

The experiences of older first-generation students in higher education: findings from interviews and an online survey of distance learners in the UK.

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Abstract

This paper reports on findings from an extensive research programme which examined the experiences of first generation students engaged in part-time distance learning. The research considers first generation students to represent a sub-population of learners whose parents/guardians did not engage with higher education. This work extends our understanding of this group of students by focusing on the case of older first generation learner engaging in part-time study.

Findings are presented from interviews with twenty-five students and an online survey which found a majority of students' (N=366) parents had no university-level qualifications. The paper reports on three dominant themes to emerge from this work: firstly the ways in which older first generation students construct study as a force for change. Secondly, the ways in which these students are drawn to part-time distance learning by specific affordances. Finally, the research reports on why first generation students are drawn to a flexible programme of study.

Introduction

First generation student (or entrants) refers to a significant sub-population of students who come from families with no history of university education. They 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 (Purcell et al, 2008). At the same time, many universities in the UK are intent on providing opportunities for students from families with little or no previous experience of higher education. Such is this drive that, following sector-wide consultation, in 2008 UCAS began asking applicants to respond to an optional question of whether their parents had attended university.

There is an emergent literature on the engagement and experiences of young first generation students in relation to higher education (see Thomas and Quinn, 2007). This research reveals parental education is a key factor in the access and success of such students. Additionally this work suggests young first-generation students more likely to attend post-1992 institutions; remain living at home during their studies; and, likely to find the transition to higher

education a challenging experience both academically and socially (Thomas and Quinn, *ibid*).

Generally, the literature focuses on the experiences of young first generation students engaging in traditional higher education. It seems to offer no account of the experiences of an increasingly diverse student population engaged in diverse modes of study, for example, part-time learners, those studying through distance-learning and mature students.

In this work older students (or mature students) are considered those aged 21 and over when commencing their studies. Bowl (2001) argues that higher education offers a different set of experiences for the mature students compared to the experience of the traditional younger entrant. For the older student, higher education is seen as struggle for personal, academic, financial and emotional survival.

The research presented in this paper attempts to extend our understanding of first generation students in higher education by exploring the case of older first generation part-time students engaging in distance education. As a context, this paper draws on a flexible modular programme (the University's Open Programme) which enables individuals to create a degree tailored to their own requirements and examines the varying experiences of a diverse group of first generation students who are also distance learners.

Method

First generation students were identified from telephone interviews originally conducted as part of a project exploring student engagement with the University's Open degree Programme undertaken at the end of 2008 and in the first half of 2009. During interviews, students were questioned about their motivations for studying at a distance, their decision to engage with the Open programme and their experience of being a student of the University. In the original project interviews were conducted with forty students and twenty-five students were identified as first generation students.

Interviews with all students were transcribed and dominant themes extracted from the data informed an online survey distributed to 1500 current students of the Open programme in July 2009. The survey explored aspects of the student experience similar to those covered in the interviews but enabled a wider and more representative insight into the experiences of students. Approximately 80% of respondents reported that neither of their parents had university-level qualifications and over a third of students reported that their parents had no formal educational qualifications.

The findings from interviews and the survey provide a broad insight into the experience of first generation learners on the Open Programme. However, the remainder of this paper focuses on three dominant themes that emerged from this work to date. These include: the ways in which older first generation students construct study as a force for change. Secondly, the ways in which these students are drawn to part-time distance learning by specific affordances. Finally, our findings reveal why first generation students are drawn to a flexible programme of study which enables them to construct a degree tailored to their requirements.

Findings

Study as a force for change

The research provided insight into the way students used skills from courses to make improvements in their lives in unexpected ways. Many first generation students wanted to achieve significant change. Beyond the expected professional development motivations, the research indicated the desire for change was often very personal in nature. Some students sought out study for purely personal development (an enjoyment of 'learning') or the need to prove their intellectual capability either to themselves or to peers. Other students looked to acquire skills and knowledge for immediate application in their family life. Students also undertook study because they were inspired by those around them and saw the benefits they gained from study.

Utility of distance learning

Distance learning allowed many individuals access to university level education that would otherwise perhaps be excluded from if they looked to attending a conventional 'brick university'. Some students had very serious on-going illnesses which rendered them housebound or had family commitments where distance learning provided them with the only opportunity to fulfil their educational aspirations. Students developed highly effective time management and study skills to accommodate the needs of studying with pressures from home and work. First generation students tend to lead a very independent student existence, avoiding interaction with other students and support services. In many cases these individuals constructed their studies as invisible with few family or friends possessing knowledge of their studies.

Attraction of a flexible degree

Students highly rated the flexibility the degrees available through the Open Programme. Emphasising the way in which the Programme enabled them to freely select and study a variety of subjects of their choice and interest in whatever depth and breadth they sought rather than the perceived 'narrow' and limiting route of a traditional named degree. The flexibility extended to allowing students to change direction to accommodate new found interests or goals as well as significant changes to personal lives. Many students studied for an Open Degree specifically because it suited their particular circumstances and preferences but some students the decision to study and Open degree also strategic – letting them avoid residential schools, attendance of face-to-face tutorials or courses with exams.

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