

Post-graduation reflections on the value of a degree

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This article investigates the impact of a changing higher education system on young adults' priorities and motivations. A considerable number of studies have explored the impact of recent changes on patterns of participation *within* higher education. 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 higher education and lifelong learning. To redress this gap, this article explores the changes to graduates' experiences brought about by the 'massification' of the higher education system. Research conducted amongst young people in Australia 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. It has been argued 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. If young adults do indeed feel misled about the rewards of a higher education, 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. Drawing on 90 life history interviews with graduates in their mid-twenties, this article explores the prevalence of such attitudes in the UK and their impact on young adults' attitudes to lifelong learning.

Introduction

The proportion of young people studying in higher education in England and Wales has increased almost sevenfold since the early 1960s, from only 6% of 19–20 year-olds in 1961 to over 40% of this age group in 2004/05 (with a target of a 50% participation rate by 2010). This expansion of higher education has been replicated in many other areas of the world. For example, in Australia, the number of students enrolled in higher education increased by 51% between 1996 and 2005 (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2007). Indeed, research conducted amongst young people in Australia (Dwyer & Wyn, 2001) has suggested

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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. Research has suggested that in Britain entry into higher education is less of a guarantee of gaining higher status and more prestigious occupations than elsewhere in the world (Shavit & Mueller, 1998). Furthermore, over recent years there has been no major shift in the distribution of graduates in the British labour market: career starts are increasingly at a lower status point and graduate density appears to have had a negative impact on wages (Brynin, 2002). If young adults do indeed feel misled about the rewards of a higher education, 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. Drawing on a sample of 90 young graduates from six contrasting types of higher education institution, this article explores the prevalence of such attitudes in the UK and their impact on young adults' attitudes to lifelong learning.

Although, to date, there has been little work that has explored how experiences of higher education affect attitudes to further learning, there is a growing body of research on young graduates' experiences within the labour market. For example, in their large-scale study of graduates seven years after they completed their first degree, Purcell and Elias (2004) paint a fairly positive picture of labour market outcomes. Indeed, they argue that the majority of their sample believed that they were in employment 'appropriate' to their level of qualification, while almost 80% of their respondents claimed that they had used the skills they had developed on their undergraduate courses. They also contend that, on the basis of their study, there is little evidence of an over-supply of graduates. However, this point can, perhaps, be contested: even on their own figures, they acknowledge that, seven years after graduation, 10% of males and 15% of females were in 'non-graduate' jobs, and this uses a notably broad definition of graduate employment.¹ Moreover, the wider literature suggests a much less optimistic picture. Brown and Hesketh (2004), for example, argue that: around 40% of graduates are in jobs that do not require degrees; only one in 20 is able to secure a lucrative job with a blue-chip firm; and the expansion of higher education threatens to leave large numbers of graduates on low incomes or unemployed. Similar findings have emerged from Smetherham's (2006) study, which explored differences between graduates with degrees of different classifications. Indeed, five years after graduation, 22% of those with lower seconds and 19% of those with firsts stated that they felt over-qualified for the jobs they were doing.

Other studies have pointed to the poor correlation between degree outcome and labour market position. For example, Grayson (2004) has argued that variables viewed as measures of cultural capital (parental income, being male, South Asian origin) have a statistically significant effect on graduates' incomes, net of social capital and human capital gained at university. He concludes that, overall, his study

shows that ‘even in an economy based on knowledge, some job outcomes are related to broader social dynamics in addition to the acquisition of human capital in universities’ (p.625)—but also acknowledges that additional studies are needed to determine whether similar factors continue to affect the job outcomes of graduates over the long term. Smetherham (2005) and Brown and Hesketh (2004) have also pointed to the impact of ‘personal capital’ on employment, even for graduates with first-class degrees and from high-status universities.

Such arguments are often predicated upon a rejection of the ‘knowledge-based economy’ discourse, a discourse in which it is assumed that there is a growing amount of ‘knowledge work’ that requires an increasingly highly educated workforce (Avis, 2000). Livingstone (2002), for example, provides strong empirical evidence to suggest that in the USA, at least, there is a large over-supply of knowledge workers relative to the number of jobs that are available to workers within the ‘knowledge economy’. He argues that policy makers, industrialists and educationalists have misread the market for high-level analytical skills and goes on to claim that while there may be other valid reasons for expanding the provision of higher education (and other high-level forms of learning), ensuring an increasingly large labour force to meet the demands of the knowledge economy is not a convincing one. Within the UK, there is some evidence that mass higher education has helped reduce unemployment, and that, over the course of a lifetime, the additional taxes paid by an average graduate more than compensate for the cost to the state of funding his or her degree (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2005). Nevertheless, this upbeat assessment has not been shared by all. Indeed, there is a substantial literature indicating that many graduates feel over-qualified for the jobs they are doing (Keep & Rainbird, 2002) and that there is little prospect of the graduate labour market expanding in line with the increased supply of graduates (Aston & Bekhradnia, 2003; Brown & Hesketh, 2004). While some studies have suggested that the substitution of graduates for non-graduates has itself led to the upgrading of jobs, Mason (2002) contends that this ‘burden of adjustment’ falls more heavily on individual graduates than employers, and thus contributes to a widening divergence of salaries and career prospects across the graduate labour market.

Research methods

This article draws on evidence from 90 adults in their mid-twenties, most of whom had graduated in 2000. They had studied at one of six different higher education institutions (HEIs)—chosen to reflect different ‘market positions’ (an Oxbridge college, a college of the University of London, a redbrick university, a 1960s campus university, a post-92 university and a college of higher education) and were recruited through a mailing sent out by the alumni offices of the six institutions and advertisements on ‘Friends Reunited’ (a UK-based Internet site that aims to ‘reunite’ old friends from school, college and university). In-depth, life history interviews were conducted with the sample between September 2005 and January

2006. This seemed a particularly appropriate method to use with young adults. Indeed, as Thomson *et al.* (2002) argue, a more biographical perspective to research recognises the fragmentation in transitions to adulthood over recent years, and allows researchers to document and understand how young adults may be experiencing and negotiating new social conditions. The life history approach used in the project was based on an inductive, 'realist' perspective (Miller, 2000). This assumes that the data collected through such histories can be used to construct general principles about social phenomena, and that 'the viewpoints of actors do represent an aspect of an objective reality' (p. 11).

The life history interviews were largely unstructured—to allow respondents to tell their own stories in their own words—but were informed by a broad 'topic guide'.² This covered: the young adults' experiences of higher education, 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. Two focus groups were then held with a sub-sample of the respondents (10 young adults from all HEIs apart from Oxbridge) to discuss cross-cutting issues that had emerged from analysis of the individual interviews. 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.

The remainder of the article considers the Dwyer and Wyn thesis, outlined above, in light of the evidence from this research project. Firstly, it draws on the young graduates' narratives to explore whether the majority of our respondents experienced disappointment at the end of their first degree, when they entered the labour market as full-time workers and realised that a permanent, professional job did not necessarily await them. In this part of the article we suggest that there is little evidence to support such claims. Instead, we argue that young people are much more realistic about the likely rewards of a higher education. In the second part of the article, the implications of this for further learning are discussed. Here, we argue that the realism about the labour market, which influenced the young people's decisions to progress to higher education, also informed the nature of their engagement with further education and training, post-graduation.

Do young adults feel disappointed when they enter the labour market?

To date, there have been few studies that have explored in any depth young people's feelings and experiences on graduation. While increasing numbers of studies are tracking the routes taken by graduates as they enter the labour market for full-time work (Purcell & Elias, 2004; Pollard *et al.*, 2004), relatively few have explored how young adults' feelings and perceptions change over this period. As such, it has been difficult to ascertain the extent to which Dwyer and Wyn's predictions of 'disappointment' and 'disillusionment' have been played out in the lives of graduates in contemporary society. By drawing on the 'learning histories' of the 90 young adults involved in our research, we suggest that such disappointments are relatively rare. Few had believed that there was an automatic progression from degree to professional job; instead, decisions to pursue degree-level study appeared to be driven, at least to some extent, by a belief that the options available to non-graduates were diminishing rapidly.

First degree as a 'basic minimum'

Indeed, across the sample as a whole there appeared to be a widespread belief that a degree was only a 'basic minimum'. As the following quotations indicate, a degree was believed to signal only a basic minimum level of qualification for an increasing number of jobs:

As much as I didn't use my degree to get me somewhere higher straightaway ... I wouldn't have got through the door without a degree ... I guess more and more it's like that because more and more people are having degrees, aren't they? So it's not so much a unique thing any more—but without it you're kind of a bit stuffed because you don't even get in [the door]. (Josephine, business account executive, Post-92)

[As a graduate] you've still got to go in on the bottom rung but it [degree] is almost regarded as the minimum thing you need in order to move through, I think. (Reese, supply chain manager, College of HE)

Similar comments were made by almost a quarter of the sample. For these young adults, there seemed to be little recognition of the 'new' forms of graduate employment documented by Purcell and Elias (2004). Instead, their more pessimistic reading of the labour market was grounded in a belief that employers were increasingly raising the qualification levels required for particular jobs (without an associated upgrading of the jobs themselves) in response to the 'over-supply' of graduates. Thus, as Aapola *et al.* (2005), have argued, remaining in education may not necessarily be a personal preference but a consequence of the new demands of the service sector or, as Brown *et al.* (2000) maintain, while graduates may be making themselves more employable by gaining a degree, this may not lead to the kinds of jobs historically associated with a university education.

Such evidence from these British young graduates tends to support the findings of research conducted by Crebert *et al.* (2004) in Australia: their sample of graduates was much more informed and realistic about the graduate labour market than

previous studies have suggested. Moreover, to many of our respondents, the relationship between higher education and the labour market was not perceived as necessarily straightforward. Success in one arena was not seen to translate directly into success in another, as Morgan (environmental manager, London) articulated clearly, when describing his transition from university into full-time work: ‘You know, you might be smart in university but it doesn’t mean you’re smart in life and, at that stage, I think I was smarter in university than in life’.

Many respondents believed that to be successful in the labour market it was necessary to consolidate the ‘basic minimum’ of one’s first degree with relevant work experience and/or appropriate extra-curricular activities whilst at university. For example, Lucia, Rosa and Ivan all considered that the work (in a paid or voluntary capacity) they had done alongside their academic study had been key to their employment success:

It was my NTCJ [journalism qualification] and my free bits of, my many toiling weeks of work experience, that actually got me the job. (Lucia, journalist, London)

I don’t think that my degree did [help me get where I am] although it wasn’t completely irrelevant ... but had I not been to university I wouldn’t have got the other experiences like editing a student newspaper. So I think having a degree ... opens doors. (Rosa, DTP executive, Post-92)

I spent three years being a hall warden. Again, for me I was thinking more long-term career-wise. (Ivan, training and development executive, College of HE)

For others, such as Jackie (finance manager, Oxbridge), the relationship between such extra-curricular activities and post-graduation employment was less direct, but equally important in bestowing a range of highly valued ‘soft skills’:

The time at uni, in terms of being involved in all that student politics stuff, I got much more confident, you know, just sort of standing up and talking and things, you know, sort of personal development.

Such responses provide some support for Brown *et al.*’s (2000) contention that, within the labour market, ‘personal capital’ and soft skills have become as important as paper qualifications. They go on to argue that academic qualifications have come to be taken for granted; indeed ‘the value of an individual to an employer is no longer represented by the denomination of academic currency but by the economy of experience’ (p. 120). In this analysis, cultural capital is argued to be a blunt tool for exploring differences between graduates who are likely to share similar backgrounds. Emphasis is placed, instead, on how individuals convert their cultural resources into personal capital; how they, to use Brown *et al.*’s terms, ‘manage their employability’. Indeed, such differences have been argued to hold even amongst those with first-class degrees (Smetherham, 2005).

While subscribing to the notion of a first degree as a ‘basic minimum’, a considerable number of respondents believed that consolidation was best achieved through further education and/or training once a first degree had been successfully completed. This is explored in more detail in the second half of the article.

Unemployment and temping

Further evidence of a lack of ‘disillusionment’ with higher education comes from exploring the experiences of those who had the most difficult and protracted transitions from university into work. In our sample, there were 12 young graduates who had experienced unemployment on graduation and 31 who moved from university into a temporary job. Experience of both was spread across all six HEIs, as Table 1 demonstrates. However, experiences of unemployment were varied—ranging from five weeks (Anya, Campus) to a year (Jackie, Oxbridge)—and, in some cases, unemployment was a result of ‘hanging on’ for prestigious training schemes or jobs—particularly for the London graduates.

Where respondents had found difficulty in moving into what they thought was ‘appropriate’ work for graduates, some did wonder whether their education had been worth it, as Anya and Rhian described:

You think, ‘Oh my God, I’ve got a degree but I’m never going to be able to find a job’ and, you know, you start thinking ‘I’ve done four years of my life [in HE]—has it been worth it?’ (Anya, project analyst, Campus)

It has taken me time and I did get quite down about it. You know, I’ve done all this education and I haven’t got a good job so I did go through a spell of, you know, was it all worth it and stuff. (Rhian, researcher, Post-92)

However, most claimed that they had felt mainly frustration at their situation, rather than regret at pursuing degree-level study. Indeed, in line with the argument developed above, almost all implied or stated explicitly that they considered their higher education to be a basic minimum and that what was more important was consolidating this with relevant experience.

It took sort of eight months to get onto a training scheme ... that eight months was weird because you always think you’re going to walk straight into a job but it didn’t happen immediately and there was a degree of frustration there, I think, thinking I should be working immediately. (Lucia, journalist, London)

I was still looking at marketing and I focused on all the big, global brands and I had interviews at all of, most of them, and the bit that held me back was my experience, not my education. (Reese, supply chain manager, College of HE)

Table 1. Experiences of unemployment and ‘temping’ on graduation

	Unemployment on graduation	‘Temping’ on graduation
Oxbridge	1	4
London	4	5
Redbrick	1	6
Campus	2	4
Post-92	1	5
College of Higher Education	3	7
Total	12	31

How periods of unemployment were understood and experienced seemed to differ most significantly by social position and the social and cultural resources individuals were able to draw upon in this period of their lives, rather than simply by the length of time they were without work. It is interesting to note that those who were least concerned about a failure to find work were those who had attended the highest status institutions and who, in many cases, had considerable cultural capital to draw upon. For example, Lucia spent her period of unemployment working (in an unpaid capacity) for local papers and public relations firms, while unemployment gave Francis an opportunity to write up some research he had conducted at university as a journal article:

I used that time [when could not find a job] profitably by doing lots of work experience at PR firms and also local papers. (Lucia, journalist, London)

I got a job after about three months of being unemployed during which time I finished one of my articles—so it was a useful time actually, being unemployed, because it was quite an investment in writing, in getting these articles, academic articles finished. (Francis, museum curator, London)

Indeed, it is possible that the confidence associated with attending a high-status university and/or coming from a family with previous experience of higher education encouraged some young people to ‘hang on’ for a prestigious job, rather than take up lower status temporary employment.

Nevertheless, nearly a third of our sample (31 respondents) moved into temporary jobs on graduation.³ In a small minority of cases, temporary work had actively been chosen as a way of ‘trying out’ different jobs, or of saving money before going travelling, for example. In most cases, however, temporary jobs were taken while respondents applied for permanent positions, or after a failure to secure a permanent job. However, it is interesting to note that this move into temporary work appeared to be understood by the majority of respondents as a relatively normal transition, useful for trying out different jobs and certainly one that did not foreclose the possibility of rapid promotion:

I did really enjoy the temping and I think it showed me what I was good at, the fact that I could get on with a variety of people ... that I was very confident and capable in certain areas. It showed me things I definitely didn’t want to do. (Stephanie, marketing and communications coordinator, Post-92)

I was unemployed for maybe nearly two months and then just fell into working for [company] via temping ... I just acted liked a jumped up ... and applied for every single post that came along and just sort of rose through the ranks, so I did really well through that. (Scarlett, assistant human resources manager, Campus)

Several previous studies of transitions from university into work have highlighted the increasing prevalence of a ‘liminal’ period of insecure, temporary employment (Aapola *et al.*, 2005; Purcell & Elias, 2004; Furlong & Cartmel, 2005). For example, a substantial minority of the graduates in Pollard *et al.*’s (2004) large-scale survey took up temporary or low-quality jobs on graduation and yet had moved into permanent work two years later. Evidence about the meaning attached

to such liminal jobs is mixed and, again, tends to suggest differences by social position. For example, Furlong and Cartmel (2005) note that their respondents from disadvantaged backgrounds came to realise that 'the professional job that they were aiming towards would only be achievable after they had gained experience in a more junior capacity' (p. 22) and suggest that this process often caused resentment and 'tended to be regarded as a feature of a poor labour market rather than part of a standard career trajectory' (p. 22). However, they also recognise that job insecurity is an established phase in the early career structure of many jobs, including some of the most prestigious such as medicine and law.

A more positive interpretation of this liminal work is provided by Try (2004) in his analysis of the employment patterns of Norwegian graduates. He argues that the growth in temporary and part-time work amongst new graduates is explained largely by behavioural changes rather than structural shifts in supply or demand. Indeed, he contends that the take-up of such jobs may result from a deliberate choice among graduates, 'either because these jobs are regarded as a good investment opportunity, or because they represent freedom and flexibility for the individual worker, even though these jobs initially are characterised by a lower professional level and lower pay level' (p. 43). Thus, what may be seen as a career trap for workers with low levels of qualification could represent something different for their more highly educated peers. Lewis *et al.* (2002) have pursued a similar argument in relation to young adults across Europe, while Heath and Cleaver (2003), focusing more specifically on the UK context, have suggested that while post-adolescents are not immune from spells of unemployment, 'periods outside formal work may represent opportunities—for further education or training, for self-employment, or for overseas travel—rather than threats' (p. 39). Indeed, recent research with young adults between the ages of 20 and 34 (Fenton & Dermott, 2006) provides little evidence of ongoing fractured relationships to the labour market amongst graduates; such transitions were associated primarily with low levels of academic attainment.

How are attitudes to further learning affected?

As noted above, very few of the young graduates felt disappointed or disillusioned on completion of their first degree—largely because of their realisation (either before they had applied for university or during their degree course) that a degree (even from a high-status university) was not a guarantee of immediate entry into well-paid and secure professional employment. Thus, no respondents were put off further learning because of a general disillusionment about the relationship between academic credentials and labour market position.⁴ However, this is not to argue that the young graduates' understanding of the relationship between the two had no bearing on their subsequent decisions. Indeed, the realism that, for many of them, underpinned their decision to go on to university study (i.e. that without a first degree the type of jobs open to them would be very restricted) also underpinned their decisions about further learning (see also Brooks, 2006).

Nearly all respondents had undertaken some kind of work-related training (Brooks & Everett, 2008a) and, for a large majority of this group, decisions about further (formal) learning were, to some extent, informed by their understanding of the relationship between a first degree and the labour market. Below we explore three ways in which this influence was played out—through respondents' desire to: compensate for supposed 'underperformance' in a first degree; specialise and achieve greater vocational preparation; and 'gain the edge' over other graduates of a mass higher education system.

Compensating

Seven respondents (from all types of HEI) explained that part of their reason for taking up further learning was to compensate for what they perceived to be their poor performance in their undergraduate studies, as illustrated by the following quotations from Patrick and Amir:

When I got accepted to Columbia [to do my MBA] ... I remember saying to myself, 'This is my second chance to do all the things I should have done in my first degree'. (Patrick, manager, Oxbridge)

I got accepted by one university to do the legal practice course, which you have to do to become a solicitor, but I turned it down because I felt that I had to prove myself to myself so I did what's called a Postgraduate Diploma in Law, which is essentially the first and second year of university LLB in Law in one year ... so in essence I was repeating my whole law degree apart from the third year. (Amir, solicitor, Post-92)

For most of the respondents in this group, the desire to pursue further learning as a means of compensation was driven by the perceived unsatisfactory level of their degree classification. While we have argued above that, across the sample as a whole, many respondents saw a degree as a 'basic minimum', for some this was qualified—it was a 'good' degree (typically defined as an upper second or above) that was seen as the baseline qualification. For Jun and Mandy, further formal learning offered an opportunity to demonstrate that the lower second they gained for their first degree was not a 'true reflection' of their abilities, while for Charles, the decision to pursue a master's degree seemed to be driven almost entirely by a need to compensate for his perceived underachievement during his first degree (rather than any intrinsic interest in the course itself):

When I got my 2:2 I thought, 'It's not all over, you know. It's a bit grim, but you could still work it out.' ... And I thought doing my LPC [legal practice course] would be a chance to address past wrongs and, you know, get back on track. (Jun, temping, Redbrick)

I ended up, I got a 2:2 ... so you know, it was one of those things where I learnt my lesson ... when I did my course last year ... I was determined that I was going to get a good mark and I did—I came away with a distinction—so I was just like, you know, 'I've learnt my lesson'. (Mandy, human resources officer, Campus)

I'd done an MSc in Health Psychology at the University of Westminster ... Because I had a 2:2 I knew that I had to go on and prove that I could do higher education ... it was

an awful course, I hated every minute of it, I knew I didn't actually need it for anything except to prove that I was capable of getting a 2:1 in my first degree. (Charles, human resources manager, College of HE)

Smetherham (2006) has demonstrated that degree classification does have a considerable bearing on labour market outcome. For example, amongst her respondents who were contacted five years after graduation, 29% of those with a lower second class degree felt that the work they were doing did not require graduate-level ability or training, compared to only 16% of those with first-class degrees. However, while recognising this positional advantage offered by a higher class degree, Smetherham also emphasises variation in outcome that cannot be explained on the basis of degree class. There were, for example, clear differences between holders of a first-class degree by both gender and type of HEI attended, with men and those who had attended an elite institution typically having achieved better income levels, occupational positions and training than the other graduates in the sample. For our respondents, engagement in further learning as a means of 'compensation' seemed to be driven by labour market considerations (namely, a belief that a lower second would disadvantage one, when competing against other graduates) but also a sense of dissonance between one's actual attainment and sense of self as a learner and/or 'attainer'. (This is explored further in Brooks and Everett, 2008b.)

Specialising

A corollary of the belief that a first degree merely provided a signal to the labour market of a certain basic level of ability was the view that it was necessary to specialise, on graduation, to develop skills and knowledge specific to one's chosen area of work. This was mentioned by over a quarter of respondents, from all six higher education institutions.

For most, further learning was clearly related to the specific sector in which they wanted to work. Celia (post-doctoral researcher, Oxbridge), for example, deliberately sought a master's degree in hydrogeology as preparation for a job in the area. She saw this as more vocationally relevant than her first degree and also a necessary requirement to enter this field. Indeed, among this group of young graduates there seemed to be general acceptance that a first degree rarely provided adequate preparation for work, even if the degree was considered vocational, as these quotations from Derek and Terry illustrate:

In practice, unless you are a tax lawyer or unless you are a lawyer who deals with legislation on a regular basis, it's [the first degree] nothing to do with law. That's why they have the in-between, the legal practice course, which is designed to give you grounding in legal practice ... Otherwise a law degree is totally irrelevant. (Derek, solicitor, London)

I realised early on that a degree just proves you've got the noodle or whatever. It doesn't really show you know what you're doing with it and early on I realised the importance of professional exams and that's why, I mean I did it without even looking into it because I

thought I just want to do, I wanted to show, you know, it looks good on the CV. (Terry, financial services case officer, Redbrick)

Instead, postgraduate qualifications and other forms of formal learning were widely seen as providing the bridges into employment:

The other point about this course [master's in design] is that the dissertation you write, they encourage you to use it as your stepping stone to get yourself a job afterwards, so [you] work out whilst you're doing the course what you want to do afterwards and tell your research [contacts] so you get to meet all the right people, maybe even do the research with them. (Hayley, marketing manager, London)

I'd applied for curator job and I wasn't getting one so I, and it was suggested to me what I needed to do was do an MA and I did an MA in Medieval Studies at Bristol. (Francis, museum curator, London)

I really liked doing my dissertation ... and then I decided, I got it into my head that I'm going to be a researcher so I started getting the *Guardian* and looking at the sort of jobs I could do and then I noticed that quite a few of them asked for like ... social research kind of qualifications. And so I thought, yeah, I'll do that because I wasn't sure if my degree would be enough. (Rhian, researcher, Post-92)

On the basis of this evidence, there appears to be an assumption on the part of the young adults that while a first degree was seen as a baseline qualification for many jobs, university was also the place—in a considerable number of cases—for developing particular work-related skills (particularly during postgraduate courses). Indeed, many of the respondents who went on to postgraduate study either immediately after graduation, or a few years later, stressed its importance in preparing them for the kinds of jobs they hoped to move into.

Gaining the edge

In line with long-standing arguments about credential inflation (Collins, 1979; Wolf, 2002), other respondents (18—from all institutions) were more concerned to embark upon further formal learning as a means of distinguishing themselves from the large number of others who were also in the possession of a first degree.

I quite fancied training for another qualification because so many people have first degrees. (Jackie, finance manager, Oxbridge)

These courses are recognised everywhere so you're immediately more attractive [to employers], so it was very calculated on my behalf ... Some of it [education] is driven from fear of, I don't really want to ever end up not being able to do a job or not having a job, so education is my key to remaining employable. (Cora, human resources manager, Campus)

For some, such as Jackie and Cora, decisions to pursue further learning to gain a competitive advantage in the labour market were taken during their first degree. For others, however, such choices were made after entering employment. For example, Carlton's narrative demonstrates how the advantage offered by further learning was believed by his employers to accrue to the organisation as a whole as well as to the individuals within it:

There are so many good people out there with degrees, who are all the same, and if you only have one degree then employers would say 'Ah, this person has two ... which makes him stand out'. And so I've ... tried to collect as many education things as possible now, just to make myself stand out ... One of my bosses at work, he's been very influential in stressing the importance of having personal qualifications, so external clients can look at you and say, 'Well, I can see you have your degree, OK, everyone has one of those, but I see you also have this professional qualification in this area, which is why I'm buying services from you'. (Carlton, solicitor, Redbrick)

Similarly, even those who had not yet pursued any further formal learning believed that additional qualifications were necessary if they were to be able to progress in their career, and stand out from other graduates:

My degree has turned into my ticket for a job but I know damn well that if I want to progress up the ladder I'm going to have to do more ... I'll have to do an MBA or an MA in something or, something that will distinguish me. (Jason, medical sales representative, College of HE)

In her study of progression to postgraduate study, Bowman (2005) argues that one reason which explained such decisions was a desire to seek distinction—both academically and within the world of work—to bypass first degree holders and low-level graduate positions. These kinds of comments, and the narratives of our respondents, relate strongly to Brown and Hesketh's (2004) contention that the 'war for talent' is hotting up. If graduates are now undertaking a postgraduate course in order to do a job that required, or perhaps on paper still requires, only a first degree, then as Brown and Hesketh claim, they are simply running faster in order to stand still as the massification of higher education brings us to a point of 'status congestion' (p. 29). However, while numerous and diverse 'widening participation' schemes are attempting to help underprivileged groups to access a first degree, policy initiatives have largely ignored the social inequalities within postgraduate education and other forms of further learning. Indeed, as Bowl (2003) has cogently argued, access to study at postgraduate level, except in rare circumstances, is frequently dependent on the student either being able to pay for their own fees or being sponsored by an employer and that, as a result, working-class students are often excluded from higher-level qualifications and the associated financial rewards.

Conclusion

On the basis of the narratives from the 90 young adults involved in this research project, it appears that there is little evidence to support Dwyer and Wyn's 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 they had even entered higher education) that a degree did not provide an automatic route into professional employment. Indeed, as we have shown, several respondents 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, we have also argued that our 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 higher education (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 their felt need to 'compensate' for perceived poor performance, 'specialise' to gain more work-related skills and 'gain the edge' within a mass system of higher education.

One reading of these responses is generally positive—that few graduates experience the uncertainties previously associated with the end of schooling (Dwyer & Wyn, 2001) and are keen to embark upon further education, training and other forms of learning. However, another interpretation is also possible: this emphasises the respondents' pessimism about the rewards of higher education, even before they had embarked upon their degrees. Despite widely publicised government proclamations about the value of a degree, its association with significantly higher lifetime earnings and its increasing importance to a knowledge-based economy (Department for Education and Skills, 2003), relatively few of our respondents believed that it offered more than a 'basic minimum' within a competitive graduate labour market. While seeming to reject such government rhetoric out of hand, there was—perhaps surprisingly—a notable absence of any critical reflection about the ways in which these putative rewards of higher education are emphasised in national debate. Indeed, alongside widespread pessimism about a degree providing a pathway to professional employment was a seeming acceptance of the inevitability of credential inflation and the necessity to compensate, specialise and 'gain the edge' (in a largely individualistic and competitive manner) post-graduation.

Indeed, we argue that for a large majority of our respondents, 'employability' was a key driver of further learning. In one of the small number of studies of the routes into further taught learning taken by students at the end of their first degree, Bowman (2005) argues that moving on to master's level study is not an identical proposition for all those who undertake it, and outlines three main types of transition: 'staying on', seen as a logical or natural extension of one's first degree, confirming the lifestyle established as an undergraduate; 'moving on', in which a student explores a different subject from that covered by their undergraduate degree as a means of adjusting career direction or developing new academic interests; and finally, 'coming back' after a period away from formal learning. While we would agree with Bowman that the meaning of further formal study differs considerably between individuals, and acknowledge that there are many diverse reasons for pursuing postgraduate qualifications, we argue that most of these different types of transition can be located with a broad discourse of employability. In developing this argument, we tend to disagree with a recent report from the think tank Demos (Gillinson & O'Leary, 2006) which, in its analysis of the relationship between the skills brought to organisations by new graduates and those required by employers,

has argued that ‘not only are graduates under-prepared for what will be required of them, they are also under-prepared for how much there is to learn’ (p. 45). Indeed, in our study respondents expressed a clear willingness to engage in further learning, either formally (in the ways outlined above) or informally, as a means of bolstering their labour market position. As such, our respondents seem to have taken on, not an awareness of a lifetime *entitlement* to learn, but what Levitas (1998) has argued is the lifetime *obligation* to learn and maintain one’s marketability, engaging in a continuous ‘enterprise of the self’ (du Gay, 1996).

Finally, it is important to remember that our sample was self-selecting: respondents offered to be interviewed after receiving a letter about the project from their alumni office, or seeing an advert on the ‘Friends Reunited’ website. It is, therefore, likely that the sample over-represents those who have had more successful learning careers and/or transitions from higher education into work—as it is probably much easier to talk about perceived successes than perceived failures. As a consequence, the more ‘difficult transitions’ discussed in this article may have been less difficult and shorter-lived than those experienced by a more representative sample of young graduates. Indeed, Furlong and Cartmel’s (2005) study of the transitions from university into the labour market of their young graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds includes more examples of significant barriers to obtaining ‘appropriate’ employment. Thus, while we argue that the disillusionment and disappointment described by Dwyer and Wyn (2001) does not characterise how our young graduates felt at the end of their first degree, their scepticism about the rewards of a higher education—at least as presented by the Government—coupled with their instrumental approach to further formal learning does not necessarily present a much more hopeful picture.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank: the Economic and Social Research Council for funding this study (award number: RES-000-22-0662); the participants in a project seminar held at the University of Surrey on 29 June 2006 for stimulating feedback; and, most of all, the 90 young adults who gave up their time to be interviewed.

Notes

1. Purcell and Elias (2004) distinguish between four different types of graduate job: ‘professional’ (defined as jobs for which access has historically been through an undergraduate degree programme, e.g. lawyers); ‘modern’ (where an undergraduate degree became the normal route into the occupations at the time of the last expansion of higher education in the 1960s—e.g. primary school teachers); ‘new’ (where the route has recently changed and is now mainly via an undergraduate degree programme, e.g. marketing and sales managers); and ‘niche’ (in areas of employment where most workers do not have degrees but in which there are niches for which graduates are sought, e.g. hotel managers).
2. Respondents were asked to talk about three stages of their life, so far: pre-university, at university, and post-university. The topic guide encouraged them to talk about these periods in chronological order.

3. It is important to recognise that, in some occupations (such as publishing and some voluntary sector jobs), temporary work represents the first stage in established career routes. However, none of our respondents described their temporary work in this way.
4. A small number of respondents were, however, discouraged from further study because of other experiences at university (see Brooks & Everett [2008b] for further details).

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