

# Motivations surrounding the pursuit of postgraduate study

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## Abstract

This paper addresses a paucity of research that exists regarding the pursuit of postgraduate study by students. The central focus of this paper is to explore the motivations of students pursuit of postgraduate study and choices in relation to particular masters courses. The identification and analysis of the motivations behind students pursuit of postgraduate work seeks to negate the commodification of education. In economics, a commodity is the generic term for any marketable item produced to satisfy wants or needs. In higher education, a postgraduate course is a marketable item which seeks to satisfy students' wants or needs. By identifying students' wants and needs, teachers in the higher education sector have a more acute chance of delivering to postgraduate students the commodity that they desire; thereby educators are keeping pace and dealing with current public demand. This paper provides a broad framework through which postgraduate opportunities can be contextualised and their implications considered in the forum of different and wide ranging approaches surrounding opportunities for its provision. The learning from this research has wide ranging application, including insight for academic and professional development in higher education as they face the key challenge of meeting students' wants and needs. This paper refers to the findings emanating from a qualitative Masters in Education thesis in University College Dublin which took the form of an original exploration of the pursuit of postgraduate study within the primary sector from the perspective of motivation and choice. The main result that emerged from the study indicated that the motivations surrounding students pursuit of masters degrees are essentially a match between their perception of what a masters constitutes and what perceived personal, professional, cultural and career needs they want met. It also emerged that postgraduate students displayed no discernability regarding the course or its content as long as it fostered these overriding needs.

## Keywords

'Meeting students needs'

'Public demand'

'Postgraduate study as a commodity'

## 1. Introduction

This paper refers to the findings emanating from a qualitative Masters in Education thesis [the study] in University College Dublin which took the form of an original exploration of the pursuit of postgraduate study within the primary sector from the perspective of motivation and choice. The thesis analysed the research findings of twelve semi-structured interviews of primary teachers pursuing part-time postgraduate study in education and compared them to trends evident in the literature in relation to three objectives. The objectives included the motivations surrounding pursuit of postgraduate study, choice of course and the impact of age on these issues.

The thesis explored the reasons behind the choices made by primary teachers to pursue part-time postgraduate study. Although the study sought to pursue the motivations behind primary teachers pursuit of postgraduate study, the literature did not pertain solely to the primary teaching profession. Indeed the study focused on generic literature analysing the concept of the pursuit of postgraduate study generally. The primary teaching profession does not provide an explicit base to the literature underpinning the study. The study uses adult learning as a lens to examine the dynamic interplay between the self-directed search for meaning through critical reflection on experience and the perceived notion of teacher professionalism. It incorporates changes in the workplace and society, contextualized in teaching with the global lifelong learning culture that emerges from this as these affect primary teachers and how they perceive the pursuit of postgraduate study in terms of their perceptions of education, their initial teacher training and their careers. The study considered the theoretical perspectives that inform decisions and motivations to pursue postgraduate work and lifelong learning. This provided a very necessary context from which to examine perceptions relating to education, the self, experience, changes in the workplace, lifelong learning, initial college experience and career opportunities. Therefore the findings of the study transcend postgraduate study and straddle any arising ideological faultline between primary teachers pursuit of postgraduate study and third level students pursuit of postgraduate study.

The broader context of motivation firstly needs explicit consideration. The psychology of motivation is a broad and loosely defined field (McClelland, 1987). It covers everything from elaborate investigations of the physiological mechanisms involved in animal drives to in-depth analysis of the unconscious motives behind abnormal acts. Literature in this field examines biological sources of human motives, social sources of human motives and theoretical information on the nature of human motives. Vernon (1969, p.1) defines motivation “as some kind of internal force that arouses, regulates and sustains all our more important actions”. It is clear then that motivation is an internal experience that cannot be studied directly. Motivation has to do with the why of behaviour, as contrasted with the how or what of behaviour. McClelland (1987, p.4) writes that, “It is very important to recognize at the outset that there are several kinds of answers to the question why, only some of which deal with the problem of motivation”. A complete answer to the question why must include all the determinants of behaviour, not just the motivational ones. Any behavioural outcome is a function of determinants of behaviour in both the person and the environment and motives are treated as only one of the determinants of action (McClelland, 1987).

When people reflect on their motives, they appear to be unconscious of them and the motives might be more obvious to others than to the people themselves. Even conscious intents are not pure indications of the motivation involved since the mind can function without being controlled (McClelland, 1987). Daines et al. (1998, p.9) develop this concept, “Adults participate in adult education for a variety of reasons. They usually have more than one motive though they may have difficulty in articulating them”. Thus what people say about their motives should not be taken at face value since on further analysis; these motives may turn out to be incorrect (McClelland, 1987). McGivney (1993) cites an example of this in the context of male respondents justifying motivations for participation in education. Male respondents in particular tend to cite motives partly to fulfil the need to conform to accepted male behavioural norms. In some sections of the community it is not regarded as normal behaviour for men to participate in education without a clear employment related aim. However, when actually participating, many rapidly develop other interests and put more stress on personal self-development and recreational motives (McGivney, 1993).

Furthermore, it cannot be inferred as to what exact general motive lies behind a particular behaviour, since the same behaviour can be motivated by several different drives. According to McClelland (1987) motives often would find quite different behavioural outlets in different people because of the individual personality differences present in all individuals. Existing research according to McGivney (1993) shows that motivations also vary according to age and gender. An example relating to participation in education indicates that younger adults and men learn mostly for employment related reasons, while older adults and women learn more for personal satisfaction, self-development, leisure purposes and family or role transitions (Edwards et al., 1993). Inferences are made from observing behaviour about a person's intent, however conclusions can be arrived at which differ from what the person feels her or his intent was. Due to the nature of motivation, the objective of the study was not to present definitive answers to the question of what motivates primary teachers to pursue postgraduate study. Rather, the study illuminates the context in which the motivations of primary teacher's pursuit of postgraduate study are embedded.

The motivations surrounding the undertaking of a long-term course of study involves, for any potential student, considerable sacrifice of finance and free time. Belanger (2003) stated that for these reasons it is often difficult for an adult to find the confidence and the initial motivation to access organized learning. However, professionals are attempting to come to terms with the demands of academic work and to combine these with the pressures of a busy professional life and a typically hectic personal life. Brookfield (1986) argues that participation in learning is voluntary and adults engage in it as a result of their own volition. It may be that the circumstances prompting this learning are external to the learner, but the decision to learn is the learners.

The pursuit of a masters for the interviewees in the study involved balancing many disparate needs. Interestingly some of the interviewees encountered negative reactions at their place of work and within their social circle prior to their

postgraduate programme and during the pursuit of their masters. However this did not deter them. This concurs with the research in the area:

“People are ready to negotiate the constraints that their participation in adult learning brings to their life...people are ready to invest their own money” (AONTAS, 2003, p.12).

A number of specific themes emerged in the study which merit consideration. These include the identification and examination of personal needs, professional needs, cultural needs and career needs.

#### Fulfilment of Perceived Personal Needs

Postgraduate study is perceived by teachers in the sample to fulfil personal needs relating to time, money and their age and stage in life. Some of the younger teachers felt that it was important to pursue postgraduate study in order to use their spare time effectively. The financial gain emerged as a motivating factor for teachers in all age groups; for younger teachers particularly in the context of increases in salary over time and for older teachers who wished to benefit from a salary increase into retirement. For those teachers who were teaching for less than ten years, they felt that this period in their careers was more conducive to postgraduate work than undertaking such a course when both personal and professional circumstances would change over the longer term. Those changes included family commitments and the loss of scholarly ability and creativity. While teachers in all age brackets suggested that there was no ideal age to do a masters, they indicated that it did depend on what your personal needs and motivations were. The masters was considered an appropriate way of fulfilling personal development needs.

While teachers in all age brackets emphasized that learning takes place in an informal capacity, they also expressed an openness to engage in formal personal development courses, a trend also noted by Knapper and Cropley (1991) and Brookfield (1986). This openness was also reflected in studies conducted by Mayo (1991) and Beder and Valentine (1987) who found that explicitly educational motives are rarely cited as the reason for attending learning activities. It would appear that interviewees were

pursuing their masters for their own personal development, a trend which correlates with Carl Roger's theory that there is a basic impulse towards growth in all human beings (McClelland, 1987). In this way the teachers in the study were taking responsibility for their personal growth.

This concept of personal growth and development is reflected in literature surrounding the concepts of self-understanding and self-acceptance and what they mean for postgraduate students. Jersild's (1955) highlights the seriousness of peoples search for intimate and personal meaning in what they are doing. Where meaning is lacking in ones work the self is uninvolved. Jersild (1955) states that this search for meaning is not an abstract search for a concrete body of knowledge; it is a distinctly personal search. Adult education and further study promote the opportunity for this self-understanding because freedom to think is such a perennial issue in academic life (Jersild, 1955). Freedom to think fosters freedom to interpret the meaning of experience. Knox (1977, p.465) writes that "effective adult learning typically entails an active search for meaning". Sachs (2003, p.162) asserts that because this learning transforms who we are and what we can do, it is an experience of identity.

Identity formation is considered an ongoing process that involves the interpretation and reinterpretation of experience. Thus identity is not something that is fixed or imposed; it is negotiated through experience and the sense that is made of that experience. Harrison et al. (2002) believe that experience can be interpreted with a multiplicity of meanings. Thus the meaning of experience is never permanently fixed and is always open to reinterpretation. This highlights the importance of continuous engagements by learners in exploration, action and reflection of knowledge set within the context of learners past, current and future experiences (Brookfield, 1986). Kolb (1984) refers to this as learning, the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Since Dewey wrote *Experience and Education* (1938) outlining the conditions that govern learning from experience, "it has been increasingly agreed that the experiences we have lead us into learning" (Rogers, 2002, p.93). All learning and experience are interlinked. According to Knox (1977), when an adult sets out to learn about something, it is related to a large amount of experience and information that the adult already possesses. Harrison et al. (2002) describe

learning as creating meanings, finding the keys, making sense of experience and critically analysing experience.

The importance of any knowledge cannot be exaggerated. Harrison et al. (2002) assert that without knowledge there can be no critical reflection. Brookfield (1986) makes the point that learning is ultimately concerned with the development of a critically aware frame of mind, not with the uncritical assimilation of previously bodies of knowledge or skill. Brookfield (1986, p.13) concludes that “central to the effective facilitation of learning is the development of powers of critical reflection and responsibility for growth”.

Taking responsibility for personal growth is one of the hallmarks of the lifelong learner (Longworth and Davies, 1996). In recent times we have seen a loosening of the boundaries around concepts of adult learning, symbolized by contemporary discourses of lifelong learning (Harrison et al., 2002). Knapper and Cropley (1991) point out that the term ‘lifelong learning’ is not simply another way of saying ‘adult education’. They state that a distinction must be made between deliberate learning and spontaneous, unplanned, even unconscious learning in order to differentiate between the lifelong learning that is a normal and natural part of everyday life and the purposeful, organized learning that lifelong education procedures seek to foster (Knapper and Cropley, 1991).

There are hundreds of definitions of lifelong learning, and each is appropriate to its own environment. It has a social, political, personal and an educational meaning. Longworth and Davies (1996, p.22) define lifelong learning as “the development of human potential through a continuously supportive process which stimulates and empowers individuals to acquire all the knowledge, values, skills and understanding they will require throughout their lifetimes and to apply them with confidence, creativity and enjoyment in all roles, circumstances, and environments”. This definition of lifelong learning encompasses the complete range of human experience. Harrison et al. (2002, p.1) supports this concept and states that “in contemporary conditions, learning becomes not only ‘lifelong’, suggesting learning as relevant



throughout the life course, but also 'life-wide', suggesting learning as an essential aspect of our whole life experience".

The use of the term empowers in this definition puts the power in the hands of the individual to develop his or her own potential through learning. Candy, principal author of the report on lifelong learning in Australian Universities, *Achieving Quality*, believes that "one of the hallmarks of the lifelong learner is the ability to take control of one's own learning" (Longworth and Davies, 1996, p.110). Longworth and Davies (1996) state that due to the loss of appeal of values and traditional, religious and family structures especially to younger people the increased focus is now on the individual, thus the onus to take charge of ones life is becoming more pressing.

The question arises as to why the discourse of lifelong learning has suddenly been taken up by governments, firms and institutions. Rogers (2002) believes that the answer is in part money since profits can be made from lifelong education and from continuing education. However, Knapper and Cropley (1991) point to the rapid and global nature of change in our society and highlight the need for people to be equipped to adjust to this change since there are no constants in a lifetime. Harrison et al. (2002, p.1) states that "learning as a preparation for life has been displaced by learning as an essential strategy for successful negotiation of the life course, as the conditions in which we live and work are subject to ever more rapid change". The depth and range of societal change have indeed been ongoing. Lifelong learning has emerged as a policy response to the needs of a changing society (Coolahan, 2003). Knapper and Cropley (1991) purport the same principle, that lifelong learning emerges as a constructive response to the phenomenon of change that is a major element in contemporary life, a device for helping people find patterns of life that satisfy their social, emotional and aesthetic needs in this rapidly evolving society. The pursuit of postgraduate study involves a pattern of life, as described by Knapper and Cropley to fulfil a particular need.

In a world where rapid change has become a constant, the concept of lifelong learning has already amassed an impressive range of supporters. The European Commission designated 1996 as the 'European Year of Lifelong Learning'. The G7 Nations, in

their Naples Communiqué, called for the “development of human potential through the creation of a culture of Lifetime Learning” (Longworth and Davies, 1996, p.1). New organizations such as the European Lifelong Learning Initiative (ELLI) and the World Initiative on Lifelong Learning have been formed to initiate lifelong learning activities and projects in Europe and around the globe and to widen the debate on this issue. In an E.U. *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* it is stated, “Lifelong learning must become the guiding principle for provision and participation across the full continuum of learning contexts” (Commission of the European Communities, 2000, p.3). The commitment to lifelong learning also relates to the fulfilment of professional needs.

#### Fulfilment of Perceived Professional Needs

Many interviewees were motivated to do a masters to fulfil their professional needs. These professional needs according to the data findings in the study include the need to keep up to date, the need to have experience validated and the need to refresh oneself. Teachers in the study who were teaching almost twenty years and were effectively at mid career perceived themselves to be in need of professional refreshment and they considered that a masters served this purpose. This was also the conclusion of Day (1999) who suggests that people, who have reached a professional plateau, may seek opportunities to renew their intellectual commitments through further study. Older teachers in the study engaged in professional development to validate their professional experience and they were conscious of the need to be familiar with newer trends and concepts in education as their younger colleagues evidently were. This concurs with a trend identified by Brookfield (1986) who observes that external validation of learning by a certified professional educator is needed for it to be perceived as educationally valid in a changing workplace.

The key driver of change in postgraduate study is the rate and level of environmental change. In many societies, people can expect to change jobs and careers or undergo radical role shifts within occupations. This results in university graduates having to acquire new knowledge on many occasions during their lives (Knapper and Cropley, 1991). Workers are being forced to take greater responsibility for themselves and to show high levels of initiative in their workplaces (AONTAS, 2003). Knapper and

Cropley (1991) believe that if changing skills and responsibilities are to be an increasing aspect of professional life, then it is essential that individuals forge links throughout their professional lives between educational institutions and the workplace. This motivation to create new professional knowledge cannot be seen as the sole impetus for the changes that have been taking place in teaching including increases in the number of teachers pursuing postgraduate study. Coolahan (2003) concludes that the concept of lifelong learning is penetrating the consciousness of those pursuing postgraduate study.

The introduction of collaborative teaching also emerged as an important area for interviewees in their decision to engage in postgraduate study. The necessary collaboration required by changes in the teaching profession was helped by collaborative methodologies offered during masters programmes where participants had the opportunity to engage with others during discussions and project work. The resultant collaborative approaches are also reflected in the way that masters programmes were regarded by interviewees as meeting their cultural needs.

#### Fulfilment of Perceived Cultural Needs

Postgraduate study is now becoming the norm, a trend which interviewees in the profession less than ten years displayed a keen awareness of. Drudy (2004) observed that masters qualifications will become the norm within the teaching profession. This certainly appears to be the situation in schools as interviewees teaching ten years or more note the trend whereby masters qualifications are becoming more widespread in schools. It emerged from this research that Principals and staffs recognize, value and indeed encourage colleagues to pursue masters in education programmes. The literature in this area provides insight into why teachers are influenced by others to pursue postgraduate work at masters level. Woods (1983) states that a career map is formed through observation of colleagues while Lyons (1981) concurs that this map is constructed from the peoples' own perceptions of the career performance of significant peers which is underpinned by values. Masters are clearly valued in society and this concept along with masters becoming the norm explains the emergent culture whereby teachers are pursuing masters in order to be on the same level as their colleagues, both in terms of qualifications and in terms of the perceived status in their

working context. The perception among interviewees was that a masters degree in itself held a certain amount of status both within a more general work context. The issue of status also emerged in relation to careers which required a masters degree as a prerequisite.

#### Fulfilment of Perceived Career Needs

In the study interviewees had different career needs and these needs changed over the duration of their teaching careers. The attainment of jobs perceived to hold high status is a need which must be realized before success is apparent for some interviewees. According to interviewees in the study masters degrees provide opportunities to fulfil this career need as it gives them the qualifications to apply for what they consider to be high status jobs, confidence in their applications and more certainty in relation to selection for interviews. For some of the interviewees pursuing a masters in education fostered career advancement.

While these teachers did not have specific career map in mind, they were motivated to acquire a masters qualification to provide them with a greater number of options and opportunities. Longworth and Davies (1996) refer to this as the power of knowledge while Kellaghan (1995) highlights this shift towards intellectual authority and points out that individuals are now realizing what research confirms that one's personal development, life chance, earnings, status and lifestyle are likely to be considerably enhanced by having a higher education qualification. Edwards et al. (1993) concur with these observations arguing that participation in education generally contributes to social mobility, providing a ladder of opportunities for some.

Interestingly interviewees expressed reservations about the adequacy of their undergraduate degree stating that the overloaded content of the course mitigated against their opportunities to be creative or to consider the implications of material presented to them. Consequently they considered that their masters in education fostered this creative and academic need. Blackburn and Moisan (1986) state that undergraduate courses at universities alone clearly cannot fulfil all training and development needs. Therefore a masters programme emerges as a response to these needs.

### Masters as a Response to these Needs

It is clear that a masters is perceived by interviewees in the sample to be a means of fulfilling personal, professional, cultural and career needs. This has implications for college authorities who are now expected to provide a masters which accommodates the personal, professional, cultural and career needs of applicants. This concurs with Brookfield's (1986) assertion that a major responsibility of adult education or continuing education directors in universities, colleges, and within the professions themselves is coming to be seen as the provision of educational opportunities throughout a professional's life span of work.

There was nothing specific mentioned by interviewees as to why their choice of masters fulfils their particular needs. Evidence that it is fulfilling needs is clear from the broad satisfaction that interviewees expressed in relation to the masters courses that they pursued. They were satisfied with the programme requirements including the need to have a certain amount of professional experience and to complete qualifying courses onto masters programmes if directed to do so by the college. Their lack of research into the programme aims and objectives of masters courses prior to application indicated that they were completing masters degrees to fulfil particular needs assuming that the masters programmes would effectively foster these needs. This point was reinforced by their lack of expectation regarding the content of the masters course. Despite this interviewees in the sample were satisfied with the content of the programmes that they chose. It is possible that this satisfaction stems from the level of adequate choice within masters programme generally since the opportunity to reflect on experiences provides students with the broad range of options that are tangible through contemplation of experience.

However, choice regarding content is not a priority for interviewees in this sample when determining options relating to postgraduate study. It can be implied from the research findings of the study that as soon as teachers in the sample had identified a masters as a means of fulfilling their particular needs they set about choosing a college based on convenience, past experiences, accessibility and perceived reputation or tradition associated with certain colleges. Further evidence of this choice of college

over course is indicated by interviewees applying for a variety of options within masters programmes in order to get accepted onto the masters programme in the college. This approach was further reinforced by some interviewees who suggested that if they were not offered their preferred option they would take any other option to ensure they completed a masters. However a minority of teachers in the study had chosen a particular field of study and had applied to a particular college to specialize in their chosen area.

While interviewees in this sample expressed concern about the cost of the masters they generally indicated an acceptance of it as a standard cost and pointed out that portions of the cost could be claimed back. In fact teachers across every age bracket viewed financial gain as another motivating factor in pursuing masters degrees. Similarly in relation to time, teachers in the study developed personal strategies to cope with the constraints placed on their time by engaging in postgraduate study. Investing time and money in pursuing masters degrees was acceptable to teachers in the study and reflects an OECD (1998) finding that in every country individuals are willing to invest time and money voluntarily in professional development. The findings in this thesis point to a situation whereby remuneration for the pursuit of postgraduate study would promote an already emerging trend where having a masters degree is becoming the norm.

## 2. Conclusions and Future Work

Participants interviewed in the study suggested that undertaking masters degrees fulfilled personal, professional, cultural, and career needs. This concurs with existing research in each of these respective areas. Motivations to pursue postgraduate study are embedded in the way that students perceive their masters to meet these individual needs.

The personal needs identified by interviewees in the sample relate to time, money and their age and stage in life. They took responsibility for their personal development by undertaking further study in order to fulfil their achievement needs. For the

participants in the study this reflected a commitment to lifelong learning which concurs with existing research which suggests that lifelong learning is penetrating the mindset of the teaching profession. This openness towards learning also fosters the professional needs of teachers.

The professional needs as identified by teachers in the study included the need to keep up to date, the need to have experience validated and the need to refresh oneself. This has also emerged in other research studies in this area. Both the data findings and the literature involving teacher identity propose that a masters is a channel for furthering reflection on knowledge and experience which is utilized by teachers to fulfil their identity needs. This is impacted upon by the changing nature of the workplace that is placing new demands on teachers in emerging professional areas. A masters is considered by teachers in the study to be a formalized approach to creating new professional knowledge in the face of these challenges.

Consequently such changes in the workplace for these participants seems to foster a situation where masters programmes are becoming the norm for individuals and within school contexts and this in turn responds to the cultural needs of postgraduate students. The literature and comments from interviewees suggest that because masters are valued by both individuals and society they are being pursued in order to achieve equal standing with colleagues in terms of qualifications.

The final area identified by interviewees in the study focused on career needs. It is evident from both the literature and the interviews conducted that each teacher has different career goals and different career needs. Consequently a masters degree is perceived to cater for a variety of career based needs. These include the need to secure a particular job, the need to gain a qualification to match a desired job, the need to gain confidence to apply for a desired job and the need to pursue the qualification that a current job is perceived to require. Some teachers in the study felt that a postgraduate qualification would provide options and opportunities beyond the classroom. These opportunities included leaving the classroom or leaving teaching and working in a different area.

Ultimately interviewees in the sample were willing to invest time and money in the pursuit of their perceived needs and it should be noted that a continuum of individually based needs requires a continuum of provision for the fulfilment of these needs. As the findings from this research have demonstrated the willingness to commit to a masters degree in a way that changes the course of life in order to fulfil needs conveys the empowering nature of learning to create choices and freedom.

The overriding emergent theme for future study is why postgraduate students are willing to forego choice of course content in favour of simply securing a masters programme at their university of choice and the implications that this finding has for university provision.

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