What 'retention' means to me: the position of the adult learner in student retention

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Abstract: Studies of student retention and progression overwhelmingly appear adopt definitions that place the institution, rather than the student, at the centre. Retention is most often conceived in terms of linear and continuous progress between institutionally identified start and end points.

This paper reports on research that considered data from 38 in-depth interviews conducted with individuals who had characteristics often associated with non-traditional engagement in higher education who between 2006 and 2010 had studied an 'Introduction to HE' module at one distance higher education institution, some of whom had progressed to further study at that institution, some of whom had not. The research deployed a life histories approach to seek a finer grained understanding of how individuals conceptualise their own learning journey and experience, in order to reflect on institutional conceptions of student retention.

The findings highlight potential anomalies hidden within institutional retention rates – large proportions of the interview participants who were not 'retained' by the institution reported successful progression to and in other learning institutions and environments, both formal and informal. Nearly all described positive perspectives on lifelong learning which were either engendered or improved by the learning undertaken. This attests to the complexity of individuals' lives and provides clear evidence that institution-centric definitions of retention and progression are insufficient to create truly meaningful understanding of successful individual learning journeys and experiences. It is argued that only through careful consideration of the lived experience of students and a re-conception of measures of retention, will we be able to offer real insight into improving student retention.

Key terms: retention, adult, lifelong learning, lifewide learning, individual, student, widening participation, non-traditional student, formal, informal, non-formal

Retention in Higher Education

The successful retention of higher education students through to the achievement of intended study goals or qualifications has been of considerable interest to the HE sector both domestically and internationally, supported by large scale and well-resourced initiatives and research programmes such as the UK '*What Works? Student Retention and Success*' programme (supported by the Higher Education Funding Council for England[1], the Paul Hamlyn Foundation[2], the Higher Education Academy[3] and Action on Access[4]); or the longstanding US programme of surveys '*What Works in Student Retention*' supported by the organisation American College Testing[5].

Student retention is a phenomena long observed and quantified. While non-standard definitions and different approaches to data collection (van Stolk et al, 2007) make international comparisons difficult, the headline figures for UK higher education (HE) shows 1 in 12 students leaving during their first year of study and between 33% and 43% of students thinking about withdrawing from HE (Thomas, 2012:4). Further scrutiny reveals wide and unsettling variations in this rate between institutions and programmes. Increasingly, such figures are being described in terms of income lost to the institution for each student who withdraws from study (ibid:4).

Student retention is generally conceived in institutional terms and with a focus on the 'economic' variables of time and measureable outcomes, for example

> Student retention refers to the extent to which learners remain within a higher education institution, and complete a programme of study in a predetermined time-period. (Jones, 2008:1).

Influential early work on the retention of 'traditional' college students, such as the work of Tinto (1993, 1997), Spady (1970) and Metzner and Bean (1987), has since been developed into areas more closely associated with 'non-traditional' students, for example ethnic minority students, going some way to making up for the paucity of research and theory relevant to contemporary considerations of the widening participation agenda, a short-fall recognised by Tinto himself (Metz, 2004).

The literature on student retention overwhelmingly focusses on mainstream or traditional modes of higher education and types of higher education students, with little consideration of the applicability of conceptual models of retention and drop-out to other modes, namely: part-time, distance and on-line modes; and to adults and mature learners. However, there are some limited examples of engagement with the area of retention within adult and distance education: Woodley (2003) attempts a synthesis of theory related specifically to open and distance learning,

acknowledging the short-comings in application of Tinto's model and explores the limited usefulness of Kember's 1995 open learning model of 'student progress'. In his discussion, Woodley, publishing elsewhere, cautions against the pursuit of an all-encompassing explanatory model:

> After all, a general theory of student dropout would be no more no less than a general theory of how people decide to take action and how they change their minds. Any theory that could encompass the enormous complexity of human choice would be so general as to be of little practical use. (2004, 61)

However, Woodley also hints at one common feature of theories of non-persistence that appears to be of critical importance to the present study:

> decision-making is based upon a type of cost–benefit analysis and their goal and institutional commitments affect, and are affected by, how well integrated they are with the system in social and academic terms. *Rather than being 'terminal', as in the decision to commit suicide, an individual's decision may simply be to take a year's break or to transfer to another course or institution.* (2004: 61; emphasis added)

Although Woodley goes on to argue for a radical departure from such theory, instead advocating the pursuit of pragmatic 'large-scale controlled experiments' (ibid:62) which offer actions to reduce drop-out, in this study we take up and pursue further the points made about the nature of 'terminal' departure.

A 2005 report by the Learning and Skills Development Agency (Macleod *et al*, 2005) attempted a systematic review of adult engagement in learning, but identified gaps in research and knowledge on 'What works in sustaining attendance in a learning programme'. It noted:

> Learners may have complex and multiple reasons for withdrawing from their programmes of study…The evidence about what affects continued participation, however, is insufficient to enable appropriate support to be provided to learners; indeed, there is debate about what constitutes 'appropriate support' (Macleod *et al*, 2005:29)

The research

The study sought a finer grained understanding of how 'non-traditional' learners conceive of their own learning and progression, through a series of detailed interviews with participants who between 2006 and 2009 were new to studying with the Open University and who started with an *Openings* module.

The individuals

The Open University has, since 2000, delivered *Openings* modules to students who may have little or no education experience, who may be lacking in confidence to study, or who may want to try a shorter, 'low-risk' module to see whether they might then progress to longer modules. For over a decade these modules have been offered to students across the UK, and form the core curriculum for widening participation, outreach and community development work pursued across the four UK nations. They are in addition often used by partner organisations in the third sector and by trades unions to support workforce development programmes.

Openings modules are proven to be effective in introducing learners to study, across a number of measures:

- Most *Openings* students are new to OU study, have low or no previous educational qualifications, many receive financial support for their studies by virtue of being in receipt of state benefits or being of low income. A large proportion come from postcode areas associated with higher levels of socio-economic disadvantage.

- In the period 2001 to 2011, 18% of all new undergraduate Open University students started with an *Openings* module.

- In the period 2006/07 to 2008/09, 34,212 students chose to commence their Open University studies with an *Openings* module. Of these students, 18,013 have since gone onto register for at least one further module, a progression rate of 52.7%.

- Pass rates on later modules are higher for students whose entry module was an *Openings* module.

Methodology

A quantitative desk analysis of all Open University students whose first registration was an *Openings* module in the period 2006 to 2009 informed this study and traced retention of individuals from the *Openings* module through further study within the OU. It focussed on six 'patterns' or 'groups', based on the outcomes of their *Openings* module and subsequent OU study, which were intended as an initial analytical framework:

1. Did not complete, did not achieve, did not progress

2. Did not complete, did not achieve, did progress

3. Did complete, did achieve, did not progress

4. Did complete, did achieve, did progress

5. Did complete, did not achieve, did not progress

6. Did complete, did not achieve, did progress

Potential interviewees were derived from a purposive sample reflecting some or all of the following factors which are associated with students traditionally under-represented in higher education – financial assistance (as a measure of low income or receipt of certain State benefits), poor postcode area (as measure of social deprivation) and lower previous educational qualifications (as an indication of greater difficulty in accessing traditional higher education institutions). Previous institutional research has confirmed that the presence of any of these characteristics is associated with lower retention rates.

During March 2011 letters of invitation to participate in an interview were sent to over 1,600 students who had registered for an *Openings* module between 2006 and 2009. From the more than 150 individuals who responded, 38 were selected for interview. The age of interviewees ranged from 28 to 74 (with a mean age of 45). Table 1 provides a summary of these characteristics for the population overall and the sample of case study interviews from which it was drawn, and demonstrates the deliberate 'oversampling' from these groups.

Table 1: Summary comparison of profiles of New OU students starting with *Openings* 2006 to 2009 and case study interviewees drawn from this population based on selected socio-demographic characteristics

	Population (%)	Case study Interviewees (%)
Previous HE experience (where data known)		
No	76%	88%
Yes	24%	12%
Poor postcode area		
No	78%	61%
Yes	22%	39%
Financial Assistance		
No	76%	50%
Yes	24%	50%

More than three-quarters of the overall population were without previous higher education experience, nearly one-quarter were from the poorest quartile of postcode locations, and nearly one quarter received financial support (in the form of a full module fee waiver) for their *Openings* module by virtue of being from a low income background or in receipt of state benefits.

The profile of the case study interviews was purposefully skewed towards students who might be considered more likely from 'widening participation'

backgrounds, with over half in receipt of financial support for their *Openings* module and nearly half being from the poorest quartile of postcode locations.

Biographical / Life histories approach

The research explicitly adopted a biographical, or life-histories, approach. By working with the interviewees the researchers sought to uncover and understand some of the socio-economic, cultural and historical forces that shaped lived experience and influenced individual decision making. In this approach, deployed in this study as a data collection and analysis tool, 'interviewees are the narrators of their own story, constructing the past, present and future with the researcher as a guide' (Merrill and Alheit, 2004:151).

Semi-structured conversations were pursued with each the participants, with the interviewer deploying as an 'interview guide' (Stenhouse, 1997) broad question areas seeking to explore:

- early educational experiences,

- experience of education

- experience of work after compulsory education,

- the decision to study the introductory module with the OU,

- perceived impact of that learning, and

- decisions whether or not to continue studying with the OU or elsewhere.

Participants were also asked to reflect on whether the learning had in some way changed them or their attitudes to learning or life.

Findings on non-Retention

Seventeen of the 38 interview participants had not progressed to further study with the OU following studying the *Openings* module and these individuals are the focus of this paper. Of these 'non-progressing' individuals, 12 had successfully completed their *Openings* module and achieved the learning outcomes required for the module (i.e. they passed), but did not register for a further OU module. Four individuals completed their *Openings* module but did not pass, and did not register for a further OU module. One further individual did not complete their *Openings* module and did not register for a further OU module. The following section explores in further detail these individuals' own learning journeys.

Hidden retention

The most interesting finding with regard to what the interview participants did after their *Openings* course was that of 'hidden' retention. Of the seventeen who did not progress within the OU, six in fact had pursued or were pursuing formal learning opportunities elsewhere. Furthermore, these opportunities were most usually related directly to the specific *Openings* module studied:

- Caroline studied 'Introducing Environment', then took up a course in Environment at Glasgow University;

- Dikeledi studied 'Starting with Law', then began a Social Science degree at Sheffield University;

- Sandy studied 'Understanding Children and Young People', then began a languages course at Plymouth University;

- Misha studied 'Understanding Children and Young People', then went on to study an NVQ level 3 in childcare;

- Grace studied 'Starting with Psychology' and furthered her studies in nursing at Bedfordshire University and

- Sheila studied 'Starting with Maths' and took up an HNC in Administration and information technology at a local college.

Reasons provided for studying elsewhere were varied. Caroline, Dikeledi and Sandy all explained that on reflection, they preferred a face-to-face learning environment to a distance learning mode.

Caroline: "*I would love to keep doing things: I would love to go back*"

Caroline grew up as an only child to working class parents. She enjoyed school, but felt she could have worked harder and done better. Parental pressure to get a job meant that after completing four O levels and gaining certificates in secretarial studies, she left to start work in an office.

After working as an office junior for a year, she joined the Royal Air Force (RAF). During her time there, she studied and moved up the ranks to become a Senior Aircraft Woman, and passed her exams to become a corporal, but did not have enough years of experience to gain that promotion.

After ten years at the RAF, Caroline left to marry. She then took up work as a civilian operator at Wiltshire Constabulary. She worked there for three years until her daughter was born. After her daughter's third birthday however, she returned to the police, and has continued to work there since.

Caroline found out about the OU while leafing through a trades union magazine. The advert caught her eye: *"I thought, 'oh I'll send that away and see, you know, if I've got any chance of doing that' ... I'm quite interested in the environment ... and that's how I came to do that ... but I think it's (also) because my daughter has been to university, and just listening to her talking ... I just feel I wish I had done it ... I just liked the whole idea of it – I can't explain it.*

Caroline was delighted to gain the credits for the course. Since then she has done a course at Glasgow University. Although she had found working on the *Openings* course a positive experience, she preferred study through a campus university: *I really, really enjoyed it. But the only thing that I didn't like was that I was in the house myself doing it. I do like meeting people.*

Discovering that Glasgow University offered adult education, Caroline then enrolled for a course on marine mammals, welfare and conservation. She greatly enjoyed this course too, although she found it more demanding than the *Openings* and more difficult to fit in with her shift work at the police. Nevertheless, she gained a further 20 credits with a high grade. What holds her back from further study are the costs and job insecurity: *"when I picked the one at Glasgow University, I'd had some money that had came to me ... so it's down to money, basically".* Caroline works full time, and so is not eligible for financial support for study. She explained how economic uncertainty affected her decision: *"I work full time, so I've got a full time wage, but obviously that's tied up with paying your bills and ... at the moment (there are) a lot of cut backs. I have held onto my job (but) a lot of people have had to be redeployed, or they've taken redundancy ... I worry about using money for say something like this, if they ... cut my allowances. So I'm waiting to find out what happens with that".*

Caroline feels she hasn't changed because of the study, although observes that she is more confident. Her plan for the future is to hold onto her employment: *"All I can think of is really just trying to hang onto the job I've got at the moment ... because I feel that, and I know that I'm not old old, but it seems to be too old to get other jobs now".* Nevertheless, she still yearns to study and would like to return to it: *"I would love to keep doing things: I would love to go back".*

Misha, although somewhat put off OU study by disappointment with her *Openings* result, in any case required an National Vocational Qualification for her work as a teaching assistant, which was not offered by the OU.

> **Misha:** *"You know there is still time no matter how old you are to get into education".*
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> Misha grew up and went to school in Leicester. After completing her GCSEs, she attended college where she gained an NVQ in Social Care. She then married and moved with her husband to Coventry. When her children began school, she became interested in school teaching and took up voluntary work at their primary school. This led to work as a teaching assistant as well as study for NVQ levels 1 to 3 in childcare. It was during that time she decided to try an *Openings* module, *Understanding children.* Although Misha enjoyed the course, she was disappointed with her result and this put her off further study at the OU. She found distance learning difficult, and felt she would have preferred face-to-face tutorials. In order to continue her work as a teaching assistant she needed to complete her NVQ level 3 in childcare, and so she returned to these studies. Despite the setback with her *Openings* study, Misha is positive about the future: *"I really want to do more in life, probably get in to teaching, maybe open my own nursery ... I am just loving working with children at the moment".*

For all six individuals who did not 'progress' within the OU, the decision to take up formal study opportunities elsewhere appears to have been positive, justified and pragmatic.

Work-based, non-formal and informal learning

For many of the individuals who did not progress to further OU study, learning appeared to mean something other than formal academic learning at a single institution.

Simon, who although had a poor experience of his *Openings* module, had made a career move at work, and so put his energies into his new and more demanding post. He had formerly explicitly linked formal learning episodes with work environments, but on reflection he saw wider connections and the application of skills acquired in learning:

> I think it actually made me realise that I was being too blinkered, it
> made me realise that things you come to accept as second nature are in
> fact *skills that are very useable in many remits than a fixed field.*
> [Simon, emphasis added]

Colleen, who already had a degree, but had taken up the offer of doing an *Openings* course because due to her particular circumstances it was free,

was working towards an ECDL[6] qualification while on jobseeker's allowance.

Colleen: *"the more I learn the more confident I become ... the more I'm able to have educated - as my dad says - educated conversations"*

The eldest of four children, Colleen was the only one in the family who went to college and university. She noted that it had been her English teacher who had inspired her to continue, as he had helped her broaden her range of reading which she greatly enjoyed. Her description of her school years was otherwise negative, characterising the teacher attitude as *"you can't be interested in being educated because of where you live"*. She further explained, *"we were in a deprived area, so therefore you didn't amount to much. You weren't encouraged to develop"*. Family expectations too meant her choice to continue with study were unusual: *"it was an expectation to go straight ... from school into work, (get) married, to have children, and that would be that. My gran ... wanted me all along ... to do hairdressing"*. Living away from home in order to attend college similarly met with opposition.

Colleen nevertheless completed her studies and had four children of her own. While the children were growing up, she attended Queen Margaret University in Edinburgh, gaining a BSc degree in Herbal Medicine. At first she was anxious *"going to university, I thought maybe I'm a bit too old to sit in a class with 18 year olds who know more about science and things like that, (but) it worked out that it wasn't that at all. We were all learning from scratch, from the same base"*. She greatly enjoyed her studies there. After university, she took on work as a funeral arranger and, although she found the work interesting, later began to find it stressful.

Currently unemployed, Colleen contacted an employment agency, who alerted her to an opportunity to study with the Open University. As she is interested in people's problems – *"it's something that I seem to find when I go into the work place; I become the agony aunt"* - she signed up for a 'Starting with Psychology' course. Having already gained a degree however, she found the level very low.

Colleen is uncertain about what to do next. She would like to take her degree to honours level, but wonders now, as a grandmother, whether she isn't too old to attend a campus university. She would also like to take her interest in psychology as far as she can, but feels reluctant to start from scratch: *"I would have preferred ... a higher stage (than Openings) ... it was a wee bit too easy for me ... once I got the material, it was just a basic sit down for 2 or 3 weeks"*. Nevertheless, she found the flexibility of OU study

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attractive, recognising that she could work and study at the same time.

Colleen is taking steps to increase her IT skills, and is now doing an ECDL[1] course at her local library. She is keen to continue learning. She feels the main drawback about completing a degree at OU is that it would take such a long time: "*when I was at uni, I was covering ten subjects ... a semester, whereas (at OU) you have to take one course at a time ... what would take 8 years ... in the OU, you would do ... in 2 years at uni*".

Seeing education as an ongoing process, Colleen feels her study has benefited her as a person: *the more I learn the more confident I become ... the more I'm able to have educated - as my dad says - educated conversations. I know a bit about something, and I'm quite willing to let the other person say something and then say, oh right, I didn't know that.*

Petra took up full time work and joined a regional Arts Club in preference to further study. She voiced an expansive perspective on learning in which little distinction was made between either formal and informal modes or subject matter:

> [A]s far as I am concerned the subject is irrelevant…people have more happiness if they understand a little bit more about the world around them I think and *learning of all types is really important*. [Petra, emphasis added]

Amanda retired from work and took up responsibilities as secretary to the local ladies club whilst also regularly caring for her grandchildren. She described her decision to study the *Openings* module as a combination of factors including: concern that the ladies club would close, leaving her with too much spare time; and a desire to learn more about modern approaches to children and parenting. Childcare was also being a lifelong interest since school, where her Headmaster had encouraged Amanda to attend college to study. Amanda expressed a similarly expansive view of education to Petra:

> I just think that you can be learning all the time and for whatever course you go on or anything if you are listening and looking you can be learning. [Amanda]

For Amanda, there was no desired progression route. She described the learning included in the *Openings* module as sufficient to achieve her intended outcome.

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[1] European computer driving licence

Amanda: *"my plans for the future really in life are to keep learning ..."*

Amanda grew up in Sheffield with her two brothers and sister. She developed an interest in working with children at an early age, helping out at a day nursery and girl-guide activities during her school holidays. Her headmaster encouraged her to enrol for a qualification in childcare, but the college was in Leeds, and Amanda, who had grown up in the '40s, felt that was too far from home. When she left school, she took up office work in the civil service, becoming proficient on an accounting machine which was an early form of computer. She then left work to marry and start a family in 1967.

In 1988 Amanda returned to the civil service. She took up work initially as an administrative officer, but later became a supervisor. After retiring, she became secretary to a ladies' group which she was involved with, along with looking after her grandchildren on a regular basis during the week.

Amanda had thought of taking up a course at the Open University when her daughter was born, but had – erroneously as she later realised - thought she would need A levels to apply. After retiring, her interest in children returned, and so she considered enrolling on a course in this subject at a local college. At the interview however, she found the course aims did not quite match her own: "*the lady said, 'oh I can tell how much you love children, and if you do this, this and this then you can be a childminder.' And I said, 'no I am not here to be a childminder I just want to do a course to bring me up to date with looking after children, my own grandchildren, I'm not taking a job".* It was then she applied to the OU and signed up for the *Openings* module *Understanding Children*.

Amanda greatly enjoyed and passed the course. She would be interested in studying again. Although she is keen to continue her work as secretary, her memories of study are positive: "*I felt that I had achieved something ... with doing the module. I enjoyed the course and learned a lot: I really felt that I had learnt something (about) bringing up a child today".* She notes that her outlook has changed and that she has become more tolerant too: ... "*although I say that I was a tolerant person, I probably learned a lot of tolerance from the course, more positive feelings about the learning and acceptance of how things have changed".*

The only aspects Amanda feels might affect her long-term plans to return to study are her feelings of insecurity about her writing skills, and fitting study in with family concerns and activities. Nevertheless, she is keen to continue to learn: "*my plans for the future really in life are to keep learning ... these modules are a good idea because it gets you into it gradually doesn't it?"*

Terminal barriers

For the remaining individuals, the reasons for not continuing with study were varied, but each was substantial, even 'terminal'.

Lifelong effects of ill health and learning disabilities

For some interviewees, longstanding physical or mental difficulties proved a significant barrier to successful study.

Samantha provided a narrative of her life in which her dyslexia was central, and had affected her study at school and in later life. It had modified her career and study ambitions and was understandably the source of anxiety when considering undertaking assignments and exams. However, with outside support and internal resilience, Samantha had successfully engaged in a range of learning opportunities in her life including a National Diploma in Care.

Samantha*: "You know my goal and everything…they've not changed they've just been kind of paused for the moment"*

Samantha completed and achieved an *Openings* module *Starting with Psychology* but did not do any further OU study. Her dyslexia had been a barrier to realising her potential in learning, although support in secondary school had been provided. She however provided an account of a number of successful learning episodes, including a BTEC National Diploma in Care, which supported her career ambitions as a care professional. She had undertaken an *Openings* module whilst looking after her two young children. Still only 24 years of age, she described a perspective on learning which selected the most appropriate option given her situation at that time, and had in effect been involved in learning of one form or another, more or less consistently through her life. She sees her future learning decisions as affected by her dyslexia and family commitments, but that her career ambitions remain unchanged.

Sandra had suffered a stroke when very young, which had curtailed her achievement of A levels qualifications, and which continued to affect her ability to concentrate and study.

> **Sandra***: "Whether it's formal or not, we never stop learning"*
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> Sandra completed the *Openings* module *Starting with Psychology* but did not pass and did not do any further OU study. Looking back on her compulsory education in a positive way, despite being a shy child and having a difficult childhood, as a now middle-aged single mother she articulated a perspective on learning which embraces both formal and informal settings, and one in which set against barriers of costs and ill health, beneficial learning can still be achieved. Sandra, having suffered serious health issues, finds studying a very difficult process and her experience of *Openings* reflected this. She sees the prospect of additional higher level study remote, due to increased costs and the effects of her ill health. However, notwithstanding these barriers, she outlines a path in which she can still learn – through enrolling at the local adult education provider, and at the time of the interview was looking forward to the college prospectus being published and discussing possible courses with her friends.

Finances and Costs of study

The four younger adult students (Alice, Beth, Samantha and Teresa) were all open to possible study in the future but generally perceived the cost of study to be the main barrier to progression.

Beth preferred to defer study until she had bought a house:

> For me it would be the time element ... I've actually secured a new role [at work] that I am starting towards the end of August and then I want to buy a house ... I couldn't consider it [study] at the moment with trying to get a mortgage and look for a house. But it isn't something I'd rule out for the future at all. Not at all ... I still really do have an interest in the counselling one. I would probably start with the introductory one first. But that is something I would probably look [to do] in 2013.

Such a decision as this may be an example of the 'cost-benefit' analysis referred to by Woodley (2004). Beth surveyed her options, and feeling that finance was a key issue for her, made a pragmatic decision about where best to direct her finances (in this case, a house purchase).

Likewise Teresa made the decision to continue with her office work, but commented "I do think since that [studying *Openings*] ... definitely made me want to study, maybe a degree or a diploma".

Discussion

The above findings draw attention to some of the key points from the narratives of 17 individuals who, from an institutional perspective, were 'drop-outs'. Yet 6 of the seventeen had in fact been retained in formal education settings and a further 4 described the non-formal and informal learning they had since taken up as equally important to them as formal learning, or at least they did not make any distinction between formal, informal and non-formal. The remaining 7 all faced 'terminal' barriers, ranging from caring responsibilities and longstanding learning difficulties, to pressure on finances to prioritise work over study at that particular point in time. *All* individuals expressed decisions that were for each individual's particular circumstances, both rational and pragmatic, and there was little evidence of individuals seeing crisis, anxiety or negativity in that decision.

Such evidence suggests that there may be different and conflicting conceptions of retention: essentially on the one hand the institution's, which seeks to retain the student in learning within its own walls; and on the other hand, the individual's, who may seek to learn in a variety of places and contexts, both simultaneously and across the lifecourse. The presence in the individual of a conception of learning wider than that of the institution creates the potential for conflict in the purpose and benefits of institutional retention programmes.

Life*long* and Life*wide* learning

The concept of lifelong learning is familiar to most of us. Its ubiquity however creates potential for complacency when considering its significance to all learning across the lifecourse. It also is a concept considered in such detail by so many researchers and commentators to have created a "bewildering number of typologies of pedagogical or andragogical approaches in the adult education literature" (Morgan-Klein and Osbourne, 2007:19). Lifelong learning is generally accepted to be an expansive term, covering the range of formal, non-formal and informal learning available to individuals from cradle to grave. Yet for significant periods, national policy has focussed on credentials and qualifications, serving to somewhat marginalise and obscure the prevalence and importance of non-formal and informal learning.

One strong feature of the interview evidence was that nearly all individuals were able to outline a lifelong perspective of their own learning that made little distinction between types of institution (ranging from adult education courses, further education settings, and higher education at both traditional/campus-based institutions and distance learning institutions), modes of study (formal, non-formal, informal), or levels of study.

Norman Jackson and Ron Barnett, amongst others, present evidence-based arguments for the existence and importance of life*wide* conceptions of learning. Lifewide learning is described as "the learning and development that occurs more or less contemporaneously in multiple and varied places and situations throughout an individual's lifecourse" (Jackson, 2011:2). It takes in a new vista of learning opportunities:

> [I]ndividuals inhabit simultaneously as part of their lives multiple learning spaces: work, non-work, family, leisure, social networks, occupational networks, social engagement and manifold channels of news, information and communication, not to mention physical and global mobility. (Barnett, 2011:23)

Lifewide learning is also evident throughout the narratives of the non-progressing interviewees. Amanda had chosen to study her *Openings* module not to achieve accreditation for career or self, but rather to support her in providing care to her grandchildren. At the same time she was fulfilling a lifelong interest in learning about children and childcare. Her choice of learning *integrated* subject interest with family life effortlessly and naturally. Her goal was not to progress to accreditation or qualification, indeed, far from it, as prior to studying the *Openings* module she had enquired and decided against a similar local college offering as it was overwhelmingly vocationally oriented.

Simon, although not completing his *Openings* module, described a realisation that his learning, skills and knowledge were applicable and transferrable to a variety of situations in his life:

> It's amazing the skills that you do pick up, but you need something to make you realise they are more than standard every day work, they are skills, they are transferrable and there are benefits to them and I think when I was evaluating the things I could do because when I was looking at myself, when I was doing that it actually made me think 'well, this is more than just everyday work'. (Simon)

Positioning the individual in student retention

A focus on individuals' perspectives of lifelong and lifewide aspects of learning provides an interesting counterpoint to institutional conceptions of student retention. Ron Barnett, considering the role of the higher education institution and its changing relationship with its students observes:

> [S]tudents are no longer entirely enfolded within universities but become customers engaging in market relationships with their universities. They have an independence from their institution: their market independence is mirrored by a new contractual relationship…and by a social and economic independence. Students have their own networks outside the university, virtual and physical…In this regime, students become not just economic and

social nomads but they also become *learning nomads*, increasingly inhabiting all kinds of social and economic situations that afford different kinds of learning. (Barnett, 2011:24)

Considerable academic and administrative time and resource has been devoted in higher education institutions and central organisations to the 'problem' of student retention. A student leaving an institution is usually perceived unproblematically as negative, both for the institution and for the (former) student. However, an individual exists only with a student identity for that institution whilst they are there. Beforehand, for the institution, they were a potential recruit (or customer), and afterward (the institutions hopes) their graduate. Throughout this, the individual in which the ephemeral 'student' identity resides, is side-lined.

Students should properly be considered as individuals, at large in the world and influenced by all its demands and opportunities. Learning is just one aspect of that individuals' world, higher education just one form of learning level, and each institution just one provider of learning. Maintaining an institutional position that focusses on the homogenising idea of 'University X's students' rather than a heterogeneous notion of individuals, represents a real risk to effective targeting of resources. Truly effective, individual focussed retention strategies should incorporate, or at the very least recognise, evidence that students engage in a wide variety of lifelong and lifewide learning, that they do so rationally and for pragmatic reasons and therefore for some individuals to leave the institution is not actually a bad thing.

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Endnotes

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[6] European Computer Driving Licence