Studying for a qualification at an equivalent or lower level: who are the students and why are they studying?

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Background. Higher Education, ‘ELQ’ students, and part-time study

Since September 2007, the term ‘ELQ’ has gradually crept into the mainstream discourse on adult learning in the UK, and those working in the field in this country are now only too familiar with the term. It refers to those studying for an ‘Equivalent or Lower level Qualification’ than the one they already possess, at whatever level. In a letter to the Higher Education Funding council (HEFCE), the Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills announced that institutions would no longer receive funding for such ELQ students (Denham, 2007). In the higher education context, examples would be students with a Bachelors degree studying for a second Bachelors degree (‘equivalent’) or a Certificate (‘lower’). The reasons given by the Secretary of State were to do with equity, consistency and the economy. He argued that such students do not receive individual financial support ‘because we do not think that it is usually reasonable for the public purse to support students in studying for a qualification which is equivalent to, or at a lower level than, a qualification that they have already achieved’ (equity). Therefore, he argued (consistency), ‘the same principles as govern student support should also apply to funding distributed by the Funding Council’ (Denham, 2007). Resources, it was argued, should be focused on widening participation, and reaching those who did not already possess qualifications. Underlying the policy shift is a continued concern to focus education resources on what the government sees as of benefit to society and the economy. Thus a number of exemptions have been made, which allow funding for ELQ students: those subjects that are already accepted under the student support scheme (e.g. nursing); programmes co-funded by employers; Foundation Degrees (which by definition must have some employer engagement); and courses in some of the subjects considered ‘strategically important and vulnerable’ (SIVS). These include a range of sciences, languages and area studies. Thus the new measure represents an attempt to further steer education provision – and student choice – in certain prescribed directions, in subjects deemed important by the government, or by employers. The government has calculated that the policy will incur considerable savings (to be used on widening participation).

It seems that the assumptions underlying the policy are that:

- Many current ELQ students are not studying for employment reasons or any other reasons of benefit to society
- In so far as they are studying for employment reasons, employers have an incentive to contribute financially
- Benefits of study occurs mainly by ‘progression’ through formally defined levels of study
- Subjects can be rated according to their usefulness to the economy and society
The policy announcement gave rise to huge protests from a range of quarters, including the academic community and many politicians. It led to debates in Parliament, and the establishment of a House of Commons Select Committee. It was clear that those students most likely to be affected were part-time students, and some of the debate focused on the survival of institutions specialising in part-time provision, notably the Open University and Birkbeck, University of London. However, part-time students are not confined to those institutions. In recent decades, their numbers have grown. Over 40% of HE students in the UK are formally part-time students. The intensity of study varies considerably, averaging 37% of the full-time-equivalent (UUK, 2006). Nearly 70% study at undergraduate level, a quarter at taught post-graduate level, and about 5% are post-graduate research students. They tend to be in paid employment, and are more likely to study at a university near their home, or by distance learning. A high proportion of them are found in the post-92 universities, with the exception of research students. They are older, about half aged 30 – 39, and there are relatively more women. In terms of subjects studied, there are relatively more part-time students in subjects allied to medicine and in education, whereas biological sciences, law, engineering and creative arts are underrepresented.

Critics of the ELQ policy have put forward many arguments, which make sense intuitively to adult educators, who know their students. Yet little hard evidence has been analysed or presented. Whilst a great deal of research has been undertaken on the impact of HE qualifications for younger graduates, there is less evidence relating to outcomes for those deciding to study at a later stage in their life course. In the following we shall consider some evidence based on our own research on graduates from Birkbeck, University of London.

The benefits of part-time study project: context and methods

The benefits of part-time higher education research project was launched in 2003, designed as a longitudinal study aimed at exploring the characteristics, motivations and benefits of study for part-time mature students. The study was conducted at both Birkbeck and the Open University. Data were collected in 2003 (baseline postal questionnaire survey), 2005 (interviews) and 2006 (follow-up questionnaire survey). In this paper we concentrate on some of the findings from the Birkbeck baseline questionnaire survey and interviews. For more details of the study and its findings, see Benefits (2007).

Birkbeck is a college of the University of London, established specifically to provide part-time study opportunities for Londoners. Today, the vast majority of the students are still studying on a part-time basis. In terms of provision, Birkbeck differs from the national picture in two respects: there is a predominance of subjects in the social sciences and humanities, and a relatively high proportion of taught post-graduate programmes. There are also a relatively large number of Certificate and Diploma programmes, developed from the London University Extra-Mural programme, which was incorporated as part of Birkbeck some decades ago. This profile of provision is clearly important to bear in mind when considering the relevance of the findings to the part-time sector generally.

Baseline questionnaire survey

Postal questionnaires were sent to all those (2,700) graduates who had qualified at Birkbeck in 2003. Qualifications ranged from undergraduate certificates to postgraduate degrees, but for simplicity they are all referred to as ‘graduates’. The response rate was 58%, yielding a total of 1,539 responses. Data from the questionnaires were supplemented by administrative data from institutional records.
Data were collected concerning:

- The demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the respondents
- Reasons for enrolling on their course of study
- Benefits and costs of participation

The data about reasons for participation were taken from the questionnaire. Respondents completed the questionnaire after they had finished their studies, so the information provided was retrospective. In the same questionnaire, they were asked about the benefits of studying.

The questionnaire included 14 reasons for enrolment, and respondents rated each of these according to how strong each reason was for them. These data were summarised using factor analysis, which identified five underlying reasons or motivations for study. Respondents were then grouped according to their pattern of motivations, using cluster analysis.

Respondents were asked more than 40 questions about the outcomes of their studies. These were summarised into 14 types of benefit using a combination of factor analysis and theory. Finally, a multivariate regression analysis was conducted, which assessed the relative importance for each benefit of study of the characteristics of graduates, their motivations for studying, and the courses studied.

**Interviews**

Following the survey, 18 respondents were selected for interviews. Of these, six had been ‘ELQ’ students, i.e. they had studied for a qualification (mostly first degree level) at an equivalent or lower level than the one they already had. The aim of the interviews was to understand more about the processes around their decision to study, the study experience itself, and the outcomes of study. In this paper we draw on some of these interviews to illuminate why the ELQ students had engaged in study and what they saw as the benefits.

**Trends from overall responses**

1) *The characteristics of the graduates*

- The distribution of graduates by subject area studied was: Arts&humanities: About 40%; Social Sciences: About 30%; Business, administration and law: About 20%; Sciences: About 10%
- In terms of level of study, the distribution was the following: Bachelors: 23%; Postgraduates: 38% and Certificates/Diplomas: 39%
- There were more female than male respondents (60%), reflecting what is known generally for the sector.
- Three out of four graduates were economically active when they enrolled to study
- The great majority of graduates were aged between 31 and 60 and the average age was 43
- 24% had dependent children.
- Just under a fifth of respondents were of non-white ethnicity
- Twenty-three per cent of the undergraduate respondents gaining a Bachelors degree already had a higher education qualification. Just over half of those gaining undergraduate Certificates or Diplomas already had a qualification at degree level or above. These were the ELQ students, and we shall look more closely at them below.
2) Study aims/motivations

Of all the reasons ticked, those related to subject interest and personal development were chosen by most respondents. Also, getting a recognised qualification was highlighted by the majority. Reasons related to changing job and improving current job were highlighted in about a third to two thirds of cases. Post-graduates in particular highlighted current job improvement as a reason for study. A cluster analysis was conducted aimed at distinguishing individuals in terms of response patterns. It yielded some highly complex categories, reflecting the diversity of the student body and the mix of factors motivating the individual, and also suggesting that individuals themselves are not always clear about study aims and reasons (Feinstein et al., 2007).

I just did it because I was interested, I never did it thinking I'm gonna get a better job although, you know, supposedly in the back of my mind I thought maybe I would get a better job

3) Outcomes of study

Benefits to the graduates were identified in three areas.

Skills

- Around seven out of ten graduates noted some improvement in skills such as writing, time management, research skills and communications. Improvements in leadership skills, team work skills and entrepreneurial skills were mentioned by one in four or fewer.

Occupational benefits

- At the time of the survey, shortly after graduation, most graduates appeared to have the same employment status, and to be in the same type of work, as when they began studying.
- Around one third felt they had been helped in their current job and/or it had become more satisfying.
- Over a half said that their career opportunities had improved, and that they expected future benefits including a higher income.

Personal and educational benefits

- The overall effects on family and friends were positive. The greatest positive effects were the ability to help children with their education.
- Large numbers mentioned personal development, improved self-confidence and increased happiness.
- Small but significant numbers said that they had joined social/political organisations, or planned to, as a result of their studies.
- Over seven out of ten graduates said that they were now enjoying learning more as a result of their studies. Six out of ten ‘definitely’ planned to engage in further studies and four out of ten were already doing so. Around a third said that their attitude to learning had become ‘much more favourable’.

ELQ students

Of the respondents for whom qualification on entry was known (1405 cases or 91% of total population), the proportion studying for an ELQ differed significantly between programmes: The largest proportion were studying for an undergraduate Certificate or Diploma (shorter
programmes usually corresponding to about a third of a full degree). Fifty two per cent of the Certificate/Diploma graduates already had a degree or above level qualification. Of those who had studied for a Bachelors degree, 23% already had a degree. Of those who had completed a post-graduate qualification, 14% had already got a post-graduate qualification on entry.

In the following, ‘undergraduate ELQ’s’ refer to those who had completed a Bachelors degree or a Certificate/Diploma’, as distinct from the ‘postgraduate ELQ’s.

In terms of gender, the proportion of women in the ELQ category was slightly higher than for the total population (69% of undergraduate ELQs, compared with 66% of all undergraduate level respondents). Considering age, the older respondents were relatively more highly qualified on entry. This means that the ELQ students were relatively older. For example, of all male undergraduates (including cert/dip students) 30% were aged 50+. Of men with a post-graduate qualification on entry (i.e. studying for a lower qualification), 46% were aged 50+. There were relatively fewer female older students. Thus corresponding figures for the women were 24% and 28% respectively.

Employment reasons and benefits

Nationally, about 15% of part-time students receive financial support from their employer. Post-graduates receive most support (25%), compared with only 13% of those studying for first degrees (UUK, 2006). For the Birkbeck graduates the figures are slightly lower, reflecting the pattern of provision. Just over 11% had received full or part funding from their employers, and there was no difference between ELQ students and others. The proportion who gave ‘employer requirement’ as a reason for study was very low (less than five per cent), and again the ELQ students did not differ significantly from the general pattern.

Yet, in response to questions about employment related reasons for study, just over a quarter of the total population reported that their course related to their employment at the start of the course. This was slightly higher for the ELQ students, and lowest for those with ‘O’ level equivalent qualification on entry. It was particularly high for post-graduate ELQs, 61% of whom reported their course as relating to their current employment. When asked whether they expected their course to relate to their employment in the next five years, an even higher proportion – around 60% - including ELQ students, responded positively. Responses to other questions suggested that, compared with the non-ELQ students, the ELQ students were equally motivated by a wish either to help their current job, make it more satisfying or to change jobs. Around a third responded positively to these types of questions. ‘Getting a rise’ or ‘getting promotion’ was relatively less important for the ELQ students.

It seems therefore that overall the ELQ students were not significantly different from non-ELQ students. Both groups included respondents who reported employment related reasons for study, but these tended to be diffuse and future oriented expectations rather than concrete well defined plans related to specific jobs. This is well illustrated in the following quote from an undergraduate ELQ student:

...it was just for interest, it was purely for interest because I already had academic qualifications.........well, there has been one benefit for work...I applied for this job at... when I started in 2001.......to be able to put on my CV that I was studying, I think helped me to get the job because the culture of this place it very much values academic qualifications, and then when I transferred to ..........last summer, to be able to put recent academic qualifications down even though- well, I think actually
particularly because they were completely irrelevant... helped me both- helped my credibility....this particular place, but I think that, you know, for anyone looking for other jobs, well, anyone ....selected candidates, you’re looking for someone with the ability to learn new things and so to see evidence that they’re interested in learning and acquiring new qualifications is quite a good indicator that they’re open to learning..

This is further emphasised in the responses about outcomes of study: over half the respondents said it had increased their job opportunities, and the undergraduate ELQ students’ responses were only slightly lower (40% of those with a first degree on entry, and 50% of those with a post-graduate qualification on entry). Future job prospects could be as important as improvement of current job situation. One interviewee put this very succinctly:

... I think it’s generally true that their present employer doesn’t value the qualification that they’ve got whilst in their employment, and it’s only your next employer that notices that you [have been a student]...

Other reasons for study

Not all students gave employment related reasons for study, and those who did, also responded positively to a range of other suggested reasons. Interestingly, on the question of further study plans – ‘progression’, half of all respondents reported that a reason for study was to help them get onto a future course. This was the same for the undergraduate ELQs whose qualification on entry was a first degree. Of those who had a postgraduate qualification on entry, a quarter gave this reason. This supports the view held by many in the field: that the notion of progression as one continuous journey from one level of study to the next level up is too simplistic, and that many move ‘sideways’ or even ‘downwards’ as part of their progression journey. The most common reason is a wish to develop expertise in a new subject area, whether for employment or personal reasons. This is further supported by the very high proportion of respondents who give ‘interest in the subject’ as a ‘very strong’ reason for study: 81% of undergraduate ELQ students and 93% of postgraduate ELQ students, compared with around 73% for non-ELQ undergraduate students. Subject interest always tends to score high in surveys of study motivation. However, it seems to us to be a much more focused and important influence for the mature student. Many of our interviewees highlighted how serious they were about their study the second time round, compared with when they first went to university:

I remember flicking through the UCAS book and literally two hours before the deadline, what am I gonna do, what am I gonna do, horse riding studies, golf studies, psychology this and that, I mean it’s basically psychology, environmental studies or maritime studies...[went in order to] get a degree and hope to get a job at the end of it. I didn’t really give a stuff about the course, I mean it had some interesting parts which is why I did it in the first place, but the majority of it I was like ((sighs)) logistics, micro-economics, I don’t care, you know, so um yes, so it was eight hours a week that course in Cardiff and spent most of the time, to be honest, doing things I shouldn’t have been doing, you know, getting high and drinking and stuff but, and, you know, by the time I was in Birkbeck College I was very focused and I, you know, it was just very, very different, so maybe I worked harder than I needed to in Birkbeck College, I don’t know..

There is further evidence of this strong focus on the study itself from the responses to the question of how important it was for them ‘to meet new people’. Overall, a third responded
that this was an important reason. This is far lower than the responses given in other surveys of full-time students, and as for the ELQ students, only a quarter reported meeting people as an important reason for study.

Conclusions
Debates around the ELQ issues are to a large extent debates about part-time students. This paper has presented some evidence on the characteristics and motivations of part-time students from one higher education institution. It is clear from this that there is no such thing as a typical part-time student. They are of a wide range of ages and therefore different stages in their life course. Their motivations vary, some being more employment oriented than others, but equally importantly, their motivations are complex, and outcomes often unpredictable. The ELQ students do not seem any different in these respects. Our evidence suggests that they are in many ways no different from non-ELQ students.

It seems to us therefore that many of the assumptions underlying the government’s ELQ policy are highly dubious. Many ELQ students derive employment benefits from their studies the second time round, even many of those who did not set out explicitly with this aim in mind. The majority of these students are not supported financially by their employers, and, we would argue, it is doubtful whether their employers could be persuaded to finance such students. Not only do employers seem to be reluctant or unable to fund their employees to do university study – as distinct from small doses of on-the-job-training, but many ELQ students go to university precisely because they seek a change in their lives, often in a different job. It is difficult to envisage many employers having an incentive to fund such study. The ELQ students clearly saw themselves as ‘progressing’ by studying new subjects, which often were much more important to them, and which for some were aimed at changing track in the employment world, and for others opened up unforeseen possibilities in the employment market. They were unforeseen, because often there was no obvious pre-existing link between the subject they studied and the employment benefit. The students were by their own accounts often much more committed to learning than they had been as young full-time students. It suggests that the returns on investment in education in mature adulthood could possibly be higher.

This paper has addressed some of the ELQ issues on the government’s own ground, raising the question of whether it is likely to achieve what it intends to accomplish. The intentions themselves are of course debatable, and they raise wider questions about values and the role of adult education in society and about the responsibility of the state.

References