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A Niche Degree: a Case Study of an MA (in Cultural Astronomy and Astrology)

Bernadette Brady

School of Archaeology, History and Anthropology University of Wales Trinity Saint David
b.brady@tsd.ac.uk

Alie Bird

School of Archaeology, History and Anthropology University of Wales Trinity Saint David
a.bird@tsd.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper introduces a case study of The Sophia Centre's MA in Cultural Astronomy and Astrology at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, UK. Initiated in 2002 as a campus-based degree with fifteen students, the MA has been taught online since 2008; its current student body numbers seventy-five. The strategies adopted in moving to online delivery are identified and evaluated. It is observed that these were influenced by an entrepreneurial philosophy imported from the private sector. While at first glance the differences between a campus-based and an online degree seem obvious, on closer inspection these differences become blurred. Key factors in implementing successful online course delivery are recognised as being the construction of a virtual campus to mirror the brick-built campus in functional terms to facilitate learning and encourage students and their tutors to establish online identities and build community. The particular importance of the curriculum is noted. Criteria attributed by different commentators to so-called niche degrees are considered. It is concluded that the MA can be described as a niche degree by virtue of the facts that its student body is diverse in age; may or may not use the degree for leveraging their careers; that its specialised curriculum links it with a special interest group which is geographically diverse and hence exclusively accessible online. Contrary to some criticism of an entrepreneurial influence on higher education, it is concluded that this style of an online niche degree harks back to a medieval academic model.

Introduction

This paper introduces a case study which we are currently conducting on the structure, history and practices of The Sophia Centre's MA in Cultural Astronomy and Astrology at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, UK. The MA was

initiated in 2002 and has seen its student numbers swell from around fifteen in 2002 to approximately seventy-five as of 2012. As might be expected the MA has incorporated a number of changes in its ten-year history, perhaps the most notable of which being its successful shift from a conventional, brick-built campus-based programme to a fully online degree. This longitudinal research project, commenced in early 2012, plans to track students' progression through the MA modules for the three to four years from their initial enrolment to their graduation. The aim of the project is to identify and understand the factors which have contributed to the MA's success so that this can be nurtured and maintained. Its area of investigative concern embraces the culture of the MA, which its researchers take to include both its structural components — demographic, curricular, pedagogic and technological — and the reported experiences of its members consisting of current students and tutors as well as graduates.

The trajectory of this paper is the presentation of part of our early research findings. The paper introduces the insider positions of the researchers and discusses their methodology. With this background in place the paper then presents some of its case study findings, in particular the 'story' of the establishment of the MA, its methods of teaching online and the role played by its curriculum in its current success. The paper concludes by offering findings on the nature of a niche degree and the place this can hold within higher education establishments.

Reflexive Considerations

In 2002, Brady was amongst the first student intake of the MA CAA at Bath Spa University College. By 2008 she was a member of the tutoring team of the revised online version of the MA and, in 2012, she completed her doctorate within the department; her thesis researched the belief in fate amongst contemporary astrologers (Brady, 2012). Brady also works as a professional astrologer and maintains her tutoring and supervisory roles as a member of the MA's teaching staff.

Bird's doctoral thesis reviewed the teaching and learning of astrology at all levels, from practical to academic, in contemporary Britain (Bird, 2006). In the course of her three-year ethnographic research project, she conducted classroom ethnography among the first students of the MA CAA at Bath Spa University College from 2002 to 2004. Her research was fuelled by her long-term enthusiasm for, and study of, astrology; by her first-hand experience of its teaching fora; and by her familiarity with its language. Following the conclusion of her doctoral research project, Bird never actually left the field and she remains involved with the MA as a tutor and supervisor.

In designing and implementing this research project, we have as far as possible taken into account its inherent top-down bias. For, however the uneven nature of the power relations is militated against, it is acknowledged that the researchers occupy positions of authority, as course tutors, in relation to their student research subjects. Thus care was taken to instigate ethical procedures, such as anonymity of questionnaires and interviewing only students who were completing their degrees, to alleviate the project's unavoidable top-down bias.

Given our ten-year association with the MA, which encompasses teaching, learning and researching experience, we approach this project as insiders of some years'

standing in relation to our field. We are mindful of the relevance here of Anthony Cohen's (1992, p.339) notion of "post-fieldwork fieldwork" which was born of a nineteen-year long involvement with his own research community. In these circumstances, Cohen (1992, p.351) advises researchers to recognise that fieldwork occurs both in the field and beyond it, its conclusions inevitably shaped in part by extraneous personal experience and "post hoc" ethnographic interpretations. Additionally, as insiders with prior knowledge of our field, our research is informed by what can be termed, as an extension of Cohen's concept, "pre-fieldwork fieldwork".

Methodology: Near and Far

Despite sharing insider status in respect of our field, we nonetheless prefer to view it from the two very different perspectives we have defined as "insider near" and "insider far". To achieve this broad view, we will mix research styles and combine participant observation with the more conventional tools of the questionnaire and semi-structured interview.

Bird's preferred "insider-near" approach involves embracing what has been described as digital anthropology or the ethnography of virtual worlds (Horst and Miller, 2012, Boellstorff, 2012). An online research field poses an inherent challenge to a researcher used to practising "deep hanging out" — the catch phrase with which Renato Rosaldo characterised participant observation in 1994, discussed and developed since by anthropologists, notably Clifford Geertz (2000, pp.107-118). For, like all researchers studying online communities, she must devise ways of doing this in a virtual, rather than an actual, field. Gary Bowler (2010, p.1270) has observed that the revisions to research approaches follow from the conception of ethnography as a method open to adaptation by individual researchers. Thankfully, it has been observed by Dhiraj Murthy (2008, p.849) that it may not be as problematic in these circumstances as was at first supposed to fulfil the remit of an ethnographic study - to observe and record everyday life - given that much of a person's everyday life is now online. As this is likely to hold particularly true of students who have chosen to enrol on an online degree, and for that matter their tutors and researchers, it is anticipated that it should be possible to form and foster fruitful field relationships by means of electronic and social networking media.

Brady's preferred research methods are more easily implemented than Bird's in respect of a virtual field. The "insider-far" position has been adopted by Brady in the course of her application of the instruments of online questionnaires and semi-structured Skype interviews to gather quantitative and qualitative material. In evaluating these methods, it has been noted with no surprise that the students readily engaged with the project's preliminary online survey, for they had already adapted to greater or lesser extent to the online nature of the degree. Students also responded favourably to the request for additional personal comments incorporated in the questionnaire, volunteering a wealth of personal observations which constitutes a rich data resource for analysis as well as ethnographic follow-up; this response was probably due to the insider positions held by Brady and Bird. The questionnaire was designed to collect demographical information, epistemological attitudes which will be monitored over the student's journey through his/her MA studies and, the subject of this paper, the reasons given by students for joining the MA programme.

The Story of the MA

At the outset of our project we collected the story of the MA from the commencement of its teaching. This story began in 2002 when the MA in Cultural Astronomy and Astrology was inaugurated by The Sophia Centre whose remit is the study of cosmology in culture. The published purpose of the MA was originally, and remains today, “to investigate the role of cosmological, astrological and astronomical beliefs, models and ideas in human culture, including the theory and practice of myth, magic, divination, religion, spirituality, politics and the arts” (Campion, 2012, p.3). With this as its broad curriculum, the MA was established and first located at Bath Spa University College, UK. In this phase of its history it was taught as a conventional campus-based degree programme. However, due to changes at Bath Spa University College, the MA relocated in 2008 to the University of Wales Trinity Saint David with Nicholas Campion as Director of the Sophia Centre and the MA course. Coinciding with this move, the MA became a fully distance-learning degree which was taught exclusively online. In accordance with the suggested classification of Mary Tallent-Runnels, Julie Thomas, William Lan, et al. (2006, p.115), who urge a standardisation of terms in this area of research, we will henceforth describe the MA as an “online degree”.

The shift from a campus-based to an online degree programme inevitably prompted an overhaul of inherited methods of course delivery. Strategies for establishing an interactive education community online were designed and implemented. Influential to these changes was the fact that, with the exception of its Director, most of its part-time tutors — although holding the necessary academic qualifications — were drawn from areas outside the academy. Additionally, we found that the part-time tutors were motivated by a deep interest in the curriculum rather than viewing the tutoring as a career building opportunity. Two of these tutors, Liz Greene and Bernadette Brady, could draw upon an extensive teaching experience specific to the MA’s curriculum but accumulated within the private sector, having both directed centres of astrological education and, in their professional capacity, written and delivered presentations at international conferences over a period exceeding twenty years. In 2002 Brady had transformed a hundred-strong class-based astrology-related school into a fully online teaching programme when she relocated to the UK from Australia. MA Director, Nicholas Campion, in addition to his experience of lecturing at Bath Spa University College, shared Greene’s and Brady’s extensive experience of lecturing within the astrological educational sector. The combined knowledge of the tutors, born of experience and largely honed outside the academy, informed the identification of the ways and means by which the MA could be successfully delivered to a body of students located around the globe. Consequently, many of the changes required for establishing the online delivery of the MA were fuelled by an entrepreneurial philosophy imported from the private sector.

Flowing from this philosophy was the view that students were clients/customers and thus essential that they saw they were receiving a quality product. One aspect of this quality product was the requirement that students should be given opportunities to allow them to develop their own online identities and thereby build a community. One of the first steps taken towards this community-building project was the instigation of a non-compulsory annual school held in Bath, UK. This summer school is scheduled

each year to take place in the week immediately prior to the annual Sophia Centre conference, also held in Bath, thereby allowing students to attend both school and conference in one journey. Around 30% – 35% of all enrolled students attend the summer school each year, availing themselves of the chance to meet actually rather than virtually as they do throughout the year and to socialise with their fellow students and tutors.

However, not all students attend the summer school. Thus, independent of the work of writing and delivering a quality curriculum, tutor hours were allocated to projects that focused on helping the students build a sense of membership of an online community of learners. This thinking is supported within the academy by, for example, Rupert Wegerif (1998, p.48) who related the success or failure of online courses to students' ability to take the step from outsider to insider and to acquire membership of the programme's online cultural community. In 2005, Karen Swan and Li-Fang Shih (2005, p.117) argued that this move from outsider to insider self-identification relied primarily on the effectiveness of an individual's ability to project a "social presence" in the virtual seminar room and the degree to which that presence is perceived by peers as "real". Swan and Shih considered that this social presence was a key factor in the success of a course, not only in respect of the expected outcomes of students, but for the future of the course itself. They pointed up the challenges associated with online learning, and thereby teaching, by stating that the "... nature of online learning might prevent students from developing a sense of belonging with other students, instructors, programs of study and educational institutions" (2005, p.115). Indeed, Liam Rourke et al. (2001, p.50) had earlier argued that the social presence of students was not just desirable, it was essential: they identified three fundamental "presence" learning requirements which they identified as cognitive, teaching and social presence. We have noted that the MA's tutors have implemented a number of projects which have served to encourage different aspects of student presence, such as a simultaneous solargraphy project conducted by members of its global community in 2011 and, more recently, the founding of a student journal. Measuring the effectiveness of the MA's projects to encourage each student to establish a satisfactory online presence is one of the aims of our longitudinal research. But, centrally, the MA's online campus is designed with a view to aiding students to establish an online presence and this design will be discussed next.

Building an Online Campus

At first glance the differences between online teaching and a campus-based degree seem obvious but, on closer inspection, these differences become blurred. For we found that the designers of the MA considered that, whether located in a brick-built or an online campus, the "places" required for learning are essentially the same. To facilitate their studies, it was believed that students needed to be able to conceptualise their campus in real terms. It was the initial conviction of the designers that students — and staff — required a campus minimally to comprise the following: lecture theatres; small meeting rooms for tutorials; offices for tutors; a departmental building to house these rooms; a library; and a place of informal gathering. When implementing the change from a brick-built campus to online course delivery, it was considered that a failure to provide a virtual equivalent of *any* of

these places would be detrimental to the MA's chances of success as an online degree.

In respect of its virtual campus, the place of the MA's "lecture theatre" is created through use of a video conferencing system. This software platform was carefully selected to ensure that all students and tutors can see and talk to each other throughout the period of the lectures and seminars. It also allows the tutor, or a student, to share PowerPoint and word processing documents so that teacher and student presentations can be incorporated into lectures, seminars and tutorials. In addition, it enables communication in the format of instant text messaging which may be addressed to all, or to a selected one of two, of a session's participants. All of the online lectures and seminars are recorded in full – capturing audiovisual and text-based presentations – recordings of which are subsequently available for student access on demand. This video conferencing system is used as well to create the "tutorial rooms" in which small groups of five or six students meet with a tutor for less formal, unrecorded sessions to expand on different subjects and discuss ongoing issues as required. The place of the "tutor's office" is created by means of Skype which is the medium used for individual meetings with a tutor and, just as they would be on the more conventional campus on which this virtual campus is modelled, these sessions are arranged by appointment. The "departmental building" is provided online by the Virtual Learning Environment software Moodle which Campion introduced to the MA in 2009. Within this Moodle-facilitated area, each student has his or her own "home places" which equate to particular module pages as well as fora to which ongoing semi-formal discussions and message threads are posted. Additionally, "housed" in this "building" is a small library focused on a diverse collection of media specifically related to the modules of the MA. The role of the main library is provided by the university's online library facilities as well as, accessed through this gateway, the student's "MyAthens" account. Email provides the complex web of conversations that weaves the whole campus together as well as linking each individual to the larger culture of the actual university campus in Lampeter, Wales.

With the online teaching "places" established, the real challenge was - and remains – the provision of the informal meeting and chatting areas considered so vital for facilitating a student to conceptualise the MA as a community and, further, to establish a meaningful presence within it. In an attempt to achieve this, the MA's designers turned to the social media platform Facebook. The "Unofficial Sophia Centre" closed Facebook group was established for the use of students, tutors, past students and selected friends of the MA. Although not all students have joined this Facebook group, it has 89 members at the time of writing. There are generally four to five postings and an average of 20 - 30 student/tutor visits to this Facebook page each day. Postings are generally, but not always, linked to the areas of study covered by the MA curriculum. This is an unmoderated forum which serves as a "pop-in" and chat-about-anything place. A "student café" has also been established which uses the video conferencing platform and meets every few weeks, purely for student activity and interaction; this "place" is out of bounds for tutors.

Hence, it can be seen that although the online campus is constructed in virtual space, its "places" can be considered in traditional terms to include: lecture theatres; tutorial rooms; tutors' offices; a departmental building containing a small focussed

library; a main library; and informal social areas. These “places” are rendered functional by conversations taking place on multiple levels, across a range of technological platforms and between different participants. In our experience students and tutors recognise these “places” and thus act - and display expectations of the behaviour of others - within them in much the same ways that they would in the places represented by the physical spaces of a brick-built campus. Alike on a physical and a virtual campus, there will be a background hum of conversation, vocal and text, in the lecture theatre until the lecturer clears his or her throat; tutorials rooms are less formal with coffee cups in hand and cross-chatter; the tutor’s office is the place for focused, one-to-one conversations; the student common room will display on its notice boards a confusion of references, calls for papers, posters, requests for copies of books and articles, quotes, quips and jokes.

It would be wrong to conclude, however, that the transition from a brick-built to an online campus followed a smooth trajectory. We found that the learning curve experienced by those responsible for reshaping the degree’s mode of delivery has led to a stronger focus on ways of encouraging students to establish an online identity by an emphasis on the importance of tutor-student communication: responding briskly to students’ emails and requests for Skype conversations; and giving comprehensive but empathic feedback on marked papers. One of the aims of our larger research project is to ascertain just how effectively this campus, with all its “places” and associated practices, has been built and is reportedly being maintained.

The MA’s Curriculum and its Niche Degree Status

In 2004, Ann Morey (2004, p.132) pointed out that the move from a campus-based to an online degree necessarily shifts potential students’ focus of attention away from the attributes of a particular college campus towards a course’s curriculum. Accordingly, our research takes as one of its areas of attention the role played by the curriculum. The MA comprises three compulsory modules, entitled Introductory; Ethnography and Fieldwork; and History of Astrology. In addition, there are optional modules from which a student chooses three, these are: Sky and Psyche; Sacred Geography; Archaeoastronomy; Astral Religions; Cosmology, Magic and Divination; plus a new module, taught from 2013, entitled Heavenly Discourses (Campion, 2012, pp.11-12). This curriculum has been designed to explore the facets of the cultural implications of the sky both exoterically and esoterically and, to date, it has attracted students ranging from astrologers to astronomers and including individuals with an amateur interest in these and related subjects. The *Onlineclasses.org* (2013), which provides an overview of degrees offered in the USA, characterises a niche degree as a weird degree that actually exists and which promises to “... set you apart from the crowd, even if they sound a little, well, *different*”. In this sense it can be allowed that the MA in Cultural Astronomy and Astrology is indeed a little “*different*” and thus would be defined by *Onlineclasses.org* as a niche degree.

The notion of a niche degree was also discussed by Christopher Carr (2008) of Cumbria University, UK. He stated that the university wished to develop a curriculum strategy which covered subjects “not necessarily being done by other universities, that meet local needs and requirements, that enable us to meet a market niche, that enable us to support the local economy, and allow us to develop a credible national and international reputation”. Carr’s notion that a degree course can be designed to

meet the requirements of a market niche provides one definition of a niche degree which, in Carr's terms, constitutes a degree that reaches out to local, and possibly under-academically educated, members of a community in an attempt to contribute educationally, socially and economically to that community. In 2009, Nancy Hass reported in the *New York Times* that the number of available Master's degrees in the USA had doubled between 1980 and 2008; although not defining these degrees as "niche", Hass points out that, "Once upon a time there were largely two kinds of master's degrees: one was a way station to a doctorate and the other overqualified you to be underpaid as a social worker..." (Hass, 2009). Hass continued her review of this expansion in postgraduate degree courses, arguing that what she characterised as this 'quiet revolution' had been driven by the combination of a shift in the employment market coinciding with a political drive for universities to become more profitable. In 2005 Swan and Shih (2005, p.115) also noted this revolution, labelling it as a "phenomenal growth of online learning".

However, the idea of a niche degree was considered rather differently by Bhattacharjee Yudhijit (2003, p.753) who, in the course of discussing a science MA created by the Sloan Foundation at the University of Southern California (USC), suggested that some would consider its programme a niche degree as it was too narrow in its focus to appeal to a student seeking employment or career enhancement. Yet, in 2011, the financial orientated website *Investopedia* (2011) while seemingly concurring that a niche degree is, by definition, tightly focused on a subject area, additionally observed that, "A niche degree is something that you can leverage, especially if the skills that you'll develop are in high demand".

Thus it would seem to us that the MA's curriculum focus on the esoteric and exoteric cultural influences of the sky can be defined as a niche degree. Importantly, by accepting this definition of the MA our research can explore the role played by its 'niche' curriculum while also enquiring if the degree is being used by its students, per *Investopedia's* suggestion, to leverage their careers. Additionally we can consider the question of whether the programme fulfils a set of functions in its home community, per Carr's notion of a niche degree, with the "local" community being taken — in this instance — to be the global community of people interested in sky-based cultural studies.

The Students

Of the eighty-one questionnaires sent to students of the online MA degree course, sixty-two students responded. Of these 74% (46) were female and 26% (16) male. Their countries of residence reflected the international nature of the MA with 36% (23) students from the UK, 29% (18) students from other European Union countries and 34% (21) students from non-EU countries ranging across time zones from both coasts of the USA and Australia to South Africa and Russia. The age of the students (see figure 1) varied from the oldest, 72 years of age, to the youngest, 23 years of age, with the majority being in their 50s.

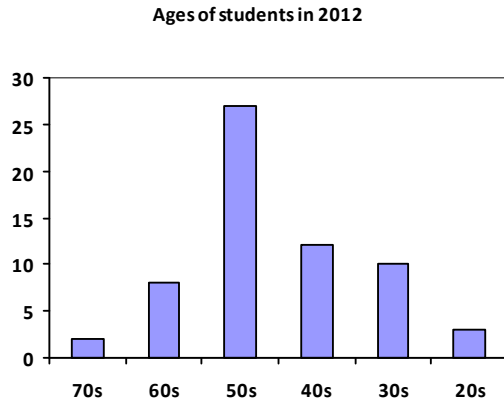


Figure 1, the ages of MA students as of 2012

Fourteen students had no prior academic background and entered the MA programme through the Accreditation of Prior and Experiential Learning (APEL) gateway. The other students were divided between those who had completed a degree, varying from Bachelor to doctoral levels, within the last five years and those who had a gap of at least 20 years since their most recent academic involvement. The widest gap was a period of 46 years (see figure 2).

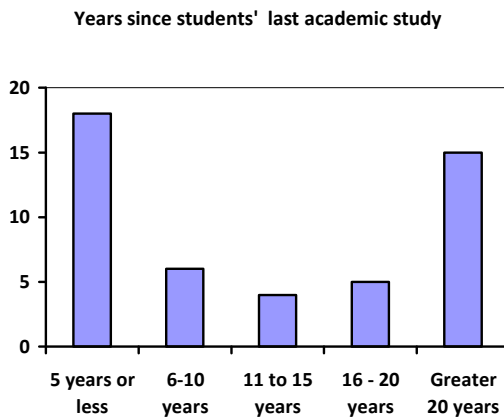


Figure 2, years since the MA students had completed any academic study (as of 2012)

To date, it has been found that the MA appeals to what have been identified as three different groups. The first group (Group 1) is comparatively young, being in their twenties or thirties, and have recently completed a preliminary degree. The second group (Group 2) is older, generally in their fifties or sixties, having completed their earlier degrees some time ago. The third group (Group 3) is generally fifty years of age and above and enrolled on the MA by way of the APEL provision. These findings are in line with the work of Tallent-Runnels, Thomas, Lan, et al.(2006, p.112), who found that the majority of students using online services were older than their campus-based equivalents, at least as far as undergraduates were concerned. They noted that the students who enrolled on online courses were typically adults who had significant roles in their communities, were highly motivated and focused on achieving specific learning outcomes. Taking a different view, Michael Osborne,

Andrew Marks and Eileen Turner (2004, p.291) asserted that mature students often reported undergoing a life-transforming event of some kind which underlay their decision to step back into higher education. However, labelling a group in line with demographic data alone leads to an over-simplification of the group's complexity. Carol Kasworm (1990, p.156) sees such generalisations as having led faculties to accept a "negative mythology regarding adult students." A generation later, Joe Donaldson and Barbara Townsend (2007, pp. 28-9) present a similar argument, pointing out that the language and discourse used to discuss undergraduate adult students shape "not only the identities of the community members but also the definitions of the problems they address and the procedures they use to address them". They note that, when a group is treated homogeneously in line with the age of its members, such generalisation suppresses the development of "new models or frameworks for use in studying or working with adult undergraduates" (2007, p.41). Hence, the generalisation which identifies life-crises as the motivation for older students to enter higher education may well be a part of this "negative mythology".

Returning to our research data, we did find evidence of life-crises in some responses. A 50 year old female student (20120938) who holds a humanities degree gained some 28 years prior to commencing the MA wrote of her decision to enrol,

I was at a major turning point in my life and realized I couldn't and shouldn't depend on others for love and nurturing and that I needed to depend on myself, as I had done when I was a child. I wanted to do something that would make me feel proud of myself and help me contribute more to the world. I really love the topics!

Similarly, a 41 year old female student (20120925) who has no previous degree announces in the general comments section of the questionnaire,

It is a phenomenon that people who decide to enrol for the MA experience difficult circumstances in life, are in a crisis, or have just overcome one. It applied to me and to other students who shared their experiences with me and who said that they know the same of more other students on the MA. It seems to be a prevalent phenomenon and may be worth investigating. Examples of reported difficulties are the break-up of a relationship / divorce, death of family member or a close friend, change of living-situation (moving home, rebuilding, etc.), health problems, and so on.

Such a comment is doubly important because it reveals a student who may have been going through a personal crisis but despite, or because of, this is sufficiently well established in the MA community to have conducted her own unofficial research amongst her fellow students and to have come to a view of the matter.

Thus some of our preliminary research findings may well support the observation made by Osborne, Marks and Turner concerning the likelihood of mature students having been prompted to step back into higher education by a life-transforming event of some kind. However, support has also been found for the view of Tallent-Runnels, Thomas, Lan, et al., which described a typical student of an online course as being a mature and highly motivated individual well integrated into his or her community. A female student (20120911) in her late sixties, who completed her last (humanities) degree over 30 years ago, talks of her need to obtain the degree to lend academic credence to her presentation of the archaeoastronomy of the indigenous community in which she lives. She comments "somebody had to do it, and if no [indigenous]

person could do it at this time, it's good that it's me": words that reveal this student's strong involvement with her community as well as her clear articulation of goals she intends to achieve with the benefit of the degree.

Just as determined is a younger female student (20120923) who, at the age of 34, had completed a degree in humanities only five years previously. She talks of the prejudices she encountered in her professional life upon undertaking the MA, but this prejudice only served to focus her motivation:

I have been and continue to be ridiculed for choosing Cultural 'Astrology' and Astronomy as my MA subject by certain groups, mainly psychologists. I lost a business partnership with a prominent psychologist and long term associate on my decision to study this particular subject in 2011. The business and politics of knowledge! No regrets as I am doing this MA for my own personal growth and understanding of subjects that truly interest me and not what others expect me to do.

The above quotations from students demonstrate that the MA student body comprises a number of highly motivated individuals who may - or may not – have been prompted to embark on their studies by some form of personal upheaval. The last excerpt suggests a revisiting of this life-crisis hypothesis for this student's experience could have been reported in negative terms as a crisis but instead she puts a positive spin on her account, presenting it as the source of her personal motivation to take the course.

In reality, deciding to enrol on a postgraduate degree is more of an issue of personal choice than of cultural pressure, as is often the case for an undergraduate degree taken immediately after leaving secondary education. The decision to enrol on the MA requires the individual to have the space in his or her life to follow a programme of study. This space has either to be actively opened up by the individual or it may suddenly appear following a life upheaval. Indeed it is not unlikely that a potential student may be aware of the MA but only gain the opportunity to enrol after space is unexpectedly opened up in his or her life. For this reason the findings of Osborne, Marks and Turner may be valid but are not particularly useful. Additionally, if a student enrolls on a part-time basis, he or she may be involved with the MA for up to four years; thus it is logical to assume that many will encounter some form of life-crisis in that period. With this being the case, it can be argued that it is largely students' inherent attitude that determines what they define as a life-crisis and the steps they take to deal with it, if any. Early participant observation has discovered only one student who has volunteered that joining the MA was an immediate and self-defined desperate response to having suffered a number of very real life crises. Thus any assumption that mature students, or students enrolling on postgraduate niche degrees, show a higher representation of crisis susceptibility than the general public is at best questionable and can, at worst, create, as Kasworm argues, a "negative myth" which blocks the development of future teaching models.

The Curriculum's Role

The students' reported motivation for joining the MA programme falls into several themes; however, by far the most dominant theme is the attraction of the curriculum. Morey, cited earlier, argued for the centrality of importance of the curricula of online degrees and her view is so far substantiated by our data as the majority of students

recorded unprompted comments concerning the attraction of the curriculum. By far the most common appeal of the curriculum was its concern with the cultural study of astrology. A 59 year old female (20120933) articulated this sub-theme when she volunteered her reasons for joining the MA, "The subject matter - it is fascinating and attractive in its own right but doubly so because I am an astrologer".

This theme, which concerns the cultural study of astrology as a curriculum component, is illustrated by the comments of a 40 year old female student (20120901) who wrote of encountering the marginalisation of astrology as the subject of serious study when speaking of her reasons for joining the MA as being,

Yes the subject matter, Yes the desire to achieve a Post Graduate Degree.
A main factor for me personally is that when I undertook my Business Degree, which I specialised in Human Resources subjects, I wanted to write about the use of astrology by business for my Undergraduate Dissertation and although one of my Tutors, who taught me Strategic HR, Management Psychology was extremely open minded and encouraged my ideas, the rest of the department would not hear of it.

A related view was expressed in the comments of a 61 year old woman (20120922) who wrote, "In truth, I have had a secret thought for decades, one of those I-don't-think-it-will-ever-manifest, but you-never-know [thoughts], to do a PhD about astrology. It had never seemed possible until now."

In contrast to the cultural influence of the esoteric view of the sky as the curriculum subject of choice, other students report being drawn to the exoteric sky-related components of the curriculum. A 31 year old male student (20120913) captured this theme when he wrote "what was crucial was the fact that it would be nearly impossible to find a more interdisciplinary field which combines archaeology, anthropology, history, religion, philosophy, sociology and probably a few more disciplines that I forgot to mention". While a 24 year old male (20120919) who has just finished a degree in humanities wrote that he was, "Interested in the history of ideas connected to scientific and cultural thought". Additionally, a male student (20120926) who is 55 years old and has completed a science degree within the last two years comments:

I was very interested in studying the area of sacred geography. In reviewing the list of courses offered I felt a powerful resonance with most of them. I made contact with Nick [Nicholas Campion, the Course Director] the evangelist and he convinced me that this would be a good course of study for me given my interests in the sacred, psychological and metaphysical. I did have some reluctance about doing another MA (I have 2 already), but Nick did convince me that it would be worthwhile to pursue. He was right.

To conclude, early research data demonstrate that the MA is indeed curriculum driven, as predicted by Morey. Therefore our research shows that, in order to maintain its appeal to its "local" community, those involved with the MA would be advised to treat its curriculum as central to its success and thus maintain it, as well as promote it in all advertising and marketing endeavours.

Additionally, the niche-like quality of the curriculum and its central role in the success of the MA raises another point which is worthy of mention. To reiterate, the culture of the MA has been shaped by a coming together, within the academy, of primarily

entrepreneurial individuals from the private sector. Patricia Gumpert (2001, p.86-7) argues that on a larger scale such a blending is generally not advantageous as it results in a higher education culture which drives a faculty motivated by “calculated self-interest”. Additionally Gumpert (2001, p.90) considers that such industry-derived models are displacing the traditional social institution of higher education, an institution she defines as one which “maintains, reproduces or adapts itself to implement values” held by the community. Yet this niche degree, with its highly specific, “different” curriculum, appeals not just to a narrow band of students but also to a narrow band of academics. Faculty members involved with the teaching of the degree possess a high level of interest in the curriculum and our research shows that they interact with their postgraduate students very much in Carr’s terms as members of a “local” community, together forming a global community of like-minded individuals. Thus, we would contend that a niche degree may be shaped by the pragmatic, customer/client industrial orientation discussed earlier but the MA can remain true to the principles of a social institution dedicated to accommodating, maintaining and reproducing its community’s values and educating its members.

Leveraging

As previously discussed, Bhattacharjee considered that a niche degree was potentially too narrow in its focus to be useful to a student seeking employment, while the financially orientated website *Investopedia.com* broadened the definition of the niche degree to encompass courses which incorporate leveraging opportunities for students interested in enhancing their careers in a competitive market. The design of the MA’s curriculum was not executed with its students’ career enhancement specifically in mind beyond the obvious educational advantages afforded by any postgraduate degree. However, our research has revealed that many of the MA’s students have embarked on the degree specifically to use it as leverage in career terms. A 23 year old woman (20120904) who had just completed a Bachelors’ degree wrote of her reasons for selecting the MA,

It was most closely connected to my specialist research field. Thus giving me the specialist education and training as a springboard for my postgraduate research. The fact that it was long distance and available part time was a huge benefit.

A less focused characterisation of the MA as a career path was offered by a 41 year old male student (20120903) who had also only recently completed a first degree, who comments, “I am interested in Cosmology and Astronomy and would like to write articles for journals when I have enough knowledge”. These two comments are illustrative of a theme scattered across all three identified groups of MA students: namely the calculated choice of some students in each of the groups to embark on the MA as leverage for their careers, regardless of the nature of these careers. This is not a new phenomenon; the first director of the MA, Michael York (2004) commented, “As is to be expected, the Sophia programme has, in its first two years, largely attracted a cohort of astrological practitioners”. Bird (2006, p.224) noted the same phenomenon and reported that these astrological practitioners recognised from its inception the career-enhancement potential of this MA course. These observations reveal that this was a feature of the MA when it was still tied to a brick-built campus.

However, it will not do to overstate this phenomenon and, in contrast to the career oriented individuals reported above, a 56 year old female student (20120927), who completed her last degree 34 years ago, spoke in different terms of the attitude of her community to her decision to undertake the MA, saying, “Everybody accepts it, but most are puzzled by the fact that I am studying for the sake of learning with no other purpose in mind but for self-enrichment. I often get asked 'What are you going to do with it?' to which I reply: 'Nothing!'”

Final Thoughts

Although we are only at the first stage of our research we have been able to establish some foundational points. Firstly, as implied by Morey, we found that the MA’s curriculum plays a major role in attracting students from within a specific interest group. However, the very nature of its unique curriculum requires that the MA reaches out to a global market to maintain a viable student body. Thus the online feature of the degree is a necessary condition of the success of the MA and an outcome of its niche attributes. Logically its “different” curriculum also attracts members of academic staff who, like the students, are drawn to the themes of the curriculum more from interest than career needs. The combination, therefore, of curriculum, staff and a global body of students enables this niche degree to engage, in Carr’s terms, with a “local” community spread across the world. Furthermore, such engagement creates and maintains a traditional social institution in Gumpert’s terms, manifesting in this instance as a global community of like-minded scholars; postgraduate students; and tutors who share similar interests.

At this stage of our research, we surmise that our findings concerning the MA may be broadly replicable to other niche postgraduate degrees. To reiterate, we suggest that a niche degree can be defined as one which presents a programme of study which links it with a “local” community. It will attract a diverse range of students who may or may not want to use the degree to leverage their careers. Moreover, the student body will be diverse in age but we argue that this diversity serves to enhance the student body rather than injecting a larger than normal number of crises-laden students into the system. Additionally the very nature of its unique curriculum will require that the degree is taught online and, as long as attention can be given to the manner of this online connection, it has the potential to build a unique community, all of whose members are bound together by the desire to maintain and/or explore a particular field of knowledge. Therefore, paradoxically, a niche degree — for all its engagement with the latest internet technology — can offer to the contemporary university system a return to what Alan Cobban (1975, p.23) considered to be a medieval academic model, comprising a group of dedicated scholars working with a group of dedicated students.

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