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Approaching work and learning indirectly

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Approaching Work and Learning Indirectly

Macintyre Ronald, Thomson Joan, The Open University in Scotland, Scotland

Introduction

This paper approaches work and learning indirectly. It does this by exploring the learning journey of Higher National (HN) students who progress into Higher Education (HE) study with the Open University (OU) in Scotland. The OU in Scotland is the largest part time distance learning provider in Scotland, at any one time it has about 16,000 students spread across the whole of Scotland. It offers a full range of modules and qualifications across the academic spectrum. It is an open and blended learning provider; this means that there are no entry requirements and the delivery model features a mix of face to face and virtual communications and a range of physical and digital learning sources. Even though we are an open entry institution many of our students come to us with existing qualifications. Since 2003 the Open University in Scotland (OU) has been collecting quantitative and qualitative   data on those who have HN qualifications. This paper looks at the experiences of those students and the central place of work in those journeys.

The paper begins with a short account of the policy and academic literature around the articulation from HN to HE in Scotland. After a short methods section, we then provide a statistical overview. The paper then looks at the interview data from the 2011 and the 2009 studies. The paper concludes with some reflections on the ways that articulation between HN and part-time study widens participation in HE. For those in work it also destabilises notions of smooth or appropriate transitions, and questions the boundaries between the personal and the professional.

Understanding transitions in the Scottish context

In Scotland, HN Awards are principally vocational qualifications.   However, in the 1990's the colleges were encouraged to contribute to the expansion of HE and as a result, there was an increasing demand to explore articulation to degree study at HE institutions (Gallacher 2009). There is now evidence that, at least for full-time students, the majority are using HN programmes as a stepping stone to further study, suggesting that HN qualifications may be seen as 'transitional qualifications' by some students (Gallacher et al 2009). When the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) was introduced in 2003 it included both college and university qualifications. This appeared to offer the possibility of seamless transition from college to university. However, there were concerns that HN study might not properly prepare students for university study (Osborne et al 2000) and in practice many college students were therefore being asked to repeat study at levels 7 and 8 of the SCQF and that in fact this new route rather than opening opportunities in a broad sense contributed to a newly stratified and differentiated system (Field 2004). Discussion focused mainly on mechanisms for effective transition within the framework of the SCQF, including better advice and guidance, specially designed bridging materials and better alignment of curriculum and teaching approaches between the two sectors (Knox et al 2007). Articulation is important politically in Scotland. The Scottish Funding Council's (SFC) strategy for widening participation 'Learning for All', first published in 2005, highlights the key contribution of Scotland's colleges in widening the social base of HE students in Scotland. The data consistently indicates that students entering full-time HE courses at college are skewed towards the most deprived areas of Scotland, while the HN entrants to degrees are distributed fairly evenly across the most and least deprived areas

(SFC 2007: 2012). The funding council concluded that improved articulation routes leading to an increase in the number of students progressing from college to university would be an effective way of widening the social base of Scottish graduates. As a result, funding that was previously spread across the HE sector in Scotland is now directed towards those HE institutions that have been most effective at providing opportunities for articulation and progression (SFC 2007). Therefore, since 2008-09 the SFC has awarded funding to five Scottish universities and The OU in Scotland to develop articulation and progression routes from college to university.   We should note that while the other universities operate on a regional basis, the OU is working nationally to promote part-time progression routes.

Implicit within these policy narratives are questions about transition and choice. Despite the increasing numbers of young people entering HE those from working class backgrounds are still under represented. This is a wider societal issue that is experienced individually, and as such it is personal (Bradley 2012). Working class school leavers often find themselves in structurally uncertain positions, and as such they need to make "safe choices" about their post compulsory education destination. There is some evidence that it is not always exam results that determine the choices that people make, and that uncertainty may actually be "self constrained", resulting in students picking vocational routes either in colleges or post 92 HE institutions (Hoelscher *et.al* 2008). Making a study "choice" that either has a clear route into the workplace, or takes place in the workplace, is seen as a "safe choice" (Esmond 2012). The idea of "choice" is itself problematic, as we must recognise that for people in uncertain social positions choice is itself constrained by a series of social and structural factors (Furlong 2009). Not least the social and cultural capital that would give someone the "confidence" to make what appears to be a risky choice to enter into HE (Bathmaker and Thomas 2009), while college and work might be seen as a more appropriate "choice" for "people like us" (Esmond 2012) .

Having gone into vocational study and employment, the reasons for returning to study and the transitions from college into university study are not clear. The idea of a smooth transition appears to be somewhat of a mirage; it tends to take place over a long period of time, and is often intimately related to work and peoples personal life (Gordon *et.al* 2011). Like college choices, transitions tend to remain concentrated in the vocational areas, "fuzzy matching" of college students progressing into HE in Scotland found that it was most common in Engineering and related areas, with students tending to go to their local post 92 HE institution (MacLean 2006). These vocational transitions again emphasise the importance of work. For many of these students their sense of identity is intimately tied to their competence in the workplace. For example, research into OU Nursing students in London found that a great deal of the uncertainty they felt related to moving from a place where they were recognised as experts in and through work, experts in the workplace, to being novices in the classroom, an experience that contrasts with most other students who feel the opposite (Watts and Waraker 2008). Work then becomes a key means by which these students differentiate themselves and their learning journey, from people who have gone straight into HE, emphasising "working class values" like hard work and learning through doing (Esmond 2012). It is not just work that seeps in, these transitions students tend to be older, and life and family are important components. Our own research found that family was both a barrier and an enabler, a barrier due to time constraints and finance, but also an enabler that provided the support required, and also interestingly to demonstrate to children the value of hard work (Thomson and Macintyre 2011). This idea that these are very personal journeys encouraged us to explore those personal aspects and use them to contextualise the quantitative data from the surveys. In the next section we detail how we went about collecting the data.

Methodology

This paper principally presents qualitative and quantitative data based on findings from the most recent group (2010/11) of students who we have studied. However it is based on a long term study of articulation and draws on insights from the previous studies of students who were registered in Scotland in 2003, 2005 and 2008/9.

The Survey
For the 2011 study a random sample of 1499 students was selected from 3100 registered OU students in Scotland in 2010/11 who had 'self-declared' as having studied an HN qualification or equivalent. From the sample group, 250 or 17 per cent responded to the survey and of these 220 were treated as valid responses where the student had studied for an HN award. By using an on-line survey, information was gathered concerning the HN qualification undertaken at college (subject area, date, mode of study, place of study, motivation for study), their transition experience to the OU (motivation for study, preparedness for OU study, subject area, credit transfer, award intention, challenges and support used) and their current employment status. The complete sample and the response data was profiled in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, employment status, amount and level of credit transfer and recorded award intention. The response data was analysed in order to answer a range of questions and provide comparison with previous studies.

The Interviews
Semi structured interviews were undertaken with 14 students. Telephone interviews typically lasted between 20 and 30 minutes. A semi-structured interview schedule was developed whose themes complemented the contents of the quantitative survey and addressed our key questions. These themes centred round the learner's journey and the interviewer asked the student to recount and reflect on their journey in relation to study motivations for college and OU; their experience and understanding of college and OU study; any study gap; what motivated them to go back to study; their experiences of going back and the relationship between work, life, and study.

One of the benefits of semi-structured interviews is that the interviewer can be responsive to themes that emerge within the interview (Punch 2005). Notes were taken throughout the interviews; these informed the questions within each interview, and, along with a review of the recordings, informed the question strategy in subsequent interviews. Interviews were recorded, and then reviewed immediately after each interview. The ongoing review of the data and the identification of emerging themes was the first phase of data analysis (Cousins 2009). After transcription the interviews were manually coded. While the interview semi-structured schedule was informed by the survey, care was taken to avoid coding in relation to the survey results. This ensured that the themes identified emerged from the interviews (Dingwall 1997). A careful reading of the transcripts identified a series of dominant themes (Baxter and Eyles 1997). Each transcript was then coded for each main theme and related and/or sub themes. In addition to identifying the most frequent themes attention was also paid to the meaning and context of less frequent responses (Cousins 2009).

A Statistical Overview

In this section we look at the results of the survey, linking this to the data we have about our overall student body and with the previous surveys. The first thing to note is that as previous surveys have indicated, students with an HN background are older (the highest proportion in the 40-44 age bracket) than the general OU population (average age 32). Of these just over 70% are in employment, and of those not presently in employment a further 8% were seeking employment. In Scotland, people from deprived areas who do enter higher education are more likely to enter college than university. For example, Scottish colleges have a higher proportion of students from data zone 1 (the most deprived) (23%) compared to all undergraduates for the OU in Scotland (13%) and this survey sample (14%) (SFC *Learning for all*, 2012). If we look at the postcode data of our students with HN and compare it with the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) we find that in SIMD data zone 2 (next most deprived) there are 22 per cent from the sample, which is equal to the proportion in colleges, and 4 per cent higher than all undergraduates for the OU in Scotland. This sample of HN students does not match the college figures. However, given that for 83% of our sample their main motivation for HN study was career and employment, that people are mobile and there is often a considerable gap between their HN study and study with the OU, we would not necessarily expect these students to still be located in the same area as when studying at HN level. The most recent data on undergraduate entrants to the OU with an HN background shows that 18.4% are from the most deprived SIMD quintile. A career focus is evident in the range of curriculum choices at HN level. For example the most popular Higher National Certificate (HNC) was Engineering and Technology (27%), followed by business (25%) and the most popular Higher National Diploma (HND) was Business and Management (33%) followed by Engineering and Technology (22%).

The vocational focus and narrow band of HN study does not match neatly onto respondent's OU study choices. Just less than 50% of the sample has identified a named award intention, of those the most popular choices were in the Arts and Humanities and Engineering and Technology, followed by Psychology and Health and Social Care. We also found that almost two-thirds (62 per cent, n=205) of respondents changed their chosen area of study from HN when they commenced with the OU. In addition, 28 per cent considered that their main subject area was now different from when they started with the OU.

As noted above our HN students tend to be older, and "the gap" between completing HN and progressing into OU study has remained fairly consistent across all the studies we have conducted, on average it is about 9 years. Therefore it may not be surprising that people shift in subject focus. However, such a shift and "the gap" indicate that transition is not seamless. The policy context emphasises credit transfer and articulating from HN directly into university at the appropriate level. However, in common with the 2009 study, we found people tended to make their first module at the OU an entry level module. We found that 76 per cent of respondents chose to commence their study at OU Level 1 (SCQF level 7). Even when people claimed credit (about half of these remain in the same subject) for their previous qualification, a similar proportion, 70 percent, commenced study at Level 1. In previous research (Thomson and Macintyre 2012) we found that students recognised that "the gap" was important, and that learning and working was a new experience, and thus they chose to start at a lower level.

Narrating the Learning Journey

In this section we use the interviews to explore some of the themes identified in this and previous surveys, as well as highlighting emergent themes. In previous research (Thomson and Macintyre 2012) the interview sample was spread across the student journey. In this cohort we made a conscious decision to focus on students nearing completion. This was because we were keen to capture the experiences of those who had made and were able to reflect for longer on the transition to part-time distance learning. Other research suggested that these transition narratives might provide us with a deeper understanding of student's journeys (McCune *et.al* 2010). To complement those longer term narratives we decided to follow the lead of other authors who have explored access and transitions (Fuller *et.al* 2011) and focus our own qualitative narrative on telling the "stories" of individual learners. However, in taking this biographical approach we note the tendency to privilege individual agency and choice, at the expense of social and structural barriers that constrain those choices (Furlong 2008), thus when we talk about "choice" it with the tacit understanding that choice is often limited and constrained.

Donald works in Power Station; he left school at 16 and went straight into work in the Power Station. He is now in his mid 40s. For him and for his family this was a safe and secure choice. Looking back at the choices he made, Donald does have some regrets. He regrets leaving school; he turned 16 over the Christmas holidays and never went back. However, he also understands and accepts that his journey to a degree, while complex, has it advantages. Noting, "... there are people who stay on at school, go to Uni … cant get a job … I have got a good job, and eventually I am chipping away and getting a good qualification as well."   Donald began his work in the Power industry in "the office" as a junior. However, that was not "hands on" enough, and he applied and was accepted onto an Electrical Engineering Apprenticeship. For many of the interviewees this tension between the academic and the practical is a key feature. One of the other interviewees, in her late 20's and studying Social Work, had been to University previously before taking the HN route, she talked about the HN, the OU route, as a style of learning that put "what I learnt into practice … and the studying …. drew out parts of the job as well". Vocational routes often focus on work and practice, where study is often simply the start of learning, and actual knowledge is built through practice (Guile 2009). Like Donald learners with vocational backgrounds derive a lot of their sense of who they are from their role as skilled practitioners, this means when they return to study they are "experts in work" but "novices in the classroom" (Watts and Waraker 2008). However, as Donald noted above this means that their studies are grounded in practical experience, and they already have a clear idea of what they want from their studies and how to apply it in and through work.

For Donald the college route was not just about "learning by doing", but about making "safe choices". It appears that for many students from "working class" backgrounds university study is seen by them and their families as being "risky". The majority of the respondents describes themselves as working class, and were clear they came from non traditional HE backgrounds. Most of the respondents expressed regret about school, about not trying harder, or about not going into HE earlier. For example, one of our interviewees, a male in the aerospace sector in his mid 40's had HE entry grades but felt he "probably should have gone to University, but that it was only for the "crème de la crème". Any kind of study represents some risk. However, vocational study is generally seen as a "safe place" for those in structurally uncertain positions (Esmond 2012). It is clear that we need to account for the deeply personal and psychological factors that inform passive and active "decisions" around transition (Bradley 2012). It also appears that we ought to consider the degree to which the OU in Scotland is considered a "safe place", and how some of the work we are doing with colleges helps to create those safe places.

Research into HE in FE in England (Bathmaker and Thomas 2009; Esmond 2012) suggest that these "hybrid" models are more likely to attract students through the FE route, and support their transitions to HE. The idea that open and distance learning is a "safe place" is interesting. Participants often cite the importance of being able to balance work and study as being key to choosing the OU. For example, Donald could have studied day release but picked the OU in Scotland for two reasons. Firstly credit transfer from his HND and secondly, that he was looking to go onto shifts and the OU in Scotland's flexible delivery model was more suitable. It appears that the OU flexible learning model is a way to stay in work and to manage the risks associated with HE study.

If work is a safe choice, and study is risky, what is it that prompts people to continue studying beyond the needs of their present role? For example, Donald did an HNC through the company over a 4 year period. His college study was day release, and part of the standard apprenticeship, he did the HNC as an "add on". It was not required for his role but Donald decided to commit to the HNC as it meant that "instead of coming out of your time as a craftsman … you were then classed as a technician". Later, in his own time, he took an HND. Here Donald explains why he took on extra study, and then stopped. "I had had enough of studying … at that time to get an Engineer post, sometimes you were only needing an HNC, so I thought an HND would see me through". Donald moved out of the Power sector into Oil and Gas, when he came back to his original employer he found that HND was no longer enough "they were looking for a degree".

It is clear from our previous research (Thomson and Macintyre 2011) that study motivations are complex and it is difficult to untangle what is personal and what is related to careers. Personal interest comes across strongly in the latest survey and in the interviews. It is also clear that the relationship between the personal and career study is not always as straight forward as it might appear. For example, one of our participants who works full time in a technical role in education and has a technical HN background, also volunteers as a Youth Worker. He recently decided to formalise the 20 years experience in Youth Work by doing a Youth Studies degree with the OU. He enjoys his job, and when he started studying it was purely for personal interest. People in his "day job" have begun to recognise that his experience coupled with OU study means that he can offer more than technical support. In his voluntary role he has gained confidence, in the past he had seen the paid youth workers as talking "a different language", now he is able to "relate to what they are saying". He is even considering changing career and moving into Youth Work. What these transition stories illustrate is that what is personal and what is career can become entwined.

These transitions also entwine work and study. The vocational focus of most HN means it is normal to regard work as the natural place for learning.   This focus on practice means participants think of competence as something that develops formally and informally *at* and *through* work after they "qualify". In the narrative above, interviewees seemed to accept that there was no job for life. They accepted that employers require employees to be flexible, and that would involve moving across and "up" the qualification ladder, and as a result of changes in work roles a number of the participants had accumulated a series of HN or vocational qualifications. Overall participants narrated "bumpy" interrupted transitions between education and employment. Stories that emphasised social and structural barriers, personal autonomy, and stories that seemed to call into question how useful it is to talk about definite transitions between education and employment. This idea of a discontinuous and interrupted journey comes across in the surveys and in the interviews, with long gaps between university and HN. We experience numerous and

overlapping transitions in our lives (Gardiner 2007). There is a sense that for some of these interviewees study and work transitions are something that happens across their lives.

Discussion

In this section we draw together the results of the survey and the interviews. This and previous surveys (Thomson and Macintyre 2012) highlighted a number of themes.

Over two thirds of OU students with an HN or vocational background are in employment, and two thirds of our students indicate they are studying for career reasons. Work is a central part of these students' lives; they are often studying to get on or get out. This is consistent with our earlier research. The recognition that untangling careers and personal motivations is going to be difficult, this is a personal journey where work and career are intimately tied to individual identity led us to select interviewees that were near completion, and also to take a narrative approach to the interviews (see Fuller *et.al* 2011). We found that for these learners career and personal motivations were entwined, and often what started as a very personal journey ended up being career related. This suggests that we need to look much more carefully whether it is useful to try and unpick the personal from the career motivation for these kinds of students.

In some ways we also found it to be all personal, as the survey identifies these tend to be older learners, they have rich personal and work lives which are often intimately related. While the government policies are largely in place and suggest that transitions ought to be a smooth process, the students we have spoken to tell a different story. Our earlier research in this area highlighted the role that career development, and non accredited work related training, had in delaying the decision to return to study. It also highlighted that even where people could have gone in at a higher level many chose entry level, in a tacit recognition of "the gap". Where the gap was about time away from study, but also displayed concerns over whether they could cope with the different study mode and the level of study (Thomson and Macintyre 2011). Those respondents were just post transition, the interviewees in this sample were nearing completion and rather than being concerned about the interrupted and discontinuous nature of their learning journey, they seemed to accept that this was who they were, and often presented it as being something they viewed positively and that employers would view positively.

One of the questions that we have is what makes people choose the OU in Scotland? Our understanding of this is informed by the idea that "choice" is not a straightforward idea, and that the education "choices" available to an individual depend on their individual circumstances. We have tried not to privilege agency over the structural conditions that constrain choice (Furlong 2009) . Work in England on HE in FE, and around the role that FE providers can play in widening participation in HE through created hybrid spaces talks a great deal about "safe choices" and "safe places" (Bathmaker and Thomas 2012; Esmond 2012). Typically those safe places are post 92 HE institutions or colleges, they are local and appear accessible, and the safe choice is also about how work relates to the subject. The OU in Scotland is a distance learning provider, and while it has well developed links with the college sector it is not likely to be considered 'safe' for the same reasons. Our research indicates that the "safe place" is the workplace not the classroom. The OU is a safe choice because it allows people to remain in work, and even though there remains some tension around the transition to being a learner in the classroom from an expert in work, work and learning are intimately related for these learning journeys.

Conclusions

In common with previous research (Thomson and Macintyre 2012), this study has highlighted the complex motivations and often interrupted learning journeys experienced by these OU students that have previously studied in the college sector. Motivation for study is for both personal and career reasons but shifts and changes throughout the individual learning journey. At HN level, the main motivation is career and employment, whereas with OU study personal interest is foremost. However, there is also evidence that what was a personal motivation becomes career related evidenced by examples where individuals were considering a career change as a result of their study. It suggests that we need to look again at how we understand career and personal, as that understanding may be very different for mature part-time distance learning students.

Interesting contrasts were highlighted through the choices that students have made throughout their learning journey. Many chose the HN route as it provided what they saw as a practical, practice based education, often related to their work situation in what they saw was a "safe' choice". This is compared with a commitment to HE study which was seen as 'not for them', more risky or too academic. This idea of vocational study as a "safe choice" for learners from particular social and economic backgrounds (Esmond 2012) fits with the idea of choice being conditioned by factors other than academic ones (Furlong 2009), and also the social and economic (widening participation) profile of college transition students (SFC, 2012). For learners in our study the OU's flexible learning model is also seen as a way to manage uncertainty and the risks associated with HE study.

The link between study at college *for* work, and flexible part-time study as a 'safe' place as students can remain *at* work is interesting. Articulation and progression from HN to university study continues to be an important component of the Scottish Government's widening participation policy, and is seen as a way to widen the social base of graduates in Scotland. Typically research has tended to characterise colleges and post 92 HE institutions as the "safe place" for transitions (Esmond 2012). However, this research suggests that part-time distance learning might also be seen as a "safe place", but perhaps for different reasons. The reasons seem to be less about "people like us" and "location" and more about the mode of study and the security associated with remaining in work. Other work that the OU in Scotland has been engaged in with the college sector is to develop 'spaces' for learning in partnership with some colleges. This is an attempt to take our "safe" model and put it into a "safe place". Students are transitioning directly from HN study to OU study via a recognised pathway while maintaining their link with the college. Early evaluation has highlighted that for many students the opportunity to continue study at less than full-time intensity, continue caring and work commitments while benefiting from a supportive peer study group has been highly valued and contributed to overall success (McCall & Thomson 2012). Further work is required to understand how a "hybrid" space that links college and part-time study creates a safe place to build confidence and support successful transition to HE.

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