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Part-Time Distance Learners' Experiences Of Study Breaks

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PART-TIME DISTANCE LEARNERS' EXPERIENCES OF STUDY BREAKS

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Abstract

Part-time distance learners often have complex lives, and the challenge of fitting study around family and work commitments means many find their studies are disrupted by external events. At The Open University, UK, over 5000 students each year formally interrupt their study through 'assessment banking'. The Open University teaching model incorporates regular continuous assessment, so, assessment banking allows students to take a break mid-module, and return at the same point the following year, bringing with them any grades from assessment tasks already completed. Despite a clear intention to resume their studies, less than two thirds of assessment banking students recommence study in the following year. Of those who return, less than half go on to successfully complete their module. This raises the question of what brings about the discrepancy between intention and actuality?

This paper reports on an initial study looking into the experiences of three students who did return to study after an assessment banking break, and what motivated them to do so. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore participant accounts of deciding to take a break, being on a break and subsequently returning to study. The key themes arising from this small scale study are around the difficulty of deciding to take a break, fluctuations in study motivation and issues of student identity in a part-time distance learning context.

This research is part of a larger study looking to improve the university's advice and guidance offered to students considering taking a formal interruption and develop a better understanding of how to support them to return to study.

Keywords: part-time learners, distance learning, interrupted study, student identity.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Open University, UK (OU) is a large distance learning institution with around 120,000 registered students each year. It has an open entry policy (undergraduates do not need entry qualifications) leading to a high level of diversity within the student body, most of whom are mature students. Many students have family commitments, most are in full or part time employment, and around 20,000 OU students have a declared disability. The individual circumstances of part-time distance learners can present challenges to engaging in higher education (HE), so the OU seeks to offer some flexibility to support students through their studies.

Deferral with assessment banking is one such policy, designed to offer some flexibility for students who need to take an extended break from their studies. The OU teaching and assessment model includes regular summative assignments throughout all modules. Assessment banking allows students to stop studying a module and return on a subsequent presentation within 13 months, with their summative assessment scores carried over. There is also an option to take a break without assessment banking, where the student would return at the start of the subsequent presentation, and would be required to repeat the summative assessment.

The university is aware that fewer than two thirds of assessment banked students reregister on a subsequent presentation of their module, and less than half of those go on to complete and gain module credit [1]. In this study, three students who assessment banked, returned to study and successfully gained module credit were interviewed. This initial study is part of a larger project, investigating the experiences of students who have opted to assessment bank.

2 METHOD

Data for this study was collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview questions steered the participants towards a chronological recounting of their student experiences from commencement of their studies at the OU, through their assessment banking experience, and up to the present day. In this respect, it could be considered a supported narrative approach [2]. All three interviews were

conducted using Skype and lasted up to an hour. The conversations were recorded, and transcription supported through the use of Sonocent Notetaker and Dragon voice recognition software. Participants were provided with a copy of their transcription for review, and given the opportunity to verify agreement for inclusion in the study.

The three participants were atypical of many assessment banking students, as they had returned and successfully completed their modules on the subsequent presentation. They were chosen for interview in order to explore how they experienced taking a break, and their subsequent return to study. The interviews also asked about the support they had received throughout the experience, and what improvements they might recommend.

The participants were not specifically chosen to cover particular characteristics, but Table 1 lists their demographic identifiers, and offers an insight into the general diversity of the OU student body.

Table 1: Interview participant demographics

Gender	2 female, 1 male
Ethnicity	1 identified as minority ethnic
Disability	1 declared a disability
First generation in higher education	2 first generation in higher education
Employment	1 full-time, 1 part-time, 1 self-employed

Transcripts were coded by hand using an eclectic coding method [3], and key themes identified to enable comparison of the individual experiences. Each of the participants was given a pseudonym.

This study has been reviewed by the Human Research and Ethics Committee at The Open University, UK and received a favourable opinion.

3   FINDINGS

The study participants are briefly introduced prior to the discussion of the interview data.

3.1   Participant introductions

All three of the participants were mature students (aged 44 to 51) who had completed several years of OU study prior to taking a break with assessment banking.

Patrick graduated from a full-time campus-university 20 years prior to commencing OU study. Initially, his OU study was sponsored by his employer, then he became self-funding after leaving his job. He deferred a module with assessment banking towards the end of his undergraduate degree in modern languages, due to the arrival of his 3rd child, and starting a new business venture.

Louise dropped out of a full-time campus-university course, aged 20, and had a career as a personal assistant. After having children, she became a childminder, which led to her studying with the OU. She took deferral with assessment banking in the final year of her undergraduate degree, due to the unexpected death of her father.

Jane graduated from a full-time campus-university when she was 21. Later, sponsored by her employer, she studied an OU postgraduate module. Subsequently, Jane became an OU staff member, so now benefits from staff fee waivers covering tuition fees. She took deferral with assessment banking in the penultimate year of an undergraduate law degree, due to pressure of work preventing her from preparing for the module exam.

3.2   Deciding to take a study break

Looking for advice leading up to their deferral decisions, the three students took different approaches. Being an insider, Jane spoke to a colleague who was able to explain the policy and her options, in addition to advising as a friend. Patrick discussed it with his partner, and then contacted the OU after having decided what he would do. Louise drew on both local and institutional support. She discussed her studies with her husband, as well as making multiple calls to the OU to request information and advice before making her final decision.

Although all three participants had indicated that they had no choice but to defer because of the situations they were in, they still found making the decision to be difficult. It is interesting to note that other students in similar situations may choose to continue, as is highlighted by Glogowska et al. [4 p73], who comment that 'a set of circumstances that was bearable for some students became intolerable for others.'

This was the case for Louise and her sister, who was also an OU student at the time of their fathers death.

Louise: "*It was a really difficult decision and there was a lot of guilt there, there was a lot of upset, you know that my sister can carry on with her degree, but I can't.*"

Patrick made an interesting analogy: "*I felt like I was giving up, I don't like giving up. It's like DNF [did not finish] in a marathon or something like that, you know, you know you are injured, you know that if you keep going you are gonna make it worse [...] That was kind of how I felt.*"

In a marathon there are peaks and troughs of enjoyment and progress, much in the same way as in a programme of study. The runner expects to have enough endurance to work through the troughs, but must give up in the event of injury. Equally, students expect to sustain their progress, but sometimes disruptive factors force students to pause or stop.

All three participants indicate that there was no option in their situations, and that the external events forced them to take a study break. However, they all deliberated over the decision, and were very reluctant to take that course of action.

Patrick had been aware that he was not giving his studies the time and attention it needed, but continued until he received a low assessment score. On reflection, he felt that he needed that external feedback of a low score, indicating that he was unable to continue, to trigger the final decision. Cross [5] identified, perhaps too simplistically, a drop in assessment scores as an indicator of reduced likelihood of return. This is not supported by this study, where two of the students had a reduced assessment performance prior to deferral.

3.3   Identity and habit

All participants reported a strong sense of belonging to the OU. Throughout the interviews they spoke with passion about the impact the university had had on their lives, and the lives of their peers. In the language of Tinto [6], the students had a strong sense of 'fit' with the institution, to the extent of having become ambassadors and frequently evangelising about their experiences. The participants all talked about regularly wearing OU branded clothing, and two were actually wearing OU sweatshirts during their interviews.

Louise: "*I'm sitting here in my OU sweatshirt again; it's worn half to death!*"

Jane: "*oftentimes I'll be going round with an OU bag or an OU T-shirt on*"

Wearing branded clothing 'may have the dual benefit of reminding people of their own group membership; thus, conferring associated well-being benefits, or signalling shared group membership to others' [7 p.206]. The participants each described several situations where they had met unknown OU students or graduates, and had lengthy conversations in which they shared experiences. Wearing university branded clothing suggests a strong link to their self-identity, and a good level of social acceptance of that identity within their community [8]. There may be a correlation of students likely to be retained being more likely to wear branded clothing, which demonstrates student identity and implies a high level of commitment. Wearing of branded clothing may be more significant for a distance student than for those who are campus-based. Campus students demonstrate a level of institutional attachment through their physical location, whilst those who are remote may be more

reliant on physical artefacts. Talking about the period during deferral, there was some concern about losing their student identity.

Patrick: "*you stop being an OU student. You stop being part of the club at that point and that can be quite difficult to recover.*"

However, all three participants had already obtained OU qualifications at the time of their deferral. On reflection, Patrick felt that through having a qualification he had earnt a lifetime membership of the OU club, even if he was not actively studying.

As experienced students, they may be those that are referred to by Greenland and Moore [9] who are more likely to be persistent, as they have demonstrated persistence in the past. Taylor [1] identified the number of completed credits and prior educational attainment on entry, as factors which positively correlate with return from deferral. This appears logical, considering those individuals having previous successful educational experiences, have already demonstrated academic ability. All three students were nearing the completion of their OU undergraduate degrees at the time of their deferral, and two had previously obtained HE qualifications from other institutions.

All participants had been concerned that deferring might break their study habit, leading to a challenge in restarting. For instance, Jane stated:

Jane: "*You know, it's one of those things whereby if you stop doing something and you have a break from it […] I find it difficult to go back or to restart.*"

There is also the risk that the newly available time which is released by not studying, will be filled with a new habit that will become difficult to break.

Louise: "*There's that bit of time where you enjoy having your evenings, watching the telly, and going to do what you want […] I did worry about getting back into it.*"

It is interesting that although Patrick and Jane both took their break because they were unable to allocate enough time to their studies, mainly due to pressures of work, they still expressed concern about developing other leisure habits, which might have prevented them returning. The challenge of finding time to study is also the challenge of identifying activities to cease, and when related to employment of family responsibilities, they may not be within the individual's control.

3.4   Returning to study

All three participants were aware that a significant number of students who opt for a deferral do not return to complete their studies. When asked about their experience during the deferral, they were consistent in reporting that they did not have any contact from the OU. This is surprising as the institution is hoping that they will return, so it might be expected that there would be proactive nurturing of that relationship. In Jane's case, being an OU employee, she specified no student related contact. Despite not feeling that they needed any contact, they all felt that other students would benefit from contact, and that lack of contact may lead to students feeling unwanted, and so not returning.

All three participants made comments relating to their commitment to returning to complete their studies, whilst raising concerns that other students in similar circumstances might need further support. When asked about the support they received on re-entry to their module, Patrick and Jane both felt support was unnecessary for them, but that other students would probably need encouragement.

Patrick: "*I'm very much a self-starter, I can look after myself. I wonder how many other people leak out of the process, because they're not looked after in that way, and maybe they don't feel wanted.*"

However, an OU report on proactive contact with deferred and assessment banked students [10] indicated that a high proportion of students who registered after being proactively contacted by a student support advisor, did not pass the module. Perhaps the need to be self-motivated to reregister, is a useful sifting mechanism, in order to reduce the number who make further investment, in both time and money, and subsequently do not successfully complete.

In all three cases, the deferral was not because they were unable to cope academically, as demonstrated by their successful completion on return, but because 'other responsibilities become paramount' [11 p327], which in my experience, is often the case for mature and part-time students.

Jane assessment banked, because she had achieved good grades in her assignments, and was concerned that her work situation might not improve, in which case, there was a high risk of ending up in the same position again. She had intended to follow the module study calendar through her deferral, but as she had feared, the work pressures did not ease.

Jane: "*The reading never really materialised in the way that I'd intended, and of course, because I wasn't doing assignments, I wasn't driven to read the material at any particular point*."

On reflection, although glad that she had deferred, Jane was not sure assessment banking had been a good decision. The assignment deadlines provide a structure, and without them, Jane lacked focus and any sense of urgency to complete the reading. Despite not having studied as much of the module as she had intended, Jane did pass the exam in the following year.

4 CONCLUSIONS

This study's primary purpose was to ascertain that there would be value in conducting a larger study, which will be reported on in the future. This initial study has identified some themes for future exploration.

All three participants found the decision to defer their studies to be a challenging one. Although, deciding to assessment bank is intended to be a pause in study, there was a feeling that it was a type of failure, because they were not able to manage study alongside their specific personal situation at that point in time and were delaying the achievement of their goal. Potentially, this feeling of failure around assessment banking may be a factor in some students not resuming their studies, as they are unable to adjust their goal to completion a year later. The OU was originally set up to provide a 'second chance' for those who had had challenging educational experiences and many OU students in that situation have low self-confidence in academic capability. For this group of students, having to take a break in their studies may reduce their confidence further, and prevent their return.

The interviews all covered aspects of identity and belonging within the OU, and that this was significantly weakened whilst they were on their study break. Those students who do not have such a strong attachment to the institution, whilst engaged in their studies, may become completely detached during a break. This could also be exacerbated by the trigger for their study break, which may be pulling them towards a different personal identity, and could even conflict with their student identity.

The final theme emerging from the interviews was around motivation. Although they all felt unable to continue when they took the decision to assessment bank, they all strongly held onto motivation to return and complete their qualifications. They also reassessed their motivation, and made active decisions to return to study. Students, who are not interrupted by external events, may follow their planned qualification pathway simply because it is the next step, without reconsidering their options each year. Taking a study break forces a re-evaluation of the goal, and it may be that some of those not returning have actively decided to pursue different life goals.

This paper reports on a small initial study only. Consequently, caution needs to be applied in drawing conclusions, and it is not appropriate to over generalise from such a small sample.

4.1 Further work

The next phase of the research will include interviews with further participants, and will seek to include interviews with students who have assessment banked and not returned to study, or tried to return, but were unsuccessful in either recommencing or completing their module. The themes identified in this study will be taken forward, along with others identified, as more data is analysed.

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