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Changing lives on the "Degree of Choice": older first generation learners on the Open programme

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Abstract

This paper presents initial findings from a programme of research exploring why students at a provider of distance higher education chose to enrol on a flexible combined studies programme – The Open Programme. The Open University's Open Programme is one of the most flexible degree programmes in the UK and enables students to select and combine modules from the across the Institution's undergraduate curriculum leading to the award of either a BA or BSc Open degree.

The research reported here emerged from a project originally designed to explore why some students chose to study clusters of Science courses as they progressed towards an Open degree whilst others focused their studies on Arts courses. This work revealed a significant proportion of the student body sampled were first generation students and in this paper we focus on their motivations, decision making and experiences. Specifically, this paper explores why these students elected to engage with higher education, why they chose to study via distance education and why they opted for an Open degree.

The research highlights some challenges for policy makers in how to better support these first generation students, specifically to ensure they align with the appropriate path to achieve their aspirations. First generation students appear reluctant to seek advice either prior to or after enrolment. Furthermore, few students immerse themselves into the full educational experience; instead they tend to lead a very independent (even isolated) student existence.

Introduction

In the UK, widening participation in post-compulsory education has been a government priority for over a decade. This high profile strategy is driven by both economic and social justice considerations and, in particular, focuses on disadvantaged groups which include ethnic minorities and those from lower-socioeconomic groups (HEFCE, 2008). Often applicants/students from these groups share a common dimension – they are "first generation students".

One of the earliest definitions of first generation students comes from the USA where much of the present research into this population has been focused. Billson and Terry (1982) define first generation students as those "whose parent had had no college or

university experience" (p58). In the UK, Thomas and Quinn (2007) define first generation as "those for whom the responsible older generation (not necessarily birth parents) have not had any opportunities to study at university at any stage in their lives" (p51). Even though most first generation students come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, parental opportunity to study at university is fundamental to Thomas and Quinn's definition of first generation students. This is because of the pivotal influence family, and in particular parental education, have on educational success and progression to higher education.

First generation students are increasingly drawn to an expanded higher education system in the UK that is focused on delivering a skilled workforce for the 21st Century and enhanced employment opportunities for graduates. Such students make up the majority of new students in this expanded system: using higher education as stepping stone to a particular occupation or way of improving their employment prospects whilst they often continue living in the parental home (Purcell et al, 2008).

Quinn (2004) claims that for young working class person, the archetypal first generation student, it is not a distant dream but rather a mundane reality that the educational experience will be continued over a longer period without any seismic shift away from familiar home ground" (p64).

At the same time university admissions staff are intent on attracting students from families and communities with little or no previous experience of higher education. Such is this drive that, following sector-wide consultation, in 2008 UCAS began asking applicants whether their parents attended university.

There is an emergent literature on the experiences of first generation students and their engagement and experience of higher education (see Thomas and Quinn, ibid) much of it originating in the USA. Vargas (2004) claims that first generation students are likely to be lacking in "college knowledge" related to admission procedures, finance and are more likely to make unrealistic study choices or plans for college given their achievement in high school. Horn and Nuñez (2000) report that that first generation students tend to experience less involvement from parents in the logistics of college and career planning. Thayer (2000) reports that the first generation students are less likely to receive family support for their decision to attend college. Whilst London (1989) reports on wider tensions that emerge between first generation students and their families. Choy (2001) has found that such students are more likely to study part-time and more likely to drop out. Billson and Terry (ibid) report that first and second generation students may have similar aspirations but first generations students are less likely to be integrated into university life as they socialise outside university and often undertake more paid work than their second generation peers.

However, a limitation of this literature is that it focuses on the experiences of young first generation students engaging in traditional higher education whilst Walker (2008) argues that we should not homogenise first generation students. However, recent work appears to offer no account of the experiences of an increasingly diverse student population, including mature learners, engaged in diverse modes of study (e.g. part-time and/or at a distance).

The research presented in this paper addresses this limitation and extends our understanding of "first generation students" in the UK by exploring the case of older first generation part-time students engaging in distance education. Specifically, the paper examines the motivations, decision making and experiences of students who

have engaged with a flexible modular programme which enables individuals to create a degree tailored to their own requirements.

Older students in higher education

Mature, part-time students constitute a significant and growing proportion of the UK's higher education student population; yet, much less is known about them compared to full-time students (Jamieson, et al, 2009). The engagement of older people with higher education is increasingly highlighted by policy makers and government officials. For instance, in 2007 the then Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skill, John Denham, made the following comments in a speech delivered at the Universities UK Conference.

> *Two important trends are coming together which will inevitably have consequences for universities.*

> *The first is that the rising tide of 18-year olds will begin to ebb…*

> *Secondly, as a country we simply cannot afford to have a Higher Education sector that is focused on school and college leavers. As the Leitch report made clear, 70% of the workforce in 2020 has already left school. Many of them need university level education.*

> *…We cannot meet the country's needs purely by educating the rising generation.*

More recently, the Rt. Hon. Lord Mandelson, First Secretary of State, Secretary of State for Business, Innovation & Skills, made the following comments in a speech delivered to senior representatives from HE, Business and Media, 27 July 2009

> *I also think we need to ask whether the higher education system adequately supports mature students and part timers. I think we have taken huge steps in all these areas…*

> *But we need to be that serious about adult skills and life-long higher and further education, for a number of simple reasons. First: almost half of British university students are already mature students. Second, most of the future British workforce of the 2020s is already in their twenties or older, and it is their skills that will determine our economic capabilities at that critical point. Third, the demographics of an ageing population mean that even with an influx of foreign students, the student market is going to get progressively older, and demand will reflect that.*

Bowl (2001) argues that mature student experience higher education in different ways to younger students. Bowl describes the mature students experience as one for "personal, academic, financial and emotional survival" (Bowl ibid, p 142). In interviews with mainly female BME mature students Bowl found that older students often found their way into university by chance and often encountered cynicism about their decision to enter higher education. Additionally, for some entry to university was traumatic and isolating as they attempted to juggle the challenges of being responsible as a care-giver and/or employee with those of being a student.

Similarly, in work carried out in Australia, Tones et al (2009) report two main barriers encountered by mature students in higher education. Firstly, conflicts in responsibilities held outside the university and those of being a student. Secondly,

difficulties associated with adjustment to the academic and social realms of university life, in particular, differing expectations of what was required in terms of assessment writing. Furthermore, Tomes et al found that students over 45-years and from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds reported greater barriers in their engagement with higher education.

In recognition that older students face particular difficulties integrating into university life dedicated induction programmes have been found to be effective in lessening anxiety about making the transition into higher education (Greer and Tidd, 2006) and increasing retention (Jones, 2006).

An expanding and ever more accommodating higher education system is encouraged by government officials that it needs to do more to address issues to do with the access and retention of mature students. The notion of a flexible, responsive curriculum is lauded as a key to 21st century higher education. With older students reporting a desire for more help in choosing the right course, little is known about how this flexibility benefits or disadvantages mature students.

Negotiated Provision and the Open Programme

Whilst much is made of the expansion of higher education in the UK and the increased provision for non-traditional groups of students in recent years, significant developments have also occurred in the delivery of the curriculum. Notably, the development of modular programmes of study during the 1990's has played a key role in the expansion of many institutions' curriculum offering.

Bretts and Smith (1998) identify various models of modular provision. They claim the most flexible modular model is a "negotiated provision" which, whilst regulated in much the same way as "named" degrees in specific subjects, enables students to select modules from across the undergraduate curriculum. In this way, a student is able to construct a programme of study relevant to their personal interests and career needs. Furthermore, Bretts and Smith argue that such a programme is attuned to the needs and context which finds the sector having to cater to the educational aspirations of an increasing number of part-time mature students.

The Open University's Open Programme is one of the most flexible degree programmes in the UK and enables students to select and combine modules from the across the Institution's undergraduate curriculum leading to the award of either a BA or BSc Open degree.

The Programme caters to a broad audience of students, including: those who wish to combine a set of subjects not catered for by the University's named degrees; those who started off with the intention of a named degree but in the course of their studies have changed their minds and students who want to maximise credit transfer. Each year nearly 40% of the University's graduates qualify with an Open degree offered by the Programme.

Whilst the Open Programme is designed to accommodate diverse pathways to a degree students tend not to study a random selection of courses. Instead, many students prefer to study clusters of courses in one or two cognate areas of the undergraduate curriculum. The research reported here emerged from a project originally designed to explore why some students chose to study clusters of Science courses as they progressed towards an Open degree whilst others focused their studies

on Arts courses. This work revealed a significant proportion of the student body sampled were first generation students and in this paper we focus on their motivations, decision making and experiences. Specifically, this paper explores why these students elected to engage with higher education, why they chose to study via distance education and why they opted for an Open degree.

Methodology

The research methodology deployed on this project was one of rich qualitative inquiry. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted by telephone with a random sample of Arts and Science students who were or had been linked to the Open Programme.

A pilot study with Science students was undertaken in autumn 2008 which proved the value of both the field of research and the deep qualitative approach. A further and larger project was completed in spring 2009 looking at Arts students.

In total, interviews were conducted with 28 older first generation students. Eighteen of the students were female and ten were male. Their ages ranged between 28 and 74 years with most of the informants in their 50s and 60s.

Findings

Why do students engage with higher education

A dominant theme that emerged amongst the narratives of student was "change" – in particular, the way in which current studies provided a mechanism by which to reconstruct or enhance one's biography. For some, this change was purely internal and psychological – a need to gain academic credentials. Others were more concerned with accessing additional or entirely new employment opportunities through the credentials of a degree.

Four main themes or accounts of change highlighted why these students had chosen to engage or participate in higher education: study purely for personal development; study for specific professional development; study to apply skills and knowledge at work or home; and, enhancement and development of one's identity

Study purely for personal development

A number of students reported embarking on higher education to fulfil a personal ambition and to add academic credentials to the personal biography:

> "I just want to try and get the subjects studied that I'm interested in and then when I get to the end of that … The degree itself is almost a bonus, you know, it's the subject matter that I'm interested in. It's the fact that you get a qualification at the end of it is like an extra bit. And just to get letters after my name, you know, it's the subject matter that I'm interested in and this is one way of getting that information." (Caroline).

Additionally, some promoted the benefits of study with the OU as a hobby with the benefit of slowing mental decline. :

Students studying for personal development had very broad patterns of study: selecting widely from the range of available courses in both Science and Arts

faculties. Conversely, some were single-mindedly focused on refreshing their knowledge in one particular discipline. Others were slightly more hedonistic in their approach, with study as more of a pure leisure activity:

> *The Open Degree is [...] not a driving factor if you know what I mean. [...] So if I get there it will be nice but I don't feel I would have wasted my money if I don't get there because I'm enjoying what I'm doing for the fact that it's filling my time, plus the fact that it's interesting and I'm learning things (Gary).*

Study for Specific Professional Development

In contrast to students studying for personal development, a smaller number of students reported studying quite strategically for professional development.

> *I need to improve my chances career wise. It is definitely career. I mean I am enjoying it as well but it is motivated by career (Angela).*

Even before the financial climate changed, students reported embarking on an Open Degree programme with the motivation to develop their workplace prospects: "make myself more employable" (Tracy) or have a stepping stone to a further qualification. Another - not wanting to return to waitressing after bringing up children – states:

> *I thought if I do a degree in something I'm interested in. I haven't actually got a career in mind or anything like that. But at least it will lead to something hopefully that I'll be a bit more interested in long term (Gail).*

Here the attainment of a degree was considered enough to enable individuals to either change their career direction completely or increase their employment prospects in a competitive environment where higher education is seen as providing a distinct advantage: "My idea is to retrain again to get another job that's more satisfactory or will have some job satisfaction as well" (Rebecca). Other students want to change their level of competence and attainment. For example, a 57 year old wishes to become a teacher:

> *I've been teaching NVQ in Childcare but it came to the stage where I wanted more qualifications. I wanted to be recognised. I want to be more competent [...] within my workplace. [...] I shall do one year in University for the PGCE [...] needs to be at least half, if not more, of the subject you're going to teach (Amy)*

In other cases, students reported needing a degree to allow them to continue holding their current post – some unwelcome change had occurred whereby an occupation that an individual may have been working in for many years now required possession of a degree. For example:

> *[I am studying] to go back to the job that I was doing before, which sounds really cock eyed, but I was doing a job teacher adviser and teacher trainer for environmental education in primary schools but I was employed by Groundwork UK and Hampshire employed Groundwork UK to supply me. Well when Groundwork as a charity lost their funding Hampshire wouldn't employ me - even though I'd been working for them for eight years - because I didn't have a degree (Caroline)*

Similarly, a professional interpreter found that - in changing her country of residence to Italy - despite her substantial experience, potential employers now demanded that she holds a degree:

> *when I send in my CV here in Italy to anybody they look at it and they sniff and they say "Oh you haven't got a degree" And I say "Yes, but I've got a postgraduate diploma" "Oh well, if you haven't got a degree well we don't want you" [...] The fact that I've been teaching for over twenty years successfully is neither here nor there. And so this is it. It doesn't really matter what sort of a degree (Gail).*

Others stated that they just needed to "have a piece of paper I could show people" (Fred) or that a degree was needed for entering management level: "it didn't really matter what it was as long as I sort of proved that I could study at that sort of level" (Sarah).

Study to Apply Skills and Knowledge at work or at home

Some students had limited interest in completing their studies with a degree instead they looked to acquire specific skills and knowledge that could be used in the workplace or in their home-life. For example, six students stated that they may not or do not intend to complete the degree – judging instead the level of skills and knowledge that satisfies their personal or professional requirements.

> *"not bothered about the degree as such – skills and knowledge picked up from courses are just as important [...] 'Cos I'm not very literate. I did drama. I wanted to learn to write things" (Eliza).*

Independently of one another, two students who are also parents of autistic (and otherwise challenged) children provided similar accounts of the way in which they intended to utilise their studies. For example, one described how:

> *In a bid to understand C [her son] I started off doing "Senses and perception", "Signals and perception" (OU modules). That was last year. I struggled at that because I didn't have a scientific background but I also had loads of issues still going on with C and to cut a long story short, I didn't complete the course. I don't feel bad about that. I don't feel like a failure because I carried on reading and I've taken from that as much as I can and that I need and it was a very valuable thing to do.*

> *I then went straight into writer's course because in between all this I was asked by the local education authority to write about life experience with C to help the education system deal with children like mine (emphasis added) (Sinead).*

Study to Change Identity or Individual Capital

A significant number of students reported being inspired to study by people around them making progress with – or having fun at – study. More specifically, some first generation students - who may have felt short-changed by their original schooling - reported that having the opportunity to study at degree level and ultimately acquire a degree gave them the confidence to compete with or stand alongside their peers at work.

> *Everyone I work with has a degree so I feel that if I have a degree as well I can hold my head high (Beate).*

These individuals saw their investment in education as a means of explicitly raising their individual capital, either in the work place or amongst their social group:

A small number of students who already held an Open degree and were continuing their studies with an additional degree reported the positive impact that the attainment of a degree had had on their psychological state and their concrete workplace achievements:

> *I think it gave me the confidence to say 'Yeah I can do that'. And I basically went through a whole bunch of promotions and ended up with, you know, a really good job out of it (Fred).*

Why Choose the Open University and Distance Learning?

There are many pathways to advanced study or higher education available to older first generation students: from the University of the Third Age; Colleges of Further and Higher Education, to conventional universities (and their extra-mural programmes). However, the OU has unique properties which students are attracted by and enable them to study in ways which are amenable and comfortable to them. Two key reasons emerged about why the students in our interviews had chosen to study with the OU: firstly, part-time distance learning enabled students to study around other life commitments (such as work and family). Secondly, and more surprising, students reported that studying at a distance enabled many students to make hidden or invisible their studies from friends and work colleagues.

Enabling Study Around Other Commitments

The flexibility of all OU study tended to be conflated with that of the Open degree, where students highly rated the fact that they can "do it when I want to" (Beate). This appeared to be especially the case for students who, for example, had debilitating and ongoing illnesses which rendered them physically limited but with an appetite for learning which is unlimited: "I'm disabled and I'm housebound more or less [... it's] ideal for me to do it from home" (Maude)

Without this flexibility, it is unlikely that many of the individuals would be able to either to access university level education or indeed maintain their education aspirations on a long term basis.

Students who have significant family or work commitments tended to adopt highly effective and imaginative time management skills to allow themselves the time to dedicate to study. For example, one informant reported that she wrote on her kitchen wall-planner the number of hours of work that she needed to achieve that week - and would execute chunks of work during, for instance, the time when she was peeling potatoes for the family dinner (Tracy).

Enabling the Construction of Invisible Student Lives

A surprising finding from this research is that a significant proportion of students have chosen distance learning with the OU precisely because it demands little interaction with fellow students and tutors. Indeed, one student sums up the advantage as being that "[I] don't have to interact with other people" (Beate).

There's not many people know I'm on it and that's the way I like it, so [...] If you're doing it at long distance it's personal innit? You're not after the glory are you 'cos you'd go to the university and go for the glory wouldn't you? (Martin).

For these students, avoidance of human contact was likely to extend from not attending tutorials through to not using e-forums. Their prerogative was to not participate in any interactive activity. Additionally, they were unlikely to discuss their studies with anyone other than their spouse for fear of being judged or "looked down on" (Maude). In essence, these individuals were constructing their studies as invisible and hidden: "It's a personal thing and as I'm doing it for myself I don't talk to a lot of people about it" (Beate).

In some of these cases, individuals barely discussed their studies beyond their very immediate family. These were often students who were wanting to prove to themselves that they 'had it in them' to gain a degree. Often, such narratives were associated with negative experiences of schooling as children and young people. In some cases these students also reported being highly uncomfortable talking about their studies because of how they felt their studies and accomplishments would be perceived by their peers. They feared being misinterpreted as thinking themselves better than their friends, acquaintances or work colleagues as shown in the extracts below.

"I try [laughing] ... to tell you the truth, I try to avoid telling anybody what I'm doing [laughing]. [...] Simply because as I say they [fellow residents in old peoples' complex] either think that I'm trying to be better than anybody else [...] I'm looked down on really (Maude).

it may perhaps, possibly class or something, but with me mates, you know, they're a bit like me, if somebody said to me "Oh I'm doing an Open University degree"...you think well, you show off, bugger off and you'd probably 'take the mick' out of them. So rather than pretend you're important or you know something you just don't say anything (Martin)

Why an Open degree?

The choice of an Open degree rather than a Named Degree was a major focus of the research. In particular, the research attempted to explore whether student reflections on decision-making and information gathering and analysis suggest that they had made (or were making) informed choices between the two degree variants offered by the University.

A small minority of students were very well-informed about both the advantages and limitations of an Open degree. A larger number were less well informed but were also unconcerned because they did not see a degree as being the main function of their study.

Three key reasons emerged for choosing an Open degree amongst our population of older first generation students: a need to keep options open; a need in some cases to preserve comfort and reduce anxiety about assessment measures or particular learning strategies; and, finally, the flexibility afforded by the degree.

Keeping Options Open

The Open Degree enables students to commit to higher education and a route to a degree – but does not commit them irreversibly into a single study pathway that may ultimately reveal itself to be the wrong one - especially if their aspirations or needs change significantly:

> *I would hate to be forced down a path. In fact when I first started out I wanted to do Oceanography, that was my aim in life and I did, I think, three years of science courses and then switched to computing and now have a career in computing and a life of computing and teach computing (Sarah)*

As one interviewee put it, the Open degree means that their decision is not "written in stone" (Caroline). What one student describes as the "selectability" (Sarah) of tailoring a degree to an individual's precise needs is highly valued.

Preserving the Student's Comfort Zone

> *Certainly I have picked certain courses, certainly the course I picked last year which the one I did two years ago which is "A world of whose making" I definitely chose because there was no exam. I accept that I really do not do well in exams. [...]*

> *So, you know, I am conscious now of I will look at things like that. I will look at is there a residential, you know, is there an examinable component? When does it start? How long does it go on? The length of duration doesn't normally bother me but I am more clear now about looking at things and making sure that something absolutely suits me (Naomi).*

Whilst many students studied for an Open Degree specifically because it suited their particular circumstances and preferences, for some students the decision to study an Open degree was also rather more strategic. In particular, the Open Degree enables them to avoid residential schools, attendance of face-to-face tutorials or courses with exams. Individuals would search out courses based on the criteria not necessarily of interest, but rather that they did not require examinations or residential school attendance. For some this was because their family (childcare or caring for an adult) commitments or limitations of income made attendance impossible. For the category of 'invisible' students introduced above, this choice was necessary because they do not wish to interact with fellow students or receive 'classroom' education.

Enabling Flexibility Around Changing Personal Circumstances and Needs

Whilst, there are no time restrictions on completing an Open degree most students studying part-time complete their studies in 6 – 8 years. However, some students take longer, often taking breaks of one or more years during their studies and this was also the case for some of the students interviewed in the present research.

Often, periods of study that extended over a number years beyond the usual or six to eight years were often associated with significant changes in personal circumstances. In many cases what started out as work-oriented study pathway became less relevant (e.g. "So it was originally [for a career] but now, as I say, it's just purely for pleasure" (Victoria)). These students found the flexibility of the Open Degree an ideal option which adapted to suit the changes in their lives. For example:

Well, I started way back doing IT-related courses and I've had sort of a gap between studying that amounted to about nine years in effect. And after that time some of the initial courses then no longer formed part of a recognised degree in IT. They were dropped off because they were too old. And also I think I got to the point where I didn't really need a degree in IT itself so I wanted just another course to, for my own benefit (Robert).

Conclusion

The programme of research on which this paper is based has revealed that few assumptions can be made concerning the varied backgrounds of and motivations for study amongst older first generation learners.

There are individuals single-mindedly making strategic changes in their career and personal lives – perhaps to gain vocational qualifications and leave their current partner. Many have nursed an overwhelming desire to return to a subject they enjoyed at school decades earlier. Ambulance paramedics want to do something very different with their spare time. Elderly people want to keep their minds active. An interpreter qualified to the highest level requires a degree to gain any work in Italy. Parents of autistic children want to both understand the condition and communicate their insights to others. A woman living in an economically deprived area wants to exit a constant round of low paid jobs and rejection letters by becoming a teaching assistant. A carer in an old people's home wants to develop her writing skills in order to record the life-stories of the WWII veterans she nurses. Lone carers and individuals with disabilities use the flexibility that distance learning and the Open Degree offers to access university-level education otherwise out of reach.

Further research is underway. Included in this comprehensive package is work either zeroing-in on specific research findings and their institutional implications or testing conclusions against a panel of 1500 current Open programme students via an online survey, to access a wider and more representative insight into the experiences of students.

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