More than Knowledge Transfer? Alumni Perspectives on the Value of Postgraduate Study for International Development

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Abstract: This article considers findings from the 'More Than Knowledge Transfer' research project, which was concerned with understanding the personal and professional trajectories of alumni from postgraduate programmes in education and international development. The article reflects on qualitative data to explore four key questions: what alumni value about their postgraduate study; the perceived usefulness of different types of learnings; how these are seen as connected to, or disconnected from, development practice; and how they are shaped by the expectations that students bring with them to the programme and their existing experiences in the international development field. The article suggests a need to problematize assumed dichotomies between 'theory' and 'practice' or 'skills' and 'criticality' and instead consider how these relationships may be shaped by students' own backgrounds and positionalities. It argues that supporting students to engage critically with, and move and build connections between, different spaces of learning and practice is key for engendering and sustaining critical and reflective approaches as they complete their studies and develop their careers in the development sector.

Key words: Higher education, development studies, education and international development, professional development, employability, critical thinking

I. Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals emphasize the potential value of participation in higher education for development (Owens, 2017). Moreover, a growing body of literature points to the benefits gained by individual students of taking part in postgraduate education (for example, Oketch et al., 2013; Webb, 2009). However, much less is known about whether and in what ways students make use of their learnings in their personal and professional lives in relation to international development once they complete their studies.[1] In this article, we consider data from the 'More than Knowledge Transfer' project, an exploratory research study which sought to understand the personal and professional trajectories of alumni from four postgraduate programmes on education and international development at one university in England. These interdisciplinary MA programmes, which bring together the fields of international education and development studies, attract students with backgrounds in both education and development, many of whom are hoping to develop their careers in education-related

roles in the international development sector. The article explores what former students valued about their MA programmes and examines how and whether they have been able to draw on their learnings from their MA as they have moved (back) into the workplace and developed their careers, and how this was affected by the experiences and expectations that they brought with them to postgraduate study. We do this through the presentation and discussion of a series of narrative vignettes, focusing on the experiences of six participants.

In the sections that follow we first consider the existing research and conceptual ideas which informed our analysis, and which we draw upon in the discussion. We then set out the methodological approach used, before turning to the presentation and discussion of findings. Finally, in the concluding reflections, we discuss the implications of the range of experiences discussed, in the context of neoliberal pressures, linked to concerns about employability and the perceived need for particular 'skills', both within higher education and within the development sector.

II. Framing the Study

In developing our analysis, we draw on ideas from a number of distinct bodies of literature. Firstly, a growing body of empirical research has, over the past few years, engaged critically with the teaching of international development, in particular higher education settings. Some of this work has looked at the implications of decolonizing development education in relation to pedagogic processes and curriculum, and the politics of historical, cultural and social representation (Langdon, 2009, 2013; Molope & Mekoa, 2018; Spiegel et al., 2017; Rutazibwa, 2018), emphasizing the need for development studies to 'engage with the crucial issues of epistemology, being, and power that maintain the present asymmetrical global relations' (Ndlovi-Gatsheni, 2012, p. 51). Another strand has been concerned with the relationship between academic learning and the development of 'skills' for development,

looking critically at the contents and processes of development studies programmes and what 'skills' development practitioners are perceived to need (Denskus & Esser, 2015; Engel & Simpson Reeves, 2018; Sims 2018; Spratt, 2015; White & Devereux, 2018). Such studies have explored the potential and challenges of building closer connections between academic learning and development practice (Hammersley et al., 2018; Langdon & Agyeyomah, 2014; Woolcock, 2007). They have also drawn attention to the perceived tension between the need for technical 'skills', linked to concerns around employability, and for more critical perspectives on development in postgraduate programmes (for example, Engel & Simpson Reeves, 2018; White & Devereux, 2018).

A second, more extensive, body of literature has critically examined the relationship between higher education and wider processes of social change. This work encompasses a number of strands relevant to our analysis. These include studies that have examined the relationship between higher education and the public good (for example, Deem & McCowan, 2018; Marginson 2011, 2013; Unterhalter et al., 2018; Walker, 2018) and those which have considered the role of higher education in the development of capabilities and human development (for example, Walker & Boni 2013; 2016; Walker & McLean, 2013). Unterhalter et al. (2018), in reviewing how the relationship between higher education and the public good has been conceptualized in the context of four countries in Africa, note a key distinction. They examine, on the one hand, understandings which posit higher education as *instrumental* in 'shaping a version of the public good' and on the other hand, those that argue that the public good is an 'intrinsic part of the experience of higher education', emphasizing 'the psycho-social, the cultural, the relational insights and soft power developed in particular kinds of higher education or put under stress through particular relationships of colonialism, globalisation, neoliberalism' (Unterhalter

et al., 2018, p. 3). McCowan (2019), similarly contrasts the *intrinsic* value of higher education, whereby the knowledge 'stored, generated and transmitted by the university' is seen as being worthwhile in itself, with instrumental value, associated with the university's role in contributing to 'individual and social goals' (McCowan, 2019, p. 68)—though he notes that the two are not necessarily exclusive.

Although this distinction between intrinsic and instrumental value has generally been considered in relation to higher education institutions, it can also be applied to thinking about the motivations and approaches to learning of students within higher education. In this article, we draw on notions of intrinsic and instrumental value, as we consider former students' motivations and engagements with post-graduate study. In doing so, we are not implying that intrinsic motivation is superior to instrumental motivation, indeed both ideas may lead to forms of public good. Philosophers have argued that intrinsic motivation might be better substituted for the concept for 'ultimate value' thereby dropping the justificatory reference to what may or may not be self-evident or have a connection to any metaphysical underpinnings concerning the validity of the term intrinsic (see Robeyns, 2017, pp. 53–5 for a discussion). Meanwhile, an instrumental motivation may act as a means to a further end of a different or even ultimate value. In our discussion, we draw on the concepts of instrumental and intrinsic value or motivation as categories of analysis that we recognize as social constructions with ontological significance. In doing so, we recognize that students come to higher education with varying previous experiences, expectations, capability sets and motivations for their learning.

A final strand of work concerned with the relationship between higher education (and students within higher education) and wider social systems that we engage with is work by Barnett (2018), who sets out a vision of the 'ecological university', which he sees as centrally implicated in seven different ecosystems or ecological zones.[2] In contrast to the 'entrepreneurial university', which, driven by a neoliberal logic, 'frames its understandings of the world through its own interests and projects' (Barnett, 2018, p. 76), Barnett argues that 'the ecological university deliberately and self-consciously has a care towards its movements across those ecosystems' (Barnett, 2018). He suggests that within the ecological university students occupy multiple learning spaces, as increasingly they may work alongside study or be involved in volunteering or entrepreneurial activities. They can therefore be understood as 'liquid learners' 'moving across different learning spaces' (Barnett, 2018, p. 99), with learning taking place outside of the university as well as within it. He argues that an increasingly 'supercomplex' world requires 'liquid learners' able to assimilate to and accommodate new worlds. This entails developing particular dispositions, including a will to learn, preparedness to explore and discover and listen to the world, and an 'orientation to appraise the world and form critical judgements on one's experiences' (Barnett, 2018, p. 101). We draw on this notion of the 'liquid learner' moving and connecting between spaces within and beyond higher education in our analysis as we consider the narratives of education and international development alumni.

III. Methodology

The research on which this article is based was conducted over the course of four months during 2017. The project's mixed methods research process was informed by an interpretivist and inductive approach.

A three-step data collection process was designed to facilitate wide participation and representation of alumni from across different settings. Step one consisted of a mapping exercise of networks of former students from the programmes. This enabled the identification of existing institutional networks and professional and personal social media networks through which alumni engaged with each other or their former university.

Step two comprised an online survey, which asked about ways in which the programme had matched participants' expectations, the usefulness of the programme in their personal and professional lives and the ongoing relationships that they maintained with other alumni and with the institution. Participants were recruited via electronic communication using institutional alumni databases, social networks identified in step one and direct communications with student representatives, in line with ethical and institutional guidelines relating to data protection. The survey generated 127 responses.[3]

In step three, in-depth semi-structured interviews over Skype, telephone, or face-to-face were organized with 22 participants who had completed the initial survey. Preliminary trends which had emerged from the survey guided the design of the interviews, focusing on the individual participants' experiences and trajectories prior to, during, and since completing, their postgraduate study. Participant selection sought to represent diversity in terms of country of origin, age, sex, mode of study and experiences of the programme. As several members of the project team had been involved in teaching on the MA programmes, to protect anonymity and ensure that participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences, the interviews were conducted by the research associate who was not familiar to any of the participants.

Although the study generated quantitative and qualitative data, in this article we focus on the qualitative data.[4] Initial analysis of this data sought to identify themes regarding participants' professional and personal development and perceptions of their MA study and explore commonalities and differences between participants. Following this thematic analysis, we returned to the original interviews and explored the individual narratives presented in each of them in more depth.

In this article, in taking a narrative approach to our analysis, we build on existing work that has used narrative approaches to understand experiences within higher education (see, Trahar 2009, 2010; Mertova, 2013). Through bringing together and presenting the experiences of individual participants, such analysis enables 'meaning making through the shaping or ordering of experience', and thus facilitates an exploration of the way in which 'individual moments or events, and the value or meanings attached to them, may be connected through time' (Chase, 2011, p. 421). Through the presentation of a series of short individual narrative accounts, we, therefore, explore how the participants themselves spoke about, interpreted and attached meaning to particular aspects of their personal and professional experiences, and consider how these interacted with the ways in which they described and interpreted their time on their postgraduate programmes. In developing our analysis in this way, we sought to do justice to the depth and breadth of reflection and richness of the experiences described within each interview, and to understand each narrative as a coherent whole, avoiding generalization or the attribution of causality to what are subjective, complex and nuanced accounts.

Our analysis was inevitably affected by our own positionality, and the role that different members of the research team have played in leading, designing or teaching on the postgraduate programmes on which the research was based. The process of analysis thus fed into a process of internal reflection on our own teaching and course development. However, we also attempted to 'step back', and, through engagement with the data and individual narratives, in dialogue with the wider literature, draw out the wider implications of the study for thinking about teaching, learning and student development in relation to postgraduate programmes concerned with issues of development and their relationship with the international development sector more broadly.

IV. Findings

Our initial thematic analysis pointed to a number of common experiences that ran through almost all of the interviews: all participants spoke about how much they valued the diversity of the student cohort, and the fact that they studied with colleagues from around the world; whilst many spoke of the importance of the networks that they were able to establish as a result. However, a closer look at participants' individual narratives, and the way they spoke about the (dis)connections of their learnings and experiences on the MA programme with their professional practice and career development, suggested a range of different sorts of experiences, which we categorized according to three key groups of participants:

1. 'Hopeful emergents': participants who were early career when starting the degree, or were doing the MA degree in the hope of it enabling them to change career and move into the education and international development sector (often moving away from teaching English), and who had relatively little experience or background in international development (8 participants)
2. 'Reflective interrupters': participants who had already been working in the sector either in their countries of origin or internationally prior to undertaking the MA and had taken a year out to complete the MA on a full-time basis in order to build and reflect on their experiences to date (7 participants)
3. 'Engaged actives': participants who were already working in the sector and who completed the degree part-time (mostly with a blend of online and face-to-face study) alongside their existing work in the sector (7 participants)

We recognize that these are artificial, and sometimes overlapping, categories; however, they were analytically useful in enabling us to identify and explore the range of distinctions and connections that the MA graduates draw between their academic study and their professional practice, and how different sorts of learning is valued by these different groups. In the presentation and discussion of findings that follows, we explore this through the presentation of short narrative vignettes for two participants in each category. These participants were selected as 'telling cases' (Mitchell, 1984), as we considered that each of their experiences was helpful in shedding light on the tensions, themes and issues found across the wider range of responses in each category. We also attempted to ensure a balance between male and female participants[5] and between those coming from high-income and low- or middle-income country contexts, in order to reflect the diversity of students who apply to and study on the four MA programmes and ensure representation of a range of voices and perspectives.

For each category, we present the two narratives and then draw out emerging themes in a short discussion. In the final section, we present concluding reflections, bringing together our analysis from across the three groups.

Hopeful Emergents

Jeremy,[6] from Europe, had been teaching English in Asia before starting his MA, and applied to the programme hoping that it would enable him to move into a new career path:

> I was fed up teaching English, and that wasn't a long-term plan anyway…initially I was looking at courses in human rights, and to do that kind of work. I thought, 'Which human rights am I most interested in? What do I think is most valuable?' I came on education. I didn't find any courses on human rights education I was interested in. Then, I came across the course at [this institution] …. That was the only Masters I applied to. It was to make that career transition from being a teacher into working to support the development of education systems.

Having completed another Master's programme previously, he mentioned having very low expectations when he started the MA programme. Indeed, he shared that studying for the MA had been more interesting than he had expected. However, although he said that many of the lecturers were 'very engaging', he felt that he learnt as much from other students and attending additional seminars as from the programme itself. Moreover, despite enjoying his time on the programme he did not feel that he gained many 'skills' that he has been able to apply in his professional career since:

> I also think it's highly academic and geared towards people who want to go on and do PhDs, not people who want to work in the sector. When I did start working, I was still very under-qualified and had a lot of learning to do on the job. I didn't come out with any skills. I came out with a lot of elevated theories, but no skills

He suggested that the programme could do more to support students to develop their understanding of career opportunities, and the work of different organizations:

> I think [the programme] sort of helped … to clarify the field I was getting into, and the theories behind it. What it didn't clarify is what any of the roles or career paths are in that field, apart from the academic track.

> I think there should definitely be some kind of formalised partnership between the [university] and a handful of organizations … so that the research they do in their dissertations could be based on the real world and practical things that exist …. Students have research they want to do, and they want to be engaged with organizations, and possibly work for them later. I think to facilitate that transition, that's one concrete thing they could do…. They should definitely do more to bridge the university world and the real world… because very few people want to continue doing PhDs.

He has since been able to establish himself as an education researcher in a global international development NGO and described the contribution he has been able to make to education policy discussions at the global level. However, getting to this point was, he noted, not easy. He described the challenges that he experienced in developing his career after completing the programme, taking on a series of unpaid internships, followed by short term contracts:

> The longest contract I've had … is the current one, which is nine months. I am still on short-term contracts. Although it looks seamless on a CV … it is pretty stressful being on short-term contracts and never knowing if it is going to be renewed.

Valentina, from Latin America, had been teaching English when she applied to her master's programme, and had previously volunteered for a homelessness programme in Asia. Like Jeremy, she explained that she was looking for a career move away from teaching:

> My background is international relations, so I was just exploring the education side of it, because I'd always been attracted to it …. I decided that teaching was not for me. I liked it, but it was not for me as a career, and I wanted to see a way to combine my background, my academic background with the education. That's when I applied.

She studied full-time on campus with the help of loans from her home country and explained that she was left with considerable debts by the time she had finished. Although she said she enjoyed the programme and felt she learned a lot, particularly in relation to research, she struggled with the amount of theory, and, as someone new to the sector, did not feel it really helped her in terms of employability:

> I really liked the programme, and I learned a lot. I found it hard, because I'm not that theory-oriented, you know?…I feel like, in reality, people that benefit more from this programme either have, already, one foot in the development sector, or they're in to get a PhD. Because …. I'm in touch with a lot of people, most people are still unemployed, or doing work for free.

Valentina stayed in the UK after completing the MA and went on to complete an additional master's programme. She has since found a

job working in an NGO with asylum seekers, following nine months volunteering in several different organizations. She feels that it was her experience volunteering, rather than her MA studies, that enabled her to secure this post. She described her frustration at what she saw as her limited career progression:

> It is really demotivating to see that after such a highly esteemed masters, I am doing admin work that really any smart person could do out of high school. However, I feel more confident about getting better jobs in the future, because, as I said, I have one foot in the door.

Reflecting on her own experiences, she suggested that she would like to see the MA programme placing more emphasis on career development, networking, and including more opportunities to develop applied skills such as impact evaluation and the development of funding proposals.

Discussion
Both participants highlighted that their motivations to study on a master's programme were broadly instrumental in nature. However, on starting the MA, neither had been very clear about what this might mean in terms of the types of employment that might consequently be available to them. Their generalized sense that their MA would be useful to move into a career in the education and international development sector was shared with other participants in this hopeful emergent category, including those who had a background in English language teaching, as well as those who had very little prior professional experience. Many, like Jeremy and Valentina, had little prior knowledge of the education and international development sector and an expectation that the MA programme would enable them to obtain interesting roles in the sector, and help them understand more about the nature of the sector, and career opportunities available within it.

Both Jeremy and Valentina appeared disappointed with what they saw as a lack of attention to career development in their programmes of study. While both have since found employment in relevant sectors, this followed months of volunteering or internships, required persistence and determination, and brought with it financial insecurity. In both narratives, these experiences sat alongside a perception that there was not enough emphasis on the 'skills' needed in the workplace in their programmes of study. While both recognized a value in the theoretical engagement that the programmes offered, they did not see this as either helping them get jobs or being useful to them once in jobs: 'theory' being perceived as a somewhat unnecessary adjunct to what they saw as more valuable applied 'skills'. Although the quantitative survey data indicated that the vast majority (75%) of respondents felt that their programme of study had prepared them well or extremely well for their professional lives, the interview data suggests that others in this group shared Jeremy and Valentina's concerns with the need for greater attention to employability.

More generally, the two narratives, and the interview data from across the hopeful emergent group, suggest that for these participants, the university, associated with theory, and the workplace, associated with practice, were seen as quite distinct spaces, with few interlinkages between academic study and the 'real world'. Participants advocated bringing the two spaces closer together, suggesting that their programmes of study should increase engagement with organizations working in the field and incorporate more practical or 'skills-based' elements associated with professional practices and enhanced employability. But there was less sense of the students being able to make these connections themselves through embracing the characteristics of 'liquid learners' moving and learning across settings and opportunities.

Reflective Interrupters
James, from Europe, joined his Master's programme in the late 1990s after extensive work in international development working

primarily with street children programmes in Africa and Latin America. He described his motivation for doing the MA as being linked to a desire to reflect on his experiences in the sector so far, as well as being associated with aspirations to develop his career in a slightly different direction:

> It was an opportunity, 'Okay, let me spend a year processing all those experiences,' trying to make sense of them, with the idea of this would also be a very useful springboard for moving on and doing, perhaps, something slightly more…. Something with a clearer developmental focus, perhaps…. I basically sat down and said, 'Okay, I've come out of the country I've been in for the last number of years. It's an opportunity to simply sit down and explore the world I've been living in,' really. Then maybe try and answer a few questions about what might that world look like in a few years' time, and, therefore, in what way the Master's would contribute towards developing that as a sort of professional narrative, without sounding…If we say, 'It was a sort of professional development,' it sounds rather cold. I think it sort of fits more into that idea of personal transitions.

In looking back on his experiences on the programme, he explained how he valued the diversity both of the cohort—which brought together people from around the world—and of the modules that were offered. He described how the course enabled him to step out and critically reflect on and engage with development issues and to question the assumptions that are made when working in development:

> I suppose the formal elements that I particularly took with me were looking at what I was doing, in a very pragmatic way, with a group of children in a very specific local organization, and looking broader and trying to understand how that work could be deepened in terms of looking at policy, looking at research processes, looking at a clear reflexivity within the sort of work I was doing. I think all of those elements were introduced to me. I think I'd sort of been dipping my toe in some of them previously,

but I think the course allowed me to access a lot of literature and a lot of developmental thinking at the time, which really gave me an extremely helpful frame for going back into work. It very clearly changed the way I went about my work after that, as well.

Since graduating, James has worked extensively at local, national and international levels particularly in relation to children and young people who live, work or depend on support on the streets for their survival. This has included direct work in four countries and influencing the work of programmes across 15 countries. He described how, in particular, he was able to take forward participatory and action learning approaches in this work, which have become embedded in his practice working with children and with others in the field. At the time of the interview, he was writing up some of this work, as well as beginning new studies in an unrelated area.

George, from East Africa, was working as a peripatetic teacher trainer, supporting schools in his country when he started his MA, which he studied on campus for one year. Unlike James, he was relatively early in his career when he applied to the MA. However, rather than representing a desire for a career shift into a different sector—as was the case for Jeremy and Valentina above—his motivations for studying the MA built very clearly on his professional experiences to date, and were explicitly linked to a desire to support the rebuilding of his country's education system post-conflict:

> When I applied, that was in 2010 … we had just recovered from one of the longest civil wars in the world … the time was really tough …. So, I was doing the teacher training, but I was also thinking around the whole context of planning, trying to build the foundations of this country …. So, the best thing I thought I would do was to do some course … in education planning … so that I would be able to support the ministry better

He described how he was able to take up a full-time place on the course by way of a scholarship:

> As a result of the crisis…my parents couldn't even afford to pay my fees even at the high school level. I benefited from the support of the UN to get scholarships for my high school. Thereafter I was lucky to be able to get scholarship from [a scholarship trust]…. to do my undergraduate in education, and then the master's course.

Reflecting on his experiences on the programme he spoke positively about what he learned and how he developed as a person:

> I think if I compare myself now and before the course, I think I am a better person not just as an individual but as an educational-ist. I am able to transfer some of the learnings that I've got from the planning, from my project development ….

After completing the MA, he was able to return to his previous employer, in a more senior role as a technical programme officer working at a national level, before moving on to work for a bi-lateral donor, with whom he moved to another African country for three years. At the time of the interview, he was working as an education specialist with a multi-lateral organization. He spoke very positively about how he has drawn on what he had learned through the MA in his work, explaining that it has enabled him to be more critical and analytical, and has informed his work in relation to gender. He also described the value of understanding the importance of using evidence, although, in doing so, he reflected on the challenges of applying this in a complex post-conflict context:

> The other thing I would like to highlight is around evidence and this was really impor-tant even when I was working with [the bi-lateral donor]. The thing around developing a programme, there's no evidence. If you google for [my country] and you really want to find research papers or research…I'm sure you won't find it. So, what evidence do we have to support our [programming]? Nothing…

Discussion

Reflective interrupters formed a more diverse group than the hopeful emergent and James and George's narratives highlight something of the differences between participants from high-income contexts who were established in their careers, and who could afford taking a year out to reflect on their practice, compared with those from low-income contexts who could only study in London with the support of a scholarship. However, notwithstanding this diversity, there are some common threads that linked them. While they differed in terms of how well-established they were in their professional careers, in both narratives there is a much clearer sense of how the programme connected with their professional lives, and where it might take them, than was identified in the hopeful emergent narratives. These are linked to both professional and personal aspirations. Thus, while George's motivations were linked instrumentally to his desire to contribute to the rebuilding of his country's education system, for James, more intrinsic motivations were linked to the value of having a space for learning about and reflecting on professional experiences.

Both participants used what they learned on the MA to inform their professional practice. For George, this took the form of understandings of project development, that he has drawn on in his work in bi and multilateral agencies. James, meanwhile, appeared to talk about a deeper shift in his whole approach to practice, involving greater reflexivity, and the application of ideas related to participatory and action learning. For both participants, academic learning and professional practice appeared more connected, as they brought experience from their professional lives into the programme, and then applied learning from it on their return to their workplaces. In these narratives we, therefore, saw some evidence of participants as 'liquid learners', moving and translating learnings between contexts,

between theory and practice, as well as across different junctures in their lives, and this reflected a number of similar experiences found across the interview data with participants in this group. However, George's discussion of the difficulties of finding research evidence in his own country also reminds us of some of the challenges of doing this, particularly in some of the very complex contexts in which many alumni live and work.

Engaged Actives
Kim, from Australasia, had been working in the education sector of the Europe-based headquarters of a multilateral organization for several years when she applied to study her MA. She described her motivations for returning to studying as being both professional and personal:

> I wanted to have a formal education qualification for professional reasons, and also just for, I suppose, a sense of self-recognition, I guess, in the sense that I was working in that environment, so I thought it would give me better status, I suppose, to have some kind of a formal qualification in education.

She studied part-time, completing one module on campus and the others online alongside her developing career as an international education specialist. She spoke positively about the intellectual stimulation and networks gained through the MA, as well as the professional benefits of acquiring a relevant qualification:

> In terms of, certainly, professionally, I had a lot of positive feedback from people about the fact that, you know, I had done a degree…so that was on that level, on a purely utilitarian level. Then, on a more personal level, it was just a really great degree, to be honest. I mean, the intellectual stimulation was lovely, after having worked in a non-academic environment for several years. It was really nice to be looking at actual research texts, rather than policy texts.

Following the MA, she moved to Latin America with her organization, and, at the time of the interview, was about to return to the organizational headquarters in Europe to work

on gender-related issues. Since completing the MA, she has played a significant role in international policy development, including in relation to the discussions around the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). She described how she has drawn on the theoretical way of framing ideas that she gained through the MA, as well as the understanding of the intersections between education and other sectors that she developed through the programme, in her work:

> So, I think I would say, yes, I've adopted more of an intersectoral approach now, thanks to that class [on health promotion], for instance, which really sort of forced me to draw links with what we're doing in other areas. So yes, that's one. So yes, I guess, really, the theoretical framework, and the opening to other areas, but within the context of education.

This has been particularly valuable in relation to her work on gender relations, where she described how she has encountered resistance from others but explained how the learnings from the MA gave her the confidence to introduce new ideas to colleagues.

Miriam, from East Africa, was working for an International NGO in her country when she joined her MA programme. Like Kim, she studied part-time, spending one term on campus, and completing the rest of the programme online, alongside her role working in community development. Her motivation to study the programme linked to her personal interests, as well as her professional development:

> So, health promotion…, and then blending it with education and especially education for adult learners, I found it to be very much in line with my work and also my personal interests.

Despite being awarded a scholarship, taking up her place on the programme was not straightforward: she described the resistance she experienced in persuading her employer to allow her time to come to London to study on campus and how she had to commit to

remaining in the organization for two years after completing the programme. Balancing study with family and working life was also a challenge, and she had to leave her young son behind with her sister when she came to London:

> At the time when I was studying, I did find the online lessons to be comfortable because what I just had to do was to create like two or three more hours in my day, so I decided to sleep less. I had to forgo some leisure time and I had to forgo weekends just to make it… In terms of my family, okay, they suffered a bit but they understood, they knew it was for some time, for a given time, for a season, and then I would be through.

Despite these compromises, she spoke very positively about the MA and what she felt she gained from it in terms of developing her understanding of education and health promotion, alongside gaining new ways of thinking critically, and developing analysis, research and writing skills:

> Another benefit is that my writing skills, I would say, even the way I read and the way I analyse things, I believe I became much, much better, and then my research skills were also improved to a large extent.

Since completing the MA, she has continued to work for the same organization, but is now in a more senior role. She explained how learnings from the programme, and the confidence she developed as a result, have been important as she has worked to influence strategic health agendas in her country:

> After my studies, I found myself in a better position to contribute to policy formation… I find that I don't just work the way I used to work before. I'm a bit more analytical, I'm much more critical…. I've been able to work with the Ministry of Health staff who are at the county level, and we've been able to come up with strategy papers. I find that as an individual, I'm contributing more and more in a more focused way, in a more guided way to my community.

> Previously I used to be shy, I was like, 'Who would listen to me?', but after attending the classes [on the MA] and the exposure that I got and just being able to sit down and look at things in a more scholarly way, I feel much more confident even when I'm preparing maybe to go for a workshop or for a meeting, I just don't go to listen. I go to actively participate, and people have actually recognized me as being able to contribute and give pertinent guidance to whatever work that we undertake.

Reflecting on her own experience she highlighted the importance of scholarships in enabling students like her to complete the programme, and she advocated for working with development organizations to increase the availability of funding for students from low- and middle-income countries.

Discussion

For those we identified as engaged actives, a period of study did not form part of a year out from employment but ran alongside it (although both participants studied in London for one term, which was a programme requirement). This group thus made up the majority of those who studied the programme part-time—approximately one-third of the total respondents to the online survey. In contrast to the disconnect between theory and practice apparent in the narratives of those in the hopeful emergent group, here the participants spoke particularly positively about how developing their theoretical understanding was important in informing their practice, enabling them to be more critical and analytical (and which was received positively by some, but not all, professional colleagues). For both Kim and Miriam, working and studying concurrently enabled them to build very direct connections between study and work and the ideas that they were encountering in both spaces and this two-way dynamic is something that was apparent in the interviews across this group. For these participants, the university space thus appeared to be viewed as closely connected to the space of practice, with the students themselves acting as 'liquid learners', learning across domains, and acting as bridges

between, these different professional and academic contexts.

In the narratives of Kim and Miriam, there are clearly direct links made between their experiences of studying and career progression, and both spoke about quite impressive career achievements. However, the focus was not only on strategically gaining a qualification on paper (though this was seen as significant) but was also linked to developing their (critical) understanding of the issues, and, importantly, increased confidence and a sense of professional legitimacy. For these participants, MA study was thus seen as valuable in providing them with the tools, understanding, and confidence to put forward new ideas and to challenge and push back against dominant orthodoxies or ways of working. However, their narratives also emphasize the intrinsic value that the study had for them, as they described personal interest in the topics and talk about the pleasure of learning.

The two narratives point to the potential for part-time study as a means for students to link theory and practice, and for students to develop their understanding of critical perspectives, which is valued not only for career and personal development but also for enabling more reflective policy and practice. However, Miriam's narrative also points to the challenges faced by many part-time students who straddle multiple worlds—of work, of study, and of family—as they attempt to carve out time and space to study while managing professional and family commitments.

V. Conclusions

Existing literature that has engaged with the teaching of development in higher education, has pointed to a perceived tension between a focus on theory and critical engagement, and a focus on more applied or practice-linked skills seen as being required for employment within the development industry (Denskus & Esser, 2015; Engel & Simpson Reeves, 2018;

Sims 2018; Woolcock, 2007), sometimes linked to wider critical discussions about the value and purpose of development, and development studies teaching, in the context of the decolonial project (Rutazibwa, 2018). Our study, through attending to the individual narratives of students who come to the study of education and development from a range of very different backgrounds, helps shed light on the importance of understanding the ways in which students' own positionality, and what it is that they bring with them to their Master's programmes, shapes not only their engagements with academic study but also the extent to which they are able to develop and sustain forms of critical reflection and transformative practice as they move out of the academic space and develop their careers in the development sector.

The narratives presented in this article, alongside the wider set of data from which they were drawn, suggest a need to problematize assumed tensions or dichotomies between 'theory' and 'practice', or between 'skills' and 'criticality', and instead consider the different ways in which these relationships may play out in relation to particular groups of students. The three types of narratives discussed reflect something of the common and particular experiences of students who are differently positioned in relation to their professional careers and the development sector, which in turn reflects differences in the way in which the relationships between post-graduate study and the space of work or practice can be understood. For the hopeful emergents, the two spaces appear separate and disconnected, and their narratives indicate that they would like to see the MA programme—and the university more broadly—playing a more instrumental role in building connections with practice. For the reflective interrupters and engaged actives, however, the sense of separation between academic learning and practice is much less apparent. Here, rather than looking to the university to develop outward linkages with the field of practice, it is students themselves, and

their former and current engagements with the development field, who can be understood to bridge practices in higher education with a broader development field. For these students, their learnings on the programme are seen as closely linked to their professional lives and viewed as valuable in enabling them to reflect on—and improve—practice. Rather than being in tension with the 'skills' needed for practice, engaging with theory and developing criticality are seen as an important part of this process of developing reflective practice, and being able to push forward new thinking and ideas.

What does this mean for thinking about curriculum and teaching practice, and the sort of learning that is valued and valuable in education and international development? Our findings point to the value—both instrumental and intrinsic motivations—of learning spaces that encourage critique and facilitate students' engagement with a diverse range of voices and perspectives, including critical engagement with theory. These can play an important role in enabling them to reflect on, analyse, and critically assess experiential and research-related evidence, challenge orthodoxies and received knowledge, and advance new ideas and thinking where appropriate (Claxton, 2021). The accounts from participants, particularly those identified as reflective interrupters and engaged actives, suggest that this is important not only for the professional career development of individual alumna but also for engendering the more critical and reflective approaches needed for ensuring that professional practice in the development sector contributes positively to challenging entrenched inequalities and hierarchies of power and to advancing an agenda of increased social justice and enhanced well-being for marginalized groups.

However, it is also clear that issues of employability, career progression and performance are very real concerns for many students, particularly those in the hopeful emergent group. Increasingly, gaining a relevant postgraduate qualification is seen as an essential prerequisite for being employed in the development sector, and this is reflected in increasing numbers of younger and less experienced students entering the MA programmes as hopeful emergents. Meanwhile, in the context of the neoliberalization of the higher education sector, the instrumental value of degree programmes in terms of graduate employment outcomes is often pushed by the universities themselves (see Patel, this SI). However, our data highlights the instability and messiness of career paths in the development sector and, as Valentina's narrative indicates, studying at a postgraduate level can entail taking on significant amounts of debt, without any guarantee of paid employment after graduation. In this context, we suggest that the answer does not lie in simply seeking to replace theory with 'skills' or a focus on critical engagement with one on employability. Rather, our data points to the need to support students—including those from the hopeful emergent group—to develop as 'liquid learners', able to engage critically with, and move and build connections between different spaces of learning and practice. The richness of the alumni experiences reflected in our data, including the narratives presented in this article, and the value that participants placed on the diverse cohort of students with whom they studied, suggests that maximizing opportunities for peer learning and reflection between students who bring with them a range of different experiences of and perspectives on development practice, and reaching out to, and building networks of alumni, to which current students can be connected, and which become in and of themselves spaces for ongoing interaction, learning and critical reflection in the field, maybe an important part of this support process.

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Notes

1. In this article, we use the plural term learnings to reflect the heterogeneous, complex and diverse processes, methods and spaces in which individuals engage with education and knowledge. Learnings aligns with our conceptual and philosophical frameworks that acknowledge the non-linear, intersubjective and iterative pathways taken by the participants of this study.
2. These are: the knowledge ecology, the ecology of social institutions, persons, the economy, learning, culture and the natural environment.
3. As there was no single existing database of alumni through which participants could be recruited, we don't know the total number of potential participants that received the invitation to respond to the survey, though estimate this to be several hundred alumni.
4. For a discussion of trends identified through the quantitative data, see North et al. (2017).
5. We note that the 'reflective interrupters' group comprised mainly men (5 out of 7 participants), whilst the 'engaged actives' group constituted primarily women (6 out of 7 participants), and this is reflected in the participants selected.
6. To abide by ethical and institutional guidelines, we have anonymized all of the names of the participants included and have not included details (for example, countries of origin or names of workplaces) that might be identifying. We chose to allocate a pseudonym to each of the participants to reflect their individuality, and to avoid the homogeneity inferred by the categories constructed for the purpose of the analysis.

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