

**Intermediate qualifications and part-time students: the value of interim goals and credentials in post-modern lives. (0145)**

**Introduction**

In the UK, students who are not studying towards a first degree or foundation degree are categorised as studying towards an “other undergraduate qualifications”. This category is used to describe a diverse range of curriculum offerings – from one-off modules to programmes of study leading to externally recognised qualifications. This paper presents key findings from a survey of 294 “other undergraduate” part-time students studying towards a Certificate or Diploma in Higher Education in an undergraduate flexible studies programme. Given almost free reign in their choice of modules from across the undergraduate curriculum, this paper examines how students located their studies within and across disciplines, their motives for study and their destinations in terms of qualifications goals. The paper also uses demographic data related to age, past experiences of higher education, occupation, and work-status to explore the ways in which students connect “other undergraduate” qualifications to work-based aspirations or more personal projects of self-development. In drawing on a framework of cultural capital, this paper extends our understanding of particular “other undergraduate” qualifications as a commodity in the lives of students and in personalised projects of lifelong learning.

**The study of sub-degree qualifications**

Data published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (see Table 5) (2011) indicates that in 2009/10 over 20% of the half-a-million students awarded an undergraduate qualification in the UK were awarded an other undergraduate qualification (eg Higher National Certificates and Diplomas, Certificates and Diplomas of Higher Education and certificate/diploma qualifications conferred by institutions). These statistics also reveal that approximately 60% of students awarded other undergraduate qualifications were studying part-time.

Part-time students have been described as a complex heterogeneous group following a wide range of qualification aims (Callender and Feldman 2009; Ramsden and Brown 2008). This complexity is particularly true of students studying other undergraduate qualifications (Bennion *et al.* 2011).

Ramsden (2006) has identified those studying at undergraduate level but not a first degree as a distinct category of part-time student and similarly Ramsden and Brown (Ramsden and Brown 2008) have suggested demographic differences between students following degrees and those studying towards some other form of undergraduate qualification. However, this paper questions whether distinctions

between those studying other undergraduate qualifications and those studying towards a degree are useful.

In the US, Bosworth (2010) views higher education as an underutilised credential and education strategy that can deliver greater income returns than bachelor degrees. Bosworth, argues that completing a certificate can position graduates for immediate workforce success and also establish solid foundations for future academic achievement. The findings of this research resonate with Bosworth's assessment of other undergraduate qualifications in the USA – that they have a currency both in terms of both the vocational and study aspirations of many students.

### **Data collection**

This paper reports on findings from an online survey completed by a total of 294 part-time students working towards two sub-degree qualifications: approximately 70% of students in the study were registered on a Certificate of Higher Education and 30% of students on a Diploma of Higher Education. The qualifications from which students were recruited were introduced in June 2010 as part of an undergraduate Programme that enables students to create a tailored qualification by choosing modules from across the University's curriculum offering. In less than a year since the introduction of these intermediate qualifications approximately 2000 part-time students have registered on these qualifications. The online survey administered to students was designed to explore the appeal of these qualifications and their role in the study and life goals of students.

### **Findings – understanding the broader purpose of “other undergraduate” qualifications**

The survey revealed a diverse population of students registered on these sub-degree qualifications. Approximately two-thirds of the students were female and the majority of respondents were aged 40 years of age or over. More than half the students were in either full-time or part-time employment whilst a small number (8%) were retired. Most respondents had less than 2 A-levels (or equivalent) on entry but approximately 20% of the students had prior experience of higher education.

The most common reason for choosing to study a sub-degree qualification in particular was the appeal of completing stepping stones towards a degree but students were also drawn to these qualifications because they provided credentials en route to a degree. Nearly 80% of students studying the Cert HE and Dip HE reported they were aiming for a degree or higher qualification, and with few exceptions, they planned to complete their degree at their current University. Only a small number, approximately 10% of students aimed to terminate their studies with the Cert HE and a further 10% aimed to conclude their studies with a Dip HE.

Given the opportunity to choose modules from across the institutions curriculum the survey found that over half of the students located their module choice in one

discipline and that most commonly students located their studies in the social sciences.

Nearly 75% of students reported that their studies would improve their job prospects but only 40% reported being initially motivated to study for career-related reasons (the majority of students reporting being motivated to study for personal interest/development). Over half the students in the study indicated that they began studying “to fulfil a missed opportunity in life”.

This paper draws on a cultural capital framework to interpret the findings of the survey. In particular, the paper explores how the Certificate and Diploma examined in the survey operate as a form of “institutionalised” capital (Bourdieu 1986). Additionally, the paper draws on Hodkinson concept of “horizons for action” as a way of understanding how these intermediate qualifications feature in the career and life goals of the students in the survey study (Hodkinson 2008).

## References

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