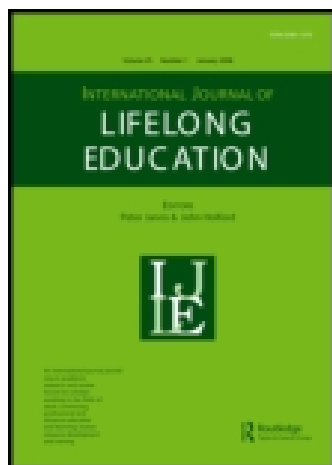


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### The impact of higher education on lifelong learning

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# The impact of higher education on lifelong learning

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The UK's National Adult Learning Survey has emphasised that graduates are more likely than other groups of people to engage in further learning and to be motivated by the intrinsic nature of the subject matter. However, beyond this we know relatively little about the learning of graduates as a specific group. In particular, we know very little about how experiences of higher education affect attitudes towards learning in the years after graduation. To start to redress this gap, this paper draws on in-depth interviews with 90 graduates from six different UK higher education institutions, five years after they completed their first degree. It argues that, in the case of many of these young adults, the influence of higher education on further learning was exerted 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.

## Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a burgeoning of the literature on higher education (HE), with a number of new journals dedicated to exploring processes of teaching and learning within the sector and various high profile research projects commissioned to investigate a wide range of higher education-related issues (for example, the seven projects on different aspects of widening participation recently funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council). What has received considerably less attention, however, is the impact of higher education on subsequent learning. While graduates' experiences within the labour market have been scrutinised in depth (Brown and Hesketh 2004; Purcell and Elias 2004), their take up of further education and training has been the focus of only a very small number of studies. Nevertheless, the interface between higher education and lifelong learning is likely to assume increasing importance in future years as a result of, firstly, the expectation that all will engage in lifelong learning as a means of keeping skills up-to-date and

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secondly, the expansion of higher education and the consequent increase in the proportion of the labour force comprised of graduates. This paper begins to address this gap in the literature by drawing on interviews with 90 young graduates across the UK, which explored the relationship between higher education and lifelong learning.

### Background

The National Adult Learning Survey (Fitzgerald *et al.* 2003) has emphasised that graduates are more likely than other groups of people to engage in further learning, and to be motivated by the intrinsic nature of the subject matter. However, beyond this we know relatively little about the learning of graduates as a specific group. In particular, we know very little about how experiences of higher education affect attitudes towards learning in the years after graduation. The work that has been conducted in this area to date has emphasised three main themes: firstly, possible changes to the role of higher education within a 'learning society'; secondly, the compulsion felt by all workers—but particularly graduates—to keep learning throughout their careers; and finally, the increasing importance of postgraduate qualifications as a result of the expansion of HE and consequent credential inflation. Each of these is now explored in turn.

Teichler (1999) has posed a number of important questions about the role of higher education within societies that increasingly expect a high level of participation in formal, lifelong learning. For example, he questions whether universities may lose their relevance in a diverse knowledge economy, and whether we will soon witness a de-institutionalisation of knowledge transmission. He also emphasises the current ambiguity of the role of universities in professional development, and speculates that an increasing emphasis on lifelong learning may result in the shortening of the current period of pre-career education. However, the available empirical evidence tends to suggest that, to date, there has been relatively little change in this direction amongst higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK. Indeed, Morley (2001) highlights the increasing attention paid to individual and collective skill development at undergraduate level. This suggests that far from foreshortening pre-career education, current policy aims to address perceived skills deficits *within* higher education. Although Teichler's work is helpful in thinking through some of the institutional implications of a shift to further formal learning throughout the life-course, he has less to say about the ways in which higher education itself may influence attitudes towards and experiences of further education and training. It is the contention of this paper that the nature of the learning society is very likely to be affected by the dispositions of those who graduate from institutions of higher education.

Various studies have pointed to the increasing level of expectation that we will all engage in learning throughout our lives. It is argued that obligations of this kind are felt most acutely amongst the working population. Indeed, Tight (1998) has contended that whilst learning in adult life can rarely be full-time, because of the requirement to work, 'it is, nevertheless, becoming compulsory, and the simplest way of making it compulsory is embedding it within work' (p. 262). On the basis of arguments such as these, some writers have suggested that we are witnessing a de-structuring of the childhood, youth and adult phases of life. Allat and Dixon (2005), for example, maintain that such de-structuring is a direct result of young people's

engagement in paid employment while they are in full-time education, and the expectations on adults to continue formal learning when they are in full-time work. Moreover, Tight (*ibid.*) believes that the ‘front end’ model which conceived childhood as about education and adulthood as about work is being replaced. Those who have focused on graduates, more specifically, have pointed to the importance of lifelong learning (alongside other activities) in securing one’s place within a highly competitive graduate labour market (Moreau and Leathwood 2006). Indeed, in their study of graduate employability, Brown, Hesketh and Williams (2000) argue that:

The shift from bureaucratic to flexible paradigms of organisational efficiency has meant that it is no longer a question of gaining credentials in order to climb bureaucratic career ladders, but of maintaining one’s employability, of keeping fit within both the internal and external market for jobs, through the acquisition of externally-validated credentials, in-house training programmes, social contacts and networks. (p. 118)

This form of credential inflation has been discussed at some length in the literature (Collins 1979; Wolf 2002). Indeed, over a decade ago, Duke (1994) argued that graduate education was coming to be seen as a ‘finishing and selecting year’ and the next stage of social and economic selection after the first degree, ‘the social function of which is to discriminate out that small elite whom undergraduate education selected out in earlier times’ (p. 87). More recently, Bowl (2003) has developed this argument, suggesting that as credential inflation continues apace, it is a second degree that has come to be seen as the new benchmark. She also points to the social inequity associated with this change by arguing that, except in rare circumstances, access to postgraduate study is frequently dependent on the student being able to pay for herself or himself, or securing funding from an employer. In either case, she suggests, working class students are more likely to be excluded from such education and thus the associated economic rewards. Wakeling’s (2005) research has also indicated that there are important social differences in access to further learning—with progression to higher degree study appearing to be heavily influenced by having attended a high status university for one’s first degree. While students clearly have a variety of different reasons for pursuing postgraduate-level education, Bowman’s (2005) research into the motivations of master’s students in two UK universities suggests that all were strongly influenced by the desire to pursue ‘distinction’—either within their course of study or the graduate labour market.

While these studies provide important starting points to an assessment of the interface between higher education and lifelong learning, none of the studies reported above set out to provide a systematic analysis of the relationship between the two. In contrast, the ‘Young Graduates and Lifelong Learning’ project, upon which this article draws, focused specifically on how experiences of degree-level study affected young adults’ attitudes to and experiences of further learning, once they had graduated from their undergraduate degree.

### **Research methods**

Between September 2005 and January 2006, in-depth, life history interviews were conducted with 90 young graduates. All were British citizens and had attended a

British higher education institution for their first degree; most were living in the UK at the time of the interview, although the sample did include seven respondents who had moved overseas at some point post-graduation. The vast majority of the interviews were conducted face-to-face—but 17 respondents (those living outside the UK or geographically very distant within the UK from our base and those who were unable to attend an interview due to work constraints or disability) were interviewed by telephone using Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) software.<sup>1</sup> Table 1 shows the gender balance and university attended of the sample. As can be seen, we recruited respondents from six higher education institutions with different market positions: an Oxbridge college; a college of the University of London; a ‘redbrick’ university; a 1960s campus university; a ‘post-92’<sup>2</sup> university and a college of higher education. Mailshots via the alumni offices of these institutions, plus adverts on ‘Friends Reunited’ website<sup>3</sup> allowed us to recruit our target of 15 graduates per institution (who graduated in 2000 or thereabouts) and who were in their mid-twenties at the time of the interview. The interviews we conducted with these young adults were semi-structured; they were encouraged to tell their ‘learning histories’ in their own words, with some prompting on a series of topics broken down into different stages of their learning career (pre-university, at university and post-university, and some comparison and reflection upon these stages). A sub-sample of 10 respondents then attended two follow-up focus groups in May 2006. These focused on general themes that had emerged from an initial analysis of the data, rather than individual biographies.

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 of a concern 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.

In the following sections of the paper, we discuss some of the themes that emerged from these interviews and focus groups. Interestingly, relatively few respondents

**Table 1. Gender of respondents, by HEI attended**

<i>Higher education institutions (placed in order of typical league table position)</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>
Oxbridge	8	7
London	8	7
Redbrick	10	5
Campus	14	1
Post-92	11	4
College of HE	7	8
TOTAL	58	32

claimed that they had been put off further study by financial factors. Where this had been a consideration, it was typically related to having become accustomed to a regular income and not wanting to return to student levels of subsistence, or the difficulty of securing a grant—rather than the prohibitive effects of debt incurred as an undergraduate. Instead, our data suggests 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. In the ensuing discussion, all respondents are referred to by pseudonyms and the HEI they attended is identified only by type (i.e. Oxbridge, London, redbrick, campus, post-92 or college of HE).

### The process of learning

It appeared that, for our respondents, higher education exerted two important influences on the process of learning, one which generally had quite long-lasting effects and a second which had a much more temporary impact. Many of the young adults 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 had 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:

I think my best learning experience...was going to university and learning that no one was going to do it for me and if I wanted to get anywhere I'd have to do it for myself and learn all the life skills. (Rose, social worker, redbrick)

I think university teaches you to be self-motivated about your learning and to look further than ways necessarily in the reading lists and I guess maybe that's the reason I am the way I am today and will read the magazines and I will go and talk and ask questions and do my own research. (Mandy, HR officer, campus)

A number of recent studies have problematised the emphasis on the 'independent learner' within current higher education policy. Leathwood (2006), for example, contends that it is a gendered construction and an inappropriate goal for the majority of students. Within the terms of her argument, 'independence' is understood as a masculinist myth: 'what suits (some) men is defined as the ideal that all should be striving for, whilst men's dependence on others remains hidden' (p. 630). There is certainly evidence to suggest that mutual dependence is often denigrated within higher education, and that many impediments stand in the way of fully collaborative learning (Brooks 2007). Nevertheless, in contrast to Leathwood's respondents, the young adults in this study (both men and women) spoke positively about the ways in which they had been encouraged to take greater responsibility for their own learning during their time at university, as well as the impact of this on their engagement with learning after graduation.

Although this transition to more independent forms of study (and its impact on subsequent learning) was both emphasised and broadly welcomed by our respondents, this positive response was often held in tension with a more ambivalent attitude

towards the intensity of their higher education courses. Indeed, 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, as illustrated by the following quotations:

I got a call from one of my seminar leaders who said like, you know, ‘Are you going to come and do postgrad and stuff?’ and I was like ‘No’ ... at the time, it’s hard to describe how I felt, I felt like I couldn’t give any more. (Marcia, picture syndicator, London)

One of the reasons I picked my job at [organisation] was because when I came out of uni I suppose I was so mentally exhausted after, you know, four years of studying that the thought of going into a job that involved, like, training for qualifications and things, I deliberately avoided jobs like that. (Ellie, invigilator and beauty therapist, redbrick)

I’d had enough by then. I really needed a break from reading basically...having to read a novel a week for English and media, you know, it just turned me off reading so much that, you know, it was just a chore.... So, yeah, when university finished I didn’t want to, I didn’t want the pressure of having an essay to do or having to revise for an exam or having a book to read, basically. (Arthur, support worker, college of HE)

[After bad experiences at Oxbridge] it’s taken me quite a long time to get back into something where I want to start learning again. (Caz, personal assistant, Oxbridge)

It is possible that these reactions are associated not only with the intrinsic academic demands of degree-level study, but also with the new pressures that are placed on students: to engage in significant amounts of paid work to support oneself financially (Metcalfe 2003; Humphrey 2006) as well as gain relevant work experience (Brooks 2006a); and to succeed academically, to maximise chances in a competitive labour market (Pearson 2006). Indeed, a recent overview of the literature in this area has pointed to the increasing prevalence of stress among those studying in higher education (Robotham and Julian 2006).

Although, in almost all cases, this reported ‘learning fatigue’ was reported to be a temporary phenomenon, with most keen to take up further education or training at some later point, it does also 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. In this light, Allat and Dixon’s (2005) claims about the de-structuring of life stages—as a result of both the requirement to engage in paid work while a full-time student and pursue further learning while in full-time employment—are brought into question. The perceived intensity of higher education (perhaps as a direct consequence of decisions to engage in paid work at the same time) seemed to consolidate, rather than challenge, the view that completion of an undergraduate degree represented the end of a particular (and quite unique) phase of one’s learning career.

### Learning and the self—the effect on learner identities

It appeared from our data that the experience of higher education had affected many respondents' sense of identity as a learner, as well as the process of learning discussed above. Here, again, the influence of HE on further learning appears 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.

#### *Strengthening learner identities*

Almost a quarter of the sample claimed that their enjoyment of the subject they had studied, as well as the opportunity to engage in critical thinking, generally, had encouraged them to continue learning post-graduation. For some, such as Lucia, this resulted in them moving straight on to a postgraduate qualification:

I went to LSE [London School of Economics] afterwards and did a master's. So I kind of carried on. I loved the subject so much—you could say that I didn't want to go into employment really—but at the time I think it was more the pull of wanting to do a particular period of history in further depth. (Lucia, journalist, London)

For others, the influence was primarily with respect to informal learning. For example, Emily believed that her experience at Oxbridge had directly affected her attitude to learning:

Having that education [at Oxbridge], that background, and the willingness to learn, we're interested to learn and discuss what's going on, and then maybe change our opinions.... I'm still learning, it's not formal sitting down and learning a bunch of facts.... It's an attitude of healthy discussion, academic topics.... There's a lot going on and you still feel you can keep thinking and not vegetating. (Emily, development director, Oxbridge)

In some cases, this enjoyment of study within higher education was part of a broader continuum of positive learning experiences, which had begun at school or college. Many, however, spoke of a significant disjuncture when they entered higher education and embarked upon a more advanced level of study. Several respondents saw their time at university as a period quite distinct from previous phases of education, which enabled them to re-evaluate their own relationship to learning. Sarina, for example, believed that her time in higher education had given her the opportunity to create a new and more positive identity for herself as a learner such that, by the time she graduated:



I actually found that I was picking up things really quickly and that I had become a fast learner and I had always thought of myself as a slow learner. (Sarina, communications co-ordinator, campus).

For others, finding an environment in which education was prized helped to reaffirm their own values:

I learnt not to care about others who think you're a bit of a boffin for wanting to study. I got bullied at school and a lot of it was because I was academically able and it was a point of contention amongst some people and I just learnt with uni and that not to care, it doesn't matter, you do it for your own satisfaction. (Ellie, invigilator and beauty therapist, redbrick)

I see it ... as a rebirth, something new. It was a change, from the enclosed environment where I used to live—where education was not the norm—to a place of opportunities. I was exposed to knowledge I had never been privy to before. It actually whet my appetite. It was all so new. (Kimberley, teacher, post-92)

Here again, higher education seemed to have offered these young women more freedom to admit to (and develop) their academic interests. And, in common with the other young adults discussed in this section, they claimed that such experiences had effected quite long-lasting change in their attitude towards learning.

#### *Weakening learner identities*

Alongside these narratives about shifts in learning identity were other, less positive stories, which point to the ways in which the influence of higher education can operate in divergent ways and differ significantly between individuals. In our sample, at least, there appeared to be a strong correlation between type of university attended and effect on learner identity. While some of those who had studied at Oxbridge (such as Emily quoted above) believed that the experience had had a strong and positive impact on their take up of future learning opportunities, others who had attended this university reported markedly different experiences. Indeed, a third of those who claimed that they had been put off further learning by their time in higher education had attended an Oxbridge college. In the minds of these young people, the idiosyncrasies of the Oxbridge system were largely to blame. In particular, several had found the tutorial system quite intimidating and the course unstructured. For example, Alice had arrived at Oxbridge intent on staying on to do a PhD and working as a physicist. However, by her final year she had been put off the subject, primarily as a result of her dislike of the way she had been taught:

[I] went into this tutorial system where I was expected to sit with someone I didn't really know very well and, you know, expound my views and give solutions and talk and ask searching questions and it wasn't something I could do at that stage so it was a bit frustrating really.... My tutorial partner had a similar sort of comprehensive background and she was very quiet and shy and...because she was so quiet as well, it was just, you know, embarrassing silences the whole time. (Alice, executive administrator, Oxbridge)

Here, Alice alludes to the way in which her academic identity was undermined, partially as a result of the social discomfort she experienced within her tutorials, and her dislike of having to 'perform' in the way that was expected of her. However, a similar sense of discomfort with the nature of the tutorial system was expressed by some of those from more privileged backgrounds, such as Caroline (whose father had studied at Cambridge):

I mean the tutorial system is very good in one way, very intense, very challenging, but also with that it's quite stressful. You kind of learn in the wrong order so you're sent off to write an essay and you come back and discuss it, at which point they tell you that you've done it wrong. It would have been nice to have a discussion before you write the essay.... You'd spend most of the time going off and studying on your own reading books and papers and writing things up. I think I'd have found a much more structured approach easier, to be honest.... I knew I didn't want to do further academic study. I'd had enough by the time I did my finals. I really couldn't bear the thought of another moment. (Caroline, policy adviser)

Seven of the 15 Oxbridge graduates reported such experiences. Jayne's comment that 'the whole tutorial system where I'd be with one other person and the tutor [was] incredibly intimidating' was typical of this group. Notably, it was almost exclusively the young women who had been affected in this way, rather than their male counterparts. Many of these respondents described how, before they embarked upon their university courses, academic achievement and education had been central to their identities and sense of self. As such, this echoes the findings of much research that has highlighted the centrality of the 'academic' to the identity of middle class young women (Mann 1998; Walkerdine *et al.* 2001). In contrast to these studies, however, our respondents' narratives indicated the fragility of such identities, which appeared susceptible to significant change during the years of higher education. While Power *et al.* (2003) have highlighted the *social* discomfort that can be felt by middle class young people as they enter university, this research points to similar possible dislocations within one's *academic* identity. (However, it should be noted that, in some cases, social and academic identities were closely intertwined. Some of the young women discussed above were clearly alienated by what they perceived to be the classed and/or masculinist nature of the Oxbridge tutorial system.)

#### *Addressing dissonance*

For Alice, Caroline and others like them, negative undergraduate experiences had a severe impact on their sense of themselves as academic achievers and discouraged them from pursuing further academic study on graduation. For other respondents, however, further (formal) learning provided one way of addressing perceived dissonance between their self-identity as a learner and their level of attainment in their undergraduate studies. As we have argued elsewhere (Brooks and Everett forthcoming), this was particularly apparent amongst those who had failed to achieve an upper second or higher, as illustrated by Jun and Mandy:

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, HR officer, campus)

Here, lifelong learning (particularly of the formal variety) provided a means of bolstering one's identity as an academic achiever, which—for some—had been brought into question by their performance during their undergraduate degree. However, it is important to note that, for these students (in contrast to their Oxbridge counterparts discussed above), their overall experiences of HE had been broadly positive; their academic identities had not been troubled by the process of teaching and learning with which they had engaged—only by the results that they had achieved.

The evidence presented in this section of the paper illustrates the importance of exploring some of the heterogeneity of the higher education system—not only in terms of the characteristics of the students themselves (class, gender, ethnicity, age, etc.) but also some of the important differences between types of higher education institution. Research to date has successfully highlighted the hierarchical nature of the sector and the impact of this on those choosing an institution in which to study (Reay *et al.* 2005) as well as those entering the graduate labour market (Brown and Hesketh 2005). What has received considerably less attention is the way in which experiences of teaching and learning during an undergraduate degree may also be significantly differentiated by institutional type and/or status.

In their research on non-traditional adult learners, Crossan *et al.* (2003) argue that it is unhelpful to think of a learning career as linear and as something that can be controlled or predicted. Indeed, they maintain that 'engagement with learning is a subjective experience bound up with other life events and experiences, and is situated in complex negotiations of meaning' (p. 64). While concurring with this analysis, we would extend it to encompass other groups of learners, as well, including those who may be seen, traditionally, as the most privileged. For many of our respondents, learning identities appeared to be—as Crossan *et al.* suggest with respect to the participants in their study—very vulnerable to changes in their social environment. For some, such identities were strengthened through the removal of pressure to conform to an 'anti-learning' peer group culture, alongside stimulating degree courses. For others, however, social environments that were perceived to be intimidating and stressful had the effect of destabilising even long-standing and apparently secure learner identities.

### Learning and the wider world

The third main way in which experiences of higher education influenced young graduates' attitudes to further learning was through informing their understanding of the relationship between formal education/training and the wider world.

Current education policy articulates a very specific view of this relationship, stressing the economic function of education and the key role of higher education, in particular, in helping to secure the UK's future prosperity. Indeed, further expansion of the sector is predicated on the assumption that the UK needs increasing numbers of highly skilled knowledge workers to compete with other countries in a globalised economy (DfES 2003). The academic literature presents various (and often vehement) contestations of these assumptions (e.g. Brown and Lauder 2006) and many of our respondents were also sceptical of such arguments (Brooks and Everett forthcoming). Nevertheless, for a significant proportion of the young adults in our study, experiences of HE did lead to a significant rethinking of assumptions about the relationship between learning and wider society.

For about a sixth of our sample, decisions about further learning were motivated by a desire to 'change direction' from the route that they believed had been set by their undergraduate degree. For some, this involved a specific vocational course that could have been completed at undergraduate level. For others, it was to develop skills that would (they hoped) allow them to move into a new area of work. Here, the experience of higher education had caused them to revise some of their initial plans about subsequent employment—through, for example, enjoying particular courses less than they had anticipated. In these cases, experiences of higher education had not led to any more profound re-evaluation of the relationship between learning and the wider world. In contrast, however, other respondents described how their time at university had, firstly, impressed upon them the role of learning as a means of distinguishing oneself from others and secondly, heightened their awareness of the importance of the status attached to different forms and places of learning within the graduate labour market, as well as society more generally. These are both discussed in more detail below.

#### *Means of distinguishing self from others*

In line with arguments about credential inflation, a significant proportion of respondents (around a fifth of the sample and again drawn from all HEIs) were more concerned to embark upon postgraduate qualifications 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)

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... (Carlton, solicitor, redbrick)

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)

For some, this had been a belief they had been committed to at the beginning of their undergraduate studies or even earlier. The majority of this group, however, had arrived at the view that further formal learning was necessary to distinguish themselves from other graduates only during their time in higher education. Ainley (1994) and Brown and Scase (1994) have discussed the ways in which young people from families with no experience of HE and who, at the time they applied for their degree course, had little awareness of status differences between institutions, come to understand the hierarchical nature of the university sector during their time in HE. Our research shows that similar shifts take place with regard to students' awareness of credential inflation, and the value of further formal learning in helping to differentiate graduates of a mass higher education system. While this pursuit of further learning as a means of achieving distinction was driven, for many of our sample, by a desire to secure their labour market position, it may also have been informed by wider social values relating to consumption of positional goods. Indeed, in discussing the take up of adult education, Usher *et al.* (1997) argue that:

When consumption becomes a matter of meaning, those with the necessary cultural and economic capital no longer consume for the sake of utility or need alone but to signify difference, to say something about themselves in relation to others. A desirable lifestyle is no longer about consuming in order to be the same as others but rather about consuming in order to be different. (p. 5)

This desire to distinguish oneself from others was often bound up with an emphasis on taking personal responsibility for one's success or failure within the labour market, which was apparent across the majority of narratives. Respondents clearly believed that the onus was on them to seek out and exploit further learning opportunities (even if the learning was directly work-related). As Furlong and Cartmel (1997) have suggested, negotiating the complex maze of potential routes for education and training is often perceived by young adults as a highly individualised process, associated with a considerable degree of self-surveillance (see also Crowther 2004) and perhaps also, as in the case of Cora below, a sense of fear at the possibility of failure:

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, HR manager, campus)

#### *Rectifying status issues*

Alongside this desire to engage in further formal learning to distinguish oneself from other graduates was a belief, on the part of some respondents, that such education or training also offered a means of rectifying 'poor choices' that had been taken when deciding about undergraduate courses. Although there were important differences across the sample<sup>4</sup>, a significant proportion of young adults reported that their views about status and reputation had changed during their time at university.

Some had become aware of the hierarchical nature of the HE sector for the first time (along the lines suggested by Ainley (*ibid.*) and Brown and Scase (*ibid.*)), while others, who had previously been aware of such distinctions between universities, had come to see these differences as more significant. Indeed, many came to share Brown and Lauder's (2006) assertion that 'increasing inequalities in occupational rewards and career prospects place a premium on gaining access to internationally recognised schools, colleges and universities' (p. 50). Typically, the respondents in this group then went on to explain how such changing perceptions had influenced their decisions about post-graduation learning. This was most marked amongst those who had attended the two institutions with the lowest 'league table positions'—post-92 and colleges of HE:

I started applying to do my master's the following year, whilst I was in this job, and I looked at different unis. I looked at Birmingham. I did look at different unis. I looked at Birmingham, Warwick, Reading and Leicester. So I kind of picked those because I thought they were better, I suppose, than post-92. (Rhian, researcher, post-92)

I wanted to do a business course... so I thought it would be better to step back, do another degree in the direction I want to be going in, and hopefully have more experience by then, and at a better university. (Sean, quality compliance associate, post-92)

While Rhian and Sean did not seem to have experienced any problems in moving from what they perceived to be a lower status institution to a university with a more elevated position in the HE hierarchy, this was not the case for all our respondents. Kimberley's narrative is particularly revealing in this respect: although she believed that her decision to pursue a master's degree at a higher status institution would go some way to rectifying the 'mistake' of having attended a post-92 institution as an undergraduate, she clearly did not feel entirely comfortable in her new surroundings, going as far as to describe herself as an 'outsider' within her new institution:

In odd ways, it's made me more determined to get more educated. I think if I'd had a really good first degree from a good status university, I wouldn't have gone on.... Yeah, I've definitely got hang-ups about going to post-92, it's one of my knee-jerks.... 'Hi, I'm Kimberley, I did go to post-92, I know it's rubbish'.... Especially now I'm in the world of academia, 'What university did you go to?' is part of your discussion group. I am into justifying myself a lot of the time, and despite coming here today for my master's... when it comes down to it, I am an outsider.... I'm not in this world, which is why I feel I should do a PhD eventually, just so I get some form of acceptance in this world. Which is sad really, if you think about it. You think, 'I'm in this private members' club, and do they realise who I am? Do they know my dad's a builder, my mum's a nurse?' It's like that. That's why I probably do have to say quietly, 'Post-92, I know it is rubbish.' (Kimberley, teacher, post-92)

Kimberley's narrative illustrates well that processes of social alienation are not confined to the compulsory stages of schooling. Even those in possession of a first

degree can feel acute social discomfort as they move into educational arenas which are perceived to be strongly classed and populated by very different kinds of people.

### Conclusion

In her analysis of the European Union's lifelong learning policy, Brine (2006) argues that 'knowledge workers' (typically graduates) are treated very differently from their less privileged peers. Indeed, she contends that while the former (and the associated emphasis on 'clean and non-physical knowledge work') often provides the 'hook' to which lifelong learning is attached, the latter are those most often targeted by lifelong learning policies: 'they are the learners with the most prescriptive curricula in terms of (new) basic skills and vocational training; they are the learners who, without easily recognisable qualifications, must gather, record and attempt to gain accreditation for non-formal and informal learning' (p. 39). Accepting this analysis, we acknowledge that the young adults in our sample can be considered a relatively privileged group. Nonetheless, we suggest that given the recent increase in the proportion of young people going on to higher education in the UK (and also elsewhere in the world), it is important that research addresses the experiences of these 'knowledge workers'—and also the considerable number of graduates who progress into lower-level jobs. Moreover, we support Power's (2001) call for more research that brings the assumed homogeneity of the more privileged/middle class under greater scrutiny.

While a paper of this length cannot do justice to the many and varied ways in which higher education exerts an influence on further learning, we have provided an exploratory analysis of some of the issues which were raised most frequently by the young adults in our study. In particular, we have argued that amongst our sample, the influence of HE on further learning appeared to be exerted at three levels, in relation to: the process of learning (how the young adults went about learning, and the extent to which they enjoyed such experiences); learning and the self—particularly the extent to which learner identities were strengthened or undermined; and understandings of the relationship between learning and the wider world.

There are clearly a number of very important benefits associated with higher education—in terms of employment, health, parenting and civic engagement, to name but a few (HEFCE 2001). Nevertheless, we suggest that the results of the National Adult Learning Survey (Fitzgerald *et al.* 2003), which demonstrate a strong association between acquisition of a degree and engagement in further learning, may mask some more problematic issues. Indeed, we have argued that the influence of higher education on subsequent learning is complex and multi-directional. We have shown that while HE may exert a variety of positive influences (such as facilitating independent learning), these often co-exist alongside less positive effects, such as the 'learning fatigue' reported by many of the young adults to whom we spoke, and the ways in which the learning identities of some of the young women in the study, who attended high status institutions, were weakened by their HE experiences. We therefore conclude by suggesting that, while the impact of a hierarchical and stratified HE market on university choices and graduate employment has received detailed attention, further research is urgently needed to explore the ways in which processes of teaching and learning—and their impact on further learning—may also differ by university type and/or status.

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## Notes

1. VoIP software (in this case, Skype) allows calls to be made from computer to computer, or computer to phone, using the internet. The compatible recording software (in this case, Skylook) allowed the interviews to be stored as MP3 files for transcription.
2. A former polytechnic, which attained university status as a result of the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act.
3. 'Friends Reunited' is a UK-based website that allows registered members to post information about themselves, which then is grouped by institutions (school, college and university) attended. Fee-paying subscribers can then access stored details so as to make contact with other registered members. The usefulness of this as a method for contacting potential respondents has been discussed by Power, Moss, Lewis, Whitty and Edwards (2005).
4. It should be noted, however, that there were important differences across the sample. Indeed, some respondents who had attended what they perceived to be a 'lower status' HEI for their undergraduate degree positively embraced such institutions—and (in line with many of the graduates discussed by Brooks 2006b) expressed no ambition to study at a more highly regarded university.

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