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How to cite:

Di Paolo, Terry and Pegg, Ann (2010). Transferring, transforming and transitioning: the motivations and aspirations of credit transfer students. In: 2010 SRHE Annual Research Conference: 'Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?' Exploring Meaning, Identities and Transformation in Higher Education, 14-16 Dec 2010, Newport, UK.

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

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Paper submitted to SHRE Annual Conference 2010.

Transferring, transforming and transitioning: the motivations and aspirations of credit transfer students

Dr Terry Di Paolo – Centre for Inclusion and Curriculum, The Open University

Dr Ann Pegg - Centre for Inclusion and Curriculum, The Open University

Introduction

This paper presents key findings from a survey of 263 Open University students transferring credit to an undergraduate degree programme from studies or programmes of learning completed elsewhere. Half the students surveyed had enrolled on Arts modules; the remainder of students were studying modules in Maths, Computing and Technology. The paper highlights different motivations and employability goals amongst these groups of students and uses theories of cultural capital and identity capital to interpret the research findings.

Credit Transfer

Broadly, credit transfer (also known as “topping-up”, “advanced standing”, “accreditation of prior learning” or “direct entry”) is viewed as the full or partial completion of study/credit elsewhere (QAA, 2008) and often denotes movement between organisations and/or higher education providers. There are a number of common credit transfer routes, including: transition from qualifications such as Diploma’s and Foundation Degrees to undergraduate degrees; accreditation of prior work-related learning; and, the transfer of studies between institutions.

There is an emergent literature on the experiences of credit transfer students but at present this focuses on the transition from studies completed at Level 3 to 5 of the National Qualifications Framework to direct-entry to qualifications at Level 6 (Barron and D’Annunzio-Green, 2009; Dumbleton et al, 2008; Lintern and Hicks, 2007; and Tait and Godfrey, 2001). This work has thus far concentrated on progression pathways between courses in partner institutions, often in the fields of business or social care, and not examined the much broader experience of transfer both in terms of disciplines and modes of learning.

Data collection

An online survey, designed to explore aspects related to career prospects and employability, was administered to two populations of part-time students studying with the Open University: one group were studying modules delivered by the Faculty of Arts and the other group studying modules delivered by the Faculty of Mathematics, Computing and Technology. Across both groups, 263 students indicated that they had transferred, or envisaged transferring, credit from past

university-level studies into their current studies. The study reports on findings from 129 students studying Arts modules and 134 students studying Maths, Computing and Technology modules.

Findings

All survey respondents were aged over 21 but Arts students with credit transfer tended to be older, with many over the age of 50. MCT students with credit transfer tended to be younger with most aged between 31-50 years. Across the two groups some 60% of students had experience of full-time higher education.

This paper focuses on findings in relation to three research questions:

1. *What motivated these students to commence studies with the institution (a distance education provider)?* –Arts students were more likely to have been motivated to study by personal interest and development over career/employment needs. In contrast, students studying MCT courses were more likely to have been motivated by employment/career needs. MCT students were also more likely to be in full-time employment compared to Arts students who were more likely to be in part-time employment, unemployed or retired.
2. *What were their plans at the end of their studies?* – students studying Arts courses responded that they were likely to be looking for a complete change in work-role or organisation. Additionally, Arts students were more likely to report moving into retirement and dormant work periods. In contrast, students studying MCT courses aspire to an ongoing relationship with their current employer either in their existing work-role or by actively seeking promotion.
3. *Do students continue their studies in their original discipline?* More than half the students in the Arts and MCT groups reported that their present studies were in areas unrelated to their past studies.

Cultural Capital and Identity Capital as interpretive frameworks

To interpret the contrast in findings between the motivations and aspirations of students with credit transfer studying Arts modules and MCT modules we draw on two theoretical frameworks: cultural capital and identity capital. These frameworks enable us to explain why some students appear to be utilising credit transfer as a vehicle for continuing past study (we view this as transition) whilst others are changing study pathways (we view this as transformation).

Bourdieu (2002) posits “institutionalised” capital as a form of cultural capital which exists in societies with a system of formal education. We draw on this notion to explore how transferable credit and past experiences of higher education also constitute a form of institutionalised capital.

To explain why some students opt to transfer credit whilst others end their studies or drop-out we draw on Hodkinson's (2008) notion of "horizons for action" which provides a way of understanding career decision-making and progression. We argue that credit transfer is demonstration for some of a "horizon" which in part comprises the achievement of a degree as part of a larger project linked to personal aspiration. The notion of horizons also enables an exploration of changing horizons across the lifecourse.

However, we also explore the importance of looking beyond cultural capital theory as an explanatory framework. Instead, we also draw on identity capital (Côté, 1996; Jamieson et al, 2009) and the notion of strategic behaviour individuals use to navigate the obstacles of late-modern society to become "pilots of their own destinies" (Côté, *ibid*:423).

Conclusion

This work adds to our understanding of the credit transfer experience in higher education by uniquely drawing on findings from students focusing their studies in contrasting disciplines and by interpreting the research outcomes using cultural capital and identity capital.

In July 2010, Vince Cable gave his first speech on higher education (HE) and noted "a big demand for more modular programmes allowing easier transfer of credits between institutions: also helping to deal with the wasted effort of "drop-outs" ...who could, under a modular system, take forward what they have achieved."

In this research, the "taking forward of achievement" is understood as complex and the consequences of late-modern society mean that credit transfer needs to be viewed as an opportunity that brings individuals closer to long-held aspirations as well as offering an opportunity to enact change and transformation in adult lives.

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