What does gaining a degree mean to returning adult students when they leave the academy?

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Paper presented at the 38th Annual SCUTREA Conference, 2-4 July 2008
University of Edinburgh

Introduction
Currently within the education forum an interesting debate is being carried out between policy makers and researchers, which centre around two key hypotheses. The first is based upon the premise that Higher Education (HE) has a responsibility to respond to the challenges and changing circumstances, which are constantly occurring within the world of work. It is felt that in order to address this need; a greater level of effort should be made to ensure that generic skills are developed so as to equip graduates with transferable skills, thus making them of more value to employers within the employment market place. The widening participation agenda has responded to this and as a consequence greater numbers of adults are returning to the academy (Gorard, 2000; Connor, 2002; Ball, 1992; Alheit, 1999).

The assumption of policy makers, that economic activity through increased HE investment actually translates into positive outcomes for graduates particularly once they leave the academy, is contested by Brown. He argues that the correlation between education policy and economic growth is being thrown into doubt, due to the mismatch between graduates and employer requirements. The reason for this is largely due to the inability of demand to keep pace with supply. Simply put, there are not enough high skilled jobs available for the number of graduates leaving the academy (Brown, 2003).

The second hypotheses, is based upon much of the work which Schuller and the Wider Benefits of Learning Unit (WBLU) have published. This stresses that learning needs to be framed in such a way that it becomes meaningful to those who take part. They have shown that the wider benefits experienced by learners go beyond the new skills being learned and can be attributed to the rise in 'Self' affirmation and the development of the 'Self' and do not therefore, always translate into learning pathways for economic fulfilment. (Schuller, 2002)

Research done with returning adults has shown that they engage within learning for a wide variety of reasons and on that basis, the outcomes are just as diverse. Therefore, in order to understand how learning will benefit adults we need firstly to understand why they want to learn and then how best to engage them positively in this (West, 1996)

As a consequence of this debate, the focus of my doctoral research has been based upon gaining an understanding of what it is that motivates adults to return to part time HE later in their lives and how this, then correlates with the outcomes they have achieved as graduates outside the academy. Are they motivated by the economic imperative or have they engaged in learning in order to gain personal satisfaction and thus build self affirmation?

This paper will outline some of the initial findings of my research, which has been undertaken using a qualititative methodology based upon the autobiographical narratives of returning adults to HE. Jackson and Jordan are clear that not enough debate has taken
place on this subject and they have concluded that the policy makers have skewed the situation in favour of the economic imperative. Empowerment of the individual has shifted to the empowerment of the business community (Jackson, 2000). It is therefore, the aim of this paper to explore these themes of participation, and to reflect upon the outcomes of graduates outside the academy, looking in detail at what it has meant to them during this journey of learning.

**The economic imperative and educational initiatives debate**

UNESCO’s Policy Paper for Change and Development in Higher Education (1995) laid out a global plan for HE. The paper held at its core the assumption that if the economic wealth of a state were to expand exponentially, then expenditure was required in the development of the HE agenda. The assumption was therefore, that in so doing, the skills level of a nation would rise in line with employment needs. However, for this to be successful, HE would need to step up to the challenge and work with employers in responding to these new requirements. Significantly, we can see a direct correlation being made between the expansion and development of HE and the economic vibrancy of a nation. As a consequence, this principle underpins much of education policy-making around the world (Teichler, 1999; Thompson, 2000; Tomlinson, 2001)

However, by applying the widening participation agenda and thus opening up the academy, it is felt by some, that we could be storing up trouble for ourselves in the future, by raising the expectations of increasing numbers of learners. By moving away from an elitist, to a mass culture of learning, the opportunities available to succeed become less. Gorard, like Brown and others, suggests that appropriate jobs for graduates are not keeping pace with the increased demand and consequently, graduates have to look for either alternative career choices to those they studied for, or lower paid jobs. They argue that government projections are no longer keeping pace with the reality of the widening participation agenda. Instead, the pressure felt by graduates to compete successfully within the workplace, means more of them have to undertake higher degrees, through postgraduate study, in order to give them the competitive edge within the market place. The issue with this approach is that where additional study raises graduates’ chances of gaining the better jobs, it also increases the level of student debt and as a result places even greater pressure on them to find well paid employment within an increasingly competitive market place (Alheit, 1999; Gorard, 2000)

Where the job prospects of graduates have been viewed by some as bleak, others however, do not think this is the case. Teichler instead, makes the point that by opening up HE to all levels within society; it becomes fundamental to the development of a democratic civilisation. In this way, he argues, HE is constantly being challenged to change and adapt even if its role is still unclear. In so doing, this requires HE to strike a balance between a variety of contrasting requirements which change between being the provider of knowledge for self improvement, meeting the needs of employers, helping to build the generic skills base, supplying specialist knowledge and skills and finally, being able to produce proactive thinkers who have the ability to change the face of the working world themselves (Teichler, 1999).

Teichler goes on to point out that unemployment and insecure employment prospects are endemic the world over, but it is those with an HE degree that are less likely to face prolonged periods out of work. Instead, he stresses that the issue should be one of inclusion across all social divisions not exclusion. The widening participation agenda is therefore, not only about increasing the number of graduates, but that these graduates should be representative of all elements within our society and as a consequence, able to learn the skills to benefit the social order as a whole (Teichler, 1999)
We can conclude from this that the principle behind the widening participation agenda has been to support the expansion of economic wealth by supplying a well educated workforce. Critically, a key assumption has been that HE would play a major role within this policy initiative. In order to meet this challenge the academy has been encouraged to work with employers, in order to make the content of the curriculum more relevant to the needs of the workplace. As a consequence greater emphasis has been placed upon generic and transferable skills, flexible learning, teaching methods, increased access points and community based learning (Hatt, 2002)

The wider benefits of learning debate

On the other side of the debate, Schuller, has established that the re-engagement of adults within learning, produces some interesting effects on their lives over and above those of gaining a qualification or learning new skills (Schuller, 2002). The remit of the Wider Benefits of Learning Unit (WBLU), was to measure and analyse the wider benefits to adults, once they had engaged within learning. It is clear from their findings that though much work has already been done, little of this was about the broader benefits, which have been brought to bear through learning. Schuller states 'It is striking how little attention has historically been paid to what actually happens as a result of people taking part in learning, compared with the huge amount of analysis devoted to motivation and participation' (Sargant, 2002; Schuller, 2002)

The WBLU found that education was able to give a structure to the lives of its participants, with particular benefit to those with mental health problems, as participation helped adults to re-establish their own sense of self and identity. The confidence they gained as a consequence, was found to be as important as the new skills they were learning during their studies (Sargant, 2002; Schuller, 2004b; Schuller, 2002; Schuller, 2004a)

But the most significant area, in which learning was shown to impact on adults, was within the growth of self esteem. This was found to reflect positively within their communities, resulting in the growth of social cohesion. It was found that by re-engaging adults within learning there was a greater interaction between social and cultural groups. By sharing experiences and ideas within a mutual learning environment, self esteem expanded thus leading to greater civic activity (Schuller, 2002; Schuller, 2004a)

When considering the concept of self and self-affirmation within adults and how this can contribute to the development of social cohesion, Harre has categorised the self into three distinct elements.

- Self 1 Personal characteristics
- Self 2 Human characteristics
- Self 3 Personal impressions.

Harre argues that each of the above make up our uniqueness and individuality. As our ‘self’ is in a constant state of flux due to the relationships we have with those around us, our self belief is continuously changing in respect of these. We can conclude then, that it is the social networks around us which can enable or disable us, depending on the level of interaction we have within them and the controls they have over us (Harre, 1998).
Research question

Participation rates show us that adults are returning to the academy in increasing numbers. Are they, as Brown has suggested, ascribing to the economic imperative that an HE degree will bring with it greater earning potential. Or, are they as his research goes on to show, now finding that this is not the case, as the economy is unable to deliver against its promises? (Brown, 2003)

Alternatively, are adults returning in order to build self affirmation and as Schuller’s research has shown, able to then demonstrate through wider benefits of learning, more subtle changes within their lives (Schuller, 2004b)

It is this debate which has been used as the basis of my doctoral research, using the context of the widening participation agenda within HE to develop the research question ‘What, if any, are the benefits to adult graduates outside the academy’?

Research techniques

In order to ensure that the research group being studied represented a cross section of adults that had chosen to return to learning later in their lives, the graduate database of an Adult Continuing Education department within a university was used, which was made up entirely of adult graduates who had studied on a part time basis, all of whom had successfully graduated.

For the purposes of this research, the graduate database was initially surveyed by questionnaire. Of those that responded, 20 graduates were interviewed in-depth. In order to establish a frame of reference for these interviews, each graduate was asked ‘why they had returned to learning at this stage of their lives’ and secondly ‘what if any were the changes they felt had come about in their lives now that they were graduates’. The interviews were semi structured allowing the graduate to determine the level of detail they wanted to share with the interviewer. Occasional steers were used, when needed within the interviews, in order to bring graduates back to the basic principles of the research. This enabled the graduate to define their own reality in respect of their life experiences, and not frame these within the expectations of the researcher.

A central tenet within the theory of Symbolic Interactionism is the assumption that it is the individual who makes their own reality. Personal histories are based upon an internalised reaction to those around them. This is achieved by the phases of the self passing through a series of processes which internalise and then contextualised experiences based upon their known beliefs. (Denzin, 1992) Mead argued that the self could be studied in its own right and stressed the importance of how it could be influenced by its surroundings both physical and emotional (Mead, 1934)

It was therefore, vital when trying to understand graduates’ stories, that they were allowed to re-live their lives through their own biographies and that these were captured within informal narratives. Simply put, it is the stories people tell us which allow us to understand their life experiences, expectations and limitations. The less structured the process for extracting this information, the more detail about the things that really matter to them would be revealed. Lived experiences do not always fall into neat categories, so when interviewing graduates it was decided to use only two key questions, thus enabling them to build their biography around these points.
Graduates outside the academy

A recurring theme started to emerge within the interviews, even though each graduate gave their own reasons for returning to learning. Essentially, this was based upon a need to make up for missed opportunities and the desire to build self esteem. Stories emerged which told of how parents could not, or would not allow them to go on to university or for that matter any other type of learning. It became apparent that only when they felt they had discharged their family duties to their parents and then their own families, could they justify their own self development.

We couldn’t think of it, my brother I felt sorry for ‘cause he was bright and the teacher came to see my father about us both, but he said no they have to work and there’s an end to it…….. he, (the brother) died when he was down the mines. I did it for us both

Molly

Once the children were in school I thought, right I’m doing it now, but I had to give up cause it was too much. So when they left home I did it again, but it was still hard going, running the house as well

Helen

Many felt they had been self indulgent and thought they had felt a huge rise in self esteem when graduating, still felt guilty about having spent this time on something just for them.

I wish I could have done this much earlier as it’s changed my life, I feel much more confident about myself and what I am doing... My children are very proud of me and say "mother you should go on and do more", but I don’t think my husband would like it… he doesn’t say nothing... but I just feel it when the children come over and talk. Gets so I won’t talk about it now

Dorothy

Some graduates had been able to develop careers which were out of their reach prior to graduating and now felt empowered within their social circles and spoke of how they now felt on a par with peers.

They all went off to Uni but I thought no, I want to earn money. I never regretted it but then I thought to myself why not, I can do it too. Anyway, my wife had done her degree and I had helped her, so I thought yeh it’s my time now so I just did it

Simon

I wouldn’t be doing this, I would be where I was for the rest of my life, but now I am her, doing this, and I think yes I did this and I’m happy

Tracy

It also became apparent within the interviews that where graduates had initially benefited from a rise in self esteem this had in some cases diminished over time as they felt expectations had not been met.

I don’t think getting my degree has helped me…….. I’ve not changed my job…. it’s made me think more deeply about what I don’t have

Emma

I’m aware that most, if any, have made a better fist of it than I. Many have started from stronger positions in the organisations they work for. I think if you start as a navvy it will be more difficult to benefit from a degree

Doug
It also became clear that returning to learning had been an aid in the recovery health and well being.

My husband had gone so I thought I need something to get on with….. There isn’t anything I can’t do now and nothing I won’t try, which is not how I was before he left

Penny

I had been drinking for a long time and it was making my life bad... I felt good going to college and liked feeling part of it all. It felt different doing it the second time around, better

Gordon

**Interim conclusions**

This is still a work in progress therefore, only provisional results can be drawn within the context of the debate as outlined above. However, there are some interesting interim conclusions.

*Why had they returned to learning at this stage of their lives*

All graduates surveyed and interviewed returned to learning in order to gain a degree. Of these, the majority did so purely for personal satisfaction thus invoking the widening benefits of learning agenda, whilst the rest fell within the scope of the economic imperative agenda, having done so to enhance their job prospects. Interestingly enough, when questioned further, this second group also expressed a need to prove to themselves and others their ability to achieve a degree.

Therefore, initial conclusions appear to show that self affirmation was a significant motivation to adults to engage in learning in later life.

*What, if any, were the changes they felt had come about in their lives now that they were graduates?*

The changes within graduate lives are more complex and require further analysis before reporting with any degree of accuracy. Raw data shows that life changes and benefits have been both subtle and overt. It is these themes which will continue to be developed within my doctoral thesis.

What can be concluded in the short term though, is that the Widening participation agenda is an effective initiative, as those graduates surveyed could not have returned under normal circumstances. By opening up the academy and making it more flexible in its approach to wider user groups, this has enabled adults to re-engage later in their lives. However, whether this group is buying into the economic imperative, within the widening participation agenda is yet to be proven. At this stage it appears that self esteem and a desire to achieve empowerment within their immediate social networks has been a key motivation to achieve a degree in later life.
References


This document was added to the Education-line database in June 2008