Young Graduates and Lifelong Learning: the impact of institutional stratification

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Abstract

The National Adult Learning Survey and the 1970 British Cohort Study have pointed to considerable differences by level of educational qualification in attitude to and participation in adult or 'lifelong' learning. They suggest that graduates are more likely than other groups to engage in adult learning, generally, and to be motivated to do so by the intrinsic interest of the subject matter. However, exploring the wider meaning attached to participation in such activities has been outside the remit of these studies. In an attempt to redress this gap, this paper draws on life history interviews with recent graduates to consider the significance they attribute to taking part in lifelong learning. In particular, it focuses on the extent to which decisions about education and training after graduation can be seen as consonant with 'individualized' life plans, and the degree of similarity between these decisions and previous processes of 'educational choice'.

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Introduction

The contested nature of 'lifelong learning' has long been evident within national and international policy documents. Indeed, Coffield (1999) notes that, 'we are clearly not dealing with an unambiguous, neutral or static concept, but one which is currently being fought over by numerous interest groups, all struggling for their definition' (p.488), while Tight (1998) argues that lifelong learning can be seen as a form of social control. Furthermore, research has highlighted the very different meanings attached to the term by those who have engaged in lifelong learning and also by those who have decided against taking up such opportunities. However, this research has, invariably, focused on older people and/or those who left formal education at an early age. As a result, there have been few studies that have explored in any depth the experiences of young adults in their 20s, who have recently graduated from university. In part, this can be explained by the relatively privileged status of this group of young adults and perhaps a tacit assumption that they are the least in need of encouragement to pursue further learning. However, as a result of the mass expansion of the higher education (HE) sector over recent years, graduates are likely to constitute an increasingly significant proportion of the labour force. It would, therefore, seem timely to investigate their attitudes to education and training in the future.

Various quantitative studies, such as the National Adult Learning Survey (Fitzgerald et al., 2003; La Valle and Blake, 2001) and the 1970 British Cohort Study (Makepeace et al., 2003), have pointed to considerable differences by level of educational qualification in attitude to and participation in adult or ‘lifelong’ learning. Indeed, Fitzgerald *et al.* suggest that graduates are more likely than other groups to engage in adult learning, generally, and to be motivated to do so by the intrinsic interest of the subject matter. However, exploring the wider *meaning* attached to participation in such activities has been outside the remit of these studies. In an attempt to redress this gap, this paper draws on life history interviews with recent graduates from two higher education institutions (with different market positions) to consider the significance they attribute to taking part in learning post-graduation. In particular, it focuses on the extent to which decisions about education and training after a first degree can be seen as consonant with ‘individualized’ life plans, and the degree of similarity between these decisions and previous processes of ‘educational choice’ in the respondents’ lives.

The interface between higher education and lifelong learning

A considerable number of studies have explored the impact of recent changes on patterns of participation *within* HE (for example: Hayton and Paczuska, 2002; Tapper, 2005). 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. The ‘massification’ of the higher education system is well documented (Tapper and Palfreyman, 2005; Scott, 1995) and, as other studies have pointed out, has been driven by increasing levels of

educational attainment at both 16 and 18, greater demand for HE from young people and their families, and policies to widen access, pursued by both Conservative and Labour administrations. Indeed, the proportion of young people studying in higher education has increased seven-fold since the early 1960s, from only six per cent of 19-20 year olds in 1961 to around 43 per cent of this age group in 2003-04 (DfES, 2005) – with a target of a 50 per cent participation rate by 2010.

There is now convincing evidence that this transition from an elite to a mass system of higher education has led to the increasing stratification of the HE sector. Much recent research has emphasised the hierarchical nature of the higher education market (Brooks, 2005; Pugsley, 2004; Reay et al., 2001b) and the importance of institutional status to graduate recruiters (Dugdale, 1997; Hesketh, 2000). However, studies that have focused more explicitly on young people's perceptions have suggested that there are strong disparities between confident 'embedded choosers' (Ball et al., 2002), with significant amounts of cultural capital to draw upon, who are aware of fine distinctions between the status of different institutions, and their less confident peers – 'contingent choosers' with no family experience of HE – who are likely to see all institutions as fairly homogenous and exclusive 'ivory towers' (Pugsley, 1998). Nonetheless, it is apparent that, whilst at university, most students develop an acute understanding of the relative status of institutions, such that they are aware of their own 'place' within the HE hierarchy and the value of their degree within the labour market relative to those awarded by other institutions (Ainley, 1994; Brown and Scase, 1994). However, to date, no research has explored the extent to which graduates apply this stratification of institutions to other areas of education and training, and to lifelong learning in particular. It is possible to hypothesise that this

experience of higher education may cause graduates from all types of higher education institution to reject what they perceive to be low status forms of learning (such as courses that do not lead to a formal qualification or that are accredited by what is perceived to be a low status institution) in favour of what are seen as higher status opportunities.

Young adults as ‘choosers’ and ‘planners’

While focussing, in particular, on the ways in which university experiences may affect the decisions made by young adults, it is important to place this within a wider context, and consider some of the other influences that may be affecting graduates’ choices about the education and training they pursue on completing their first degree. Narratives of individualization and choice suggest that traditional support structures and predictable trajectories have been replaced by an emphasis on the individual and his or her strategies for success (Beck, 1992). Indeed, as Aapola and colleagues (2005) have noted:

Economic insecurity and risk are now imagined to be best addressed through individual resiliency and a capacity to change and adapt to a volatile educational and labour market. Individuals need to be prepared *to return to education to re-skill themselves*, to negotiate wages and conditions through private arrangements, to change career paths when necessary, to manage livelihoods without a ‘job for life’, and to take personal responsibility for their economic security. (p.59, italics added)

Amongst many proponents of the individualization thesis, education and training are seen to play a key role in enabling young adults (as well as older workers) to maintain their labour market flexibility. Indeed, as Heath and Cleaver (2003) note, 'Participating in education and training in order to remain "skilled" is now viewed as a key component in the building of individualized biographies in late modernity' (p.75). In outlining what she terms the 'choice biographies' of privileged young people in the Netherlands, du Bois Reymond suggests that lifelong learning becomes blended with work and leisure as these 'trendsetters' 'strive to redefine the constraints created by flexibilization and rationalization of labour' (p.67). Furthermore, Lewis et al. (2002) have provided empirical evidence of the way in which young adults, across Europe, were trying to achieve some security in their lives by increasing their employability through education and training. Many of their respondents emphasised the importance of keeping their skills up to date and of taking responsibility for doing this, themselves.

However, alongside these narratives are others that suggest that the ability to construct individualized pathways through education, training and the labour market (amongst other things) is strongly related to class position, as well as gender and ethnicity. Indeed, du Bois Reymond contrasts the 'choice biographies' of the upper middle class young people in her sample with their less privileged peers from upper working and middle class backgrounds, who tend to follow 'normal biographies'. Similarly, Brannen and Nilsen (2002), in their study of young people in Britain and Norway, distinguish between a model of: deferment (in which young adults live very much in the present with little thought for the future); adaptability (in which the future is seen as a risk to be calculated and controlled through the construction of individualized

pathways into adulthood); and predictability (in which individualized pathways are eschewed in favour of more traditional patterns). Brannen and Nilsen argue that these different models are strongly related to the social characteristics of the young people, including: their gender, race/ethnicity and social class; opportunities for education and training; and prevailing cultural constructions of what it means to be young. They conclude by noting that, 'It is perhaps ironic that the only young people in the study for whom the notion of life as a planning project may be truly apt are those who aspire to be male breadwinners' (p.531).

Other researchers have been more questioning of whether even privileged young people construct their biographies and life plans with the freedom suggested by, for example, du Bois Reymond and Brannen and Nilsen. Indeed, much of the research on higher education has emphasised the importance of a young person's social position to the decisions he or she makes. Reay et al. (2001b) have provided clear evidence of what they call 'class matching', processes where certain types of institution are seen as 'not for people like me'. While traditional universities were often discounted by working class students, the choices of the middle class and more privileged students were not necessarily any wider or 'freer'. Indeed, Reay et al. emphasize the importance for *all* students of choosing somewhere that they think they will feel safe and happy:

Most of the students are applying to low risk universities where if they are from an ethnic minority there is an ethnic mix, if they are privileged they will find intellectual and social peers, and if they are mature students there is a high percentage of mature students. (p.865)

This reflects much of the wider literature on educational choice, which has provided strong empirical evidence of the very different ways in which families from different social classes and ethnic groups engage with the educational market, with respect to: 16-18 education (Ball et al., 2000), secondary schools (Gewirtz et al. 1995; Lauder and Hughes, 1999; Power et al., 2003) and even pre-school provision (Vincent and Ball, 2001). These studies have revealed class-based differences in terms of both inclination to engage with educational markets and capacity to exploit the market to one's own advantage.

However, this kind of analysis has not been extended to the choices young adults make about education and training once they have completed their first degree. While it is possible to hypothesise that the same social factors may well be played out in young adults' subsequent choices, the studies by Ainley (1994) and Brown and Scase (1994) discussed above, suggest that by the end of their degree almost all graduates develop an acute sense of both the importance of institutional status and the market position of different institutions. Thus, it is possible that this increase in cultural capital, when combined with some of the social benefits that accrue from a university education (HEFCE, 2001), may change a young adult's ability and inclination to 'choose' within education and training markets. Framed by these debates, this paper explores the ways in which young adults make their decisions about lifelong learning and the extent to which, for the individuals concerned, these represent continuities or changes when compared to previous processes of educational 'choice'.

Research methods

Thirty young graduates were recruited to take part in the research – through alumni magazines and websites. Most were in their mid-twenties and had graduated about five years earlier (see Table 1 for a summary of some of their characteristics). Half the sample had attended what, for the purposes of this paper, will be called ‘Old University’: a university founded in the 1950s, which has a reasonably high status and is typically found within the top quartile in university league tables (for example, those published by *The Times* and *The Guardian*). The other half of the sample had graduated from ‘New University’ – a higher education institution in the same geographical area as ‘Old University’ but which has only recently secured university status. This institution occupies a contrasting market position, having been placed near the bottom of most league tables over the past few years.

[Insert Table 1]

Between November 2003 and April 2004, individual life story interviews were conducted with each of the respondents. This seems a particularly appropriate method to use with young adults. 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. Moreover, a biographical approach is also well-established in European research on adult education, with the intention of exploring the temporal dimension of lifelong learning (Schuller et al. 2004) as well as giving respondents the opportunity to give meaning to, and construct

past experiences within a social context (Crossan et al., 2003). The interviews were largely unstructured – to allow the young adults to tell their own stories in their own words – but most focussed, at least to some extent, on: the young adults’ experiences of higher education, employment and any education, training or other form of learning that they have undertaken since leaving university; the meanings they attach to work, learning and leisure, and the extent to which such pursuits overlap; and the relative importance of these activities in their lives.

As Table 1 indicates, ten of the respondents had taken up postgraduate study in the five years since completing their first degree. The other twenty all claimed that they had also taken part in some form of education or training such as studying for professional or technical qualifications and following in-house courses. Clearly there are limitations to the methods used in this study, which affect the claims that can be made on the basis of the young adults’ narratives. Firstly, the relatively small size of the sample precludes investigating the whole range of graduate experience. Secondly, all respondents were self-selecting to some degree. Although the adverts made it clear that I was interested in the experiences of all graduates, even those who thought that they had not taken part in any learning after their first degree, a large number of those who put themselves forward had completed formal qualifications since leaving university and all thirty considered that they had taken part in some form of lifelong learning. In contrast, research which has sought a representative sample of graduates has suggested that only about half go on to further study in the two to three years after graduation (with just over half of this number studying for postgraduate qualifications) (Pollard et al., 2004). Thirdly, given the high number of young adults studying for either postgraduate qualifications or those associated with the early

stages of a professional career, it is unlikely that these patterns are representative of the lifelong learning likely to be pursued by graduates ten or so years after completion of a first degree.

Nevertheless, despite these limitations, this study is able to highlight a number of important issues. Indeed, even amongst this sample of thirty young adults, significant differences emerged in how their higher education experiences had affected their attitude to, and choices about, education and training post-graduation. As these differences applied to decisions about both postgraduate and non-postgraduate forms of learning, it seems possible – indeed likely – that they may endure in the future. It is these differences which are now explored in the following section of the paper.

The impact of institutional stratification: a three-fold typology

Analysis of the interview transcripts centred on a number of key themes, derived from the project's research questions. The results discussed below focus on two of these questions: 'Has the young graduates' understanding of the structure of the HE sector (and the different status attached to different institutions) had any impact on the ways in which they have assessed the value of opportunities for lifelong learning?' and 'To what extent does this represent continuity or change when compared to previous processes of 'educational choice'?'

From the interviews, it emerged that the young adults' experiences at university influenced their attitudes to subsequent education and training in a number of different ways. For example, for some young adults, student debt imposed significant

limitations on the kinds of courses they could finance themselves; for others, the university student lifestyle was so appealing that they had enrolled in further courses primarily to extend this for another year or so. However, the narratives of many of the young graduates suggested that the stratification of the HE sector had had a significant impact on their choices after graduation, and it is this that provides the main focus of this paper. Indeed, the relationship between institutional status and post-first degree educational choice can be categorised using a three-fold typology.

Continued importance of institutional status

For some respondents, the status of the university they had attended had been important in their decision-making processes about their first degree, and the status of the education or training provider continued to be of importance thereafter. However, all the young adults in this group had attended Old University and were, in many ways, typical of the ‘embedded choosers’ that Ball et al. (2002) describe: they were aware of fine distinctions between institutions, often had considerable cultural capital to draw upon – and usually familial experience of HE. For example, Ben, who had attended Old University as an undergraduate and chose to remain there for his postgraduate study, described his decision-making in this way:

I looked around at other places, but...it's way better than most places. It's joint third in the country so I thought I would be going downhill if I went anywhere else. (Scientific researcher, talking about full-time postgraduate study.)

The status of training providers had also been important to Tahir (an accountant and graduate of Old University), when he had been deciding where to study for his professional qualification in accountancy:

Interviewer: And how did you decide which school to go to?

Tahir: It's more reputations plus people. When you start work you meet other people who studied CIMA [Certificate in Management Accountancy] and you ask them, 'What's the best one?' or 'What are you studying and how did you find it?' It's more recommendations.

Similarly, when discussing her plans to join an evening class in marketing, Megan (who, like Tahir and Ben, was a graduate of Old University who had placed considerable store on the institution's status when she was applying for her degree) explained that she would probably choose City of London College in Moorgate 'because it's kind of very established – the reputation definitely would be a factor'.

Some had, however, adopted more nuanced positions, believing that there was no necessary relationship between the quality of learning available at a higher education institution or other provider and its reputation. For example, Leah, who had attended Old University, claimed: 'I get the impression at New University that it would be a lot more structured learning, less sort of, you know, grandiose – probably a better learning experience.' Nevertheless, this did not make her more inclined to take up future learning at newer and less prestigious institutions:

I need to think about what is going to be CV-able...you know, doing an evening class at Westminster University might be CV-able but it doesn't have the same impact [as going somewhere more prestigious]. (Leah, political researcher, talking about part-time study in public relations.)

This would suggest that, while the young adults in this category did not pathologize those who attended lower status educational institutions in the way that can be seen at the secondary school level (Reay, 2004), some – like Leah – were, nevertheless, willing to sacrifice potentially better learning opportunities for the sake of higher social status. Within these young graduates' narratives there was also a clear belief that institutional status – even at the postgraduate level – provided clear markers within the labour market and thus to potential employers. In many ways, this reflects both Duke's (1994) assertion that postgraduate taught master's degrees have come to be seen as a 'finishing and selecting' year, 'the social function of which is to discriminate out that small elite whom undergraduate education selected out in earlier times' (p.87) and Bowl's (2003) contention that, as credential inflation continues, 'the second degree becomes the new benchmark' (p.146). Indeed, despite the nuanced responses of some respondents within this group, strong continuities in processes of educational choice were evident. Whether they were looking for full-time master's courses or part-time professional or vocational qualifications, awareness of institutional stratification remained high, just as it had done when they had been making their decisions about where to study for their undergraduate degree. In Ben's words, few wanted to 'go downhill' by studying with an educational provider that they perceived to occupy a lower place on the institutional hierarchy.

Inversion of institutional status

In contrast, a second group of respondents tended to invert ideas about institutional status in their narratives. For them, conventional league table hierarchies were turned on their head. All graduates in this group had attended New University – and most were typical of the ‘contingent choosers’ described by Ball et al. Indeed, a considerable proportion of respondents had no family experience of higher education. Typically, when describing how they had decided which university to attend for their undergraduate degree, they made no reference to the importance of reputation; they had been unaware of status differences between institutions, had attributed little importance to them, or thought that they would be unlikely to secure a place at an ‘old university’. Although, during their time at university most had become aware of status differences between institutions, conventional rankings were frequently inverted. Indeed, many of these graduates had developed a strong and positive allegiance to New University – seeing it as suitable place for ‘people like us’. For many in this group, this had affected their choice of education or training provider after they had left university. Sophie and John are typical: both returned to New University to study for a postgraduate qualification, even though they were aware of similar courses at more prestigious institutions nearby.

I can walk down the street now and say they are Old University students. They’re just completely different and you can spot it. I thought I wouldn’t want to be at university with those type of people...It’s not posh – just everything is really serious. They all took it too seriously. (Sophie, marketing officer)

New University has always been in the shadow of Old University....we used to hate the Old University people, I think because they looked like rugby people.....We felt underdogs, [but] there was a certain nobility about being from New University. (John, screen-writer/teacher)

In her analysis of social class, race and representation in inner city secondary schooling, Diane Reay (2004) argues that:

Prior to taking up their places at demonised secondary schools, the vast majority of black and white working class children had been repeatedly negative about these schools. However, once at secondary school a confusing mixture of hopefulness, desire, recognition and ambivalence came into play as complex feelings of belonging and commitment complicate the idea of 'demonized' schools (p.1013).

Although John and Sophie – and others like them, who felt a strong allegiance to New University – were generally much more privileged than the children interviewed by Reay (not least because they were in possession of a degree certificate) and had not attended a 'demonized' educational institution, similar shifts in their perceptions were evident. Just as the children in Reay's study developed 'counter spaces of representation that challenge dominant representations of inner city comprehensives' (p.1006), so these young graduates had developed sophisticated and creative counter discourses in relation to conventional education hierarchies. However, while Reay goes on to argue that educational segregation in the inner city (in London, at least) can be seen in unambiguous class terms – mirroring the social and geographical

segregation of the city – with clearly differentiated ‘white middle class places’ and ‘racially diverse working class places’, different conclusions can be drawn from the narratives of the young graduates. John and Sophie’s analysis of the market for postgraduate education and training suggests that similar social processes operate *within* broadly middle class segments of society; processes which are not well explained by the concept of a subjugated working class and an exploitative middle class. Instead, this differentiation on the part of what John, in the extract above, calls the ‘underdogs’, tends to support Bottero’s (2004) contention that:

defensive reactions against those above (against ‘snobs’, the ‘hoity toity’ etc.) as [well as] against those below (‘slags’, the ‘common’ etc.).....occur at every level of the social hierarchies that people inhabit (and reproduce by such practices). (p.994)

Interestingly, there was also some evidence that some Old University graduates were making similar defensive reactions against institutions that they perceived to be above them in the hierarchy of education/training providers. Rebecca, who worked for an accountancy firm, had thought seriously about studying for an MBA (Master of Business Administration). She had come to the conclusion that, because such qualifications had become increasingly common, it was only worth holding one from Oxford or Cambridge: ‘you have to get into one of the top ones for it to mean anything’. However, she had decided against applying there because of the type of student she believed she would encounter:

I feel as if it's quite competitive...all the people that go there are a certain type of people....I couldn't cope with the type of people you have there, on the course.

Similarly, Richard had chosen to reject what he perceived to be high status London-based law firms for his professional training, in favour of lower status regional firms. This, he claimed, was as a result of a fear of 'not fitting in'.

In the cases of John, Sophie, Rebecca and Richard, this defensive reaction and sense of social difference from those who attend higher status providers can be seen as one way in which social inequalities are reproduced, but also as a clear sign of the enduring stratification of markets in education and training, even amongst the highly educated.

New and increased importance of institutional status

So far, the emphasis seems very much on continuity in decision-making processes: a majority of those who placed importance on institutional status for degree-level study also thought the reputation of the provider was important for post-first degree learning, while many of those who had given little consideration to status continued with this approach after graduation (although, in many cases, the low status of the institution was embraced). However, the narratives also revealed some evidence of more significant change. Indeed, a small group of respondents described how institutional status and reputation had not been considerations during their choice of first degree, but that it had become increasingly important thereafter, as a result of their university experiences. Leila, who at the time of interview was a teacher in a

sixth-form college, had studied for her first degree at New University but moved to Old University for her postgraduate study (an MA in Literature and Culture followed by a Postgraduate Certificate in Education). She described her decision in this way:

I mean, I could have stayed at New University and done a Master's....it was a lot cheaper to stay at New University, but I think it's the name of New University. I know I'm capable of doing this and, somehow, people say that, you know, if you've got a degree from New University you weren't bright enough to go elsewhere – which frustrated me.

This could be interpreted as one way in which the kind of reproduction of social hierarchies, discussed above, is disrupted. Indeed, this interpretation would accord with the view of many policymakers, that a higher education brings with it a range of social benefits that are likely to increase both the social standing and cultural capital of graduates (see, for example, DfES, 2003). However, this discontinuity is brought into question, not only by the narratives of John, Sophie and others who, as a result of their higher education, came to strongly identify with lower status institutions, but also by those who changed in relation to the importance that they attributed to attending a high status institution. Indeed, all the respondents who had transferred from New University to an older and more prestigious establishment for subsequent education or training in the way Leila had, had come from families with considerable cultural capital and, in most cases, familial experience of higher education. Leila had attended a private secondary school, had a sister who had gone to university before her, and was aware that her family were sensitive to differences in institutional status. Moreover, Leila believed that her grandparents had been disappointed about her

choice of university for her first degree, and too embarrassed to mention it to their friends:

I know my grandparents would go around telling everyone I was studying in [town] and they never said it was New University, so their friends would assume I went to Old University.

This appears to provide further evidence of the strong continuities between social position and patterns of engagement in education and training post-graduation. One interpretation of Leila's story is that postgraduate study offered her the opportunity to rectify or repair the link between her social position (or the social position of her family) and her position on an educational hierarchy that had been altered by her choices about undergraduate study.

However, despite the apparent relevance of cultural capital within her family, Leila had not found the transition from New University to Old University unproblematic. Indeed, she described how differences in institutional status had been alluded to during her first session on the MA course and had caused her considerable discomfort:

Well, I remember going in, the first day and there was a whole group of people around. We were talking.... And they went round saying, you know, who are you, what have you done? And most of them said, you know, I did Law at Exeter, you know, all these other things. And a lot of them had actually already done, I think, English and History at Old University. It seemed a really popular combined degree. Then when I said I went to New University

they sort of looked down on me...it was just a generally negative attitude. I thought the lecturers were checking me out to see what I knew. Therefore, didn't think I could have learnt much on my degree from New University.

Thus, repairing the symmetry between position on social and educational hierarchies was not necessarily straightforward.

Discussion

Despite some claims that acquisition of a degree places all graduates on a 'level playing field' as a result of cultural, social and intellectual benefits of a higher education, this research suggests, firstly, that markets for education, training and 'lifelong learning' more generally, continue to be stratified – although not in quite the same way as for undergraduate studies (for example, some respondents were aware that a high status was necessarily an automatic indication of high quality experiences of teaching and learning). Secondly, it suggests that young graduates continue to be positioned differently in relation to the educational choices available to them; the changes that do take place tend to reinforce social hierarchies rather than disrupt them. For example, although some of those who attended New University for their first degree became more attuned to the importance placed on conventional league tables by other students and graduate employers, this heightened awareness did not necessarily lead to them aspiring to study with higher status providers. Indeed, as the evidence above indicates, in some cases a greater awareness of university hierarchies was associated with an increased tendency to identify with lower status institutions. Similarly, those who did transfer from New University to a more prestigious

institution had considerable cultural capital to draw upon and, as a result of their transfer, attained greater congruence between their (familial) social position and their position on an institutional hierarchy than they had achieved during their undergraduate studies.

In their study of the benefits of learning, Schuller et al. (2004) argue that the learning strategies adopted by the middle classes have implications for the working class in that they act as methods of social exclusion. To illustrate this point, they discuss the case of Susan, a white, middle class woman, whose desire to learn alongside ‘people like me’ is, they argue, both ‘an internalisation of class and a realisation of class in terms of replicating homogenous, middle class, white civic associations’ (p.145). They go on to contend that, in the aggregate, such actions constitute a class strategy, ‘showing how adult education creates social capital but not necessarily the conditions for social inclusion’ (p.145). This study has provided evidence of similar processes of stratification and differentiation. However, it is important to emphasise two points of difference. First, this research with young graduates has shown how these processes operate amongst a relatively socially homogenous group. Although there were significant differences between the young graduates, discussed above, all were in possession of a degree and, thus, would be placed in the top sixth of the working age population, in terms of their level of qualification (Office for National Statistics, 2005). This suggests that the polarization between the middle class and working class, evident in Schuller et al.’s work (and also that of Reay, discussed earlier in this paper), is perhaps an over-simplification of more complex processes of hierarchical positioning, evident across the social spectrum. Second, and relatedly, it is questionable whether such processes can be termed a ‘class strategy’, if individuals

are simply choosing to learn alongside others whom they perceive to be socially similar.

It is possible, however, that the two understandings of class alluded to above – as conflictual (evident in the studies by Reay and Schuller at el.) and as an expression of status hierarchy (evident in the narratives of the young adults involved in this research) – are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Indeed, recognising the temporal and spatial aspects to the articulation of class may suggest that in those places and at those times where class homogeneity is high (e.g. in the comparisons and rankings made by the relatively privileged respondents in this study) status hierarchy and horizontal differentiation is more likely to be evident. Indeed, this would accord with Savage's (2000) contention that the last three decades have witnessed a shift in modes of class awareness that has resulted in a decline in vertical comparisons (with those judged to be 'above' and 'below' one in the hierarchy of social classes) and a corresponding increase in comparisons with those judged to be of the same social position.

Many of the young adults who took part in this project were engaging in education and training as a way of enhancing their labour market flexibility, in the ways suggested by Beck and others. Nevertheless, their choices about what constituted appropriate education and training and, in particular, the appropriateness of the provider, do not seem to be 'free' in the way some theorists would suggest. Indeed, it would seem that for many young adults, first degree experiences play a largely *confirmatory* role in this process. Those who went to a high status university had typically placed considerable importance on the reputation of the institution when

they were making their HE decisions; during their time at university had their views confirmed; and they then transposed similar priorities and models of decision-making onto their decisions about learning thereafter. Those who had attended a low status university as an undergraduate had typically been unaware of status differences (often seeing all universities as ‘ivory towers’). Although, in line with the literature (Ainley, 1994; Brown and Scase, 1994), many reported becoming aware of status differences while at university, a considerable number chose to reject high status choices in their subsequent learning, feeling more at home and socially comfortable in what they perceived to be lower status places. Thus it appeared that, for few students, the cultural capital accrued through degree-level study had significant impact on their decisions about post-first degree learning. The discontinuities that were evident amongst this sample were largely amongst those who had considerable cultural capital to draw upon – and who were able to rectify what they perceived to be the ‘mistake’ they had made in choice of institution for their undergraduate studies.

The focus of this paper has been on institutional stratification, on the way in which higher education institutions and other providers of education and training appear to be hierarchically positioned by young graduates pursuing further study. However, it may also be important to consider the relative status of educational *qualifications*. As Brooks (2005) has shown, when deciding about undergraduate studies, some young people engage in a delicate balancing act, attempting to maximise the status of both degree subject and institution. Of the young graduates involved in this project, relatively few alluded to the status of the qualifications they had gained, or were hoping to gain, since completing their first degree. However, amongst those who did were graduates of both Old and New Universities:

The Microsoft Certified Systems Developer qualification has got a high status – it's like the equivalent of doing an A Level rather than an NVQ [National Vocational Qualification] so it's universally recognised as a good qualification to have. (Lisa, New University, web designer, talking about her plans for further study)

If it were a course I'd want it to lead to something like a Master's....I don't want letters after my name but I suppose it's something else to try to distinguish me. (Lorna, Old University, business analyst, talking about plans for further study)

Indeed, several graduates from New University, who did not aspire to pursue further education and training in high status institutions were, nevertheless, keen to gain high status qualifications. This may suggest that perceptions about the status of qualifications are less socially-embedded than those about institutional status (perhaps because they are not associated with a particular kind of 'institutional habitus' (Reay et al., 2001a) or tied to a particular set of socially-inflected spatial practices) and also, that some young adults, while wishing to study within institutions in which they feel socially comfortable, seek to differentiate themselves from others through the type of qualifications that they pursue.

Conclusion

Despite this evidence that a small number of graduates had become more sensitive to issues relating to status (albeit related to qualifications, rather than institutions) as a result of their higher education, strong continuities between processes of educational choices pre- and post-first degree were apparent in this study. Moreover, even amongst this sample of what many sociologists would consider to be a privileged and highly educated sample of young people, differences in cultural capital persisted after university and were played out through decisions about lifelong learning. It would, therefore, seem wrong to assume that a degree is an automatic leveller, as some policymakers have suggested. Instead, experiences of higher education may actually confirm previous social inequalities. While not denying that various ‘social benefits’ accrue from a university education, the narratives of the thirty respondents involved in this research indicate that differences in processes of educational choice may well be unaffected. Indeed, on the basis of this evidence, the ability of young graduates to put together customised packages of education and training – choosing ‘freely’ from a wide range of providers – to fit their labour market needs and build their individualized biographies, is surely brought into question.

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Biography

Rachel Brooks is a lecturer in social policy in the Department of Political, International and Policy Studies at the University of Surrey and co-convenor of the BSA's Youth Study Group. Her research interests focus on young people's experiences of education and training. She has recently completed a book that explores the impact of peer relations on young people's experiences of education (*Friendship and Educational Choice: peer influence and planning for the future*, Palgrave, 2005).

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Table 1: Details of respondents

Pseudonym	Job	Post-first degree study
m		
GRADUATES OF NEW UNIVERSITY		
Clare	production assistant	various courses in animation
Jane	marketing officer	postgraduate certificate and diploma in marketing
Jason	event manager	management accounting course
Jill	head of training	in-house management programme; various professional courses
John	further education teacher/ screen writer	MA; certificate in teaching
Leila	school teacher	MA
Lisa	web designer/ marketer	external training courses
Madeline	police officer	various police courses
Nick	audio producer	web design – self-study
Nigel	recruitment consultant	NVQ in management; sports qualifications; in-house recruitment courses
Penny	human resources officer	MA
Sarah	publishing manager	various professional courses
Steve	co-owner of marketing company	various professional courses
Susannah	trainee school teacher	Postgraduate Certificate in Education

Tom	outdoor instructor	various professional courses
GRADUATES OF OLD UNIVERSITY		
Annie	financial administrator	various IT courses; informal learning
Ben	scientific researcher	PhD
Carl	IT programmer	IT qualifications
Frank	various temporary jobs	various short courses
India	PhD student	MA; PhD
Leah	political researcher	in-house courses
Lorna	business analyst	in-house courses; IT programming course
Matthew	IT management	graduate training scheme; informal learning
Megan	marketing and communications manager	in-house management training scheme
Patricia	editorial assistant	TEFL; informal learning; taught self German
Peter	scientific researcher	PhD
Polly	researcher	various in-house courses
Richard	solicitor	professional qualifications in law
Tahir	accountant	management accounting qualification
Tim	actuary	actuarial qualifications