1. Non-Technical Summary

A 1000 word (maximum) summary of the main research results, in non-technical language, should be provided below. The summary might be used by ESRC to publicise the research. It should cover the aims and objectives of the project, main research results and significant academic achievements, dissemination activities and potential or actual impacts on policy and practice.

Young Graduates and Lifelong Learning

Aims

Various quantitative studies have pointed to considerable differences by level of educational qualification in attitude to and participation in lifelong learning. Indeed, they suggest that graduates are more likely than other groups to engage in adult learning, generally, and to be motivated to do so by the intrinsic interest of the subject matter. However, exploring the wider meaning attached to participation in such activities has been outside the remit of these studies. In an attempt to redress this gap, this research drew on life history interviews and focus groups with 90 recent graduates from six different higher education (HE) institutions to consider the significance they attributed to taking part in post-HE learning and the role they perceived it playing in their lives in the future.

Main results

Work-dominated learning

- The vast majority of further learning undertaken since graduation was considered by respondents to be work-related, reflecting the more general prioritising of work within their lives.

- Learning played a key part in the implicit contract that many respondents used to conceptualise their relationship with their employer. While they were willing to sacrifice their leisure time and devote long hours to their work, they expected to be rewarded with the resources (and in some cases the time) to pursue their own learning.

- There was a clearly articulated interest in pursuing learning that was not related to paid employment. However, for a large majority of respondents, these interests were rarely realised because of the demands of paid work. Although many of them believed that this balance between work and leisure would shift as they grew older, few had any definite plans about when and how this might happen.
The impact of higher education on further learning

- The process of learning. Many young graduates believed that one of the most positive consequences of their time in HE was that they had learnt how to study independently. Less positively, a significant proportion of respondents talked of exhaustion and ‘learning fatigue’ at the end of their undergraduate studies. In many cases, this had discouraged them from pursuing further learning in the years immediately after graduation.

- Learner identities. For a considerable number of respondents, degree-level study had served to strengthen their identity as a learner, through developing an intrinsic interest in the subject they were studying and increasing their confidence in their own abilities. For others, however, experiences of HE had been much less positive and, in some cases, had undermined their sense of themselves as academic achievers.

- Relationship between learning and the wider world. Respondents’ understandings of this relationship played an important role in informing their decisions about further learning. Few had believed that a degree would provide an automatic route into professional employment. Instead, additional education and training were seen as important means of securing advantage within a competitive graduate labour market.

Experiences of combining work and study

- This study suggests that some of the potential benefits of combining paid work and education may have been overlooked by previous studies. As a result of the way in which the labour market is currently structured and the high level of competition for jobs that are deemed ‘professional’, relevant work experience is an important means of differentiating oneself from other graduates.

- This emphasis on combining different types of activity seemed to be something that was important to most of the young adults in their lives after graduation, as well as during HE. There appeared to be strong continuities between the way in which the graduates had combined work and study in their lives before and after graduation – driven by an ongoing aim to maximise their ‘employability’.

Status, reputation and social class

- A significant proportion of the sample believed that issues relating to the status of educational providers and courses had influenced their decisions about further learning. Here, status and/or reputation were often defined in broader and more nuanced terms when compared to previous processes of choice.

- There were important differences between respondents in the extent to which these patterns conformed to previous patterns of educational choice, often related to the social location of the individuals concerned.
Policy implications

- There appears to be a significant gap between government pronouncements about the rewards of a degree and young adults’ own beliefs about the relationship between degree-level study and subsequent employment. A more rigorous national debate may be needed to explore some of these very different understandings of the purposes of an enlarged HE system.

- Young graduates believed that significant periods of paid work, undertaken whilst a student, offered many advantages in securing a ‘good’ job on graduation. Within the context of a highly competitive market for ‘professional’ graduate positions, HE staff should perhaps pay greater attention to these putative rewards, and find more ways of integrating the learning done at university and within paid employment.

- Provision of opportunities for further learning are very important to most young graduates and often constitute part of the ‘implicit contract’ they form with employers.

- Although levels of participation in post-undergraduate learning are high, in many cases this is driven by a perceived need to distinguish oneself from other graduates of a mass HE system. Understood in these terms, this is not necessarily an efficient use of resources – for the individuals concerned, their employers and/or society more widely.

Dissemination

- Two papers have been submitted to peer-refereed journals; three further articles and two book chapters are in preparation. A book proposal is also currently under review with the Policy Press.

- Eight papers from the project have been presented orally at conferences and seminars. Abstracts have been submitted for an additional two conference papers, to be given in the coming academic year.

- An end-of-project seminar was held to discuss the findings with academics and practitioners.

- A project website was set up early in 2006.

- The project has been covered in a number of practitioner-focussed publications; articles are planned for the *Times Higher Education Supplement* and *Adults Learning*. 