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19 Is developing employability skills relevant to adult language students?

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1.   Introduction

Open University (OU) students are typically mature students who combine studying part-time with work or caring responsibilities; the average age of OU language students has been dropping, and about 30% of our new students are now under 25.

The traditional view of adult learners who study languages is that they often study for pleasure or personal development, rather than for clear career goals. The current study investigated whether adult students found the development of employability skills as part of their language courses useful, and, if so, the development of which particularly key employability skills they valued most.

Keywords: adult learners, motivation, aspiration, survey.

2.   What we did

This study aimed at understanding the views languages students at the Open University have on employability, and if and how they think their language modules should equip them to develop/practise/enhance employability skills (Pegg, Waldock, Hendy-Isaac, & Lawton, 2012).

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Along with two colleagues[2], I conducted two surveys in 2015 amongst two cohorts of students enrolled in language courses at the Open University. The first cohort (127 responses) involved students enrolled on the module *Exploring languages and cultures*, the compulsory Level 1 (L1) module for all students on the BA (Hons) Language Studies. This BA includes strands in French, German, Spanish, and English (Applied Linguistics), and students specialise in any two of those strands. The module *Exploring languages and cultures* is taught in English and introduces key concepts relating to languages, language learning, plurilingualism and intercultural communication. The second cohort (259 responses) was made up of students of French, German or Spanish studying at Level 2 (L2), i.e. those who had typically already completed at least 120 credits at Level 1.

The survey was designed to find out the aspirations and motivations of adult language students with reference to the NUS/CBI (2011) definition of employability skills as encompassing: a positive attitude, self-management, teamworking, problem solving, communication and literacy, application of IT, application of numeracy, entrepreneurship and business, and customer awareness.

3.   Discussion of outcomes

In terms of motivation for studying languages, the study showed that although around a third of students study for personal development (L1: 37.4%, L2: 33.9%), overall the main motivation is to help them change or develop their career (L1: 44.7%, L2:33.5%); see Figure 1. Although the picture is not straightforward in the sense that students do not always study modules in a linear way, it also appears that students enrolled on the L1 module are more motivated by their career than those at level 2, and that the profile of students is changing. One has to remember that because students study part-time, and it typically takes students 6-8 years to complete a degree course, these changes between L1 and L2 might indicate a medium-term change rather than a more arbitrary difference in cohorts.

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2. María Fernandez Toro and Concha Furnborough

Figure 1. Students' main motivation for studying languages
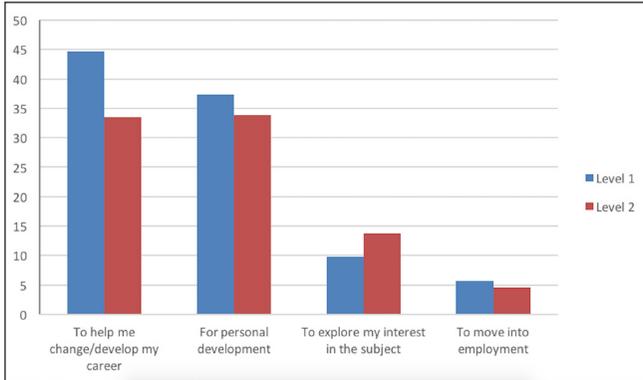
If students are partly motivated by changing or developing their career, how do their current occupations compare to their career aspirations? The results indicate that students are keen to move away from jobs in the areas of administrative and secretarial work, caring leisure and related services, and sales and customer service, and that they are aspiring to join the teaching profession or to become translators, interpreters, and communications specialists, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Students' main current occupation vs. aspirations after study
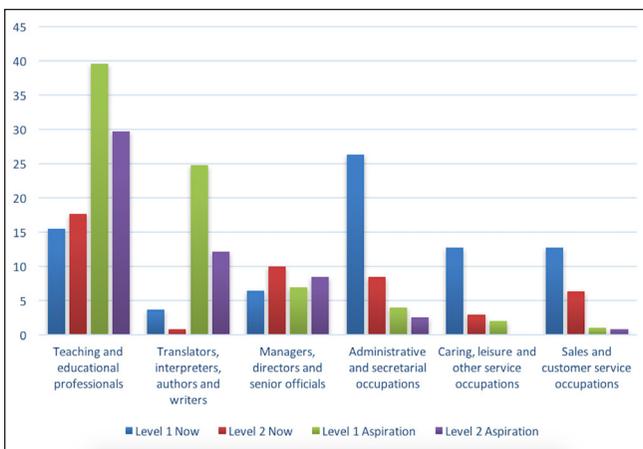
Most students felt that the qualification they were studying would be useful for their career, and thought that the most useful skills for their future profession would be communication and literacy (41.2%) and self-management (27.5%), followed by positive attitudes and team working (10.1 and 6.3% respectively).

Whilst it is not surprising that communication and literacy are considered the most useful skills amongst language students (Figure 3), self-management is perhaps a more unexpected choice, in particular as there is a marked increase in the usefulness accorded to this skill from L1 to L2 (21.1% and 34% respectively). Self-management involves "readiness to accept responsibility, flexibility, resilience, self-starting, appropriate assertiveness, time management, readiness to improve own performance based on feedback and reflective learning" (NUS/CBI, 2011, p. 13) – all key to successful study, particularly at a distance and part-time – so this perhaps explains how the more experienced L2 students value the skill more, and are more aware of it.

Figure 3.   Most useful employability skill in your future profession
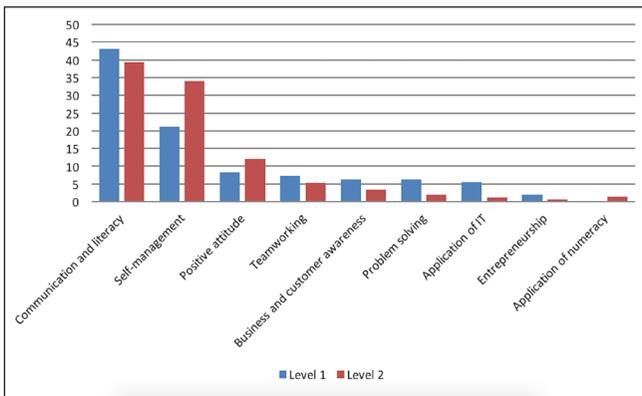
Students also thought it was important that some employability skills are included in future courses as we develop or update the curriculum, presumably even if not directly relevant to their career development. The most useful ones, again perhaps not surprisingly, being communication and literacy, followed by positive attitude, self-management, teamworking and problem solving (Figure 4).

Figure 4.   Usefulness of including these skills in our future language courses
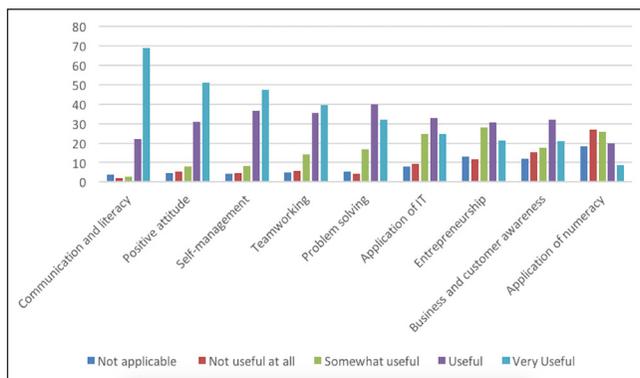
4.   Conclusion

This study revealed that, far from being mostly interested in studying languages for personal development, adult, part-time language students at the OU are keen to use their qualification to help them develop or change their career, and consider the qualification they are studying useful in achieving these goals.

Students were able to identify the most useful employability skills in their future career development, highlighting communication and literacy and self-management. However, they were also keen to see other skills, such as a positive attitude, teamwork and problem solving explicitly addressed in language courses in the future.

Although it might seem obvious that communication and literacy are the most valued skills by language students, this might also indicate a blurring between employability skills and the actual subject knowledge that is developed through a degree in languages. Whilst responding to the professional aspirations of students in the way we develop our curriculum, as language educators we should also be clear about what constitutes generic employability skills versus content specific knowledge and skills that are developed by studying languages. Debates

about employability, especially in language education, should reflect the tensions between developing a knowledge curriculum and fostering the development of more generic skills.

References and links

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