**Table 6: Barking and Dagenham learners on Level 3 and HE courses from 2004/2005 to 2008/2009.**



### **Concluding Comments about Barking and Dagenham Learners**

The above analysis gives some context to the types of learners at Havering College both FE and HE students from Barking and Dagenham. As it can be seen, there is great diversity of learners, as well as learners from under represented groups, featuring strongly on various programmes. The HE programmes appear very successful in attracting learners from Black British and African backgrounds. The reports now documents the methodological issues that arose when undertaking the qualitative research.

# Methodology

## Introduction

This section of the report touches briefly on the methodological issues that informed the research questions, design, methods and data analysis. The ethical and legal considerations will be discussed in more depth as well as how research participants were sought. A brief overview of the participants will also be provided. A starting point concerns the methodological paradigms that guided the research process.

## Methodology

The research was commissioned by HEFCE with the explicit aim of adopting qualitative research strategies. Qualitative research practice attempts to capture “rich data” (Sherman and Reid, 1994:54) and follows on from phenomenological, interpretative or social constructionist ontological assumptions, namely that there exists “multiple, subjective realities” (Gilbert, 2001:33). Qualitative research practice is also based on an epistemological stance that takes for granted the notion that the researcher is not neutral or value free in the research process (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994). Qualitative research practice, rejects positivist notions that there is an objective, external world and that “truth” and “facts” can be plucked from this world using scientific methods (Alasuutari, 1998). Overall, qualitative research aims to produce rich data that is generally (though not always) based on the spoken word and tries to capture something of the complexities, uncertainties and ambiguities of human experience. A further aim is to theory build (an inductive process) rather than theory test (a deductive process), although the distinctions in practice are less well pronounced.

## Research Questions

The overall questions that guided this research were to try to:

- Provide a clearer understanding of the social, economic and cultural factors which lie behind low participation rates in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham.
- Help HE providers to develop different and effective ways of engaging with their local communities, particularly schools.
- Provide evidence for longer term planning and strategic development of widening participation in selected areas and possibly provide lessons and models for potential transfer.

There were two distinct strands to this research, firstly to consider Barking and Dagenham FE learners (level 3) experiences and:

- To explore whether students at the outset of their courses, are considering attending an HEI in the future.
- What advice, guidance they were given whilst at school, e.g. progression routes, a consideration of why they chose to attend Havering College and what they understand about HE.
- To consider current advice given by tutors, support staff, careers guidance, connexions etc, in the context of the college about future HE plans (if any).
- To consider experiences and attitudes towards education to date.
- To explore attitudes towards HE (i.e. concerns, fears, hopes, expectations etc)
- To explore any barriers towards continuing their education past Havering College, i.e. finance, cultural, caring responsibilities etc.

The second strand of research looking at Barking and Dagenham HE students in the college and aimed to explore the:

- Hard data around these students, i.e. their age, gender, ethnicity etc.
- What influenced their decision to study at HE level and what course of study they are currently enrolled on.
- The needs of such learners.

- Their experiences of school and of living in the borough.

Initially there was also a third strand to the research proposed and this focused on considering the impact of the new diplomas on HE take up as well as a consideration of staffs attitudes towards the student and diplomas etc. This was a potentially interesting exploration although Havering College new diplomas were only run in the context of the London Borough of Havering. Attempts to make contact with Barking College were unsuccessful and therefore this strand of research did not take place. This does, however, seem an important area that requires further consideration in the broad area of widening participation.

## **Research Method**

For the context of the Havering College research, the research tool employed was in-depth qualitative interviewing<sup>6</sup>. The “interview” is a very widely used research tool for both quantitative and qualitative approaches (Darlington and Scott, 2002; Rapley, 2004; Dunne et al, 2005). In-depth interviewing however is associated with qualitative approaches and offers a number of distinct advantages (Kvale, 2006) not least in enabling people to tell their story and capturing the authenticity of their “voice” rather than the researchers voice (Kvale, 1996; Darlington and Scott, 2002; Alvesson, 2002).

## **How participants were sought**

Participants were sought mostly through individual lecturers and tutors. Lecturers were sent details of the research project<sup>7</sup> and asked to ascertain whether there were Barking and Dagenham learners in their respective classes and to discuss the research and seek potential volunteers. Details of the volunteers were then passed onto the researcher. The researcher also went directly to classes to seek out potential volunteers as well as other direct means, i.e. seeking out potential research participants in the college libraries.

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<sup>6</sup> Copy of interview schedules can be found in the appendices.

<sup>7</sup> See appendices for copies of research information

These methods were successful in procuring research participants although towards the end of the data-gathering phase of the research period, finding willing candidates became more difficult due to the time of the academic year, i.e. student deadlines for coursework.

### Range of Students Surveyed

20 FE students were interviewed. Details are as follows:

**Table 7: FE Research Participants – an overview**

<b>1</b>	A2 level Psychology Law Business Studies	M	19	British Asian	M/C	N
<b>2</b>	BTEC – National Diploma - Sport	M	17	White British	Lower	N
<b>3</b>	BTEC – National Diploma - Sport	F	16	White British	Not stated	N
<b>4</b>	BTEC National Diploma Health & Social Care	F	17	White UK	W/C	N
<b>5</b>	BTEC National Diploma - Childcare	F	17	White UK	Don't know	N
<b>6</b>	A2 levels	M	17	Black African	Lower	N



	Media IT Business  Law As				class	
<b>7</b>	A2 Media & Communicati ons IT And one other	F	18	White British	W/C	N
<b>8</b>	BTEC National Diploma Media	F	17	African	M/C	N
<b>9</b>	Access Health & Social Care	F	23	White English	W/C	N
<b>10</b>	BTEC National Diploma Health & Social Care	F	17	White/Black Caribbean	n/a	N
<b>11</b>	BTEC National Diploma Health & Social Care	F	18	White British	W/C	N
<b>12</b>	BTEC National Diploma Motor Sports	M	18	White British	W/C	N

<b>13</b>	BTEC National Diploma Mechanical Eng	M	19	Black African	n/a	N
<b>14</b>	BTEC National Diploma Sport	M	16	Black British	n/s	N
<b>15</b>	BTEC National Diploma Performing Engineering Operations	M	21	Eastern European	m/c	N
<b>16</b>	NVQ 3 Electrical Engineering  BTEC National Diploma Engineering	M	19	White British	w/c	N
<b>17</b>	Diploma in Childcare and Education	F	16	White British	m/c	N
<b>18</b>	Diploma in Childcare and Education	F	16	White British	n/s	N
<b>19</b>	Maths and	F	20	African	w/c	N

	English GSCE					
	A level Chemistry					
<b>20</b>	AS levels Media IT Art	M	19	Black British African	m/c	N

Six HE Students were interviewed, as detailed below:

**Table 8 – HE Research Participants – brief overview**

<b>1</b>	BA (Hons) Youth and Community	M	50+	Black African	W/C but from M/C family	N
<b>2</b>	BA (Hons) Combined Studies	F	40+	African- Caribbean	M/C	N
<b>3</b>	BA (Hons) Social work	F	Late 40s	White British	W/C	N
<b>4</b>	Foundation Degree Early Childhood Studies	F	26	White British	W/C	N
<b>5</b>	BA (Hons) Social Work	M	32	Black African	W/C	N
<b>6</b>	BA (Hons) Counselling	M	41	White UK	W/C	N

## **Ethical Issues**

Ethical issues are a vital component of any research process (Flick, 2002, Punch, 2005). This research has been guided by a range of ethical considerations and a generally accepted understanding of what is ethical research practice (Robson, 2000 and David and Sutton, 2004), such as the avoidance of harm, confidentiality, anonymity, informed consent, right to withdraw from research and adherence to Data Protection issues. Research participants were provided with both verbal and written information, including its purpose, funding arrangements, future dissemination plans as well as provided with reassurances about issues such as confidentiality and anonymity. In some cases, lecturers identified students to be interviewed and therefore, it is additionally important to ensure that they cannot be identified in the final report. The method of securing participants for the research, as discussed earlier, fully took account of potential data protection issues.

Given the researchers position in the college, i.e. a member of staff, there are potential for ethical issues to arise, not least in terms of power differentiations and students feeling obliged to take part. The potential issues involved in practitioner-researcher have been well documented (Humphreys and Metcalfe, 2000; Fook, 2001; Fryer, 2001; White, 2001) and have been taken into account when designing and implementing the research.

All interviews were conducted in a private space in the college and agreement sought to tape record the interviews. Research participants were given the researchers contact details in case they wanted to withdraw from the research at a later date or if any other issue arose. Pseudonyms have been used when discussing the findings.

## **Data Analysis**

The method of data analysis utilised for this research followed the model advocated by Miles and Huberman (1994) who argue that such processes aim at;

- Data reduction
- Data Display
- Conclusion drawing and verification

(1994:10/11)

An equally helpful understanding of the process of data analysis within qualitative research paradigms is offered by David and Sutton (2004) who argue that such methods aim at:

“...the attempt to identify the presence or absence of meaningful themes, common and/or divergent ideas, beliefs and practices.”

(2004:191)

The research process has also drawn on influences of Grounded Theory approaches (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and the notion of “constant comparison” (Walsh, 1998, Robson, 2002). Overall, the data analysis process aimed to draw out significant themes that emerged within and across the interviews as well as consider the minority voices and more divergent themes. The report now goes on to consider the findings that emerged from the research participants’ stories.

## Findings – FE Students

### Introduction

This section focuses on the first research strand, namely the experiences of FE level 3 learners currently on a variety of courses at Havering College. The themes that emerged were numerous although all pertinent to the research questions. This section discusses the experiences of living in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham, the respondent's experiences of school and the emergent themes that arose in this context, the decision-making process at age 16, support and guidance received, learners self conceptualisations and learners future goals and aspirations. A starting point concerns the respondents' experiences of living in Barking and Dagenham.

### Experiences of Living in Barking and Dagenham

The learners interviewed universally expressed a strong emotional response in relation to what it was like living in Barking and Dagenham. Responses tended to be less than positive although for a small minority it was described as "all right", "Ok", or "not a bad place to live". Concerns were raised about

- Crime (or the fear of crime)
- Abuse from young people and/or anti-social behaviour
- The general environment not being nice, i.e. graffiti, litter, run down
- Lack of leisure/recreational facilities
- Poor, under performing and undisciplined schools

Rob for example, stated that:

***"Personally I don't like the area...I think it's a bad area, not enough facilities for young people...I just think Barking and Dagenham is becoming a joke".***

The fear of crime was expressed by a number of respondents, although respondents themselves had rarely been the victims of crime. Of more concern was anti-social behaviour by young people, in particular being harassed verbally. Maria for example, stated that young people “for no reason” had recently abused her Dad in the street. She states further:

***“When you walk up the Heathway...you feel like...you’re scared to look at people in case they’re going to attack you.”***

Anne, although a young person herself, felt young people in the borough were “strange...rude and aggressive”. Emily described Barking and Dagenham as “horrible”. She said that because of how she dressed, she “attract[ed] trouble”. She stated further that there was “nothing good” about living in Barking and Dagenham. Rob stated that you have to “look over your shoulder in Barking and Dagenham”. Jane stated:

***“Its horrible, its really horrible, its not very nice...I want to move as soon as I can”.***

There were some comments that suggested that there were “good places”, i.e. safe places in the borough as well as “bad” places. Respondents described the environment in negative ways and that the borough was “dirty” and “noisy”. It was notable that all the respondents used limited leisure or recreational facilities in the borough other than local swimming pools. If respondents went to the shops, they would make a decision to use shopping facilities outside of the borough, mostly Romford and to a lesser extent Ilford. This was also the case in terms of cinemas and other evening leisure activities, i.e. going to pubs and nightclubs.

The issue of racism also emerged in the respondents’ stories. Anne had experience of being racially abused, and Stephen, whilst not experiencing direct racism himself, spoke of the threat of indirect racism, namely because of the BNP presence in the borough. Simon had also experienced racism and

while aware of the predominantly white population, felt that where he lived was more “mixed” but he still did not always feel safe. For Stephen, the fact that the borough was becoming more ethnically mixed, made the environment feel safer for him.

The negativity associated with the borough impacted on students in terms of their self-image and confidence as well as related to issues of cultural capital (as will be explored later). Conversely this negativity also provided impetus and motivation to achieve at college, to go to university so that one “*could get out of the borough*” and not end up like the young people “left there”, i.e. unemployed, in jobs with poor prospects or becoming a young parent. A sense of “othering” emerged, in terms of the “other young people” residing in the borough. This is explored further below.

### **Pathologising “Others” in Barking and Dagenham**

Some respondents, despite being “young” themselves, expressed strong images in how they described other young people who lived in Barking and Dagenham. Sarah for example described Barking and Dagenham as a “*shit hole*” and felt that the people who lived in Barking and Dagenham “*made it a shit hole*”. Deborah stated that whilst she found Barking and Dagenham “OK”, she would be reluctant to inform people that she came from Barking and Dagenham because

***“People would look down on you....everyone thinks its a bad area”***

She explained further that the “reputation” of people from Barking and Dagenham was that people were unemployed and lazy. This theme emerges later on in accounts of why the respondents felt that there was a low participation rate in HE in the borough. This pathologising and negative labels applied to “others” in Barking and Dagenham is interesting as it may relate to how people feel about themselves in terms of self-image and confidence



which is discussed later on in terms of learner identity. It also relates to issues of cultural capital. Rob for example was particularly scathing about “others” in Barking and Dagenham. He recounts an incident at school:

***“One time I said to this kid, proper picking on me...and I went, just because I am smart and I am proud to be smart, I mean I want to get a good job and all that and you are just bastards who are completely jealous and fucking stupid.”***

This pathologising of “others” was heard in other accounts. For example, Jane stated that her Dad’s expectations of her were to get a good education and job and not “*end up like other people in Barking and Dagenham*”. This theme emerged again towards the end of the interviews, in response to being asked why there were fewer young people accessing Higher Education in Barking and Dagenham. Other young people were described as interested only in using alcohol and drugs, becoming pregnant and that education was not seen as relevant or necessary. This “pathologising” was evident in how schools were conceptualised as explored below.

## **Experiences of School**

The majority of respondents’ experiences of school were either indifferent or negative although some were more positive and perhaps balanced. In itself this is not surprising; the fact that respondents had chosen to leave school is suggestive that learners did not have a strong attachment to school, however the less than positive experiences of school are clearly important in young people’s self image and identity as a “learner” as well as potentially impacting on their future academic aspirations. The pathologising, towards self and others in the context of living in Barking and Dagenham, also seem to have pervaded the schools.

For those young people who experienced school in a negative way, there was a feeling that the schools were “known” as being “shit” and “poor”. Clear

themes emerged from respondents' accounts that other students were disruptive, took up teachers' attention and time, discipline was poor and that teachers were perceived as "not caring" about the students. Andrew and Sarah both described their schools as "*rubbish*". For the students who had attended one particular school in the borough, the head teacher leaving in their first year, was perceived to have contributed to the sense that the school had gone "downhill" and indeed the school subsequently went into special measures. This was emphasised by other students who attended the same school. Kaz for example, spoke of the school as "*falling apart*". There was a sense that schools were known to be "*crap*" and so from year 1 of secondary school, expectations from learners were not high or positive. James was particular harsh in his account of his experiences at school and there was anger in his account. He described "*hating school*", feeling that no one cared and that teachers themselves felt the school was "*crap*". A sense emerged that both staff and students had "given up". James acknowledged that he "*couldn't be bothered*" at school and recognised that he "*messed around*". James later states:

***"I did pretty well considering I went to a crappy school."***

Katie also comments that:

***"...all schools seem crap in Barking and Dagenham"***

There seems evidence of a collective feeling that the area, the schools and people who reside in the borough are somehow "crap" and "shit". There is a sense that everyone, professionals and young people are resigned to this state of affairs and everyone is accepting of the status quo. Perhaps challenging these perceptions would be key to a sense of restoring a sense of community pride.

There were a number of contradictory discourses that emerged. Sarah for example, was critical of her school in that there were issues of discipline, that there didn't appear to be strong enough deterrents to students in terms of

appropriate behaviour and that teachers appeared *“not to care”*. On the other hand, Sarah acknowledged that she *“messed around”* and *“had attitude”*. Andrew too was critical of his school and felt the teachers *“had given up”*, yet later says his poor GCSE results were down to him as he did *“not put any effort into it”* and that he *“messed around”*. Respondents complained of not being respected, not liking the atmosphere of school, i.e. being told what to do, yet at the same time complained about what they perceived as a lack of discipline.

### **Experiences of School - Friendships**

A factor that appeared to impact on how learners' experiences of school often centred on good relationships with peers, i.e. friendships. Fola, for example, moved to Barking and Dagenham at the end of Year 8. She felt that for three years her experiences of school were negative because she *“didn't have many friends”*, was an *“outsider”* and was *“out of place”*. She felt that it took time for her to become accepted but once accepted, her experiences became more positive although she was still generally negative about issues of discipline in the school. Other respondents talked about friendships spontaneously and how you *“got on”* with peers was inextricably linked to one's experience at school. Ahmed was positive about his school experiences and stated he got on with his teachers and other young people. Maria felt that initially she did not like school but once she began to *“get on better with other students”* her experience became more positive.

For those negative about school, having friends made it manageable and *“OK”*. Andrew was very negative and angry about his experiences at school then later revealed he did not have many good friends when there. Rob commented that the culture of his school changed from one of poor discipline to one of very strict discipline as well as improvements in other aspects of the school. In particular, he commented that because the bullying and disrespect between students decreased, due to the new regime, this helped his learning. He talked about the *“social side”* of school improving and felt that his own social skills had improved which made him *“happy”* and *“helped my learning”*.

This seems an area that requires further consideration and one that probably features in the existing literature. Nonetheless friendships appear to have an important bearing on how people perceive their school experiences as well as potentially influencing future academic choices, i.e. going to a college instead of staying on at school. This will be explored later on in the section that considers the decision-making process. It may also have a fundamental impact on how students identify themselves as “learners” and future attitudes towards higher education.

### **Experiences of School – Relationships with teachers**

For those students who felt their experiences of school were satisfactory, they expressed the view that they “got on with the teachers”. This seemed key in affecting how young people experienced school. Even when the discourses were negative about school, respondents could identify at the very least, one or two teachers that had a positive impact either in terms of enjoying their subject or being encouraged. Rob and Maria spoke of a maths teacher who left and was not replaced. Rob felt that because of the teachers skills and knowledge he had been “*flying in maths*”. Her departure and lack of replacement, he said had “*cost me one of my GCSEs*”, although he got a D. Emily, although very negative about school, reported that her head of year was the only teacher who recognised she might have been “bright”, although she doubted his motives. Deborah reported that “*the teachers were quite good*” and felt they all were helpful. She commented on teachers who “*went beyond their duty*” although in her view this was dependent on the relationship you had with them.

The sense that students felt disrespected by teachers also emerged in some accounts and this contrasted with their experiences at Havering College where they felt respected by tutors and felt they were treated like “adults”. Some of this stemmed from the feeling that teachers did not care about students and/or discipline, had “given up” and did not push students with potential. Other respondents spoke of explicitly of not feeling respected by

the teachers. Rob spoke of his unease about calling male teachers "Sir". Simon felt that whilst some teachers encouraged students to express their opinions in class, all teachers did not encourage this. Simon spoke very explicitly of not feeling valued and respected

### **Experiences of School - Being "Pushed" and Being Quiet**

The term "being pushed" featured in many of the stories told and pertained to students having attended schools, within and outside of the borough. A discourse emerged whereby a "good school" was one that "pushed you". Several students spoke of knowing that they were "lazy" but felt they were not given the "push" or encouragement they required. Kaz, for example, felt he entered school at above average level and so had consequently got "*bored*" and was not challenged by the work. He said that whilst a few teachers gave him harder work, he generally felt that his needs educationally were not met. Emily too felt that the teachers "*never pushed me at all*", although acknowledged that she was very difficult at school and displayed challenging behaviours.

A number of respondents expressed the view that they knew they were fairly clever and so did not have to work hard in class. A number of these respondents also described themselves as fairly "quiet" and undemanding in classes. It seems their needs were ignored and were coupled with teachers time being perceived to be spent managing the disruptive students. Rob acknowledged that he "*made demands*" on teachers and "*asked lots of questions*". Kaz also felt that he both asked and answered too many questions in class and had a sense that both students and teachers did not like this. Fola also had the sense that:

***"I was not pushed but was motivated myself to do well"***

She then contradicts herself as she also expressed the view that if she were quieter at school and not motivated to do well, then she would not have been pushed. The students, who were schooled outside of the borough described

being pushed and the sense that the schools were known for “pushing” students. This research has clearly only touched upon this issue but this seems an interesting area for further research in terms of considering what being “pushed” at schools means for the school, young people and parents/carers.

Simon, Kaz and Maria all talked about being quiet. Kaz felt that he could not be himself at school and that he felt he had to be quiet, even though as discussed above, he asked and answered questions in class. He states:

***“..At school I didn’t feel I could be myself, I was quieter...a different me to what I was outside of school”.***

Simon felt that because he was quiet, both students and teachers “*took the piss out of him*”. Simon also felt that the smaller classes at Havering College alongside a growing academic and social confidence, enabled him to ask questions whereas at school he would not. Maria also felt that she could not ask questions in class at school, although this now contrasted with her experience at college, whereby she felt she could ask lots of questions. Fola, described being “*forgotten about*” in school. Only one student described, “*being stretched*” at school and this raises a potential concern about the needs of some students not being met in the current school system. This area of exploration links to a later discussion about specific interventions, i.e. Gifted and Talented (G&T) programmes.

### **Experiences of School – Positive Stories**

Some discourses about school were positive, for example particular teachers were highlighted as “good”, “special” and “going beyond the call of duty”. Two respondents talked about positive change in their school in terms of dramatic improvements in discipline, facilities and a general positive cultural change in both the institution and students. Rob felt that the GSCE pass rate also improved, he states:

***“...that’s incredible, especially in a Barking and Dagenham School....the school dug itself out of a really big hole”.***

As it can be seen, the pathologising is evident in Rob’s statement. However, Rob was enthusiastic about the changes in his school as was Maria who had attended the same school. This account contrasts sharply with the school that was perceived to have gone “*downhill*” when the head teacher left.

### **Schools outside of the borough**

Six students were schooled outside of the borough, generally in Havering, although one had been to secondary school in Portugal and one had returned to his previous school in Canning Town after only two weeks in a Barking and Dagenham School. Some of the rationale given for why they went to schools outside of the borough concerned geography, namely that some schools were the nearest C of E or Roman Catholic schools to their homes. Some students specifically mentioned that their parents had been reluctant to send them to Barking and Dagenham schools because of their perceived poor reputation.

Jane, for example, was aware that she could have gone to a Catholic school in the borough but that ultimately her parents had decided to send her to a Havering school as it was perceived to be better educationally and that “*the school would push me more*”. Jane felt that compared to her friends in Barking and Dagenham schools, she felt she was pushed a lot more in her school, although she recognised she was “*lazy*” and needed pushing. The students schooled outside of the borough were mostly positive about their experiences. Joseph for example felt his C of E school was particularly good in terms of the ethnic mix of students, i.e. there were students from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds.

## Post 16 Choices and Decision Making Process

Respondents were asked about their decision making-process when they were in year 11 in respect of what they were going on to study and where they would study. They were also asked who had helped them make these important decisions as well as where their sources of information had come from. Most respondents appeared to make a decision between A levels and BTECs, although one respondent was on an Access Course and three respondents were undertaking the CACHE Diploma in Childcare. Five respondents were currently studying for A levels (As and A2s) although the most popular choice was National Diploma BTEC courses, with 12 of the 20 respondents undertaking one. Rob had previously completed As levels at his school but then had gone on to do a BTEC. Stephen had initially completed a BTEC National Certificate at Havering College and was now doing A levels to ensure he would enough points to gain university admission<sup>8</sup>.

For some of the A level students, there was a sense that it was an expectation from parents that they would go on to do A levels as part of the journey to getting into university. Some of these students were also encouraged by teachers at their schools to do A levels although all left to do A levels elsewhere (with the exception of Rob, as discussed above). Katie, for example, said that it was:

***“...drummed into you at school that they [A levels] are the best thing to do”.***

The BTEC students articulated a more detailed decision making process than A' level students. It seemed that the norm was A' levels, and that BTECs, to some extent, were seen as a less prestigious qualifications. Some parents were reported to have favoured A' levels over other qualifications. Jane for example, stated that she had felt pressure from her Father to study maths and science A' levels.

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<sup>8</sup> For the figures around numbers of students doing A levels and numbers of students doing BTECs, the current course students were on was counted.



For some respondents, they recognised that they did not have the appropriate GSCE grades to be able to stay on at their school and do A' levels. Ahmed for example, had 3 GSCE grade A to Cs and the rest were "*under C*". He thought that most schools in the borough would require 5 A-Cs. Simon felt his GSCE grades were very disappointing and therefore chose a BTEC course in sport, as he felt sport was the only thing he had excelled in. Nonetheless, Simon's confidence as a learner was clearly growing and he was beginning to think about university. Maria wanted to study PE and sport but, as she had failed GSCE PE, knew she would not be able to do A level PE, a BTEC in Sport might therefore be more appropriate.

There were a number of students who achieved excellent GSCE results and yet they felt strongly that A levels, "were not for them". James, for example, who achieved very good GSCE grades stated that he did not want to do A levels because they were "*...not for me, to be honest*". Saskia, because she did not want to stay on school, "*did not think about doing A levels*". She later states, "*I thought I should really [do A levels]*".

Other respondents made very rational decisions about how their next course of study would fit in or lead to their future academic and career goals. Deborah for example, wanted to become a Social Worker and felt that the BTEC in Health and Social Care would have the advantage over A levels because of the placement element. This would give her an advantage when applying for university, i.e. the fact that she would have had practical experience in social care, as well as the required academic qualifications. She had also felt that A' levels would be too generalised and not readily applicable to her career goal of becoming a Social Worker. Jane, who planned to go on to train as an Occupational Therapist, also commented upon the fact that the BTEC had a practical placement. She felt that having some practical experience would aid her university application.

These very practical and rational decision making process that linked the current course of study with future goals, featured heavily in other accounts. Rob and Maria felt that their BTEC would open a wider range of possibilities

of study at university whereas A levels might be too constraining. Fola had considered her future career aspirations, had researched university courses and Havering College entrance requirements, and felt that a BTEC would be the most appropriate course of study. She felt that the BTEC would enable her to be “creative”, “practical” and “academic” whereas A’ levels might be too limiting or too narrow in scope. She also commented that the media facilities at her school were poor in comparison to what she had seen at Havering College.

Some of the decision-making process had considered the possibility of stepping off points from academic study. Saskia, for example, was undertaking a diploma in childcare. She felt this would give her options when completed and she could then go on to study a reasonably wide range of subjects at university which might then lead to a career in teaching. However, if, after completing her diploma she had had enough of studying, she would have a recognised qualification to go into childcare. The engineering students had also made similar decisions, i.e. their courses, gave them possible options for the future, in terms of a reasonably wide range of subjects to study at university, or would give them immediate careers options. For those students on Ford apprenticeships, career progression was ultimately linked to gaining further and higher qualifications. Rob and Maria also felt their BTEC qualifications gave them a wider range of possible subjects to study at university, although all within the field of sport. It was interesting to note that Rob, had previously started As levels at his former school, but because he failed one out of the three As levels, he was not permitted to continue with A2s. He felt that, although very disappointing at the time, the BTEC in fact had a much wider range of modules than the A level PE, and so had the potential to “open lots more doors”. He also commented positively on the work experience opportunities within the BTEC.

This suggests that not all students view BTECS as the “poor relations” of A’ levels, or that only “clever” students go on to study for A’ levels. It was of note that students achieved very good GSCE grades, which would have been sufficient to go on to study A’ levels. Students are therefore making very

positive, well thought out choices, in respect of studying for BTEC courses – how universities perceive BTECs over A levels is another area of exploration.

For some students however, BTECs were initially seen as “easier” than A levels because the perception was that they would not involve exams. Stephen acknowledged that this had informed his decision making at age sixteen although he now recognised that this reasoning was flawed and his decision “stupid”. Deborah also stated that she was not good at exams and so A levels were not necessarily the best option for her, although other factors had influenced the decision making process. Sarah also expressed a similar view in that she had chosen a BTEC over A’ levels “*because it’s easier*”. Emily had applied for a Diploma in Childcare on the advice of her sister who had allegedly suggested that the course was “*easy*”. Nonetheless, as discussed above, a number of students had weighed up the advantages and disadvantages of doing BTECs over A levels and vice versa. The decision making process was sophisticated, thoughtful and often relied on students’ own efforts. This relies on students having the motivation and resources to go about sourcing information as well as relating to having the necessary cultural capital.

Interestingly, two respondents, had done both A levels and BTECs. Rob had begun As levels but had failed one and was not allowed to continue at school. He had subsequently enrolled on a BTEC at the college and felt that this was now the better option to achieve his future goals of becoming a PE teacher. For him, failing the one A level had been a bitter disappointment, not least in that he achieved A grades in his other As level, but he had turned the experience into a positive and appeared all the more determined to succeed. Joseph now regretted being hostile to the idea of A levels when he was sixteen. He had chosen a BTEC but had struggled with this and gained a certificate rather than a diploma, and so now was on various A level courses, in order to have enough points to get into university. He regretted “*wasting his time*” as many of his peers were already at university and he felt left behind.

## Post 16 Choices and Decision Making Process - Reasons for Choosing Havering College

For the students doing non-A' level programmes, the choice was often between Havering College and Barking College and in some cases, there was no choice of institution. Havering College was chosen over Barking College because:

- Barking College had a poor reputation, i.e. issues around negative word of mouth stories and perception that people who went there, often failed their programmes.
- Barking College not perceived to be a “safe” environment.
- Too many Barking and Dagenham young people attended the college
- Course at appropriate level, not on offer, i.e. not enough Level 3 BTECs on offer.
- Barking College too near home and perceived not to offer a “new” or challenging environment.
- Poor facilities, i.e. libraries, computing

Some learners had interviews with both with Barking College and Havering College but often chose not to attend the interview at Barking College once their place was secured at Havering College. What was striking in the context of the discussions earlier concerning pathologising “others” in Barking and Dagenham is that for some respondents, they deliberately chose an educational institution away from where they lived and away from their former peers.

Kaz, for example, spoke of the need to be in a new environment so he could be himself. He also expressed the need to be away from people who might “constrain him”, he spoke of “*tak[ing] a step into a different world*”. Maria too, spoke of wanting to get away from Barking and Dagenham and young people who resided there as; “*I hate most people in Barking and Dagenham*”. Rob, too spoke of wanting to get away from his peers in Barking and Dagenham

whom he felt would attempt to impede his learning. Emily felt that coming into a new environment, where people did not know her would be helpful, not least in trying to escape her label of being “disruptive” in her previous school.

This was also echoed by Katie who felt that she wanted to “*cut ties*” with Barking and Dagenham, get away from school, the area and more importantly, the people in Barking and Dagenham. She stated that she wanted to get away from what she perceived as “*negative people*” who had “*negative attitudes towards education*”. She was clear that she wanted to surround herself with people who were motivated and were positive. She felt that there were:

***“...not many people like me in school, i.e. bright and willing to work hard....not many people like that at all.”***

Deborah on the other hand was worried that there would be too many people from her former school at Havering College and this impeded her sense of wanting to “get away” from the negativity associated with the area. In the end, though, she realised that there were only two people from her school at the college and they were both on other programmes. Additionally, going into a new area and new college was seen as preparation for university, i.e. you would be required to make new friends, “*step outside one’s comfort zone*” and develop skills like becoming independent and moving towards being an adult learner rather than a school pupil. For some this was initially challenging. Katie found the adult teaching style difficult at first and had needed time to “get used to it”. Sarah had found it strange that tutors did not ring her up if she failed to attend lectures. However this theme, of almost testing oneself, or seeing coming to Havering College as a testing ground for later independence at university was a strong theme to emerge in learners stories.

Students had often attended open days at Havering College and had liked what they had seen. Fola for example, had been impressed at the media facilities. The importance of Open Days was found in previous research (Finch, 2006) in the context of HE learners. Carla had not known anything

about the college but had come to an Open Day with her parents and had liked what she had seen. Open days thus serve a very useful function; in ensuring students attend an institution where they feel comfortable as well as choosing the right course of study.

It was surprising that so few respondents considered Havering Sixth Form College and indeed, some had never heard of it. Kaz had been a former student but felt the environment had not been right for him. Katie had considered the Sixth Form College but felt it did not suit her and described it as *"too posh"*. It was also clear that for some students, the decision to come to Havering College was quite *"last minute"*. Several students reported, having an interview at the college, and then *"starting two days later"*. For Rob this last minute issue was because of having to wait until August for his As results but for others this related to uncertainty about what to do or where to go and the issue being forced, often by parents, fairly late in the summer. Indeed the themes of late applications relate to issues of cultural capital, i.e. how do students know when to apply? This also has implications for application to HE courses as raised in Pickerden (2002) and Finch (2006).

For the A' level students, whilst they knew they would not stay on at their own schools, largely though not only because of their negative or indifference experiences, they did not always have a *"choice"* of institution. Most students applied only to Havering College for their A' levels. Stephen had not been offered a place at Havering Sixth Form College because his predicted GSCE grades has been too low and Joseph had left his application too late to be accepted. This suggests that learners in Barking and Dagenham, may not know about Havering Sixth Form College, the entrance procedures, or may feel the entrance requirements are unattainable. It may also have a reputation of being *"too posh"* or being for *"others"*.

It was interesting to note that of the five A' level students interviewed, two had come straight into the college from school. Katie had only applied to Havering College and Joseph had left his applications to other colleges too late. Kaz as mentioned above had transferred from Having Sixth Form College and Carla

had previously attended Redbridge College but had not enjoyed her experience there and she described it as, "*not a proper college*". She found out about Havering College through the Internet and had heard "*great stuff*" about Havering College. Julia had also previously attended Redbridge college as a Level 2 student and had had poor experiences. Stephen was previously a BTEC student at Havering College. This may have implications for how Havering College markets it's A' level courses to Barking and Dagenham students as well as students from other local authorities, although the biggest proportion of A level students and other Level 3 learners come from Havering, (47%) (Havering College, 2009). There seems perhaps an image problem, that a College of Further Education is often viewed as an institution for those who have somehow failed in school or want a "second chance". Given all the respondents stories, this pathologising should be challenged as many students are making very positive choices to come to the college. Indeed this is also seen in Higher education students at the college as will be discussed later but also emerged in previous research carried out at the college (Finch, 2006).

### **Post 16 Choices and Decision Making Process – Sources of Support and Information**

The respondents were also asked to elaborate further on their decision making process, in terms of how they knew about Havering College, what they knew about they college and sources of information. As will be discussed below, some learners used careers guidance and Connexions. For a number of learners they relied on their own knowledge and researched the options themselves, often, though not always with the support and help of parents/carers.

Students appeared to have different experiences of the careers guidance service at school. Many of those reported not using it on the basis they had done their own research, or "not listening" to what was suggested. Emily acknowledged that as she had spent so much time truanting from school that she had probably missed the sessions. Jane reported that a careers advisor

had been helpful in advising her the qualifications she would need to pursue a career in Occupational Therapy and a BTEC was suggested. Sarah also found the service helpful and whilst she knew she was interested in a career in nursing, she was unsure how she would achieve this. The careers guidance service then suggested a BTEC in Health and Social Care and also suggested she do this at Havering College. Simon also reported using the service, which he experienced as helpful.

Ahmed used both the careers guidance service and Connexions on several occasions and reported that they had been directive in finding him an appropriate course. He commented that they made phone calls on his behalf, which he found helpful. For those that used the service, both careers guidance and Connexions, (although in some cases, the two services were perhaps confused with one another) the support and guidance were considered helpful. The support appears even more important when a minority of students reported not having parental help. This also links to issues of cultural capital and the issue of being a first generation HE learner, which will be discussed later. In terms of different methods of helping students make decisions about future career and academic plans, Nicholas, who was schooled in another borough, stated that sixth form college representative had come to his school although he couldn't recall any careers advice. He also stated that companies had come into schools advertising apprenticeships. Alternative methods, such as these, may be useful to explore in the Barking and Dagenham context.

From the discourses that emerged, it seemed that teachers were rarely influential about post-16 academic choices. This may be because in this sample a number of the respondents had perhaps made up their mind about what to do, or had researched the options independently. Some of the respondents reported that at times, teachers had suggested A' levels in particular subjects but largely, teachers advice, in this sample, was not significant in the decision making process. This may relate to the fact, that the students on the whole had negative or indifferent experiences of school. Deborah reported that once she had made it clear to the school that she was



not going to do A' levels, she felt no further advice was forthcoming. This finding may also relate to the fact that teachers may not feel this is part of their role, not least when there are specialist services available. It is an interesting area that would benefit from further exploration.

Of note was the students who carried out their own research, some very deliberate, i.e. using the Internet, being proactive in getting prospectuses from colleges and schools, attending open days at the college, or using both careers guidance and their own efforts in order to make decisions. Fola, for example, had researched university entrance requirements in her chosen profession, before making her decision at the end of year 11. Students also reported having parental help and were encouraged to get the prospectuses and carry out research. It was clear that some parents were very proactive. James for example, said his Dad had found details of the college and programme on the Internet and had encouraged him to undertake the course. Some students used other contacts, including friends or other family members, to help them make their decisions. Rob for example, had asked a member of his cricket team, who was a PE teacher which route he should take, i.e. A levels or BTEC. Emily relied on her elder sister for advice and guidance.

It was positive to note that most respondents reported that they felt their parents were supportive of their endeavours and all had positive attitudes towards studying. The support was displayed in differing ways, some parents were clear that their expectations were that their son/daughter would attend university. For example, Joseph said that because his elder brothers were at university, then the expectations was that he would also go. He felt some pressure from them but also felt it was something he wanted to do himself. Kaz also talked about family expectations that he would go to university.

For others parents, they appeared supportive, but did not appear to put pressure on their sons/daughters. Students reported that their parents had said "*it was up to them*" and as long as they were happy, they would support whatever decisions they made. It was notable that for a minority of students,

there did not seem to be much in the way of parental guidance. Emily, for example, stated that her sister had advised her. Another student, Sarah, had attended the open day on her own, unlike the majority of the other students who attended with their parents, had been given advice by the careers guidance service and her parents, whilst she felt were fairly supportive, did not appear to offer any specific advice.

It is clear that parental/carer support is of importance when young people make their future academic choices and this is well known within existing research. What was of note from the interviews was that many parents seemed to lack knowledge themselves of the local area and options available post-16, although many were still “supportive” of education. Another issue however also emerged and this concerned parental expectations around going to university. What was notable from the interviews, is that relatively few young people, expressed the view that their parents had clear expectations that they would attend university.

### **Perception of Self as Learner - Being “Clever”, “Lazy” and “The Stupid One in the Family”.**

A theme to emerge in the accounts, which was not originally anticipated, concerned how young people viewed themselves as “learners” in terms of their academic achievements. Five students referred to themselves as “clever” in the context of school. Rob and Maria felt that this made them “different” from their peers. All three students discussed a sense of having to hide their cleverness at school although towards the end of his school career, Rob embraced this identity as “clever” and challenged other students. Rob and Kaz both discussed not wanting to ask lots of questions in class for fear of either irritating students or being labelled as “clever” or, as Rob stated, a “boffin”. Maria spoke of hiding her cleverness at school and said this made her different from the “other” young people, because “she wanted to get something out of life”. Andrew expressed a contradictory discourse, in that he appeared angry about his school experiences and complained that the teachers had “given up”. Yet later on in the interview he acknowledges that:

***"I am quite bright but I messed about at school".***

His "poor" GSCE results, as he described them were "down to me". Sarah described how the clever children got bullied at school and so she began to "mess around" in an attempt to avoid being labelled "clever". Sarah then stated that the "clever children" then began to mess around and she felt they fell behind as the years went by although Sarah managed to mess around without it having an impact on her work. James also referred to being bright but in the context of "messing around" which he felt he "got away with" because he was bright.

A number of students expressed discourses about being "lazy". Kaz said he stopped pushing himself at school, "gave up" and "got lazy". As a result he felt he did not achieve his full potential in terms of GSCE results, although he still gained 8 A-Cs grades. Jane also expressed the view that she and her friends were lazy and that she needed to be pushed. Katie also expressed the view that she knew she was lazy.

With regards to the self-labelling, as documented above in terms of the "clever" label and the "lazy" label – another label emerged strongly from a number of the discourses. This relates to young people describing their siblings as "the clever one in the family" and so by default, they then are the "not -clever" son or daughter in the family, perhaps even "the stupid one". Indeed Andrew referred to himself and his mother as "the dim ones" in comparison with his Dad, who was a "smart guy" and his sister, both of who had attended university. Emily described her sister as "the clever one" in the family, as she was currently attending university. Not only was Emily the "stupid one" she was also the "naughty one". Sarah described herself as the "naughty child" in the family and make negative comparisons between herself and her two elder sisters, one of whom had been at university and one was a qualified accountant. Other respondents talked about their siblings, both older and younger as "the smart one" or "the clever one". Again, this seems to have an impact on how young people see themselves academically and could

adversely impact on their academic confidence and performance. These young people may also “live up” to their family label that then extended into the school environment where the same labels continued to be perpetuated and reinforced.

### **Perception of Self as Learner - GCSE results**

In terms of GSCE grades, 17 of the 20 young people interviewed all more than met the government target of 5 A-Cs grades at GSCE. Students seemed remarkably unconfident or un-enthusiastic about their results, with some claiming, “*I did all right*”. Students often spoke of success at GCSE as achieving 11 A stars but as none of the young people interviewed had achieved such grades, there was a collective sense of underachievement. Students also appeared reluctant to share their results and often claimed they had under performed. This may be linked to the few students considered Gifted and Talented at school, i.e. the impact of labelling. Saskia for example, was surprised at her results, eleven GSCEs, all grades B and C. She stated that she wanted to go back to her school and;

***“...stick my fingers up at my teachers who thought I would never achieve, never get anywhere...I want to prove them wrong. When I got my results I was really happy, wanted to go and say, in your face...felt that no teacher thought I could do it.”***

James described his achievements as doing “*pretty well*”, although he achieved 10 GSCEs, grades A-C, two of which were A stars which seems more than “pretty well”! Kaz was clear that he had under performed and those who labelled themselves “lazy” also felt they had achieved “OK” results but “*nothing special*”. This raises a potential issue about learner identity and a lack of confidence in their academic abilities. Emily was a striking example of this in that for someone who by her own admission had rarely attended school, achieved 9 grade C, GSCEs. She described being “*amazed*” at her results, and it being a “*fluke*” and “*luck*”. When challenged about having

achieved good grades, despite not attending school and so therefore she must be “bright”, Emily vociferously rejected this label. This was an interesting interview in a number of respects.

This raises a serious issue about the social construction of “success” in terms of GCSE grades as being 10 plus, A star grades. This is coupled with the media pushing the view that standards are slipping. Students then carry this “label” into their tertiary education and potentially into their higher education. It was also interesting to note that existing research into how young people conceptualise and react to their GCSEs results could not be found via the usual methods of literature search. This clearly relates to well known sociological theories about the impact of labelling. In this case the labelling is dynamic, involving schools and the young people themselves - coupled with the pathologising that appears evident in the borough.

There were a minority of students, who did fall below achieving 5 A-Cs. Andrew recognised he had potential but felt that:

***“...school not right environment for me, I hated being told what to do”.***

Simon recognised his results were disappointing and he took responsibility for his results, recognising that he had messed around at school and that he had not worked hard. He expressed regret at *“letting my mum down”*. Ahmed did not express any opinion about his grades, other than he knew he could not stay on at school and do A levels because his grades were too low. Ahmed however remained positive about his school experiences. Andrew, Simon and Ahmed were now working hard and all were considering university. For Andrew and Simon in particular they were now in educational establishments that they felt met their needs and suited them.

## **First Generation Higher Education Learners**

Of the twenty young people interviewed, fifteen could be said to be first generation Higher Education learners. Whilst some cousins and siblings have attended, their parents/carers had not attended a Higher Education Institution. Of those fifteen, Rob's carer was currently a mature student on an HE course at the college.

Of the five young people whose parents had attended university, Simon's mum had attended as a mature student. Joseph and Stephen's fathers and both of Nicolas' parents had attended university in their country of origin. It is striking that only one "Mum" had a degree compared with five Fathers. It was also of note, that for three young people who were not first generation Higher Education learners, their parents had been educated overseas. This may suggest that parents/carers may not have the required cultural capital or knowledge of HEIs to be able to advise their children. Indeed, Rob had sought advice from contacts through sport, as well as rely on his college tutor for guidance around universities. Saskia's mum, who worked as a school receptionist, had taken advice from the teachers about how her daughter could become a teacher as well as advice around which universities had a good "reputation". What emerged strongly in the accounts was the importance of college tutors in supporting students through the university admissions process as well as offering advice regarding which universities may be more appropriate. The respondents were positive about the tutor support in this respect and given the students backgrounds and first generation HE learner status, this seems to be of vital importance.

## **Cultural and Social Capital**

As alluded to in a number of places in this report, the notion of cultural capital emerges in lots of different contexts. This sociological theory is based on the work of Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990 and Bourdieu, 1996) and proposes that over generations, unequal power resources, i.e. social, cultural and economical capital are transmitted. Cultural capital, Bourdieu argues, is

the most important form of capital for children in schools and relies on families having familiarity and knowledge of the dominant culture. The dominant culture, evident in language, cultural codes and behaviour impacts on one's "habitus" which defines and shapes ones values and motivations. Educational establishments operate within the normative discourses of the dominant culture and can exclude those without sufficient educational cultural capital. This issue emerged in an informal discussion with a Havering College tutor who felt that extra mural "enrichment" activities were essential for his students who wanted a career in the media.

The norms and values that exist, or are perceived to exist in the community of Barking and Dagenham, may also impact on young people's cultural capital. Students it seems, whilst accessing support or carrying out their own research in terms of future academic and career aspirations are using "outsider" or "cold" sources of information, i.e. the Internet and prospectuses, without having any real insider knowledge. This is discussed further in Raphael-Reed et al (2007). The respondents largely identified themselves as working class. Indeed cultural capital and the perceived lack of, was discussed at length in Raphael-Reed (2007) and many of the points raised also emerged in the young people's discourses.

The question that emerges is how can young people, living in a "deprived" area gain "cultural capital" – not least when powerful dynamics of shame, i.e. living in a "bad area", attending a "shit" school" and the powerful effects of labelling, from professionals and family members and a degree of self labelling all combine? However, coupled against this view, is that these young people, compared to what they term "others" in Barking and Dagenham, do have some degree of cultural capital. They see education as valuable and inextricably linked to career choice and economic success. They have clearly rejected what they see is the dominant culture in the borough, to become young parents, to have jobs with limited prospects, become unemployed and view education negatively. There is also the linked concept of social capital (Vryonides, 2007) referring to individuals and families social resources, networks and connections that can potentially provide

access to valued social goods. This concept may more readily apply to the young people interviewed, in that this “capital” seemed lacking, hence the reliance on careers guidance and Connexions. The section below details specific interventions that emerged in the interviews.

### **Specific Interventions**

In the sample of twenty FE college learners, it was notable that very few of the respondents had been subject to any specific intervention or programme other than careers guidance. In terms of Gifted and Talented (G&T) programmes, it seems that these students were not considered gifted enough, as very few students discussed being classed as G&T. When students did discuss G&T it was in a negative way. Kaz, for example, had not been included in his schools G&T programmes although he felt he should have been. His impression of the G&T programme at his school was that it was tokenistic and more about the school saying they were doing it than actually providing any meaningful programmes. James, who had attended the same school, felt the G&T programme was under-developed. He knew he had been classed as G&T and said he had attended a few meetings but that nothing more had come out of it. He felt that the G&T programme “...was *pretty pointless*”. Fola, who attended a different school, was also aware of being classed as G&T. Her expectations had been that extension classes might be arranged. Instead G&T pupils were given a “*treat*”. Saskia, who attended a school outside of the borough claimed she been “*chucked off*” the G&T programme. She said; “*I obviously wasn’t good enough for it*” yet went on to achieve some impressive GSCE results. This suggests that further research and evaluation of G&T programmes in the borough may be warranted. Indeed, in 2008, The Evening Standard reported that The London Borough of Barking and Dagenham had one of the lowest percentage of children in primary and secondary schools classed as G&T in London, (4.7%). This contrasts sharply with the neighbouring London borough of Havering, where the figure was 14.1% (Hayes, 2008).



Two young people reported that they had been provided with mentors whilst at school and this had been a positive experience. Katie, for example, described herself as “lazy” and felt the teachers did not push her as she was quiet and made little demands on the teachers in class. She acknowledged that she could get by and did not have to work hard. She was subsequently allocated a mentor, who would accompany her to lessons. She felt that someone in the school must have therefore recognised her as potentially “bright” but in need of support and encouragement. Katie felt that without the mentor support she; “*wouldn't have got the grades I did*”. Simon also has a mentor whom he described as “*helpful*”. The mentoring scheme thus seems to be potentially usual in supporting perhaps quieter, undemanding or students who lack confidence but appear to have academic potential.

Only one respondent, Rob discussed a specific intervention, which he thought was Aim Higher but was not sure. Rob felt his entry to the scheme (and 11 of his peers) was based on sporting abilities. He was very positive about the scheme. He explained that as part of the scheme he had met the West Ham football team and more importantly, was financially supported to go to Loughborough University, sit in on some lectures in sport and use the sporting facilities. Rob was effusive in his tone when discussing sitting in on the lectures “*with professors*”. As a result of this, Rob was intending to apply to Loughborough University.

This suggest that the mentoring schemes and Aim Higher schemes have been “successful” in that three young people have been supported in different ways. The fact that Katie and Rob were applying for university and Simon, having under-performed in his GCSEs, was now thinking about the possibility university, suggests that these schemes have value. Clearly more research and evaluation of these schemes is required. It was disappointing to note that the G&T scheme had made so little impact on those interviewed. A significant proportion of the respondents achieved very good GCSE results and one might have expected them to be involved in such programmes. Where students were involved in G&T schemes, the fact the students reported they had little value is disappointing.

## **Aims, Aspirations and Future Plans**

It was reassuring to note that seventeen of the twenty young people interviewed, all planned to go to university. Seven young people had already applied to university, some had offers and other students were still going through the interview process. Students applied for a variety of programmes including Nursing, Occupational Therapy, Social Work, Law, Computer Game Design and Magazine Journalism. Students had chosen a wide range of universities both old and post 92. Post-1992 universities featured more in students' choices than "old" universities.

The remaining ten had begun the process of research but were not due to apply until the following year. Nonetheless, they generally were clear about the area or subject they wanted to study and considered a number of possible universities. These students were interested in Sport Degrees, Business, Teaching, Physiology, Film Studies, Engineering, Motor Sports and Nursing. It was interesting to note that two engineering students who were on apprenticeships, expressed some antithesis towards higher education but felt they would have no choice but to progress to foundation Degrees and then honours degree, as career progression was inextricably linked. Nonetheless their discourses were slightly confused and contradictory about the perceived benefits of Higher Education, although many of their peers were currently at University. Interestingly, these students were amongst the minority whose parent or parents had attended university.

It was clear that the respondents had all chosen vocational courses and it could be hypothesised that might be because of the vocational natures of BTECs qualifications, although the A level students also wanted to do vocational courses. Career goals therefore, were readily mapped towards Higher education choices. Of the three respondents who did not explicitly state they wanted to go to university, Andrew had not yet made up his mind although had begun researching what universities might offer the area he was interested in. One childcare student, Emily, was clear that university was not for her, that there was too much work involved and that by the time she had

finished her present course, she would have spent enough time in education. She also expressed the view that university was “*too posh*”, that only “*posh people*” went to university and that they would “*look down on me*”. These comments were interesting as Emily’s sister was currently attending university. Carla also was clear that her goal was working in childcare for which she felt a degree was unnecessary.

All the respondents were clear that they wanted to end up with careers that offered them security, choice and gave them a reasonable standard of living and that would enable them to make meaningful choices about their lives. For some of these students, going onto higher education was a way out of Barking and Dagenham. For Rob his motivations concerned his difficult upbringing and he was determined not to make some of the mistakes his mother had made. He also felt pressure to be a role model to his younger half siblings whom he did not live with. The students uniformly expressed concern about their peers who had left school at sixteen and felt that their jobs were of limited value and would lead to limited career opportunities in the future.

It was also notable that all the young people interviewed felt that qualifications were essential and necessary. With the exception of Emily, all had peers who were intending to go to university or were all ready at university. Having friends and peers with similar attitudes towards education thus seems essential for participation in higher education and the impact of peer culture on how one views education cannot be under estimated. An intervention that aims to break the possible negative peer culture towards education might be indicated.

### **Havering College of Further and Higher Education**

It was useful to note that the students appeared very positive about the college and their programme of study. Learners praised the college tutors, their style of teaching and the general college environment which felt safe. In particular, learners commented on the feedback they received from tutors,

which was perceived to be helpful and constructive. Given these students perhaps limited or less than positive academic confidence, this seems important. Kaz for example commented on the constructive feedback given by his tutors, he states:

***“...they congratulate you when you do good work so when you get that from your teachers its quite a boost; you know you’ve got some good teachers here”.***

Kaz felt further, that if he sensed his teachers were disappointed in him, that that would also give him an impetus to try harder in future. He also felt that the teaching staff had “*trust*” in him. Rob felt that the assessments timetables were structured well. The theme that learners were treated like adults strongly emerged from the discourses. Learners were aware that they were responsible for their own learning and they had all made choices to be there. Students also were positive about the help they received from tutors regarding applying for university as well as guidance about which universities might be appropriate places to study. Fola for example, had taken advice from her tutor about which universities offered the most appropriate course as had Stephen.

This is not to say that all discourses were positive. A minority of students commented about what they perceived to be poorly organised courses. The canteen also came up quite frequently, namely that the food was of poor quality, high in fat and was expensive. A few male students complained about the security guards, stating they were often heavy handed, although Fola, raised the security presence as a positive aspect of the college environment.

### **Why Barking and Dagenham has low participation rates in Higher Education**

Students were asked whether they were surprised that the area in which they lived had low participation rates in higher education. They were also asked to

consider reasons for this. Most students were not surprised that the borough had low participation rates although a variety of themes emerged as to why this might be the case. Kaz felt that there existed widespread attitudes of indifference towards educational attainment within the borough and felt that this had invaded the schools. He felt that indifference or even hostility towards education had become “the norm” for many people and this was being perpetuated in future generations. Other students felt that university was not seen as relevant to many young people. Emily spoke of a powerful culture in the borough that meant you left school at 16, had children young and got “*rubbish jobs*”. Emily was clear that she did not want that for herself.

However as will be seen in the context of the Higher Education learners responses in the second phase of the research, this “culture” may be changing, as the borough is becoming more diverse. Katie felt that because of the poverty in the borough, this may prevent young people from attending university, who may feel pressure to help their families out financially. A number of respondents referred to the perceived high levels of teenage pregnancy, which was clearly felt to impact adversely on achieving educationally. A number of respondents also commented on what they perceived to be a dependency culture, i.e. a belief that the state will take care of you, that impeded aspirations. Other respondents commented on the powerful influence of peer culture, poor schools with indifferent attitudes towards discipline and the impact of parental attitudes on their children, i.e. if parents are not interested in education, then these values will be passed on to their children.

Another theme to emerge concerned possible cultural differences, Stephen for example, said that within his Ghanaian culture, education was highly valued and there was strong community pressure to succeed educationally and “*not let your parents down*”. Joseph, who was from a Nigerian background, also spoke of possible cultural differences, not least the perceived differences in parenting style. He felt, like Stephen, that there was strong community pressure to succeed and a degree of competition amongst family and friends. Fola, also from a Nigerian background, made similar

comments. She also felt like an “outsider” and so knew she would have to work harder than the indigenous population. Fola felt some pressure to succeed because of her second-generation immigrant status as well as racism and continued negative media coverage about young black people

### **Concluding Comments**

What is clear is that students, despite their negative experiences of school and the impact of the negative pathologising evident in the borough, have all achieved educationally and hopefully the majority will go on to university. In some ways perhaps, it is not these young people that research activity needs to be aimed at. It also seems apparent that these young people are neither considered “clever” enough or “naughty” enough to warrant teacher attention. Interventions therefore could be developed to target this group of students who perhaps fall between the two extremes. Additionally resisting labels seems a challenge both at the personal, familial and institutional levels.

### Introduction

The second strand of research looked at higher education learners' experiences of education, as well as their experiences of college. The themes that emerged were very similar to those revealed in Finch (2006) and therefore fewer number of higher education students were interviewed. The themes that emerged included, their experiences of living in Barking and Dagenham, their experiences of schooling, their current experiences of studying for a higher education qualification, why they had chosen to attend Havering College and their future career goals and aspirations.

### Relationship with Borough

Four of the six respondents had moved into the borough as adults and all respondents expressed the view that Barking and Dagenham was a satisfactory place to live. Respondents claimed where they lived were peaceful, facilities were satisfactory and the environment was nice, i.e. green spaces, clean and tidy. The facilities were considered good in respect of libraries and doctors etc. Fred expressed the view that he had made a decision to move into the borough with his family because it was considered nice and safe. Janet whilst positive about the borough expressed the view that she did not feel safe to go out at night. Robert, who was one of two respondents to have grown up in the borough, was more negative. Having very recently moved out of the borough into Essex, he now felt that Barking and Dagenham was not a nice place, although at the time, he had "*not known any different*". Further, Robert felt that Barking and Dagenham had a bad reputation and people looked down on you if they knew you were from the area. Kathy, whilst not unhappy living in the borough, expressed the view that she would not want to bring children up in the borough and was looking to move in the near future when she started a family. Similar to the young people, the higher education learners also stated that they tended to go outside of the borough for shopping and leisure activities. Overall

respondents were more positive about the borough than the young people. This is probably because most of the HE learners had made a decision into move into the borough.

### **Experiences of Education**

Four of the respondents had been educated in schools outside of Barking and Dagenham and two of those had been educated abroad. Most of the discourses of school were positive. Robert and Olivia had attended schools in the borough and their experiences were less than positive. Olivia described her experience of school as “*indifferent*” and felt that because of the streaming system, she had been “*held back*”. She felt that the focus was on literacy, where she acknowledged she struggled and so was streamed according to that criterion. She said in other classes she felt bored and frustrated. She also commented that when she began her secondary school, the school had recently changed from a Grammar school to a secondary school and as such, the school was in a period of transition.

Robert was much more hostile about his school experience and states:

***“It was awful looking back...it was complete crap. We had maths texts books that were still in old money.”***

He recollects young teachers coming into the school that initially appeared keen but then “*soon lost their interest and zest*”. He felt that the teachers had the expectation that the students would not achieve educationally and that it just a place one had to be until you were 16. He described the school environment as “*laissez faire*”. He also felt that children in the school came from impoverished backgrounds and recalls that many children had free school meals.

Olivia, Kathy and Fred had passed a number of O levels/GCSEs and Olivia and Fred had stayed on a sixth form, although Olivia had left after a year.



The other students left with a few CSEs. With the exception of Michael, all the respondents had then gone onto various jobs. Michael began a business degree in Ghana but did not complete the course as he made a decision to come to England.

Respondents often took advice from family members about future choices when leaving school and often there was a sense that there were unspoken expectations that they would go into certain occupations. Robert for example, felt the expectation was that he would go and do an apprenticeship in a skilled manual trade, or go into factory work like his parents. Olivia, felt there was an expectation that should go and work in the banking sector and this was considered a prestigious and safe occupation. Janet was advised by her parents to go into office work, as this was suitable work for a "women". Most of the respondents had had a range of jobs working in childcare, security, taxi driving, plumbing, administration and various social care jobs.

With the exception of Fred and Michael, all the respondents stated that there had been no expectations and no discussion of attending a university when they were leaving school. Olivia's younger brother had gone onto university but he had always been the "*clever one*" in the family. Fred had been encouraged by his parents and other relations in Nigeria to attend university and whilst this had been his plan, coming to England and having to support himself, had meant this was not possible. Fred regretted not attending university earlier but had felt his role was to support his family by working. Michael had always known that his parents had expectations of him and his siblings that they should attend university. He spoke of very clear expectations around his behaviour in school and what he should achieve.

Fred and Michael discussed what they felt were differences in attitudes towards education. They felt they had both grown up in cultures, i.e. Nigerian and Ghanaian that valued education. Fred felt that White English culture did not value education in the same way although he recognised he was making generalisations. Fred also said that in the Nigerian community he was part of

in London, it was the expectation and norm that young people would go to university. He also felt that because of racism, children of African parents were going to be at a disadvantage compared to their white peers and so would need to be *“one step ahead of the game”*. Fred also made comments about what he perceived to be as differences in parenting style – he felt that the Nigerian parenting style was stricter and that children had less choice and freedom than their white peers.

### **Why Learners Doing an HE Programme?**

Respondents had all made the decision to return to education for a variety of reasons. For Olivia and Kathy, there was a sense of ambivalence about doing a higher education course, in that their work roles now demanded they achieve a degree. Olivia therefore, had worked in social services and was now required to get formally qualified as a social worker as changes in legislation meant she could not longer carry on doing the work she had previously carried out. Kathy, who worked in childcare, was also required by changes in government policy to undertake degree study. Olivia described herself as *“not academic”* and found the course demanding and stressful. Kathy, felt that the programme was very time intensive and demanding and if she had the choice, she would not have wanted to study for a degree. Janet also described herself as:

***“I am just not clever, don’t have an academic way of thinking...am a practical person”.***

Fred, the oldest of the respondents, had made the decision to study as he felt he could not progress further in his social care career without a recognised qualification, in this case a degree in Youth and Community Studies. He also felt that as one of his daughters was in university – this had given him the motivation to study. For him, it also meant he could be a role model to his younger children. Michael too, needed the degree to progress in his social care career, although he had chosen to undertake a degree in social work.

Robert was in a similar situation, in that he had achieved a degree from the Open University but now needed a professional qualification, i.e. the degree in Counselling, to progress his aim of becoming a qualified counsellor, eligible for BCS registration. Janet's motivations were slightly different, in that she felt that as her son was now an adult, this was now "*her time*". She felt she was now under less financial pressure and she "*wanted to better myself*". She felt she had always wanted to go back to education and now this was the right time to pursue this goal.

What is clear is that the courses are all vocational and are clearly linked to career progression or in the case of Janet, are perceived to link to career progression. What is also clear is that the students at Higher Education students at Havering College tend to be in a particular age group i.e. mature and will not always meet the government's target of participation in Higher Education. Nonetheless, it seems crucial that providers of Higher Education, attract local students to their college, who are likely to be mature. There also seems an issue about confidence, with two of the respondent making clear statements about "not being clever". Robert also did not appear confident about his academic credentials despite having achieved a First Class degree from the Open University. HEIs must therefore have an awareness of the very distinct needs of such groups of learners.

### **Why Havering College?**

For most of the respondents, Havering College was seen as "local" and convenient; the programme could fit in with working and family commitments. Havering College, for four of the respondents, was the only HEI they had approached. Olivia had the choice of Anglia Ruskin University but felt it was too large and intimidating. Michael had wanted to attend a university outside of London but felt that because of his family commitments, it was convenient to come to a college near his home.

A number of the respondents liked the small classes and had developed good working relationships with the other students. Fred liked the fact that other students were in a similar position to himself, i.e. a mature students, trying to manage the demands of life, i.e. work, studying and looking after children. Janet, who had previously attended another university, felt that the tutors at Havering College were very approachable and she felt like an *“individual”*. The methods of teaching were praised alongside the generally supportive atmosphere. That is not to say that all the comments were positive. Learners complained about the noise levels in the Library and the refectory and lack of books and online journals. Two learners felt the course was disorganised in that staff had left and had not been immediately replaced.

### **First Generation Higher Education Learners**

All the respondents were first generation Higher Education learners and all identified themselves as coming from working class backgrounds, although it is clear that Fred and Michael’s backgrounds in Africa had been middle class and to some extent privileged. It was interesting to note that Fred’s knowledge of higher education stemmed from having an older daughter at university and his wife was also a mature student, studying teaching at another local provider. It also emerged that students often only applied to Havering College and also applied late – again the issue of cultural capital emerges in that the mature, first generation higher education learners may not have “insider” knowledge of Higher Education Institutions and may not be active and knowledgeable “consumers” of Higher Education.

### **Goals and Aspirations – self and family**

All learners clearly wanted to be successful and achieve their degrees in order to progress and further their careers. Fred, Michael and Janet had expectations that their children would attend university. Robert did not have children but felt his nieces and nephews would probably attend. Olivia’s

children had chosen not to attend university. All saw success as being financially independent. It was interesting to note that respondents often echoed their parents' views, that success was about having a "good job" whereby you were "*financially independent*". Whilst parents would be proud of their mature son or daughters' educational achievement, this was not the most important criterion of success. Robert spoke of not feeling that he could talk about his experience of studying to his parents – he felt that it was out of his parents' world, that it would not mean anything to them. He felt if he discussed it, he would somehow be betraying his parents, as "*I would be talking above them*". He felt that his parents' indifference towards education was part of white working class culture, whereby education was not seen as relevant. This sense of alienation felt by some mature working class students when entering Higher Education is noted in the literature (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003; O'Hara and Bingham, 2004) and also emerged in previous research undertaken at the college (Finch, 2006).

### **Low participation rates in higher education**

The respondents were not surprised that the area had a low participation rate in higher education amongst young people. They attributed to this to the socio-economic issues in the borough. Fred had an understanding of the effect of poverty on educational aspirations and achievements. Janet felt that young people may need to enter employment as soon as possible because of poverty. Robert and Fred discussed the "white population" in the borough and felt that there was a strong culture that did not view education as relevant or necessary. Robert said:

***"...maybe the white population should take a good look at themselves and consider why they are so hostile to education".***

Fred also felt the white population did not seem to value education although he felt the borough was changing. Michael too felt some degree of optimism,

in that he felt services were improving in the area and that the change in the ethnic mix of the population would be a positive thing in the long term, although he recognised the difficulties of the BNP presence in the borough.

Kathy was more scathing and pathologising about those living in Barking and Dagenham, she was not surprised there was a low participation rate in Higher education because:

***“This is going to sound mean...Dagenham is a different class of people, more crime...feel it’s the class of people there, comes from parents.”***

Again, this labelling and hostility towards “others” living in Barking and Dagenham is also evident in some of the Higher Education Learners accounts.

### **Concluding Comments**

A number of important themes emerged from the HE learners, some of which were very similar to the findings from previous research (Finch, 2006). From the quantitative analysis it appears that HE learners at Havering College tend to be mature and so the college appears well placed and experienced in meeting these students needs. Although as documented in Finch (2006) the college still attracts younger learners, whose reasons to stay in the local area, were largely found to relate to financial imperatives as well as being positive about the college’s facilities.

Helping learners develop acquire academic confidence, when they have had negative or indifferent experiences of school, or have left with limited qualifications thus also seems essential. Tutors role, it seems, is not just about “teaching” learners, but “inducting” them into the culture and practices of academia. The report now returns to the research questions and offers some recommendations in light of the research findings.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

### Introduction

This chapter returns to the research questions and considers these in light of the research findings. Like all research processes, this often raises more questions than answers. There is also a danger that such research processes may not take account the many complexities, debates and perspectives. The report however tries to offer some comment in respect of the research questions originally posed and offers some tentative recommendations recognising that participation in higher education is a complex phenomenon.

### Social, Economic and Cultural Factors

It is clear that Barking and Dagenham is considered a “deprived area” in many ways which are well known to impact adversely, for different reasons, on educational attainment, goals and aspirations. What was significant about these findings was the exploration of the cultural factors in Barking and Dagenham that may impact on young people’s participation in higher education. In particular, this focused around the poor reputation of the borough, its facilities and particularly schools and the people who lived there. Residents were seen as unemployed, welfare dependent, become teenage mothers, lacking in aspiration, lacking the ability to defer gratification, i.e. short termism, defiant of authority, not least school authority and were perceived to have negative attitudes towards education. Despite this view of those who reside in Barking and Dagenham, the young people interviewed, whilst seeing themselves as “different” from those who they talked about in negative and pathologising ways, perhaps unconsciously, had taken on this poor sense of self-worth and perhaps lacked academic and social confidence. The power of labels also emerged and this general sense of malaise and low aspirations was perceived by the young people interviewed to have affected the schools. The paradox of the research findings appeared to be that whilst students were very negative about their school experiences, they had still been successful and most of those were intending to go onto university. This suggests that

perhaps the schools are not as bad as portrayed by the young people and that these young people have a degree of resistance and resilience to what they considered to be the dominant culture and were all, for various reasons, motivated to succeed both academically and in their chosen careers. A further paradox seemed to be that, living in a “shit” borough and going to a “shit” school, had proved a strong motivating force to leave the borough to attend a college, as preparation for university, and then go on to university. Higher education was seen as a way out of the borough and its associated negativity.

### **Effective ways of engaging with local communities and schools**

One of the questions considered how Higher Education Institutions could more effectively engage with local communities and schools. For the Level 3 learners, Havering College’s marketing strategy, in terms of Open Days, appears successful in attracting some Barking and Dagenham learners but there seems perhaps scope to consider more direct ways of marketing although the Internet also provides valuable information to young people and their parents. For young people who do not have access to the Internet this may be problematic. There may be scope therefore for college representatives to visit schools and engage in more “direct” forms of advertising. The community may see Havering College, as “outside” of their area so ways in which Havering College could develop their presence within the borough may be indicated – perhaps satellite sites, although this may mean more direct competition with Barking College as well as The Adult College of Barking and Dagenham. The population may, also view Havering College, as relevant only to the population in Havering – that it attracts learners from such a wide geographical area, perhaps needs publicising. Havering College however clearly attracts significant numbers of learners from the London Borough, including mature higher education learners. It seems a shame, that mature Higher education students, do not receive the same government attention as 18-30 year olds.



## **Longer term planning and strategic development**

In the longer term, it seems Barking and Dagenham has an image problem. Barking and Dagenham it seems need to re-invent itself and re-brand itself. In particular, encouraging people to socialise in the borough, redeveloping facilities and leisure activities, may engender a sense of belonging and community. It is also clear that the population of Barking and Dagenham, with increasing numbers of black and minority ethnic communities moving into the area poses an opportunity and may encourage more positive attitudes towards education. The new population of “incomers” may therefore demand better from services in the borough. For professionals in the borough, being aware of how they view the population and how individuals and organisations may engage in pathologising behaviours also seems key. For example, publications, which repeatedly highlight the populations so called “deficits”, do not appear to be helpful in engendering a sense of pride and cohesiveness or indeed help change attitudes towards education.

One of the Level 3 learners interviewed, made a useful suggestion. He felt that if schools got parents more involved in post 16 academic choices and “educated” parents about relevant Level 3 courses and how to apply for university, then this would be helpful and supportive for young people. He also felt that university needed to be discussed by the schools when making options about GCSEs. This might also be something that Havering College could enact, i.e. getting parents more involved in the university application system and informing them of the process. This seems vital for first generation HE learners.

## **Transferable Models of Intervention.**

From this small piece of research, the mentoring schemes and the Aim Higher scheme was important for three learners. However it was surprising that learners did not appear to be the subject of specific interventions – again this may be because they were not considered “bright” enough, or were labelled “lazy” or “quiet” and therefore undemanding of teachers. Further research

wok around the efficacy, nature and scope of the G&T programmes currently in operation in the borough would seem indicated given the learners interviewed for this research, were not positive about the schemes and so few of them, were knowingly seen as G&T.

Further Education Colleges seem well places to support learners with less than positive experiences of school and the fact that many of the learners saw going to a college in a different borough, as preparation for university seems very important indeed. Havering College seemed well placed to meet the particular needs of Level 3, learners from Barking and Dagenham by the methods of teaching, the ethos of the college and the encouragement and support given to learners. Whilst the research into Higher Education learners experiences was not as extensive as the Level 3 learners experiences, that Havering College, recruits and retains such students, is a measure of its success in terms of widening participation.

### **Concluding Comments**

Overall this research explored the experiences, expectations and aspirations of learners from the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham. The research focused on the experiences of Level 3 learners as well as higher education learners. The research raised many interesting themes, some of which were raised in the "Four Cities Research" (2007). All the learners interviewed all demonstrated a commitment to successfully completing their programmes. They all demonstrated high levels of motivation and all had clear goals and career plans, all of which were reliant on being successful academically. The learners were all able to break through these so-called barriers, with varying levels of support and self-motivation.

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## Appendix 1 - Consent Form



### CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

The purpose of this letter is to provide you with the information that you need prior to consenting to participate in this study.

#### *HE and Communities Research – Barking and Dagenham*

##### **Project Description**

Continuum – the Centre for Widening Participation Policy Studies at UEL has been commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to undertake research on low participation rates in Higher Education in Barking & Dagenham.

The aims of the study are to provide a clearer understanding of the social, economic and cultural factors which lie behind the participation rates in Barking and Dagenham.

You are being asked to participate in a focus group discussion to last approximately 1 hour at an agreed location. The discussion will be focused on gaining your insights into how you have experienced Higher Education and how expectations and aims have been realised.

##### **Confidentiality of the Data**

The interview tapes, subsequent transcripts of the tapes, and any notes taken will be given a code and your name will not appear anywhere with the data. Only the principal investigator, project manager, and administrative assistant will have access to the data. The data will be stored on password protected computer files and in a locked office.

##### **Location**

This research study is being funded by HEFCE and being carried out by Continuum, Centre for Widening Participation Policy Studies at the University of East London.

##### **Disclaimer**

You are not obliged to take part in this study, and are free to withdraw at any time. Should you choose to withdraw from the interview process you may do so without disadvantage to yourself and without any obligation to give a reason.

---

I have read the information above relating to the programme of research in which I have been asked to participate and have been given a copy of this form to keep. I understand that my involvement in this study, and particular data from this research, will remain strictly confidential. Only those involved in carrying out the study will have access to the data.

I hereby fully and freely consent to participate in a focus group for this study, and I understand that this will be audio taped and or filmed. Having given this consent I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the research at any time without disadvantage to myself and without being obliged to give any reason.

**Participant's name (BLOCK CAPITALS):** \_\_\_\_\_

**Participant's signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Karina Berzins**

University of East London  
CONTINUUM, Centre for Widening Participation Policy Studies  
4-6 University Way  
Docklands Campus  
London  
E16 2RD

**Jo Finch** (Curriculum Manager)  
HCFHE  
Tring Gardens  
Romford  
RM3 9ES

## **Appendix 2 – Interview Schedule – FE Learners**

### **Interview Schedule – FE Students**

#### **Background Information**

- 1) Gender, age, ethnicity, class, disability?
- 2) What jobs do you or your parents do?
- 3) What newspapers do you or your family read?
- 4) How long have you lived in B&D? Where have you lived previously?
- 5) What is it like living there?

#### **Schooling**

- 6) What school did you go to?
- 7) What were your experiences of school? (Good, bad etc)
- 8) Previous ed qualification
- 9) Who was your favourite teacher?
- 10) What advice did you receive at school about future career, education etc. Who helped you the most? Who helped you the least?

#### **Current Education**

- 11) Course currently on, do you like it? Did you want to do something else? What are the good things about college? What are the worst things about college?
- 12) Why did you want to study at Havering College?
- 13) Did you have a choice to come to Havering College?
- 14) What helps you as a learner?

#### **Future/Attitudes towards Education**

- 15) What do you want to do in the future, i.e. career, job, university, college, further study etc?
- 16) What did you want to do when you were younger? Has this changed? Why?
- 17) What would be your ideal job?
- 18) Has anyone helped you with regard to above? (i.e. tutor, support worker, parents, friend etc)
- 19) What do you think your parents want you to do in the future?
- 20) Has anyone from your family gone to university or studied before?
- 21) What do you think about universities?
- 22) Are your friends at college or university? What do you think your peers think of studying?
- 23) Do you think having qualifications is important?
- 24) What does it mean to be successful in society? Do you feel successful? How could that change? How might family members answer the previous question?



## **Appendix 3 – Interview Schedule – HE Learners**

### **Interview Schedule – HE Students**

#### **Background Information**

- 25) Gender, age, ethnicity, class, disability?
- 26) What jobs do you and/or your parents do/did?
- 27) What newspapers do you or your family read?
- 28) How long have you lived in B&D? Where have you lived previously?
- 29) What is it like living there?

#### **Schooling**

- 30) What school did you go to?
- 31) What were your experiences of school? (Good, bad etc)
- 32) Who was your favourite teacher?
- 33) What advice did you receive at school about future career, education etc. Who helped you the most? Who helped you the least?

#### **Current Education**

- 34) Course currently on, do you like it? Did you want to do something else? What are the good things about college? What are the worst things about college?
- 35) Why did you want to study at Havering College?
- 36) Did you have a choice to come to Havering College? Did you apply to other universities?
- 37) Who in your family has attended university/college?
- 38) Have your friends been to university/college?
- 39) What helps you as a learner?

#### **Future Career Aspirations/Attitudes towards education**

- 40) Do you think having a degree will help you with your future career? If so, in what ways?
- 41) If you have children, have your children attended university? Do you want your children to go to university? Why?
- 42) How will you support them?
- 43) What did you want to do when you were younger? Has this changed? Why?
- 44) Do you think having qualifications is important?
- 45) What does it mean to be successful in society? Do you feel successful? How could that change? How might different family members answer the previous question?

## Appendix 4 – Information about the Project



### Communities and Widening Participation in Education in Barking & Dagenham

#### Background

Continuum – the Centre for Widening Participation Policy Studies at UEL, in partnership with Havering College of Further and Higher Education and Barking College, has been commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to undertake research on low participation rates in Higher Education in Barking & Dagenham.

The current suite of research projects will build on research previously commissioned by HEFCE on young participation in higher education, commonly referred to as the Four Cities research. This provided a rich and complex picture of the processes that underpin the low rates of participation of young people in higher education in the following constituencies: Birmingham Hodge Hill, Bristol South, Nottingham North, and Sheffield Brightside

The five cities research is a further stage of geographically focused work with a direct emphasis on the facilitation of longer term HE engagement in low participation neighbourhoods and the development of transferable models of practice.

The aims of the study are:

- Firstly, to provide a clearer understanding of the social, economic and cultural factors which lie behind the low participation rates in each community.
- Secondly, to help HE providers to develop different and effective ways of engaging with their local communities, in particular with schools.
- Thirdly, to provide evidence for longer term planning and strategic development of widening participation in selected areas, and possibly provide lessons and models for potential transfer.

#### Havering College of Further and Higher Education

The research in the college will focus on FE (level 3) and HE learners who reside in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham. The research aims to explore future education and career aspirations, attitudes towards education and the quality of advice and information. The research will employ qualitative methodology. This research will be carried out by Jo Finch (Curriculum Manager – Social Work).

## Appendix 5 – Information about the project for Research Participants



### **WANT TO WIN A NINTENDO WII CONSOLE AND GAMES?**

**DO YOU LIVE IN BARKING AND DAGENHAM?**

**ARE YOU ON A FURTHER EDUCATION (LEVEL 3) OR A HIGHER EDUCATION COURSE?**

**WANT TO TAKE PART IN GROUND BREAKING RESEARCH?**

**IF YES TO ALL QUESTIONS THEN READ ON....**

#### **The Communities and Widening Participation Research Project**

Continuum – the Centre for Widening Participation Policy Studies at UEL, in partnership with Havering College of Further and Higher Education and Barking College, has been commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England to undertake research on low participation rates in Higher Education in Barking & Dagenham. The research in the college will focus on FE (level 3) and HE learners who reside in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham. The research aims to explore future education and career aspirations, attitudes towards education and the quality of advice and information learners receive.

#### **We need you!**

We need to interview learners from a range of programmes. The interview will take about 30 minutes and can be done in person or over the phone at a time to suit you. Your details will remain confidential.

#### **Interested?**

If you would like to take part in this interesting research project please contact Jo Finch on 01708 455011 ext 4015 or [jfinch@havering-college.ac.uk](mailto:jfinch@havering-college.ac.uk) or give your lecturer your first name and phone number/email address and we will contact you.

## WIN A NINTENDO WII AND GAMES

All research participants will be entered into a draw to win a Nintendo Wii console and a selection of games.

