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A qualitative study exploring the perceptions of part time distance learning students learning gain using the 'Three Gains' Employability model

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Abstract

This qualitative project set out to identify if Open University (OU) students who were studying a level three (FHEQ level 6) module had achieved, as a consequence of their study enhancement in three key areas of an employability framework: learning, working and personal gains. Findings from 27 interviews demonstrated that learning gains appeared to arise from specific module material that was relevant to the student's employment, but also, on study skills and transferrable skills that contribute to the students' confidence and ability to carry out their employment. Working and personal gains appeared to be closely linked because of the students' developing confidence, self-esteem and sense of achievement as a result of their studies, as well as their practical skills such as self-management. The key personal gain that emerged was confidence, which had a positive impact on the interviewees' personal and working life. The increased self-esteem and sense of achievement indicated that 'study has enhanced an individual's sense of self'. The study also reports unexpected gains: the impact of their studies was apparent in how others view of them changed over time. Colleagues admired and respected them for their achievement with their studies and sought advice from them at work. Their families had pride in them and for some were seen as a role model for their children. This study is unique: The Three Gains model of employability used as a conceptual framework offers a perspective on the employability gains part-time distance learning students achieved through study.

Keywords: employability, three gains model, learning gain, working gain, personal gain, distance learning, confidence

Introduction

There has been a recent drive for universities to evidence their worth and address the issue of employability related to undergraduate degrees, which has led to a growth in career support services for students. The focus is largely young undergraduates who are studying full time and preparing for their first job. At the Open University, for our students (of whom 46% self-define as career changers and 44% as career developers), higher education often does not represent the ability to get that first job, but the ability to keep their current job and/or progress on to the next job.

Higher education institutions (HEI) worldwide are under pressure to produce employable graduates (Small et al 2018) As such, the onus is on the higher education

sector to present graduates to the labour market who are both work ready and have attained employability.

Small et al (2018) suggest that the most desirable graduate outcome sought by employers is employability and over the past decade, one of the most important developments in HE has been the employability agenda. With the demise of the job for life, graduates are expected to take responsibility for their careers, by developing and maintaining employability Once they are part of the labour market, graduates need to continue working on their employability in order to find and keep jobs (Akkermans et al. 2013)

Hind and Moss (2011) suggest that Employability skills are a set of social behaviours and skills that people can learn to interact and work with other people in a variety of different situations and will help them with their career development. But employability considers more than the possession of particular knowledge, skills and attributes of graduates. Employability also includes the capability of individuals to use and present knowledge, skills and attributes to employers.

Employers are most interested in the potential employee's interpersonal skills and fit with the organisation (their likeability, making them rewarding to deal with), their ability to do the job, and willingness to work hard. It is these factors that together form the determinants of employability proposed by Hogan et al (2013). Not only do graduate recruiters prefer potential employees who have good attitudes, are likeable, can do the job well, work hard and display a good fit with the organisation, but also employers look for those with excellent communication skills, emotional intelligence, teamwork skills, work experience and demonstrated leadership to list a few (Quacquarelli, 2018).

Workers' employability is obtained through the acquisition of knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics that are valued by current and prospective employers and thus encompasses an individual's career potential (Fugate , Kinicki and Ashford, 2008).

The OU defines employability as 'a set of capabilities and achievements that support students in the development of their careers, raising their aspirations and enhancing their contributions to society' (The Open University 2019). Small et al (2018) defines employability as the capacity to be self-reliant in navigating the labour market, utilising knowledge, individual skills and attributes, and adapting them to the employment context, showcasing them to employers, while taking into account external and other constraints. These two definitions alone suggest different perspectives, one looking at capabilities, and one looking at capacity. In the face of different approaches to employability, a widely shared criticism is that the concept is fuzzy, lacking clarity and specificity of meaning (Peeters et al 2019).

Much work has been undertaken to provide clarity around the concept of employability in the form of employability models. An early example is the USEM model which was influenced by Stephenson's (1998) concept of capability, specific to an individual's confidence. USEM is an acronym for: understanding, skills (subject-specific and generic), efficacy belief (and self-theories generally) and metacognition (including reflection).

Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) propose another model: The Key to Employability, suggesting that a graduate with a sense of self-efficacy is more likely to get the job they target and to be successful in this job. The graduate with self-confidence will probably be more successful in their professional life. The graduate with self-esteem tends to evaluate their practices more realistically. Therefore, they will be better at identifying and addressing points for improvement a lifelong learning.

In a more recent framework, Peeters et al. (2019) introduce the concept employability capital as a variation on Forrier et al (2009) movement capital proposing this variation better captures the combination of both obtaining and retaining employ-

ment. Peeters and her colleagues specify the personal resources (referred to as capital and consisting of knowledge, skills and attitudes) that help individuals in addressing challenges they may face when aiming to strengthen their labour market position (employability). Building on the previously cited typologies, which Peeters et al. mark as key publications concerning employability and which they check with an expert-panel, they identify four dimensions: job-related attitudes, job-related expertise, career -related employability capital and development-related capital. The term employability is used to differentiate between job-related, career-related and development-related resource categories. Furthermore, capital refers to knowledge, skills and attitudes as well as social capital.

These three models provide a glimpse into the complexity of employability models that are currently available. Williams et al (2016) systematically reviewed 16 of those models that assumed both a holistic and an individual perspective on employability. Within these models, 88 different constructs were identified as being part of employability. These constructs are broadly divided into: components that represent value for the employer in the form of the individual's human, social, psychological or cultural capital; components that represent the individual's proficiency to reflect on and put their capital into practice, and; components that reflect contextual factors that influence employability (Williams et al., 2016).

Rich (2015) produced a Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) occasional paper on employability suggesting that knowledge, skills and social capital make up the three elements needed for employability, and suggests that 'Simply having a consistent framework for employability will not only make it measurable, but will also help to enhance it' (Rich 2015:29). He proposed a broad definition of employability as being the ability to "get a job, to keep a job and to get on in a job". In response, Kellett and Clifton (2017) proposed a Three Gains Model of employability, where students achieve personal gains, learning gains and working gains.

This study set out to identify if students from a large faculty offering a range of subject areas, who were studying a FHEQ level six module had achieved these three gains as part of their distance learning study.
The purpose of such an approach is to measure the distance that students travel between their entry and exit points (whatever that exit point may be) and specifically captures the impact that their study has had on their career and professional development. By identifying these three gains in relation to successful students, this project will consider the value of the Three Gains Model, and its potential to provide evidence to promote a broader focus for the collection of employability data.

Methods

This was a qualitative exploratory study drawing upon an Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA) (Robson & McCartan, 2016, King 2017). This approach, utilising telephone interviews enabled an in-depth exploration the personal experiences of this group of students and how their experience influenced their learning, working and personal gains. This qualitative approach enabled the exploration of the real world experiences, as lived by the participants, (Robson & McCartan, 2016) and was essential as the focus of the study was to perform an open, exploratory enquiry on how social realities were formed and perceived based on the participants' experiences in relation to their learning. Consequently, by exploring and interpreting the epistemological reflections drawn from adopting phenomenological methods enabled an understanding of subjective constructs and ways of seeking knowledge to apprehend reality – the lived experience of this group (Robson and McCartan 2016, King & Brooks, 2017).

Ethics

The study, drawing upon the principles of the British Education and Research Association's (BERA) guidelines (BERA 2018) had clearance and permission granted from the Open University's Student Research Project Panel as well as the Open University Research Ethics Committee. Prior to commencing the study, each participant was provided with detailed information (including, data protection and the relevant data collection process, confidentiality and research dissemination) enabling them to make an informed decision regarding participation. Participants were asked to provide written consent for the study.

Sample

Purposeful sampling is widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection individuals, or groups, that are especially knowledgeable about, or have experience with the phenomenon being explored, (Robson and McCartan 2016). Furthermore, this sampling method is also useful in studies that are influenced by the researchers' knowledge of the potential sample. Drawing upon the researchers' knowledge and expertise of the potential sample, these modules were chosen as they would be likely to participate, and had sufficient study and learning experience to present these, and their opinions in an expressive, and reflective manner. Using the purposive sampling method, four modules from the Faculty of Well Being, Education and Language's (WELS) provision was chosen for the focus of the study. One FHEQ level 6 module was chosen from each of the four disciplines (Sport, Health and Social Care, Childhood/Youth Studies and Modern Languages), modules were selected that provided a broad and representative sample of the Open University's students within the Faculty. The modules chosen, reflected the study's purpose and the expectations, that participants would be willing to provide the rich, unique information of their experiences of value to the aims of the study. In total across the four modules 160 students were invited of which a total of 27 students, which was a response rate of 17%, were interviewed. These comprised:

> 7 students studying a level three Sports related module
> 7 students studying a level three Health and Social Care module
> 5 students studying a level three Early Childhood / Childhood and Youth module
> 8 students studying a level three Modern Languages module

Ninety two percent of interviewees were in full or part-time employment when they were studying. When compared to the overall figure of 76% of OU students already in employment, it was clear that proportionately more WELS students were focused on employment related study than the overall OU figure.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using a preformed interview template that reflected the objectives of the research and those questions that arose from the utilisation of a conceptual framework based on the three gains learning model proposed by Kellet and Grifton (2017).

The interview method was chosen as the preferred method of data collection as it enabled the exploration of the meanings associated with the phenomenon and experience of learning and learning gain, and furthermore, enabled the exploration and collation of multiple perspectives required within the study (Robson & McCartan, 2016). For the purpose of this study, due to the large and widespread geographical distances, (participants were included from each of the four nations of the UK) required to travel to manage face to face interviews it was decided to conduct the interviews by telephone. Whilst telephone based interviews may lack some of the features of face-to-face interviews such as physical interaction and nonverbal cues, they do provide adequate information and enable effective data collection, especially within

resource challenged studies. Drawing upon the recommendations of Hanna, (2012) and King & Brooks, (2017) the telephone interview method was considered an effective alternative for the data collection required in this study.

Data Analysis

All data were anonymised and protected during the process of data transcription and data analysis (Robson & McCartan, 2016).Thematic analysis was carried out using Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflective approach framework for identifying, analyzing, describing, and identifying themes within data collected from the interview. All the interview transcripts were read and re read by two of the project team and a constant reflexive comparative method was used until themes emerged. The interviews with students focussed on the three gains set out by Kellett and Clifton (2017); working gain, learning gain and personal gains.

Findings

The main themes related to the questions posed during the interviews of working gain, learning gain and personal gain.

Working gain

In response to a question regarding students' aspirations in relation to their studies 15 out of 25 respondents reported they were studying for employment related reasons, such as a '*more fulfilling job*', '*to improve my prospects*', '*set up my own business*' and '*up-skill or reskill*'. Nineteen out of 27 respondents referred to future or current employment

Students were asked what benefit their studies had been to their working life:

More than half responded that the module content had a direct relevance to their working life. Just under half responded that the module studied developed their transferrable skills, such as better understanding of people, better skills of analysis, knowledge of relevant theories, which were seen to be beneficial.

For some students the flexibility of studying at a distance was beneficial to their job:

So I haven't had to say to an employer please can you let me off one day a week or two days a week. And I could choose when to study, and with a young family that was really important.

A subtheme in relation to working gain was the notion of confidence in workplace skills as exemplified by the following quotes:

'it's making me feel more like a professional rather than……giving me more of a professional basis in my confidence.' (A10)

'you do think well how can I get over this next problem? You kind of want the challenge, you want the difficult client in a way. (B05)

'I mean my approaches are different, obviously more efficient so I'm able to get more work done.' (B14)

Learning Gain

Learning gains appeared to be achieved from specific module or course material that was relevant to the interviewee's current employment. Learning gains also related to study skills and transferrable skills that contribute to the interviewees' confidence and ability to carry on.

It was not surprising that many students identified that the benefits of their learning were closely aligned to the benefits for their employment.

'one of them (modules) was built around children support or child support, and how agencies help. So that was really useful going through that as well, and linking it to my primary interest' (A01).

> *So, a lot of the TMAs were based around real cases or real scenarios in your workplace, and then scaffolded around with the theory. So those ones were what I would say were the most applicable to me, because I could see straight-away how they fitted into my work life (A10).*
> 'T*he content of the module involves working with groups, getting people's opinion as well, and that's what my job entails now' (B01).*

One student explained the monetary benefits of studying:
'Financial benefits absolutely.'(B01).

Personal Gain
Many students reported their personal gains, which included developing skills that underpin successful study at a distance:

> *it taught me a lot about time management, which obviously I'm using a lot now. (A11)So really it was discipline really. I had to discipline myself to come up-stairs and actually do all the reading. (B05)*

All respondents reported achieving personal gains, with the predominant answer from 21 students being an increase in confidence and self-esteem:

> Their newfound confidence had a positive impact on the interviewees' personal and working life. The increased self-esteem and sense of achievement indicated that:
> *I think more confident, I think I'm much more positive. (A12):*
> *I've gained so much confidence, because once upon a time I would think that studying for me was limited because I felt that I couldn't do it. (B02)*

A consequence that emerged was the positive change in others' perspectives of them both at work and outside of work:

> *'perhaps if I've had a little bit of a day where I've doubted myself, or if you've made a silly mistake. Colleagues have said to me then don't be silly, you've got a degree'. (B15)_:*
> *'It's been good for my daughter to see me do it, to be working hard for a pur-pose'. (A02)*

> *'people are like wow how did you manage that with two children? And then obviously I talk about doing it through the Open University rather than in a brick uni. So yeah definitely, people take me much more seriously.' (A11)*
> *'I also think people are inspired.'* (B06)

Personal gains related to working gains
When students were asked how their personal gains related to their working life, responses included developing the potential to form a new career, enabling a change of employment direction, and accessing new opportunities within their current employment situation, suggesting that future benefits may result.
Responses also included an increased sense of autonomy and power over current (and potentially future) situations at work:

> *'I'm more ambitious, more confident, and I'm starting to look at management postings on the NHS recruitment website.' (B01)*
> One student who had completed their studies by the time they were interviewed alluded to a sense of autonomy and self-determination:
> *' now I have got the degree that that opens up so many doors for me [...] I'm not waiting around for people to choose me, I can choose what I want to do.'(A03)*

Working and personal gains appeared to be closely linked. Interviewees reported developing confidence, self-esteem and a sense of achievement as a result of their study-

ing. Other gains were their practical skills such as self-management. Throughout the interviews it was clear the three gains were intimately connected and therefore not clearly defined, as articulated by one student:

> '*the feel-good factor, and being able to take control of something, do something, achieve something outside of the workplace. And that kind of almost mental health position I think feeds into the whole of your life, work, relationships, all aspects really. (B09)*

Employability Skills

In an attempt to further verify the three gains, the students' employability skills were also recorded. On completion of the interviews, students were asked about employability skills that they had achieved as a result of their studies. The employability skills used were drawn from the Confederation of British Industries (CBI) skills framework, (CBI nd).

Employability skills are those transferable skills that are particularly sought by graduate recruiters. The CBI has identified eight skills that they consider to be the most sought after by industry employers. All of the eight skills were achieved by some students, whilst some skills were achieved by all (see table 1 below).

Table 1: CBI Employability skills, all responses with comments (to be inserted on page 9)

CBI Skill	Achieved N=27	%	Summary Comments from those who disagreed
Self-Management	24	89	Already had this skill
Teamwork	17	63	Distance learning can be lonely
Business and customer Awareness	16	59	Already had this skill/not relevant
Problem Solving	26	96	Already had this skill
Communication and literacy	27	100	None
Application of Numeracy	7	26	Felt it was not relevant to the course studied
Application of IT	21	78	Already had this skill
Entrepreneurship	18	67	Felt this was not relevant to them

Students identified that they associated three top skills associated with employability: communication and literacy, self-management and problem solving. In relation to communication and literacy one student stated:

> *So for sure I write a lot better, and I can formulate ideas a lot better in speech and in writing. And that's come just obviously from assignment after assignment after assignment and reading and reading and reading. (A10)*

In relation to the skill of self-management one student commented on the challenges they had in relation to their competing priorities:

> '*when I was studying with the OU and I was working and I had two children to feed and look after, I really learned how to prioritise. Sometimes you have to say no to things, and just real managing, prioritising and making sure the im-*

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portant things are done. And accepting that sometimes you can't actually do it all in one day, I'm learning that rapidly.' (A11)

In relation to problem solving one student outlined the benefits of this skill:
'I suppose it gets you to look at different angles, change your perception on things rather than just looking at it one way.' (A04)

Discussion

Overall, the interviews of 27 students undertaking FHEQ level six study (equivalent to 3rd year) demonstrated that progress was made in all three areas of personal, learning and working gains. The key personal gain that emerges from the interviews is confidence, and this had a positive impact on the interviewees' personal and working life. Other achievements were related to power and autonomy as well as self-management and problem solving. The increased self-esteem and sense of achievement indicated that 'study has enhanced an individual's sense of self' (Kellett and Clifton, 2017). It would appear that students who were interviewed had developed employability skills across a broad range, although some skills were already achieved and not as a result of their studies.

Confidence has been linked to successful studies by a number of researchers; Cross et al (2018) who explored how students understand and interpret learning gain found that students became aware of an increase in respect to confidence in talking to fellow professionals and performance at work, or social confidence when mixing with friends. The findings of this study align with Cross et al finding suggesting that the confidence gained through study realised not only learning gain but also personal and working gain. Simons Leverett and Beaumont (2020) who studied the elements of success of distance learning graduates found that a key aspect of the graduates' success was the supportive feedback received from tutors, which they reported enabled students to build their knowledge, skills and confidence as they progressed to completion of their degree.

Learning gain is generally accepted to mean distance travelled or the difference between skills, competence, content knowledge and personal development at two points in time (Speight et al 2018; McGrath et al 2015). This understanding is embedded throughout much of the literature on employability. However, the measure of distance and the conceptualisation of what constitutes measurement varies significantly. Measurement of learning gain ranges from grade point average scores; standardised tests; psychometric measures and self-assessed reported data. This reflects the findings of McGrath et al (2015) who assert that there are five key methods that can measure Learning gain: standardised tests; grades; self-reporting surveys; other qualitative methods and mixed methods. An indication of the complexity of developing a measure of learning gain is demonstrated by the decision of the Office for Students to end the National Mixed Methodology Learning Gain (NMMLG) project commissioned by HEFCE in 2016. The aim of the project was to identify a methodology that could measure students' learning gain longitudinally through a nationally administered survey. Interim evaluation highlighted a number of issues with the data collection process and a low response rate, resulting in premature closure of the project, citing the failure of engagement and a consistent methodological measurement tool as causative factors.

The lack of clarity in determining a method to measure learning gain and the lack of conceptual clarity may, therefore, be the result of not knowing what to measure and the effect of context on the metric. The influence of context upon learning is well documented (Englund et al 2018; Cross et al 2018; Kaatrakoski et al 2016).

The most prevalent of the CBI employability skills reported by students has having being achieved was communication and literacy, which is not surprising for students who are studying at a distance and have achieved level three study. The next

most prevalent skills were problem solving, self-management and appreciation of IT. All three skills are clearly relevant to enhancing the students' employability but could also be deemed necessary requisite skills for successful distance learning study.

It could be suggested that in relation to the development of employability skills, the students in this study, who were all undertaking distance learning programmes, had the added benefit of having developed the necessary skills to be successful at distance learning study. Simons et al (2020) explored the factors that led to success for distance learning graduates and identified that certain facets of intrinsic motivation were attributable to successful study. They found that autonomy and competence, which are core to intrinsic motivation (Ryan and Deci 2000) were developed as a result of the support and flexibility they experienced through distance learning. It could be suggested that the intrinsic motivation aligned to distance learning study is also a factor in successfully developing employability skills. Students in this study reported developing autonomy and power as well as becoming more confident and being able to make choices for themselves.

Another explanation for the successful development of employability skills could be related to resilience. It is recognised that the attrition rate of distance learning study is higher than that of face to face study, for a range of reasons (Simpson 2013), and in order to be successful distance learning students need to develop resilience. Simons et al (2018) explored the issue of resilience in distance learning study and found that Students rated highly the support they received from tutors in the form of tailored, detailed feedback on their assignments. Other factors that enabled students to persist in their studies were time management, self-belief and motivation.

Speight et al (2018) who explored measures of longitudinal learning gain in UK higher education found that across the board, full time undergraduate students from eight subject areas indicated low confidence in understanding of the labour market and commercial environment in which they hoped to work. Distance learning students from this study, on the other hand, were likely to already be in employment, therefore could be deemed to have an advantage in relation to their employability. It is also suggested by Simons et al (2020) that implicit to successful distance learning study is the development of autonomy and competence, which could be aligned to the CBI skills of self-management, which 89% of respondents reported they had.

Advance HE (formally HEA) developed a guide to approaching employability (Cole and Tibby 2013) suggesting that HEIs should attempt to create their own shared understanding of employability; review and map the present state of their education in relation to this understanding; devise a way to enhance employability; and find a way to evaluate progress (Cole and Tibby 2013).

Kellett and Clifton (2017) argue that the part-time sector must broaden its thinking from the narrowness of employment outcomes to a more nuanced clustering of plural gains: learning gain, working gain and personal gain which exemplifies a more holistic fusion of skills, values and attitudes in employment journeys. The findings from this study suggest that distance learning students develop all three gains as they work towards their degree. Kellet and Clifton's proposed Three Gains Model of learning gain, personal gain and working gain appears to be an effective mode of employability for part time distance learning students.

Limitations

Sample, size in Qualitative research is a largely contentious issue, with mixed views concerning what constitutes a valid sample size. It is widely accepted that the smaller the sample size the greater the affect upon reliability due to the potential risk of variability in responses, (Robson and McCartan 2016). However, the key issue in this study that may affect reliability is the poor response rate of 17%, and it is this failure to capture a representative sample that may cause bias in the data collected. Whilst the tech-

nique of purpose sampling adopted in this study enables the selection of potentially information rich data sources, the availability, responsiveness and willingness of participants may have affected the results of this study. None the less, the authors of this study are confident that saturation had been achieved in the data collected, whereby no further substantive information would have been acquired**.**

Conclusion

The Three Gains Model appears to be a comprehensive way to evaluate what students gain through studying at the OU in relation to employability. This small scale research study demonstrates that OU study contributes to student development in three key areas of an employability framework: learning, working and personal gains.

The gains arose from specific module learning that was relevant to the student's employment, but also, on study skills and transferrable skills that contributed the development of enhanced confidence and their ability to perform roles in the workplace. The students' developing confidence, self-esteem and sense of achievement was closely linked to their working and personal gains. These appeared to be closely linked due to the development of practical skills such as self-management. The study demonstrates the most significant developments was that associated with personal gains such as confidence, which in turn, had a positive impact on the participant's personal and working life. The increased self-esteem of the participants, and sense of achievement, indicated that 'study has enhanced an individual's sense of self'.

The study also reported unexpected gains: the impact of their studies was apparent in how others view of them changed over time. Colleagues admired and respected them for their achievement with their studies and sought advice from them at work. Their families had pride in them, and for some, were seen as a role model for their children.

This study is unique: The Three Gains model of employability used as a conceptual framework offers a perspective on the employability gains part-time distance learning students achieved through study. Furthermore, this study, poses the question as to whether distance learning study could add a different dimension to the achievement of employability skills, as most students were already in employment (92%) and therefore having to juggle life, work and study all at the same time. Whilst The Three Gains Model appears to be a comprehensive way to evaluate what students gain through studying at the OU in relation to employability. The added use of CBI employability check list could be deemed to reinforce students' responses to having benefited holistically from their study through distance learning.

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