

# **Returning to learning: gender, ethnicity and re-entry into postgraduate study**

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## **Abstract**

It has often been argued that many graduates lack the 'work-readiness' skills that render them employable (e.g. Confederation of British Industry 2008). Conversely, others (e.g. Brown 2003) argue that the graduate labour market is congested and that those missing out on graduate employment do so due to a structural 'opportunity trap' that privileges the privileged.

This paper uses three large-scale national datasets from the UK to explore this field, including the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education surveys. It reports analysis of 22,207 individuals who graduated in 2007, and works from the hypothesis that those entering the workforce and then returning for taught postgraduate study are primarily doing so due to underemployment following graduation.

Those returning tend to be high-achievers from elite universities in low-skill work after graduation, as well as women and those from minority ethnic communities; this suggests a mix of individual and structural factors at work.

## **Main paper**

The graduate labour market in the UK is becoming increasingly congested, with a growing throughput of students chasing a largely stagnant pool of opportunities – especially since the global financial crisis. This 'opportunity trap' (Brown 2003) has been such that even high-achieving graduates have been unable secure employment at a level that matches their academic results or perceived employment potential (Smetherham 2006).

One effect has been the reclassification of jobs as 'graduate' as become populated by those who have been unable obtain traditional graduate roles (Chevalier and Lindley 2009). Another has been that graduates have felt compelled to increase their qualifications in order to accrue, accredit or demonstrate the 'work-related skills' that are valued by employers, especially where they felt that they underperformed in their first degree (Tomlinson 2008; Brooks and Everett 2009). This latter critique is often advanced by graduate employers (e.g. Confederation of British Industry 2008), although the evidence is weak.

There are persistent questions about who wins and who loses within this marketplace and which factors might determine behaviour and outcomes. This paper will address one component of this issue, by looking at those individuals who enter the graduate labour market after completing their first degree, but who return to higher education within three years to increase their qualifications through taught postgraduate study.

The primary research question was therefore to distinguish between 'leavers' (those who were in work six months after graduation and did not re-enter higher education within three years) and 'returners' (those who were in work after six months, but who subsequently re-entered higher education on a taught postgraduate course). Specifically, the following research questions were addressed:

1. How do the populations of returners and leavers contrast across (a) occupation after six months, (b) gender, (c) age, (d) ethnicity, (e) undergraduate degree classification, (f) undergraduate degree subject, (g) whether they undertook a sandwich placement, and (h) status of university at which their undergraduate degree was undertaken?
2. Which of these factors are significantly associated with the likelihood of a return to taught postgraduate study, once other factors are held constant?
3. What can be inferred about the nature of the graduate labour market and the perceptions of people entering it?

This paper will report the findings of a quantitative study using data drawn from the national Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) surveys, which take place in the UK at six months and three-and-a-half years after graduation. Specifically, it focuses on a representative sample of 22,207 individuals who graduated in 2007 and who were active in the labour market six months later. Of these, 11 percent returned to taught postgraduate study at some point prior to 2010, when the second survey was undertaken. Data from the DLHE surveys is linked to administrative data on higher education and demographic background held by the Higher Education Statistics Agency.

From this large combined secondary dataset, a range of potential predictor variables for graduates' behaviour were isolated. The study then used binary logistic regression analysis to examine which factors determined whether an individual became a 'returner' (i.e. enrolled for postgraduate study after a period in the labour market) or a 'leaver' (i.e. remained within the labour market). This technique is useful in that the individual contribution of each variable can be isolated while controlling for others.

The factors found to have a statistically significant role in determining whether a graduate became a 'returner' were gender, ethnicity, subject, sandwich study, degree classification, university status and status of initial employment. 'Returners' were significantly more likely to be from high status universities and to hold a highly classed degree, but to have been in low-status work after six months. Those graduates who had undertaken a sandwich year were much less likely to return, as were those with STEM degrees. In addition, the analysis demonstrates that women and graduates from minority ethnic communities are also disproportionately likely to 'return' when other factors are held constant. This effect was particularly marked within STEM subjects.

These results suggest that there may be a combination of two processes at work. Firstly, there appears to be an agentic process that sees some 'high flying' students unable to secure graduate work at the level they are expecting, who then return for postgraduate study. This may be due to issues with their 'work-readiness', potentially due to features of their degree programme or their engagement with it, whereby, in an competitive marketplace, their qualifications alone were insufficient to secure desirable employment.

Secondly, there appears to be a structural process that sees women and graduates from ethnic minority communities struggling to compete within the graduate labour market – or at least expecting not to be competing on an even playing field (Rafferty 2012; Taylor et al 2012). The result of this is that they are more likely to seek to increase their credentials in order to overcome perceived or real discrimination from graduate employers. As noted above, this appears to be more marked among science and technology graduates.

This paper will briefly present the quantitative analysis before moving into a discussion around the two hypothesised processes that appear to be at work. It will problematise the arguments around 'work-readiness' and the relationship between this and workplace experience. It will go on to draw on the literature on structural inequalities in the graduate labour market (e.g. Moreau and Leathwood 2006), and examine 'returning' in the context of high educational demand from women and people from ethnic minority communities. It will engage with ongoing concerns about employment discrimination and the nature of competition within the 'opportunity trap', posing some important questions for employers, universities and government.

## References

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