Young Graduates and Lifelong Learning

1. Background

The contested nature of ‘lifelong learning’ has long been evident within national and international policy documents (Coffield, 1999). Furthermore, research has highlighted the very different meanings attached to the term by those who have engaged in lifelong learning and also by those who have decided against taking up such opportunities. However, this research has typically focused on older people and/or those who left formal education at an early age. As a result, this project is one of very few studies that have focussed specifically on the experiences of young adults in their 20s, who have recently graduated from university.

A central focus of the research has been the impact of a changing higher education (HE) system on young adults’ priorities and motivations. A considerable number of studies have explored the impact of recent changes on patterns of participation within HE. However, there has been less emphasis on how such changes have been played out in the experiences of graduates and, more specifically, in the interface between HE and lifelong learning. To redress this gap, the project focused on two particular changes to the HE system. First, it explored the changes to graduates’ experiences brought about by the ‘massification’ of the HE system. Research conducted amongst young people in Australia (Dwyer and Wyn, 2001) has suggested that as result of the normalisation of post-compulsory education and the encouragement of high aspirations, young people have come to assume a one-to-one relationship between being qualified and having a lasting professional career. Dwyer and Wyn argue that, as a result of these assumptions, young adults are often disappointed when they do eventually enter the labour market, and experience uncertainties previously associated with the end of compulsory schooling. This thesis may hold equally within the UK. If young adults do indeed feel misled about the rewards of a HE, it is possible that this may have a significant bearing on their perceptions of the value of engaging in further education and training in the future.

Second, there is now convincing evidence that the transition from an elite to a mass system of HE has led to an increase in both the stratification of the sector and the importance of institutional status to graduate recruiters. However, studies that have focused more explicitly on young people’s perceptions have suggested that there are strong disparities between confident ‘embedded choosers’ (Ball et al., 2002), with significant amounts of ‘cultural capital’ to draw upon, who are aware of fine distinctions between the status of different institutions, and their less confident peers – ‘contingent choosers’ with no family experience of HE – who are likely to see all institutions as fairly homogenous and exclusive ‘ivory towers’. Nonetheless, it is apparent that, whilst at university, most students develop an acute understanding of the relative status of institutions, such that they are aware of their own ‘place’ within the HE hierarchy and the ‘value’ of their degree within the labour market relative to those awarded by other institutions (Brown and Scase, 1994). Little research, however, has explored the extent to which graduates apply this stratification of institutions to other areas of education and training.
2. Objectives

(i) To provide new knowledge about young graduates’ experiences of and attitudes towards lifelong learning.

(ii) To determine whether (and in what ways) young graduates’ experiences of HE influence their assessment of the value of opportunities for lifelong learning.

(iii) To establish the extent to which young adults’ previous experiences of combining work, study and leisure affect their ability and inclination to engage in lifelong learning after graduation.

(iv) To contribute to theoretical debates about processes of educational ‘choice’, and the status of different forms of education and training.

(v) To highlight the policy implications of these issues.

Objectives (i) – (iv) have been addressed through analysis of data from individual interviews with 90 young graduates and two focus group interviews with a sub-sample of respondents.

Objective (v) has been addressed through discussing the findings with academics and practitioners at a project seminar and subsequent correspondence.

All objectives are discussed further in the ‘results’ section below.

3. Methods

The ‘Young Graduates and Lifelong Learning’ project comprised two main phases: individual interviews with 90 young graduates and focus groups with a sub-sample of 10 of the respondents.

Phase 1: Individual in-depth interviews with recent graduates

During the first phase of the research, statistics on student entry qualifications and family background were used alongside data on graduate employment to identify six HE institutions, occupying different ‘market positions’ (an Oxbridge college, a ‘redbrick’ university, a 1960s campus university, a post-1992 university, a college of HE and a college of the University of London). Working with staff in the six institutions, alumni databases were used to select a sample of 600 graduates (100 from each institution) who were of a similar age (mid-twenties) and who passed through HE at the same time. In most cases, the sample was selected to include individuals with a range of different characteristics (in terms of gender, ethnicity and subject studied at university). Direct mailings were sent to the graduates, asking them if they would be willing to take part in the research. As this did not generate sufficient positive responses to meet our target number of interviewees (15 per institution), we supplemented the mailshots with adverts on the ‘Friends Reunited’ website. This was a more successful strategy, and enabled us to recruit a total of 90 respondents, spread equally over the six institutions.
During the first eight months of the project, individual life story interviews were conducted with each respondent. The interviews were largely unstructured – to allow the young adults to tell their own stories in their own words – but were informed by a broad ‘topic guide’. Typically, they included: the young adults’ experiences of HE, employment and any education, training or other form of learning that they had undertaken since leaving university; the meanings respondents attached to work, learning and leisure; and the relative importance of these activities in their lives.

With the permission of the respondents, the individual interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. The research questions, wider literature and analytic notes taken immediately after each interview were then used to develop a thematic framework for analysing the material. This was used methodically to code the interview data, using NVivo. The coded material was then used to identify patterns across the data, and tentative theories and explanations were developed. The emerging findings then fed into the second stage of fieldwork.

**Phase 2: Focus group interviews with a sub-sample of recent graduates**

In this phase, focus group interviews were held with a sub-sample of the graduates. Although the issues discussed within the focus groups were closely linked to the research questions that informed the study, they were structured around common issues that emerged from the first stage of the research, rather than individual biographies. As such, they made it easier to compare the experiences of the young adults and test out some emerging hypotheses. Moreover, the focus groups facilitated the analytical technique of saturating categories or ‘negative case analysis’ whereby examples that might modify or disprove emerging ideas were sought, until new data merely reinforced existing categories.

It was hoped to hold six focus groups: one for each of the institutions involved in the research, and to involve about 30 of the respondents. However, as only 10 young graduates were able to participate (because of work or personal commitments), only two focus groups were held. All the institutions, with the exception of Oxbridge, were represented in the focus groups, and there was an equal gender balance. As in the first stage of the fieldwork, a ‘topic guide’ was used to guide discussion, interviews were transcribed and then data was annotated according to a thematic framework. Findings from this stage of the fieldwork were then related to those that emerged from the first phase and theoretical explanations developed.

**Characteristics of the sample**

Despite attempts to ensure a reasonably diverse sample (through the sampling of alumni databases), the emphasis on self-selection and the nature of the research are both likely to have affected the characteristics of the sample. For example, the prospect of being interviewed by an unfamiliar researcher is probably less concerning to those involved in certain jobs than others. Perhaps as a result of this, it is notable that we recruited a considerable number of graduates employed in ‘people-orientated’ jobs such as human resources.

We were concerned that the nature of the sampling may have made it difficult to recruit those who believed themselves to have had relatively unsuccessful educational or career histories (through an understandable reluctance to talk about difficult experiences).
However, this does not seem to have been the case. Indeed, we recruited a considerable number of graduates who had experienced a period of unemployment on graduation, and many who talked about negative experiences at some point in their learning histories or early careers.

4. Results

Objective 1: To provide new knowledge about young graduates’ experiences of and attitudes towards lifelong learning

In contrast to a recent study (Pollard et al., 2004) which found that only half of graduates had engaged in further learning in the five years following the completion of their undergraduate degree, all respondents in this research claimed to have taken part in some form of learning, post-graduation. While there were no evident gender differences in the type of further learning pursued, there was notable variation by status of institution attended. For example, while over half of respondents had engaged in some kind of formal postgraduate-level learning leading to a qualification, a considerably smaller proportion of those who had attended the college of HE had gone on to further study of this kind.

The vast majority of further learning undertaken since graduation was considered by respondents to be work-related: either to train/learn for a particular job or role, or to boost their credentials within a competitive graduate labour market. This dominance of work-related learning was reflected in respondents’ broader narratives about the balance between the different parts of their lives: across the sample as a whole, there was a clear and explicit prioritising of work, which varied little by gender, ethnicity or type of university attended. Moreover, there were few differences by type of job. Prioritising of work and work-related learning was as evident amongst those employed in jobs not traditionally considered as of ‘graduate level’ (such as administrators and sales representatives), as amongst those on high profile graduate training schemes.

The negative consequences of the changes to employment brought about by the globalisation of economic competition have frequently been emphasised within the academic literature. For example, the emphasis on remaining ‘employable’ has, it is argued, brought about the ‘democratisation of insecurity’ (Beck, 1992), with many more people now facing the possibility of redundancy during their working lives. However, in this study, few interviewees shared this type of insecurity, nor was there much evidence that they felt exploited by their current employers. Indeed, learning played a key part in the implicit contract that many respondents used to conceptualise their relationship with their employer. While they were certainly willing to sacrifice their leisure time and devote long hours to their work, they expected to be rewarded not only with the expectation that they would take on responsibility for their own development, but also with the resources to make this possible. Obligations to employers were matched with expectations that time, funding and/or professional networks would be made available to facilitate learning.

Studies that have outlined changes to working patterns in contemporary society have pointed to the blurring of boundaries between work and leisure – particularly in the case of highly skilled workers. In this research, however, while there were certainly some respondents whose lives were ‘blurred’ in this way, most made quite clear conceptual
distinctions between different parts of their lives and, although in many cases they were working long hours, leisure was rarely conflated with work. Moreover, many hoped that, in the future, they would be able to shift the focus in their lives away from a privileging of work towards a more even balance between work and leisure. Similar aspirations were voiced in relation to the place of different types of learning in their lives. Across the sample as a whole, there was a clearly articulated interest in pursuing learning that was not related to paid employment nor underpinned by economic imperatives. Indeed, around half of the interviewees expressed a desire for more time in which to pursue learning that was leisure-orientated, beyond the necessities of a job. However, for a large majority of respondents, these interests were rarely realised because of the demands of paid employment. In many cases, because of the long hours spent at work, insufficient time was available for ‘leisure learning’ in the evenings and at weekends, while for others time outside work was spent engaged in work-related learning. Although many of them believed that this balance would shift as they grew older, secured their reputation and place within the labour market, and developed commitments outside of work, few had any definite plans about when and how this might happen. Thus, it remains to be seen whether this prioritisation of work and work-related learning is bound up with the establishment of graduate careers, or whether it will become a more permanent feature of their working lives.

Objective 2: To determine whether (and in what ways) young graduates’ experiences of higher education influence their assessment of the value of opportunities for lifelong learning.

Our data suggested that experiences of HE influenced decisions about further learning at three levels, in relation to: the process of learning; the construction of learner identities; and understandings of the relationship between learning and the wider world.

The process of learning

Many respondents, across all six institutions claimed that one of the most positive consequences of their time in HE was that they had, for the first time in their lives, learnt how to study independently. This was believed by respondents to have a significant impact on future learning, giving them the necessary skills and motivation to engage in further education and training, through formal and/or informal routes. Less positively, a significant proportion of young graduates talked of a distinct ‘learning fatigue’ at the end of their undergraduate studies, brought on by the exhaustion they experienced in the final stages of their degree. For many of these respondents, this had discouraged them from pursuing further learning (particularly of a formal kind) in the years immediately after graduation. Although, in almost all cases, this was reported to be a temporary phenomenon, with most keen to take up further learning at some later point, it does highlight enduring assumptions about a ‘front-loaded’ education system, with many young adults experiencing a significant break in their learning careers at the point of graduation.

Learner identities

Here again, the influence of HE on further learning appeared complex and multi-directional. For a considerable number of respondents (across most institutions and subject areas), degree-level study had served to strengthen their identity as a learner,
through: developing their intrinsic interest in the subject they were studying; increasing their confidence in their own ability to learn; and, in some cases, providing them with the freedom to admit to an enjoyment of learning for the first time in their lives. For others, however, experiences of HE had been much less positive and, in some cases, had undermined respondents’ sense of themselves as academic achievers. This was particularly the case for some of the young women in the sample, who had attended the highest status institutions.

Relationship between learning and the wider world

This project provides little evidence to support Dwyer and Wyn’s (2001) prediction of ‘disappointment’ and ‘disillusionment’ with education as graduates enter the labour market in search of full-time jobs. In large part this can be explained by the realisation (often before respondents had even entered HE) that a degree did not provide an automatic route into professional employment. Indeed, many had an acute awareness of the absence of any automatic correspondence between success at university and success at work. As a consequence, there were no young adults in our sample who were discouraged from further learning because of a general disillusionment about the relationship between education credentials and employment. However, respondents’ understandings of this relationship played an important role in informing their decisions about further learning. Indeed, the same kind of considerations that had come into play in relation to their decision to enter HE (i.e. that without a degree the type of jobs open to them would be very restricted), also exerted an important influence on their decisions about further learning – through the belief that such learning would allow them to specialise and gain more work-related skills, and give them an advantage over other graduates. (This is discussed further in Brooks and Everett, 2006.)

Experiences of HE also affected respondents’ attitudes towards the status and reputation of further learning opportunities. This is discussed in relation to Objective 4, below.

Objective 3: To establish the extent to which young adults’ previous experiences of combining work, study and leisure affect their ability and inclination to engage in lifelong learning after graduation.

The evidence from the young graduates suggested that there are clearly some negative consequences to working long hours during one’s schooling and HE. Nonetheless, it appears that some of the potential benefits of combining activities in this way may have been overlooked by previous studies. Many of these advantages are strongly related to the competitive nature of the graduate labour market. Within this analysis, it could be argued that young people, employers and society as a whole would benefit if students felt less need to supplement their studies with paid employment (and could thus devote more time to their studies). However, the evidence from the young graduates involved in this research suggests that 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.

Very few respondents saw HE as primarily a time for intellectual development and growth. Instead, it was conceived of as a period of preparation for full labour market involvement. In this way, significant periods of paid work were not seen as inimical to
the aims of university but – in contrast – broadly in line with them. Indeed, both were viewed primarily as a means of furthering one’s employability within a competitive graduate labour market. It was also the case that many respondents thought that their paid work had had a number of positive and direct benefits on their HE studies such as: enabling them to integrate more fully with other students; providing motivation to persevere with their academic work; and helping them to achieve a healthy balance between different types of activity.

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. On the basis of this sample there was scant evidence that debt incurred as a student or other financial pressures had deterred respondents for engaging in further learning. On the contrary, there appeared to be strong continuities between the way in which the graduates had combined work, study and, in most cases, leisure in their lives before and after graduation. However, this is clearly not the same as positing a causal relationship between the two: it is not necessarily the case that it was the experience of juggling work and study at school and/or university that caused or enabled graduates to maintain such patterns post-graduation. Indeed, many respondents’ choices to continue to combine work and formal study post-graduation appear to have been driven, at least partially, by an ongoing aim to maximise their ‘employability’.

Objective 4: To contribute to theoretical debates about processes of educational ‘choice’, and the status of different forms of education and training.

Respondents’ narratives indicated that, for many, choice processes at the end of an undergraduate degree were configured in significantly different ways from those experienced earlier in their lives. For example, many highlighted the importance of considerations such as: maintaining close contact with their social networks; staying close to home; choosing to work with specific teachers/mentors; and the particular teaching methods used when they were deciding what type of learning to pursue, or where to pursue it. For others, there was much less choice in post-graduation learning because few providers offered the sought education or training and/or the type of learning was prescribed by employers. Previous research has highlighted the importance of geographical considerations to choices about school and university, alongside marked differences by class in the ‘socioscapes’ inhabited by young people, with those from more privileged backgrounds prepared to travel considerably further for their education than their peers (Reay et al., 2001). In contrast, in relation to lifelong learning, even those with high levels of cultural capital and significant familial experience of HE frequently talked about strong geographical constraints on the options for further learning open to them.

Nevertheless, a significant proportion of the sample (around a third) believed that issues relating to status 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. Although the reputation of the overall institution (either generally or for the course in question) was of most importance to respondents, the status of the qualification itself, and the perceived status of teachers and mentors were both considered significant by a considerable number of respondents. Moreover, there were important differences between respondents in the extent to which
these patterns conformed to previous patterns of educational choice. We developed a typology to outline five different 'choice patterns' with reference to status issues:

- **Little change in awareness – still important.** Many of the respondents who had attended high status institutions as undergraduates indicated that issues of reputation (particularly of provider and course) had also informed their decisions about post-graduation learning. Such patterns were often associated with relatively high levels of parental cultural capital.

- **Little change in awareness - still unimportant.** A small number of respondents had not given much thought to issues of status either when they were choosing their undergraduate courses or more recently. For some, this approach appeared to be underpinned by an assumption that higher status places are socially exclusive and for ‘other people’, an approach which had changed little as a result of the HE experience.

- **Change in awareness – more important.** A considerable number of respondents reported that: their views about status and reputation had changed during their time at university (or shortly afterwards when they entered employment); this had become more important to them; and had had a direct impact on their post-graduation learning. This was most marked amongst those who had attended the three lower status HEIs and suggests that, for some young adults, HE does affect ability and inclination to engage with educational markets.

- **Change in awareness – less important.** Most of the respondents who claimed that the status of the overall institution had become less important to them in their post-university lives had attended Oxbridge. Here, however, there were important gender differences, with the young women, in particular, believing that the status of Oxbridge could be a handicap both socially and in the workplace. For others, HE experiences had caused them to become more questioning of automatic assumptions about the reputation of an institution and the quality of its teaching and research.

- **Change in awareness – but still not important.** For a further group of respondents, issues related to the status of institutions had become more apparent during their undergraduate studies. However, in contrast to some of their peers above, they chose to embrace the perceived low status of the institution they had attended, often seeing higher status educational providers as socially exclusive.

**Objective 5: To highlight the policy implications of these issues.**

**For the higher education sector**

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.

While significant periods of paid work during full-time study may have a negative impact on academic attainment and be discouraged by HE staff, young graduates believe that they offer 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.

For graduate recruiters

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. Some believed that opportunities in this area could compensate, to some extent, for long working hours and short-term contracts. Those who were not offered such opportunities (through formal and/or informal learning) did not feel such a sense of obligation to their employer and, in several cases, this had caused them to seek alternative employment.

For society, generally

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.

Processes of ‘choice’ in relation to learning continue to be affected by social position, even amongst graduates. While the specific factors affecting ‘learning choices’ are often configured differently post-graduation, social class and status of university attended both exert some influence. It is therefore wrong to assume that all graduates make their decisions on a ‘level playing field’.

5. Activities

Invited paper on discourses of graduate employability to the Department of Education, University of Brighton (12/10/05).

Invited paper on learning and work in the lives of young adults to the School of Education, University of Southampton (23/02/06).

Paper on the dominance of work-related learning in the lives of young adults at the British Sociological Association’s annual conference, Harrogate (23/04/06).

Paper on relationships between HE and further learning as part of the ESRC-funded ‘Geographies of Higher Education, Geometries of Power’ seminar series, Gregynog Residential Centre, Wales (11/07/06).


End-of-project seminar to discuss the findings with academics and practitioners, University of Surrey, 23/06/06. As part of this seminar, three papers from the project were presented.
Project website was set up early in 2006 and has been advertised widely on education, lifelong learning and youth-related email discussion lists: [http://www.surrey.ac.uk/politics/research/young-graduates.htm](http://www.surrey.ac.uk/politics/research/young-graduates.htm)

### 6. Outputs

To date, the project has generated:

- a dataset of 90 individual, life-history interviews and two focus group interviews with young graduates;

- two papers which are currently under review with refereed journals (*Journal of Education Policy* and *Journal of Education and Work*);

- two papers which were written for a conference/seminar presentation and are currently being revised for submission to refereed journals (*British Educational Research Journal* and *British Journal of Sociology of Education*);

- eight presentations at conferences or seminars;

- an end-of-project seminar, which discussed findings with academics (from education, sociology and social policy) and practitioners (including careers advisers, graduate recruiters, student skills advisers and professional placement tutors);

- a proposal for a book (entitled *Beyond the First Degree: learning and work in the lives of young adults*), submitted to the Policy Press in July 2006, and which is currently under review; and

- a project website.

In addition, over the next six months we plan to write: one further article for submission to a refereed journal (*Sociology*); two book chapters; and two articles for professional publications (*Adults Learning* and the *Times Higher Education Supplement*). We have also submitted abstracts for papers to two additional conferences.

### 7. Impacts

The research has generated considerable interest from practitioners working in related fields, as well as from the academic community. The end-of-project seminar was well attended by practitioners, several of whom contacted us after the seminar to continue the discussion on specific points.

We have been invited to write short pieces for a number of professional journals and magazines, including *Adults Learning* and the newsletter of the Higher Education Academy’s subject centre for social policy. The deputy head of the careers service at Brunel University, who attended the project seminar, also wrote an article about our findings for her professional magazine, ‘Phoenix’.
In addition, the Department for Education and Skills has expressed interest in our findings, and asked to be sent a copy of the final report and related publications.

8. Future Research Priorities

The project has highlighted a number of areas worthy of further investigation:

*Changes over time.* Many respondents believed that their capacity to engage in more leisure-orientated learning would increase as they got older. A follow-up study of the respondents, at a later point in their lives, would help to provide evidence about the extent to which the prioritising of work-related learning diminishes over time. Longitudinal data of this nature would also provide important evidence about changes to learning careers.

*The impact of work context and organisational type on the learning pursued by young graduates.* Although this study did explore these differences to some extent, a more systematic exploration of different sectors of graduate employment would help to tease out in more detail the influence of the specific context on attitudes to and experiences of further learning.

*Transitions to post-HE learning.* Many respondents described a significant shift in their learning careers on entering the workplace. The processes through which graduates adapt to new approaches to learning (and the types of support given to them in this process) would also benefit from further research.
References


