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Rethinking Graduate Attributes: Understanding the learning journeys of part-time students in the Open University in Scotland

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Abstract

Four in ten of Scotland's university students study part time. But their voices and experience are often sidelined in debates about employability and graduate attributes. What do part-time students value in their course of study, and how does this differ from the experience of students in campus based universities? What is the relevance of current and future employment to their experience of study? What relevance might graduate attributes have to part time students? This paper draws on evidence gathered in two large scale surveys of Open University (OU) students in Scotland to explore these issues. The first of these studies explored study motivations and the relationship between study and employment. It highlights the fact that people often choose to study at points of change, or desired change in their life. Study either facilitates that change, or is in itself a part of the change. The aspirations of students does not neatly fit the traditional linear 'graduate attributes' model of progression from study to graduate career. Rather our findings suggest more complex journeys which pose challenges to that model and suggest alternative ways of viewing the relationship between study and 'graduateness'. The second study explores the experience of OU students who studied previously at higher education level in a Scottish college. For these students employment and study is often intertwined and learning journeys are complex and non-linear. In the final section of the paper we look critically at the relevance of the idea of 'graduateness' for part-time / in work students and draw on the literature to suggest alternative

ways in which the relationship between Higher Education (HE) and employment might be conceived in the context of the (changing) relationship between study and employment.

Introduction

The genesis of this discussion lies in our engagement with several inter-related activities. Firstly, the QAA Scotland Enhancement Theme, Graduates for the 21st Century, which encouraged us to think about what graduate attributes and graduateness mean for HE students studying part-time while in employment. Secondly, 'Learning to Work', the pan institutional Scottish employability programme and finally the OU in Scotland's role as a 'hub' for part-time progression from Higher Education (HE) in the college sector to HE in the university sector.

Part-time study for those in work is increasingly discussed as a means of meeting government policy objectives in relation to HE expansion, skills development and skills utilisation. The *Leitch Report* (Leitch, 2006), for example, focused explicitly on adult skills and on the need to raise the proportion of individuals in the workforce with higher level skills. More recently in England, *Higher Ambitions* (DBIS, 2009) stressed the importance of HE in relation to skills for employment. Little (2010) notes that:

'Government envisaged that the next phase of HE expansion would be based around more flexible routes in to HE, more part-time study, more work-based learning, more vocationally-based Foundation degrees (Fds) which would increase opportunities for different types of people to experience HE in a wider range of ways.'

In Scotland skills utilisation has been at the forefront of the government's policy concerns. The importance of HE is recognised in the refreshed skills paper *Skills for Scotland* (The Scottish Government, 2010A). However, the recent Green paper

Building a Smarter Future (The Scottish Government, 2010B) on the future of HE poses questions about the scale and funding of part-time provision but tends to assume that the main function of HE is in providing skilled graduates who have come through the HE system direct from school. So, for example, the Green paper asserts that

'Business receives two main benefits from higher education: the provision of highly skilled graduates into the workplace and the exchange of knowledge from academia to business.' (The Scottish Government, 2010B: 38)

This policy ambiguity is also apparent in *Higher Ambitions* and Little (2010: 58) observes that while its main message was concerned with part-time and the workplace

'... references to employability focussed on "preparing" the next generation of graduates to meet the increasing demands that businesses are making of their "new entrants".'

Existing research and policy literature on gradueness and part-time learners is limited. In part, as we have already noted, this seems to result from a tendency to default to a conventional view that HE is predominantly concerned with full-time students attending university straight from school (see for example Little, 2010:59). In this view part-time reduces essentially to the full-time model of undergraduate study but extended over a longer time period. But part-time is also often conflated with lifelong learning or work-based learning. Part-time students, although nearly a half of the HE sector across the UK by head count, are almost invisible in the debate. As a result much of the discussion is framed in a linear way: from school to university to work. Many part-timers are excluded when HE is viewed through this lens but arguably it is also inadequate for many full-time students for whom part or almost full-time work is a significant part of their lived experience.

The Graduates for the 21st Century Enhancement Theme [1] in Scotland has provided a forum for wide ranging debate around graduate attributes, graduate skills

and the development of practice across the sector. A particular feature of the theme was the way in which the concerns of earlier themes, for example Employability and Research Teaching Linkages were treated as integral to the discussion. However, the outputs from the theme that can be explored on the theme website do also highlight the way in which part-time students can be marginalised or rendered scarcely visible. Although seldom made explicit, an assumption that linear and relatively uninterrupted journeys from school to university or from school to college to university is the norm; reflected for example in the overview of employability commissioned for the Graduates for the 21st Century Theme (Gunn et al: 2010) or in the quote with which they preface their report

'There is no debating that a major responsibility for the smooth integration of graduates into professional life, and hence into society, lies with higher education institutions.' (Pukelis et al 2007).

Notions of transfer of learning from university to employment are also often implicit in the way that skills and attributes are discussed.

In drawing on two large-scale studies of OU part-time student experience we would like to suggest that part-time provides a helpful and critical lens to reframe and reshape debates around gradueness. What do graduate attributes and employability debates mean for students who are already in work? Does current policy and practice in this area meet the needs of part time students and what more could be done? In addition, the issues raised in the specific context of the experiences of part-time students encapsulate and help reframe broader discussions around the significance of HE study and what the 'difference' university education makes to individuals.

Understanding Complex Study Motivations

The first of the two studies that we draw on was conducted as part of the OU's engagement with the four year *Learning to Work* initiative which supported HEIs in Scotland to develop policy and practice in the field of employability.. The *Learning Journeys, Working Journeys* study (Caddell 2010) was designed to explore how students articulate their study motivations and interests (particularly in relation to occupational and career concerns), the support provided by their employers, and the assistance that the OU provides or could provide. A survey of Scottish OU students was conducted between November 2008 and January 2009. The range of data gathered from 1106 respondents through a mixture of closed and open response questions went significantly beyond the broad information about study motives and employment that is routinely captured in OU course surveys and allowed for the development of nuanced and disaggregated understanding of OU student needs and interests in relation to the link between work and career interests.

The national *Destination of Leavers of Higher Education* survey (DeLHE) is a very useful resource, providing the OU provided with specific information about its own students but as with the courses surveys disaggregation is difficult. In addition, the questions on the DeLHE survey are focused to a large extent on the 'traditional' undergraduate into 'employment' trajectory as is the longitudinal *On Track* study supported by the Scottish Funding Council. Both surveys provided useful material to inform a discussion of graduateness, but it was necessary to extend the focus of the inquiry to capture the experience of part-time students in work.

The demographics of the respondents to our survey aligned well with the characteristics of the population from which they were drawn but with some under-representation of younger students and students studying health and social care and over-representation for business school students. The responses provided a very rich data set which was large enough to enable analysis in a diversity of ways. Here we focus in on findings relevant to the focus of this chapter.

While the single most significant reason for undertaking university study was an interest in the content of the course the remaining five reasons in the top six were all skills or career related. Motivation was also mixed and mediated by a complex range of other factors including missed opportunities, family and personal satisfaction and enjoyment. Suggestion or direction by an employer was the primary reason for study in less than 2% of cases. Women in the survey were slightly more career oriented than men; 26% of women gave career related reasons as their most significant reason for study, compared with 22% of men. Those in employment – perhaps unsurprisingly – indicated greater career related motivation (26%) than those not in employment. However, 18% of people not in employment indicated career-related motivations were key to their return to study. This is reflected in the open comments, with some students being very specific about the career aspirations they are pursuing and the study pathway they need to pursue. As one student noted,

'Being made redundant and have thought about what I want to do for the rest of my life. Decided I would like to be a primary teacher but need a degree first! [sic.]'

A theme which emerges strongly from the answers given in the open-ended questions is that of crossing boundaries – people choosing to study at points of change (or desired change) in their life. Study either facilitates that change or is in itself seen as part of that change. This transition may be related to work, to family, into retirement or other lifestyle or personal changes. These transitions can be viewed, broadly, as falling into four categories.

Learning Journeys: Key Transitions

A. A transition in the (usually paid) work undertaken

This is epitomised by statements from respondents such as:

'1. To update and upgrade my qualifications to something valued by employers. 2. As a safety net in case anything happened to my job (and it

has).’

and

‘I know what I want to do with my career and needed a degree to achieve this.’

B. A transition back into work

Some students articulated their study in terms of a transition (back) into work, after taking time away from family or caring related work or after a period of illness.

For example:

‘I am taking some time out to spend with my young family. I wanted to ‘keep my hand in’ while I was off, for my own benefits and to evidence to employers when I return to work.’

C. Transition in occupation (retirement / lifestyle change)

For others, the transition was in the other direction – out of work into retirement or into a new lifestyle. As one respondent noted:

‘I gave up city life and now have a croft in the Highlands - I thought Science courses might better help me understand the environment, weather patterns, renewable energy - etc etc...’

D. Personal Development (self and social esteem)

A number of students articulated their study motivations in terms of more personal transitions – in confidence and ability. A range of specific phrasing of this type of change can be observed, but this includes examples such as:

- *‘To see if I could ‘do it’ - it was a bit of a personal challenge.’*
- *‘To set an example to my kids.’*
- *‘I think, if I am honest, there is a want to raise my status, to be recognised amongst others’*

This theme of transitions, and the role played by higher education in facilitating such change, may provide a fruitful route in to the reimagining of employability discussions in relation to the needs, experience and interests of students already in employment.

The study revealed a complex set of relationships between student motivation, expectations of support from employers and employer understanding of the value of engagement with part-time HE. In the survey group as a whole, 107 of the 1106 participants were officially categorised by the OU as 'sponsored' students. Yet what emerges is a picture of more widespread employer support, with 286 employed students (40% of those in employment) stating that they had received support of some kind from their employer. Such support extended beyond financial support to study leave, flexible working, study space, or simply recognising that the efforts that the employee / student was making. The open-ended comments associated with this question highlight some further ways in which employers support their employees. There was mention of direct support, such as meeting the cost of prescribed books. Others highlighted the support their employers provided by allowing links between study and work. As one respondent noted:

'My job involves similar skills to what I am studying through the OU and my employer allows me develop these skills by giving me tasks that will help me in the future'.

In a similar way another respondent explained how they were able to use their work situation as a case study, highlighting that

'I couldn't do the course without this support'.

There were noticeable differences in the support received by different groups of students and thus the different ways in which study / work relationships are perceived and supported. For example, men were more likely to receive financial support (10% of women, 14% of men said they received full funding for study).

Women were slightly more likely to get study leave (12% vs 10%). Access to flexible working provision was the same for both men and women at 13%. Support also varied by subject-studied. High levels of employer support were reported by students studying Business and Law (55%), Education and Childhood (57%), and Health and Social Care (48%). Lower levels by those studying Social Science/ EDIS and STEM courses (both 29%), those with no declared main subject area (24%) and Arts, Humanities and Language students (22%) (based on % of those who responded).

Participants were also asked what support they would like to have received from their employer. It is significant that the 'most wanted' support is not financial but rather study leave and encouragement. The open-ended responses highlight a range of opinion on the support that students would like from employers. Some were very positive about the help they had received. One was particularly effuse in their comment:

'Short of paying for the course, my employer could not have been any more helpful.'

Another group of respondents highlighted how little support they received. One noted that:

'Any assistance would have been wonderful. Any support or understanding would have also assisted greatly.'

Another highlighted a particular problem around leave for study activities, with lack of recognition of the need for time off to study at key points. They noted the lack of support from their managers, stating, *'Any support from upper management would have been welcome, other than, 'Well I don't care if it is a Summer School just put in for a weeks holiday''.*

Such concerns were echoed by others concerned about time off for exams and their capacity to make use of study leave. There was also some comment on the types of study supported by employers. For example, one student noted

'I would like my employer to focus less on the 'business need' of the course content and more about the benefits of someone studying at all, in improving them as an employee no matter what they are studying.'

This raises key questions about how students and employers respectively view the 'attributes' developed through study. Focusing on the development of technical, specifically task or job related skills development will prioritise a different form and content of learning to an approach that prioritises development of learning and 'graduate attributes' more broadly.

Further emphasising this theme, the survey results highlighted a range of perspectives that indicated that support from employers may not be appropriate or could actually result in forestalling the student's career aspirations. Several students put forward the argument that their studies were not work related and indeed many considered it a leisure activity or *'for enjoyment'*. They thus did not feel it appropriate to expect support from their employer. One student typified this position, highlighting that

'I did not expect or want support from my employer as the subject was outside the role of my job and it was undertaken for personal reasons.'

A small group of students went further with their concerns, explaining that they did not want their employers to know they were studying as they wanted to use their study to change jobs. One categorically stated: *'It is best my employer does not even know I'm studying.'* This was also true of students whose focus was on career change. As one noted, their *'current study is to move away from current employer so would not expect any assistance.'* There was also concern that accepting support from an employer can tie you to that employment. One respondent explained that they *'could have applied for funding but would have been tied to a contract with them for three years after my course finished.'*

In a further part of the survey, students were asked about the skills, qualities and competencies that they thought employers valued – and whether they had

gained any of these whilst studying with the OU. The first question is, of course, rather broad – all skills are likely to be valued somewhere by some employer, depending on specific jobs. However, such a broad brushstroke question does give an indication of the differences in expectation of various groups of students. The data suggests that variation in responses is sectoral. So for example, Health and Social Care and Education and Childhood students placed greater emphasis on specific vocational skills than other groups,

Certain skills areas – notably self motivation, time management and problem solving – were widely perceived to have been enhanced through OU study. Other key skills areas were not seen as being significantly enhanced by study – leadership and management being two such areas. Interpreting these results is rather tricky in that it is possible that respondents felt that they already had these skills, so did not acquire them through OU study. The diversity across subject areas, however, does highlight this as an important area for further analysis.

Exploring the Transition from FE to HE

The second large scale study which we draw on here was carried out in 2009/10 and formed the third iteration of a sequence of surveys (Cannell et al, 2007; Cannell and Thomson, 2010) of the experience of students moving from HE study in the Scottish college sector to part-time study at the OU. The study was conducted through an initial survey sent to 1500 current OU students in November 2009 which was then followed up by in depth interviews with 30 of the 208 survey respondents. While the full report based on the survey describes a detailed picture of the experience of transition (Cannell, Macintyre and Thomson, 2010) the relevance to our discussion of graduateness is set by the diversity of the student journeys. Typically the gap between HE at college and degree study is of the order of 9 years although there is a wide range of variation. Most importantly, however, these students interweave employment and study through complex and non-linear learning

pathways. HE in the Scottish college sector has a strong vocational focus though the study of the Higher National Certificate (HNC) and Higher National Diploma (HND). More recently a shift to HNCs and HNDs being used as transitional qualifications on the way to a degree has been identified (Gallacher et al, 2009). However, our survey data suggests that, while this shift is apparent for part-time students, the study trajectories of individual students are woven in to their identities as workers and their experience of employment. The survey confirmed the findings of two previous OU studies that part-time students motivations and their orientation to employment shifts over an extended period of time. Initial engagement with HE at college tends to be relatively instrumental and strongly vocational. Students quoted in Cannell and Thomson (2010) note for example that their HN study was

'Compulsory as part of apprenticeship'

'Required qualification for the job I was in at the time'

or that:

'Employer chose course'

After, what is often, an extended interlude of employment before a further formal engagement with HE motivations remain predominantly career related but much more strongly nuanced by personal factors. Whereas the direct transition of full-time students from college to university is often understood in terms of a deficit model, the survey data suggests that skills and attributes brought from college study and most recently from employment enable these students to make successful transitions on route to a degree. This remains the case when, as in a majority of cases, students return to HE study in a different subject area than they pursued at college.

Discussion

The learning journeys and student experience illuminated in the two studies we have conducted suggest that for many students engagement with HE presents a more complex picture than the linear pathway to gradueness than is routinely

assumed. Perhaps the most striking aspects of the results related to study motivations are the diversity of interests and reasons students have in undertaking university study and how clearly articulated these are. The open ended responses to the survey questions conveyed the richness of reasons why people take up and continue OU study. Indeed, the multiple and diverse reasons that individual students demonstrate is striking, with intrinsic interest in the subject often coupled with more strategic interests in career or skills development or more personal development interests. Viewed through the narrower lens of transition from college to degree study the picture of diverse and changing motivations is reinforced. Both studies suggest that younger students are more pragmatically career oriented but as part-time learners pursue extended learning journeys it is clear that skills, motivation and aspiration interact with study, work and personal life in complex ways. The OU may be distinctive among HEIs in being wholly concerned with part-time study but part-time students and over 25 year olds with experience of the work-place are represented across the sector. Indeed many school leavers embarking on HE study have a significant engagement with paid employment. In this context we suggest it might then be helpful to look again at the discourse in relation to gradueness from a part-time perspective.

We would argue that reframing notions of gradueness is important for three inter-connected reasons. Understanding gradueness as the end point of a linear HE experience fails to capture the lived experience of many HE students. As a result our understanding of what HE can bring to individuals and society is diminished. However, it also carries with it assumptions about the ways in which skills and attributes are developed. This is an important debate since policy makers, educators and employers tend to agree about the kinds of skills required for employment [2]. However, in practice, employers frequently express dissatisfaction about the skills which graduates bring to the workplace. The findings of our studies suggest some ways in which progress might be made.

There are differences between the skills that our students feel that they acquire from OU study and those that they believe employers value. However, it is clear that many employers are unclear about the benefits that such study brings. The challenge is not simply for employers but for HEIs who need to recognise the experience, skills and attributes that students bring with them to their studies. Importantly skills acquisition and development needs to be understood in context of what individuals already have and their aspirations for change. Detailed analysis of the transitions from college to the OU suggests that study and work experience together develops skills that are prerequisites for a successful experience of HE. Yet some of these personal skills are sometimes seen as the outcome of such experience.

Two powerful themes which run through the student experiences captured in both our studies are transition and transformation. We would suggest that this experience sits uncomfortably with the notion of transfer that is often implicit in the linear acquisition of graduate attributes that are then carried by the student into the world of work. In *The Transfer of Learning* Leberman et al (2006:30) argue that transfer is seen as fundamental to learning but '*rarely achieved when we want it and yet achieved without our efforts at other times*'. An alternative approach might be to develop the transformation metaphor suggested by Hager and Hodkinson (2009). Such an approach allows for a more situated view taking the learner's transformation as central. The *person* moves from one context to another, not the knowledge. Learning is then seen as a continual process of change which changes both the learner and the learner's context. Critically then transformation is not confined to education in or by HEIs, but rather is integral to life and work and the role that HE places in facilitating that change.

In conclusion, we would suggest that further study would be of value in understanding the contribution of HE to skills development and in reframing the discussion of graduateness. In particular it may be helpful to use the part-time

student experience to interrogate more closely the link between skills acquired through HE study and skills acquired through employment. In doing so we might then look critically at whether graduateness is correctly viewed as an end point of an HE experience or whether graduate attributes are inherently social and contextual and acquired through more circuitous and transformative processes.

End notes

[1] More information on the enhancement themes can be found at

<http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/> (accessed 3rd August 2011)

[2] See for example contributions from Jacquie Hepburn (Alliance of Sector Skills Councils) and Janet Lowe (Chair, SFC Skills Committee) at the 3rd Employability for Scotland Conference, 29th October 2009,

http://www.policyreview.tv/conferences.html?theme_id=2 (accessed 3rd August 2011)

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