

**Title of Paper:** What does gaining a degree mean to returning adult students when they leave the academy?

**Research Domain:** Student Experience

**Conference Registration:** Day Delegate 15<sup>th</sup> December only.

### **Conference Abstract and Paper:**

#### **What does gaining a degree mean to returning adult students when they leave the academy? 0192**

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#### **Abstract**

In this paper I will outline my research findings within the context of an interesting debate 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 economic challenges and changing circumstances, which are constantly occurring within the world of work. The second argument is based upon the wider benefits of learning experienced by learners and how these go beyond the new skills being learned. In my research, I show that learning can be attributed to the rise in self-affirmation and the development of the “self” and does not always translate into learning pathways for economic fulfilment. Instead, a further dimension in respect of the symbolism of learning has been shown to be a significant outcome for learners. It is this which has become an enabler, allowing them to draw upon what this represents within their communities.

#### **Conference Paper**

##### **Understanding the symbolism of learning within the social context.**

Exploring the concept of the symbolism of a degree, it is Blumer (1969) who talks about social organisation as being “*a framework inside of which acting units develop their actions*” (Blumer, 1969, p 87). In this way, individuals react to the social and cultural norms which make up the social construct, thus enabling them to function effectively within this. Implicit within this, is the understanding of the “*fixed sets of symbols which people use in interpreting their situation*” (Blumer, 1969, p88). Understanding the actions of individuals in relation to the social dynamic, it is clear then, that the individual is constructing their own reality in respect of their interpretation of the social norms around them.

Using the discourse of adults, it is clear within the following quote, that the perception of the adult was that there was a ‘*secret society*’ associated with graduate learning. Not being a graduate meant that she stood outside this concept and as such, felt less of a person. This clearly changed when, as a graduate, she felt equal to other graduates and no longer an outsider. This is

linked with the notion of self-hood and the freedom of being liberated through the symbolism of learning to obtain a changed 'self' and identity. This becomes a recurring theme within the vast majority of the discourses, as the adults celebrated the identity change they were able to externalise due to their learning achievement.

*'After achieving the degree I felt that I stood on my own as a more enriched person and actually there wasn't a secret society, a little door that you go through'*

(Ann Green).

When considering the behavior changes of the vast majority of adults as they became graduates, it became clear that low self-affirmation played a pivotal role in the decision to enrol in a degree in later life. All of them, without exception, wanted to be part of what it meant to be a graduate in society. This was borne out by the following quote:

*'I missed out when I was younger and felt that I had underachieved, and in a way I wanted to prove a point to myself and perhaps to others, like my friends, you can do this, well so can I'*

(Robert Foot).

Learning is based upon a value system for adults, who ascertain the worth to them in real terms of returning to learning in later life. In this way, before learning takes place the activity has to be meaningful to them in their social communities. Considering that the emotional 'self' reflects the social milieu in which it identifies itself and that, "*emotionality is conceptualized as a process of self –feeling*" (Denzin 1984, p 54) then it becomes apparent that the 'self' interactions of individuals are directed towards the reflected appraisals of others. The social symbolism of a degree was found to have become part of the consciousness of adults and the achievement of this was the way in which they were able to positively reflect themselves in the consciousness of others in the social communities around them.

What can be drawn from this, is that learning was predicated upon a need to be recognised within the social milieu and as such, had the capacity to change the identity of the adult as they became a graduate in later life. It was the public acknowledgement of gaining a degree, that not only supported personal gratification, but this built upon the social status of the graduates within their communities. It is difficult to quantify this, as the significance of gaining a degree is not how important it is to the outsider, but rather what it means to the communities that the graduate inhabits (Cohen, 1985). The externalisation of this increased social acceptance was recorded as greater self-awareness, self- affirmation and self-confidence and it was this personal awareness which became the enablers in the lives of adults as they became graduates, and were as important as the knowledge associated with gaining a degree. It is this enabling outcome, which directly impacts upon the change in identity of the adult as they become a graduate, which supports them in their lives beyond formal economic or social outcomes.

### **The implications of this research for adult learning**

Where policy makers have skewed their funding methodologies towards the economic agenda, as the way in which to motivate adults to return to learning in later life, my research shows that another key factor needs to be considered. The vast majority of adults in my research, did not enrol in a degree with a specific economic aim. Instead, they wanted to define themselves in a period of their lives when they wanted to change their identity in their social groups. The symbolism of the degree was a crucial factor in their choice and its achievement changed the identity of the graduates, helping them to function more effectively within their social groups.

Adults will engage in learning at a time which is relevant and appropriate to them. Equally, the outcomes which they expect to gain from a degree are varied and do not generally translate into hard outcomes. It is not therefore, a clear case of economic versus social benefits which adults weigh up when considering a degree, as policy makers would have us believe (Brown and Lauder, 2003b; Gorard et al, 1999a; Gorard et al, 2000a; Gorard et al, 2000b; Green, 2004; Knoll, 2005). Instead, graduates bring broader benefits to the communities in which they function, which by definition, are much harder to measure and quantify

As Schuller et al (2004a) have found, government initiatives are out of step with the benefits which lifelong learning brings when reviewing social capital and social cohesion. This is due in part, to the lack of research being carried out specifically investigating the benefits to learners in the long term. (Schuller, 2002a; Schuller et al, 2004a; Schuller et al, 2004b). I contend, that the wider benefits of learning are a rich seam of activity which should be carefully mined by policy makers and educationalists, in order to enrich the society in which we live.

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