

# Is it worth doing a degree?

**Kate Purcell looks at some implications of the research evidence.**

According to Universities UK, record numbers of students were accepted on undergraduate courses in 2020, including 23.3 per cent of all UK 18-year-olds from low participation neighbourhoods. Does this mean increasing equality of opportunity? I have been doing research on the relationship between higher education and employment for more than 30 years, most recently a longitudinal study of students who had embarked on undergraduate courses in autumn 2006. Graduating into the post financial-crisis labour market in 2009/10, they faced another crisis and another recession ten years on. What lessons do our findings have for those with an interest in post-compulsory education\*.

These are the findings I think most pertinent, unpicking some of the concepts beloved by policy-makers and identifying actionable targets for change:

**1. There's no such thing as 'the graduate labour market'**, but a fluctuating plurality of graduate labour markets which overlap to a greater or lesser degree, with increasingly fuzzy edges that overlap with non-graduate markets. Did having a degree enable respondents to get good jobs and secure employment? The answers are 'It depends': on *what* and *where* they studied, and the opportunities, obstacles and choices they encountered from early childhood onwards. It also depended on how hard they worked, levels of achievement and capacity to recognise opportunities and take initiatives, but our research findings suggest that work ethic and self-confidence are essentially attributes that derive from socialisation and experience. Some people are more likely to be 'in the right place, at the right time' than others.

**2. 'Employability' is not a personal attribute**

**but a function of the availability of appropriate jobs.** Knowledge, skills and personal attributes contribute to the capacity to obtain and keep a job, but so does *availability* of vacancies. As organisations have become increasingly fragmented, secure employment opportunities with the potential for career development have decreased. Increased proportions of graduates in previously non-graduate jobs does not reflect 'over-education'; it primarily reflects a shortfall in career opportunities and employers' unwillingness to develop and pay for skills and knowledge by creating secure jobs rather than short-term contracts.

**3. Changing contractual relations between employers and workers is impacting on graduate employment opportunities.** In some cases where graduates with high skills are in short supply, this had provided opportunities for some to achieve employment flexibility, working in highly-paid sub-contracting that enabled them to spend more time on other aspects of their lives. But as is well-established by research, most 'employment flexibility' is flexibility *for employers* to minimise labour costs and maximise productivity. From the Covid follow-up research in 2020, it was clear that in most sectors, the self-employed and those on fixed-term or other temporary contractual situations were more likely to have experienced income reduction or job loss. Also, working from home creates new potential for discrimination, particularly in access to training and promotion.

**4. Qualifications provide access to career ladders, but glass ceilings remain.** Most of the graduates were in managerial, professional

or high-skilled technical occupations, but within these occupations, the positions and earnings of those from lower socio-economic backgrounds tended to be lower than those coming from within the higher occupational classes. The interview data illustrated how social advantage and the capacity of families to support graduates financially in their early and mid-careers, and the extent to which they had access to professional and managerial networks, had substantial impacts in graduates' access to opportunities. This was amplified by the increasing significance of unpaid work experience, postgraduate education and other training. Also, within occupations, the gender gap remained virtually unchanged since the late 1990s and widens as careers progress.

**5. Good labour market information and careers guidance at all stages of education is essential**, and is something that all those who care about extending equality of opportunity should be fighting for. Limited social investment in careers guidance in communities and schools well ahead of 16 and prior to higher education entry, disproportionately handicapped those from socially-disadvantaged backgrounds, who reported less access to information about educational and career options, with systematic differences related to the kinds of schools attended, gender, ethnicity, social class and region.

**6. The value of individual and public investment in higher education cannot be assessed on the basis of individual financial returns to higher education.** It's time to reclaim the understanding that the main benefit of access to post-compulsory education is *public*, with social, community and economic benefits for which central and local government - and also employers - should pay. Our survey and interview data revealed that graduate motivations were rarely (and never exclusively) based on income maximisation. Having jobs that they enjoyed, developing their capabilities, job security, career progression and employers' ethics were all more important to most than high financial reward - and having a degree *had* enabled most to achieve these. But our Covid follow-up research included detailed investigation of their work experiences and responsibilities, and a high proportion were in occupations providing essential services in the public sector. It clarified the extent to which contribution to social utility was far from equated with individual financial returns.

\* For full details, see [www.warwick.ac.uk/futuretrack](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/futuretrack). Futuretrack surveyed participants through five stages, from UCAS application in 2006 until 2019; 9-10 years after graduation for most. Then, as we analysed the findings, Covid-19 struck. Consequently, we went back in 2020 to investigate the impact of the pandemic and the work-related and economic restrictions on their careers and aspirations. The first four stages of the longitudinal study were funded by the Higher Education Careers Services Unit (HECSU) and the Warwick Institute for Employment Research. Stages 5 and 6 were funded by the Nuffield Foundation. A detailed follow-up of UK-domiciled Futuretrack respondents who had lived in the Midlands before or after completing their undergraduate degrees or had studied in Midlands HEIs, along with research among young people who had not proceeded to higher education and case studies of Midlands employers, was conducted in 2014-16, *Precarious pathways into employment for young people?* funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). See [www.warwick.ac.uk/paths2work](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/paths2work).

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