

Triumph Against Adversity: How 'Access to Social  
Work' Students in Further Education Colleges  
Exert Individual Agency and Overcome Structural  
Barriers to Gain Entry to Higher Education

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of  
Education

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January 2010

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis explores the experiences of students enrolled on access courses at three further education colleges in England. A mixed methods approach was used involving questionnaires, focus groups, and interviews. The study was located within the context of widening participation policy and stringent entry requirements for higher education social work programmes. Theoretical ideas relating to social reproduction, critical race, life course development and feminism were drawn upon to investigate students' education and career decision-making. Particular focus was given to key 'turning points' linked to structure and agency factors influencing the education and career choices open to students. Issues of intersectionality in these areas in terms of ethnicity, gender and class formed a central part of the investigation undertaken.

The findings show that issues of social disadvantage presented additional challenges for students' progression to higher education social work programmes. Students in general were less likely to apply to or to be offered places at pre-1992 universities, and some experienced barriers in gaining access to post-1992 universities. These barriers were disproportionately evident among black minority ethnic students, but were also reinforced by what the author terms problems of 'vocational stratification'; namely, that particular vocational routes to higher education, such as 'Access to Social

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Work' courses, are gendered classed and raced and receive less state financial assistance than other 'care' related courses such as childminding. HE social work programmes being more difficult to access than non-vocational courses compounded these issues. Despite these obstacles, the exercise of agency was strong among students. Key 'turning points' linked to social inequalities acted as a catalyst and prime motivator for students pursuing their education and career desires, and in wanting to make a contribution to people, and to society.