The predominance of work-based training in young graduates' learning

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Abstract

This paper draws upon results from an ESRC-funded research project exploring young graduates' attitudes to, and experiences of, further education or learning post-graduation. Respondents' narratives indicated a strong emphasis upon job-based learning, or training, over and above an oft-stated desire to do further study 'for its own sake'. Whilst the majority of graduates expressed contentment with their work-leisure-education balance, a significant number also marked up a desire for 'leisure-learning' which was not 'yet' possible due to the demands of work and work-based training. This prompts questions about how we, and the graduates, conceptualise the 'use' of having a degree in an era of higher education massification, exploring issues of 'generic' skills and personal growth. It also raises questions about the role and function of wider 'lifelong learning' practices for those in their 20s, as well as the status of the work-leisure-education balance of young professionals, and whether this encourages or discourages efforts to develop a 'learning society'.

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Introduction

In the large literature on education and work, as well as the sociology of education more broadly, the experiences of young graduates have rarely been the focus of attention. In part, this is likely to be a result of their privileged status in terms of academic credentials and assumed social background. However, in line with several other studies that have started to open up the educational experiences of the middle classes to sociological scrutiny (Power et al., 2003; Devine, 2004) and explored the relationship between higher education and subsequent employment (Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Furlong and Cartmel, 2005; Moreau and Leathwood, 2006; Tomlinson, 2007), this paper draws upon findings from an ESRC-funded project to explore young graduates' attitudes to, and experiences of, further education or learning post-graduation.

We show how the interviews we conducted with 90 graduates, across the UK, highlighted a strong emphasis upon job-based learning, or training, over and above a frequently stated desire to do further study 'for its own sake'. Whilst the majority of our respondents expressed contentment with the current balance between work, learning and leisure in their lives, a significant number also marked up a desire for 'leisure-learning' which was not 'yet' possible due to the demands of work and work-based training. This prompts questions about how we, and the graduates, conceptualise the value of having a degree in an era of higher education massification.

It also raises questions about the role and function of wider ‘lifelong learning’ practices for those in their 20s, as well as the status of the work-leisure-learning balance of young professionals, and whether this encourages or discourages efforts to develop a ‘learning society’.

After first providing a brief description of the research methods used in the study, the paper goes on to outline the patterns of participation in learning since graduation and, within this, the dominance of work-related learning. It considers these trends in light of debates about the ‘economy of experience’ within discourses of lifelong learning. The second part of the paper considers the fit between the prioritisation of this form of learning and the place of work, more generally, within the young adults’ lives.

Research methods

Between September 2005 and January 2006, 90 in-depth life story interviews were conducted with young adults who had graduated from six contrasting types of higher education institution (HEI) (an Oxbridge college, a ‘redbrick’ university, a 1960s campus university, a post-1992 university, a college of HE and a college of the University of London) five years previously. To recruit graduates from these institutions, alumni databases were used to select a sample of 600 graduates (100 from each institution) who were of a similar age (mid-twenties) and who passed through higher education at the same time (in most cases, graduating in 2000). The sample was selected to include individuals with a range of different characteristics (in terms of gender, ethnicity, geographical area of residence and subject studied at university). Direct mailings were sent to the graduates, asking them if they would be willing to

take part in the research. The success of this method differed from institution to institutionⁱ and, in cases where it was less successful, the sample was augmented through adverts posted on the ‘Friends Reunited’ websiteⁱⁱ. In total, 15 graduates from each of the HEIs were interviewed. (In the quotations from respondents that follow, the type of HEI they attended is signalled, along with their job at the time of interview. Pseudonyms are used throughout.) Although the sample was reasonably diverse in terms of the types of jobs respondents were employed in, their geographical location and social class background, it is likely that the methods used to recruit respondents – particularly the emphasis on self-selection – had some impact on the characteristics of the sample as a whole and thus the type of ‘life stories’ we were told.ⁱⁱⁱ

The interviews were largely unstructured – to allow the young adults to tell their own stories in their own words – but were informed by a broad ‘topic guide’. Most interviews focused, 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 had undertaken since leaving university. The interviews were also concerned to explore: the meanings that young adults attached to work, learning and leisure; the extent to which such pursuits overlapped; and the relative importance of these activities in their lives. The research questions, wider literature and analytic notes taken immediately after each interview were then used to develop a thematic framework for analysing the material. This was used methodically to code the interview data, using NVivo. The coded material was then used to identify patterns across the data, and tentative theories and explanations were developed.

Patterns of participation – the dominance of work-based learning

The take-up of post-graduation learning

The great majority of the 90 respondents described themselves as having engaged in some form of further education, training or self-directed learning since graduating.^{iv}

In itself, this tells us about little other than the self-perceptions of the young graduates, a point returned to below. For example, around four-fifths of respondents had undertaken a taught course providing some kind of qualification or accreditation, although this ranged from first aid courses through extra GCSEs to PhDs. Several main reasons were provided for undertaking further studies post-graduation, the principal strand of which related to work, with others referring to: necessary or desired skills-development (languages, driving, sports and arts); psychological benefits (particularly a love of learning and a need to continue challenging oneself); the social benefits of participating in a learning environment; and the feeling that it would simply be silly to turn down a free opportunity.

There was no evident difference between male and female participation in further academic or vocational education. However, differences by HEI attended were notable, as Table I indicates. While over half of those interviewed had engaged in some kind of formal post-graduate level vocational or academic education leading to a qualification, those who had attended the college of higher education were the least likely to have gone on to further study of this kind. Perhaps more counter-intuitively, 'London' and 'Campus' had the highest rates of engagement in postgraduate study. This may be partially explained by the particular employment sectors within which some of these graduates were working or hoped to gain employment, many of which

required a formal postgraduate qualification. (See Brooks and Everett (2008) for further discussions of differences by institution.)

Table I

Learning and work

When interviewing our respondents, we were interested in their reasons for taking up further learning and, in particular, the extent to which they saw it: as linked (either strongly or weakly) to work; as a leisure pursuit – having no obvious connection to work; or as a means of connecting both work and leisure interests (for example, as evident in some of the young people in du Bois Reymond's (2004) research). Here, we accepted the respondents' own categorisations of their learning.

Work-oriented learning was clearly the dominant form of learning engaged with, post-graduation, across our sample. Around two-thirds of respondents did mention some form of 'leisure' learning; however, these replies included a good number of rather restricted (a single short individual night-school course, longer courses started but not finished) and stretched (participating in book groups and reading self-help books and crafts magazines, watching TV documentaries and doing Sudoku) understandings, as well as evidence of blurred work-leisure learning (learning to drive, or learning a language that would enable them to do, or facilitate them with, their job). For the entire group, some or all of any further learning undertaken had been work-related or work-based, and when initially asked about studies post-graduation, most interviewees placed greatest emphasis upon such training, or else (vocational or academic) postgraduate courses pursued as an instrumental device of career

establishment or progression. Almost all had undertaken or were undertaking further education or training that was in some way work-related, either because it was necessary prior to starting a job, had become necessary at a later point if they were to continue in their employment (or become a felt necessity to secure a current position), or was necessary or desired to open doors, now or later. Implicit in many narratives were assumptions that their education, at least until the point of graduation, had not been adequate to prepare them for work. Further learning was generally seen as offering a better preparation, although this was not always as a result of a close fit between the skills required in the workplace and those developed through education/training: in some cases, it was a means of securing what Brown et al. (2003) have called 'positional advantage' over others.

To do a (better) job

Firstly, with regard to that post-graduate education or training which is necessary in order to find employment and do a job; for around two-thirds, some or all of their further education or training since graduation had been either necessitated by, or a key support for, their job. This group refers firstly to those who had taken a post-graduate qualification to 'activate' an academic qualification, as with solicitors who had taken the Legal Practice Course and similar paths for accountants. In this case, a vocational path tended to have been chosen in the first degree, and so the path had been well-researched and the need to do a post-graduate year was already known and accepted as a *fait accompli*. There were also those who had chosen a profession less related to their first degree, either pre- or post-graduation, and so needed to obtain a post-graduate qualification either in order to secure, or as a condition of continued, employment. The former was the case with teachers, whilst the latter was more often

seen amongst those working in human resources; this was by far the more common route amongst the sample. A few respondents had found that further education was necessary because they wished to change their career path either immediately after graduation or else after their first experience of their chosen field or of their postgraduate training, or because of a lack of success in seeking a job after graduation. Finally, within this group were those, like Jackie (Oxbridge, finance manager), who had undertaken postgraduate study in order to ‘stand out’: ‘I quite fancied training for another qualification because so many people have first degrees’. Here, again, we see evidence of further learning being perceived as a means of securing what Brown et al. (2003) describe as ‘positional advantage’ within a congested graduate labour market.

To do a job (better)

In the second broad grouping, we also saw the great majority, almost four fifths of respondents, engaged in some kind of education or training that was necessary or felt desirable in order to continue or progress in a job, such as the requirements of continuing professional development (CPD). Whilst only ten graduates made explicit reference to CPD, most referred to a similar need to put in some hours in order to remain on top of their field or else maintain relevant skills:

It’s an industry where there is constantly new technology and new ways of doing things, so you have to be on top of it. The job is deliberately improving your knowledge about stuff and learning new things. (Max, Oxbridge, journalist)

Beyond the point of CPD and related activities, it becomes more debatable as to what extent we can speak of further training (once in a job) being more necessary, or desired. One Campus graduate on a fast-track scheme spoke directly of the firm's 'up or out' system, whereby promotion is required in order to stay with the company. Others tended to speak only of being encouraged by their employer, more or less strongly, to undertake certain training:

Yeah it was a CV thing, and also because they were, at the time work were, you know, sort of pushing us all to do it and it was kind of like, oh well, why not really... (Jackie, Oxbridge, finance manager)

In such instances the situation is less clearly 'up or out', although the training may well still have been undertaken in order to create or maintain a good impression, and thereby in some way secure Jackie's position, or else improve her chances of progress either now or later. Similarly, once people had envisaged a particular career path and set out to achieve this, the necessary can be reconceived as the desired, and vice versa, as with the Campus fast-tracker discussed above and those undertaking further training as one aspect of seeking chartership with a professional body:

There's something which I'm doing at the moment which is called the Associate, the AMA which is the Associateship of the Museums Association ... increasingly curators are encouraged to do it and it's a bit like an almost professional accreditation, and you can certainly be a curator without it but it's one of those things that, as today, you know, people like qualifications and it's all an extra string to your bow. (Francis, London, museum curator)

Qualification inflation in the ‘economy of experience’

The relative success of many graduates in fields unrelated to their undergraduate study suggests that their degrees provided general confirmation of ability, and the acquisition of skills, from which point they were considered as *tabula rasa* for employment training. Most respondents seemed quite aware that their degree might count more as a ticket of entry to the graduate market than a guarantee of employment. This indicates that graduates may be wiser about the value of a degree in the contemporary graduate labour market than has been presumed by some (Furlong and Cartmel 2005). This is further confirmed by graduates’ awareness of and attitude towards what has been termed the ‘economy of experience’ (Brown et al, 2004), for which a degree represents primarily a foundation block to be built upon through work and further training:

To be employable is more than just a degree, it’s about what you can deliver in the world of work and what networks can you build and what revenue can you drive for a big organisation. (Cora, Campus, HR manager)

The discourse of many interviewees would thus seem to connect in quite a self-aware fashion with Rogers’ (1992, cited in Tett, 1996) first two understandings of the purposes of education – as something technical, for the provision of a skilled labour force, and as establishing personal status and setting a position for the future^v. The increase in an instrumental perspective on education for many after their first degree and first experience of full-time work was clear, from education being just ‘what you do’ at school and even university to now being what gets you where you want to be, articulated well by Hayley and Cora:

I'm kind of getting better at recognising that different types of jobs will look good on my CV and prove that I have X, Y, Z skills and knowledge which inevitably I've learnt whilst doing that job, I didn't have them before I got into the job, and that's how you get into the next one.' (Hayley, London, marketing manager)

I'm quite unusual in my peer group in that I really went after doing learning that would give me a qualification because it's currency, you know, when you go into the external market, you know, it's, not only are those courses more expensive but because they're recognised everywhere, you're immediately more attractive so it was very calculated on my behalf. (Cora, Campus, HR manager)

Many graduates also seemed quite aware that, as a result of 'credential inflation' (Collins, 1979; Brynin, 2002), a first degree was less valuable within the labour market than one had been a decade or so ago. Within this new context, many had come to believe that further qualifications were necessary if they were to improve their 'employability' within the graduate labour market. Indeed, implicit in their narratives is both scepticism about government arguments that a shift to a knowledge-based economy has led to an exponential increase in the number of high level jobs available and a strong belief that there is, instead, intense competition to securing fulfilling employment:

I do recognize now that you actually have to work so hard in order to be extra special, because 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, or this person has two, and he's done this thing as well, which makes him stand out. And I feel there is so much pressure now for people to actually do that. (Carlton, Redbrick, solicitor)

From evidence like this, it would seem that the great majority of the further education or training undertaken since graduation was predominantly work-oriented (rather than related to leisure interests). For some this was prescribed by particular sectors of employment (such as the training necessary to become a lawyer, solicitor or teacher). In other cases, however, it was driven by a recognition that – as a result of the mass expansion of higher education and an over-supply of high-level skills – a first degree was no longer sufficient to secure one's place in the graduate labour market. Thus, postgraduate education and training had come to be seen as an important component within the 'economy of experience' (Brown et al, 2003; Brooks and Everett, 2009) and a means of securing advantage over other graduates. The following section of the paper demonstrates how this emphasis on work-related learning reflected and, in some cases was underpinned by, wider choices the young graduates had made about the place of work, learning and leisure within their lives.

The balance between work, learning and leisure in young graduates' lives

The prioritising of work

The dominance of work-related learning in the lives of respondents was evident in their broader narratives about the balance between the different parts of their lives.

This was the case, for many, even before they had entered full-time work – and had underpinned a significant proportion of decisions about postgraduate education.

Although there were a few notable exceptions, across the sample as a whole, there was a clear and explicit prioritising of work, which varied little by gender, ethnicity or type of university attended. Moreover, there were few differences by type of job.

Prioritising of work was as evident amongst those employed in jobs not traditionally considered as of ‘graduate level’ (such as administrators and sales representatives), as amongst those on high profile graduate training schemes:

In terms of work/leisure, it depends, I mean I can work long hours here. I travel a lot with my work and sometimes it’s too much for me – I don’t mind working, I’m happy working around 50, 55 hours a week – [but] when it gets over 60, 70 hours a week then I’ve kind of had more than I can take really.
(Caroline, Oxbridge, Civil Service Fast Stream)

I mean that’s one of the beauties of the job, you know, I am my own boss, I’m very autonomous, it’s my territory, I run it the way I want to run it and all I’ve got to do is make sure that I get to a certain level or I lose the job so....But at the moment, yeah, it’s very, very work-orientated at the moment. There’s not much leisure time at the moment. (Joseph, College of HE, Sales Representative)

Indeed, there was little evidence that a perceived failure to secure a ‘graduate job’ had led to any wider disillusionment about the world of work or the role of learning in facilitating progression within the labour market. Although many respondents had

moved into what Furlong and Cartmel (2005) call the 'insecure buffer zone' in which temporary and/or part-time jobs are used as a means of subsistence or as part of the process of securing work within more advantaged sections of the graduate labour market, this had not diminished their commitment to paid employment and, in some cases, had appeared to underpin their privileging and prioritising of work. Cat (Oxbridge, PA), for example, had had difficulty finding a job and worked in a variety of temporary jobs but commented:

I mean it did get to a, you're working long hours anyway certainly when you're, when you're a new graduate you're terribly keen anyway so you're not working 9 till 5 cos it just doesn't look good.

The acceptance of work-dominated lives

Although many respondents claimed that they would like to shift the balance between work and other parts of their lives in the medium-term (see below), most were accepting of the dominance of work in their lives at the time of the interview. This was explained in a number of ways. Firstly, many believed that it was necessary to devote considerable time and energy to establishing their career, to ensure that they built a good reputation for themselves, gained relevant professional qualifications and secured a range of relevant experiences at work:

[While you are doing your training] it's like you have no social life. That's one of the things that you get told before you become an accountant. You sit there in your first lecture and they say you will lose, you are sacrificing

something and you are, but you will gain it back and you have to remember that. (Stuart, London, Accountant)

I think graduates in whatever job they do are kind of cannon fodder in a way for getting [treated badly] and getting hurled a lot of work and certainly at my old work I used to work weekends as well and evenings. But I think that goes with the territory that if you're trying to climb the greasy pole and especially, particularly the corporate ladder, you know, you take it. (Lucia, London, Journalist)

Others, particularly those who had experienced more protracted transitions into employment, believed that an initial commitment to and prioritising of work was necessary to gain a 'graduate job' and/or to secure one's place within the graduate labour market. Several studies (Elias and Purcell, 2004; Furlong and Cartmel, 2005) have indicated that there is often a considerable time lag between graduating and finding graduate-level employment. Respondents who had had difficulty in gaining work that they deemed appropriate to their level of qualification tended to believe that a short-term prioritising of work would help to consolidate their position.

A significant minority of respondents explained the dominance of work in their lives in terms of their 'imagined futures'. This group typically emphasised their plans for 'settling down' with a partner and/or having children in the medium-term and, thus, the importance of building their career and establishing themselves now, so as to compensate for a likely reduction in commitment to work in the future. Although, in line with many other studies (Brannen et al., 2002), it was predominantly women who

talked about this type of imagined future, a small number of men also believed that their priorities would be likely to change on starting a family, and that this had affected their attitude to work shortly after graduation:

I think it comes down to priorities [in] that I know I'm not going to work as long hours as I usually do because I'll want to spend more time at home with my family when I have a family. Got my girlfriend but, you know, at some stage I'll probably get married and have kids and things. I'm going to value that more so [then] I'm going to work my [contracted] hours rather than all hours under the sun. (Reese, College of HE, supply chain manager)

Such explicit reasons for choosing to prioritise work were accompanied, in many of the narratives, by what appeared to be an implicit acceptance or normalisation of these patterns. Roberta (London, research analyst) was typical of many when she claimed: 'I mean a lot of people in their late twenties have to work incredibly long hours and it's just the way it goes I think'. Indeed, such was the widespread belief that one had to prioritise work at this 'early' stage of one's career, that some of those who had made a conscious decision *not* to spend long hours at work felt a little embarrassed about their choice. For example, Sarina (Campus, communications co-ordinator) confided that:

Sometimes....I feel a bit kind of like...why haven't I got more to do? Why's everybody else saying like, well not everybody else but like my best friend at work, she's just got so much to do it's unreal. She's like there like nearly 60 hours a week....so I kind of, sometimes I look at her and I kind of think I wish

I had that kind of purpose, do you know what I mean? I wish I had so much to do that...it had to kind of, you know, encroach on my personal life.

The quotations in this section thus suggest that while many of our respondents talked about ‘accepting’ this emphasis on work within their lives, perhaps – as a result of labour market requirements, a sense of inevitable competition with other graduates and the normalisation of these patterns – they often believed had few alternatives.

Learning and ‘implicit contracts’

Those who have written about what has been termed the ‘new sociology of work’ (Pettinger et al., 2005) have emphasised the negative consequences of the changes to employment brought about by the globalisation of economic competition. The emphasis on remaining employable – within one’s current job as well as the labour market more widely – has brought about the ‘democratisation of insecurity’ (Beck, 1998), with many more people now facing the possibility of redundancy during their working lives. Moreover, Sennett (1998) has suggested that the new forms of capitalism, brought about by globalisation, are destructive of the individuals who become caught up in them, leading to isolation, rootlessness and the erosion of trusting relationships. Similar arguments have been made in relation to the place of lifelong education (and its relationship to work) in late modern society. For example, although the roots of non-formal education lie in the emancipatory practices of adult education, Griffin (1999) and Coffield (1999) contend that the recent emphasis within government policies on the importance of engaging with education, training and other forms of learning throughout one’s working life is driven largely by economic imperatives. Indeed, they go on to argue that the language of lifelong

education/learning is an effective mechanism for shifting the responsibility for professional development and maintaining one's employability from the state and/or one's employer to the individual. In this analysis, it is very much the *controlling* function of educational discourse that is stressed.

However, this gloomy prognosis has not been accepted by all. Indeed, Michaels et al (2001) have argued that, in the new configuration of working relationships and employment structures, the well-educated, in particular, have gained more power and autonomy. No longer do such individuals have to remain loyal to the same organisation to succeed and progress; the educated classes have more freedom to move and 'short circuit' organisational hierarchies (Brown et al., 2003). Aapola and colleagues (2005) have argued that young women, in particular, may be the beneficiaries of workplace change, contending that they are particularly good at balancing choice and risk: 'the message of self-invention, choice and flexibility has been taken seriously by many young women who sit at the intersection of feminist discourse and economic reality' (p.67), who are more confident about their futures than young men, and more flexible in the face of change and disappointment.

More positive analyses have also emerged in relation to debates about education, learning and work. For example, while recognising the economic underpinnings of government policy in this area, du Bois Reymond (2004) suggests that young people who do not rely on formal education but who create a blend of different types of learning (for example: combining formal and informal learning; and learning through work and leisure as well as educational institutions), have better opportunities within a knowledge society and are more likely to 'realise self-determined ways of living and

learning which are not as dependent on cultural heritage from parents as was the case with former generations' (p.195). Similar perspectives were provided by many of the respondents in the current research project. Few interviewees shared the insecurities central to Beck's (1998) analysis of the 'risk society', nor was there much evidence that they felt exploited by their current employers. Indeed, education played a key part in the implicit contract that many respondents used to conceptualise their relationship with their employer. While they were certainly willing to sacrifice their leisure time and devote long hours to their work, they expected to be rewarded not only with the expectation that they would take on responsibility for their own development, but also with the resources to make this possible. Obligations to employers were matched with expectations that time, funding and/or professional networks would be made available to facilitate learning, as the quotation below demonstrates:

Now it's time to move on, it's time to do a bigger job with, you know, I just feel like I've learnt everything I can learn. The boss I work for at the moment is so much more senior than I am and she just doesn't have enough time to spend on my development. You know, I'm churning out lots of stuff and I'm not getting much back from her in terms of, you know, 'What are you learning from this?' and 'How can I help?' and 'What else could you be doing?' There's not enough time for her to spend with me and I don't enjoy that.
(Cora, Campus, HR manager)

It was a personal motivation to [do the course]... [my employers] didn't require me to have it, they didn't need me to have it, but if I wanted it then they were prepared to support me in it, but it was my choice, me fishing for it.

I had to request it and I had to do the work, and pass obviously, for them to keep to paying for it.... a big hand in the amount of training that I've had is your own personal attitude, most of the time you need to request it. (Leah, Campus, marketing manager)

This suggests that work-related learning was not simply thrust upon our respondents by their employers but that, in many cases, the young graduates were active agents in pursuing their own 'learning agendas' whether inside or outside of 'work time'.

Little time for leisure learning

Studies that have outlined changes to working patterns in late modernity have pointed to the blurring of boundaries between work and leisure – particularly in the case of highly skilled workers. These have typically emphasised: the hybrid nature of spaces used for work, socialising and learning (Solomon et al., 2006; Halford, 2004); the increasing prevalence of 'homeworking' (Felstead et al., 2005); and the requirement for employees to be 'flexible' in their approach to both their long-term 'career' and their day-to-day working patterns (Jenkins, 2004).

In many ways, similar assumptions have been made about the dissolution of boundaries between education and paid employment on the part of young people in full-time education (Brooks, 2006). Indeed, Allat and Dixon (2005) argue that 'underpinned by the newly added temporal norm of flexibility...the adult model of the worker-learner, adept at managing both the self and life, is cascading into the earlier years of the life course to be recast for those in full-time education into what might be called a learner-worker model of childhood and youth' (p.92). Perhaps the most

detailed exposition of this thesis is found in the work of du Bois Reymond (2004) who contends that young ‘trendsetter learners’ across Europe are helping to define new forms of learning and create new combinations of different types of learning. She suggests that increasing numbers of young people are critical of the formal education they receive, because of the perceived gap between theory and practice, and the lack of respect with which they are treated by teachers. While ‘disengaged learners’ respond by rebelling, ‘trendsetter learners’ respond productively – focusing on learning outside formal educational institutions and workplaces and, in their desire to minimise alienating work conditions, dissolve the boundaries between leisure, learning and work.

In the current project, while there were certainly some respondents whose lives were ‘blurred’ in the ways outlined by du Bois Reymond, a considerable proportion of the sample made quite clear conceptual distinctions between different parts of their lives and, although – in many cases – they were working long hours, leisure was rarely conflated with work. Indeed, as noted above, many hoped that, in the future, they would be able to shift the focus in their lives away from a privileging of work towards a more even balance between work and leisure. Similar aspirations were voiced in relation to the place of different types of learning in their lives. Across the sample as a whole, there was a clearly articulated interest in pursuing learning that was not related to paid employment. Indeed, around half of the interviewees expressed a desire for more time in which to pursue learning that was leisure-oriented, beyond the necessities of a job. However, for a large majority of respondents, these interests were rarely realised because of the demands of paid employment. In many cases,

because of the long hours spent at work, insufficient time was available for 'leisure learning' in the evenings and at weekends:

I don't know, if I had more time, it'll be lovely to pick up French again, for example. But I've got to be realistic, I don't have much time and I have no practical use for being a French speaker. No. If I thought that it would help me, an extra degree or language or learning a special skill or hobby, I would do it. But, you know, we work really hard and I don't have the time. (Stewart, Oxbridge, recruitment consultant)

I did my British sign language stage 1 when I was at university and that's something that I would like to, to do outside in my own time but it is just getting the time now outside [work] and getting the motivation a little bit more but that's certainly something that I'd like to develop and I would very much see that as fun. (Cynthia, Redbrick, social worker)

For other respondents, time outside work was spent engaged in work-related learning. In some instances this was of direct relevance to the respondents' current job; in others it was to facilitate movement into a new area of work, as Lilly (Campus, HR manager) described:

...A year in I got.... headhunted to another positionso that was really a lot more Human Resources related than the first job I'd been doing....so then that's when I decided I should probably study some more directly HR-related stuff cos I did Psychology for my undergraduate just because I thought it

would be good for the social work side of things...but I really wanted to actually study HR in more detail so I did like a professional certification.

In common with their evaluation of the balance of their lives more generally, most of the young graduates appeared to be convinced of the need to privilege work-related learning in their lives at the present time. Again, they alluded to an 'imagined future' where work would play a lesser role and they could devote time to other priorities, including leisure-based learning.

There is a qualification I would like to do ultimately and that's International Peace Studies but it's at Trinity in Dublin.....So if I end up doing it it probably won't be until much later in life..... It's something I'd like to do just to satisfy my own curiosity, my own interest because I do have a passion for, as I say, Irish politics and the workings of religion within that. (Eliza, Redbrick, housing officer)

I'd like to do evening classes. I'd like to do something interesting or practical or I don't know what I'd like to do but maybe that's something for the future to consider...I'd like to learn to draw or something like that, something back to the arty farty.....Yeah, or learn photography or something, something that would be interesting to me – but there's not any time for at the moment.

(Samantha, Campus, HR advisor)

In his analysis of the 'learning society', Edwards (1997) outlines three possible versions of what such a society could look like: an 'educated society', central to the

modernist project of promoting active citizenship and liberal democracy; a 'learning market', enabling institutions to provide services for individuals as a condition for supporting the competitiveness of the economy; and, finally, a post-modern model comprised of 'learning networks', in which participation in learning is an activity in and through which individuals and groups pursue their heterogeneous goals (p.184). Evidence from our study suggests that young adults do have aspirations to Edwards' 'post-modern' model, one in which individuals pursue learning to further their own goals and draw on a wide range of resources to enable them to support their diverse lifestyle practices. However, many of the participants in the current study believed that, as a result of the necessary dominance of work and work-related learning in their lives at the present time, little time, energy or – in some cases – money was left to devote to leisure-based learning. Their narratives suggest that, instead, it is Edwards' economic model of a learning society which had greatest currency: that which ties learning firmly to the workplace.

Conclusion: instrumentality, employability and responsabilisation

In this paper, we have shown how almost all the young graduates involved in the research had been involved in further learning on completion of their first degree. We have also argued that, for a large majority, this learning was work-related and driven by the need to secure a particular job, progress within one's current position and/or consolidate the qualifications obtained at university within an 'economy of experience'.

The dominance of work-related education and training in the narratives of the young graduates involved in this research project supports Jarvis' (2001) assertion that the vocational has infused education discourse, that 'lifelong learning... is nested in an ideology of vocationalism' (Boshier 2001, p.368), relegated to an instrumental role and embedded within work (Tight 1998), such that people become subject to an obligation to learn (Avis 2000):

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 in both the internal and external market for jobs, through the acquisition of externally-validated credentials, in-house training programmes, social contacts and networks. (Brown, 2000, p.637)

The position of some is that such discursive practices herald not emancipation, but rather assignment to a position of permanent inadequacy and the struggle to escape (Bolhuis 2003). However, this pressure to maintain employability also connects with the more nuanced approach of Rose's (1999) notion of 'responsibilisation', bringing the employee or citizen to govern themselves. Applying such ideas to the field of education, Edwards (2002) argues:

Lifelong learning can be argued to play an influential role in catering for active, enterprising selves and subjecting them to educational and training practices that attempt to instil flexibility and enterprise as desirable and desired ways of being. (p.359)

Graduates may be expected to market their skills in an entrepreneurial fashion to flexibilised job-markets, yet the responsabilised individual can also cultivate their freedom through improving their social and economic position, being empowered by discursive practices which emphasise their potential, as well as becoming responsible for the maintenance of such (Rose, 1999; Nielsen, 1996; Edwards and Usher, 2001). In line with such a thesis, we observed amongst our respondents a generally quite positive attitude towards learning as something which should continue throughout (at least) the working life and, as we have shown above, a significant number had taken considerable steps to ensure that they made use of all training offered, and derived the greatest possible benefit from their job.

However, alongside this positive attitude towards work-related training was a desire to engage in 'leisure' learning, learning which was *not* underpinned by economic imperatives. Here, tensions emerged as respondents reported that the balance between work and leisure in their lives left them little time to engage in learning that was not related to the workplace. Although many of them believed that this balance would shift as they grew older, secured their reputation and place within the labour market, and developed commitments outside of work, few had any definite plans about when and how this might happen. Thus, it remains to be seen whether this prioritisation of work and work-related learning is bound up with the establishment of graduate careers, or whether it will become a more permanent feature of their working lives.

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Table I Postgraduate qualifications by type of HEI attended

	Oxbridge (N=15)	College of Uni. of London (N=15)	Redbrick Uni. (N=15)	1960s Campus Uni. (N=15)	Post-92 Uni. (N=15)	College of HE (N=15)
Formal PG qualification	9	13	6	12	7	5

ⁱ For example, while almost all respondents from ‘Campus’ were recruited through the alumni mailings, none from ‘Oxbridge’ came via this route. Across the other four, about half the sample was recruited through the mailings.

ⁱⁱ There are clearly important methodological issues related to the use of this method of sampling. We are cognisant of some of the ethical issues raised by Power et al. (2005), and are also aware that accessing graduates in this way may well have led to a rather skewed sample.

ⁱⁱⁱ For example, it is likely that the sample over-represents those who consider themselves to have had reasonably successful careers to date and under-represents those who have more difficult trajectories into work.

^{iv} The project recognised a wide variety of ‘learning’ including the following main groups: that which is directly taught and provides a qualification or accreditation; that which is directly taught and does not provide qualification; that which is not directly taught (either indirect or non-taught) and provides a qualification, and that which is not directly taught and does not provide any qualification.

^v More than with his third and fourth understandings, of education as a tool for the reproduction of social structure and as a revolutionary force for liberation and reflection, although of course there is much that can be read into and from the interview data in this regard.