

Exploring the Adult Learners' Transition from the Workplace to Higher Education

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

This research sets out to explore how prior experiences of the workplace impact upon an individual's transition into higher education (HE).

Through a psychosocial lens, this research employs a framework of transition, organisational culture, and identity to create knowledge in particular for policy and practice design within the HE landscape.

The data collected from a focus group of postgraduate students focuses predominantly on the influence of organisational culture on their unique transitions. Additional themes comprised of their attempts to control and modify the meaning of the transition, their experience of adjusting to new roles or identities, as well as their multi-membership.

Their narratives also report on the impact of Covid-19, enriching an understanding of the ways that they had been facilitated to cope and maintain their engagement during this time.

This research is on-going, and so the preliminary findings will be discussed in this presentation.

Full paper

This exploratory research sets out to identify characteristics of the

transition undertaken by returning learners as they move away from their workplace and begin embarking on postgraduate study.

The findings underscored in this presentation stem from a preliminary study carried out at the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic amid the many nationwide lockdowns. This data has contributed to the doctoral research currently being pursued by the author; implications for the main study are discussed.

While the author has proposed that the knowledge created through this research aims to contribute to policy and practice design within the HE landscape, the rich and insightful understandings and perspectives of the returning population may also enable the academy to facilitate and support the unique transitions.

Populations of learners are growing progressively diverse – with individuals retreating to education both later in life and to fulfil various distinct goals, for instance to support their professional practice or to fulfil a life-long ambition or interest. Despite this, little acknowledgment has been given to this transition in the literature. The lack of knowledge available in this area has led to inadequately prepared learners, as is evidenced in this study, as well as clusters of students unaware of the support available to them as they enter the new domain.

This research explores the accessibility of the learning experience, taking into account the remote nature of teaching and learning during the pandemic, along with the benefits and barriers the students became acquainted with as they attempted acculturation and affiliation with their new role and context through a virtual learning environment.

Formerly, much of the literature has discussed the linear ladder of progression, moving from school or university to the workplace, with little coverage of those individuals shifting between but nonetheless progressing 'back' to education. Given that we dedicate so many years of our lives to working, it's a wonder that we don't consider how these workplace environments, cultures and collectives impress upon the other areas of our lives more. Arguably, exploring this population could provide valuable observations and anecdotes for individuals looking to reroute their paths, to experience the

academic and social roles of HE.

Over the summer term of the 2020-21 academic year, a focus group of postgraduate students was held at a world-leading faculty of education in the UK. While this could only be carried out safely over a virtual platform at the time, the Zoom meeting proved to be a compassionate and comprehensive conversation. Through the exchange of narratives, the participants benchmarked and empathised with one another. The participants' contributions weren't short of social cues and gestures either, evidencing how they had adapted to the virtual space after a year of online learning. Bringing the participants together to discuss their experiences in this way provided them with a platform upon which they could reflect, and attempt, if only briefly, at combating the isolation.

To explore the data, a framework of transitions (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2012; 2022), organizational culture (Handy, 1991; 1993), and identity was assembled; as the population crossed over into their new context, insight from these three pillars bridged together intellect from across the domains of practice. Schlossberg's (1981) seminal work on transitions, in particular her model of 4 S's, has facilitated the analysis of unique coping mechanisms employed by the participants. In discovering the characterisations of the participants' 'situations', data was extracted to build a holistic illustration of the transition process that each returner encountered as they enrolled back into higher education.

Undertaking this move during the Covid-19 pandemic spurred on a series of unanticipated events for the participants, which required that they drew upon and further sourced assets and coping mechanisms to facilitate their acculturation and engagement with their learning during this time.

The author has since carried out a thematic narrative analysis, following which a series of themes were interpreted and engaged with in order to retell the lived experiences of the individuals. Through this presentation, the author will be exploring the intricacies of the data, discussing the role that the various virtual environments played in the participants' transitions, their experience of remote learning, and how this mobility contributed to their multi-membership during this unprecedented time.

References

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