Commentary on Higher Education Attainment among Adults in Scotland since the 1960s.

As might be expected given his reputation, Professor Paterson has produced an impressively thorough and careful piece of empirical research. The data enable comparisons of three Scottish-born cohorts to be made across a wide span of time, and the results illustrate the complexity of the processes of change which have been in operation. The paper prompts some reflections and questions which might be fruitful for further analysis.

It is tempting to assume that the outcomes from obtaining a degree as a mature student are the same as for doing so at the 'normal' age of early 20s. But is that really the case? Analyses by Egerton (2000, 2001) based on data from the General Household Survey throw some interesting light on these issues. She found that mature graduates tended to earn less than early graduates. More specifically, in the first years of their graduate careers, the mature graduates tended to earn more than the early graduates, because of greater labour market experience, but after ten years in the labour market and beyond, early graduates were earning more than mature graduates. Those who graduated later on in the lifecourse were less likely to have attended elite HE institutions, and more likely to be employed in less remunerative sectors, such as welfare services and the public sector generally. There were, then, several key differences between mature and early graduates. In terms of the occupational hierarchy, it was found that the probability that mature graduates worked in 'lower service' rather than 'higher service' jobs was significantly greater than for early graduates. Moreover, analysis of the changing proportions entering the finance/business sector and the welfare sector (health, education, social services) from the late 1950s through to the early 1990s, found that both male and female early graduates increasingly went into business/finance and became less likely to enter welfare services, while the opposite applied to mature graduates. So, mature graduates became increasingly likely to enter the less well-paid segments of the labour market.

Paterson's analyses focus on obtaining a degree as an absorbing state which some people reach more quickly than others (and some especially in the earliest cohort

never reach at all). However, while obtaining degrees and other HE qualifications is an important part of adult education there are many other learning opportunities over the course of a lifetime. Adult learning can potentially include a wide range of different types of participation – from formal courses resulting in qualifications to vocational training and informal learning (Pallas, 2002). Even if we confine attention to higher education there are further degrees, higher degrees, vocationally-oriented degrees. These qualifications can be obtained from elite or from non-elite institutions. Hence status differences in educational attainment could still be on-going throughout the lifecourse even in modern societies where a large proportion of the population have obtained a first degree while still in their 20s.

As mentioned in the paper, processes of cumulative advantage - here the tendency of those who already have a good deal of education to be more likely to go on to obtain more of it – could undermine the potential of adult education to compensate for initial inequality. But there may be some countervailing factors. Those who find themselves in poor quality part-time jobs or unemployed in their twenties may become more strongly motivated to obtain qualifications so as to improve their prospects in the labour market (Elman and O'Rand, 1998; McMullin and Kilpi-Jakonen, 2014). More generally, the question here is whether we can say what it is – other than measured scores on early ability tests – which differentiates those who obtain degrees as a mature student from those who do not. There could be all sorts of antecedent factors – including, for instance, type of schooling, parental expectations, type of occupation in early career – which longitudinal data in particular might be utilised to throw some light on.

Paterson makes an important distinction between full degree qualifications and HE qualifications below degree level. It would be interesting to know more about these sub-degree qualifications are. One could speculate that they are often likely to be higher-level vocational and professional qualifications. Related to this, some of the differing results by gender - particularly differences between HE and full degree qualifications in the 1958 cohort - could be due to the many women who got teaching qualifications in tertiary education but not a full degree.

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