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November 2008

The Flexible Professional in the Knowledge Society –
new demands on higher education in Europe (Report 6)

Graduates' retrospective views of higher education

**Report to HEFCE by Centre for Higher
Education Research and Information, The Open
University**

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Executive summary

This report is one of a series of reports commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England which draw on a recent European Commission Framework Project, 'The Flexible Professional in the Knowledge Society' (the REFLEX project). The project – undertaken in eleven European countries - was an investigation into the employment experiences of European graduates over the five years since graduation in 2000. By design, the UK sample comprised graduates who had completed a Bachelors degree in 2000. In most of the other countries, the samples comprised wholly (or mainly) those with a Masters degree.

In this report, graduates' retrospective views of their higher education are analysed according to factors relating to the course studied and institution attended, the characteristics of the respondent, aspects of their behaviour during study and success on the course, and their experiences after graduation.

In common with European graduates overall, the majority of UK graduates considered their higher education had been a good basis for personal development. Within the UK, those from Russell Group institutions were less likely to rate this aspect as highly.

Compared to European graduates overall, UK graduates were much more likely to report they made little use of the knowledge and skills gained from their degree in their first job on graduation. When reporting on their current work, some five years after graduation, UK graduates were much more likely than when in their first jobs to feel they were using their knowledge and skills – two thirds did so (as did a similar proportion of European graduates overall).

In common with European graduates overall, the majority of UK graduates considered that, had they the choice again, they would opt for the same course and institution.

1 Introduction

- 1.1 This report is based on the results of a major international study of graduate employment, 'The Flexible Professional in the Knowledge Society – new demands on higher education in Europe (REFLEX)', which was funded by the European Commission as part of its 6th Framework programme, Priority 7 'Citizens and Governance in a Knowledge Based Society'. The study – undertaken by eleven European countries – was an investigation into the employment experiences of European graduates over the five years following their graduation in 2000. Details of the study are contained in Appendix A.

The main feature of the study was the application of a large questionnaire to nationally representative samples of the graduating populations in the participating countries and, through this, the exploration of the kinds of work the graduates had obtained, how well they felt prepared for it, its relationship to their higher education (HE) studies, the competences that they felt they possessed and were required of them, the nature of the organisations for whom they worked, the changes they had experienced over the five years since they had graduated, and their values and attitudes to the higher education they had received.

By design, the survey sampled graduates who had completed their studies with either a Bachelors or a Masters degree (or equivalent) depending on which qualification was seen as the main 'exit' qualification with which graduates left HE in 2000 and entered the labour market in each of the respective European countries. In the UK, the sample comprised graduates with a Bachelors degree. In most of the other countries, the sample comprised wholly (or mainly) those with a Masters degree.

This report is one of six commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England to draw out the main differences and similarities between the experiences of UK and European graduates. The focus of this report is on graduates' retrospective views of HE. Other reports in the series deal with age factors, graduate competencies, subject differences and contextual factors. There is also an overview report.

- 1.2 The gradual establishment and spread of pseudo markets in HE is increasingly evident throughout Europe, and particularly in the UK, with the extension of tuition fees to full-time courses, the introduction of requirements on institutions to provide information about degree programmes to prospective students, their families and employers, and the systematic gathering of feedback from students and recent graduates on their study experience. The strong link drawn between the introduction of variable fees and graduate repayment and the lifetime premium that graduates can expect to enjoy was a key argument used in support of the new funding arrangements introduced in England in 2006. Whether this amounts to the commodification of HE as a private good and the transformation of students (and employers) into consumers is debatable. In parallel with this marketisation, the implementation of quality assurance systems, originating from the commercial sector and with a strong customer focus, has reinforced calls to take heed of the views of students and recent graduate employees, as well as to accommodate the requirements of employers. The views of students and graduates are likely to be influenced as much by prior expectations as actual experience and they will differ from country to country. They are also bound to be modified and revised during graduates' transition into employment, further training, self-employment and, for a small minority, unemployment, immediately after graduation and then subsequently as they establish themselves in the graduate labour market or not (for a tiny minority).

- 1.3 This report presents an analysis of the REFLEX data on graduates' retrospective views of their course. These views are primarily concerned with the usefulness and relevance of the course to subsequent employment and includes factors such as whether it was a good basis for starting work, performing their current work tasks, their future career and personal development. It also considers the data on whether, if they were free to choose again, they would choose the same course at the same higher education institution (HEI). These indicators of satisfaction with HE are then examined in more detail according to factors relating to the course and institution, the characteristics of the respondent, aspects of their behaviour during study and success on the course, and their experiences after graduation. UK respondents are considered first for each factor and then are compared with their counterparts in the other European countries. More extensive tables are included in Appendix C. Where relevant, the findings from the REFLEX study are related to previous findings about UK and other European graduates and their retrospective views of their courses. This report commences with a brief review of other relevant recent findings.

2 Background

- 2.1 In the earlier CHEERS survey (Brennan *et al*, 2001; Schomburg and Teichler, 2006), respondents were asked to rate their HE courses on 18 aspects of provision, such as teaching quality, course content and programme design. UK graduates rated their higher education courses much higher than other European graduates on virtually all dimensions, often with over 20 per cent more graduates than the European average rating them 'good or very good'. Averaging the differences across all aspects of provision, UK graduates were 11 per cent more likely to rate their courses 'good or very good'.
- 2.2 A similarly positive picture of UK HE compared with other European countries emerged when graduates were asked about the modes of teaching and learning employed on their degree course, such as 'facts and instrumental knowledge', 'independent learning' and 'detailed regular assessment of academic progress'. UK graduates reported a higher emphasis than the European average for 10 of the 12 features. Although there was much variation, no other graduates were as positive as the UK graduates.
- 2.3 However, UK respondents rated the utility of their studies more for the development of personality and long-term career prospects than for finding a satisfactory job after graduation. If utility is measured by 'finding a satisfying job after finishing your studies', the CHEERS study found that UK courses were rated by these graduates below the European average – the Scandinavian countries coming out highest in this respect. However, if utility is measured in terms of 'your long-term career prospects', UK courses fared much better – 7 per cent above the European average and second only to Sweden and Norway. UK higher education traditions of 'developing the personality' appeared to remain strong – UK graduates were 10 per cent more likely than European graduates on average to rate this aspect highly, along with Dutch graduates.
- 2.4 Referring to the same study, Teichler (2002) noted that UK graduates four years after graduation were more likely than graduates from most other countries to report that they made little use of knowledge and skills gained from their degree, that another field of study would have been more useful and that their current work situation was worse than expected when they entered HE. The numbers of graduates reporting this were not especially high (around 25 per cent in each case) but were substantially higher than the European average.
- 2.5 The CHEERS study also found that UK respondents were similar to other European graduates in believing they would choose the same course and HEI again – slightly under two-thirds confirmed this. However, many would have preferred to have taken a higher level of study – 43 per cent in the UK compared with a European average of 35 per cent. Perhaps this suggests a need for holders of UK Bachelors degrees to 'top up' with postgraduate and professional qualifications in order to be competitive in an increasingly international labour market (Brennan, 2005). Only a very small minority (3 per cent) of UK graduates (compared with 4 per cent across Europe) would not have chosen to study at all.
- 2.6 These latter findings are confirmed by a more recent UK study for the Department for Education and Skills (Purcell *et al*, 2005). This time over two-thirds of the graduates surveyed claimed that they would do the same course again at the same institution. Most of the remainder would still opt for HE, but would do a similar course at a different HEI or a different course altogether – generally one that was more vocational or provided more opportunity for work experience. Only 3.5 per cent of respondents reported that they would choose, with hindsight, not to have entered higher education. Purcell *et al* reported that, despite being a small sample:

“Members of this minority were more likely to be male, to have achieved a lower degree grade, to have come from a lower socio-economic group, to have attended a new university and to have had their career options affected by student debt. They also reported higher expectations that going to university would improve their job prospects, but less likelihood of having had a particular career in mind when choosing to enter higher education.” (Purcell *et al*, 2005: xx)

One can infer from this that those two thirds who do exactly the same again would be less likely to match these characteristics. We will return to this in Section 4.

- 2.7 Graduates of Scottish institutions appear to be particularly satisfied with their courses. The *Longitudinal Survey of Learners: Sweep Two* (SFC, 2005) carried out by Ipsos MORI and Critical Thinking for the Scottish Funding Council found that as many as 90 per cent of 2004 graduates were satisfied with their overall experience of studying a year after graduating. Part-time learners who studied at an HEI were the most satisfied group overall (94 per cent) and there was little variation in the high levels of satisfaction among different groups who studied at further education (FE) institutions. The majority (80 per cent) of those who gained a qualification would select the same course, if they were making their choice again, but those who studied at an FE college were slightly more inclined to say they would select the same course again (82 per cent) than those who studied at an HEI (78 per cent). Graduates were even more content with their choice of college or university than their choice of course, with over eight in ten (85 per cent) expressing satisfaction across the HE and FE sectors. Reflecting back on their learning experience, respondents continued to believe they had developed a broader range of skills and knowledge and had developed new skills as a result of taking their course. 69 per cent also felt they had improved their job prospects. One year after gaining their qualification almost half (45 per cent) felt they had commenced their chosen career, while a further quarter (26 per cent) felt they were on track but not quite there yet. Respondents were also invited to indicate which aspects of their learning experience would have made the biggest difference had they been improved. As might be expected, given recent graduates’ concern with finding suitable employment, the aspect most commonly selected was more advice about careers and jobs, alongside more contact with teaching staff.
- 2.8 The National Student Survey (NSS) 2005 also confirmed UK graduates’ overall satisfaction with their course of study. The questionnaire was designed to capture six essential dimensions of teaching quality using 21 individual questionnaire items. In addition, a measure of overall satisfaction was included, and 81.4 per cent of respondents ‘mostly’ or ‘strongly’ agreed they were satisfied overall with their course (SurrIDGE, 2006, for HEFCE). More positive responses were given by older students (31 years plus at entry), non-UK domiciled students, those on sandwich courses, those attending smaller institutions (less than 10,000 students) and those in departments with high scores in the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). Less positive responses were given by younger students (21 or under at entry), those with higher prior attainment, students on franchised courses and those in departments with lower scores in the RAE. However, it appears that this last effect, RAE, may be more significant in Arts and Humanities subjects than it is in the Sciences.
- 2.9 Of the six dimensions of teaching quality, NSS respondents rated their course highest for ‘Personal Development’, with ‘Teaching and Learning’ and ‘Learning Resources’ close behind. ‘Assessment and Feedback’ was rated lowest overall (although still above the neutral point of 3 on the 5 point scale), and ‘Organisation and Management’ and ‘Academic Support’ in the middle of the range of responses. In terms of ‘Personal Development’, access students, those on sandwich courses and those attending smaller institutions were more likely to rate their course higher in this dimension. There were significant differences across all dimensions according to the subject of study, although these did not fall into broadly defined groups of subjects, such as arts and

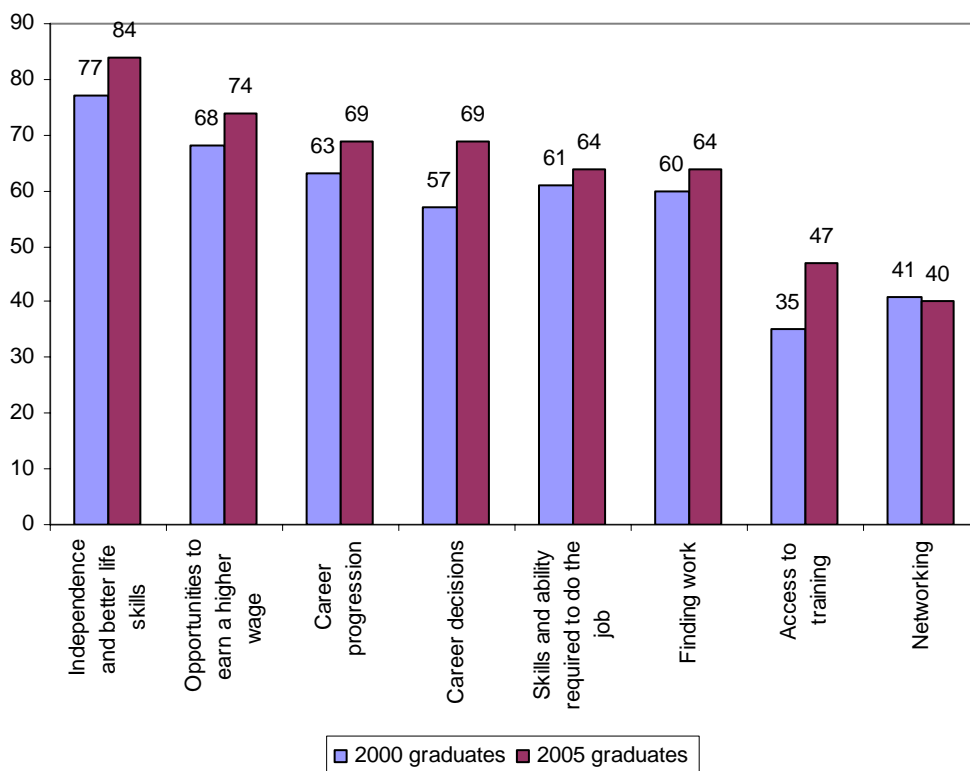
sciences or vocational and non-vocational subjects, nor were the differences consistent across all dimensions.

2.10 When the six dimensions of teaching quality are linked with the overall satisfaction rating for each respondent, however, it is clear that ‘Teaching and Learning’ had the greatest influence on the overall rating given. The effect of this dimension was almost twice as strong as the next greatest influence, ‘Personal Development’, and indicates that ‘Teaching and Learning’ is consistently the most important dimension for UK graduates in rating the teaching quality of their course.

2.11 The most recent survey, undertaken by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) in 2006, also found that a large majority (90 per cent) of graduates from 2005 and 2000 would go to university if they had their time again (CIPD, 2006). However, a third of respondents said they would choose a different course. Around a quarter (23 per cent) from 2005 and 16 per cent from 2000 wished they had opted for a scientific or technical course. Twenty-two per cent of the 2005 graduates would have chosen a course leading to a professional qualification or business-based course and this rose to 28 per cent and 27 per cent, respectively, of the 2000 graduates, suggesting that the experience for some of taking longer to find the right job (Purcell *et al*, 2005) increases the retrospective desire for a degree that would have equipped them with job-related skills. Nevertheless, the ‘skills’ that most of the 2005 graduates said they had gained were ‘communications’, ‘presentation’, ‘teamwork’ and ‘confidence’. Interestingly, while ‘computer’ skills were mentioned most often by the graduates from 2000, these had dropped to fifth (and from 80 per cent to 72 per cent of respondents) for the 2005 graduates. This may be because students are learning such skills at a younger age and by more informal means.

2.12 The CIPD survey also found that 84 per cent of graduates from 2005 felt their degree had helped them gain ‘independence and better life skills’, 74 per cent ‘opportunities to earn a higher wage’ and 69 per cent ‘career progression’ and ability to make ‘career decisions’, as the chart below shows:

Figure 1: How a degree has helped individuals, 2002 and 2005 (%)



2.13 These previous surveys of UK, and in some cases other European, graduates indicate their high overall satisfaction with their course and the institution at which they studied. In the UK, this appears to be based on the impact of HE on personal development and long-term career prospects rather than preparing for and finding work and acquiring the knowledge and skills relevant to their initial employment. The REFLEX data focus on the relevance of courses for employment rather than on other quality factors, but provide a rich source to explore these findings in comparison with the views of graduates from ten other European countries and in relation to a variety of individual, institutional and course characteristics.

3 Overall comparison of graduates' retrospective views

3.1 This section explores the general data on UK and other European graduates' views of the impact of their HE study on their work, career and personal outcomes and whether, with hindsight, they would have made the same choice of course and institution again.

3.2 Graduates were asked to evaluate their study programme against six different outcomes (on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 was 'not at all' and 5 was 'to a very great extent') on the extent to which it had been a good basis for:

starting work

further learning on the job

performing your current work tasks

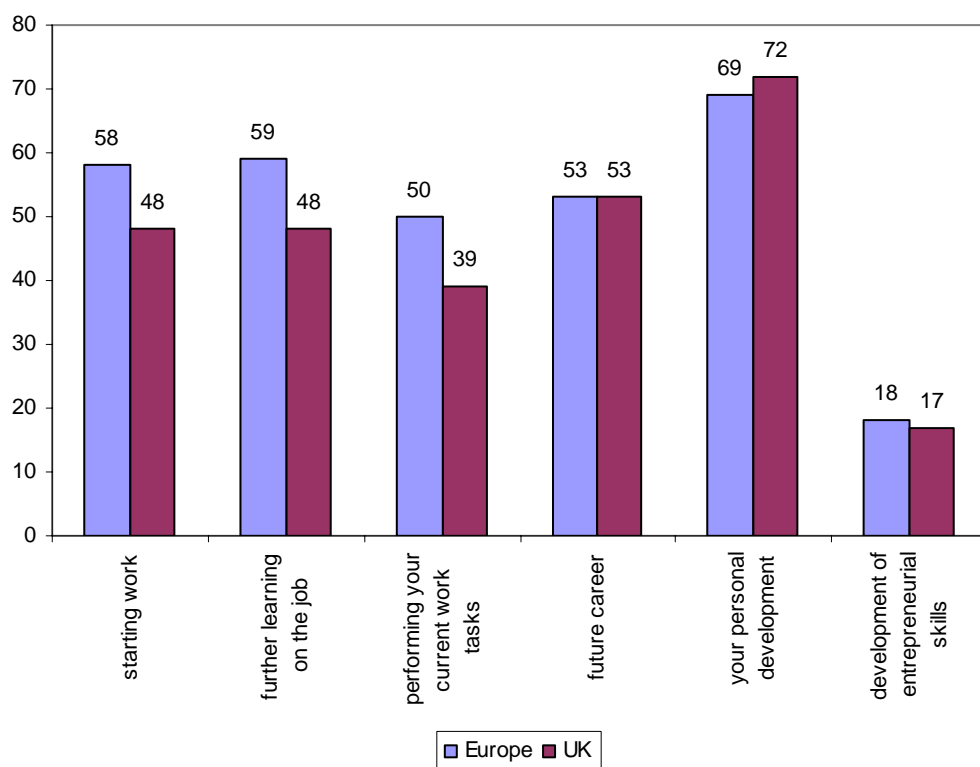
future career

your personal development

development of entrepreneurial skills.

Figure 2 shows the percentage of the respondents in the UK and all countries that rated their programmes as being a good basis for these outcomes 'to a great' or 'to a very great' extent.

Figure 2: Study programme as basis for...; overall and UK (%; responses 4 and 5)



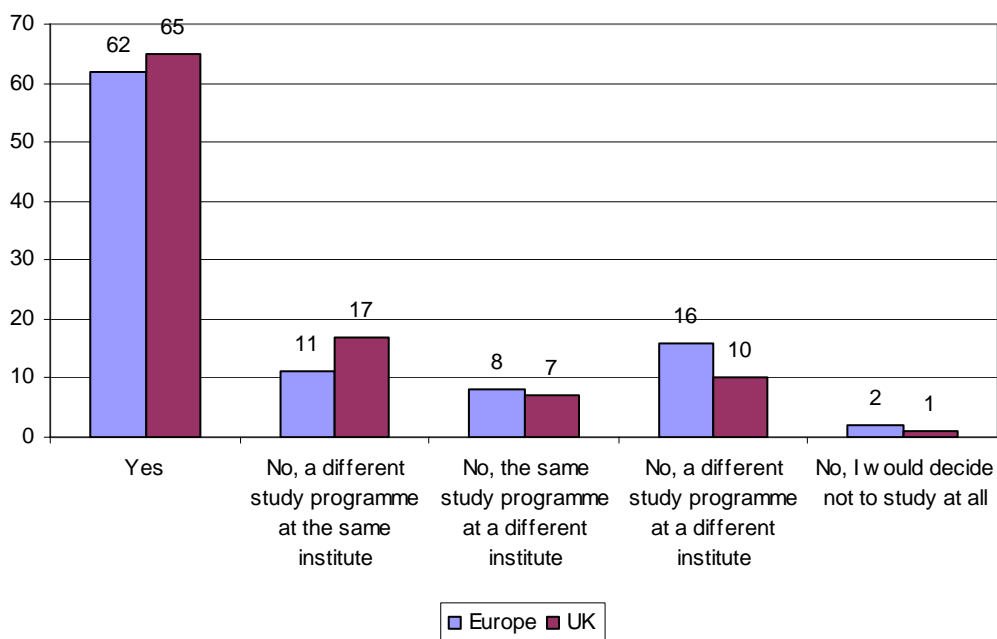
Question I1: To what extent has your study programme been a good basis for...; Scale of answers from 1 = 'not at all' to 5 = 'to a very great extent'.

3.3 On the first three of these outcomes, 'starting work', 'further learning on the job' and 'performing your current work tasks', the UK graduates clearly did not rate their courses

as highly as those in other countries in the study, with results in each case 10 per cent or more lower than the average for all countries. As a basis for 'starting work' only Italian graduates rated their courses as low and as a basis for 'further learning on the job' only German graduates rated them nearly as low as UK graduates (see Table 1, Appendix C). For 'performing your current work tasks', no other country rated their courses as low. For all three of these outcomes, UK graduates rated their courses consistently lower than other countries. Northern European, and especially Norwegian, graduates rated their courses highest on these measures.

- 3.4 In contrast, the UK graduates rated their courses higher than most countries as a good basis for 'personal development', with 72 per cent reporting them doing so to a great or very great extent. However, the proportion was also high for other countries, with less variation from the average of 69 per cent for all countries than for the other outcomes considered. The UK was closer to the average for those considering their courses to have been a good basis for a 'future career', though still far behind Norway. Nevertheless, this seems to confirm the findings of earlier studies that UK respondents rated the utility of their courses more for the development of personality and long-term career prospects than for finding a satisfactory job after graduation and being well prepared for starting work. It is arguable that educational traditions and philosophies that owe their origins to people such as Newman, with their emphasis upon the role of HE in 'personal development', are still alive and well in the UK. These findings may also confirm the 'looser fit' between HE and employment in the UK compared with other European countries (Brennan, 2005).
- 3.5 The figures for those graduates rating their courses as a good basis for the 'development of entrepreneurial skills' are much lower for all countries than for the other outcomes. However, there is quite a bit of variation between countries in this, with France (35 per cent) and Spain (27 per cent) scoring the highest and Finland and Norway (10 per cent) ranked lowest. Nevertheless, the UK (at 17 per cent) is again around the average of 18 per cent for all countries in the study.
- 3.6 Figure 3 shows the percentage of the respondents in each country who, given the choice again, would choose the same course at the same institution, a different course at the same or a different institution and those who would decide not to study at all.

Figure 3: Choosing the same study programme at the same institute (HEI), overall and UK (%)



3.7 As with earlier studies mentioned in Section 3 of this report, approximately two thirds (65 per cent) of UK respondents would have chosen the same course at the same HEI and in this they are similar to graduates in the other countries. Only the Czech Republic (70 per cent) and Austria (67 per cent) scored higher than the UK, and Spain (50 per cent) was the only country substantially lower than the average of 62 per cent (see Table 2 in Appendix B). More UK respondents than the European average would have taken a different course at the same HEI, showing an institutional loyalty only surpassed by Spanish graduates. The UK and the Czech Republic had the lowest proportion of respondents of any country who would have chosen a different course at a different institution (10 per cent). This was significantly below the average for all countries of 16 per cent. Interestingly, France, with the same percentage of respondents as the UK who would have done exactly the same again, also had the second highest average proportion who would have done something completely different, though still within HE. Finally, the proportion of UK graduates who would have decided not to study at all was only 1 per cent, slightly below the average for all countries, thus confirming the findings of earlier studies. The country with the highest proportion – by far – of respondents who would not have entered HE (9 per cent) was Spain.

3.8 In the following sections these general data are analysed according to factors relating to the HEI and course (Section 4), the characteristics of the respondent (Section 5), aspects of their behaviour during study and success on the course (Section 6) and their experiences after graduation (Section 7).

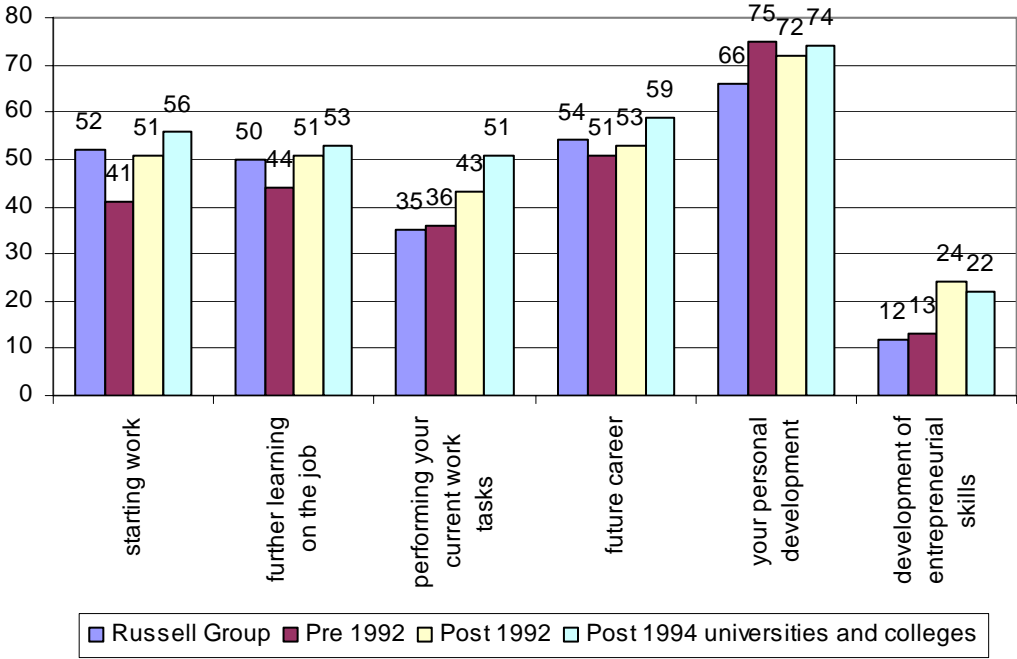
4 Graduates' retrospective views according to the type of institution attended and the nature of their course

4.1 In the UK, it is argued that 'where you studied' can be more important than 'what you studied' (Brennan, 2005; although see Schomburg and Teichler's (2006) caveat on p94). The following section examines graduates' views of their courses according to the type of HEI attended, the subject or field of study and the knowledge and skills acquired. HEIs are categorised as Russell group, other pre-1992 universities, post-1992 universities and post-2004 universities and higher education colleges. As in the subject report (Report 3 in this series), the two dimensions of arts/science and vocational/non-vocational subjects are used to analyse the responses. As well as subject, we also consider whether the field of study was most appropriate to their work since graduating, the characteristics of the course and mode of study as a factor in interpreting graduates' views.

Type of HEI

4.2 In Section 3 we saw that UK respondents were more likely to rate their courses highly as a good basis for 'personal development' and 'future career' than for 'starting work', 'further learning on the job' and 'performing your current work tasks'. This holds true regardless of HEI type, but there are some interesting variations. For example, those respondents from Russell group institutions were less likely to rate their course as a good basis for 'personal development' to a high or very high extent than graduates from all other types of institution (see Figure 4 below). Courses at other pre-1992 universities and post-2004 universities and higher education colleges were rated a little higher than the average for all UK institutions on this measure. As a basis for 'future career', courses at post-2004 universities and higher education colleges were more often rated as high or very high than all other institution types, particularly other pre-1992 universities. So it seems that traditional assumptions about the 'elite' and 'old' universities being the places to go for personal development and to improve future career prospects were not as strongly held by respondents to this survey. Or, perhaps, it is the 'value that is added' by newer universities that is being appreciated more by their graduates.

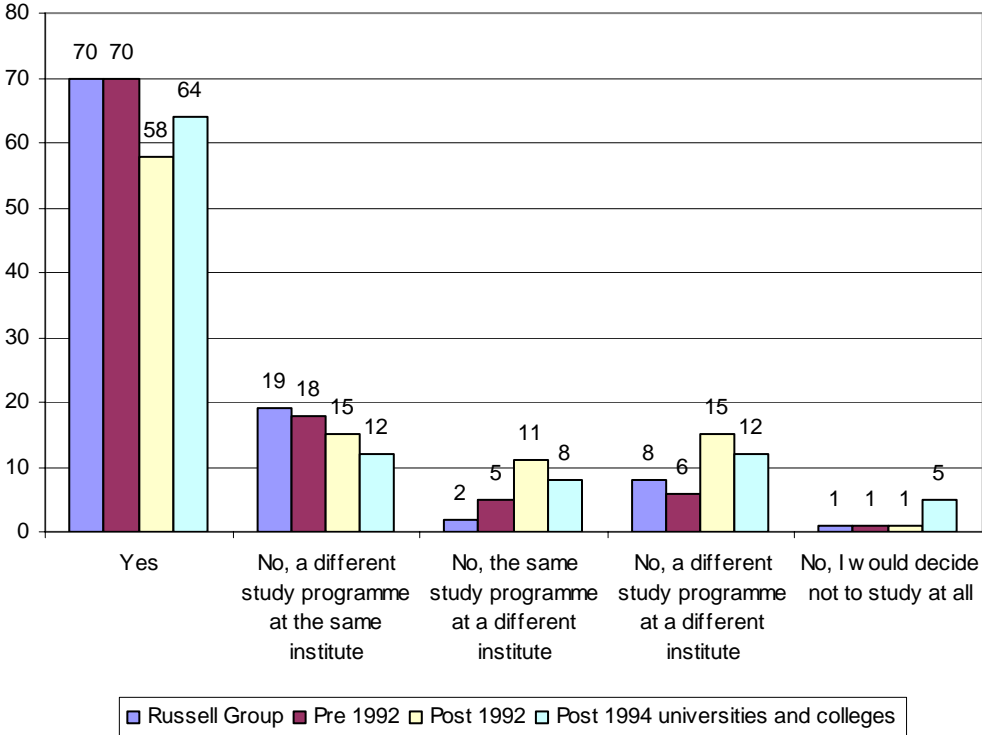
Figure 4: Course as a good basis for... by type of UK HEI (%)



4.3 Looking at the specifically job-related dimensions, ‘starting work’, ‘further learning on the job’ and ‘performing your current work tasks’, it is this latter type of HEI, the other pre-1992 universities, that was rated consistently low by UK respondents. In each case, approximately a third of the other pre-1992 university graduates described their courses as a good basis for these work-related outcomes to ‘a low extent’ or ‘not at all’ [not shown], and on ‘performing your current work tasks’ this reached as many as 36 per cent of the graduates of this type of institution. Conversely, the post-2004 universities and higher education colleges were rated higher than all other HEI types on each of these outcomes and significantly more so on their courses as a good basis for ‘performing your current work tasks’. For this outcome, approximately only 35 to 36 per cent of respondents from Russell group and other pre-1992 universities rated their courses highly or very highly. Here, then, traditional assumptions about the vocational characteristics of HE study at newer universities and colleges appeared to be confirmed by respondents and older universities seemed to be disappointing a significant minority of their graduates. However, this may be partly a reflection of the subject profiles of these different types of HEI and of the graduates who responded. We will return to this in paragraphs 4.7 to 4.11.

4.4 Although only a minority of all UK respondents regarded their HE study as a good basis for developing entrepreneurial skills, it is interesting to note that twice as many graduates from post-1992 universities and post-2004 universities and higher education colleges rated their courses ‘to a great or very great extent’ on this measure (see Table 3, Appendix C). Around two thirds of Russell group and other pre-1992 universities rated their courses ‘to a low extent or not at all’.

Figure 5: Whether graduates would choose the same course at the same HEI by HEI type (%)



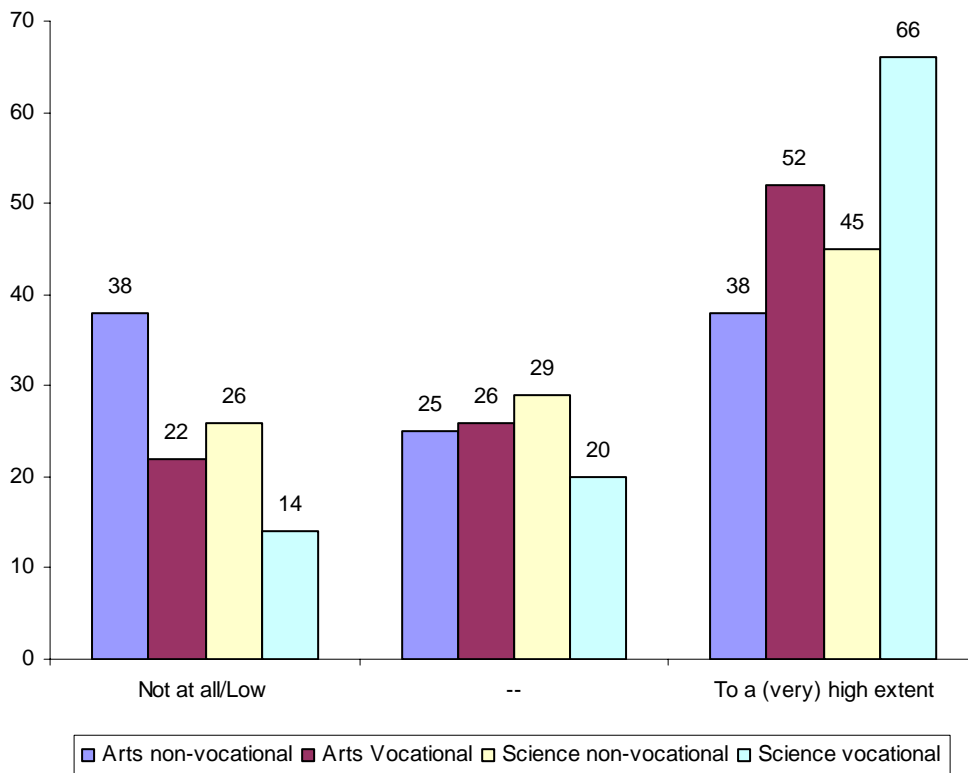
- 4.5 Turning to the question of whether the respondents would choose the same course at the same HEI if they had the choice again, graduates from both Russell group and other pre-1992 universities were more likely to do exactly the same again than those of the newer universities and colleges. The former also showed more loyalty to their HEI even when they would have chosen a different course. Figure 5 illustrates this.
- 4.6 Furthermore, those from newer universities were more likely to have chosen a different course and HEI than graduates from both types of old universities. Although the sample is rather small, a substantially higher proportion of post-2004 university and college graduates would have decided not to study in HE at all, compared with all other respondents.

Subject differences

- 4.7 As in the “Subject differences in graduate employment across Europe” (Report 3 in this series), the two dimensions of arts/science and vocational/non-vocational were used to analyse the data.
- 4.8 As one might expect, the UK graduates of vocational subjects – both arts and science – tended to rate their courses more highly than other UK respondents as a basis for the work- and career-related outcomes identified by the survey. This was particularly the case for graduates of vocational science subjects in relation to ‘further learning on the job’, slightly less so for ‘starting work’ and ‘future career’ and not quite so highly for ‘performing current work tasks’ and the ‘development of entrepreneurial skills’. In each case, those who had taken vocational arts subjects scored their courses more highly than non-vocational science graduates. So, in the UK at least, the key distinction seems to be between vocational and non-vocational subjects, at least in relation to work- and career-related outcomes. This finding is borne out by respondents’ own description of their courses as ‘vocationally orientated’. However, the pattern changes considerably when UK respondents were asked to rate their courses as a good basis for their personal development. On this measure, the non-vocational arts subjects

scored highest, closely followed by the vocational science subjects, with the vocational arts and, lastly, the non-vocational science subjects trailing behind.

Figure 6: Course as a good basis for further learning on the job by programme type (UK respondents) (%)

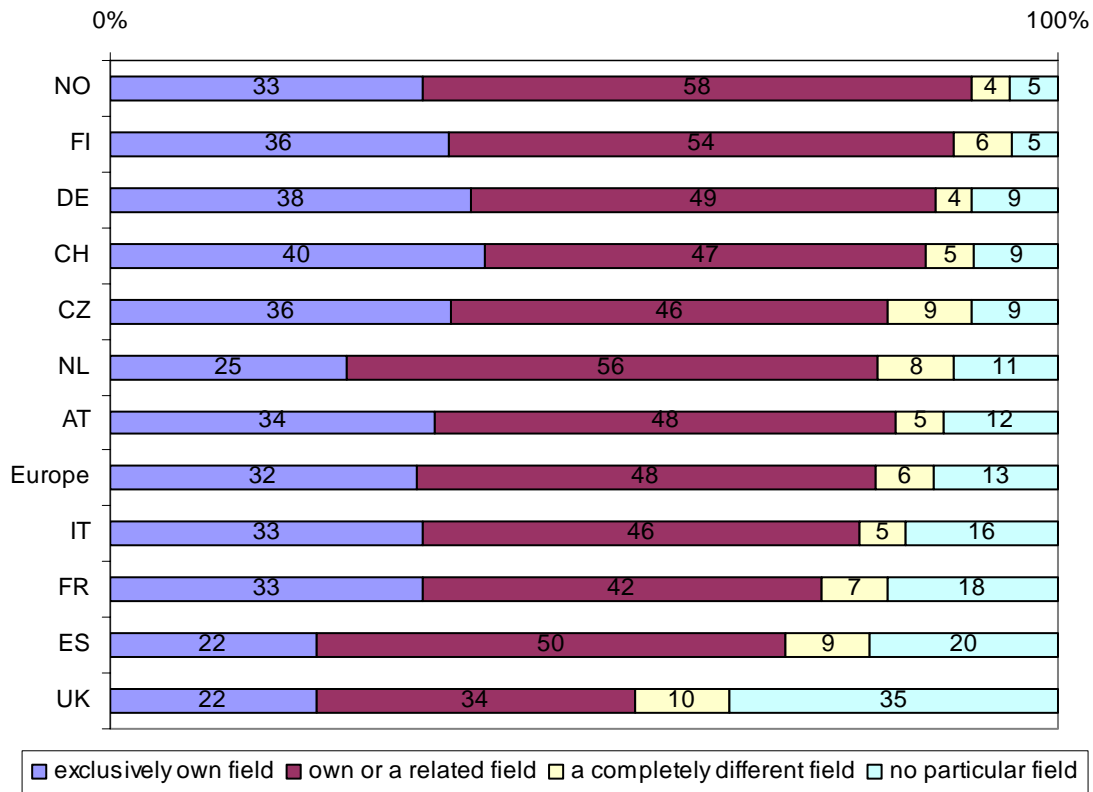


- 4.9 This overall pattern was very similar to that of respondents from France and Italy. But in Spain, the science graduates – both vocational and non-vocational – rated their courses higher than those who had taken arts subjects as a basis for ‘starting work’, ‘further learning on the job’ and ‘performing current work tasks’. Of the countries that tended to regard their courses as preparing them well overall for work and career, the Norwegian graduates who had studied non-vocational arts subjects were relatively more positive about their courses than their equivalents in countries that tended to rate their courses lower overall. In Finland, the country with the lowest average for the ‘development of entrepreneurial skills’, the unusually low ratings given by graduates of non-vocational arts and science subjects were largely responsible for this country’s position relative to the other countries. The Netherlands was similar to Finland in this respect.
- 4.10 Given the choice again, vocational science graduates from the UK, Germany and Spain were more likely to have chosen the same course and HEI than graduates from the other three programme types in each country and a lower than average proportion would have decided not to study at all. Of those taking non-vocational science subjects, the French graduates were substantially *less* likely than their compatriots to have chosen to do exactly the same again and more likely to have taken a different course at a different HEI or not to have studied at all. This may be partly due to differences between institutional types and their subject profiles, such as the Grandes Ecoles. On the other hand, Austrian non-vocational science graduates were much *more* likely than other respondents from that country to make the same choice again and much less likely not to have chosen to enter HE.

Appropriateness of field of study for first job and current work

4.11 Respondents were asked what field of study was most appropriate for their first job.

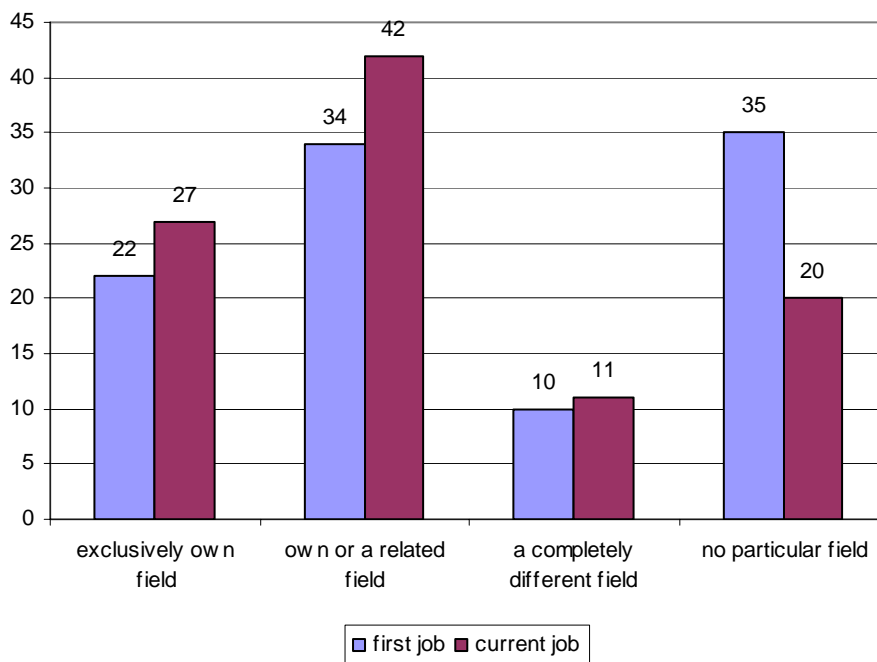
Figure 7: Field of study most appropriate for work in first job by country (%)



4.12 The UK was considerably out of line with the other European countries in the study, as less than a quarter (22 per cent) of the respondents felt that 'Exclusively own field' was most appropriate. Even adding 'Own or a related field', the combined response only reached 56 per cent, compared with an average for all countries of 80 per cent. Conversely, more than one third (35 per cent) of UK respondents indicated that 'No particular field' was relevant, compared with an average of 13 per cent, and only Italy (16 per cent), France (18 per cent) and Spain (20 per cent) also exceeded this average. This appears to support the messages from graduate recruiters and careers advisers that many UK employers are more concerned with the acquisition of a degree, generic skills and personal attributes than with the subject studied.

4.13 However, it is interesting to compare this with respondents' views of the field of study most appropriate for their current job, four or five years after graduating.

Figure 8: Field of study most appropriate for current work (UK respondents) (%) -



4.14 The figure for those UK respondents who felt that ‘No particular field’ was most appropriate for their current work fell to 20 per cent from 35 per cent for their first job and, likewise, those who had selected ‘Exclusively own field’ and ‘Own or a related field’ had increased from 22 per cent to 27 per cent, while the average for all countries rose only from 22 per cent to 27 per cent. This could mean that UK respondents took a while after graduating to move into a field of work closer to the subject of their HE studies or that they had taken a job initially that did not require a degree and specialist knowledge of a particular subject.

Extent to which knowledge and skills utilised in first job and current work

4.15 These findings are confirmed by a related question on the use of knowledge and skills. Respondents were asked the extent to which their knowledge and skills were utilised in their *first* job. Again, the UK stands out in the proportion of respondents replying ‘To a low extent’ or ‘Not at all’ – nearly a third, in comparison with an average for all countries of 18 per cent. Once more, Italy and Spain were the only other countries to exceed the average, with 21 per cent and 31 per cent respectively. Conversely, only 46 per cent of UK respondents felt that their knowledge and skills were used to a high or very high extent in their first job, compared with an average for all countries of 57 per cent.

4.16 Several years later, however, two thirds of UK respondents thought their knowledge and skills were used to a high or very high extent in their *current* work – as much as 21 per cent higher than for their first job (i.e. 67 per cent). The UK still lagged behind the average of 72 per cent, and far behind Norway’s 82 per cent, of respondents reporting this high level of utilisation of their knowledge and skills. Whether this allows us to put a more positive interpretation on graduates’ views of the job-related outcomes of their course (paragraphs 3.2-3.5 above) depends on whether the knowledge and skills being referred to here were acquired solely as a result of their HE course or through subsequent further training and experiential learning during study and since graduation. It is likely, of course, to have been a mixture of both.

Mode of study

4.17 Turning to mode of study – i.e. full- or part-time – substantially more UK respondents who had studied part-time (76 per cent) than full-time (64 per cent) would have done

exactly the same had they the choice of what and where to study over again. This is consistent with the responses from more mature students (25 and over – see section 5.3 below), who made up around four fifths of the part-time population. Graduates who studied full-time were twice as likely as graduates who studied part-time to say they would have chosen a different course at a different HEI and substantially more likely to say they would have chosen a different course at the same HEI.

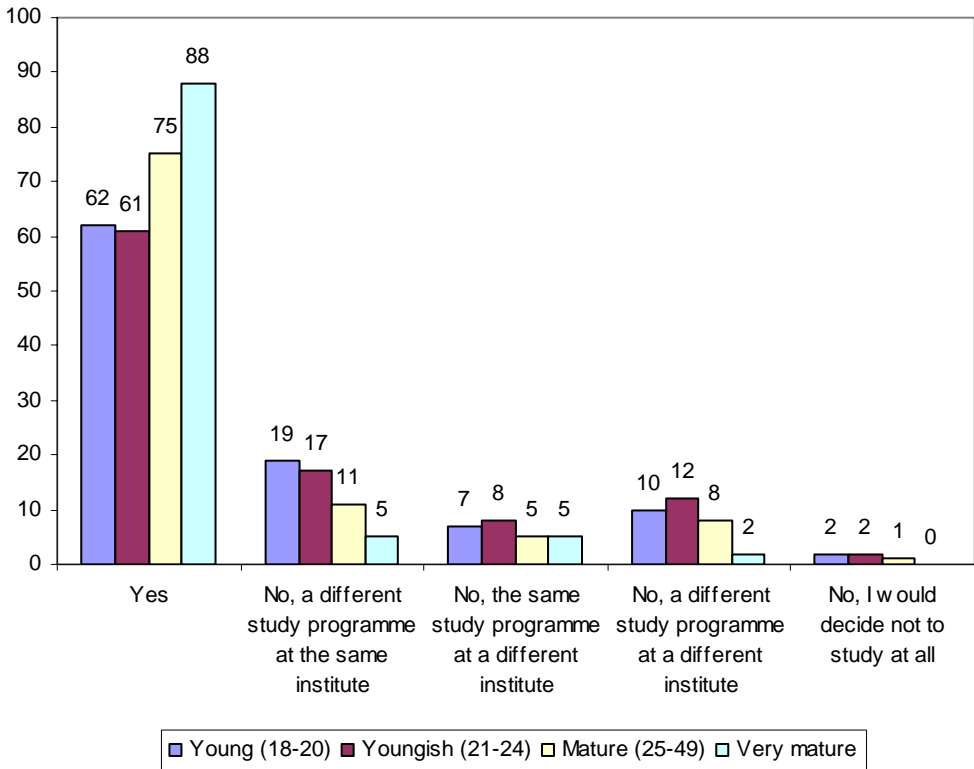
5 Graduates' retrospective views according to individual characteristics

5.1 Having analysed graduates' views by the nature of the HEI attended and the type of course studied, this section focuses on the characteristics of the respondents, including age, gender, ethnic group and parental educational background.

Age

5.2 Respondents were categorised according to their age at entry to HE into four groups: 17-20 years, 21-24, 25-49 and the over 50s. The UK graduates who were under 25 at entry to HE were more likely than older entrants to rate their courses to a great or very great extent as a good basis for 'starting work'. This accords with an earlier finding that the age group with the highest labour market risk are those who start HE studies after the age of 24 (Brennan and Shah, 2002). Among those who were 25-49 years of age on entry, more thought their course was a good basis for 'further learning on the job' than for 'starting work'. In comparison with the UK, there was much greater consistency across the age ranges in the other European countries in the study. On 'personal development', the over 25s in the UK were more likely to rate their courses highly than those who had been younger students.

Figure 9: Whether graduates would choose the same course and HEI by age (UK respondents) (%)

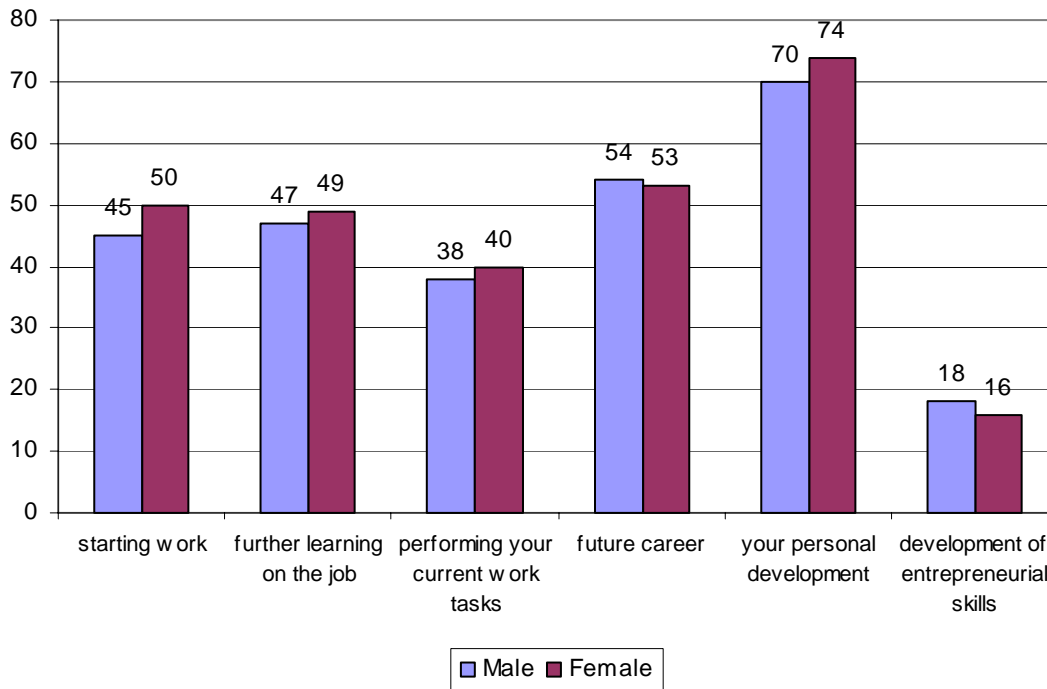


5.3 On whether they would take the same course at the same HEI, given the choice again, those who were 25-49 on entering HE (75 per cent) were substantially more likely to do exactly the same than their younger counterparts (61-62 per cent). (Of the over 50s, 88 per cent would do exactly the same again, although this was a relatively small sample.) This may reflect their greater maturity in a number of ways, including the effectiveness of their decision-making. Of this mature group, those that would have studied something different in HE were not necessarily more likely than the younger students to have chosen a different course at the same HEI, although it might have been assumed

that they were less flexible in their geographical mobility due to greater family and other commitments.

Gender

Figure 10: Study programme as basis for...; by gender, UK respondents (% responses 4 and 5)



5.4 For the survey as a whole there was a higher rate of response among females – higher than the proportion of females in UK higher education at the time of their graduation in 2000. However, the proportion of female respondents was similar across Europe. For ‘starting work’, ‘further learning on the job’ and ‘personal development’, the women graduates in the UK were more likely to rate their courses ‘high’ or ‘very high’ than men. However, for ‘future career’ the figures are very similar to those for the male respondents. The picture across the other European countries is more mixed. The responses to whether, with hindsight, they would choose the same course and HEI again are very similar for both men and women in the UK. In other European countries, however, the women graduates showed a slightly greater desire to have done something different within HE.

Ethnic group

5.5 In a survey of this size, the relatively small numbers of respondents from each minority ethnic group make it difficult to offer firm conclusions. The most we can do is to indicate where our findings seem to suggest the need for further research and analysis.

Nevertheless, the most notable and uniform patterns appear to relate to the Black and Black British respondents who were consistently above the averages for UK graduates in rating their courses highly for all the outcomes, especially for ‘future career’, ‘personal development’ and even ‘development of entrepreneurial skills’ – although still a minority for this last question. These graduates were closer to, but still above, the average for the other three outcomes, the lowest and closest being for ‘performing current work tasks’.

5.6 Paradoxically, though, smaller proportions of Black respondents (52 per cent) than the average for all UK ethnic groups (65 per cent) would have chosen the same course at the same HEI. More often than not, those who would have done something different in

HE in this ethnic group (32 per cent) would have chosen a different course at the same HEI. Although the numbers of Black respondents who would have decided not to study at all were very small, when combined with other non-white groups, a larger proportion (5 per cent) of these graduates would not have entered HE if they had the choice again than the average (1.4 per cent).

- 5.7 It would be worth exploring this further with a larger sample of graduates from ethnic minorities. This would help to elaborate on previous studies, such as Brennan and Shah (2003), who found that, despite a higher incidence of initial unemployment than their white counterparts, once they found a job, most ethnic minorities have as good a chance to be employed in a graduate level job and they are usually not more likely to be employed in non-graduate occupations.

Parental educational background

- 5.8 Respondents were asked whether one or both or neither of their parents had HE background. Those *without* a parental HE background were more likely than those *with* to regard their course as a good basis for most of the outcomes, except for 'starting work' and 'development of entrepreneurial skills'. Interestingly, the difference was most pronounced for 'personal development' (neither parent: 74 per cent; one parent: 71 per cent; both parents: 69 per cent). Also, those with one parent with an HE background were less likely (62 per cent) to choose the same course at the same HEI than respondents with both (67 per cent) or neither (66 per cent) parent having an HE background. The former were also more likely (19 per cent) than the latter (15 per cent and 16 per cent respectively) to have chosen a different course at the same HEI. One explanation may be parental influence on subject choice and whether it was absent or tempered by more than one voice.

6 Graduates' retrospective views according to aspects of their behaviour and performance

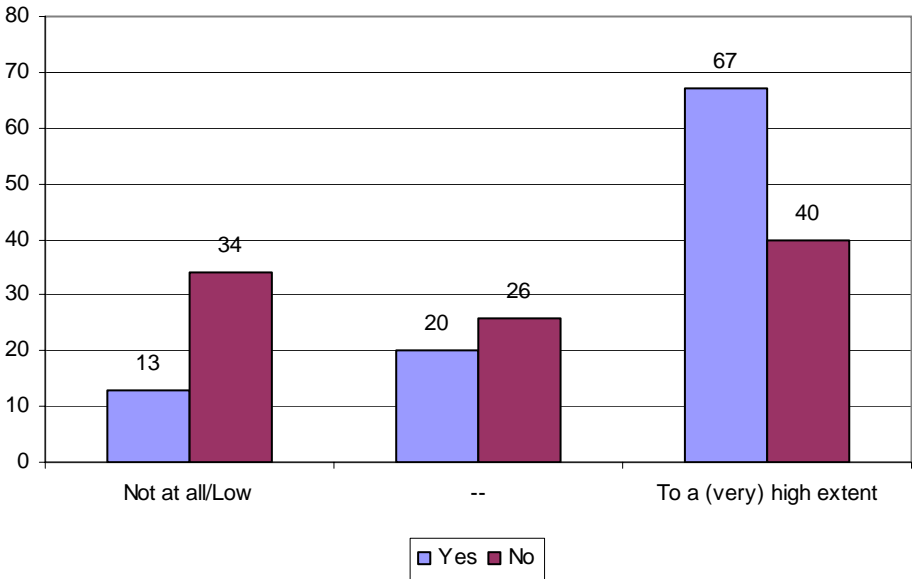
6.1 Analysis of the REFLEX data in terms of the graduate respondents' individual characteristics and background can only provide a limited picture of how they viewed their courses retrospectively. Investigation of aspects of their behaviour and performance during their HE study can help to deepen our understanding of why they came to view their experience in the ways that we have so far revealed. This section covers effort levels, indicated by the hours that respondents had spent studying and whether they had striven for the best marks; their participation in work placements/internships; whether they held office in a voluntary organisation; and their degree results.

Effort levels

6.2 The survey asked graduates about the extent to which they did extra work above what was required to pass exams and whether they had striven for the highest possible marks. Perhaps not surprisingly, those UK respondents who reported lower levels of effort were substantially less likely than others to rate their courses highly on the outcome measures identified in Section 3.2 above. Likewise, this group of respondents were less likely to have chosen to do exactly the same again (around 12 per cent below the average), given the choice. Of the remaining HE options, they were more likely to have chosen a different course at the same HEI (around 24 per cent) than at a different one (13 per cent) and least likely to study something completely different (around 9 per cent). However, perhaps surprisingly, they were no more likely than those who showed greater application to have decided not to study at all.

Work placements/internships

Figure 11: Course as a good basis for starting work by participation in work placement/internship (UK respondents)



6.3 About one third of UK respondents had taken part in one or more work placements or internships as part of their study programmes and, of these, two thirds (67 per cent) rated their courses highly as a basis for 'starting work'. This compares with an average of less than half of all UK respondents and only 40 per cent of those who had not undertaken a placement or internship. Conversely, approximately a third (34 per cent)

of those who had not taken part in a placement or internship did not regard their course as a good basis for starting work compared with only 13 per cent of those who did gain some work experience and the average of 28 per cent of those rating their course low or not at all on this outcome measure. The experience of work placements and internships also had the effect of increasing the likelihood of raising respondents' ratings of their course on the other work- and career-related measures, although less so than for 'starting work'. Interestingly, however, more of those who had not taken part in placements/internships regarded their courses highly as a basis for 'personal development' (73 per cent) than those who had (70 per cent). There were no substantial differences, though, when it came to whether, with hindsight, they would have chosen the same course and HEI.

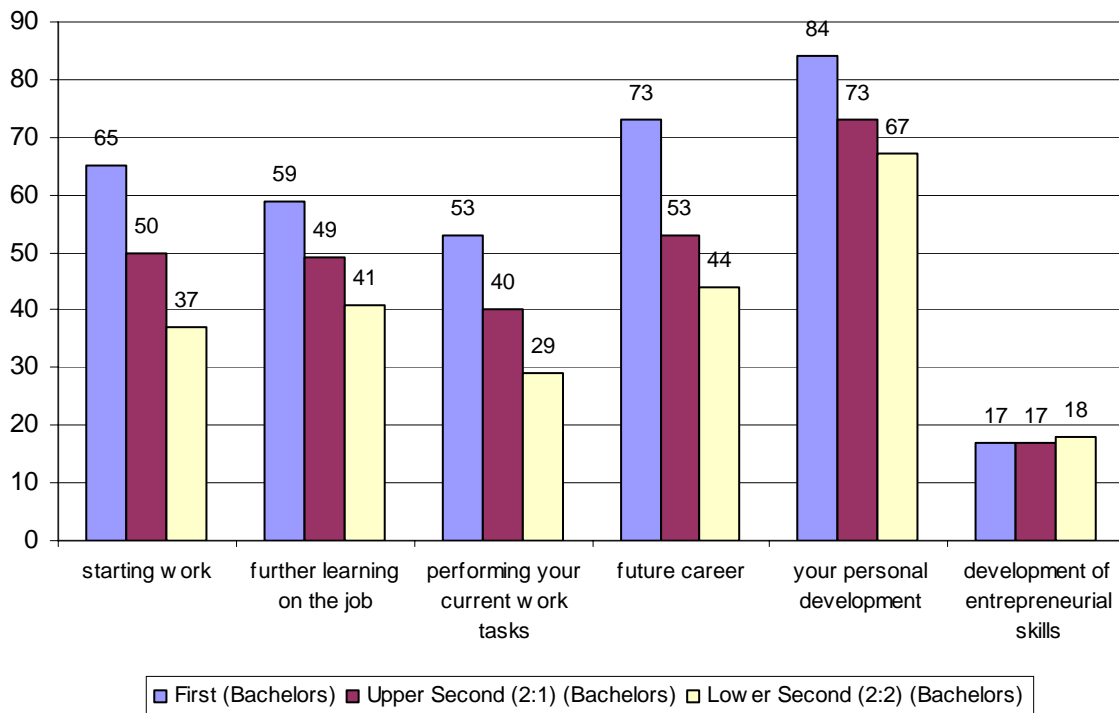
Office in voluntary organisation

6.4 Those graduates reporting that they had held an office in a student or other voluntary organisation during their time in HE did not rate their courses differently from those respondents not so doing.

Degree results

6.5 Perhaps not surprisingly, there is a strong correlation between degree results and how graduates rate the efficacy of their courses across most of the work/career and personal related outcomes, as well as in relation to what and where they would study if they had the choice again.

Figure 12: Course outcomes by class of degree (UK respondents, %)



6.6 Those UK graduates with first and upper-second class honours Bachelors degrees and almost any class of Masters degrees were more likely to rate their course highly as a basis for 'starting work', 'further learning on the job', 'performing current work tasks', 'future career' and 'personal development'. The only exception was 'development of entrepreneurial skills', which was rated 'low' or 'not at all' regardless of the respondent's final grade and level of award. However, those with lower-second class honours Bachelors degrees were less likely to rate their courses highly and more likely to rate them 'low' or 'not at all' for these measures. This seems to reflect the general

assumption that, in an increasingly competitive graduate labour market, the 'new' benchmark is an upper-second class bachelors degree, possibly topped up at an early stage in a career with a masters, in order to mark out the award holder from the rest. Also, despite the relatively small numbers of respondents claiming, with hindsight, that they would not have studied at all, it appears that the proportion of those with lower-second class degrees reporting this was nearly twice the average for all UK graduates. Perhaps the experience of just missing out on the benchmark of an upper-second class honours degree, despite substantial effort, is significantly more disappointing than gaining a lower class degree with little or no academic exertion.

7 Graduates' retrospective views according to their experiences after graduation

- 7.1 It is likely that graduates' views of their HE study will change over time as a result of their experiences between graduation and after having spent several years in work, further training or unemployment. This may depend on a range of factors, such as their expectations and aspirations on graduation, their self awareness of their own knowledge and skills, their grasp of the graduate labour market and work and whether their work is directly related to their subject of study. This section looks at the impact of a number of possible influences on graduates' views of their course and HEI of study, including the incidence of further postgraduate study, the duration of initial job search, the incidence and duration of unemployment since graduation, whether the type of education was most appropriate for the work they undertook and whether they had recently undertaken work-related training.

Additional higher education qualifications

- 7.2 Forty-two per cent of the UK respondents had undertaken additional study after their initial Bachelors degree, such as a Masters degree, a PhD or other postgraduate qualification. Those that had undertaken additional study, not surprisingly, were more likely (54 per cent) than the average for the UK (48 per cent) to have rated their course as a good basis for further learning on the job. This group was also more likely, though to a lesser degree, to have scored their course highly or very highly as a basis for future career (5 per cent higher than the average), starting work (3 per cent), performing current work tasks (3 per cent) and personal development (2 per cent). However, they were 2 per cent less likely to have rated their course this way for the development of entrepreneurial skills.

The group that had undertaken additional study was also, given the opportunity to take the decision again, more likely (68 per cent) than the UK average (65 per cent) to have chosen the same study programme at the same HEI and much less likely to have opted for a different course at the same HEI (12 per cent compared with an average of 17 per cent).

Duration of job search

- 7.3 Those UK respondents who considered their courses to have been a good basis for starting work tended to have spent more time searching for work *before* graduation and less time *after* graduation than those who did not think of their courses in this way. Not surprisingly, the former group of respondents spent less time overall searching for work (3.4 months before and after graduation on average) than those who did not rate their courses as a good basis for starting work (4.5 months on average). This was also the case for those who would have chosen the same course at the same HEI were they to take the decision again.

Incidence and duration of unemployment

- 7.4 In a similar vein, those who rated their courses as a good basis for starting work and/or would do exactly the same again were less likely than other UK respondents to have experienced unemployment since graduation. Also, if they had experienced periods out of work, the incidence of unemployment tended to be lower and the duration shorter.

Type of education most appropriate for work

- 7.5 Generally, the higher the level of education that UK respondents felt was most appropriate for their first job after graduation, the more likely they were to regard their course as a good or very good basis for employment related outcomes such as

'starting work' and 'further learning on the job'. This also held true for the decision to study the same course at the same HEI. Even when respondents felt their first job required a higher level of education than they themselves had undertaken, their attitude towards their course remained positive. Conversely, those who felt their first job required 'lower than higher education' qualifications were less likely to consider their course a good basis for 'starting work' and 'further learning on the job'. Naturally, this group was also more likely to have regretted studying at all, although the proportion remained very small. They were, however, much more positive about the impact of study on their future career prospects and personal development.

- 7.6 Understandably, those declining numbers of UK respondents who felt their job at the time of the survey *still* did not require HE were even more negative about their course in terms of employment outcomes, especially as a basis for performing current work tasks. This even seems to have curbed their positive feelings about their course in terms of their future career prospects. Also, the proportion of these respondents who would have decided not to study at all increases threefold. Interestingly, however, the experience of what has been termed 'under-employment' or even 'over-education' does not seem to have dented their enthusiasm for their HE as a means of personal development. This aspect, of all the outcomes investigated by the survey, seems to remain intact almost regardless of some respondents' disappointing experiences after graduation.

Work-related training

- 7.7 Those UK respondents who had undertaken a work-related course or training in the past twelve months were substantially more likely to have rated their HE course as a good or very good basis for 'further learning on the job' and for 'performing current work tasks' and to have made the same choice of course and HEI again.

8 Summary and conclusion

- 8.1 This analysis has proceeded by examining the responses to two survey questions in which the respondents were asked to evaluate their study programme in respect of its value in subsequent employment, and by analysing these according to separate specific aspects of the respondent, the course and the HEI attended. The findings were then compared with the averages for the UK and for other countries and substantial differences noted. It is likely that certain factors isolated in this way may, in reality, be strongly associated with each other. For example, particular types of HEI may be characterised by certain subject profiles – e.g. more vocational or, at least, job-related – and attract certain kinds of student – e.g. more mature, part-time and work-orientated. In such cases, it may require further analysis to discern which factor has a direct impact on the answers given and which factor has an indirect effect, as a consequence of being closely associated with the former. Given the scope of this report, it has not been possible to undertake this more in-depth analysis.
- 8.2 Nevertheless, the REFLEX survey has confirmed a number of findings from the earlier studies described in Section 2 of this report, enhanced our understanding of these, revealed a range of new findings and suggested further avenues for investigation. This section summarises these and offers some conclusions on graduates' retrospective views of their course.

Confirming and enhancing what we think we already know

- 8.3 Most UK graduates rated their course to a great or very great extent as a good basis for personal development and future career prospects. This confirms the earlier CHEERS study and the findings of the first National Student (Surridge, 2006) and CIPD (2006) surveys.
- 8.4 Fewer were impressed with their courses as a basis for 'starting work', 'further learning on the job' and 'performing current tasks', with the UK average rating for these job-related outcomes substantially lower than for most other European countries in the study. Only a small minority regarded their HE study highly for developing entrepreneurial skills, but this was on a par with most of the REFLEX countries.
- 8.5 The majority of UK respondents were similar to other European graduates in believing that, had they the choice again, they would opt for the same course and HEI. However, a significant minority would have chosen a different course, whether at the same HEI or another, and this confirms both the CIPD report (CIPD, 2006) and the study for the DfES (Purcell *et al*, 2005).
- 8.6 Of these, the majority would have chosen to study at the same HEI again, showing greater loyalty to their UK institutions than graduates from other countries to their own institutions.
- 8.7 Only a very small minority of UK graduates would not have chosen to study in HE at all. Again, this confirms the findings of the CHEERS, DfES and CIPD surveys.
- 8.8 Those respondents with lower-second class honours Bachelors degrees were less likely to rate their courses highly and more likely to rate them 'low' or 'not at all' for all but one of the outcomes. This seems to reflect the general assumption that, in an increasingly competitive graduate labour market, the 'new' benchmark is an upper-second class Bachelors degree, possibly topped up at an early stage in a career with a postgraduate or professional qualification, in order to mark out the award holder from the rest.

New findings

- 8.9 The REFLEX survey has also produced findings on the impact of HEI type, subject studied, the appropriateness of the latter for work, the utilisation of knowledge and skills in work, the age and gender of respondents, work experience, additional study and the level thought to be appropriate for a first job after graduation.
- 8.10 Graduates of Russell group institutions were less likely to rate their course as a good basis for 'personal development' or 'future career' to a high or very high extent than graduates from all other types of HEIs. This may be because they recognised that they were already in possession of the social capital, through family connections and pre-HE attainment, that certain employers were seeking from new graduates and their choice of university was a confirmation, rather than a significant extension, of this.
- 8.11 A substantially higher proportion of post-2004 university and higher education college graduates would have decided not to study in HE at all, compared with all other respondents.
- 8.12 Those UK respondents who had taken vocational subjects – whether science or arts – tended to rate their courses more highly than other respondents as a basis for the work- and career-related outcomes identified by the survey. However, non-vocational arts graduates were most likely to rate their courses as a good basis for their personal development.
- 8.13 Given the choice again, vocational science graduates from the UK, Germany and Spain were more likely to have chosen the same course and HEI than graduates from the other three programme types in each country, while a lower than average proportion would have decided not to study at all.
- 8.14 When reporting on the field of study most appropriate for their *first* job, substantially more respondents from the UK than other European countries in the study stated 'No particular field'. However, when reporting on their *current* work, this proportion fell substantially and, likewise, those who had selected 'Exclusively own field' and 'Own or a related field' had increased by a similar margin, although still some way below the average for all countries in the study.
- 8.15 In a similar vein, UK graduates were more likely than respondents from most other countries in the study to report that they made little use of the knowledge and skills gained from their degree in their *first* job after graduation. However, when reporting on their *current* work, they were much more likely to feel they were utilising their knowledge and skills, although the latter may not have been acquired exclusively during their HE course.
- 8.16 The UK graduates who were under 25 at entry to higher education were more likely than older entrants to rate their courses to a great or very great extent as a good basis for 'starting work'. Among those who were 25-49 years of age on entry, more thought their course was a good basis for 'further learning on the job' than for 'starting work'. Given the choice again, those who were over 25 on entering HE were substantially more likely to do exactly the same than their younger counterparts.
- 8.17 Women graduates in the UK were more likely than men to rate their courses 'high' or 'very high' for 'starting work', 'further learning on the job' and 'personal development'.
- 8.18 About one third of UK respondents had taken part in one or more work placements or internships as part of their study programmes and, of these, two thirds rated their courses highly as a basis for 'starting work' – a much higher proportion than those who had not undertaken a placement or internship. This was also the case, but less so, for the other job-related outcomes.

- 8.19 Those graduates that had undertaken additional study, not surprisingly, were more likely than the average for the UK to have rated their course as a good basis for further learning on the job. This group was also more likely, though to a lesser degree, to have scored their course highly or very highly as a basis for 'future career', 'starting work', 'performing current work tasks' and 'personal development'. The group that had undertaken additional study was also more likely than the UK average to have chosen the same study programme at the same HEI and much less likely to have opted for a different course at the same HEI.
- 8.20 Generally, the higher the level of education that UK respondents felt was most appropriate for their first job after graduation, the more likely they were to regard their course as a good or very good basis for employment-related outcomes such as 'starting work' and 'further learning on the job'. Interestingly, however, the experience of what has been termed 'under-employment' or even 'over-education' does not seem to have dented their enthusiasm for their HE as a means of personal development. This aspect, of all the outcomes investigated by the survey, seems to remain intact almost regardless of some respondents' disappointing experiences after graduation.

Further avenues for investigation

- 8.21 The study has raised a number of questions that would benefit from further investigation and examination, which may include more detailed analysis and comparison of existing statistics, such as the CHEERS and REFLEX datasets, as well as new studies perhaps involving more qualitative exploration of some of the tentative explanations contained in this and other reports in the series. The following lists those research issues that specifically relate to UK graduates' retrospective views of higher education.
- 8.22 What is behind the institutional differences between the ratings and to what extent are they accounted for by the subject profiles of different types of HEI, their size and other institutional characteristics? The differences when graduates were asked to rate their institution rather than their course (paragraphs 4.5 – 4.6 above) suggest they are well aware of the reputational strengths and positional advantages that some types of HEIs confer.
- 8.23 The responses to the survey could be further analysed according to individual subjects to determine whether there are any outliers within the four fields of study identified using the arts/science and vocational/non-vocational dimensions. Are computing and engineering regarded as relevant to finding and doing a job as agriculture or veterinary science, for example? Are there larger proportions of graduates of particular disciplines who would have chosen a different subject and/or a different HEI?
- 8.24 The data confirm the 'loose coupling' of HE and employment in the UK in comparison with most other European countries and the greater likelihood that UK graduates will report that no particular field of study was appropriate for their first job after graduating. So it is important to study the initial trajectories of their working lives post-HE study to understand whether and how they move into jobs that are more likely to use their subject-specific knowledge and skills or, indeed, whether they are simply moving from 'non-graduate' jobs to 'graduate' positions, if this distinction remains meaningful. The role – and mix – of postgraduate courses, employment-based training and experiential learning in facilitating these shifts should be further investigated. This may confirm whether the upper-second class honours Bachelors degree topped up with a professional masters end-on or within a few years of graduation is, indeed, the new benchmark threshold for graduate success in the UK.
- 8.25 As an increasing number of younger (17-24 year old) students commence part-time courses, often linked to employment, it will be crucial to monitor whether the higher level of satisfaction with their courses found among mature part-time students is

maintained when compared with their full-time counterparts. The initial trajectories of younger part-time and mature full-time students might also be fruitfully explored further.

- 8.26 Given the greater likelihood of graduates from some ethnic minorities experiencing unemployment, and for longer periods, than their white counterparts, why does a greater proportion rate their courses highly as a good basis for the work-related outcomes considered in this report?

Conclusion

- 8.27 This report has focused on graduates' retrospective views of their course, particularly in terms of employment outcomes. More general views were also sought on whether, with hindsight, they would have undertaken the same course at the same HEI again or even entered HE at all. But, in a survey predominantly about HE and employment, it is likely that graduates would have been responding largely with this in mind. So, while the results are relevant to broader issues about the quality of HE, this specific employment focus must be borne in mind when considering the findings.
- 8.28 It is also important to recognise that graduates were being asked to reflect on their courses five years after graduation, during which they may have changed jobs (or even careers), undertaken further training and even experienced periods of unemployment. Their views, as represented in this survey, will be refracted through their experiences – and particularly their working experiences – since graduating. The process of recollecting may introduce inaccuracies, but it may also permit a more informed and detached view of some of the enduring qualities of HE study that were not immediately apparent to the respondent as student and graduand.
- 8.29 Nevertheless, the graduates' responses seem to confirm the overall conclusion of other reports in the REFLEX series that HE in the UK is more about a broader liberal education, character formation and the selection of candidates for future roles in employment, than the specialised socialisation and training systems found in other European countries. UK respondents valued their courses much more highly for personal development and longer-term career prospects than for helping them to find work and being prepared to perform well in work tasks. Although they might have felt overqualified *and* under-prepared for their first posts after graduation (see Report 1 in this series), the looser link between HE and graduate employment in the UK, together with more extensive initial training and further learning on the job, may enable graduates to become flexible professionals capable of succeeding in an increasingly knowledge-based economy and society.

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Appendix A: Background to the study

This report is based on the results of a major international study of graduate employment. The study, 'The Flexible Professional in the Knowledge Society – new demands on higher education in Europe' (REFLEX), was funded by the European Commission as part of its 6th Framework programme, Priority 7 'Citizens and Governance in a Knowledge Based Society' (and by several national funds). The study was carried out collaboratively by research groups in thirteen European countries (Austria, Belgium-Flanders, the Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland and the United Kingdom) and Japan. It was co-ordinated by the Research Centre for Education and the Labour Market at Maastricht University in the Netherlands. The UK part of the study was undertaken by the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information at the Open University.

The study had three strands:

- A country study highlighting the main structural and institutional factors that shape the relationship between higher education and work;
- A qualitative study on graduate competences in the knowledge society;
- A survey of higher education graduates five years after graduation.

The results of the survey that are presented in this report cover graduates from eleven of the countries involved in the study, viz. Austria, the Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Switzerland and the UK. The graduates were selected from the 1999/2000 graduating cohort and were contacted by means of a mailed questionnaire (with the option of completing a web-based questionnaire) in the spring of 2005. Overall, 33,832 questionnaires were returned from these 11 countries, including 1,578 from UK graduates. For the UK sample this represented a response rate of 23 per cent. The overall average response rate was 30 per cent, varying from 20 per cent in Spain to 45 per cent in Norway. (See Appendix B for details of case numbers for each country.) The samples were selected to be representative of the various national higher education (HE) populations of students enrolled on 'first degree' or equivalent programmes considered to be the main 'exit' qualification with which graduates left HE in 2000 and entered the labour market in that country. In the case of the UK, this was taken to be a Bachelors degree, but in very many other countries the 1999/2000 graduating sample comprised wholly (or mainly) those with a Masters degree. The UK sample also included a (very) small number of graduates from taught Masters programmes who had previously completed a first degree in the same broad subject area, had enrolled on a taught Masters programme (at the same institution) without loss of time and graduated from that programme in 1999/2000.

Due to data protection issues in the UK it is generally not possible to contact graduates directly. Hence, broad population data for graduates in the year 1999/2000 was provided by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). The sample itself was drawn either by HESA or the higher education institutions (HEIs) themselves, and was broadly representative of the first degree graduating population.

Key sampling variables were field of study and type of HEI. The UK sample was drawn from 43 HEIs covering a range of types and locations. The achieved sample (i.e those responding to the survey) was also broadly representative of the graduating population, though females were slightly over-represented, as Table A below shows:

Table A: Comparison of graduating population, initial sample and achieved sample

	Population, %	Initial sample, %	Achieved sample, %
Full-time	90	89	88
Female	55	53	61
Non-white	12	12	8
23 & under	70	69	64
24-27	12	12	14
28 & over	19	19	23

The extensive questionnaire comprised 11 sections as follows:

- A Study programme completed in 1999/2000
- B Other educational and related experiences
- C Transition from study to work
- D First job after graduation
- E Employment history and current situation
- F Current work
- G Work organisation
- H Competences
- I Evaluation of study programme
- J Values and orientations
- K Socio-biographic data

A copy of the UK questionnaire is available for download from the HEFCE web-site.

This study followed on from an earlier study, Higher Education and Graduate Employment in Europe (CHEERS), also funded by the European Commission (see, for example, Brennan et al., 2001; Schomburg and Teichler, 2006; Teichler (ed) 2007)¹.

As in this previous study, the data collected have gone well beyond the topics usually covered by national surveys of this kind. For example, they included questions about the HE experience and attitudes, values and competences in relation both to employment and to other areas of life. Extensive and complex data checking and cleaning processes have been time-consuming. However, given that the research teams involved were already highly experienced and most had been involved in the earlier CHEERS study, the project was able to build on previous work. Once again, this large-scale European study of graduate employment used a common cross-national research methodology.

¹ Brennan, J., Johnston, B., Little, B., Shah, T. & Woodley, A. (2001) *The employment of UK graduates: comparisons with Europe and Japan* London: The Open University

This report is one of six reports commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England. The full set of reports comprises:

- 1 The employment of UK graduates: comparisons with Europe
- 2 The context of higher education and employment: comparisons between different European countries
- 3 Subject differences in graduate employment across Europe
- 4 Competences possessed and required by European graduates
- 5 Age differences in graduate employment across Europe
- 6 Graduates' retrospective views of higher education

Appendix B: Case numbers of respondents for each country

United Kingdom	1578
Italy	3139
Spain	3916
France	1700
Austria	1821
Germany	1700
The Netherlands	3424
Finland	2676
Norway	2201
Czech Republic	6794
Switzerland	4882
Total (Europe)	33832

Appendix C: Tables

Table 1: Study programme has been a good basis for...; by country (%) (responses 4 and 5; multiple responses) (see Figure 2)

	Total	UK	IT	ES	FR	AT	DE	NL	FI	NO	CZ	CH
starting work	58	48	48	53	50	63	54	59	61	80	61	61
further learning on the job	59	48	52	53	58	56	49	63	71	72	61	61
performing your current work tasks	50	39	46	42	44	53	44	52	59	69	49	55
future career	53	53	45	50	48	58	46	54	51	71	53	57
your personal development	69	72	67	63	64	77	73	70	65	74	67	67
development of entrepreneurial skills	18	17	21	27	35	17	14	14	10	10	11	24
Count (n)	(22000)	(2000)	(2000)	(2000)	(2000)	(2000)	(2000)	(2000)	(2000)	(2000)	(2000)	(2000)

Question I1: To what extent has your study programme been a good basis for...? (Scale of answers from 1=not at all to 5=to a very great extent)

Table 2: Choosing the same study programme at the same HEI by country (%) (see Figure 3)

	Total	UK	IT	ES	FR	AT	DE	NL	FI	NO	CZ	CH
Yes	62	65	65	50	65	67	59	62	59	64	64	70
No, a different study programme at the same HEI	12	17	14	20	7	10	10	9	11	9	12	9
No, the same study programme at a different HEI	8	7	7	11	5	6	11	9	7	7	6	9
No, a different study programme at a different HEI	16	10	11	11	22	15	17	19	23	19	17	10
No, I would decide not to study at all	2	1	3	9	2	3	4	0.5	0.5	1	1	2
Count (n)	(20931)	(1968)	(1880)	(1901)	(1877)	(1813)	(1921)	(1860)	(1883)	(1912)	(1979)	(1937)

Question I2: Looking back, if you were free to choose again would you choose the same study programme at the same institute of higher education?

Table 3: Study programme as a good basis for...; by UK type of HEI (%) (UK respondents; responses 4 and 5; multiple responses) (see Figure 4)

	Russell group	Pre 1992	Post 1992	Post 1994 universities and colleges
starting work	52	41	51	56
further learning on the job	50	44	51	53
performing your current work tasks	35	36	43	51
future career	54	51	53	59
your personal development	66	75	72	74
development of entrepreneurial skills	12	13	24	22

Question I1.: To what extent has your study programme been a good basis for...? (Scale of answers from 1=not at all to 5=to a very great extent)

Table 4: Whether graduates would choose the same course at the same HEI by HEI type (see Figure 5)

	Russell group	Pre 1992	Post 1992	Post 1994 universities and colleges
Yes	70	70	58	64
No, a different study programme at the same HEI	19	18	15	12
No, the same study programme at a different HEI	2	5	11	8
No, a different study programme at a different HEI	8	6	15	12
No, I would decide not to study at all	1	1	1	5

Question I2: Looking back, if you were free to choose again would you choose the same study programme at the same institute of higher education?

Table 5: Course as a good basis for further learning on the job by programme type (UK respondents) (see Figure 6)

	Arts non-vocational	Arts Vocational	Science non-vocational	Science vocational
Not at all/Low	38	22	26	14
--	25	26	29	20
To a (very) high extent	38	52	45	66

Question I1: To what extent has your study programme been a good basis for...? (Scale of answers from 1=not at all to 5=to a very great extent)

Table 6: Field of study most appropriate for work in first job by country (%) (see Figure 7)

	Total	UK	IT	ES	FR	AT	DE	NL	FI	NO	CZ	CH
exclusively own field	32	22	33	22	33	34	38	25	36	33	36	40
own or a related field	48	34	46	50	42	48	49	56	54	58	46	47
a completely different field	6	10	5	9	7	5	4	8	6	4	9	5
no particular field	13	35	16	20	18	12	9	11	5	5	9	9
Count (n)	(22006)	(1824)	(1704)	(1810)	(1723)	(1835)	(1887)	(1882)	(1873)	(1924)	(1607)	(1923)

Question D10: What field of study do you feel was most appropriate for this work?

Table 7: Field of study most appropriate for current work by country (%) (see Figure 8)

	Total	UK	IT	ES	FR	AT	DE	NL	FI	NO	CZ	CH
exclusively own field	32	27	39	27	35	29	34	24	33	34	33	37
own or a related field	53	42	46	56	44	56	54	59	57	60	52	52
a completely different field	7	11	6	8	8	6	5	8	6	4	10	5
no particular field	9	20	9	10	13	10	8	10	5	3	5	6
Count (n)	(19058)	(1726)	(1689)	(1715)	(1627)	(1625)	(1761)	(1799)	(1687)	(1841)	(1772)	(1816)

Question F9: What field of study for you feel is most appropriate for this work?

Table 8: Whether graduates would choose the same course and HEI by age (%) (UK respondents) (see Figure 9)

	Young (18-20)	Youngish (21-24)	Mature (25-49)	Very mature (50+)
Yes	62	61	75	86
No, a different study programme at the same HEI	19	17	11	6
No, the same study programme at a different HEI	7	8	5	6
No, a different study programme at a different HEI	10	12	8	2
No, I would decide not to study at all	2	2	1	0
Count (n)	1270	230	370	51

Question I2: Looking back, if you were free to choose again would you choose the same study programme at the same institute of higher education?

Table 9: Study programme as a good basis for...; by gender (UK respondents; responses 4 and 5; multiple responses) (see Figure 10)

	Male	Female
starting work	45	50
further learning on the job	47	49
performing your current work tasks	38	40
future career	54	53
your personal development	70	74
development of entrepreneurial skills	18	16

Question I1: To what extent has your study programme been a good basis for...? (Scale of answers from 1=not at all to 5=to a very great extent)

Table 10: Course as a good basis for starting work by participation in work placement/internship (UK respondents) (see Figure 11)

	Participation in placement/internship	No participation in placement/internship
Not at all/Low	13	34
--	20	26
To a (very) high extent	67	40

Table 11: Course outcomes by class of degree (UK respondents; responses 4 and 5; multiple responses) (see Figure 12)

	First class	Upper second	Lower second
starting work	65	50	37
further learning on the job	59	49	41
performing your current work tasks	53	40	29
future career	73	53	44
your personal development	84	73	67
development of entrepreneurial skills	17	17	18