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**From High School to Higher Degrees: Teaching and Supporting
Learning for Students entering Postgraduate Professional Study
without Undergraduate Degrees**

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper reports research into motives and concerns of non-graduate students accessing a two-year, part-time, professional, post-graduate programme via recognition of prior learning, and tutor efforts to engage them and support learning and achievement.

Design/methodology/approach – Five secondary sources provided data on 72 students. Research instruments were; a background questionnaire, student performance profiles, mock exam participation data, an online survey on the student-centred approach to delivery, and a generic module evaluation survey.

Findings - Regardless of prior academic exposure, most students were driven by extrinsic career related motives, most worried about work and family pressures as potential barriers to academic achievement, but few worried about individual ability to meet academic standards. Graduates outperformed non-graduates and were more likely to engage in formative assessment. Efforts of tutors to implement student-centred learning were well received and engagement in formative assessment and feedback activity impacted positively on performance.

Research limitations – Research relied on secondary data and was limited to students on two cohorts. Therefore there are limits to what might be extrapolated from the data.

Practical implications - Tutors should recognise the gap between graduate and non-graduate performance and whilst making active interventions to close the gap, be more explicit with non-graduates about the demands of post-graduate study.

Originality/value – Relatively little research is available on the experiences and achievement of non-graduates accessing post-graduate study via RPL.

Keywords - Non-graduates; post-graduate study; recognition of prior learning (RPL); student-centred learning (SCL); barriers and enablers to learning.

Paper type – working paper.

Introduction:

In Europe, the framework for higher education is provided by the Bologna Declaration. Two cycles of studies are defined; first cycle (undergraduate) and second cycle (postgraduate), where *'access to the second cycle shall require successful completion of first cycle studies, lasting a minimum of three years.'* (European Higher Education Area, 1999 p.6). This working paper focuses on a cohort of adult learners undertaking a part-time, post-graduate professional qualification, without that first cycle exposure, plus the efforts of tutors on an introductory module, to facilitate their learning. The paper was written at the beginning of the author's investigations, prior to embarking on doctoral studies on the topic and as such covered issues considered to be of relevance at this preliminary stage, namely:

- Why did non-graduates with operational experience but no higher education experience enroll on post-graduate professional course?
- What were the particular concerns of non-graduates with respect to their studies?
- How successful were they, relative to graduates on their course?
- How appropriate and effective for non-graduates were current practitioner techniques for teaching and supporting learning?

Background

The students concerned were enrolled on a two year, part-time Postgraduate Diploma in Human Resource Management (PDHRM). Students completing the programme achieved a Level 7 academic qualification (QAA, 2008) and admission to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) at Associate level. All were employed in full-time positions in HR and most had their studies funded by their employer. Most students had

completed first cycle studies (graduates), but a minority of students without appropriate academic or professional qualifications at undergraduate level were accepted onto the programme via RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning) on the basis of relevant work experience in the field (non-graduates). Seventy-two students were surveyed. Cohort 1 comprised 45 second year students and Cohort 2 comprised 27 first year students.

Although the research focused on a specific non-graduate group, most modules on the professional HR courses at the university were delivered to a homogeneous cohort of graduates and non-graduates, of domestic and international origin, studying full-time and part-time, native and non-native English speaking, with extensive field experience and none. Therefore the challenge for lecturers was to initiate and develop pedagogical interventions that would maximise student engagement and thus facilitate learning and achievement. For the first module on the course, Leading, Managing and Developing People (LMDP) a student centred approach to teaching and learning was adopted as a means to achieving these two goals. Tutors relied on particular techniques including case study analysis and discussion. Voluntary formative assessments (based on previous exam questions) were offered weekly with feedback provided by email, and a voluntary mock exam (undertaken in students' own time at module end with audio feedback by email) was devised with the intention of using assessment for learning rather than assessment of learning (Hounsell et al. 2008).

Literature Review

The Adult Learner – Motivation to Study

Roths, Lemos and Gonçalves (2013) found that adult learners enrolled in education showed both intrinsic (interest in the subject and personal enrichment) and extrinsic (job related)

motives for participation. Using Carré's model of motivation for adult education and training (Carré, 2001, cited in Rothes, Lemos and Gonçalves, 2013) adult students were surveyed against ten motives, three intrinsic and seven extrinsic. Men scored more highly than women in most of the extrinsic motives including *economic* (money), *prescribed* (ordered to participate), *professional-operational* (acquiring professional skills), *personal-operational* (acquiring skills for use outside of current workplace) and *vocational* (demand for skills or symbolic recognition to enhance or retain job). Students over 25 scored higher in extrinsic motives including professional-operational, personal-operational, vocational and *derivative* (participation as a way to avoid situations perceived as unpleasant) and higher in one intrinsic motive, *hedonic* (pleasure taken from space and materials available in the educational setting). Less qualified participants and those on long vocational courses scored significantly higher in all ten motives, with the exception of the intrinsic *epistemic* (learning for its own sake) and *socio-affective* motives (search for interpersonal relationships) where they scored higher but not significantly so.

Recognition of Prior Learning

Cooper (2011) examined the experiences of non-graduates admitted onto a professional Disability Studies Masters programme on the basis of RPL exploring the question "*can adult learners prior experiential knowledge act as a resource for the successful acquisition of postgraduate academic literacy practices?*" (p.40). It was questioned whether adult learners' previous professional and life experience would act as a resource for writing and research or as a barrier to acquisition of the academic literacies needed to complete a Master's level programme. Cooper's findings indicated adult learners' prior experience acted as affordance or constraint dependent on three factors. First, the nature of the disciplinary subfield; the

operational knowledge of students on the Disability Studies programme was seen by lecturers as complementing and enriching formal academic knowledge. Second, the nature of the programme's curriculum and pedagogy; the interventions of lecturers in curriculum design and pedagogy were found to be instrumental in either facilitating or inhibiting learning. Third, the students' social and learning histories were instrumental; Bourdieu's concept of "*habitus*" – *a durable unconscious and embodied set of transposable dispositions*" (Mutch, 2003, p.384, cited in Cooper, 2011, p.42) formed out of past experiences and socialisation processes (Bourdieu, 1990, cited in Cooper, 2011).

The Part-time Adult Learner

O'Connor and Cordova (2010) suggested that adult learners studying on part-time Masters programmes were both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated to learn but that learning would happen when there were synergies and congruence among three key variables; individual characteristics, learning environment and workplace. Students showed preferences for what they wanted to learn, how they wanted to learn and environments where they perceived instructors treated them as adults, allowing them opportunities to use and share their experiences. The curriculum needed to be relevant and activities and assessment which allowed them to be active learners with some control were favoured.

Shepherd and Mullins Nelson (2012, p. 10) described the adult learner as having "*transitioned...to a life inclusive of family, career and other duties such as civic or volunteer services*". Such students might therefore be described as "*employees who study*" rather than "*students who work*" (Cresswell, 2012, quoted in Shepherd and Mullins Nelson, 2012, p. 10). In a study of 352 participants, King, Saraswat and Widdowson (2014) found that for adults studying part-time whilst in employment, their prime identity was not that of "*student*". More

than 50% had their studies funded by their employer and some expressed dissatisfaction with the volumes of work and degree of self-directed learning expected leading to the perception that they were teaching themselves rather than being guided by skilled practitioners. Quoting Universities UK, they noted that despite the reliance in the UK on part-time higher education as a means of up-skilling the workforce, part-time students “*seem to be an invisible and in national policy at least, poorly understood cohort*” (UUK, 2013, quoted in King, Saraswat and Widdowson, 2014, p. 65).

Barriers to Learning

Cross (1981) identified three main inhibitors to adult participation in formal learning, named as situational (individual circumstances), institutional (such as timetabling and access to resources and facilities) and dispositional barriers. Dispositional barriers related to relative attitudes, self-perceptions about oneself as a learner and expectations about what would be required to succeed. Catterall, Davis and Yang (2014) found that some students from non-traditional academic backgrounds (no previous exposure to higher education) underestimated both the volume and difficulty of the studies they had to do on their courses. Some struggled to see the relevance of subject matter not directly related to their profession and were unclear of the role of theory as opposed to practice. Many students struggled to “*reposition themselves as critical learners, particularly in the absence of direct instruction.*” (p.252).

Enablers to Learning

Catterall, Davis and Yang (2014) suggested that interventions should be undertaken to close the gap between expectations of students from non-academic backgrounds and the reality of academic life. They questioned whether such students should be helped to change to fit into

the university culture (Tinto, 1993, cited in Catterall, Davis and Yang, 2014) or if the university should create a new institutional *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1990) more inclusive to students from non-academic backgrounds (Thomas, 2002, cited in Catterall, Davis and Yang, 2014)?

One outcome of the processes that lead to the Bologna Declaration (European Higher Education Area, 1999) was to shift the pedagogical focus of European higher education towards a more inclusive, student-centred approach, (Hyland, Kennedy, and Ryan, 2006, cited in Nordrum, Evans, and Gustafsson, 2013). Turner (2006, p.6) defined student-centred learning (SCL) as a “*broad teaching approach that encompasses replacing lectures with active learning, integrating self-paced learning programs and/or cooperative group situations, ultimately holding the student responsible for his own advances in education*”.

MacKeracher, Stuart & Potter,(2006, cited in Baharudin, Munira, and Mat, 2013) suggested that to facilitate learning, adult learners required an environment which met needs for relevancy in content, recognition of prior learning and respect from others. Using and sharing experiences in problem analysis were of particular importance to this cohort, (McKeachie and Svinicki, 2006, cited in O’Connor and Cordova, 2010).

Methodology:

Secondary data derived from five different sources was utilised to address the research questions. First, at the onset of the course, students were invited to complete a hard copy background questionnaire requesting information on age, gender, previous levels of academic attainment, current and previous HR occupational experience, motives for enrolment and concerns about their studies. Data from two cohorts covering successive academic years was available. Second, student profiles (records of achievement) were analysed to provide

quantitative data on performance over three modules (Cohort 1) and one module (Cohort 2). Third, data comparing performance of mock exam participants on LMDP against non-mock exam participants for both cohorts was used as a proxy measure for evaluating the success of the student centred learning approach to delivery. Fourth, for the same reason, Cohort 2 students were invited to complete an online survey using the Survey Monkey instrument. Finally, quantitative and qualitative data was extracted from hard copy module evaluation surveys (generic to the university) completed by Cohort 2 students for the LMDP module, distributed in the final teaching session.

Findings:

From the background questionnaire it was established that of the 72 students on the course, all were employed full-time in HR positions. Fifteen had worked in HR for over ten years (21%); 25 students had worked in the field for between five and ten years (35%); 23 students had between one year and five years occupational experience (32%); 9 students had less than one year's HR experience (13%). Three students had been educated to Level 7 (4%); 47 at Level 6 (65%); 2 at Level 5 (3%); 2 at Level 4 (3%) (QAA, 2008); 12 at Level 3 (13%); 9 at Level 2 (12%), (QCA, 2015). Eight were male (11%) and five were less than 25 years of age (7%).

With respect to motivation, 62 students (86%) listed their primary motives as extrinsic. There were no notable differences between graduates and non-graduates. Comments related to acquiring a professional qualification, career development, removing a barrier to internal promotion, taking advantage of the fact that their employer had funded the course and providing a network for job opportunities. Of the ten students who listed a more intrinsic motive, comments related to having something to prove, relishing the opportunity to learn

more about their discipline and thus become better at it and enjoying the company and community of fellow practitioners.

When asked of any particular concerns, finding time for studies was the most common response. Sixty-two students (86%) cited issues such as work and family pressures as potential inhibitors to study. Seven students (10%) worried about achieving academic standards. There were no notable differences between graduates and non-graduates. The remaining three students either responded negatively to the question or did not make a response.

From student profile data, it was established that average marks for Cohort 1 were 54% after the first module (LMDP) and 58% after three modules. For graduates the average marks were 61% after LMDP and 63% after three modules. For non-graduates the average marks for LMDP were 51% and 52% after three modules. For students on Cohort 2, the average mark for the 27 students after one module (LMDP) was 52%, but for graduates it was 55% and for non-graduates 45%.

From data surveying participation in the LMDP voluntary mock exam, the following was extracted. For Cohort 1 students, the average summative module mark for mock exam participants was 56% and for non-participants 49%. For non-graduate participants the average module mark was 53% and for non-graduate, non-participants 47%. For graduate participants the average module mark was 64% and for graduate non-participants, the average module mark was 57%. For Cohort 2 students the average summative module mark was 54% for mock exam participants and 43% for non-participants. For Cohort 2 non-graduate mock exam participants the average mark was 47% and for non-graduate non-participants, 41%. For Cohort 2 graduates, the average mark for mock exam participants was 57% and for non-participants 47%.

Sixteen students (59%) on Cohort 2 responded to the online survey on the impact of participating in module activities and receiving formative feedback on their engagement with the module. Participation rates for graduates and non-graduates were 71% and 50% respectively. Responses were universally positive with remarks focusing on the how the experience of mock exam and feedback helped improve time management, understanding of questions and level of response attained. As one respondent remarked ‘*it validated my learning.*’ Students were particularly positive about the use of audio feedback as a useful tool in learning and exam preparation. Responses were peppered with adjectives such as ‘tremendous’, ‘fantastic’ ‘excellent’ along with more prosaic terms such as ‘concise’, ‘clear’, ‘pragmatic’ ‘constructive’ and ‘personal’.

Twenty-four Cohort 2 students (89%) completed the paper-based generic module evaluation survey. All respondents strongly agreed or agreed that the module’s purpose had been clear, that module content was relevant and appropriate and the module well organised. All responded positively to questions on staff knowledge, communication and guidance. All strongly agreed or agreed that they were satisfied with the module. Responses to the general comments question on the module were complimentary and focused on the positive impact of the module experience and the formative feedback in particular. Written comments included “*there has been a great academic/practitioner balance in both teaching and group discussion and “I have felt well supported in this module and well prepared for the exam”*”.

Discussion

The students were predominantly female and thus representative of a profession that has become feminised, (Ulrich et al, 2013). Otherwise there were no identifiable differences in motive or performance along gender lines. Motives for study were consistent with Carré’s model, in particular the fact that older students tended to display more extrinsic motives as

only 7% of students were under 25 years of age and 86% of students displayed extrinsic motives only, (Carré, 2001, cited in Rothes, Lemos and Gonçalves, 2013.) The extrinsic desire for enhancement and professional development was well summarised in the comment of one student: *“the CIPD unlocks doors!”*.

Student concerns on entering the programme were consistent with two of Cross’s three barriers (1981), in particular *situational*, in that they expressed fears of finding time to study given work and family commitments and to a lesser extent *dispositional* with only 10% expressing concerns about achieving academic standards. Given that over 30% of both cohorts were non-graduates entering a post-graduate arena this last fact was surprising.

Of the 31% of students who were non-graduates, 13% had been educated Level 3 and 12% to Level 2. Level 2 *“recognises the ability to gain a good knowledge and understanding of a subject area of work or study, and to perform varied tasks with some guidance or supervision”* (QCF, 2015). When this was contrasted with standards at Level 7 with its requirements *“for conceptual understanding that enables the student ... to evaluate critically current research and advanced scholarship in the discipline”*, (QAA, 2008), the extent of the gap that students needed to traverse became explicit.

The size of this challenge might have been mitigated by the fact that 45% of both cohorts had over five years’ experience in operational HR and therefore would have much to contribute to discussion, sharing experiences and anecdotes with the learning classroom community. However, given the ten per cent gap in performance between graduates and non-graduates on both cohorts as indicated by profile data, it seemed that work experience might have acted as a complement to, rather than a substitute for academic experience for non-graduates. This difference was apparent for Cohort 2 after one module and remained for Cohort 1 after three modules. Non-graduates did not close the performance gap.

Engagement in formative assessment and feedback as measured by mock exam participation, did make a difference to performance for non-graduates and graduates on both cohorts. Non-graduates participants achieved average marks 6% higher than non-graduate, non-participants for both cohorts. For graduates the difference was higher with average marks 7% and 10% higher for participants than non-participants over Cohort 1 and 2 respectively. This factor might have been accounted for by the greater academic experience and higher academic literacy of the graduates than the non-graduates; in that when they had the feedback they were better able to act constructively on it.

In adopting a student centred learning approach to LMDP module design and delivery, tutors' intentions had been to create a forum for group based discussion and debate that would allow graduates to disseminate academic experience and non-graduates to share work experience for the mutual learning benefit of all. The success of this approach was evidenced by the universally positive feedback obtained from the paper based module evaluation survey and online survey. The response rate to the former was 89% and to the latter 59%. This compared favourably to the average response rate to online student surveys of 33% suggested by Nulty (2008). Therefore data of some meaning to the context could be extrapolated from the responses and it could be concluded that students had engaged with and enjoyed the learning experience. However, only half of the non-graduates on Cohort 2 took the pro-active step of completing the on-line survey and therefore this might be taken as an indication of a lesser degree of engagement on their part.

Conclusions

Nearly a third of students enrolling on the PDHRM course gained access on the basis of RPL. This was on the basis of the underlying assumption that there were similarities between

experiential (i.e., non-formal and informal) and academic learning, and that possible differences between the two could be readily overcome (Harris 2006 cited in Joosten-ten Brinke, Sluijsmans, and Jochemsa, 2009, p.62). Efforts of tutors and the SCL approach undertaken on the module made some progress towards closing the gap between graduates and non-graduates but to contend that differences may be readily overcome is inaccurate. The performance gap demonstrated on Cohort 2 was previously demonstrated and continued by their predecessors in Cohort 1.

For those who engaged with it, whether graduate or non-graduate, the SCL approach made a difference and had they not participated in the formative activity and feedback process, including the mock exam, it was safe to say that some of the non-graduates would not have passed the summative assessment. However the participation rate in SCL of graduates was higher than that for non-graduates and therefore tutors' efforts were reaching out most to those who needed it least.

The impact of *situational barriers* (Cross, 1991) on non-graduates who had not engaged with the SCL process must be investigated with a view to identifying strategies for overcoming them. For fear of frightening less academically experienced students, tutors had been reluctant to concede that non-graduates enrolled on the course were at a disadvantage over their graduate colleagues. This was evidenced by the small percentage of students citing *dispositional barriers* when asked of concerns on enrolment (Cross, 1981). Tutors must be more explicit not just about the demands of the course, but also about the positive instrumental effect of engagement in formative activity on performance (SCL) as an enabler to learning.

Efforts to close the performance gap between graduates and non-graduates must be made and every student should be encouraged to excel. The author's commitment to the SCL approach

on the course indicates a preference for creating the new inclusive 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1990) favoured by Thomas (2002, cited in Catterall, Davis and Yang, 2014), where non-academic as well as academic experience can be celebrated. Closing the gap will require resources, for example to provide additional support to non-graduates and "*the possible deleterious effect of suggesting that some students may need additional preparation*" less they be perceived as more resource intensive and consequently less preferred under a managerialist agenda, was noted, (Catterall, Davis and Yang, 2014).

This working paper documented preliminary investigations using secondary data and therefore there are limits to what can be extrapolated from the findings. As the topic for the author's doctoral studies, the intention for the future is to undertake primary research with current and previous course students and their tutors and potentially to widen the range of the study to cover the experiences of other students accepted onto post-graduate professional courses via RPL.

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